

Connoisseurs of Angst

The Jewish Mystique and Postwar American Literary Culture

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"let's all be Jews bereft. . ."

Berryman, *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, 1968, "151"

In October 1963, the scion of New England Puritans and nationally acclaimed poet Robert Lowell attended a symposium in New York City on Hannah Arendt's controversial new book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, which was published earlier that year. The symposium, sponsored by *Dissent* magazine, was attended by a number of the writers and critics known today as "the New York intellectuals," including Irving Howe, Daniel Bell, Lionel Abel, and Alfred Kazin; also present was a veteran of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and a former leader of the revolutionary Jewish labor Bund (Arendt herself did not make an appearance). For many in attendance the symposium was a watershed event, one of the first public airings of long-suppressed emotions about the Nazi crimes against Europe's Jews.¹ For Lowell, a Boston Brahmin with a taste for the exotic, the event was noteworthy for other reasons. In a letter to his friend and fellow poet Elizabeth Bishop, he noted his delight at the vitality and passion of the speakers: "One was suddenly in a pure Jewish or Arabic world, people hardly speaking English, declaiming, confessing, orating in New Yorkese, in Yiddish, boing and clapping."² Having stumbled into an unfamiliar world where human speech flowed irrepressibly and where English had been transformed into "New Yorkese," Lowell was moved to reflect on the Jewish contribution to American culture more broadly: "There's nothing

¹ For a description of this event, see Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 273-5. For a number of responses to the event and to Arendt's book more broadly, see "Eichmann and the Jews," *Partisan Review* 31, no. 2 (Spring 1964): 253-83. See also Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 329-31.

² Robert Lowell to Elizabeth Bishop, October 27, 1963, *The Letters of Robert Lowell*, ed. Saskia Hamilton (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005), 438.

like the New York Jews," he continued. "Odd that this is so, and that other American groups are so speechless and dead."³ At a moment when Lowell feared that a generalized weariness had settled upon the nation, he discovered an uncanny strength and candor in the discourse of these "New York Jews" – all the more affecting since the source of all of this booing and clapping was the single most tragic event in modern Jewish history.

Lowell's letter to Bishop was hardly an isolated case of a non-Jewish writer expressing admiration for Jewish writers, thinkers, and debaters in postwar America. Indeed, whereas literary trendsetters from the previous generation such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were renowned for their antisemitic views, American literary culture in the post-World War II era was marked by an increasingly prevalent philosemitism. What emerged and soon became commonplace was a positive view of Jews as integral to the most daring and original developments in the national culture. This philosemitic enthusiasm reached its apogee, arguably, between the late 1950s and the early 1960s, a transitional moment in American cultural life when the buttoned-up conventions of the early Cold War had begun to lose their coherence, but the insurgent counterculture of the later 1960s had yet to assert itself. During these years, countless Jewish writers and critics rose to prominence, including Daniel Bell, Saul Bellow, Leslie Fiedler, Paul Goodman, Clement Greenberg, Joseph Heller, Sidney Hook, Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, Norman Mailer, Bernard Malamud, Arthur Miller, Grace Paley, David Riesman, Norman Podhoretz, Harold Rosenberg, Philip Roth, Delmore Schwartz, Karl Shapiro, Meyer Shapiro, Susan Sontag, and Lionel Trilling.⁴ These figures wrote some of the period's most influential works of fiction, sociology, political commentary, and literary and art criticism. More generally, they embodied an exciting new intellectual style marked by an admixture of cultural sophistication and ethnic vitality. Many observers came to see this "Jewish" style as exemplary. As Norman Podhoretz put it in his 1967 autobiographical work, suggestively titled *Making It*,

³ Ibid.

⁴ Much has been written about the "Jewish American Renaissance" in postwar America. On the one hand, there are innumerable essays and reviews by critics who are themselves part of this efflorescence. See inter alia Irving Howe, introduction to *Jewish-American Stories* (New York: Mentor, 1977); Alfred Kazin, "Introduction: The Jew as Modern Writer," in Norman Podhoretz, ed., *The Commentary Reader* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1966); Alfred Kazin, *Book of Life* (New York: Delta Books, 1971), 125–61; Leslie Fiedler, *Waiting for the End: The Crisis in American Culture and a Portrait of Twentieth Century Literature* (New York: Delta Books, 1964), esp. chaps. 5 and 6. Among the most useful "secondary sources" (though I recognize that the boundaries separating these genres are permeable), I would include Mark Shechner, *After the Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), and *The Conversion of the Jews* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990); Norman Finkelstein, *The Ritual of New Creation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982); and Ruth Wisse, "The Jewish American Renaissance," in Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael Kramer, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

"For the moment, Jews were culturally all the rage in America."⁵ Alongside the actual contributions of Jewish writers and thinkers, then, what took shape was a distinct "Jewish mystique," an image of Jews as the embodiment of a unique mode of intellectual engagement, uniquely suited to the demands of the moment.

The philosemitic turn in postwar America raises numerous questions. What psychic and imaginative needs did non-Jews, particularly non-Jewish intellectuals, experience after World War II? How and why were these needs answered by Jews, whether actual Jewish individuals or the abstract notion of "the Jew"? And how did the lionization of Jews during this period relate to broader patterns of thinking about minority groups in American culture? To address these questions, I will explore responses to Jews among three representative midcentury, non-Jewish American poets: Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and John Berryman. To approach American philosemitism via three poets runs the risk of obscuring the phenomenon in its broader manifestations, but I will claim that these poets articulated broadly felt impulses in the culture at large. Moreover, by studying selected poems that meditate on Jewishness or on specific Jewish individuals we gain a close-up view of the variable symbolic roles Jews played in the psyches and imaginative life of non-Jews.⁶ Central to my argument will be two main points: first, that in dialectical opposition to the emergent culture of American triumphalism and suburban conformity, there arose a new valorization of vulnerability and marginality; and, second, that as American intellectuals made their *détente* with mainstream institutions, they came increasingly to admire forms of intellectual engagement that combined depth of insight with an ability to remain aloof from institutional norms. In both cases, Jews came to appear as exemplary figures. Their proximity to the worst terrors of the twentieth century made them emblems of suffering and survival, and their supposed ability to bridge the world of high culture and the ethnic street made them cultural heroes among those wary of the conformist sway of the institutions that increasingly defined their lives.

BACKGROUNDS

Before World War II, most American writers who mattered to the culture at large had treated Jews with disdain, if not downright hostility. In writings by prominent figures such as Henry Adams, Henry James, Theodore Dreiser, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, the Jew

⁵ Norman Podhoretz, *Making It* (New York: Random House, 1967).

⁶ The first scholar to organize the poets I am considering around philosemitic motifs was Hilene Flanzbaum, "The Imaginary Jew and the American Poet," *ELH* 65, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 259-75. In my work here, I hope to build on and expand upon this excellent article.

typically appears as a force of *corruption*.⁷ Jews are depicted as interlopers and imitators, damaging whatever is held to be precious, from the purity of language to the “natural” operations of the economy to the sanctity of social bonds. Adams, whose antisemitism was legion, blamed Jews for controlling the newspapers and for embodying the capitalist zeal that had eroded the core values of American life. As he wrote in a letter in 1914, “With communism I would exist tolerably well ... but in a society of Jews and brokers, a world made up of maniacs wild for gold, I have no place.”⁸ Adams’s comment reflects the tenor of a period ripe with fears of a Jewish conspiracy to take over the world, epitomized by Henry Ford’s *Dearborn Independent*, with its countless “revelations” of Jewish plots, culminating in the 1920 collection *The International Jew: The World’s Foremost Problem*.⁹ In Adams’s discourse, Jews stand symbolically for the entanglement of forces responsible for disrupting the precious balance of nineteenth-century American society.¹⁰

The antisemitism of the conservative, nostalgic Adams was often matched by that of writers who championed the new experimental thrust of 1920s culture. In Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1925), a key text in the modernist revolution in the arts, the Jew is also maligned, though here the problem has less to do with imputed economic behavior than with an imagined failure to embody the new hedonism. The Jewish character Cohn is an unwanted interloper who suffers from an excess of self-consciousness

⁷ A great deal has been written about the figure of the Jew in modernist writing. For useful recent discussions, see *Between “Race” and Culture: Representations of the Jew in English and American Literature*, ed. Bryan Cheyette (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), and Anthony Julius, *T. S. Eliot, Antisemitism, and Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁸ Worthington Ford, ed., *Letters of Henry Adams, 1858–1918* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938), 2:33.

⁹ See Henry L. Feingold, *A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream, 1920–1945* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 24–33; John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Pattern of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 300–30.

¹⁰ There are important exceptions to this tendency, to be sure. Within nineteenth-century American religious thought in general, there was a tendency to valorize modern-day Jews as custodians of an original, unchanging biblical faith, supposedly untouched by the depredations and tumult of history. The influential novelist William Dean Howells expressed a version of this view in an article describing a trip to the Lower East Side in 1896 (Howells was accompanied by the novelist and Yiddish journalist Abraham Cahan, whose work Howells championed). Here Howells affirms the connection between New York’s Jews and “that old Hebrew world which had the sense if not the knowledge of God when all the rest of us lay sunk in heathen darkness.” As with other forms of Christian philosemitism throughout history, this view casts Jews as a noble relic from the ancient past. What is implied, however, is that the “old Hebrew world” is also essentially outmoded. While viewed in essentially sympathetic terms, the Jew also figures as a benighted figure whose purchase on the correct form of faith is tenuous indeed.

and refuses to get drunk. Just when a group of jolly American expatriates would find their new paradise in Paris and Pamplona, Cohn intrudes on the festivities, inducing one of the "hard-boiled" heroes to exclaim, "Go away, for God's sake. Take that sad Jewish face away."¹¹ The Jew simply cannot give himself over to spontaneous action and joy. As such, he provides a foil for the hero, Jake Barnes, whose easy familiarity with the ways of Parisian café society and Spanish bullfighting makes him the envy of the joyless Jew.

Yet another version of antisemitic discourse may be tracked in T. S. Eliot's work, most notoriously in *After Strange Gods*, originally delivered as a series of lectures at the University of Virginia in 1934. In the context of laying out a blueprint for a well-ordered society, he writes that "the population should be homogeneous ... and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable."¹² Eliot explained that the commingling of different cultures at any given time leads to moral and political chaos, and while presumably any "alien" group might have stood for the offending interloper, "free-thinking Jews" represent the most offending, since they allegedly refuse to obey *any* authority. The linkage between Jews and cultural dissolution comes to the fore in Eliot's poem "Gerontion," which implicates the Jew in the decline of civilization, as we read in these lines: "My house is a decayed house / And the Jew squats on the window sill, the owner, / Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp, / Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London."¹³ The Jewish landlord is here a synonym for plague. He comes from everywhere and nowhere, leaving him without any allegiance beyond that of his own purse. Like Adams and Hemingway, then, Eliot imagines Jews as a mortal threat to community and cultural coherence; they must therefore be restrained or somehow kept out.¹⁴

To be sure, there were exceptions to these instances of pre-World War II antisemitism. A striking counterexample can be found in the writings of the Norwegian-born economist Thorstein Veblen, whose 1919 essay "The Intellectual Pre-eminence of Jews in Modern Europe" discovers the sources of Jewish genius in the very same cosmopolitanism that Eliot saw as a threat. Veblen imagines Jews along essentially the same lines as Eliot: once again we find a portrait of the cosmopolitan Jewish intellectual for whom skepticism follows as a response to homelessness. But for Veblen, whose concern was to identify the qualities necessary for original critical thought, these characteristics are charged with a positive valence:

¹¹ Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926; repr., New York: Scribner, 2003), 181.

¹² T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods* (London: Faber, 1934), 19.

¹³ T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971), 21.

¹⁴ For a useful corrective to the now-standard view of Eliot as hostile to Jews, see Ranen Omer-Sherman, "Rethinking Eliot, Jewish Identity, and Cultural Pluralism," *Modernism/Modernity* 10, no. 3 (2003): 439-45.

It appears to be only when the gifted Jew escapes from the cultural environment created and fed by the particular genius of his own people, only when he falls into the alien lines of gentile inquiry and becomes a naturalised, though hyphenate, citizen in the gentile republic of learning, that he comes into his own as a creative leader in the world's intellectual enterprise. It is by loss of allegiance, or at the best by force of a divided allegiance to the people of his origin, that he finds himself in the vanguard of modern inquiry. He becomes a disturber of the intellectual peace, but only at the cost of becoming an intellectual wayfaring man, a wanderer in the intellectual no-man's-land, seeking another place to rest, farther along the road, somewhere over the horizon.¹⁵

The Jew who has been set free from Jewish traditions but has yet to find a new home becomes for Veblen the quintessential modern intellectual hero.¹⁶ As Alfred Kazin has proposed, this portrait of the Jewish wanderer may be seen as a self-portrait: the foreign-born Veblen never became fully acculturated to America mores, and he clung to his outsider status as a safeguard for his own critical perspective.¹⁷ It would take the sweeping social, cultural, and economic changes of the post-World War II years for Veblen's view, with its praise of marginality, to become much more prevalent.

POSTWAR DEVELOPMENTS

The aftermath of World War II witnessed a sea change in perceptions of Jews in American literary culture, largely displacing the paranoia of the Adams-Hemingway-Eliot group. On the level of society as a whole, this period witnessed a sharp decline in antisemitism. As the historian Edward Shapiro has shown, although antisemitic attitudes spiked in 1944, when Jews provided a ready scapegoat for frustrations and deprivations linked to the war, they declined steadily amid the economic expansion and triumphant Americanism that followed the war.¹⁸ Among the signs of this new acceptance were that housing developments and country clubs increasingly dropped restrictions on Jews, fewer job listings excluded Jews, colleges and professional schools began eliminating quotas, and avowedly anti-Jewish organizations disappeared almost altogether. Public displays of antisemitism lost legitimacy for various reasons, including the association between antisemitism and Hitler; a renewed public commitment to the values of liberalism as the Cold War took shape; a rise in the popularity of religion,

¹⁵ Thorsten Veblen, *Political Science Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (March 1919): 37.

¹⁶ Many of the central ideas in Veblen's essay will resurface nearly fifty years later in Isaac Deutscher's famous essay "The Non-Jewish Jew"; see *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

¹⁷ For a discussion of Veblen as a European outsider, see Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of American Prose Literature* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942).

¹⁸ Edward Shapiro, *A Time of Healing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

coupled with a new sense of the "Judeo-Christian" ethos underlying both Judaism and Christianity;¹⁹ and the broadening of a white-collar labor force and the expansion of suburbia, which increasingly placed Jews and Christians side by side in places of work and residence.²⁰ All of these factors paved the way for Jews to enter the middle class on a more or less equal footing with Protestants and Catholics.

But while these developments suggest a gradual erasure of the idea of Jewish difference, the postwar years also proved to be a moment of heightened Jewish cultural vitality, including powerful reassertions of Jewish particularity. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the New York Jewish intellectuals (the same group who would later gather to discuss the Hannah Arendt controversy we began with) began making their mark. Key organs for the dissemination of their ideas were the iconic journal of the anti-Stalinist Left, *Partisan Review*, and the newly established *Commentary*. By the early 1960s they could also be found in magazines of more popular appeal such as *Vogue*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and the *New Yorker*. While they generally affirmed the goals of American democracy, they also tended to adopt a critical stance vis-à-vis dominant social trends: one of Trilling's collections of essays was appropriately called *The Opposing Self*; the journal Howe founded in 1954 was called *Dissent*. This was also the period when Jewish novelists such as Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth began winning prestigious literary awards and reshaping the terrain of American literature. In a period when many of the most acclaimed writers came from the South (e.g., Robert Penn Warren, James Agee, Allen Tate), these Jewish writers created a new literary discourse incorporating the accents of Yiddish and introducing a new stock of characters. Most commonly, their narratives centered around the misadventures of a humane but deeply suffering character, the newly ubiquitous schlemiel (consider Bellow's *Seize the Day* [1954], Malamud's *The Assistant* [1957], and Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* [1959]).

Numerous explanations have been offered to account for this "Jewish American Renaissance." Some have seen it as part of a broad pattern of Jewish movement into mainstream American society, enabled by the decline in antisemitism.²¹ Others have proposed that an impasse in socialism led those Jews who a generation earlier would have moved in radical

¹⁹ Will Herberg's book *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in Religious Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) reflects the pervasive new sense of American as defined by religious, not ethnic identity. He proposes that Jews were one of what were essentially three denominations of an overarching monotheism.

²⁰ For a discussion linking the "whitening" of Jews in postwar society with the rise of the middle class, see Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What It Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

²¹ See Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); Shapiro, *Time of Healing*.

political circles towards intellectual work instead.²² If young Jews in the 1930s might have thrown themselves into the struggles of the working class, their heirs in the 1950s set to work before their typewriters, meditating on social and cultural questions that – without the ready aid of Marxist dogma – had become endlessly complex and engaging. Still others have attributed this cultural ferment to an existential situation characterized by partial or incomplete assimilation.²³ Neither an integral part of the largely religious, Yiddish-speaking immigrant milieu into which they were born, nor of the mainstream American society they were entering, a generation of American Jews turned inward and drew on untapped creative resources to find their bearings. As an effect of this position of in-betweenness, the argument goes, the generation of American Jews who came of age in the 1930s and 1940s were uniquely situated to create works of especially powerful insight. An added impetus to cultural work was given by the Holocaust, which called for some type of reckoning and became a tacit point of reference for much of the Jewish writing during the period.²⁴

To understand why the image of the outsider Jew gained broad appeal among non-Jews at this time, it is useful to recall the set of new challenges faced by American intellectuals in general after the war. As many have noted, this was a time when the daunting complexity of social and political problems and unprecedented developments in science and other areas lent new authority to the figure of the expert. With increased funding for research and academia (thanks to factors such as the booming economy, the G.I. Bill, and the Cold War), it became increasingly attractive for intellectuals to accept positions in institutions from think tanks to university departments. Many American writers increasingly eschewed the lure of expatriation, accepting instead positions teaching in English departments or working in the expanding publishing industry. Indeed, whereas alienation from such institutions had once appeared the inevitable fate – and perhaps the ideal condition – for innovative literary and cultural work, American intellectuals of various kinds began to see some form of accommodation to institutional structures as their fate. But, as Richard Hofstadter argues in *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (1964), this rapprochement between intellectuals and American institutions generated its own form of anxiety. “Many of the most spirited younger intellectuals,” he writes, “are disturbed above all by the fear that, as they are increasingly recognized, incorporated, and used, they will begin merely to conform, and will

²² See in particular Shechner, *After the Revolution*.

²³ See Howe, “New York Jewish Intellectuals,” and Bloom, *Prodigal Sons*.

²⁴ The question about precisely when and to what extent American Jewish writers began responding to the Holocaust remains the subject of some debate. For a useful survey of this literature see S. Lilian Kremer, *Witness through the Imagination: Jewish American Holocaust Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989).

cease to be creative and critical and truly useful. This is the fundamental paradox in their position ... that they are troubled and divided in a more profound way by their acceptance."²⁵ For many American writers caught between the old alienation and the new acceptance, the Jew became a new symbol for a mode of existence in the interstices of the culture. Insofar as Jews seemed to retain some measure of immunity to institutional pressures, they seemed to embody resistance to institutional conformity. This was not so much some atavistic escape from social pressures altogether, but a mode of inhabiting institutional structures while remaining essentially unaltered by them.

PHILOSEMITISM AMONG THE CONFESSIONAL POETS

This kind of view can be seen among poets associated with the school known as the "confessional poets." First used disapprovingly in a review of Lowell's *Life Studies* in 1959, the term "confessional poetry" is applied to a group of poets who emerged in the late 1950s and 1960s, including Lowell, Philip Berryman, Sylvia Plath, W. D. Snodgrass, and Anne Sexton.²⁶ All of them came of age during the 1930s under the shadow of high modernist masters such as Eliot and Pound but moved American poetry in decidedly different directions, introducing a candor and range of emotion absent from much prewar poetry.²⁷ In their focus on the pressures of middle-class family life and on the anxieties and emotional conflicts of the subjective ego, these poets created works that reflected the postwar zeitgeist. Their principal themes include divorce, sexual infidelity, childhood neglect, and the mental disorders that follow from psychic wounds received in early life.²⁸ Powerfully influenced by psychoanalysis, they often return in their poetry to traumatic and haunting experiences, making poetry serve as occasion for self-discovery and catharsis.

In the careers of many of these poets, a process of artistic development can be traced from an apprenticeship stage of working in formal, controlled

²⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 393.

²⁶ M. H. Rosenthal, "Poetry as Confession," *Nation*, September 19, 1959, 154-5.

²⁷ The use of the term "confessional" to refer to these poets has been widely and justifiably criticized, above all because the label suggests that the drive for personal catharsis overshadowed aesthetic criteria for these poets, and that was far from the case. See Adam Kirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets* (New York: Norton, 2005), x-xv. In this article, nevertheless, I will use the phrase "confessional poetry" because despite its inaccuracies it provides a useful shorthand to refer to the poets I am discussing.

²⁸ Diane Wood Middlebrook, "What Was Confessional Poetry?" in Jay Parini, ed., *Columbia History of American Poetry*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 632-49. See also Kirsch, *Wounded Surgeon*.

verse to a later stage when a palpably personal, expressive voice begins to emerge. With Lowell, this development occurs between *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946) and *Life Studies* (1959); with Plath between her first collection, *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960), and her posthumous *Ariel* (1965); and with Berryman between *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1956) and *77 Dream Songs* (1964). One of the striking aspects of this development in these three cases is that it coincides with a tendency to identify with Jews, who are imagined as emblematic victims and as independently minded intellectuals in a standardized world. That is, Jews become sympathetic figures precisely when these poets move toward their most personal and original work. It might then be argued that the Jew figures as a muse, or at least a symbolic figure of support, for the emergence of confessional poetry in its most distinctive forms.

ROBERT LOWELL

This fascination with Jews is evident at several moments in Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959). An example is "Memories of West Street and Lepke," a poem that fits into the volume's focus on the barely concealed conflicts haunting the complacency of middle-class life. The poem begins by describing the poet's routinized life as a part-time college teacher and a father during what Lowell calls the "tranquilized *Fifties*." This period presents such a homogeneous aspect to the poet as he gazes out onto his Boston street that he imagines that "even the man scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans / has two children, a beach wagon, a helpmate, / and is 'a young Republican.'"²⁹ In order to escape this bland present, Lowell delves into memory, dwelling on the period of five months he served in jail in 1943 for being a conscientious objector to the war. In this decidedly more vital and principled period of his life, Lowell found himself in the company of an eccentric cast of characters, including "a Negro boy with curlicues / of Marijuana in his hair" (85) and the convicted Jewish mobster Louis "Lepke" Buchalter, who was executed in 1944. This is, as it were, a period of "slumming," and yet Lowell's partly ironic view of his youthful excesses cannot obscure a genuine feeling of comradeship he felt for his fellow inmates.

Among these inmates, Lowell recalls with distinct tenderness a figure marked by his name and overall bearing as a Jew:

Strolling, I yammered metaphysics with Abramowitz,
a jaundice-yellow ("it's really tan")

²⁹ Robert Lowell, *Life Studies and For the Union Dead* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), 85. For insight into Lowell's biography, see Paul Mariani, *Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell* (New York: Norton, 1996).

and fly-weight pacifist,
 so vegetarian,
 he wore rope shoes and preferred fallen fruit.
 He tried to convert Bioff and Brown,
 The Hollywood pimps, to his diet.
 Hairy, muscular, suburban,
 wearing chocolate double-breasted suits,
 they blew their tops and beat him black and blue. (86)

Lowell sets up a dichotomy between the muscular, evidently non-Jewish brutes (Bioff and Brown) and the physically weak, intellectual, and morally pure Jew. Abramowitz's body is itself changeable, moving from "jaundice-yellow" to "black and blue" as the result of his afflictions. But this insubstantial body is merely the container for an exemplary mind, capable of moral discernment and metaphysical speculation. This figure makes an appropriate interlocutor for Lowell, the conscientious objector: both are pacifists; both have a penchant for "yammer[ing] metaphysics." The Jew here is thus a fellow inmate in a violent world, whose only crime, it would seem, is gentleness of spirit. The logic of reversal in the poem positions Abramowitz and Lowell, inmates in West Street Jail, as victims of an intolerant world. As for Lepke, even he becomes a strangely sympathetic figure, so beaten by the world (and his lobotomy) that he now drifts in a "sheepish calm."

The poem leaves us reflecting on two images of stasis: the opening image of the poet languishing at home as a part-time college professor in the "tranquilized fifties" and the final image of the lobotomized Lepke lingering in his cell, just before his execution. But the similarities between these images cannot distract the reader, nor presumably the poet himself, from the recognition that the Jewish mobster has been forcibly taken out of commission by the authorities while the poet/professor has willingly accepted *his* deadening life. The poem's indictment of 1950s America evinces a romance with criminality, which offers an image of temporary freedom in an ultimately crushing world.

In "To Delmore Schwartz" (1959), Lowell creates another portrait of an eccentric Jewish figure who, like Lowell's jail mate Abramowitz, offers friendship, conversation, and inspiration to the poet. Schwartz (1913-66) was widely considered one of the more brilliant of the New York Jewish intellectuals, whose short stories, poetry, and critical essays suggested a great potential that was never fully realized. From 1943 to 1955, Schwartz served as an editor for *Partisan Review*, and his writing frames a mode of experience that became associated with midcentury Jewish intellectuals. In his 1951 essay "The Vocation of the Poet in the Modern World," Schwartz posits an analogy between the essential identity of the modern poet and the modern Jew. The modern Jew, he writes, is "at once alienated and indestructible; he is an exile from his own country, exiled from

himself, yet he survives the annihilating fury of history."³⁰ Contemporary poets, he adds, must be similarly willing to accept alienation as their lot; in their devotion to what he calls the essentially affirmative art of poetry, poets also resemble Jews in their tenacious powers of survival. Schwarz was also associated with erratic behavior, including bouts of paranoia and mania. Like Lowell, Schwartz was repeatedly hospitalized during the 1950s for psychiatric problems. In a letter written to Elizabeth Bishop a few days after Schwartz's death in 1966, Lowell summed up his impression of him as a mad genius, exemplary though also terrifying in the reach of his mind. "Delmore ... quickening with Jewish humor, and in-the-knowness, and his own genius, every person, every book – motives for everything, Freud in his blood, great webs of causation, then suspicion, then rushes of rage."³¹ In Schwartz's life and work, then, the themes of Jewishness, madness, and creation join, a combination that made him an emblem of the modern artist in extremis and a hero to Lowell, among many others.

Lowell's poem conjures a visit he paid to the Jewish poet in his Cambridge home in 1946. During a night of drinking, he and Schwartz are "underseas fellows, nobly mad." Together they contemplate "the chicken-hearted shadows of the world" and the "universal *Angst*." They also revel in the insights of European cultural heroes: "'Let Joyce and Freud, / the Masters of Joy / be our guests here,' you said" (53). The poem creates a contrast between the intimacy and profundity of the poets' colloquy in Schwartz's house and the frozen world of wintertime Cambridge that lies outside ("The Charles / River was turning silver" [54]). The only reminder of the proximity of the Ivy League is, surprisingly, a stuffed duck from a hunting trip Schwartz once took: "Your stuffed duck craned toward Harvard" (53). Schwartz's duck is evidence of an absurd attempt to make it as an all-American outdoorsman, and he has evidently returned to his books. As for Lowell, his affinities are inside with the inspired Jewish poet in his garret rather than outside in the more sedate quad, where his famous WASP heritage would be more likely to place him.³²

³⁰ Delmore Schwartz, "The Vocation of the Poet in the Modern World," in Reginald Gibbons, ed., *The Poet's Work: 29 Poets on the Origins and Practice of Their Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 91. A version of this essay was originally delivered as a lecture in 1949 at the Union Theological Seminary in New York.

³¹ Lowell, letter to Bishop, July 16, 1966, in Hamilton, ed., *Letters of Robert Lowell*, 472.

³² In a letter written to Lowell after the publication of *Life Studies*, Schwartz expresses tremendous gratitude for this poem while also correcting one detail: "I liked all of your new poems [*Life Studies*] very much and was quite touched and flattered by the poem to me, and meant again and again to write and tell you so. The stuffed bird belonged to Bill Van Keuren and he shot – I've never shot anything but pool." Letter to Lowell, April 12, 1959, in *Letters of Delmore Schwartz*, selected and edited by Robert Phillips (Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review Press, 1984), 353–4. Schwartz's point about shooting pool rather than ducks reinforces the point I am making about Lowell's poem, namely, that it hints at the absurdity in considering duck hunting in relation to Schwartz, the urban Jewish poet.

Instructively, one of Schwartz's well-known poems, "Sonnet: The Ghosts of James and Peirce in Harvard Yard," which was published the same year as *Life Studies*, also evokes Harvard as a place of exile for the Jewish aspirant to high culture. As the poet walks through campus (Schwartz taught at Harvard in 1940-47) he hears the ringing of the Harvard bells and imagines that the sound they make is the repeating word: "Episcopalian! palian! the ringing soared."³³ The sonnet ends with the voices of the ghosts of William James and Charles Peirce, who warn the poet of the insufficiency of his own understanding: "And you are ignorant, who hear the bell / Ignorant you walk between heaven and hell." The point would appear to be that the Jewish poet does not possess a deep enough knowledge to belong at Harvard, though the poem itself insinuates that the real problem is the WASP culture that does not want the Jew. Seen in relation to Schwartz's poem about self-consciousness and insecurity at Harvard, Lowell's "To Delmore Schwartz" points to a desire to decamp from the WASP world of his forbears and to join forces with the marginalized Jew at Harvard.

But Jewishness is not merely a symbolic identity for Lowell. He lays claim to an actual Jewishness – remote, to be sure, but biologically grounded nonetheless – in his prose memoir "91 Revere Street" (also in *Life Studies*). The text begins by reaching back to the Lowell family's early roots in America, and surprisingly the first member of his lineage the poet recalls is not one of the famous *Mayflower* descendants on his mother's side, but his great-great-grandfather on his paternal side, the venerable Major Mordecai Myers, whose portrait hung in his childhood home. "He was a dark man, a German Jew – no downright Yankee.... One of those Moorish-looking dons painted by his contemporary Goya" (12). This picturesque, orientalized ancestor turns out to have been a patriotic American from the time he arrived in the New World: he served in the War of 1812 and later became mayor of Schenectady. But Lowell makes clear that his Jewish ancestor fed his youthful fantasies of rebellion: "In the anarchy of my adolescent war on my parents, I tried to make him a true wolf, the wandering Jew!" (12). Though Lowell admits to distorting Myers's actual character, the point remains that Lowell identifies with a Jew in his need to find a model for himself. As with his portraits of Abramowitz and Schwartz, Lowell's memoir reveals a fascination with the Jew as a figure both inside and outside society, possessed of a rare insight gained from this kind of mobility.

SYLVIA PLATH

A onetime student of Lowell, Sylvia Plath also evokes Jewish figures in her efforts to name her own experience and aspirations. However, where Lowell

³³ Delmore Schwartz, *Selected Poems: Summer Knowledge* (1959; repr., New York: New Directions, 1967), 51.

recalls specific encounters with individual Jews who offer companionship and conversation, Plath evokes Jews more abstractly as symbols for bodily mutilation and persecution. In *The Bell Jar*, a harrowing narrative of the mental breakdown and hospitalization of a college girl, the opening passage evokes the Rosenbergs, whose trial and execution shadow the entire narrative. "I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves. . . . I kept hearing about the Rosenbergs over the radio and at the office till I couldn't get them out of my mind."³⁴ While no one else in the novel seems to have any sympathy for the Rosenbergs, they haunt the protagonist, whose name seems vaguely Jewish (Esther Greenwood) and whose sensitivity to them reveals her affinity for victims in general. When she endures shock treatment after suffering a nervous breakdown, the ordeal appears to have been foreshadowed by the images of the electrocuted Rosenbergs. Though the protagonist survives, Plath's insistence on this analogy suggests that the narrative cannot be read in entirely triumphant terms.

In "Lady Lazarus," Plath evokes her own numerous failed attempts at suicide, and in the poem's opening lines she adduces the Jewish victims of the Holocaust as prototype and symbol for herself:

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot
A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.
Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?³⁵

Plath identifies herself with the victims of the extermination camps, whose bodies have been transformed into lifeless objects. The poem affirms that Plath herself has survived, though this is far less a triumphant resurrection (as with the biblical Lazarus) than it is like an experience of continuously haunting of the world of living. Like the Freudian "uncanny object," which cannot be discerned as being living or inanimate, Plath herself seems to straddle life and death. The poem's confrontational tone ("Do I terrify?") is strengthened by Plath's identification with Jewish concentration camp victims. Having been singled out for the most brutal forms of dehumanization, the Jew comes to possess the authority of the witness of the deepest evil of which humanity is capable and indeed of death itself.

³⁴ Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 1.

³⁵ Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 244. Subsequent citations from Plath's poetry refer to this edition.

By identifying with the slaughtered Jews, Plath lays claim to a *terrifying* discursive power.

Another set of allusions to Jewishness can be found in "Daddy" (1962), Plath's most anthologized work and a poem that announces the theme of female rage in more explicit terms than anything American poetry had witnessed to date. It is addressed to Plath's German father, whose early death has left the poet with a deeply ambivalent mixture of longing and resentment. On the one hand, she recalls how she used to pray to recover her father; on the other, she recalls the agony of trying to speak to him. As the poet recounts her difficulties communicating with her father, she moves associatively from the image of her tongue caught in the "barb wire snare" to an image of being a Jew carried off in a train: "A Jew to Dachau, Auswitz, Belsen" (223). Under the oppressive gaze of her father, the poet comes to see herself as a Jew: "I began to talk like a Jew / I think I may well be a Jew" (223).

Some readers have found Plath's leap from a personal experience of psychological pain to the theme of genocide to be unearned and troubling in its implications. "There is something monstrous, utterly disproportionate, when tangled emotions about one's father are deliberately compared with the historical fate of European Jews," writes Irving Howe.³⁶ On the other hand, Susan Gubar has argued that Plath's evocations of Jews can be read as an example of the technique of *prosopopeia*, speaking in the place of the other, which has a celebrated position in post-Holocaust poetry.³⁷ Rather than weighing in on this particular debate, I would call attention to the ways Plath's references to Jews fit in with a broader postwar tendency to imagine Jews as bearers of a particular kind of insight. In a more explicit way than "Lady Lazarus," the poem imagines Jews as representatives of a world of occult knowledge, as in the next stanza:

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew. (223)

Like Lowell, who lays claim through his great-great-grandfather to an alternate family history, Plath displaces her paternal heritage by laying claim to a secret affinity for her "gipsy ancestress." Associated with the figure of the Gypsy, the Jew here seems not so much an abject victim of persecution, but also a symbol for an exotic, mysterious figure in possession of occult

³⁶ Irving Howe, *Critical Point: On Literature and Culture* (New York: Horizon Press, 1973), 166.

³⁷ Susan Gubar, "Prosopopeia and Holocaust Poetry in English: Sylvia Plath and Her Contemporaries," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 191-215.

knowledge. What her "Taroc pack" (a symbol also of Plath's own poems) enables her to see is the evil underside of Europe's mythic purity. If the snows of the Tyrol and the beer of Vienna are not "very pure or true," it is only the hated outsiders – the Gypsy and the Jew – who can glimpse this impurity and take its measure. And these figures seem to have gained a species of freedom through their insight. In the last line of this stanza, the tone takes on a whimsicality, as if the poet were regaining her own agency at the same moment that she identifies with the Jew. Plath's poem allows us to see, then, how a figure associated with subjugation could also be transformed into a figure of resistance. To "talk like a Jew" is not merely to talk as the shamed, incarcerated victim, but also to speak from a position of mysterious authority, freed from the straitjacket of conformity and her Oedipal enthrallment to her father. This is one way, perhaps, to read the phrase "weird luck": through the alchemy of her own imaginings, she has seen her weakness transformed into strength.

JOHN BERRYMAN

Born to Roman Catholic parents and raised in small towns in Oklahoma (Lamar, Sasakwa, and Wagoner), John Berryman (1914–72) served at Mass and attended Catholic schools from the age of five. After the death of his father, he moved with his mother and stepfather to New York; attended South Kent School, an Episcopal prep school in Connecticut; and got his B.A. at Columbia College. Over the course of his career, Berryman's work shows a development from a highly controlled, formally rigorous poetic style, modeled on the "academic" style of the 1940s, to an idiosyncratic, whimsical, and emotionally expressive voice. His fascination with Jews, which included a period of seriously contemplating conversion to Judaism, reflects his restless search for a voice and model.

One of Berryman's earliest successes was his short story "The Imaginary Jew" (1945), published in the *Kenyon Review* and winner of the magazine's story contest for that year. The story is a first-person narrative by a nameless character who has no preconceptions about Jews; he is from "a part of the South where no Jews had come, or none had stayed."³⁸ While at college he realizes that nearly everyone he spends time with turns out to be Jewish, and, as he gradually learns of the persecution of Jews in post-1933 Germany, he develops a "special sympathy and liking for Jews" (246). We learn this as background for a singular and uncanny event that befalls him on the streets of New York in the summer of 1941, an event that Berryman repeatedly assured interviewers actually happened to him. Having moved to New York City, the narrator finds himself listening in on a fierce street-corner debate

³⁸ John Berryman, "The Imaginary Jew," reprinted as appendix to *Recovery* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1973), 246.

on the question of American intervention in the war. When he breaks into the discussion to defend the idea of going to war against Hitler, the isolationist in the debate, a cruel man whom the text identifies as Irish, accuses the narrator of being a Jew: "You look like a Jew. You talk like a Jew. You *are* a Jew" (250). Though he protests that he is no Jew at all, the narrator soon discovers in himself an impulse to change his blood, if only to defy his accuser and to distance himself from what turns out to be their shared Irishness: "Shame, shame: shame for my ruthless people. I will not be his blood. I wish I were a Jew" (252). The story concludes with a postscript in which the narrator reflects that, for the sake of the exchange with the Irishman, he had in fact become a Jew, as much a Jew in the eyes of the antisemite as any real Jew.

"The Imaginary Jew" suggests that the Jew that is hated is always a figment in the mind of the hater, as we learn in the story's final declaration: "every murderer strikes the mirror, the lash of the torturer falls on the mirror and cuts the real image, and the real and the imaginary blood flow down together" (252). Thus the story discovers a particular logic – the logic of unconscious self-hatred – in acts of violence in general and in anti-semitism in particular. Under these conditions, the Jew – even the falsely identified Jew – becomes a walking index for the pathologies of the gentile. "The Imaginary Jew" discovers the essence of Jewishness in the experience of being reviled by the non-Jew, which was also Jean Paul Sartre's point in *Anti-Semite and Jew*, originally published a year before Berryman's story.³⁹

But Berryman invests palpable meaning within Jewishness as well, particularly in subsequent writings that call attention to the cultural strategies that have enabled Jews to survive their tribulations. An example is a work entitled "from *The Black Book*" (1958), a cycle of three poems depicting scenes of excruciating violence and torture during the Holocaust – a grandfather being stamped down in the mud, a girl being raped, a group of Jews in "long-lockt cattle-cars."⁴⁰ In their focus on physical violence and bodily disfigurement, these poems recall Plath's evocations of the Holocaust in the poems we have seen as well as other works about the Holocaust by non-Jewish poets of Berryman's generation, such as Randall Jarrell and Anne Sexton.⁴¹ But Berryman is more interested than these other poets in exploring the inner lives of the Jews who are victimized by the Nazis. As a collective image for the Jews, Berryman evokes the image of the "luftmensch," a term of derision in much Zionist (and Nazi) discourse, but in the context of postwar America a badge of spiritual refinement. The second poem in

³⁹ Jean Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. George Becker (New York: Schocken Books, 1948).

⁴⁰ John Berryman, *Short Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967).

⁴¹ See Randall Jarrell, "The Refugees," in *The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), and Anne Sexton, "After Auschwitz," in *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).

the cycle begins with these lines: "Luftmenshen dream, the men who live on air, / of other values, in the blackness watching / peaceful for gangs or a quick raid" (107). Even while the Jews here watch out for the violent hordes, they remain in an illuminated state, dreaming of "other values." If they "live on air" it is not because they have no productive form of labor (as the phrase was generally interpreted to mean), but rather because they see the "air" as imbued with meaning. Berryman's Holocaust poems confer a spiritual dignity to the suffering Jews.

Jewishness provides a model for Berryman himself at key moments in his most innovative and celebrated work, the "Dream Songs," which make up two separate books, *77 Dream Songs* (1964) and *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (1968). The central character is a witty, traumatized, sexually obsessed, and occasionally misanthropic poet named Henry, whose life experiences are identical to Berryman's though Berryman insists he be read as a "character." Among the numerous poems about fellow writers and literary critics, there are twelve powerfully felt elegies to Delmore Schwartz, who was a close friend of Berryman, as he had been of Lowell. In these elegies, Henry comes to the brink of despair, as if Schwartz's ignominious death, alone in the Chelsea Hotel (where his body lay a full day before being discovered), symbolized the death of part of Henry himself and a judgment on the fate of poets in postwar America. The elegies move from descriptions of Schwartz's death to recollections of their years of friendship, including one memory from the period when both were instructors at Harvard:

unstained, I saw him thro' the mist of the actual
blazing with insight, warm with gossip
thro' all our Harvard years
when both of us were becoming known
I got him out of a police-station once, in Washington, the world is *tref*
and grief too astray for tears.⁴²

Schwartz is so close to the realm of the imagination that he is not really identified with his physical body at all. He is another version of the luftmenschen, a spiritual being whom Berryman glimpses "thro' the mist of the actual." The episode Berryman is recalling here involved a time Schwartz was held in jail for six hours after partly destroying a hotel room in Washington, D.C., in actuality more the result of mania than of drunkenness, which, however, was taken to be the cause. Like Lowell's "Memories of West Street and Lepke," here too the Jew is depicted as a figure moving against the grain of American society, so much so that he has been taken into police custody. As Berryman recalls Schwartz's legal and spiritual conflicts with this world, he names the world a *tref* (i.e., nonkosher) place, thus

⁴² John Berryman, *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest: 308 Dream Songs* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969).

incorporating Yiddish, ostensibly Schwartz's language, into his own poetic discourse. The effect of this unexpected Yiddish term is to wrench the poem momentarily out of its elevated "poetic" register and to lend it an air of the vernacular, the ethnic, and the urban. This movement downward in terms of diction is reversed once again in the final line of the stanza, which alludes to the concluding lines of William Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality" ode (compare Berryman's "grief too astray for tears" with Wordsworth's "Thoughts . . . too deep for tears"). The inclusion of Yiddish alongside this allusion to British romanticism enables Berryman to make his poem a play between registers, demonstrating his freedom from poetic discourse as traditionally construed. (Instructively, at other moments in the *Dream Songs*, Berryman also writes in a dialect marked as African American, which once again signifies a movement downward from the elevated diction that predominates elsewhere.)⁴³

In a subsequent elegy to Schwartz, Berryman portrays his poet-protagonist Henry in the act of writing, trying to block out any distractions that would dilute the intensity of his meditations: "Let no activity / mar our hurrah of mourning." In order to capture the properly elegiac tone, he suggests that it may be necessary to become or at least impersonate a Jew himself, as if Jews were the quintessential mourners: "let's all be Jews bereft, for he was one." Here Berryman echoes and extends Schwartz's analogy linking poets and Jews we saw in Schwartz's 1951 essay "The Vocation of the Poet in the Modern World." If the perspective of the true poet is analogous to the perspective of "the Jew," becoming a true poet requires installing oneself in the position of the Jew.⁴⁴

These various invocations of Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness in works by Lowell, Plath, and Berryman do not add up to the construction of a single, unchanging "Jewish type." What we find instead are multiple fantasies, with Jews standing, on the one hand, for the experience of abject suffering and, on the other, for a range of positive qualities, including verbal expressiveness, emotional sensitivity, moral courage, intellectual sophistication, and the ability to affirm value in an anxiety-ridden age. By identifying with Jews, these poets lay claim to a heightened kind of poetic authority, which supports their agenda of disclosing the horrific underside of midcentury American life. Thus, even as Jews were being welcomed into the expanding middle class as "white" Americans, the Jew also became a symbol in various kinds of literary texts for resistance to the status quo – in the argot of

⁴³ For a discussion of the language of minstrelsy in the *Dream Songs*, see Katherine Davis, "Honey Dusk Do Sprawl": Does Black Minstrel Dialect Obscure *The Dream Songs*?" *Language and Style* 18, no. 1 (Winter 1985): 33–4.

⁴⁴ This fantasy of becoming Jewish resurfaces in Berryman's unfinished autobiographical novel, *Recovery*, published posthumously in 1972.

the time, they were seen as quintessentially "marginal," which in an age of conformity was seen as a badge of honor.

CONCLUSION

How does this pattern of references to Jews relate to other patterns of racial and ethnic reference in American literature? Many groups besides Jews have fascinated American writers – from African Americans to Native Americans to Spanish bullfighters to hoboes. What, then, distinguishes the fantasies woven around Jews from those woven around other groups? One helpful point of reference is offered here by the critic Michael North, who argues in *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* that high modernist writers engage in a practice he calls "rebellion through racial ventriloquism."⁴⁵ Surveying canonical figures such as Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot, North argues that these writers make use of an invented form of black speech, often mediated by the minstrel show, in order to free themselves from the straitjackets of standard language and white identity. At a moment in the 1920s when the movement for the standardization of English had emerged as a powerful political force, these writers discovered in black dialect a model for a more expressive, liberated form of discourse. In the case of Eliot, his personal correspondence is strewn with phrases in imitation black dialect, and he wrote satirical poems about an African character "King Bolo" as well as an unfinished play starring a black minister. North argues that black dialect presented itself as a "safety valve for [the young Eliot who was] sick of scholarly trivia and ... the cramped language of references and citations." It also offered a "prototype of the audacious poetry [he] was to write instead of academic philosophy."⁴⁶

This analysis relates in a limited way to the patterns of Jewish reference in work of the confessional poets. Most generally, as in North's analysis of the role of African Americans for the modernist imagination, for Lowell, Plath, and Berryman the impulse to identify with Jews follows from an impulse to rebel against the conventions of the white Christian world. Moreover, these poets all link Jewishness with a distinctive kind of *voice*. Lowell reports to Elizabeth Bishop that the New York Jews speak an ecstatic and almost unrecognizable form of English and that beside them everyone else is speechless and dead; Plath recalls that she began to "talk like a Jew"; and Berryman has his hostile Irishman in "The Imaginary Jew" accuse the protagonist of speaking like a Jew. In Berryman's later poetry, he incorporates Yiddish as one of various

⁴⁵ Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

strategies for liberating his language from the controlled, academic verse of his early career.

Nevertheless, there are crucial differences between the turn toward black vernacular by modernist writers that North describes – their black-face performances – and the varieties of “Jewface” we have explored. Most notably, African Americans almost always stand for the primitive, a mode of existence that is prior to or wholly removed from the traditions and canons of Western civilization. (This applies equally to the work of the high modernist writers and to that of contemporaries of the confessional poets such as Jack Kerouac.) While Plath recalls this trope when she links the Jew to the Gypsy, a figure on the fringes of European society, Lowell and Berryman emphasize precisely the Jew’s *insider* status when it comes to Western culture. The point about the Jews is their deep and authoritative grasp of European high culture. Still, theirs is a version of cultural sophistication liberated from the buttoned-down regime of the official institutions of culture; Jews’ easy familiarity with high culture enables a spontaneous repossession of its ethos and authoritative texts. Thus Lowell yammers metaphysics with Abramowitz in the West Street Jail and discusses Freud and Joyce with Delmore Schwartz in his garret located at some remove from Harvard. Borrowing the terms of Philip Rahv’s description of the two poles of American consciousness, we might say that in the figure of the Jew the “paleface” and the “redskin” overlap; the high cultural sophisticate and the untamed radical are one.⁴⁷

A further point is that unlike the modernist figures North examines (and unlike their contemporaries, the Beat writers), Lowell, Plath, and Berryman did not eschew academic institutions and the road of professional normality they represented. Whereas the quintessential modernist was an expatriate, the typical confessional poet of the 1950s and 1960s was a college professor (Lowell and Berryman both taught at Harvard, among other places; Plath taught at Smith). But while Lowell, Plath, Berryman, and others became “respectable,” it is evident that the concessions to decorum required by this transition did not always sit easily with them. One of the premises of their poetry, after all, was that the middle-class existence offered up as the good life during the postwar boom was in many ways a hollow promise. What they sought to articulate were the underground emotions, traumatic memories, and psychic pain that prosperity could hardly undo. This ambivalent relationship to mainstream American life (university life, the family, etc.) provides a context for understanding the unique appeal of Jews. By straddling the worlds of the paleface and redskin, of the sophisticated intellectual and the untrammelled savage, the Jew represented a mode of existence that was both inside and outside the

⁴⁷ Philip Rahv, “Paleface and Redskin,” in *Image and Idea: Fourteen Essays on Literary Themes* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1949).

mainstream. Recall that Lowell meets Delmore Schwartz in his room in Cambridge, not in some far-flung café on the Left Bank. The Jew thus represents a realm of relative, not absolute, freedom. Jews are in this sense an ideal model for intellectual and literary engagement in an age of complexity, in which fantasies of escape into some fantasy of primitivistic freedom were losing traction. The insights the Jews were to offer – and that admiring American writers sought to make their own – illuminated the world *as it had become*, in all of its complexity and brutality. As this period of anxious introspection gave way to the radical impulses of the 1960s, the Jewish intellectual gradually ceased to embody an exemplary mode of engagement. New models, emphasizing ideological certainty and forthright action, came into vogue, dimming the luster of the image of the ambivalent, alienated Jew.