There is an early episode of *The Simpsons* in which Bart takes a job at a mafia hangout, the “Legitimate Businessmen’s Social Club.” One day while he tends bar there, Police Chief Wiggum visits the local mob boss, Fat Tony, to ask if he knows anything about a cigarette truck hijacked on route 401. “What’s a truck?” Fat Tony cagily replies (www.snpp.com/episodes/8F03.html). By the same token, when considering the contemporary study of Jewish literature, one must first ask, “What is literature?” From a historical perspective, the study of literature as such begins with what was originally a Jewish text: the Hebrew Scriptures. As primarily (Christian) ecclesiastical institutions, the first European universities were dedicated in part to the study of Biblical Hebrew, and pioneering American colleges such as Harvard and Yale replicated these requirements. The modern institutionalization of Jewish Studies as an academic inquiry began with the 1819 establishment of the Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft des Judentums (Society for Jewish Culture and Science) in Berlin. Though this was the first organization dedicated to the study of Jewish culture with a historistic focus, rather than a Christian or rabbinic one, it replicated previous presumptions and preoccupations by focusing primarily on classical Jewish texts such as Talmud and Midrash, and medieval Jewish thinkers such as Rashi and Maimonides, to the deliberate exclusion of contemporary Jewish culture conducted in vernacular languages such as Yiddish or Ladino (or German), along with non-rational strains within Jewish thought such as mysticism, messianism, or heresy.

In the American academy, the establishment of Jewish Studies departments and programs—distinct from general, often implicitly Christian, “religious studies” departments—dates mostly from the 1960s and 1970s, and constitutes a response to the lifting of quotas restricting Jewish enrollment and hiring, as well as the growth of ethnic consciousness among American minority groups; this parallels an analogous growth in Latino and African American Studies. American academic divisions in Jewish Studies during the 1960s and 1970s nonetheless often extended the legacy of Wissenschaft des Judentums by focusing on Jewish religious culture rather than the practice of everyday life, political ideology, or modern literary forms. In Israel, by comparison, the study of modern literature in Jewish languages such as Hebrew or Yiddish was an integral component of academic culture from the very outset, and the study of literature in modern Hebrew was as constitutive an act in the creation of a national culture as any more concrete exercise in nation-building (or nation-imagining). The function of literary study as an extension, or construction, of national culture tended until the late 1960s to focus on the ideological
functions of literature, its purported usefulness to the national project, rather than the aesthetic criteria being institutionalized contemporaneously in the academic cultures of other national literatures. Whether in Israel or the US, therefore, for much of the twentieth century the study of Jewish texts often effaced precisely their literariness.

A representative, and excellent, document illustrating the major trends in American Jewish Studies in this period is an anthology edited by Judah Goldin (1914–98), titled *The Jewish Expression* (Goldin 1970; 1976). As Goldin writes in a postscript to his own introduction for the volume, this collection began life as a course reader for a seminar he taught to ten undergraduate students at Yale University in the late 1960s, none of whom could read Hebrew. Elsewhere in the introduction he explains, “In the title of the volume and these introductory remarks I have used the word ‘expression’ as a kind of shorthand. It is intended to serve the purposes of what is generally called literature—in that event, we are discussing literary expression. … For the most part, it is true, the essays deal with aspects of literature (hence the direction taken also by the introductory comments); but not entirely” (Goldin 1970; 1976: xiii).

What the collection consists of, in fact, are essays on historiography, halakha (ritual law), the Maccabean uprising, the concept of revelation among Jewish Hellenists, medieval liturgical poetry, classical Jewish mysticism, Spinoza’s critique of religion, Martin Buber’s reclamation of Hasidic thought and storytelling, and the culture of the Lithuanian yeshiva. The one contribution by a belletristic author, Sh. Y. Agnon (to date the only Hebrew writer to receive the Nobel Prize in literature) is a two-page meditation on the Kaddish prayer in the (then) new context of the State of Israel. Clearly, what Goldin and most of his contributors—few, if any, of whom were directly involved in the preparation of the volume—meant by the term “literature” is far different from the critical study of modern literary forms such as the novel, the autobiography, lyric poetry, or drama written in Jewish languages or from a professed Jewish perspective.

To make this observation is not to condemn Goldin or his contemporaries, but merely to identify them as products of their historical moment, when both the unlimited consideration of Jewish culture within the academy, and the unrestricted access of Jews to institutions of higher learning were still new and essentially untested. A number of events and trends have intervened since then that account for how the field of Jewish literary studies has gone from an endeavor that could be effectively summarized in a single well-chosen anthology to the current era of prolixity and perplexity.

**Jewish literature and Jewish languages**

One of the most obvious and urgent trends to develop in the wake of Jewish Studies’ original disciplinary efflorescence has been the rise of modern literary studies focusing on Jewish languages. Prior to the 1970s, Hebrew had been studied in American and European universities primarily from a perspective of Biblical Studies, sometimes with no connection to the Jewishness of (the first half of) the Biblical canon and often with little reference to Hebrew as a modern, spoken language. The impact on diaspora Jewish consciousness of the 1967 Six-Day War—which radically intensified American and European Jewish identification with Israel and, for example, prompted many diaspora synagogues and religious pedagogy programs to adopt the cadence and pronunciation of modern Hebrew anachronistically for liturgical purposes—certainly influenced a change in this status. In institutional terms, a watershed moment toward the elevation of modern Hebrew literature was the 1975 publication of *Modern Hebrew Literature*, an anthology edited and translated by Robert Alter (Alter 1975). This volume offered a canon of modern Hebrew literature spanning from its origins with Mendele Moicher Sforim (Sh. Y. Abramovitsh, c. 1835–1917) and Y. L. Peretz (1852–1915) to contemporary Israelis such
as A. B. Yehoshua (b. 1936) and Amos Oz (b. 1939). Both as a public intellectual and as a university professor, Alter has provided for the past generation a blueprint for the study of modern Hebrew literature.

Around the same time the Israeli scholar Dan Miron published his first book in English, *A Traveler Disguised* (Miron 1973), devoted to the Yiddish writings of the bilingual (Yiddish and Hebrew) author Mendele Mocher Sforim. As a product of the Israeli academic system, and a (rebellious) student of the Israeli philologist Dov Sadan (1902–89), Miron took as a given the centrality of belletristic literature in Hebrew and Yiddish to modern Jewish culture. He broke, however, from his mentor by stressing the radical discontinuities between Yiddish and Hebrew in the modern era, their distinctive challenges to creating literature. Where Hebrew lacked the semantic resources to describe contemporary life, writers never doubted the aesthetic merit of using it as a literary language; though Yiddish was the natural vehicle for describing the everyday life of Ashkenazic Jews, its writers expressed profound anxiety, shame, and reluctance to use a despised *zhargon* for serious intellectual purposes. The natural consequence for the development of modern Jewish literature was to reserve Yiddish for satirical parodies, an aesthetic of the grotesque. Given this radical departure from Sadan’s notion of a constructive interdependence between vernacular Yiddish and literary Hebrew, Miron’s decision to publish a book—in English, in America—focusing on only half of Mendele’s output was part of a larger strategy that resulted for the next three decades in Miron dividing his career between primarily Hebrew-language scholarship on Hebrew literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and primarily English-language scholarship on Yiddish at Columbia University in New York.

Thus, for both Alter and Miron, although the study of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature, respectively, is but one aspect of a much larger intellectual project, they can each be credited as the originators of this field of study in the contemporary sense. Nonetheless, an instructive contrast can be drawn between these two scholars, with resonance for the whole field of modern Jewish literary studies, over the question of literary theory. At precisely the moment when these two professors were establishing themselves, the study of the humanities generally was in a process of re-defining itself under the influence of a new theoretical lexicon—identified in various iterations as post-structuralism, deconstruction, formalism, critical theory, or continental philosophy—derived primarily from French (and secondarily from German and Russian) sources. Although a conspicuous number of the leading figures in this diverse and fractious movement were Jews, at the outset almost none of them addressed explicitly Jewish topics in their writing. During that era, similarly, scholars of Jewish literature maintained an often-ambivalent relationship with this discourse. Alter, for example, has almost completely disregarded this entire conceptual landscape. The consequence of this for his criticism can often result in little reference to the critical views of his contemporaries or a sense of how the literature he considers contributes to a larger historical or aesthetic project. For example, his brief, excellent book of lectures *Canon and Creativity* (2000) offers elegant readings of the Hebrew poet Haim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934), together with James Joyce and Franz Kafka, to illustrate the rather evident fact that the Bible has exerted a significant influence on twentieth-century literature.

Miron, by contrast, came of age just as the Structuralism to which subsequent trends in literary theory have reacted took root in Israeli criticism, and his own writing has frequently employed a personal, even idiosyncratic take on psychoanalytical theory, to considerable effect. What began, therefore, as a resistance to the mythos of a unified Jewish culture that bolstered the teleology of Zionism has become an examination of the psychological, linguistic, and formal fault-lines that have contributed to the fractiousness and fragmentary character of modern Jewish ideologies as well as the aesthetics of Jewish-language modernism. Miron’s career has thus been much more heavily engaged with...
questions of literary theory than Alter’s; his recent book, *From Continuity to Contiguity* (2010), is as much a history of Jewish-language literary criticism from the mid-nineteenth century to his own contemporaries, as it is a consideration of belles-lettres authors such as Mendele, Bialik, Kafka, Sholem Aleichem or the current state of Jewish, and particularly Hebrew, belles-lettres.

**Literary theory and rabbinic hermeneutics**

While the last three decades have seen the study of modern literature in Jewish languages established as an integral component in the Jewish Studies curriculum, the question of whether the study of Jewish literatures can be seen as fundamental or integral to the study of modern literature as such remains unresolved. One means of understanding this question, however, is to consider the ways in which a reciprocal relationship has emerged since the 1980s between the canonical body of Jewish texts (Rabbinics) and the contemporary practice of literary theory. The most important example of this phenomenon is Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick’s anthology *Midrash and Literature* (Hartman and Budick 1986). The starting premise of this collection was to recognize midrash not merely as a genre of rabbinic commentary, but also a hermeneutic method unto itself—one that, in a postmodern reading, first and foremost emphasizes intertextuality, but also rhetorical play, contingency and contiguity, analogical strategies over logical ones, and the constructive if radical juxtaposition of multiple languages and temporalities.

An example of how, and why, midrash functions is evident in the compendium *Bereshis rabbah*, the largest and most significant rabbinic commentary to the Book of Genesis. There the third-century sage Resh Lakish reads the second verse of the Hebrew Bible—“And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep/And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Gen. I, 2)—as follows:

**And the earth was without form** symbolizes Babylonia: *I beheld the earth, and lo it was waste* (Jer. IV, 23); **and void** symbolizes Media [Persia]: *they hastened to bring Haman* (Est.VI, 14).**1 And darkness** symbolizes Greece, which darkened the eyes of Israel with its decrees, ordering Israel, “Write on the horn of an ox that you have no portion in the God of Israel.” **Upon the face of the deep**—this wicked State [the Roman Empire under whose occupation the Jewish kingdom had fallen in 70 CE]: just as the great deep cannot be plumbed, so one cannot plumb [the iniquity] of this wicked State. **And the spirit of God moved**: this alludes to the spirit of the Messiah, as you read, **And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him** (Isa. XI, 2).

*Midrash Rabbah* (Freedman 1938; 1983: 17)

In such a reading, which is one of five competing, mutually exclusive interpretations of the verse contained in this particular volume, from Resh Lakish and his contemporaries, the intent is neither to establish a literal meaning of the Biblical text, nor to mandate a single hermeneutical strategy for applying it. Midrash is only parabolic in a contingent, provisional sense. It is allegorical precisely in Walter Benjamin’s understanding—“Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things”—as representing the fallenness, rather than the authoritativeness, of language (Benjamin 1998: 178). It is “logocentric” only by default, because the revelation for which language substitutes is absent. Thus, the Biblical verse stands here in an intimate, reciprocally critical relationship with the rest of the Biblical canon, as well as with an understanding of Jewish history that, while culminating in messianic eschatology, nonetheless centers itself in the political crisis of its (reputed) author’s specific circumstance.
As this brief example demonstrates, midrash, operating parallel to the Western philosophical tradition, quietly turns the methodological assumptions of Western thought on their head, and as such provided practitioners of deconstruction with a precursor or prooftext for their own theories. In Hartman and Budick’s anthology, accordingly, scholars of rabbinic literature such as Judah Goldin, David Stern, Joseph Dan, and Moshe Idel appear alongside literary theorists such as Hartman, Budick, Frank Kermode, and Jacques Derrida, and the topics covered within its pages include historical and methodological descriptions of midrash in rabbinic practice, the interrelationship between midrash and Jewish mysticism (Kabala), the presence of midrash in John Milton’s poetry, and quasi-midrashic readings of *Robinson Crusoe*, Jorge Luis Borges, Kafka, Agnon, and Paul Celan.

The intersection of midrash with postmodern theory proved to be mutually productive for ensuing scholarship in the field of Rabbinics and the subsequent fate of deconstruction. For Rabbinics, the encounter with literary theory continues to distinguish the most significant and sophisticated scholarship in the field, whether in the United States or Israel. For deconstruction, and specifically the later career of Jacques Derrida, the implicit acknowledgment of midrash as a critical practice presaged a larger turn in deconstructive theory from Western philosophy, toward questions of politics, religion, and a more explicitly subjective, even autobiographical perspective. One example of this shift is to be encountered in Derrida’s essay *Monolingualism of the Other: or, the Prosthesis of Origin* (Derrida 1996; 1998), where the author considers the problems of language and particularly the postcolonial burdens of working in the French language from an explicitly North African and Jewish perspective. In effect, rather than offering an autobiographical narrative, Derrida constructs a midrash from his own life story, so that his experiences coming of age during World War II in Vichy-controlled Algeria become representative not only of specific instances of postcoloniality, national dislocation, or the Jewish encounter with modernity, but also of the philosophical fate of language—the placement of one language among others, the incorporation of multiple linguistic systems in a single language, and the inability of all languages to achieve signification.

**Emerging literary histories**

The shape of Jewish literary scholarship has also been influenced by historical events outside the academy, particularly the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, which brought an influx of scholars educated in Eastern Europe to the West, and the end of the Cold War, which brought about a reappraisal of Soviet–Jewish culture among scholars of literature. Soviet-trained scholars of Yiddish literature brought a breadth of archival experience—as well as comfort in using Yiddish as a language of scholarship—that few Western-trained scholars could match (Estraikh 1999; Kerler 1999; Krutikov 2001). Since then, the work of younger, Western-trained scholars has likewise brought to light new information and a perspective on Jewish life in the Soviet Union formulated after, and independent of, the political conflicts of the Cold War (Veidlinger 2000; Shneer 2004; Shternshis 2006; Moss 2009). In addition to this academic “Détente,” several scholars of Russian literature have turned to Yiddish, and in so doing their scholarship has reversed a characteristic trend of East European Jewish modernization by going from Russian to Yiddish, rather than the other way around (Safran 2010; Murav 2011; Glaser 2012). As a result of these efforts—whether from scholars actually trained in Soviet–Yiddish culture, younger Western-trained scholars, or Slavists recognizing the relationship between Russian and Yiddish culture—one can come to recognize the complexity of Jewish life under communism: not just the pathos of oppression, repression, and suppression but also its creative potential, as well as the ambiguities of its efforts to accommodate the implacable demands of totalitarianism. By
re-examining Soviet–Yiddish culture, these scholars have reconstructed a vast empirical and conceptual record of Jewish modernity, and they have established as historical fact for students of the period an ideological premise that early Leninism had codified and later Stalinism had destroyed—the indelible status of Yiddish as a national language for early-Soviet Jews. Indeed, the focus on Yiddish literature is an explicit consequence of Soviet language policy toward Jews; in the twenty years following the October Revolution the state actively and vigorously promoted Yiddish-language institutions, and prohibited the use of Hebrew. Although the state closed its Yiddish institutions by the end of the 1930s, and the leading Yiddish writers were murdered in the early 1950s, the continued cultural memory of Yiddish remained much stronger in the Soviet Union than in the West (Shneer 2004; Moss 2009).

In addition to integrating Russian-trained and Slavicist-oriented scholars into the academic culture of contemporary Yiddish Studies, this development has unsettled the study of Yiddish literature from a conventional comparison—whether implicit, as in the case of Miron’s English-language scholarship, or explicit, as in the practice of the journal *Prooftexts*—with modern Hebrew literature. It has moreover expanded the geography of Jewish literary studies to incorporate Russia and Eastern Europe in addition to the United States, Canada, and Israel.

At the same time as the rarefied study of modern Jewish literature received a new infusion of scholars, resources, and topics of consideration, a larger trend in the American academy—and in a somewhat different sense, Canada and Great Britain, as well—introduced a new set of debates about the politics of literary studies to an academic culture that had grown weary of the abstraction and arcana associated with deconstruction. “Multiculturalism” in the US and “Cultural Studies” in the UK included approaches such as Afrocentrism, critical race theory, gender studies, queer theory, and the new historicism, seeking to challenge what was seen as the hegemony of a literary culture over-dominated by a restrictive canon of masterworks via a focus of literary study around questions of performance, material culture, vernacularity, and historicity. The response to its challenge of reckoning has become the signal event in Jewish Studies of the last two decades.

As with critical theory, the role of Jews and Jewish culture in the “multiculturalism debates” was ambivalent. To the extent to which such debates concerned the establishment of diversity requirements in American academic curriculums, the question of whether Jews, or other primarily European immigrants to the United States, qualified as sufficiently “Other” to be “multicultural” spoke more to a lack of clarity in the new discourse than the historical status of Jews as an ethnicity. With respect to Jews, the new multiculturalist rhetoric appeared at its most complacent to reiterate the prejudice it sought to ameliorate: where Jews had once been excluded from academic life for being insufficiently European, now they risked exclusion ostensibly for having assimilated *too well* to European and white American society (Biale et al. 1998). Nonetheless, the curriculum of multiculturalism in the US inevitably influenced the growth of identity politics within Jewish Studies, including the reclamation of ethnic Jewish authors as candidates for inclusion in a revised American literary canon.

The term “multiculturalism” in the United States has been a misnomer primarily because the concept of a single nation possessing several independent cultures—the metaphor of “the salad bowl” seeking to replace the venerable image of “the melting pot”—never convincingly characterized American society. Most pressingly, the concept of multiculturalism as it has been employed in the United States has been with few exceptions a surprisingly monolingual affair, and therefore as much as it claimed to resist the homogenizing rhetoric of previous Americanist discourses, it only reiterated their practices with respect to language, and with respect to insisting on a binary opposition in American society between whites and people of color. In Canada, by contrast, because the society has been bilingual (English and French) historically, and its various
immigrant populations have on the whole arrived more recently, the multiculturalist movement has been much more linguistically diverse and ethnically distinct than in the US, less oriented around representing diversity in the public sphere than around maintaining the autonomy of ethnic communities. For these reasons, the study of Jewish literature can be seen as signifying a potential rupture or anomaly within American multiculturalist discourse, whereas it can be identified as a primary example, even a success story, of Canadian multiculturalism.

In the UK, meanwhile, the study of Jewish literature emerged in the context of postcolonial studies and cultural studies. Distinct from US “multiculturalism,” postcolonial studies focused on communities—primarily African–Caribbean and Indian subcontinental—that shared a history of imperialism, diaspora, and intertwined immigration patterns. Their experience of immigration was much more recent, and their ongoing connection to sites of origin much more immediate than in North America. For this historical reason, as well as the theoretical affiliations of its founding scholars with specific strands of British Marxism and Gramscian analysis, this discourse maintained a much more internationalist perspective than its American or Canadian counterparts. Its most influential work in this respect is Paul Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Modern Consciousness (1993), which identifies the political fate and cultural practices of the African diaspora in the Caribbean, the United States, and Great Britain as constitutive phenomena to global modernity. Central to the argument of this work are the common cultural features, elective affinities, and instructive contrasts between the Jewish diaspora and the Black Atlantic.

In turn, the influence that various multiculturalist discourses have exerted on the study of Jewish culture over the past two decades has been in every respect inarguable. From the outset, the question of whether, and when, Jews were reckoned as part of the white American hegemony provoked a contentious scholarly debate, most deftly discussed in Eric Goldstein’s book The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity (2006). Meanwhile, within the field of Jewish Studies, there have been various moves toward diversity.

One important development over the past two decades has been the growth of gender studies in the field of Jewish literature. As the editors of Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature (1992) note, the first inklings of a feminist approach to Jewish literary studies only began in the mid-1980s, no less than a decade after these strategies and ideologies had been integrated into mainstream literary studies (Sokoloff et al. 1992). Since then however, feminist literary criticism has recovered for the study of Jewish literature significant Yiddish and Hebrew writers such as Rahel (Bluwstein), Lea Goldberg, Shulamith Hareven, Dahlia Ravikovitch, Orly Castel-Bloom (all Hebrew writers), Esther Singer Kreitman—the sister of Isaac Bashevis Singer—Celia Dropkin, Rokhl Korn, Chava Rosenfarb, Malka Heifetz-Tussman (all, including Kreitman, Yiddish writers), and Dvora Baron (a bilingual writer). Moreover, scholars have made significant contributions to a gendered understanding of modern Jewish literary culture by examining meta-textual questions such as the role of women readers in shaping Jewish literature and the social semiotics of Hebrew and Yiddish in Ashkenazic culture (Parush 2001, 2004; Seidman 1997).

The beginnings of Sephardic Studies is another aspect of diversification within Jewish Studies. Although the rabbinical, philosophical, and belles-lettres culture of medieval Iberia (al-Andalus)—written exclusively in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Judeo-Arabic—has been a preoccupation in Jewish Studies since the era of Wissenschaft des Judentums, and the ideal of a Jewish–Muslim–Christian convivencia preceding the Spanish Inquisition animated liberal Jewish aspirations in Europe during the nineteenth century, the recognition of modern, post-expulsion Sephardic culture has lagged significantly behind the focus on Ashkenazic culture and its diaspora, and its literatures in Yiddish and Hebrew. However, new work in Sephardic studies now includes work on modern
religious writing in Ladino and rabbinic culture in the Ottoman Empire (Lehmann 2005), modern Ladino theatre, journalism and belles-lettres (Borovaya 2011), as well as the ground-breaking cross-cultural comparative study, Making Jews Modern: the Yiddish and Ladino Press in the Russian and Ottoman Empires (Stein 2004), and work that considers contemporary Ladino poetry comparatively with French, Hebrew, and Spanish models.

Although the study of Sephardic culture is a welcome and long overdue component of contemporary Jewish Studies, one should not seek a sense of parity between Ladino literature and the primary languages of Ashkenazic modernity, Hebrew and Yiddish. Where Jewish intellectuals in the Czarist or Austrian empires had a choice among three or four languages (Hebrew, Russian or German, Yiddish, and following the dissolution of these empires new national languages such as Polish, Czech, or Hungarian), the most prestigious and significant language of the modern Sephardic diaspora, particularly in the bellettristic realm, was French. Rather than attempting to quantify linguistic and ethnic diversity within modern Jewish culture, the most sophisticated linguistic and philological models today stress a continuum in Jewish language use that allows scholars to understand the interconnectedness and variability among all the languages that Jews have spoken and written. As the linguist Benjamin Hary has argued, “This is why the idea of the Jewish linguistic spectrum is helpful. It allows us to place Jewish language varieties on a continuum stretching from those with a high concentration of the most prominent distinct linguistic characteristics that differentiate them linguistically and culturally from the surrounding ‘dominant’ language varieties (e.g. Yiddish) to those with only few and marginal traits (e.g. varieties of secular Jewish English). Other forms of Jewish linguistic practice are located somewhere between these two poles” (Hary 2011: 44).

Beyond Jewish languages

In this regard, one can recognize a significant intensification of interest in the Jewish character, whatever that may mean to individual scholars, of literature written by and about Jews in national vernaculars such as English, French, or German (for example, Reizbaum 1999; Samuels 2009; Suchoff 2011; Gilman and Zipes 1997). At perhaps the furthest extreme, the Israeli–American critic Michael Kramer has argued in a provocative essay—“Race, Literary History, and the ‘Jewish’ Question”—that any work of literature written by a Jewish person, regardless of its content or the author’s affiliation, counts as “Jewish” literature (Kramer 2001). In a sense, this essay cuts the Gordian knot of Jewish literary criticism, and more broadly the question of Jewish identity, by declaring that Jewish literature is whatever Jewish people write, irrespective of Jewish cultural markers such as language, theme, or more debatably authorial intent. Beneath this cheerfully inclusive thesis, one can moreover detect an influence on Kramer’s thought of the Zionistic embrace of every strand in Jewish culture, even its most unaffiliated aspects, as the consequence and constituents of an indivisible, intangible, Jewishness; his championing of every Jewish-originated writer as a participant in “Jewish literature” calls to mind both the “ingathering of exiles” at the heart of Zionist and Jewish messianic thought, as well as the contemporary Israeli “law of return” granting citizenship to any person able to demonstrate Jewish origins seeking to settle in the Land of Israel. At the same time, his premise argues for a radically American democratization of Jewish literature, implicitly equating writers with essentially no affiliation or even sympathy for the Jewish religion or Jewish peoplehood with authors steeped, however critically, in Jewish learning, religious practice, and language.

According to the logic of this essay, Nathanael West, Boris Pasternak, or Clarice Lispector would count in equal measure to Mendele Mocher Sforim, Sh. Y. Agnon, or Abraham Cahan not merely as Jewish writers, but creators of Jewish literature. And yet, if a defining
characteristic of Jewish literature is the use of historically Jewish languages, then where or how might one locate authors such as the American–Arab–Israeli writer Anton Shammas, whose work includes poetry in Arabic, translations and a novel in Hebrew, and significant essays in English on the predicament of Arab (i.e., non-Jewish) culture in Israel? It is worth considering the challenge that Shammas’s one novel (to date), Arabesket (“Arabesques,” 1986), poses to any notion of, variously, Jewish, Arab, or Israeli literature: written in Hebrew, depicting primarily Arabic-speaking characters, it tells two parallel stories—a family saga fictively retelling the author’s own family history, and an ironic account of the author’s pursuit of a phantom cousin while traveling to and participating in an international writer’s conference in Iowa—that together split the difference between postcolonial and postmodern literary discourse (Shammas 1986).

The family saga, for example, is a privileged genre in postcolonial literature, particularly in Latin American fiction, since as a genre it serves to dramatize a dispossessed people’s rootedness in a land and a history from which they have otherwise been effaced. However evident the appeal of this genre might be for an Arab–Israeli writer, who nonetheless resides today in the United States, the novel’s play of identities, language, temporality, and genre indicate its contemporaneity with a cosmopolitan postmodernism, for which the encounter with global modernity, in contrast to the angst and crisis of literary modernism, provides the occasion for advertising the liberating possibilities offered by multiple nationalities, languages, and styles. If the encounter between tradition and modernity for Jewish modernists had resulted in a sense of loss and homelessness in the face of both of these power structures, the same encounter for postmodernists such as Shammas suggests the prospect of being at home in multiplicity. Shammas’s fiction thus offers a profound parallel to Derrida’s thesis in Monolingualism of the Other: just as Derrida describes his own relationship to French, Arabesques is written in a language that does not “belong” to its author. And yet, in its fluent mastery of Hebrew idiom as well as its richly allusive interplay between Hebrew and Arabic storytelling forms, Shammas’s novel reveals in its own dislocation a familiarity with the Jewish textual tradition that is far more intimate and inextricable than the writing of most Jewish authors not working in a Jewish language.

Shammas’s novel, in unwitting tandem with Kramer’s essay, therefore poses the question of how Jewish literature might, and must, be defined beyond Jewish languages. Today, more than 60 percent of the people identifying as Jews in the world live outside of Israel, and therefore use non-Jewish languages in their daily life, while approximately 20 percent of the Israeli population is non-Jewish but nonetheless Hebrew-speaking. Ultimately, what is the meaning of “Jewish culture” or “Jewish identity” when the great majority of people identifying as Jews, whether in Israel or not, maintain modern lifestyles characterized neither by traditional religious observance nor intensive study of traditional texts? However radically Kramer has framed his solution to this quandary, the question his essay takes up is significant not just for the problems it poses for the definition of Jewish literature, but more broadly for the meaning of Jewishness as such. One might suggest, therefore, that just as Benjamin Hary has proposed a “Jewish linguistic spectrum,” so too must one think today of a “Jewish literary spectrum,” that can include the multiple affiliations, juxtapositions, and languages in which Jewish literature might be identified. For a writer like Anton Shammas, like many of his contemporaries in world literature, as well as his predecessors in the creation of Jewish literature, the pulse of identity in formulations such as American–Arab–Israeli, like Derrida’s Franco–Maghrebian Jewishness, or Alexander Harkavy’s 1928 Yiddish–English–Hebrew Dictionary, must be measured at the hyphens that bring these affiliations into uneasy relation.

Kramer is part of a coterie of American–born Israeli scholars, including most prominently Hana Wirth-Nesher and Emily Miller Budick, who have produced much of the most astute literary criticism on Anglophone Jewish–American literature of late. Call It English (Wirth-Nesher
Marc Caplan

(2006), for example, is an insightful study of the linguistic tensions within ostensibly English-language fiction by Jewish writers, revealing to what extent echoes of Hebrew and Yiddish, among other languages, inform and undercut (intercut?) this literature. *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* (Budick 1998) is one of the best treatments of precisely the multicultural question of how African Americans and Jewish Americans, as preeminent examples of ethnicity in the United States, engage in a common struggle with the meaning of American culture via a dialogical, often agonistic encounter with one another. In complementary ways, these works demonstrate that American Jewish fiction can be neither distinguished nor essentialized as “American,” or as “Jewish,” but in its unsettled negotiation with both identifications must be read through a larger linguistic, historical, and cultural series of affiliations and ruptures.

**High, low, and middlebrow**

In contrast to this focus on a “canonical” definition of belletristic literature is a dynamic field of popular and mass cultural literary studies that has recovered a good number of neglected writers and writing from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe, Israel, and the Americas (Eshed 2002; Weinbaum 2005; Hess et al. 2013). Work in this field also contributes to thinking of a Jewish literary spectrum, with studies that pay particular attention to middlebrow fiction, subcultural writing, audience reception, and image-texts in addition to languages (Roth 2004; Ben-Ari 2008; Baskind and Omer-Sherman 2008; Finkelman 2011). New thinking has also emerged from cultural studies, using the techniques and assumptions of critical theory as they have developed in the study of philosophy, literature, history, and law in order to study topics in visual culture, popular culture, and the practice of everyday life. The work of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has been pioneering in opening up the fields of Jewish ethnography, visual culture, performance studies, museum studies, and tourism studies; although her research has been focused primarily on topics in Jewish culture, her influence extends to the theory and methodology in each of these fields, whether in a Jewish context or not.

Similarly influential is the work of the cultural historian Sander Gilman, primarily on German–Jewish culture. Among the topics that his research has shaped are included the rhetoric of Jewish self-hatred, the image of the Jewish body, myths of Jewish intelligence, and the intersection of Jewish culture with medical history. The greatest influence each of these scholars has exerted on the field of Jewish literature has not been to offer new definitions of literary study, or even new perspectives on Jewish authors—unless, in the case of Gilman, one considers Freud to be a belletristic writer—but rather to establish a reciprocity between literary and cultural studies so that one methodology informs the other. Such methodology is evident in Jeffrey Shandler’s *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (2006), which examines the status of Yiddish following the Holocaust, and includes in its purview contemporary translations both from and to Yiddish, the sociology of Yiddish language pedagogy, the use of Yiddish among non-native speakers, the popularity of Yiddish-language kitsch (*tschotsches*), and the international popularity of contemporary klezmer music. Although the focus of this research pursues the cultural studies mandate of analyzing the practice of everyday life to an extraordinary degree, Shandler’s influence on the whole field of contemporary Yiddish Studies has been pervasive and salutary, and in turn both the prominence of this new discourse as well as the centrality of cultural studies to Jewish Studies can be seen as reformulating essential methodological questions about what constitutes the study of literature, language, or culture.

What each of these developments demonstrates—from the beginning of Jewish Studies as an institutional discipline to the impact of critical theory to the proliferation of multiculturalism in all of its aspects—is a common structure in the recent history of Jewish literary study; from a
position of belatedness in the reception of a new discourse, scholars within the field of Jewish Studies have assimilated new methodologies and theories in a way that changes both the inherited discourse and the way in which Jewish culture has been defined and studied. At the heart of this process is a series of questions that has in fact constituted Jewish culture since the Biblical Abraham set his sights on the land of Canaan: to what extent is Jewish culture, however defined, a unique, autonomous, and independent phenomenon, and to what extent is it a creative amalgamation of its surrounding cultures with its past influences? How can the study of modern Jewish literature be a study of Jewish culture, and how can it be the study of modern literature, when it must inevitably be both?

Notes

1 The connection between “void” and “hastens” is an untranslatable, and somewhat forced, word play; *voḥu*—void—and *wَلَِلَّا*—“they hastened.”

2 The translation here differs negligibly from the published version. For a more contemporary midrash on this verse, see (or, rather, hear!) Bob Dylan, “Spirit on the Water” (Dylan 2006).

**Essential reading**

Derrida, Jacques (1998) *The Monolingualism of the Other: or, The Prostheis of Origin*, Trans. Patrick Mensah. Stanford: Stanford University Press. A stunningly lucid, elegant, brief inquiry into the meaning of language in creating and frustrating cultural identification, it illustrates the structures of political domination that determine linguistic and literary expression, while demonstrating the inevitability of writing to trespass and subvert these expectations. This is as good an example of how a Jewish experience of the world can shape and transform a consciousness of global modernity as it slouches toward the beginnings of the postmodern.


Harshav, Benjamin and Harshav, Barbara (eds) (1986) *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, Berkeley: University of California Press. The best case ever made for the significance of Yiddish poetry to an understanding of literary modernism, and an excellent introduction to modern Yiddish literature, including invaluable critical perspectives as well as significant historical documentation.

Miron, Dan (2010) *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking*, Stanford: Stanford University Press. The monumental and magisterial summation of views on the modern history of Jewish literature as well as the significance of literary criticism in Jewish languages from the single most important scholar of these subjects working in the contemporary era.


**Bibliography**


Eshed, E. (2002) Mi-tarzan ve-'ad zbeng: Ha-sipur shel ha-sifrut ha-popularit ha-'Ivrit [From Tarzan to Zbeng: the story of Israeli pop fiction], Tel Aviv: Bavel [Hebrew].


