Dialogues of Generations in Post-Holocaust Jewish American Fiction

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"In that apartment Josh and Mickey had grown up answering in English the Yiddish of their parents." This sentence is quoted from *Envy, or Yiddish in America* (1969), a short story by Cynthia Ozick (1928-), which tells about fierce verbal fights in a group of Jewish bellestrists living in New York City. As the quotation and the entire story point out, tensions are per definition implied in Jewish American literature. Of course the particular nature of these tensions depends on how one sets up the definition, but there is undoubtedly a significant corpus with authors and texts rooted both in Jewish and in American traditions, and it inevitably involves questions of whether and how the two legacies can be integrated. That challenge has been answered in several ways from the rejection or neglect of either component to various attempts at the combination of the two. Succeeding primary and secondary texts reflecting on Jewish American identity and on Jewish American literature can thus be read as an ongoing dialogue trying to address issues of the double commitment and offering diverse solutions from time to time. My paper will focus on four pieces of Jewish American fiction which not only participate in that dialogue but represent its problems in the form of cross-generational dialogues themselves. Another shared feature of them is that they are all - directly or indirectly - responses to the Holocaust. Otherwise, their authors, genres and approaches greatly differ and the dates of their publication cover almost fifty years. As such, studying them might allow the reader to trace some tendencies in the self-reflective transformations of Jewish American literature during the second half of the 20th century.

Jewish American literature is very much a question of definition. Not only its limits or attributes but even its existence is the target of much dispute, so any reference to it necessarily relies on somewhat arbitrary premises. In this paper, I will follow the most widely accepted practice of discussing authors who have declared themselves to be of Jewish origin and, at least partly, worked in the US, written in English and overtly addressed Jewish issues on the thematic level of their fiction. Besides meeting these
criteria, the four pieces of literature to be examined now have dialogue as a core structural element in common. In my first two examples, dialogue takes the form of debates between protagonists who try to convince each other about the preference of either Jewish or American culture. The second two instances also abound in dialogues, but conversations have different functions here: both books are based on double narratives with the plotline later in time deriving from the interpretation of the actions of a previous generation. So in the former cases, dialogues take place between two standpoints trying to gain dominance over each other, while the latter two examples represent how the protagonists can only unfold their stories and come to terms with themselves and the community as a result of dialogues with former generations. In chronological order, my first example is *Eli, the Fanatic*, a short story in *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), Philip Roth's (1933-) first collection. The second one, the already cited *Envy, or Yiddish in America* was published ten years later. The other two works are close to the end of the century: Art Spiegelman's (1948-) Holocaust comics, *Maus I-II* came out in two volumes in 1986 and 1991, and Paul Auster's (1947-) novel, *The Book of Illusions* was published in 2002.

Though chronologically speaking the order above is valid regarding the time of both the publications of the stories and the actions represented by them (in each case at least one of the plotlines is approximately contemporaneous to the writing), I suggest a change in the order of treating them because of the logic of generations, another curious concept in Jewish American literature. I will start with Ozick's short story, for its protagonist is a first generation immigrant to the US, an elderly Jewish poet desperate for having lost almost all of his readers since they have either perished in the Holocaust or given up "mamaloshen", their Yiddish mother tongue for the language of their new hosting countries. In contrast to him, Eli, the protagonist mentioned in the title of Roth's short story, is a fully integrated American citizen. A lawyer by profession, he is also the chosen representative of the local Jewish community - consisting of similarly assimilated descendants of immigrants - in a legal case against a group of newly arrived Holocaust-survivors. The Holocaust is central to Spiegelman's books as well, shown from the double perspectives of first and second generation survivors. Finally, Auster seems to care about generations in neither of the former senses of the word – as he doesn't start to count family members either from the first immigrants or from the survivors -, still, the structure of his novel is based on the parallel stories of two protagonists with decades between them in age, just like in the book of Spiegelman, and it is also full of motifs frequent in Holocaust literature. Following the suggested order rather than a strictly chronologic one, we might better understand some of the interactions between succeeding generations of authors in Jewish American literature.

Ozick clearly designates the topic of her short story in the title: *Envy, or Yiddish in America*. The narrative follows Edelshtein's point of view, an aging Yiddish poet bitterly envious of his colleague, Yankel Ostrover, "a thinly disguised caricature of Isaac Bashevis Singer" (1902-1991), the most distinguished American author who wrote in Yiddish, while achieving fame world-wide in English translation. Singer himself was aware of his work belonging to more than one culture and often reflected - directly on indirectly - on the difficulties of their reconciliation. Rejoicing at the success of their literary integration, he could still identify himself in his Nobel acceptance speech (1974) using more or less distinct categories: "I am happy to call myself a Jewish writer, a Yiddish writer, an American writer." Besides, in an introduction to his collected short stories he makes an
apparently off-topic remark which nevertheless sets forth what the essential subject of literature is according to him: it should "reflect the combinations and complications of heredity and environment". The inevitable conflict of (Jewish) heritage and (American) future was in the focus of his essay Problems of Yiddish Prose in America too, where he "argued that the old language [...] sounds utterly absurd in an American context" and "the only alternative for a writer of Yiddish prose was to return to a reimagined past". Similarly to Singer, Cynthia Ozick also responded to problem of yiddishkeit (Jewishness in its Diaspora sense) disappearing from the face of the Earth as a result of the Holocaust and she suggested that English could take over the function of Yiddish as a new lingua franca.

5 Returning to Ozick's story, its reader may have the impression that it consists of nothing else but the protagonist's multifarious meditations on the issues indicated above. However, the monotonous dilemmas concerning Yiddish versus English are clad in various forms. Actually, we get an astonishing number of narrative modes and even genres within the short story: realistic passages and conversations alternate with stream of consciousness, there are inserted poems, jokes, advertisements quoted verbatim, parts of interviews, lectures and translations, summaries of further short stories, unsent letters etc. (It is worth mentioning that the letters bear an important and probably not quite accidental literary reference to a significant piece of Jewish American literature published only a few years before Envy. Their style may easily remind the reader of the graphomanic protagonist's fictive letters in the novel Herzog (1964) by Saul Bellow, who was not only a Nobel laureate Jewish American author like I. B. Singer, but also translated some of the latter's fiction.) Though most of the texts remain fragmented. This exuberance of narrative modes accompanied with a sense of incompleteness which characterizes many of the parts and the short story as a whole as well, seems to be in parallel with the fate of prolific but unsuccessful Edelshtein; a metaphor of his literary attempts and failures on the meta-level of narrative techniques.

6 The plot is simple and offers no resolution. Edelshtein goes to a reading given by Ostrover where he meets a young girl called Hannah and asks her to be his translator but she refuses his demand. Edelshtein, on the one hand, despises Ostrover because of his success in English translation, while, on the other hand, he desperately tries to get a translator for himself. Accordingly, there are two sets of dialogues unfolding more or less in parallel, still in sharp contrast to each other. The first set takes place among Edelshtein and his contemporaries: Ostrover, two of his translators - both are the uncles of Hannah - and the editor of the local Yiddish literary magazine, depicting thus a rather comprehensive tableau of Yiddish literary life in the 60's. The second set of dialogues consists of Edelshtein's short conversations with, and long, unfinished letters to Hannah. Ostrover is severely condemned by Edelshtein for having left the narrowed but homely worldview of the shtetl, the Yiddish town, thus becoming a writer accepted all around the world: "his Yiddish was impure [...] his subject matter [...] was insanely sexual, pornographic, paranoid, freakish [...]. A pantheist, a pagan, a goy". Edelshtein is longing for success, still, he feels that the price of that would be the betrayal of Yiddish tradition, for a translation is never a true copy but rather a substitute of the original. He is trapped between two ambivalent ambitions: as a poet, he would like to give authentic voice to his past but he would equally like to be read, and there is no community reading in Yiddish any longer. His ancestors grow into a tragic burden impossible to be passed on to the next generation. His controversial state of mind is best demonstrated in a self-quotation. At
their first encounter, Hannah starts and Edelshtein finishes one of his early poems, saying: "Little fathers, little uncles [...] / You belong to the Angel of Death / I to you. [...] / I have no business of being your future." (69-70) Then in his first letter, the poet writes: "Grow old in Yiddish, Hannah, and carry fathers and uncles into the future with you." (74) The bitter irony of a situation where the link between the two characters is established by reciting verses which explicitly reject the idea of generations in continuation reveals the complexity of Ozick's approach. Her story is just as much a tribute to as polemics with I. B. Singer. Ironic representation eliminates the full approval of any character's opinion but the pressing need to choose assimilation in order to survive is pointed out with a precise sensitivity, while grief over a lost language and all the nuances, memories and lives stored in its words and extinguished for ever is expressed in the passionately poetic style of certain parts recalling the magic realism of Singer's stories. And just like Envy, the entire collection in which it was first published, The Pagan Rabbi is devoted to similar dilemmas and contradictions implied in Jewish American life and literature.

A conflict between Jewish and American culture is the central theme of Philip Roth's short story as well. But while Edelshtein was fighting with the heritage of his ancestors and with the reluctant future generation in the field of literature, Eli, the protagonist named in the title, is a middleman in a legal debate between already assimilated American Jews and first-generation Holocaust survivors. Eli Peck is a decent though slightly neurotic American attorney living in the town of Woodenton with a wife expecting their first child any day, and he is delegated by the local Jewish community to request the newly arrived immigrants to move somewhere else. The Jews of Woodenton - as they call themselves - integrated into the wealthy Protestant suburb a long time ago, and the eccentric appearance of the newcomers make them feel anxious about the safety and peace they enjoy. Their formal excuse against the group of survivors calling themselves the Yeshiva (Jewish elementary school) of Woodenton is a local law that prohibits the establishment of any school in a residential area in order to protect inhabitants from any disturbance. Eli, as a member and the chosen representative of the assimilated Jewish community tries and fails to mediate a compromise between his clients and yeshiva, which consists of a rabbi called Leo Tzuref, eighteen kids and a mysterious man of Eli's age who never speaks a word but is represented as the embodiment of the horror. "Eli saw him. At first it seemed only a deep hollow of blackness - then the figure emerged." They exchange words, letters and finally clothes along the story rich in rhetorical and symbolic elements, till the final scene, when Peck puts on the traditional black clothes of the mute character and goes to see his newborn son in the hospital in the provocative costume. That outcome is in sharp contrast with the conclusion of the previous story. Ozick seems to suggest that assimilation is inevitable, while Roth emphasizes that it is equally inevitable to undertake Jewish heritage. Ozick pointed out the impossibility of continuity between generations after the Holocaust, Roth, on the other hand, warns to the moral imperative of passing tradition on.

Beside the plot, there are at least three levels of the narrative that cooperate in the transmission of the message above. The interplay of the double rhetoric of "common sense" (278) versus "Talmudic wisdom" (267), the strongly visual symbolism and Freudian concepts result in a powerful representation of the American Jews' ambivalent situation after World War II. In their first dialogue, Tzuref calls Peck's attention to the possibility of
double interpretations. The attorney is first shocked by the rabbi's enigmatic discourse revealing the difference between human regulations and divine commandments: "When is the law that is the law not the law?" (251). Then he gradually takes on the awareness that utterances might carry completely opposed meanings if they are related to different contexts. For instance, in a phone conversation with one of his friends, Ted Heller blaming him for the inefficiency of his negotiations with Tzuref "Eli heard himself say, 'What happened, happened.'" (276). The friend's question "And what's happened?" (276) obviously refers to the legal matter they are talking about at the moment, while Eli can only think of the irreversible tragedy of the survivors. Along with him, the reader is also urged to seek hidden implications of apparently straightforward statements. An important group of metaphors systematically developed all along the story is connected to topographical concepts. Eli's very first sentence "It's the commuting that's killing" (250) is just a casual remark about traffic at first sight, but when rereading the story, it is obviously a concise summary of Eli's go-between position, since Woodenton is repeatedly described as the home of peace and safety, far from the threats of New York City and the world - just like there is a spiritual distance between the Jews of Woodenton and the survivors living in the yeshiva (which is located on top of a hill, also invoking the idea of moral heights). Consequently, Heller's reproving comment on the religious yeshiva ironically turns into a description of Woodenton - quite against the speaker's intentions. "All the place is, is a hideaway for people who can't face life. [...] They have all these superstitions, and why do you think? Because they can't face the world, because they can't take their place in society." (277) Peck is trapped between the two opposing parties since he feels tempted to identify with both groups, and the responsibilities of the father and husband trying to protect his family's private life clash with a broader sense of social responsibility in his mind.

What is at stake in the story, is the question of identity, and it proves to be a source of inextricable confusion. "'I am them, they are me, Mr Tzuref.' 'Aach! You are us, we are you!'" (265), "'No,' Eli intoned, 'I am me. They are them. You are you.'" (267) This verbal dialogue between Peck and Tzuref advances in parallel with a mute series of interactions between Peck and the man in the black clothes. Peck, willing to help, presents his own suit to the immigrant, who in return gives his former black costume to the attorney. Finally, the two men meet face to face, both of them wearing each other's clothes. "And then Eli had the strange notion that he was two people. Or that he was one person wearing two suits." (289) The result of the encounter is the ultimate scene, Eli's scandalous visit to the hospital, which he experiences as a revelation of his rediscovered Jewish identity while his environment treats as a nervous breakdown. Psychological approach, more precisely, Freudian language is present all along the story, but - like many the other elements - it is also ironically controversial. On the one hand, Peck is desperately fighting against his wife's psychoanalytic interpretations and constant efforts "to get things back to Normal, for Normal was where they loved one another" (254), since he feels that the American use of psychoanalysis tends to make people turn their attention away from the real problems of society to the petty nuisances of private life. On the other hand, the plot itself follows a Freudian logic: Eli insists that he can come to terms with himself and the community growing into a responsible father only by facing his past and his Jewish heritage and assuming its consequences.

Art Spiegelman articulates very similar concerns in the second part of his Holocaust comics. In the third chapter, he is represented as a tiny little figure sitting at a huge
drawing board, thinking "Sometimes I just don't feel like a functioning adult." (II: 43) As the following visit to his psychiatrist confirms, the childlike self-representation has a double reference to family responsibilities: partly, to Spiegelman's difficulties of processing his father's past, including his recent death and the complications involved in accomplishing his work, *Maus*, and also to Art's worries regarding the birth of his first child. As we learn from the book, the first person singular narrator's relationship to his father has always been troublesome, he is irritated by many of the old man's habits, they do not seem to have overcome the grief either for Art's brother's being killed as a child in the Holocaust or for the mother, Anja Spiegelman's suicide in 1968, and Art is justly afraid of reproducing the generational gap and a similar lack of harmony between his future child and himself. So, cross-generational dialogue appears here as the crucial motivation for writing as well as the result of the author's recognition of the essential interdependence of family members and their life stories. The duplicity of constraints and sources of inspiration are emphasized at the beginning of both volumes. The second book starts with the dedication: "For Richieu and for Nadja", a simultaneous invocation of the past and the future: the author's elder brother long dead and his daughter to be born. On the other hand, the prologue-like series of pictures introducing the first volume set two other layers of time in contrast: a childhood memory of Art and the personal past of his father. In the scene, the narrator is a child roller skating in the street with other kids. When he falls over, the others leave him alone. Afterwards, he complains about the accident to his father, who answers: "Friends? Your friends? If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week... THEN you could see what it is, friends!" (I: 6). In the context of *Maus* that is to be understood as an imperative: the narrator is expected by his father to interpret everyday events of his life in the framework of the Holocaust, a situation he has no direct knowledge of. Spiegelman realizes that their dysfunctional communication is rooted in that expectation, and he makes an attempt to bridge the distance between his father and himself.

The result is a book with double plots: the story of Vladek Spiegelman's Holocaust experiences, and the story of Art Spiegelman trying to understand and represent his father; a biography and an autobiography in one. But what Paul de Man pointed out in his essay about autobiography, is valid for Spiegelman's narrative as well. He is very much aware of the fact that his book "deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores". He emphasizes the distortion inevitably involved in any representation in several ways, for example by the reflected use of animal characters. Animals speaking and behaving like human beings are conventional in the genre of comics but they have an almost blasphemous effect in the context of the Holocaust at first sight. However, Spiegelman makes it explicit that he is unable to approach his father's story in any other way but his own - that is, using the instruments of his profession as a cartoonist. Instead of falling in the trap of futile attempts at creating the illusion of authentic representation, he repeatedly calls the reader's attention to the fact that what we read is only the biased author's reconstruction of his father's story. For instance, on the first page of Volume II, the narrator and his wife discuss the question of what kind of species she, being French, should belong to in the book where Jews appear as mice, German Nazis as cats, Polish people as pigs, and American soldiers as dogs; thus verbalizing the arbitrariness of representation.

The stories of father and son grow inseparable, offering one of the most powerful testimonies of first and second generation Holocaust survivors. Their relationship is far
from being idealized: Art finds it outrageous when Vladek makes racist remarks on a
black American hitchhiker (II: 99), and calls him a murderer when he learns that the
father burnt Anja's diaries right after her suicide (I: 159). Still, some kind of reconciliation
and identification between them is accomplished by the end of the book. Volume I, which
tells about Vladek's youth, marriage and deportation, bears the title: My Father Bleeds
History, while the title of volume II, which covers the time he spent in Auschwitz, is
phrased in the first person singular: And Here My Troubles Began. Of course, the second title
can be interpreted not only on the level of the plotline earlier in time, taking place in the
40's, but it also refers to the author's difficulties with his own work in the 1980's. A
symbolical and concise summary of the latter experience is a picture in which Art
Spiegelman, who wears a mouse mask hiding his own face, is pondering on the success of
his first volume sitting in a chair at his drawing board, which is placed on top of a heap of
Holocaust victims' naked corpses. (II: 42) The composition fusing the two plotlines is a
shocking visual expression of complex feelings: the awareness of fiction necessarily
hiding reality; a sense of guilt for having created an artist's career out of the suffering
and death of other human beings; the alienation of the author from his own work etc.
Like in the previous examples, the closure of Maus combines the two plotlines while also
highlighting the borderline between fiction and reality. The last page ends with a
tombstone and the inscription "Spiegelman" followed by the names of Vladek and Anja,
and their dates of birth and death. Below that, one can read in a similar structure: "art
spiegelman 1978-1991" (the period during which Maus was produced). So the
accomplishment of the work means the end of its author as well: at least the symbolic
termination of Art Spiegelman, the creator and the creation of his fiction, the
Mirrorman who could only exist as the Artistic reflection of his father.

What was just a coincidence in the case of Maus is an intentional artistic device in Paul
Auster's novel, The Book of Illusions: most of the characters have speaking names. Another
common feature of the two novels is the - already mentioned - double structure with two
plotlines, either of which unfolds as the restoration of the other. The first person singular
narrator and the protagonist of the plotline taking place in 1988 is called David Zimmer.
David is a name of Hebrew origin; Zimmer means room in German, and it is a good
description for David's character since he is confined to his room first because he is
stricken by grief, then due to his research. The narrative begins with the loss of his
family: Zimmer's wife and two children die in a plane accident, and after the tragedy he
spends months at home, alone, drunk and unable to do anything, just thinking of death.
However, after he finds himself laughing at a silent movie scene on TV, he tries to cling to
this unexpected and vague sign of vital instinct, and starts a research on the director and
starring actor of the film, Hector Mann. The actor's name has a double reference too:
Hector was the greatest hero of Troy, a victim of the war depicted in Iliad, while Mann is
the German version of man. Eventually, it is Mann who was the active hero of his
adventurous story starting in the 1920's, and Zimmer's story is only its reflection, an
attempt at discovering and recording it decades later - just like in the case of Maus. The
third speaking name important for my interpretation is Alma Grund. She is a young lady,
daughter of Mann's deceased cameraman, and also the actor's only biographer. Alma
comes from the Latin and means nourishing, while Grund is a German word again, meaning
basis. Both senses are significant in her relationship with Zimmer, for she is the one who
feeds him with information on Mann first, then they fall in love, and in spite of her death
at the end of the novel, she provides the basis on which Zimmer is finally able to rebuild
his life again. "I didn't know how to mourn her except by keeping myself alive. [...] I
understood that Alma had done that for me. In eight short days, she had brought me back from the dead." (316)

The book starts and finishes with total destruction - all the characters who have a name die in the beginning and in the end as well, except for David Zimmer in both cases -; still, there is decisive difference between the first sentence: "Everyone thought he was dead." (1); and the last one: "I live with that hope." (321). What changes between the two tragedies is Zimmer's response to them. When his family died, he became catatonic with depression; when all the characters die who participated in Mann's story, including Zimmer's lover Alma, he is able to overcome grief and - as the reader learns on the final pages - makes a new start in life, finding a new partner in time, as well. The pattern recalls a crucial issue in Holocaust literature: whether and how one is able to process the trauma of losing his entire world. Besides the concept of the survivor, there is another word recalling the language associated with Holocaust: witness. It is used by Anna explaining why she asks Zimmer to join her on her trip back to Mann: "Because I need a witness." (105) Hector Mann himself is not only of Jewish origin, but that very fact proves to be the key moment in the restoration of his mysterious biography by Zimmer. Like the two protagonists, Alma is also associated with Judaism, though in an indirect way. She has a big purple birthmark on the left side of her face, and the logic of her reaction may easily remind the reader of a reinforcement of Jewish identity as the backwash effect of the stigmatization and persecution of Jews in the Holocaust. Having read a short story by Hawthorne, she identifies herself with its heroine also bearing a birthmark and realizes that: "The birthmark is who she is. Make it vanish, and she vanishes along with it. [...] Other people carried their humanity inside them, but I wore mine on my face [...]. I also knew that I would always be defined by that purple blotch on my face. [...] It was the central fact of my life and to wish it away would have been like asking to destroy myself. [...] I knew what people were thinking. [...] The birthmark was the test of their humanity." (121)

Paul Auster is one of the most acknowledged living American authors, and he is admittedly Jewish, nevertheless he is hardly mentioned in canonical works summarizing Jewish American literature. The reason is probably that Judaism does not seem to appear as the central subject of his work. However, reading The Book of Illusions in the context of Jewish American fiction not only adds significant meanings to the interpretation of the novel in specific, but it also reveals how certain essential motifs, ideas and structures originating in post-Holocaust Jewish American literature wander from generation to generation and become common assets of mainstream literature.

As we have seen in all the four works discussed - and as can be seen in numerous other examples not referred to in this paper - Jewish American literature often reflects on the complex issue of identity and its transformations. In Ozick's short story, the dilemma is the possible loss of the original Jewish identity for the sake of assimilation into American society. Roth describes a crucial turning point in that process: Holocaust, which threatened Judaism with complete dissolution. However, it also indicates that Jewish American literature was able to turn the threat into the possibility of making a new start. The natural progress of gradually giving up a former, European sense of Jewish identity in order to become fully American was violently interrupted by the Holocaust. But instead of perishing, Jewish American literature has gained new energies from the trauma. Spiegelman testifies that Jewish American identity can only be articulated with a special emphasis on Jewish heritage. As a further step, Auster's work does not focus primarily on
Jewish issues, still, he also relies on the achievements of previous generations. Following
the dialogue between Jewish American authors and their works, we can see how the
recognition that traditional narratives are impossible to continue can produce new
narratives responding to these very difficulties. As one Auster's characters, Hector Mann
says: "I am a ridiculous man. God has played many jokes on me. ... in the tangled, self-
torturing logic of his decision Hector had continued to pay off his debts to a God he
refused to believe in." (278)

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**ABSTRACTS**

A crucial question of Jewish American literature is how the two traditions can be integrated.
Succeeding texts reflecting on identity and literature can thus be read as a cross-generational
dialogue trying to address these issues. This paper focuses on four pieces of post-Holocaust
Jewish American fiction participating in that dialogue. The examples: *Eli, the Fanatic* by Philip
La question essentielle de la littérature juive américaine est de savoir comment intégrer les deux traditions. Les textes que nous étudions parlent des problèmes de l’identité et de la littérature sous la forme d’un dialogue entre les générations. L’article se focalise sur quatre ouvrages de la littérature juive américaine écrits après la Shoah et participant à ce dialogue, notamment *Eli, the Fanatic* de Philip Roth, *Envy or Yiddish in America* de Cynthia Ozick, *Maus* I et II de Art Spiegelman et *The Book of Illusions* de Paul Auster.

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