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Irony, Self-irony and Humor in 20th Century Jewish American Literature

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1 INTRODUCTION: TERMINOLOGY

1.1 The Questions of Self-irony

Jewish people living in the United States have had to face various challenges of identity several times in course of the twentieth century. Historical events like the succeeding waves of immigration or the Holocaust as well as social trends like the civil rights movement or feminism compelled both individuals and communities to revise many of their inherited concepts regarding religious beliefs, ethnic categories or gender roles. Many of these changes are represented as the central theme of documentaries or pieces of literature and arts, and many of these representations make the impression of being self-ironic. Let me start with five—rather diverse but not quite random—examples.

Woody Allen's film, *Zelig* (1983) is a mockumentary on the fictive title character's life, focusing on the years before and during World War II. The Jewish protagonist, Leonard Zelig—played by the director himself, which is a feature not indifferent from the point of self-irony—gains fame for his ability to adapt his outlook and behavior to the people surrounding him: his hair turns red and curly among Irishmen, his skin darkens among African American people, and he speaks professional-sounding gibberish among the physicians studying his peculiar condition. The film is an obvious parody of assimilation, however, Woody Allen does not simply make ridiculous a minority character's attempt at adjusting to majority society but he rather destabilizes many conventional ideas. Mockumentary—the portmanteau of mock documentary—as a genre itself questions the sharp distinction between reality and fiction: the film represents Zelig's fictitious biography in the style of documentary films directing the audience's attention to the fact that what one perceives as "true story" is always already constructed. The film also challenges several concepts regarding identity. When asked by his psychiatrist about the reasons for his genuine ability, Zelig answers he behaves like his environment because "it's safe ... to be like others... I want to be liked". With an ironic turn of the plot, he becomes exceptional due to his intense "to be like others". Society's response to his condition is also ambiguous: the media celebrates him as the "Chameleon Man" with people imitating his imitative skills, whereas physicians treat his condition as an illness. One of them, a young female psychiatrist eventually succeeds with stabilizing Zelig's personality, as illustrated by the scene in which the former patient is able to contradict visiting professors monitoring their colleague's achievements. Yet the parodistic features

of the scene highlight that the psychoanalytic concept of a true, stable inner self waiting to be discovered and fully developed, is just another myth, since the allegedly healthy Zelig apparently keeps doing the same as before, only this time he completely adapts himself to the expectations of his attractive psychiatrist he is in love with, instead of the other professors present. Thus *Zelig* subtly raises many relevant questions regarding identity without either rejecting it or entirely submitting to it.

In contrast to Woody Allen's hilarious comedy, Allen Ginsberg's "Kaddish For Naomi Ginsberg 1894-1956" is far from being humorous as it fits in the tradition of the kaddish, the Jewish mourning prayer. Yet the original kaddish is a sanctification of God's name, a fixed text to be reproduced word by word when recited for the deceased relative whereas Ginsberg's poem is a highly personal confession, severely challenging conventional ideas concerning God by its Buddhist references as well as its ultimate line: "Lord Lord Lord caw caw caw" (36), which draws a parallel between God and the voice of repugnant and ominous carrion-eating birds. The poem is also a lyrical quest for identity through family history, however, the tableau of the institutionalized mother, the divorced father and other fighting, poor and sick relatives does not seem to offer an encouraging tradition to rely on. Still, Ginsberg's "Kaddish" is far from being a refusal of a difficult heritage although the lyrical self does not fully acquiesce to it, either. The central, recurring line quoted from the mother's farewell message: "The key is in the window, the key is in the sunlight at the window" (31) becomes a powerful metaphor calling for opening up one's mind to new approaches. In other words, the lyrical self surveys key components of his identity revealing hidden contradictions and doubts in order to articulate questions to which the inherited and evoked paradigms cannot provide fully satisfying answers.

Dilemmas of identity and of religion are also in the focus of the short story "Angel Levine" written by Bernard Malamud in 1955. His narrative is a paraphrase of Job's parable in a contemporary setting. Its protagonist, Manischevitz, an aging Jewish tailor suddenly afflicted by a series of tragic losses, is visited by a young African American man, who claims to be "a bona fide angel of God" (Malamud, *Complete Stories* 159) sent to save the life of Manischevitz's fatally ill wife on the condition that he declares he believes in his visitor being an angel. "The tailor could not rid himself of the feeling that he was the butt of a jokester. Is this what a Jewish angel looks like? he asked himself" (Malamud, *Complete Stories* 165-166). The humor of Malamud's narrative—analyzed in detail in subchapter 4.3—derives primarily from the juxtaposition of the disparate contexts: the

realistically depicted scenery and the racial issues acute in the New York City of the 1950s versus the biblical paradigm recalled both by the literary allusions to Job's story and by the religious tailor's conventional beliefs. In spite of the miraculously happy ending—against his better judgment, the tailor finally declares the visitor to be an angel and his wife immediately starts recovering—Malamud's narrative is preoccupied with the prolonged moment of dilemma. "Manischevitz was recalling scenes of his youth as a wheel in his mind whirred: believe, do not, yes, no yes, no. The pointer pointed to yes, to between yes and no, to no, no it was yes. He sighed. It moved but one still had to make a choice" (Malamud, *Complete Stories* 165-166). The story argues for the opportunity of redemption through reconciliation but at the same time it does so with such incredible turns of the plot and such a self-mocking rhetoric that its conclusion deliberately avoids easy generalization. Thus Malamud manages to point out the necessity for revising or even transgressing outdated and questionable paradigms without completely discarding them or pretending to be in possession of a new paradigm able to provide the reader with an overall solution. Instead of offering yet another myth soon to become outdated, he emphasizes that the pointer tends to be "between yes and no" and the choice is not the mere result of ready-made categories but it always depends on an individual's responsibility in a genuine situation.

Joseph Heller's novel, *God Knows* (1984) is a biblical paraphrase, too. It is a meditative memoir by King David, who is revising events and participants of his life while also talking to and commenting on the people surrounding him on his deathbed: his favorite wife, Bathsheba, Abishag, the beautiful Shunammite maid attending to his needs, his sons: Adonijah and Solomon, rivals for succeeding their father on the throne, and Nathan, the prophet. The characters are familiar not only from different books of the *Old Testament* but also from their reinterpretations by Shakespeare, Milton and others. Heller's account is accurate and carefully true to his biblical sources, however, the modern, satirical voice in which King David contemplates on the issues of life and death, history, Jewish identity, other people and himself, might easily recall Heller's other narratives. Thus Heller creates from a historical figure a metaphoric self for the aging male Jewish American Everyman of the twentieth century. The presence of this point of view is confirmed, for example, by the narrator-protagonist's deliberately anachronistic remarks. "That's another thing that pisses me off about that Michelangelo statue of me in Florence. He's got me standing there uncircumcised! Who the fuck did he think I was?" (Heller, *God Knows* 43). Making David himself point out the distorting nature of artistic representation in an

indecent tone, the author self-ironically reminds the reader that his version is just one more among the other biased, inauthentic interpretations of the king. At the same time, Heller also emphasizes this way that the self can only articulate himself through already existing narratives revealing a not linear but rather circular structure of history.

A similar idea on the unreliability of inherited stories is articulated in Pear Gluck's autobiographic documentary, *Divan* (2003). The film tells about the Jewish American director's visit in 1996 to Hungary, the homeland of her first-generation immigrant father, travelling on a Fulbright grant received to collect Hasidic tales from relatives still living there. Her quest for identity is symbolized by a quest for a family heirloom, a couch that prestigious rebbes used to sleep on. By obtaining the couch, Pearl Gluck hopes to reunite with her father, who is deeply dissatisfied with her thirty-year-old yet unmarried daughter because she abandoned the orthodox Hasid lifestyle. Their conflict is succinctly and humorously summarized by the narrator: "I tell my father that I'm also praying for a *chasan*. A husband. Even if we are not praying for the same man". The subtle distinction between the Yiddish and the English words indicates the cultural distance, too. Another moment clearly expressing Pearl Gluck's limbo position takes place at an international Orthodox Hasidic meeting, where she is trying to record people with a camera but is soon banished from the men's section. There is an almost still picture of a thick and dense hemp net, simultaneously serving as a metaphor of the closely intertwined social network, which the people on the other side of the net are just celebrating, and making the visual impression of bars separating women from men. The sight is accompanied by the following narrator's text: "Here I was in Debrecen and once again I'm banished. I end up thrown out. Because I wanted both—inside and outside. And you can't have both. So I figure I'll just go on my own pilgrimage—my own personal mix of family and rebbes". This "own personal mix" is embodied by the couch Gluck finally buys at a flea market in Budapest since she is unable to obtain the original piece of furniture because its owner does not judge her orthodox and worthy enough to buy it. The fake couch—the fakeness of which is playfully revealed at the end of the film— fulfills its mission as the father finally sits on it, paying the first visit in his life to his daughter's new home and unorthodox lifestyle. On the other hand, the couch functions as an ambiguous reminder of family heritage and of the ultimate inaccessibility and discontinuity of that heritage.

The shared feature of the examples above is that the articulation of identity is at the stake of each story, however, each of them constantly destabilizes the subject articulated by the narrative. The means of this destabilization is diverse from local textual or visual

ambiguities through reinterpretations of various literary and cultural conventions to the humorous juxtaposition of different traditions, yet they each result in a self-ironic representation. In other words, I understand self-irony as a rhetoric response to a dilemma of identity.

Self-irony is not the only possible answer to the challenges of identity. In Jewish American poetry, for instance, a pathetic voice seems to be more frequent, as it can be observed in Muriel Rukeyser's "Letter to the Front" or "Israel" by Karl Shapiro, to name just two of the innumerable available examples. Besides, self-irony is far from being a unique feature of Jewish American literature. Daniel Grassian's *Hybrid Fictions: American Literature and Generation X*, for instance, describes many of the rhetoric and narrative strategies I call self-ironic, as characteristic of a powerful trend in American prose emerging at the beginning of the 1980s. However, the playfully mixed genres and controversial traditions simultaneously evoked in a multicultural context, which Grassian focuses on, seem to prevail in the last three decades while these practices were dominant in Jewish American fiction already in the 1950s, as argued by Paul McDonald in the first chapter of his *Laughing at the Darkness: Postmodernism and Optimism in American Culture*. Consequently, I have decided to start my investigation of self-irony in the field of Jewish American fiction with the hope that the observations gained from Jewish American texts might prove to be useful for the interpretation of other self-ironic pieces of literature, too.

1.2 Irony, Self-irony and Humor

The only point that theorists of irony seem to agree on is that they cannot agree. Søren Kierkegaard concludes the survey of his predecessors' approaches to irony by emphasizing that "the concept of irony has often acquired a different meaning" (245) although he hopes that "the various meanings the word has acquired in the course of time can still all be included" (245) in the definition of irony he wishes to offer in his crucial book *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*. A century and a half later, Paul de Man sounds far less optimistic about the same venture in his deliberately similarly titled essay "The Concept of Irony". "[I]t seems to be uncannily difficult to give a definition of irony [...] It seems to be impossible to get hold of a definition, and this is itself inscribed to some extent in the tradition of the writing on the texts" (164). Henri Bergson voices strikingly similar doubts regarding the broader context of the comic—in the

framework of which and among many other terms he discusses irony as well—at the beginning of his treatise on *Laughter*.

> What does laughter mean? What is the basal element in the laughable? What common ground can we find between the grimace of a merry-andrew, a play upon words, an equivocal situation in a burlesque and a scene of high comedy? [...] The greatest of thinkers, from Aristotle downwards, have tackled this little problem, which has a knack of baffling every effort, of slipping away and escaping only to bob up again, a pert challenge flung at philosophic speculation. Our excuse for attacking the problem in our turn must lie in the fact that we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. (Bergson 5)

This apparent resistance of irony—and of several related terms like comic or humor—to definitions may derive from numerous reasons. First of all, it is a common problem with the terminology in many disciplines of humanities that much of their vocabulary consists of words which are simultaneously used in everyday discourse, too. Thus the scientific precision of certain terms is often challenged by their subjective, intuitive, casual interpretations wide-spread among non-scholarly speakers; and what could be more subjective than the inclination to laugh? In particular, since it is not only personally but also culturally bound what one finds amusing. Bergson, for instance, provides his readers with profuse examples which most of the 21st century audience probably still feels funny but when he says "why does one laugh at a negro? [...] I rather fancy the correct answer was suggested to me one day by an ordinary cabby, who applied the expression "unwashed" to the negro fare he was driving" (Bergson 22), we immediately sense the distance of a century dividing us from the author. Sigmund Freud describes this ephemeral aspect of droll phenomena apropos of what he calls *topical jokes* in his substantial book on *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. "These latter jokes contained allusions to people and events which at the time were "topical", which had aroused general interest and still kept it alive. When this interest had ceased and the business in question had been settled, these jokes too lost a part of their pleasurable effect and indeed a very considerable part" (Freud 150).

Besides the always changing criteria for what triggers a laugh depending on time, place and several other individual factors, there are difficulties specific to irony as well. According to the concise summary of Claire Colebrook, "irony has a frequent and common definition: saying what is contrary to what is meant [...] But this definition is so simple that

it covers everything from simple figures of speech to entire historical epochs" (1). The problem is not so much that irony is discussed in such neighboring still diverse fields as rhetoric, linguistics, literary history, literary criticism, aesthetics, ethics or psychology, rather that the various disciplines and schools frequently offer incompatible results. These incongruities originate in the antique Greek sources, in which *eiron* referred to the stock character of the comic stage constantly gaining a victory over his opponent, the boastful *alazon* by pretending to be less intelligent and powerful than he actually was; while *eironeia* denoted his specific self-disparaging way of speaking. Although "Kierkegaard clarifies the relationship between irony as a figure of speech [...] and irony as a mode of existence" (Lang 1), scholars working primarily along either line or the other tend to draw rather controversial conclusions, as can be seen, for example, in the long debate over the concept of irony between representatives of New Criticism versus the Yale School of Deconstruction. Moreover, Kierkegaard himself ends up elaborating "two radically different concepts, and one of the difficulties of reading this text arises from the fact the unqualified term *irony* is used interchangeably for both" (34), argues Candace Lang, distinguishing between Kierkegaard's two concepts as a teleological irony versus a non-teleological one, which "eludes dialectization" (Lang 35), and which she calls humor, emphasizing that it should not be confused with Kierkegaard's own concept of "religious 'humour'" (Lang 35).

Synonyms and related terms complicate the picture in other ways, too. In "The Rhetoric of Temporality", for instance, Paul de Man fiercely argues against Peter Szondi's views on irony; however, much of de Man's argumentation is based on Charles Baudelaire's essay, "De l'essence du rire" ("On the Essence of Laughter"), a text which deals with the nature of the *comic* but does not once mention the word *ironie* (irony in French). But one can hardly blame de Man for having drawn a relevant though differently labeled line of thoughts into the discussion for it is true that much can be learnt about irony under other titles as well. Arthur Koestler's theory of humor with its core concept of *bisociation*—the collision, fusion or confrontation of "previously unconnected matrices of experience" (Koestler 45)—looks revelatory when thinking about the structure and the power of irony, too. Apparently, irony is not easily categorized either horizontally or vertically. Bergson in his above cited *Laughter* treats irony as merely one of the numerous subcases of the comic; while for Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel irony is *the* all-encompassing, central term. Similarly, self-irony is just a minor, technical subcase of irony mentioned only twice in D. C. Muecke's detailed monograph on *Irony and the Ironic*, or listed once as

one item among several other subtypes in the crucial essay "Irony as a Principle of Structure" by Cleanth Brooks, who reminds the reader that "irony, even in its obvious and conventionally recognized forms, comprises a wide variety of modes: tragic irony, self-irony, playful, arch, mocking or gentle irony, etc." (1044). Both examples indicate well the overall tendency of English-speaking literature on the subject of irony, according to which irony and self-irony are labeled by the same term, irony. In contrast, self-irony seems to be a category in its own right and antithetical to irony in many Eastern European cultures, as we can see it in the Romanian E. M. Cioran's essay *Irony and Self-irony*; or in the Hungarian Richárd Papp's book on Jewish humor *Miért kell Kohn bácsinak négy hűtőszekrény?* (*Why Does Mr. Kohn Need Four Refrigerators?*), which right after the introduction starts with the chapter: "A hagyomány mintái és az önirónia" ("Patterns of Tradition and Self-irony"). As Norman Knox notices in his analysis of *The Word Irony and Its Context 1500-1755*, "the rhetoricians played something of a shell game with these terms— *irony, sarcasm, antiphrasis, asteismus, micterismus*, and *charientismus*—for an illustration used in one guidebook under *irony* was likely to turn up in another under *sarcasm* and in another under *antiphrasis*" (36).

This terminological obscurity is especially salient in the context of criticism on Jewish American literature, which teems of lengthy lists of the synonyms irony and humor without clarifying the relationship of these terms. For example, Victoria Aarons in her essay on "American Jewish Fiction" in the *Cambridge Companion to American Fiction after 1945*, an overview published in a series of canonizing power, does not use the word "self-irony" but mentions almost all the concepts close to it.

> The ironic self-parody, self-indictment, and attempts to reinvent themselves that characterize Roth's protagonists begin with Eli [...] For Saul Bellow, ironic detachment is the means by which twentieth-century, post-industrial man dubiously negotiates American, especially American Jewish, life. Bellow's characters are typically intellectual, self-consciously self-reflexive, humorously self-parodic, and inclined to sarcasm, bitter irony, and complicated scorn. (132-133)

Enumerations like this clearly indicate the need for this whole range of more or less synonymous categories as well as the embarrassing absence of clear distinctions between them.

Several attempts have been made to offer a systematic overview of the field of irony. Kierkegaard's dissertation; *A Rhetoric of Irony* by Wayne Booth; Muecke's two books,

The Compass of Irony and *Irony and the Ironic*; most recently *Irony* by Colebrook; or in Hungarian *Túl az irónián* (*Beyond Irony*) by Antal Éva are just some of the book-length summaries trying to cover the whole or at least most of the rich and diverse literature on irony. The tendency, however, seems to be pointing from efforts to set up an all-embracing and ultimate system of terminology (Kierkegaard, New Criticism) towards the chronological surveys which accept or even welcome the co-existence of more or less irreconcilable, alternative approaches to irony, although authors of the latter trend usually also reveal their personal standpoints and preferences within the wide range of selection they describe. Especially, since these comparative studies of the various theories on irony allow the reader to notice that the controversial views are all built up of the same collection of abstract features originally subtracted from the complex characters and speeches of the *eiron* and particularly the prime ironist, Socrates. In each theory, however, different elements are highlighted while others are ineluctably suppressed or completely neglected, resulting sometimes in ostensibly mutually exclusive but equally justifiable definitions. With all these recent and comprehensive surveys available, I do not feel it necessary to add one more revision to the already lengthy list; neither do I feel entitled to make a presumably futile endeavor at settling all the debates indicated above. Especially, in the light of Paul de Man's remark, who suggests that the ambiguities of irony and of the related terms detailed above derive from the very nature of irony itself. "Irony is no longer a trope, but the undoing of the deconstructive allegory of all tropological cognitions, the systematic undoing, in other words, of understanding" (De Man, *Allegories* 301). Therefore I restrict myself to clarifying in what sense I use the terms irony, self-irony and humor in this paper.

Many of the authors quoted above tend to distinguish two essentially different types of irony. Wayne Booth, for example, writes about

> [T]he fundamental distinction between stable ironies and ironies in which the truth asserted or implied is that no stable reconstruction can be made out of the ruins revealed through irony [... In case of unstable irony, the] author—insofar as we can discover him, and he is often very remote indeed—refuses to declare himself, however subtly, *for* any stable proposition, even the opposite of whatever proposition his irony vigorously denies. The only sure affirmation is that negation that begins all ironic play [...] (240)

Candace Lang seems to be explaining her aforementioned terminological suggestion for *irony* (roughly like Booth's *stable irony*) versus *humor* (roughly like Booth's *unstable irony*) along very similar lines.

> The ironic text is primarily "expressive," by which I mean that it is intended to transmit a message, communicate an idea, or express a thought or sentiment. [...] If the ironist chooses to transmit this message in a less direct way than the "straightforward" expository writer [...] his work is nonetheless potentially interpretable, and generally contains indications as to how it is to be read. [...] The humorist writes with the conviction that language is *always* an essential determinant of thought [...] and that its semantic ambiguities and connotative resonances are to be explored and actualized rather than limited or suppressed. (Lang 5-6)

Lang separates the two concepts chronologically, associating humor with postmodernism and irony with—a very broadly understood—modernism (14). However, I agree more with Ernst Behler, who dates the turning point separating the two radically disparate interpretations of irony to Friedrich Schlegel's *Fragments* (73).

> There is general agreement that this decisive extension of irony to a basic critical term took place toward the end of the eighteenth century and coincided with the formation of the romantic theory of literature. Until then, irony had been understood mostly as a figure of speech, firmly established and registered in rhetoric. [... Afterwards, however,] irony is virtually identical with that self-reflective style of poetry that became accentuated during the romantic age, and it is a decisive mark of literary modernity [...] (73)

In this paper I use the word *irony* in its rhetorical sense (like Booth's *stable irony*, Lang's *irony* or Behler's pre-romantic *irony*), that is as a figure of speech of varying extension, the obvious meaning of which is in conflict with the overall context including not only the whole of the text but the background knowledge of the implied audience regarding the author and the situation as well, thus pointing to the necessity of a second, recognizable, ironical interpretation. "*Participant constellation*" (80), as Katharina Barbe calls it, is essential here. She differentiates "three types of participants: the speaker or ironist, the victim or hearer, and the (evaluating) audience. Not all participants have to be present to render a situation ironic. However, the presence of the speaker or ironist is obligatory, whereas either one or the other participant (victim or audience) can be absent, but not both" (80). Her linguistic analysis calls attention to another significant factor in

addition to the translatability of irony: the ironic speaker's purpose is always some type of criticism (30). In other words, irony always culminates in a laugh *at* someone or something, at the expense of the butt of irony, be it a person or an inanimate phenomenon.

In contrast to *irony* as understood above, I use *self-irony* to denote those cases of irony in which the butt of the irony is the speaking or writing subject itself, thus rendering both meaning and subject doubtful and fragmented (like Booth's *unstable irony*, Lang's *humor* or Behler's *irony* after Schlegel). This gesture of negating the ostensible meaning without the indication of a clear, translatable "opposite" connotation opens up the text for multiple possible interpretations by undermining the obvious reading with the aid of the context (again understood in the broadest sense of the word). While rhetorical irony allows the speaker to gain a superior position over the victim of the irony in a consensual, finite second meaning shared with the audience, self-irony infinitely brings the instability and the split or uncertain nature of the subject in the foreground.

I prefer to introduce the word *self-irony* instead of either of the above mentioned terms (Booth's *unstable irony* or Lang's *humor*) because I acknowledge the need for distinction between the two types of ironies, however, I cannot fully agree with either of the suggested variations. The limits of Booth's exclusively structuralist approach, especially regarding the cases of unstable irony, have been revealed by several post-structuralist authors like Paul de Man or Lang herself. On the other hand, I find Lang's interpretation of *humor* somewhat misleading. Not only because the simply orthographic difference between her *humor* and Kierkegaard's religious "*humour*" do not seem practical but also because the plurality of meaning in *humor* in her interpretation is always produced by the uncertainty of the speaking subject. However, in several situations—in jokes based on puns or in certain samples of visual humor like in the genre of comics—the author might be of no importance and the effect can still be humorous. Therefore, I reserve *irony* and *self-irony* for those texts in which the position of the speaker or writer is crucial, distinguishing between the two terms on the basis of the unity versus the plurality of the meaning and the stability and superiority versus the uncertainty of the subject's position. This looks particularly feasible when we take into consideration that self-irony as a concept antithetical to irony is already widely used in Hungarian literary criticism and apparently in other Central-European languages as well, which is relevant to my theme since Jewish American literature has a double cultural background: Central European traditions re-interpreted in an Anglo-Saxon framework.

In addition to irony and self-irony, it looks necessary to have an all-encompassing term as well like the *comic* in Baudelaire's or Bergson's texts or *irony* in the post-Schlegelian usage, covering all the more or less synonymous words related to any phenomena triggering a laugh. *Humor* could be an appropriate choice since it is widely used for examples of a verbal, visual or dramatic nature, even when the speaker cannot be identified or is of no importance. Still, there is an apprehensible contrast between *humor* and the *comic* similar to that between irony and self-irony. The word *comic* has always implied a sense of superiority from Aristotle, who suggested in his *Poetics* that "[C]omedy is [...] an imitation of characters of a lower type [...] the Ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly" (9), to Bergson or Baudelaire, both of whom start their aforementioned essays with describing the quintessentially comical scene of a man falling in the street and others laughing at him. Irony expresses the speaker's superior position (often shared by the audience) over the butt of the irony while the comic is built on the (implied) audience' superiority over the participants of the comical scene. Humor, in contrast, is either neutral regarding the vertical ranking of communicative roles—as in case of Koestler's above mentioned theory on the bisociation of incompatible but equally justifiable matrices—or, moreover, manifests an egaliterian nature, as emphasized in Kierkegaard's concept of religious humor or by André Comte-Sponville, who ranks humor among the virtues because of its essential element of empathy (211-221). Consequently, I use *humor* as the most general term in this paper. *Irony* versus *self-irony* will be investigated if the speaker's or writer's position is of importance. In addition, the *comic* aspect will be analyzed if the subordinate versus superior roles among the participants of the communication seem to be essential for the interpretation.

1.3 Twentieth Century Jewish American Fiction

"Who is a Jew?" asks in the title of a chapter Simon N. Herman in his book on *Jewish Identity* and his response includes the detailed analyses of two, somewhat controversial judicial decisions brought in Israel. In the first case, a petitioner called Brother Daniel, who had been born Jewish but converted to Christianity during the World War II and became a monk, applied for Israeli citizenship in 1962 in terms of the Law of Return. The Israeli Supreme Court rejected his claim for naturalization arguing that "a Jew who has become a Christian is not deemed a Jew" (78). However, "[i]n the main judgment Justice Silbert pointed out that according to religious law, the fact of Brother Daniel's

conversion did not obliterate his Jewishness. He could still be regarded as a Jew for certain purposes" (78) in line with the *halacha* (the Jewish religious law), which says that "a person is a Jew if he was born to a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism with the prescribed procedures" (78). The ambiguity of the court's argumentation lies in the fact that the decision is based on a religious criterion for identity while it contradicts the relevant rules of the very same religious code. Herman summarizes the description of the heated public dispute aroused by the cases he has investigated, calling attention to the impossibility of an ultimate definition.

> Basic differences of conception appear about the structure of Jewish ethnic identity; some participants in the debate sought to separate out the "religious" and the "national" components, while other maintained that they could not be disentangled. While it was widely agreed that there needed to be [...] a commonly accepted criterion (applicable alike in Israel and in the Diaspora) as to who is a Jew, questions arose about the extent to which it was feasible to speak of "a Jewish *identity*" existing everywhere as a uniform entity; [...] the variations [...] make it more appropriate to think in terms of a pluralistic Jewish society allowing for a diversity of "Jewish *identities*". (81)

The key element both in Herman's and Judge Silberg's approaches seems to be the phrase "for certain purposes". Accordingly, I do not endeavor to offer a conclusive definition for Jewish American literature since the various possible meanings of each component are infinite and no boundaries can be drawn in these fields which could not be rightfully challenged. Nevertheless, boundaries must be drawn for the purpose of clarifying the scope of any treatise, therefore I describe below what I intend to examine under the title "Twentieth Century Jewish American Fiction" without claiming that my understanding of these terms could not be justly and significantly modified in a different situation.

I prefer the phrase "Jewish American" to the alternative "American Jewish" in line with the "General Introduction" of the canonical *Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature*, in which the editors elucidate that this order of the adjectives suggests that "Jewish American literature" is to be studied primarily in the greater context of "American literature", along with other subcategories like "African American" or "Native American" literatures (1). The vital connections of Jewish American literature to the works and trends of the other available broader category, Jewish literature are not to be neglected either but I will refer to them in a peripheral way. In the same spirit and also for practical reasons, I

will study in detail only those authors who produced most of their oeuvre in English, in spite of the fact that the so-called “Great Tide” of first-generation Jewish authors like Abraham Cahan or Avrom Reyzen continued writing and publishing in Yiddish—some of them beside English, some others instead of it—even after their arrival to the USA. However, it can be argued that Jewish American literature was acknowledged by and integrated into the mainstream of American literature only from the moment on when the authors switched from Yiddish to English. Isaac Bashevis Singer’s career demonstrates this transition very palpably, that is why I have decided to analyze his work in detail although he kept writing all his life in Yiddish. Yet many of his books were first published in English translations strictly revised by the author himself so he is not so much of an exception to the rule regarding language as he might seem at first glance. As for Jewishness, setting religious or genealogical criteria is extremely elusive as we have seen in Brother Daniel’s example or even risky and grim as being possibly reminiscent of discriminative laws preceding and during World War II. Therefore I concentrate on the text rather than on the author, that is, I investigate works in which Jewish heritage and culture are embraced and addressed as major issues on the thematic level. This approach is in line with what Tresa L. Grauer proposes in her essay “‘*The Changing Same*’: Narratives of Contemporary Jewish American Identity”.

> “Jewish” functions [...] in contemporary Jewish American literature [...] as a powerful fiction or trope of identity. [...] Rather than depicting an “authentic truth” about Jewish existence, whatever is Jewish about the literature that I have been examining—as well as the fictional authors that it represents—lies in its claim to locate Jewishness within a self-conscious re-visioning of a Jewish narrative tradition. (42)

Most of the writers have been motivated to deal with these themes because they come from a Jewish family background on which many of them reflect in their autobiographical statements. However, I will refer to these extra-literary texts only as secondary sources as my focus is the Jewish viewpoint manifest within their pieces of fiction.

This leads to the second criterion: in what sense I use the word fiction. Literature, especially from a postmodern point of view, is a treacherously broad term possibly including any text from high-brow publications to products of popular culture or even documentaries. For this reason, I prefer fiction, emphasizing that my primary subject is the analysis of works created by the imaginative mind, and I will rely on pieces of documentary genres like essays, interviews or straightforward testimonies, which

otherwise constitute a substantial part of the relevant Holocaust literature, only as subsidiaries. To narrow down the still immense field, I have decided to exclude both poetry and drama as well, although for different reasons. The impressive corpus of Jewish American poetry seems to be far less rich in irony, self-irony and humor than Jewish American prose. Drama, on the other hand, is abundant in such phenomena but the study of plays would necessarily lead to the realms of stage productions and films—especially in the American culture—where the dominance of visual elements and other constituents of the performance would easily divert the attention from my main interest, which lies in the written literary text. For similar reasons, I do not explore the great field of jokes either since they primarily belong to the oral tradition, albeit several book-length scholarly studies have recorded and discussed this treasury of Jewish humor, too. Nonetheless, these restraints cannot mean the complete elimination of the genres listed above. It is out of the scope of this study to endeavor a full overview of the omitted fields, and I do will not give detailed analyzes of texts belonging to them either. Still, irony, self-irony and humor are so much built on the encounter and dynamics of disparate paradigms that several samples of prose in this paper could not be fully interpreted without references to the relevant contexts in poetry or film as well as to the parallel phenomena in non-American Jewish or non-Jewish American cultures. But it must be noted that all these allusions will be used only to support the main line of argumentation without any claim for totality in the neighboring fields.

Finally, I need to clarify my use of the period twentieth century in this paper. As I have mentioned, a significant part of Jewish American literature in the first decades of the twentieth century was still written in Yiddish in spite of some major achievements like Henry Roth's first novel, *Call It Sleep*; while some Jewish authors like Gertrude Stein produced some of the greatest books of the period without paying much attention to Jewish issues. Consequently, for obvious but complex historical reasons to be explored more in detail in the next chapter, Jewish American fiction in English started to flourish in the years immediately before and during World War II and it still continues to offer numerous outstanding books. Therefore I will survey the trends of the first half of the century relatively briefly in comparison with the chapters devoted to the post-war decades. At the other possible end of the line, the mere number 2000 in the calendar does not look like a satisfactory enough reason to stop my investigation of exciting trends which started in the final years of the twentieth century and are still going on. So I will to cover some texts from the first years of the twenty first century as well.

To sum up, my intention in this paper is to discuss literary works in English prose by authors who have spent at least a decisive period of their career in the US in the twentieth century producing fiction, on the thematic level of which they acknowledge and address their Jewish heritage. The questions I would like to answer in the next chapters are the following. What are the issues that tend to be represented in an ironic, self-ironic or humorous way by Jewish American authors? Obviously, the already vast and ever-expanding corpus of Jewish American literature makes it impossible—at least in the extent of a dissertation but probably in any single book—to offer a comprehensive list of *all* such themes. Therefore I will focus on some of the motifs that repeatedly appear in the work of several prominent authors, admitting in advance that my selection is necessarily somewhat subjective and far from being ultimate hence could be supplemented by further examples. However, the three major thematic areas to be covered in this paper already provide us with abundant samples for close reading analysis allowing the study of the second and even more important question: precisely how irony, self-irony and humor operate in these texts. As a result of the above investigations in detail, I will finally attempt to answer my last and most significant question. Namely, what are the additional hues, aspects and meanings that irony, self-irony and humor add to the examined pieces of fiction in particular and Jewish American fiction in general? Especially since detecting how emphases are shifted within a certain field of literature by the three literary terms to be explored we might learn about the nature of these concepts themselves.

2 THE IMMIGRANT: TRANSFORMATIONS OF IDENTITY

2.1 Introduction: Generations

Generation is a keyword in Jewish American literature, just like in any immigrant culture. However, it is not without ambiguities. Actually, it refers to two somewhat oppositional movements which chronologically succeed one another but partially overlap as well. In the first sense of the word, one can start counting generations with the immigrant just arriving from Europe in the USA, mostly at the end of the nineteenth or in the first decades of twentieth century. In the archetype of this family history, the Orthodox Jews of the first generation insist on tradition: they speak Yiddish, observe religion, and spend most of their time in the relatively closed community of the *ghetto*, the city version of the *shtetl* (European small town with a large Jewish population); the second generation makes intense efforts to integrate better into majority society: prefers to speak English, goes to a secular college instead of a *yeshiva* (Hebrew religious school), loosens up the rules of religion and moves out of the ghetto for the sake of a better job; while the third and the succeeding generations go even further in the same direction gradually forgetting first Yiddish then Hebrew, attending *shul* (synagogue) and celebrating religious holidays less and less frequently, giving up *kosher* (religiously appropriate) cooking and finally considering interfaith marriages. In this trend the overall tendencies of secularization in twentieth century society coincide with the ethnic minority's aspiration for integration in the majority heading towards the dissolution of Jewish identity in a general American identity. This process of transformation and the involved conflicts between generations are thoroughly represented in several narratives from first-generation Abraham Cahan's immigrant novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky* published in 1917 or Anzia Yezierska's short stories through the work of second-generation authors like Saul Bellow or Tillie Olsen to the following passage of *Operation Shylock* by third-generation Philip Roth.

> Hebrew school wasn't school at all but a part of the deal that our parents had cut with *their* parents, the sop to pacify the old generation—who wanted the grandchildren to be Jews the way that they were Jews, bound as they were to the old millennial ways—and, at the same time, the leash to restrain the breakaway young, who had it in their heads to be Jews in a way no one had ever dared to be a Jew in our three-thousand-year history: speaking and thinking American English, *only* American English, with all the apostasy that

> was bound to beget. Our put-upon parents were simply middlemen in the classic American squeeze, negotiating between the shtetl-born and the Newark-born and taking blows from either side (Roth, *Operation* 312)

One of the most concise illustrations of the assimilation process described above is a collage of family photos made by Elliot Malkin, labeling each representative of his generation with a movement within Judaism under the title “How To Lose Your Religion in 5 Easy Steps”.

The complex humor of the collage results from several factors. First of all, the title recalls the language of Do It Yourself brochures, which usually instruct the reader how to repair or construct something, while the procedure described by Malkin points to the opposite direction. In addition, DIY traditionally focuses on manual work: mechanical operations performed with and on objects; in contrast, Malkin reflects on the most spiritual aspect of human beings: religion. Nevertheless, the parallel drawn between the two, apparently and amusingly incompatible levels of life seems appropriate if one thinks about how DIY and family history are both bound to the home, being personal versions of greater and more general systems; or even illuminating since it emphasizes the active nature of identity transformations, calling attention to the fact that these changes are not just happening to the individual but one is highly responsible for them. Malkin’s choice looks especially apt if we consider that DIY is the everyday aspect of the self-made man’s essentially American myth and Malkin uses the genre—although turned inside out—to describe the process of his family’s Americanization.

The collage, at the same time, is self-ironic. In the title Malkin describes himself and his family's accomplishment as a loss, still, his standpoint is more ambiguous than the expression of mere grief over a gradually and irrevocably lost religion. Conceptually, his family tableau is built upon the model of a family tree displaying names and portraits. The family members, however, are not positioned vertically, placing the first known ancestor either at the top, suggesting his superiority, or at the bottom, as the root or the trunk of an actual tree, implying that the representatives of the latest generation would be the fruits, the fulfillment of the family's accumulated efforts. Contrastingly, Malkin's representation is horizontal: the generations are set along an imaginary timeline, next to each other, neither of them dominating the picture. Moreover, they are arranged into a sine wave insinuating that the progress should not be apprehended as a simple, straight line leading from the fixed starting point of the first forefather to a certain direction but as a constant oscillation within a certain range of possibilities. This layout visualizes that the different trends of Judaism indicated in the inscriptions are not so much succeeding phases of degradation—as the title explains—but rather equal and simultaneously co-existing versions of a faith, as it actually is among contemporary Jews. Consequently, Malkin's own "unaffiliated" point of view, which would manifest the position of final loss according to the title, appears at the same time as one more justifiable version of the same heritage, with the two possible interpretations of the author's statement—the loss versus the maintenance of tradition—mutually questioning each other. The choice of the word "unaffiliated" intensifies this ambiguity, since it is a declaration that the person is not the member of an organization, which in this context means that Elliot Malkin considers himself not to belong to any church; at the same time he portrays himself in a family tableau, affiliate to a family portrayed as a series of representatives of a religion. Below the collage, he provides a short biography for each individual's portray, concluding his own with the following outcome: "You've lost your religion but still identify strongly as a Jew". This distinction between a religious versus an ethnic and cultural identity might explain to some extend but by no means erases the complex and problematic nature of Jewish identity revealed above.

Apparently, Malkin's position in this collage is that of the *liberal ironist*, as Richard Rorty coined it in his philosophical treatise on *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. He uses the word *ironist* "to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her most central beliefs and desires" (xv). In the same spirit, Malkin takes his agnostic or atheistic stand as just one option among several others, which he acknowledges as alternatives and ranks at the same level as his own approach although he does not entirely

agree with any of them. Just like Rorty, who dedicated his book to his ancestors: “In memory of six liberals: my parents and grandparents” and emphasized the historically determined and therefore contingent nature of one’s set of beliefs, or as Rorty calls it: *final vocabulary*, Martin also takes (family) history as the starting point of his quest for his own personal *vocabulary*, which, nevertheless, he does not claim to be any better or more true than the ones he inherited but does not share any longer.

The concept of vocabulary as a decisive factor dominates the passage by Roth quoted above, too. There the narrator, who bears the same name as the author, portrays the generation of his parents as rather comical figures stuck in between two powerful identities, ineffectively trying to make a compromise between the strong Jewish heritage of the “shtetl-born” grandparents and the equally strong, American ambitions of the “Newark-born” grandchildren. However, the firm position of the narrator rejecting his Jewish heritage for the sake of a new, assimilated identity is simultaneously questioned by the context since this meditation on the relationship between generations is motivated by the scenery: the narrator-protagonist is sitting alone in an empty room with a blackboard bearing a short Hebrew text, unintelligible for him, which reminds him of the Hebrew school he used to attend. This instructive classroom situation is a condensed, metaphorical model of the whole novel, in which Roth is compelled to reassess his views regarding his Jewish identity as he gets involved in an adventurous and dangerous plot taking place in Israel. The conclusion he draws later in the passage contradicts the fully assimilated position he claimed to possess earlier in the novel. „The cryptography whose signification I could no longer decode had marked me indelibly four decades ago: out of the inscrutable words written on this blackboard had evolved every English word I had ever written.” (Roth 312) In the light of this recognition, it is no longer the generation of the parents which looks comical aspiring in vain for an impossible compromise but the generation of the narrator, which beguiled themselves thinking that they can absolutely get rid of their past. On the other hand, the central theme of the *Operation Shylock* is the wide range of doubts regarding fake and real identities. Accordingly, both the classroom and the life threat under the pressure of which Roth has been meditating on the issues above turn out to be a bogus thus questioning the validity of the lessons he learnt and the statements he made in these circumstances. As a result, no final, stable propositions seem possible in the self-ironic structure of the novel which offers only somewhat controversial standpoints, among which the speaker’s mind oscillates due to each turn of the plot, somewhat similarly to the movement described by Malkin’s sine wave.

Just like Roth, who is forced in his narrative by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict driving the plot to reevaluate his identity, American Jewry also had to reconsider their relationship to Jewish tradition due to a historical trauma, the Holocaust. Beforehand, several authors with a Jewish family background did not judge this aspect of their identity essential enough to focus on it in their work; afterwards, many of them turned their attention to it. A good example for this shift is Karl Shapiro's collection, *Poems of a Jew*, published in 1958, in the *Introduction* of which he reflects on "The hideous blood purge of the Jews by Germany in the twentieth century" (xii) and adds that "[t]he poems here were written over a long period of time and are extracted mostly from volumes which have nothing to do with the present theme. But the undercurrent of most of my poems is the theme of the Jew, and for this reason I collect these examples now as a separate presentation." (xii). So what was only an "undercurrent" all through his career is now brought into the foreground. Of course, the temporal gap between the years of World War II and 1958 is not insignificant. To understand the connection between the two, apparently distant events—the trauma of the massacres in the 1940s and the book of poetry published at the end of the 1950s—one needs to take into consideration that "[o]ne of the characteristic features of PTSD[1] is its belatedness" (7), as Stanislav Kolář points it out in his "Introduction" to the *Reflections of Trauma in Selected Works of Postwar American and British Literature*.

The second meaning of the word "generation" in Jewish American literature belongs to the terminology of Holocaust and trauma studies. Trauma studies are rooted in the psychological and medical diagnoses of PTSD by Freud and his contemporaries, who examined veteran soldiers returning from the fights of World War I, however, the independent researches were united to form the great, interdisciplinary field of trauma studies after World War II, in close relation to the similarly complex investigations of Holocaust studies. The "intergenerational and transgenerational transmission of trauma", or in other words, the "idea that trauma can be passed on to descendants was initially explored in the field of the Holocaust studies" (Kolař 11). In this sense, first generation survivors are the individuals who were the victims of Holocaust themselves; second generation survivors are their children; while third generation survivors are the grandchildren. Holocaust and trauma studies have revealed that the victims—both as individuals and communities—often respond to the atrocities with evasion and repression

[1] Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

since the traumatic experiences fall so far out of the scope of the available conceptual systems that they are unable to interpret and process the trauma inflicted upon them for a long time. This phenomenon explains why the first literary testimonies on Auschwitz, like Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* (1958) or Eli Wiesel' *Night* (1960), were written and especially published in English translation so many years after the events. In other words, the Holocaust was fully recognized as a major issue of Jewish American literature with a significant delay, but as it entered the mind it started to dominate it as well.

In that respect, the two interpretations of the word "generation" work in opposite directions. In case of the assimilation process, later generations get gradually further from the tradition brought by the immigrant ancestors—as illustrated by Elliot Malkin's family tree—while in the posttraumatic narrative the first generation survivors' futile attempts to forget and move one as well as the second generation's difficulties tend to raise interest in the narrative of the family history typically culminating and offering resolution by the time of the third generation. In the particular case of the Holocaust and its American reception, the situation was further complicated by the peculiar position of the already more or less assimilated American Jews contemporaneous to the European victims. They had to realize that their European Jewish hinterland was practically erased since hardly anyone was left there to maintain the tradition from which they arrived. The previously rather individual decisions regarding assimilation became burdened by an increased sense of responsibility for the Jewish community as a whole. The interplay of these dilemmas and of the wide range of various personal responses resulted in the "Literary Renaissance among American Jews" (157) starting in the late 1950s, as pointed out by Cynthia Ozick in her crucial essay *Toward a New Yiddish*.

Moreover, the shift from ambitions of assimilation towards an increased consciousness of heritage among the American Jews coincided with a major conceptual shift in American society in the 1960s. Beforehand, the United States were considered to be a "melting pot" in which people of diverse ethnical background amalgamated. The process of assimilation was primarily understood as the individual's adaptation to the majority. From the 1960s, however, more and more attention was paid to different minorities and their unique values. The metaphor of the "melting pot" was gradually substituted by the concepts of the "salad bowl" or "mosaic culture", in which the ultimate goal of a homogeneous society is replaced by the co-existence of more or less different groups based on mutual tolerance and respect (Yang 86). The need for such a multicultural view emerged not quite independently from the lessons of the World War II but it was

motivated by other factors as well—the Civil Rights Movement, for instance—and it influenced people far beyond the Jewish community.

In the context outlined above, phenomena belonging to the first versus the second interpretation of generations cannot be fully and clearly separated. Accordingly, Chapter 2 of this paper focuses on the steps of the assimilation process of immigrants and their descendants while Chapter 3 is primarily devoted to fiction motivated by and concentrating on the Holocaust from the point of view of the first, second and third generation survivors' generations. Nonetheless, it has to be kept in mind all along the investigation that in case of individual authors the two categories above often coincide so the two themes are mutually and unavoidably influenced by each other.

2.2 From the Shtetl to the City

The archetypal scene of European Jewish life before the World War II was the shtetl while most of the immigrants arriving at Ellis Island entered the United States through the similarly emblematic American landscape: New York City. Moving from a small town to a metropolis influenced numerous aspects of life both for the individual and for the various units of community from the nuclear family to the newly emerging urban neighborhoods. The change of daily practices often questioned and altered not only long-established customs but also the essential value systems they were based on and these transformations frequently manifested as conflicts between the "old" and the "new".

Abraham Cahan's short story, "A Ghetto Wedding" (1898) tells about the marriage of two first-generation immigrants in New York City. Wedding is a rewarding theme in general and it is especially so in case of a Jewish narrative published in an American context. In addition to the romantic appeal of love stories culminating in marriage, the wedding ceremony grants an exquisite subject, too, because it takes place at the intersection of the personal and the social, allowing the author to depict the intimacy of the couple and the great tableau of the family and the guests simultaneously. Moreover, a WASP audience can find a special interest in the exotic details of the Jewish wedding ritual; no wonder that the American image about Jewish life at around the turn of the century has long been dominated by the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, which also centers around the theme of marriages. However, Hollywood expectations regarding a romantic story with a proper happy ending are not completely fulfilled either by Sholem Aleichem's stories about Tevye, the dairyman and his daughters—which served as the basis for the

musical—or by Cahan's story. Both writers—and many of their contemporaneous colleagues in Yiddish literature—offer instead a gentle humor verging on sadness, which results in an air of realistic authenticity in spite of the narrative voice slightly reminiscent of folk tales.

The complication in Cahan's story derives from the poverty of the young couple in love. Nathan would acquiesce to a modest wedding but his sweetheart, Goldy insists on a respectable wedding. "It is to be noted that a 'respectable wedding' was not merely a casual expression with Goldy. Like its antithesis, a 'slipshod wedding', it played in her vocabulary the part of something like a well-established scientific term, with a meaning as clearly defined as that of 'centrifugal force' or 'geometrical progression'" (*Norton Anthology* 125). The third person singular narrator ironically exaggerates when compares something so subjective and down-to-earth as a wedding to hard sciences. On the other hand, the implications of the simile are extremely precise. A scientific concept functions only if it is clearly defined and consensually used by all the experts in the field; consequently, its modification or confutation necessarily influences or may even destroy the whole system. Likewise, Goldy's personal vocabulary—used here in a sense similar to Rorty's term, signifying one's essential set of beliefs—with its central term of a "respectable wedding" represents the whole value system of the shtetl she comes from. The conflict develops as Goldy not only acts according to tradition but also expects other members of the community to do so.

But the Jewish ghetto of the Lower East Side in Manhattan is far from the shtetl. The people are partly the same—the story is populated by relatives and friends living in closely related neighborhoods—but the old rules do not quite apply. This is indicated by the story by the couple's changing approach to the wedding. In the first phase, they have enough money only for a "slipshood wedding", which Goldy rejects, so they wait and work for each other. However, economy is down and jobs are rare so instead of accumulating more money they have to live on their dwindling savings. Thus, after two years, Goldie agrees to have the modest ceremony and apartment which they can afford. In this second phase, ambitions are turned upside down: the sum of one hundred and twenty dollars, which did not seem satisfactory in the beginning, becomes now the very goal of their joint efforts. The enthusiasm with which Goldy argues and strives for the newly set but previously disdained target ironically questions the validity of her beliefs, especially since the constituents of Goldy's definition for a respectable wedding are all the material

markers of social status: proper clothing, a large ballroom full of guests and certain refined pieces of furniture in the newlywed's home.

Still, the narrator does not portray the betrothed or even the fiancée as comical figures. The reader is not only addressed directly in the opening sentence of the story but placed in the middle of the scenery. "Had you chanced to be in Grand Street on that starry February night, it would scarcely have occurred to you that the Ghetto was groaning under the culmination of a long season of enforced idleness and distress" (123). Thus the events are not represented from a superior observer's point of view but from the street level, where the reader is also positioned as one of the passers-by, just like the others, including the protagonists depicted in the following passages. This technique makes the situation more personal invoking empathy, which is the basis of humor according to Comte-Sponville. The third phase of the plot starts with Goldy's idea that spending all of the couple's money on a fancy ceremony instead of sharing it between the modest wedding and the basic furniture necessary for their first common household would compel the guests to bring gifts matching the level of the celebration so the couple could finally get everything she dreams of. Nathan expresses his doubts first but soon complies with the plan simply to make his beloved happy. And the narrator's voice is full of sympathy, too. The spiritual aspect of such ephemeral objects like a satin gown or a Brussels carpet is emphasized for instance by the scene when Goldy mails a piece of carpet she got as a sample for free in the shop to her mother. To Nathan's inquiry, "how do you know that is just the kind of carpet you will get for your wedding present?" Goldy merrily answers: "As if it mattered what sort of carpet! I can just see mamma going the rounds of the neighbors, and showing off the costly table-cloth' her daughter will trample upon. Won't she be happy!" (127). In other words, Goldy is not depicted as a simple, material and egoistic girl but as someone who goes beyond her limits to meet the social norms she believes to be essential.

The failure of the wedding is inevitable and faithfully described in detail, nonetheless, the closure of the tale is not depressing at all. Very few of the invited guests arrive and even fewer of them send or bring some cheap presents since the whole community is afflicted by unemployment. Moreover, Nathan and Goldy have no money left to call for a carriage and as they are walking home in the middle of the night they are insulted and humiliated by a gang of loafers. Still, most of the human responses to the gloomy situation are heart-warming: "[T]he bard [...] stirred by an ardent desire to relieve the insupportable wretchedness of the evening, outdid himself in offhand acrostics and

witticisms. Needless to say that his efforts were thankfully rewarded with unstinted laughter" (132); Goldy whispers in Nathan's ears with sincere affection: "My husband! My husband!" (132), and he answers with calling her "my pearl, my birdie" (133). The final scene displays the couple in the dark street heading towards their rented home, "being only themselves in the universe, to live and to delight in each other" (134). So the whitewashed walls and empty rooms of the apartment they are trying to reach symbolize not only the loss or absence of old values but also the promise of a fresh start free of blocking conventions.

The humor prevailing in Cahan's story is characteristic of many Jewish American narratives portraying the difficulties of first generation immigrants. The sympathetic but realistic representation of ambiguities and the more or less open endings of plots allow authors like Cahan or Bernard Malamud to avoid a didactic voice still to suggest that one should embrace life as it is, accepting its faults, doubts and misfits, opening up one's mind to deal with these challenges and to adapt to reality instead of trying to force any preconceived conceptual system on it in vain. I. B. Singer's humor, on the other hand, derives not simply from accepting and revealing the plurality inherent to his subjects but also from generating uncertain and multiple meanings by the employment of unreliable narrators and by the ironic use of the Yiddish literary tradition. This modernist gesture of writing between quotation marks may be one of the reasons that made his oeuvre so outstandingly popular among the English-speaking audience, especially if we consider that he became acknowledged around the middle of the 20th century when New Criticism, which favored Modernism, was the dominant school of literary theory in the US.

Isaac Bashevis Singer is possibly the most prominent representative of Yiddish literature, or at least his receiving the literary Nobel Prize in 1978 suggests so. In his acceptance speech he also emphasized this aspect of his work: "The high honor bestowed upon me by the Swedish Academy is also a recognition of the Yiddish language". However, his identity as an author is far from being unambiguous, as reflected by the various pennames he used. Leslie Fiedler, in his essay on "Isaac Bashevis Singer; or *The American-ness of the American-Jewish Writer*" expounds convincingly how each pseudonym corresponds not only to a certain period in Singer's career but also to a specific authorial position. Born in Poland in 1902 as Izaak Zynger, the young writer immigrated to the US in 1935 fleeing from Nazi threat and following his brother, Israel Joshua, already an established belletrist at the time. Upon his arrival to New York, Isaac first worked for the Yiddish magazine *The Daily Forward* under the name "Isaac Warshafsky". Later on,

he developed the American persona “Isaac Bashevis Singer”, the middle name of which means “Bathsheba’s”, referring to his mother, and he published most of his work first in English translation under this name. Whatever he decided to publish in its Yiddish original as full-length volumes, went to press bearing a third version of his name, “Isaac Bashevis” on the cover. As Fiedler puts it, “Son of his native city as a journalist, son of his mother as a Yiddish novelist, he is his father’s son as an American author; or perhaps rather the acknowledged brother of Israel Joshua Singer” (75). It could be debated how much the name by which Singer became famous reflects his father’s, his mother’s or his early deceased brother’s heritage, or why the Warshawian tradition is emphasized in the work of the Yiddish essayist while it is omitted from the American belletrist’s self-image; but these questions would be slightly off the point of this paper. What seems more important here is the conscious act of the author creating himself instead of taking his identity for granted.

Singer’s experimenting with versions of his own name as an author reminds me of Kierkegaard’s gesture of publishing some of his work under different pseudonyms, which many critics evaluate as ironical (Evans 68). Yet there is an essential difference between the two authors’ ironic self-multiplication. Whilst Kierkegaard’s insertion of imaginary writers like Johannes Climacus or editors like Victor Eremita calls the reader’s attention to the distance between the originally intended meaning and the final text thus revealing the mediated nature and consequently the unreliability of any utterance and its interpretations, Singer’s self-ironic separation of his authorial identities accentuates more personal concerns: his commitment to his family and his hometown, and the discrepancies of the tradition he grew up in versus the one he chose and made success in as an adult. The philosophical questions raised by the ambiguities of Kierkeagaard’s pseudonyms express doubts regarding theories on truth and the subject claiming to make valid statements about it. In contrast, Singer’s approach is more emotional and literary: keeping apart different fields of his activity he highlights that neither identity nor the culture inherited and produced can be treated as part of a homogeneous unity, although parts of his name recurring in each variant of his pennames also imply that the fragments are not completely independent either.

I. B. Singer often plays this destabilizing game not only with his own identity as an author but also with the narrative voice. The title story of his first collection, *Gimpel the Fool* starts with Kierkegaardian self-irony negating the truth of the subject’s statements in the moment they are articulated. “I am Gimpel the fool. I don’t think myself a fool. On the contrary. But that’s what folks call me” (Singer *Collected* 3). In many other stories like

“The Unseen”, “The Destruction of Kreshev”, “Zeidlus, the Pope” or “The Last Demon”, the narrator is the “Evil Spirit”, who is notorious not only for its wicked deeds but even more for his ambition to manipulate people: characters and readers likewise. Consequently, the atmosphere of the shtetl represented otherwise with a sensitive nostalgia makes an enchanting and a threatening impression simultaneously, like many fairy tales, and the morals proposed by the stories are ambivalent. For example, “Joy” tells about the Job-like sufferings of a devoted rabbi who loses his children one after the other to consumption and as a result rejects his faith but remains a benevolent person and seems to have a revelation on his deathbed. “Well, now everything is clear.” [...] the rabbi murmured. “One should always be joyous.” Those were his final words.” (Singer, *Collected* 37) On the one hand, the rabbi’s final words clearly contradict the atheist views he logically developed along the plot, on the other hand, his behavior—his grief, his doubts as well as his good deeds—are so convincing that the reader is motivated to believe in his sincerity and wisdom in case of his last statement just like previously, and endeavors to find coherence behind the apparent absurdity; which is quite in line with the conventional interpretation of the story of Job serving as a model for Singer’s plot as well; and which is the very tradition fully and persuasively refused beforehand. Thus the self-ironic multiplication of possible meanings elicits both sympathy and a very active participation on behalf of the reader.

This maintained ambiguity of a strong nostalgia mixed with signs of the awareness that the object of desire is only imaginary can be among the reasons explaining why “The Little Shoemakers” by Singer is one of the most popular stories on first-generation Jewish immigrants. The tone of the folk tales is nowhere more impressively dominant in Singer’s oeuvre than in this saga of the shoemakers’ dynasty from the Polish shtetl, Frampol. After introducing the family tree with several generations pursuing the same profession and bearing the same first names as the five sons of the founder of the trade, the narrator tells the story of Abba, whose seven sons, one after the other, immigrate to America. Finally, under the immediate threat of Nazi invasion, their father also follows them and the whole family is happily reunited over the ocean. After all the tribulations, the story closes with a completely and unusually happy end: the old grandfather overcomes his initial feelings of being a foreigner and he is integrated both into the large family of his descendants and their prospering trade of a shoe factory. The only dissonant element is the way the eldest son and the founder of the American factory, Gimpel, publicly announces the arrival of his father. “In the ads Gimpel published in the papers, he had proudly disclosed that his family belonged to the shoemaking aristocracy” (Singer, *Collected* 54). Not only this strongly

American gesture of exploiting an intimate family matter for the sake of invigorating the trade sticks out of the basically emotional approach of the context but also the language of the passage, which concisely paraphrases the family history in the businesslike style of newspaper advertisements. Still, this incongruity does not render all the rest of the story incredible. The contrast only stresses the fairy tale quality already indicated by the little song recalled in many crucial moments of the plot listing the names of the little shoemakers as well as by the overall structure of the saga. These elements keep the readers permanently alert to the fictitious nature of the narrative.

Beside the author and the narrator, the characters' level can be dominated by irony and self-irony as well. Similarly to the previous example, Bernard Malamud's short story, "The First Seven Years" also takes place in the milieu of the shoemaker trade in New York City, in a small workshop owned by a first-generation Jewish immigrant from Poland. Feld, the shoemaker is most concerned about the impending marriage of her nineteen-year-old daughter, Miriam. The father would prefer Max, a college boy and future accountant from the neighborhood but the girl seems uninterested, although she obediently goes for the few dates Max proposes at the request of Feld. The situation is further complicated by Feld's assistant, Sobel, a young World War II refugee, also from Poland, who has been working deftly and honestly for seven years but involuntarily eavesdrops on the first conversation between Feld and Max and rushes out from the workshop without any explanation. The story is told by a third person singular narrator from Feld's point of view, which might make the reader inclined to identify with him. However, the narration works covertly but constantly against that. The opening sentence represents the protagonist daydreaming about Miriam's wedding in the workshop. "Feld, the shoemaker, was annoyed that his helper, Sobel, was so insensitive to his reverie that he shouldn't for a minute cease his fanatic pounding at the other bench" (69). Ironically, it is Feld who turns out to be insensitive to the long-growing affection between Sobel and Miriam.

Another example for the irony of the narration could be the scene of the above mentioned initial conversation between Feld and Max. The whole situation is turned upside down in several respects. First of all, the romance is proposed neither by Max nor Miriam—who have not even met yet at this point—but the father, who tries to play the role of the matchmaker. The dialogue here is on the verge of the ridiculous both from an American point of view concerning romantic love and in the context of Jewish tradition as well since Feld is far from being an objective professional in the matchmaking trade; his reveries about Max make him look and act more like an immature girl detached from

reality: like someone he considers his daughter to be. On top of all, the whole dialogue about the date is mingled with a business transaction as Max originally entered the shop to get his worn shoes fixed, and the mixture of the material and financial with the spiritual and romantic is one of the most conventional techniques producing a humorous effect. However, the reader is impressed in "The First Seven Years" not so much by an ironical narrator pointing out the protagonist's delusions but rather by Feld's self-irony since he is aware of and repeatedly reflects on the awkwardness of his position all along the scene. For instance, when he offers a discount on mending the shoes to encourage Max, he immediately makes a mental note about the mistake of integrating the two disparate processes in the gesture of setting the price. "At once he felt bad, for he usually charged $ 2.25 for this kind of job. Either he should have asked the regular price or done the work for nothing" (71).

Self-irony culminates at the end of the story, in the closing conversation between Sobel and Feld, who is finally forced by his ailments and business difficulties to plead his assistant back. Sobel cannot avoid it any longer to disclose that he has been serving Feld for such a low wage for such a long time in the hope of marrying Miriam, who seems to return his sentiments though they have never overtly spoken about love without the father's permission. The shocked Feld bursts out: "Sobel, you are crazy," he said bitterly. "She will never marry a man so old and ugly like you" (77) but a moment later he corrects himself: "Ugly I didn't mean," he said half aloud. Then he realized that what he had called ugly was not Sobel but Miriam"s life if she married him. He felt for his daughter a strange and gripping sorrow, as if she were already Sobel's bride, the wife, after all, of a shoemaker, and had in her life no more than her mother had had" (78). Feld's observation—articulated by the narrator—ironically turns against his own standpoint: he has to recognize that what he rejects in Max is his own identity. On the other hand, he *does* admit this recognition—although only to himself and not to Sobel—so in this sense the climax allows for a reconciliation of the conflict due to the protagonist's self-irony. A very similar resolution appears in another story by Malamud, "A Summer's Reading", the careless adolescent protagonist of which goes straight and starts to educate himself after the self-ironic guidance of an old friend of his, who admonishes him "George, don't do what I did" (172).

It must also be noted that Malamud's story is an ambiguous paraphrase of a Biblical incident, "The First Seven Years"—as the title indicates—of Jacob serving Laban for the love of Rachel (Gen. 29. 15-30.), adapted to a contemporary urban setting. In the *Old*

Testament Laban cheats on Jacob, replacing his younger daughter, Rachel with his elder daughter, Leah on the wedding night so that he can exploit Jacob's expertise for another seven years. Contrastingly, in Malamud's version Feld is only inadvertent and not wilfully deceptive and the end of the plot is left open with the father asking for two more years of patience from Max before consenting to the marriage proposal. The Biblical narrative focuses on Jacob's position and approves of his deeds in a speech allegedly conveyed by the angel of God while the modern version concentrates on Feld (the counterpart of Laban, the father) and it offers no omnipotent voice declaring which of the characters would be completely right or wrong. While both narratives suggest that the claim of a new generation wins over the aspirations of the elders, Malamud is not only more sympathetic with the old generation represented by Feld but his distinction between the generations is less sharp, too. For instance, Feld's main, self-ironic objection against Max is that he is "old", by which he refers to the suitor's age as well as to his first-generation immigrant status. Besides, Feld's ambitions to foster his family's assimilation by marrying his daughter to a better assimilated accountant are hindered by his daughter's preference for the "soul" familiar from the shtetl, which she esteems so high in Sobel and misses form Max (75). In other words, her choice is justified by the new American concept of young people choosing their spouse instead of the old routine of marriages decided upon primarily by parents but the object of her desire is a representative of the "old" world. Moreover, the author's gesture of conveying a modern dilemma by retelling a traditional story also casts a vote for the "old".

A similarly humorous contrast of the "old" versus the "new" is in the center of Saul Bellow's short story, "The Old System", too. However, the tension here is not between an underlying "original" narrative and its modern paraphrase but between two systems of references manifest in the frame and the main plot of the story. The frame represents Dr. Braun, a biochemist spending a winter Saturday afternoon alone at home recalling a family conflict in his childhood between two of his cousins. Thus the actual plot is separated from the frame regarding chronology and protagonists as well. In addition, the shift in the narrative voice seems even more significant: although the whole story is told by the same impersonal third person singular voice restricted to the knowledge of Dr. Braun, the frame is a monologue in which objective descriptive parts alternate with philosophical comments while the main plot consists of vivid scenes full of sentiments and dramatic dialogues. This contrast between "The Old System" and Dr. Braun's present lifestyle is also made explicit as the very subject of his meditations in the frame.

Dr. Braun's point of view is ironically detached. He is a biochemist, who "had himself delivered cats and dogs. Man, he knew, entered life like these other creatures, in a transparent bag or caul" (51) and who examines members of his family—including himself—with the same analytic attitude always slightly superior to its object that he applied to "other creatures" in his professional life. This approach is striking, for instance, in the self-ironically precise evaluation of his emotional life. "It was said of him, occasionally, that he did not love anyone. This was not true. He did not love anyone steadily. But unsteadily he loved, he guessed, at an average rate" (48). Accordingly, the scientist's objectivity and accuracy dominate the style of the whole frame: the reader is informed in succinct, meticulous sentences about Dr. Braun's daily routine from noon when he wakes up till early sunset. The time is short and late: it is the second half of a brief day at the very end of the year, making the impression that it symbolizes Dr. Braun's position in his life, too. Beside the cold scenery, the protagonist's solitude and the lack of action, especially the need for a summative contemplation on one's own life and family history also evoke the image of approaching death.

In contrast, the main plot teems with life, although—ironically—all of its characters are dead by the time of the recollection. The two personalities in the focus are Isaac and his sister Tina, both of them Dr. Braun's elder cousins. Although each of them belongs to the same second generation of an immigrant Jewish family, Isaac acts with "the authority of a senior, almost an uncle" (52) and both he and Tina seem to represent an earlier generation than Dr. Braun, who is the only character permanently referred to by his family name all along the story. In fact, relatives' first names are necessary in the narrative for practical reasons so that one can distinguish between the characters; and the frequent use of the title "Dr." might also have the function of reminding the reader of the acknowledged scientist's image. However, the consistent use of "Braun" even in situations representing him as a child surrounded by others with the same family name highlights the ambiguity of his position. On the one hand, he despises the fight between Tina and Isaac labeling its events as "European Judaic, operatic fist-clenchings" (69) or "a situation of parody" (72). On the other hand, thinking of himself exclusively in terms of his family name suggests that he is above all the representative of his family. It is especially telling that Dr. Braun's first name, Sam is mentioned only once, which is at the same time the only occasion when he actively participates in the conflict of the siblings that he otherwise tries to observe from a distance, unbiased. In other words, he makes constant efforts to keep himself out of the

object of his investigation striving for rational statements of general validity but at the same time he is deeply involved so most of his ironic rejection turns into self-irony.

The whole story is organized along dichotomies which humorously break down in the end. Braun's aforementioned rationality and his preference for general theories are in sharp contrast with the other family members, who are represented as impressive individuals primarily directed by their feelings. In the conflict of Isaac and Tina, the former is a stereotypically male figure: a multimillionaire and womanizer, who likes to say about himself that "I fought on many fronts, Cousin Isaac said, meaning women's bellies" (63). Tina, on the other hand, is depicted as the archetype or even the caricature of the Jewish mother: the center of the family with an oppressive influence on others like her younger brother, Mutt, or even Isaac. The conflict between the two genders merges with a conflict between two steps of assimilation: Isaac starts his big business bribing a WASP partner, which the others feel too risky to join in spite of his invitation. As a result, Tina later blames Isaac for not sharing his fortune with the large family while Isaac is angry at Tina because she abandoned him at the first, crucial moment. Dr. Braun, a scholar with a degree and apparently void of all the confusion of the two siblings seems to be more successfully integrated into American society than either of them. His temperate style is also in line with what he says about non-Jewish Americans: "[t]he native, different wisdom of Gentiles, who had much to say but refrained" (74) as opposed to "these Jews—these Jews! Their feelings, their hearts! Dr. Braun often wanted nothing more than to stop all this" (83). The ambiguity of the two approaches culminates in the description of the final "deathbed scene" (70) or "deathbed joke" (77) the most cathartic and parodistic moment of the story when the dying Tina theatrically makes peace with Isaac offering emotional reconciliation but simultaneously erasing all meaning from the previous events. Nonetheless, Dr. Braun's logical and stabile life looks static, lifeless and desolate compared to the great and vivid world of the cousins recalled by him with great nostalgia.

In each of the stories above, the transition from the European Jewish shtetl to the multinational American city is represented in the context of the family, which serves as a condensed model of the greater social movements. First and second generation immigrants often act as middlemen between a traditional Jewish and an American value system. The diverse versions of third generation immigrants' fates and attitudes will be discussed more in detail later since they significantly coincide in time with the decades during and after the Holocaust and the succeeding generations of its survivors. The direction of the progression necessarily points toward assimilation to the American majority, however, the nostalgia for

the "old" is strong and can never be fully resolved or erased within the individual. Most of the stories offer reconciliation in the form of self-irony and humor which allow the author and the characters to fully express both components of the Jewish American identity and the conflicts between the two without making judgments in favor of either.

2.3 From Religion to Secular Culture

Religion has always been one of the key components of Jewish identity, as illustrated, for instance, by Alan Unterman's list on "*The dimensions of Jewish identity*".

> An analysis of the various elements constituting Jewishness, in its broadest sense, is important for understanding both the Jewish and the gentile perception of Jewish identity. Briefly we can isolate four categories which go to make up Jewishness: (1) biological origin, (2) religious affiliation, (3) membership of community/culture, (4) ethnic or national belonging and language use." (Unterman, *Jews* 13)

Moreover, several theorists of the Jewish Emancipation claimed for Judaism to be considered primarily a religion. As a result, "in western Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century [...] the dogma of assimilation [...] asserted that Jewry is not a nation but a religious community" (94) explains Simon Dubnow in *The Sociological View of Jewish History*. Emmanuel Levinas voices similar views in his 1961 essay "Jewish Thought Today" regarding "the Jewish thought born from the Emancipation that occurred in the eighteenth century. [...] In this position, which is still that of many Western Jews, Judaism is a religion alongside with Christianity, a form of worship" (160). On the other hand, Arthur Hertzberg suggests that "the position and politics of the Jew in the modern era have [...] been identified with the era of revolution and with revolutionary forces" (27) of the nineteenth and twentieth century as their struggle for "equality as a right" (27) included equal rights for Jewish people as well; however, many of these egalitarian social movements meant to discard religion. Therefore the theme of faith in the Jewish American literature of the twentieth century is controversial: it is represented both as a definitive token of identity and as an obstacle to assimilation, challenged not so much by the dominantly Christian views of the American majority but rather by numerous elements of secular life.

The resulting conflict within the individual's identity is a frequent theme in Jewish American literature often expressed by means of Christian versus Jewish imagery and

doctrines. But even in such cases, the decisive motivations and the essential stakes of the narrative are often to be found not in the confrontation of two religions but in the worldly aspects of the story. For instance, the protagonist in Chaim Potok's 1972 novel, *My Name is Asher Lev*, is an aspiring young painter, whose ambitions are hindered by his Hasidic family background. He has to face what Isaac Deutscher describes in his essay on "Marc Chagall and the Jewish Imagination": "Judaism's hostility towards the visual arts is notorious. By enforcing rigorously the commands, 'Thou shalt not make any graven image', rabbinical orthodoxy stunted the growth of the visual arts far more cruelly than even Calvinism did" (154-155). The central scandal of the novel is Lev's painting, "The Brooklyn Crucifixion", in which he employs Christian symbols to depict his mother's tribulations, who is torn between her devout husband and his son. The father judges the work as a betrayal of Judaism in favor of Christianity, however, Asher Lev understands their dissent not so much in terms of religion but in the traditional context of the artist's clash with society. He dedicates his "Brooklyn Crucifixion" also "For the Master of Universe whose suffering world I do not comprehend" (Potok 313), implying the ordeals of the numerous persecuted Jewish characters of the book and recalling the crucified Jew in Marc Chagall's "White Crucifixion" (1938), which referred to the long centuries of Russian pogroms as well as the emerging Nazi threat.

Similarly, Philip Roth's short story "The Conversion of the Jews" tells about a dispute between a rabbi and a schoolboy on Jewish versus Christian doctrines. However, the final point made by the protagonist does not judge in favor of either but exceeding both claims that one should "never hit anybody about God" (Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus* 158). So the apparently theological conflict points beyond the boundaries of any theology as the various ironies present at every level of the narrative—the plot and the characters as well as the rhetoric— systematically question each system of references evoked by the text.

The plot develops along a series of dogmatically provocative inquiries proposed by the protagonist, Ozzie in class. His antagonist, the representative of scholarly and social authority that Ozzie revolts against, is his teacher at Hebrew school, Rabbi Binder, whose name triggers associations like the profession of a bookbinder, or someone establishing links between generations by means of a shared knowledge, or someone bound by tradition. In contrast, Ozzie's full name is Oscar Freedman, designating someone for whom freedom is the decisive factor in life. Although the theme of the narrative is precisely how Ozzie manages to break free of the constraints of his heritage, the past participle form in his name ab ovo represents him as someone already liberated, whose freedom is the result

of someone's active efforts; which in the context of the short story and of Roth's oeuvre might refer to the American component of Ozzie's identity. It is worth noting that this interpretation shows similarities with Allen Guttman's reading of the protagonist's name in Bernard Malamud's short story, "The Lady of the Lake", in which the character "changes his name to Henry R. Freeman, in an obvious effort to shed his Jewish identity for that of a free man" (Guttman 113). The use of such speaking names—mostly of Yiddish or German origin but easily recognizable for the English speaking reader, too—is a frequent literary device in Jewish American literature.

Ozzie undermines Rabbi Binder's teachings by the Socratic method of ironic questions.

> 'What I wanted to know was different.'
>
> What Ozzie wanted to know was always different. The first time he wanted to know how Rabbi Binder could call the Jews 'The Chosen People' if the Declaration of the Independence claimed all men to be created equal. Rabbi Binder tried to distinguish for him between political equality and spiritual legitimacy, but what Ozzie wanted to know he insisted vehemently, was different. (141)

Socrates' pretended naivety is disguised here as a child's innocence, still, Ozzie threatens religious doctrines due to his acute sense of pointing out incoherences within the system—emphatically repeated thrice in the quotation above—quite in the spirit of Derridean Deconstruction, also rooted in Socratic irony. The boy not only challenges Jewish dogmas on the basis of his American knowledge about the Declaration of Independence—as a symptom of his somewhat split Jewish American identity—but always focuses on what is "different", turning arguments taken from Judaism against the rabbi. After a series of debates, their conflict culminates regarding the Christian idea of the Immaculate Conception, which Rabbi Binder repudiates as biologically impossible but Ozzie asks: if God is omnipotent then "why couldn't He let a woman have a baby without having intercourse" (141).

Roth's narrative can also be read as a humorous paraphrase of Christ's passion story. The everyday characters, the childish phrasing of sublime doctrines, the comic episodes and the happy ending might even make the impression of a parody but without an offensive edge, rather directing the reader's attention to the human aspect of story, "how Jesus was historical and how he lived like you and me" (141). Ozzie is reminiscent not only of the twelve-year-old Jesus teaching in the temple but also of the mature man

persecuted for his views. The young boy, who repeatedly irritates his seniors with his inquiries, is slapped on the face first by his mother then by the Rabbi so he flees up to the roof of the school, where his dialogue with the crowd gathering below and anxious for his life gradually turns into a scene of preaching. Like Christ on the cross, Ozzie is also placed above the others as if he got closer to some heavenly truth through his suffering, which is further emphasized by the lengthy and philosophical description of the intimate relationship between the sky, the light and human life introducing the final scene of the story. It is worth mentioning regarding the psychology of martyrdom what the narrator points out: "the truth was that he hadn't really headed for the roof as much as he'd been chased there" (151). Ozzie also has a charismatic influence on the people: he persuades everybody to repeat his words "upon his knees in the Gentile posture of prayer" (157). The differences between the two figures, however, are just as informative as the parallels. The mother is dominant in both narratives but Ozzie is a half-orphan, so the father—a possibly authentic source of authority both in a worldly and in a transcendental sense—is totally absent from his world. Besides, Christ welcomed suffering, saying "whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (*King James' Bible*, Matthew 5:39) while Ozzie's ultimate conclusion is the complete rejection of not only hitting another human being but also of accepting the blow.

All through the story, Ozzie is accompanied by his schoolmate, Itzie, who acts both as his double and his counterpoint. They are of the same age, they have similarly sounding nicknames, and the reader first learns about the debate between Ozzie and the rabbi from their dialogue. In contrast to Ozzie, Itzie is interested not so much in the controversial theoretical information regarding God's omnipotence but the petty and funny scandal of the word "intercourse" being pronounced in class. Later on, he is the first to become Ozzie's disciple encouraging his friend on the roof not to yield to the rabbi. However, he does so by saying "Jump!" (153). And when Mrs. Freedman begs Ozzie "Don't be a martyr, my baby" (155), Izzie misunderstands the word hitherto unknown to him and starts chanting: "Be a Martin, be a Martin..." (155), which is then echoed by all the children in the yard, too. So Izzie's character functions as a permanent source of irony, challenging religion first by emphasizing the carnal aspect of the Immaculate Conception—"Marry hadda get laid" (140)—then by acting as the embodiment of the ignorant crowd, who seem to support their spiritual leader but are practically the very ones turning him into a martyr and completely misinterpreting the situation and the ideas involved.

Not only Ozzie and Itzie see things different: much of the humor in the short story derives from the way Roth represents the same idea or scene repeatedly, from various characters' points of view. For example, Ozzie's presence on the roof is celebrated by his schoolmates as a heroic deed and it is gradually enriched by spiritual and theological associations but the old custodian of the school, Blotnik interprets the situation in a radically different context. "Anybody who has ever had a cat on the roof knows how to get him down. You call the fire department. [...] you do the same thing if you are Yakov Blotnik and you once had a cat on the roof" (150). These rapid shifts between contrasting frames of reference in the narrative activate the reader's sensitivity to the multiple possible interpretations of the same phenomenon. Therefore it is easy to see by the end that Ozzie's claim for religious tolerance self-ironically points into two opposite directions. On the one hand, he addresses his mother, his schoolmates in Hebrew school and the rabbi; and the title, "The Conversion of the Jews" also suggests that he warns Jewish people not to hurt others. On the other hand, the short story was published in 1959, at a time when Holocaust literature had already started to flourish and Jews started to be generally considered as the archetype of people persecuted for their religion; moreover, it appeared in the collection *Goodbye, Columbus*, which also included the story "Eli, the Fanatic", directly addressing the theme of Holocaust. Thus Roth avoids the dangers of a didactic voice lying in Ozzie's admonition "You should never hit anybody about God" (158) by opening up the horizon for numerous various readings involving different victims and victimizers, possibly beyond the scope of the actual story but always emphasizing the responsibility of the individual.

In contrast to Roth, whose narrative directs the attention to the social dangers of religious intolerance and calls for the acceptance of several coexisting theologies, Cynthia Ozick's short story, "The Pagan Rabbi" focuses on the other side of the coin: she dramatizes how one's life might be destroyed by letting religious plurality in it. The story is told by a first person narrator who learns that his childhood friend, "Isaac Kornfeld, a man of piety and brains, had hanged himself in the public park" (Ozick, *The Pagan Rabbi* 4). The friend visits the widow, Sheindel and tries to reconstruct the events relying on three sources: his own memories, Sheindel's oral reminiscences and Kornfeld's written legacy, a notebook and a letter found in the pocket of his coat. This diversity of genres—childhood anecdotes, dialogues, summaries of bedtime stories told by Kornfield to his children and parts of his multilingual notes including quotations of poetry as well as original observations—results in a fragmented structure, which reflects well the theme of the

narrative: the tormenting absence of one ultimate and fully comprehensible truth and the both seductive and killing multiplicity of incongruent phenomena and their interpretations.

According to his notes, the title character, Isaac Kornfeld is forced "to choose between Jewish and pagan values embodied respectively in his first and last names" (Friedman 8). The former child prodigy, the rabbi of great reputation is entranced by Nature, who appears to him in the form of a dryad or tree nymph: the spirit of a tree embodied as a young and beautiful girl. Under her influence and aspiring for a free soul able to admit the delightful and elusive diversity of the world, the rabbi gradually turns away from his religious studies and the discipline of monotheism, finally committing suicide on the dryad's tree, presumably as a gesture expressing ultimate freedom. As shown by the name of both the girl, Iripomoňoéià and her master, Lord Pan as well as Kornfeld's notes written in Greek, Hebrew, Aramic and English, the dilemma of the Many versus the One is articulated here through "the Hellenism versus Hebraism theme that features so prominently in Ozick's fiction" (Friedman 2) from her early "unpublished volume of poetry 'Greeks and Jews'" (Friedman 2) to the novella "Usurpation" in which the protagonist must choose between "The Creator or the creature. God or god. The Name of Names or Apollo" (Ozick, "Usurpation" 176).

Stephen Wade proposes that "Ozick's story has a forebear in E. M. Forster's story, 'The Story of a Panic' (1954), in which a very plain and provincial Englishman has a vision of Pan" (179). It is worth expounding this parallel in respect of the subject of the present paper since the similarities of the two narratives are significant while the differences demonstrate well the contrast between Forster's ironic versus Ozick's self-ironic approach to the same subject: the liberating yet destructive power of sensual and intellectual ecstasy. Both titles encapsulate tension: the concept of a "Pagan Rabbi" is an oxymoron in itself while Forster's etymological pun on "a Panic" refers to the double effect of the incident described by the narrator: his company's sudden alarm and Eustache's, the protagonist's revelation due to an unexpected visit of Pan during a walk, which a group of English tourists take in the hills surrounding Ravello. Both narratives describe the surrealistic course of events turning the protagonist into a disciple of Pan, who breaks free from the bonds of ordinary society. Besides, both stories are told by a narrator of the similar type: a middle-aged male Everyman of mediocre mind, who tries to understand in vain what has truly happened. On the other hand, Eustache is an adolescent, who becomes a follower of Pan as a result of a momentary epiphany launching the "career—if career it can be called" (Forster 1) of the enlightened mind whereas Kornfeld's

devotion enfolds gradually as the fulfillment of his studies and culminates in his death. In other words, the divine presence is the beginning of the plot for Eustache, who receives it as a gift; while it means the end for Kornfeld, who has been working hard toward it all through his life. In harmony with these elements, the conflicts are not quite the same either. Eustache's spirituality is clearly inhibited by society so his freedom means getting rid of the social constraints. Ironically, his victory gains even public acknowledgement later on; as the narrator puts it: "I have often seen that peculiar smile since [...] on the photographs of him that are beginning to get into the illustrated papers" (Forster 14). In opposition, Kornfeld's struggle is an inner dilemma: his spiritual efforts are not only accepted but greatly supported by society and the ironic turn does not take place in the community but in the individual, who becomes dissatisfied by the rabbinical path along which he has been seeking his freedom and enlightenment therefore turning to Hellenism instead.

The narrators' personalities and their relationship with the protagonists differ, too. Forster's narrator is the prototype of Matthew Arnold's repugnant Philistine as described in his *Culture and Anarchy*: a conventional and materialistic man, who tells about himself in the context of a discussion on the artistic and philosophical aspects of a beautiful landscape that "I do not know anything about pictures" (Ozick, *The Pagan Rabbi* 5) but "I have had some experience of estates" (Ozick, *The Pagan Rabbi* 7). He is irritated both by Eustache and the Italians he feels superior to. Consequently, he completely misunderstands the events: he explains the appearance of Pan as a simple gush of wind overreacted by his group of friends; he physically obstructs Eustache's strife for freedom by trying to lock him up in his hotel room; and fails to recognize the young Italian servant's, Gennaro's self-sacrifice, who first betrays Eustache for ten lire—in a way reminiscent of Jude—but finally helps him to escape from the hotel, Gennaro dropping dead as they jump out of a balcony. In contrast to Forster's narrator, Ozick's chronicler does not share the direct sensation of Pan with the protagonist, he only hears and especially reads about Kornfeld's experiences, still, he appreciates these revelations more than his counterpart in Forster's story. He is an educated man himself—his friendship with Kornfeld dates from the rabbinical seminar they used to attend—and he not only reproduces—quotes, summarizes or translates if necessary—his friend's notes but also comments on them. As a result, Forster's narrator depicts only the surface of the events while Ozick's story gives partial insight into the psyche of the characters.

In spite of the numerous thematic, motivic and structural similarities of the two narratives, the authors' approaches are essentially different. Forster's story is based on one

coherent series of dichotomies whereas Ozick sets up a humorously multifaceted situation including several points of view. Forster's story is organized along oppositions like the Englishman versus the Italian, the material versus the transcendental, the rational versus the artistic and the objective versus the subjective. His narrator not only makes explicit that he belongs to the group defined by the first elements of these word pairs but speaks disdainfully about people depicted by the second ones. For instance, when the enlightened Eustache warmly greets Gennaro, the only person who understands him in the hotel, the narrator is outraged. "I always make a point of behaving pleasantly to Italians, however little they may deserve it [...] Taking Miss Robinson aside, I asked her permission to speak seriously to Eustache on the subject of intercourse with social inferiors" (22-23). Understanding Forster's story requires from the reader the understanding of the author's irony: how the narrator's stable social and ideological system is shaken by the transcendental experiences and how the simplest old Italian peasant women comprehend this far better than him. The narrative does not lack other characters, either, but their positions do not divert from the basic dichotomy; each of them can be arranged along an imaginary line drawn between the protagonist and the narrator, some of them closer to the pole of transcendental understanding represented by Eustache—like the young English girl, Rose, who says after the panic that "I should have stopped, I do believe" (13)—some closer to the narrator's worldview. The inferiority of the latter is emphasized by the Christian references of the story: the Italian scenery, Gennaro's self-sacrifice, Eustache's blessed smile and his ultimate freedom all seem to suggest that transcendental knowledge is accessible, though mysterious. Forster does not express directly what Eustache symbolizes—he does not specify, for example, whether the transcendental should be imagined in the realm of religion or art or sensuality etc.—but he points out his meaning ironically, representing the defeat of its opposite embodied by the ridiculously narrow-minded narrator.

In contrast, Ozick's story offers various futile attempts at communicating with the transcendental. Not only Kornfeld is looking for spirituality: his father as well as the narrator's father were devout Jews proud of their sons studying to be rabbis; the narrator, disillusioned by their rivalry turns to atheism; while the failure of his marriage to a Puritan woman illustrates the dead-end street of Christianity. On the other hand, none of these characters turn out to be right or wrong in the end, as it happened in Forster's narrative. Even Kornfeld's search for the transcendental is depicted as not only the most powerful endeavor—the central issue of the narrative—but also as the greatest failure at the same

time, leading to his death. Consequently, Ozick's construction does not provide the reader with any superior position to identify with thus understanding the author's irony and message; her self-ironic narrative displays only equally justifiable ideologies, each of them questionable in light of the others and apparently all doomed to fail. In the end, there is no Eustache who would possess transcendental wisdom and whom the seeker could turn to. The Christian idea of salvation through the sacrifice of another person does not work, either; unlike Gennaro's death, Kornfeld's perishing does not bring anyone closer to any revelation. Moreover, his ultimate position of hanging dead from a tree can be read as the visual parody of the elevated spiritual status he has been struggling for, so even his death is deprived of the atmosphere of redeeming pathos. Still, Ozick's world does not seem more pessimistic than that of Forster. Quite to the contrary: Kornfeld's joyful notes as well as his intimate relationships—his marriage, his friendship with the narrator and his professional reputation—all testify the delightful nature of his search even if it teems with doubts and can be fulfilled only by death. Ozick is unable to offer an ironically transmitted conviction, like Forster did. She finishes her narrative with the narrator's advice to the widow, "Your husband's soul in that park. Consult it" (p 37), which can be read as the equivalent of a self-ironic encouragement to read Ozick's story.

Religion is not always challenged on a scholarly basis in Jewish American fiction. Bernard Malamud seems to be more interested in the practical, emotional and social aspects of the subject. He addressed the theme of the contrast between the devout Jewish man and the young female prostitute twice, in "The Magic Barrel" (1953) and in "God's Wrath" (1972). Both short stories have strikingly similar constellations of characters—a prostitute with an aging, religious father and her lover(s)—, both fit in the series of parables so typical of Malamud's oeuvre, and the closing scenes also resemble; but different elements of the analogous situations are emphasized creating a doubtful yet optimistic atmosphere in "The Magic Barrell" on the one hand and invoking the voice of the most desperate prophets at the end of "God's Wrath".

"The Magic Barrell" starts with a scene of the matchmaking stereotypical in Jewish fiction. Leo Finkle, a young rabbi-to-be living in New York City is so immersed in his studies that he has no time for women but his chances for a job are better if married so he consults a matchmaker. Pinye Salzman offers him a long series of disenchanting maidens—some too old, some disabled, some not truly a maiden any longer—and Leo finally finds himself attracted to the photo of a beautiful girl, allegedly mixed among the other portrays only by accident; she is Salzman's own daughter, disowned since she

became a prostitute. In spite of the matchmaker's resistance, the story ends with the encounter of the two young people at the usual corner of the girl, witnessed by the father hiding behind a wall. Leo approaches the girl with the feeling that "[h]e pictured, in her, his own redemption" (Malamud, *The Complete Stories* 149). The question is left open whether the couple will really come together but the possibility of a happy ending is undoubtedly present.

The essential question of the story is why the future rabbi is attracted to the harlot. A socially reasonable explanation might be that the Jewish rabbi is just as much an outcast in the WASP society of America in the 1950s as a prostitute, though on radically different bases. Uniting their forces, the female professional of the body and the male professional of the mind might really make up a successful whole. More pessimistic interpretations may argue that Leo is simply the victim of a cunning Salzman, who only pretended to be unwilling to introduce him to his daughter in order to increase his desire by setting up artificial difficulties, being aware from the beginning that the yeshiva student will be easily seduced by the hustler's charms precisely because he is so unexperienced in the realm of the flesh. Either way, the narrative questions both religious and social prejudices self-ironically emphasizing the common heritage of the Jewish immigrants yet insinuating that the breakdown of traditional rules might prove to be fruitful.

In "God's Wrath", Malamud focuses not on the perspectives of the young couple—in fact, there is no young couple to speak of—but on the father-daughter relationship. The father this time is "Glasser, a retired sexton" (Malamud, *The Complete Stories* 507), a widower living with Lucille, his youngest daughter from his second marriage. He does not often see his elder daughters since they are unhappily married: "Helen's husband, a drinker, a bum, supported her badly" (507-508) while "Fay had a goiter and five children" (508). After a while, the youngest girl also moves away from home and becomes a prostitute under the name Luci Glass. The final scene is reminiscent of the ending of "The Magic Barrell": the father is peeping round the corner as the daughter meets her next client but the optimism of the previous story is completely absent. In the last sentence, Glasser "calls down God's wrath on the prostitute and her blind father" (513).

The text invites the reader for at least two, controversial interpretations: a religious versus a psychological one. The theological understanding evokes the lamentations of Jeremiah who compared Israel turning away from the one true God for the sake of various idols to a prostitute abandoning her husband, saying "thou has played the harlot with many lovers; yet return again to me, saith the Lord" (King James' Bible, Jeremiah 3:1). In this

reading, Malamud's story would be a sorrowful, modern paraphrase of the biblical parable warning Jewish people that they have committed the sin of giving up their faith and offending its laws for the sake of ephemeral worldly pleasures again. But equally justifiable would be a psychological analysis proposing that the daughter's behavior is more than logical. She has grown up in a family where there are no attractive female role models to follow: both wives of Glasser have deceased early, Luci's married sisters are far from being happy and the perspective her father kept proposing to his youngest daughter was to become a financially independent spinster; so it is not very surprising that she ends up experimenting with an entirely different lifestyle, marking her shift of identity by changing her name as well. Her chief argument for her choice is the open-minded variety of her new social life; which is in contrast with the failure of communication between father and daughter. "'It's not as bad as people think,' Luci said. [...] I meet lots of people" (512). Glasser's final outcry for God's wrath activates both interpretational frameworks, self-ironically playing out one against the other. According to religious laws, the prostitute is the sinner, however, Glasser equally blames "the blind father" (513), referring either literally to his own "rheumy eyes" (507), or metaphorically to his psychological blindness regarding his daughter's needs, or—turning the logic of psychology against theology—to the blindness of the universal father, God, who is insensitive to the psyche of actual human beings, fragile and fallible as suggested by Luci Glass' name and fate, and who would require blind obedience to several millennia old phrases hardly applicable to contemporary reality.

The incongruence of theology and the everyday world is a frequent issue in Jewish American literature. Another short story by Malamud, "The Silver Crown" approaches it from a different angle: this time the conflict is not between religious inhibitions and the individual aspiring for fulfillment even at the expense of transgressions but between a rational versus a mystical worldview. Faith is associated here with the irrational, located almost on the verge of the foolish; an approach familiar from I. B. Singer's formerly discussed "Gimpel, the Fool" or "Idiots First" by Malamud. In these narratives, the devout protagonist is either a feeble minded person himself like Gimpel or someone responsible for a relative like that, as in the case of Malamud's stories. Both Singer and Malamud emphasize that faith is not simply of essential necessity turning visible as one reaches the boundaries of the ordinary but it also becomes accessible only beyond the edge of reason. Thus each story simultaneously questions religion and argues for it employing arguments that do not obey the rules of exclusively logical disputes.

The self-irony of “The Silver Crown” is increased by setting the plot in a business context. The protagonist, the “young Gans, Albert, a high school biology teacher” (536) is the embodiment of rationality: a teacher of sciences, who has to face the limits of rational knowledge when his father becomes fatally ill and the specialists disagree about both diagnosis and treatment. As someone with nothing to lose, he consults a “faith healer” (536) against his better judgment. The healer is a rabbi, Jonas Lifschitz, who deals with producing silver crowns, explaining that “[t]he crown is not a medicine, it is the health of your father. We offer the crown to God and God returns to your father his health” (540). The humor of the dialogues between Lifschitz and Gans derives primarily from the clash of the two worldviews: the client repeatedly asks for intellectual analysis and factual evidence in vain whereas the rabbi speaks the completely different language of mystical tradition. The humor is especially powerful when Gans points out the split within the mystical system: if the crown is a sacred offering operating with such immeasurable qualities like love and health, why Lifschitz has two price categories? Finally, Gans unveils Lifschitz as a fraud. The rabbi tries to defend himself by telling that all his profit was necessary for taking care of his imbecile daughter, Rifkele. In their ultimate, heated fight, both men blame each other for what the other lacks: rational versus emotional truth, respectively.

> “Miracle,” Albert bellowed, “it’s a freaking fake magic, with and idiot girl for a come-on and hypnotic mirrors.” [...]
>
> “Be kind,” begged the rabbi [...] “Be merciful to an old man. Think of my poor child. Think of your father who loves you.’
>
> “He hates me, the son of a bitch. I hope he croaks.”
>
> [...]
>
> “Aha,” cried the wild-eyed rabbi, pointing a finger at God in heaven. “Murderer,” he cried, aghast.
>
> [...]
>
> An hour later the elder Gans shut his eyes and expired. (552)

Neither of the two contesting standpoints triumphs: Lifschitz’s mysticism is disclosed as a bogus enterprise financially exploiting people in dire need but at the same time Gans’ lack of love for his father is also revealed. All through his story, Malamud is primarily concerned with systematically and humorously displaying the incompatibility of the two worldviews, still, he finishes the narrative with self-ironically pointing out the fatal consequences of living one’s life imprisoned in either.

Each of the stories mentioned above represent Judaism challenged by diverse aspects of modern life but their self-irony might tell a lot about the double trap involved in any communal identity based on a shared ideological system. Since any such system is established by the rejection of some Other—the immoral, the irrational, the people of different ethnicity or religion etc.—it is permanently threatened by whatever it has expelled. The modern and postmodern multicultural American scene is especially abundant in situations of this Other—for example, the immigrant—rightfully claiming for integration. On the other hand, letting the formerly excluded Other in always carries the risk of not simply modifying but completely destroying the system resulting in the collapse of the individual's life formerly organized along recently questioned principles, losing both its theoretical basis and the support of a stable community working along consensual values. So a devout Jewish American mind constantly has to face the double challenge of maintaining Judaism as a key component of identity and getting integrated in an American society based on somewhat different ideologies. The self-irony of these stories allows the authors to depict both sides of the coin without making a judgment in favor of either. Besides, their humor enhances a more extensive, multifaceted exploration of the particular situations revealing the most problematic points without an offensive edge.

2.4 From Yiddish to English

In contrast to the previous examples full of sympathy, irony in Jewish American fiction can manifest itself in a sarcastic voice as well, especially when the theme is the Yiddish literary circles in the U.S. This is the case, for instance, in two short stories by I. B. Singer, both told by a first person singular narrator, who is an acknowledged American Yiddish immigrant writer, strikingly reminiscent of the author himself. The opening of "The Cafeteria" describing this milieu is worth quoting at length.

> Even though I have reached the point where a great part of my earnings is given away in taxes, I still have the habit of eating in cafeterias when I am by myself. I like to take a tray with a tin knife, fork spoon, and paper napkin and to choose at the counter the food I enjoy. Besides, I meet there the *landsleit* from Poland, as well as all kinds of literary beginners and readers who know Yiddish. The moment I sit down at a table, they come over: "Hello, Aaaron!" they greet me, and we talk about Yiddish literature, the Holocaust, the state of Israel, and often about acquaintances who were eating rice pudding or stewed

> prunes the last time I was here and are already in their graves. [...] and our eyes ask mutely, Whose turn is next? [...] I cannot spend too long with these Yiddishists, because I am always busy. I am writing a novel, a story, an article. I have to lecture today or tomorrow [...] It can happen that an hour after I leave the cafeteria I am on a train to Chicago or flying to California. But meanwhile we converse in the mother language and I hear of intrigues and pettiness about which, from a moral point of view, it would be better not to be informed. (*Collected*, 287)

The speaker clearly distinguishes between his "new" American life and the "old" Yiddish scene. The oppositions are clear and manifold. The narrator is successful and rich while the cafeteria can only boast of tin utensils and cheap, self-service food. It is small and bound to its location while Aaron travels often and far all over the U.S.A. All the other guests are marginal characters eager to greet him, who, in contrast, has only a limited amount of time for them since he is an active professional who has managed to emerge from this community, unlike the others. He does not even try to unite the two worlds since he descends to the cafeteria only when he is by himself. His activities described in detail are in sharp contrast with the timeless stability of the cafeteria and the ghosts of deceased friends who seem to populate not only the conversations but the place as well; and who turn out to be the real protagonists of the plot. The allegedly superior position of the speaker and his resulting irony—most striking in his final remark about the pettiness of local gossips—dominate the whole narrative although the edge of his patronizing tone is somewhat taken off by the humorous mock-complaint of the first sentence and his nostalgic approach.

Death is the central theme not only in the guests' conversations but in the whole narrative. Aaron has a love affair with an attractive young woman called Esther, who regularly attends the cafeteria. The hierarchy in their relationship complies with the general power structure of the story: all the other guests crave for Esther in vain since she exclusively admires the narrator's work and person, who, on the other hand, is not interested in her enough to maintain the liaison very long. Still, they meet a few times and on one occasion she claims to have seen Hitler—or his reincarnation—in the cafeteria. The narrator doubts her sanity but later on, with an esoteric turn, he also meets her ghost in the street at around the time when she commits suicide: she appears in the company of another elderly, Yiddish friend, who has already passed away, too. Aaron reflects on the incident afterwards in the same ironic tone with which he previously criticized her menial job of

sorting buttons at a factory. “Yes, corpses do walk on Broadway. But why did Esther choose that particular corpse? She could have got a better bargain even in this world” (300). Although his sarcastic evaluation prevails in the end, his representation of the dead-end street of “these Yiddishists” is not void of self-irony either: from the very first page on he is just as involved in the community’s permanent meditation on their own approaching death as the others, and his world, just like Esther’s, is haunted.

A similar shift from irony to self-irony can be observed in “The Joke”. In the 1982 edition of Isaac Bashevis Singer’s *Collected Stories*, arranged by the author, this story immediately follows “The Cafeteria” obviously not by accident. Chronologically, the plot takes place much earlier than the preceding story, between 1933 and 1938, but the milieu is the same and the emphasis is more on self-irony. The plot develops from a nasty prank played on Dr. Alexander Walden, a professor of Hebrew living in Berlin, by a rich Yiddish publisher, Liebkind Bendel, an immigrant to the U. S. The aging professor infuriates Bendel by not answering any of his letters so the publisher invents a young, female American millionaire—modelled on Walden’s former wife—madly in love with the professor, and they start to correspond in her name. The narrator gets involved in the story when Dr. Walden is persuaded under the increasing pressure of Nazi threat in Germany to travel to New York where an encounter in person with his imaginary correspondent cannot be avoided and Lebkind asks the narrator to help him warding off the exposure of his cheating by telling Walden that his beloved died in a plane crash. The professor is reluctant to accept the explanation and not much after the incident he falls sick and dies. The last scene represents him at his funeral lying on the bier with “a hint of a smile that seemed to say, ‘Well, *ja*, my life was one big joke—from the beginning to the end.’” (316).

The positions within the ironic structure change all through the story. In the beginning, Dr. Walden is the butt of the joke not only from Bendel’s point of view but also from that of his appreciative audience. The narrator depicts Walden as a caricature of the presumptuous scholar gaining his high social due to someone else’s money. Like Bendel’s collaborators—for instance his wife and another woman translating his letters into German—the reader is also inclined to laugh at the professor’s self-conceit and gullibility. Later on the whole incident is placed in the larger context of the imminent World War II, where everybody is the butt of an impersonal and cruel fate of irony. The superiority felt by the prankster and his collaborators over their victim is replaced by sympathy and a sense of responsibility or even guilt. The publisher, who treated Walden with mock reverence all through the unharmful farce, ironically falls entrapped in his own scheme at

the professor's tragic appearance. From this point on, Bendel is the most comical character in the narrative as he tries to flee the consequences of his deeds. Dr. Walden regains his superiority first by seeing through the prank, then at his funeral, which is attended not only by the physicist Einstein, whose presence endows the event with the intellectual prestige that Dr. Walden was gradually losing, but also by "a young woman dressed in black" (316), who looks just like the embodiment of the imaginary correspondent. The boundaries between fiction and reality are humorously blurred as the narrator draws the conclusion, "I realized [...] that whatever anybody can invent already exists somewhere" (316). In addition, it is uncannily self-ironic of the narrative that the last laugh is attributed to the dead.

These changes of status are clearly indicated by shifts between languages. "Why should a Polish Jew in New York publish a literary magazine in German?", poses the narrator a rhetorical question in the opening sentence of the narrative. "Liebkind Bendel's only language was Yiddish" (302), still, as soon as he became rich on the stock market and in real estate in New York, he used his fortune to launch a German magazine edited by his wife. His gesture might be explained by the usual ambition of the parvenu to express his financial success by possessing something of high intellectual and social status. The reputation of German as the language of culture as opposed to Yiddish, the inferior vernacular on the European stage is elucidated by the narrator at another point of the story. "[T]he knowledge that Dr. Alexander Walden had for a time been the husband of a German heiress and wrote in German made the Hebraists stand in awe of him. Since he ignored them, they accused him of being a snob. He avoided even speaking Yiddish, though he was the son of a rabbi from a small village in Poland" (303). In the American context, however, English, and not German is the mainstream language therefore Bendel's magazine makes the impression of being so outdated that it becomes its own parody.

The European knowledge regarding languages proves to be inadequate in case of Dr. Walden as well. After his arrival, he tries to communicate with the narrator in German in vain so he finally changes to "Yiddish, with all the inflections and pronunciations of the village he came from" (309). He also complains that "I know English from reading Shakespeare. [...] But here they speak an English that sounds like Chinese. I don't understand a single word they say" (310). He experiences the breakdown of his European erudition and his being forced back into the disdained Yiddish of his childhood as the collapse of culture. "What do you write in the Yiddish newspapers? What is there to write about? We are returning to the jungle. *Homo sapiens* is bankrupt. All values are gone—

literature science, religion. Well, for my part I have given up altogether" (311). It is worth mentioning though that the status of Hebrew remains intact in course of the whole narrative; it is considered to be the subject and the medium of well-respected scholarly investigation and not the field for power games.

In fact, the question of languages and of Yiddish in particular was a crucial issue in the first decades of Jewish literature in America. Most of the Jewish immigrants arriving to the U. S. spoke Yiddish as their mother tongue so Yiddish literary circles and periodicals flourished in the first half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, "[i]mmigrant writers of the early twentieth century were still addressing the artistic problem of how to bring Jewish experience to the American reader" (Wisse, 272). In addition, authors with a Jewish family background in the U. S. also had to face the challenge of launching their careers within the framework of the primarily English-speaking majority literature of the country. As a result, different authors were experimenting with a wide range of individual answers to these dilemmas. "Antin made herself over into a genteel writer and Cahan accommodated the English reader by treating Yiddish as a foreign language, Yezierska brought the immigrant streets to life by imitating their cacophony and fractured English" (272-273), lists Ruth R. Wisse some of the possible approaches.

Systematically, the immigrant Jewish author could choose between three options: insisting on the mother tongue; trying to mediate between the two cultures; or entirely giving up the Jewish heritage for the sake of joining mainstream American literature. The first possible approach was not unfamiliar for Jewish writers long used to living in the European Diaspora where an educated man would pursue religious studies in Hebrew, spoke Yiddish at home and knew enough of the official language of the country he happened to live in to be able to get a degree or to conduct business transactions with majority citizens. However, confining themselves to Yiddish always involved the risk of remaining forever closed in the ghetto of minority literature. Still, the lively Yiddish literary life in America, especially in New York City in the first half of the twentieth century offered a significant opportunity for many authors like Morris Rosenfeld (1862-1923), the most notable representative of the "sweatshop poets", who addressed the difficulties of impoverished immigrant laborers at around the turn of the century. Obviously, the financial and social difficulties described by them were the chief reason for hindering first-generation immigrants' acculturation in English and consequently their insistence on expressing themselves in their mother tongue but it is also not by accident that many of the exclusively Yiddish writers were most active in the field of poetry, which

is more bound to the formal conventions already developed in and therefore bound to a particular language than prose.

Most of the Jewish authors living in America realized soon that success necessarily meant succeeding in English so they represented Jewish experiences in the language of their new, chosen homeland. This recognition was also in line with the direction of Jewish Assimilation movements in Europe, which began in Germany as early as the end of the eighteenth century but developed in other countries only very slowly and gradually, motivating primarily urban Jewish writers to adapt to producing literature in the majority language of their country. Abraham Cahan, for instance, was a first generation immigrant and bilingual writer: the competent editor of Yiddish periodicals and the ardent organizer of Yiddish literary life wrote his semi-autobiographical novel, the archetype of the immigrant novel: *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) in English. Still, it needed to be rediscovered by Isaac Rosenfeld in 1952 to be acknowledged as a major accomplishment of American literature (Wisser 271). Similarly, Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934), the other great example of the genre also received due attention only belatedly, after its reprint in 1964. Apparently, the immigrant status and themes were more of a stigma and therefore an obstacle to literary success until the aftermath of the World War II when the postmodern trends—not independently of the lessons learnt from the historical cataclysm—brought so-far marginal minority issues into the focus of interest.

Some authors chose the third way: they preferred to establish a career in mainstream American literature. It would be probably too far-fetched to propose that such an ambition required a conscious choice between the American and the Jewish culture. However, there are several texts insinuating or overtly expressing that an American versus a Jewish identity was conceived as an either-or question on both sides in the first decades of the twentieth century. David Levinsky's concludes his fictive autobiography by emphasizing the ultimate irreconcilability of his two identities: "My past and my present do not comport well. David, the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher's Synagogue, seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well-known cloak-manufacturer" (Cahan 372). In Cahan's dichotomy, Jewish spirituality is set in contrast with American materialism, however, the split does not always take the form of two opposing values but can be also manifest in one identity completely oppressed or replaced by the other.

It is telling, for example, that Gertrude Stein, who came from a German-Jewish family and unquestionably belonged to the first rank of American High Modernism, never

addressed Jewish issues directly, although many of the dominant immigrant themes are present in her oeuvre. The family saga of *The Making of Americans* (1925) represents the individual's complex psychology in terms of the rich and ambivalent heritage of a three-generation family history. Moreover, it speaks of the American identity as the result of the self-conscious act of "making". "A man in his living has many things inside him, he has in him his important feeling of himself to himself inside him, he has in him the kind of important feeling of himself to himself that makes his kind of man; this comes sometimes from a mixture in him of all the kinds of natures in him" (149). Stein was also exceptionally sensitive to minority issues. According to the distinguished African American writer, Richard Wright, her novella, "Melanchta" (1909) was "the first serious literary treatment of Negro life in the United States" (145), quotes Stephen J. Whitfield, who also suggests a possible connection between the first person narrative and Stein's own oppressed identity. "Perhaps Stein showed such a gift for ventriloquism precisely because her Jewish consciousness was very limited or absent" (145).

A sense of incompatibility regarding Jewish and American identities appears in various texts of Jewish American literature describing the first half of the twentieth century in retrospective, too. For instance, David Zimmer, the narrator in the novel *The Book of Illusions* by Paul Auster writes about the first and second decades of the twentieth century that "[i]t wasn't a crime to be a Jew in Hollywood back then. It was merely something that one chose not to talk about" (86). More significant is Philip Roth's relevant passage in his summative analysis of Saul Bellow's work, which celebrates the opening of Bellow's third novel precisely because it managed to create a full-fledged American identity by getting rid of his Jewish immigrant identity.

> Bellow once told me that "somewhere in my Jewish and immigrant blood there were conspicuous traces of doubt as to whether I had the right to practice the writer's trade." He suggested that, at least in part, this doubt permeated his blood because "our own Wasp establishment, represented mainly by Harvard-trained professors," considered a son of immigrant Jews unfit to write books in English. These guys infuriated him. It may well have been the precious gift of an appropriate fury that launched him into beginning his third book not with the words, "I am a Jew, the son of immigrants" but, rather, by [...] flatly decreeing, without apology or hyphenation, "I am an American, Chicago born. [...] This assertion of unequivocal, unquellable citizenship in free-style America [...] was precisely the bold stroke required to abolish anyone's doubts

> about the American writing credentials of any immigrant son like Saul Bellow. Augie at the very end of his book exuberantly cries out, "Look at me, going everywhere! Why I am a sort of Columbus of those near-at-hand." Going where his pedigreed betters wouldn't have believed he had any right to go with the American language, Bellow was indeed Columbus for people like me, the grandchildren of immigrants, who set out as American writers after him." (Roth, Introduction xi-xiii)

The last lines of the quotation provide the reader with a further clue to Philip Roth's first collection of stories, *Goodbye, Columbus* published in 1959, six years after *The Adventures of Augie March*, revealing the self-irony of the title. Roth's book was, on the one hand, one of the most acknowledged representations of Jewish American immigrant milieu, on the other hand it is both a celebration of and a farewell to the immigrant tradition and status, offering portrays of male characters in each stage of life struggling with and trying to break free of their heritage: as a schoolboy ("The Conversion of the Jews"), a student ("You Can't Tell a Man by the Song He Sings"), a soldier ("Defender of the Faith"), a young adult ("Goodbye, Columbus"), a mature professional ("Eli, the Fanatic") or an aging man ("Epstein"). Besides the passage above might explain why Roth—like many of his colleagues—keeps protesting against being labeled a Jewish American author. "Those kinds of considerations are newspaper cliches. Jewish literature. Black literature. Everyone who opens a book enters the story without noticing these labels" ("It No Longer Feels"), says Roth in an interview made in 2005, when the public interest in minority literatures is obviously high.

Cynthia Ozick's novella, "Envy, or Yiddish in America" also addresses the issues outlined above. The protagonist, "Edelshtein, an American for forty years, was a ravenous reader of novels by writers "of"—he said this with a snarl—"Jewish extraction" (Ozick, *The Pagan Rabb*i 41). The first sentences introduce him as a character of bitter irony regarding Jewish American authors. Edelshtein, a Yiddish poet himself, claims to be annoyed by the inauthenticity of his fellow authors conveying a false image of Yiddish heritage. However, his harsh criticism is soon exposed as mere jealousy directed primarily against another Yiddish novelist, Yankel Ostrover, "a thinly disguised caricature of Isaac Bashevis Singer" (Friedman 78). On the pretext of their personal conflict, the narrative depicts a lively tableau of the Yiddish literary life in the 1960s complete not only with a range variety of the characteristic figures and dilemmas in this subculture but also with its genres from samples of poetry and diverse forms of fiction to jokes and personal letters.

Besides supporting the multifaceted representation of a complex situation, the mixture of genres has another essential function: it allows rapid shifts between points of view thus fostering the reassessment of opinions and situations often revealing their overt or implied irony.

The participant constellation—in Katharine Barbe's terminology—of the ironic structure is rarely so clear as in this story, however, the roles of the victim of the irony, of the ironist and of the appreciative audience become visible precisely because they are so frequently redistributed among the characters. In the beginning, not only Edelshtein is introduced as the chief ironist with his contemptuous snarl but his collaborating audience, a fellow Yiddish author, Baumzweig, and the butt of their irony, Ostrover both make their first appearance in these roles. "Edelshtein's friendship with Baumzweig had a ferocious secret: it was moored entirely to their agreed hatred for the man they called *der chazer*. He was named Pig because of his extraordinarily white skin [...] They also called him Yankee Doodle. His name was Yankel Ostrover, and he was a writer of stories" (46). At this point, the narrator still seems to comply with Edelshtein's approach: Ostrover's nicknames precede his real name as if his being laughed at dominated over his actual existence. The label "Pig" is especially offensive as it denotes the emblematically impure animal according to kashrut, the Jewish dietary laws. In contrast, the next mocking label, Yankee Doodle is double-edged: on the one hand, it similarly expresses a sense of being unclean—not Jewish enough because too Americanized—on the other hand, it refers to the same feature that makes Ostrover the object of envy in Edelshtein's and Baumzweig's eyes: namely, his success in the United States. The same ambiguity of mixed contempt and jealousy is present in Edelshtein's appreciation of Western Culture in general. "Take away the Jews and where, O so-called Western Civilization, is your literary culture?" (41), he cries out on the first page and on the last he complains that "I lost everything, my whole life" because "I have no translator!" (100). This state of mind is in harmony with Sheldon Norman Grebstein's description of what he calls Jewish humor.

> Traditionally, Jewish humor is stark, edged, cynical. It communicates the double view of the man who is supposedly superior to the common run of humanity because he has been chosen, but finds in actuality that he has really been singled out for extra knocks on the head, dealt by those to whom he is presumably superior. Consequently, Jewish humor mocks, sneers at human foibles and pretensions, and delivers ironic observations about itself and its practitioners, the chosen people. Frequently it verges on self-hatred ("An anti-

> semite is a man who hates Jews more than he should."), or conveys the desperation of a wisdom about moral conduct which is impossible to practice. (186)

The bitter self-irony described above dominates Edelshtein's evaluation of the desperate situation of the Yiddish language after World War II. It is a subject on which "he lectured for a living" (43) spicing his speeches with jokes, some of them quoted verbatim in the novella, like the one on the editor of the last Yiddish daily left, who catches sight of a Yiddish funeral procession in the street and immediately warns his colleague, "Hey Mottel, print one less!" (43). Edelshtein repeatedly laments that both him "and his audiences found the jokes worthless. Old jokes. [...] To speak of Yiddish was to preside over a funeral" (43) for "the langue was lost, murdered. The language—a museum" (42) and the novella invokes this museum-like effect of Yiddish by inserting numerous Yiddish words in the English text, which then need to be translated or at least explained somehow by the context for the English reader. The use of sporadic Yiddish expressions to evoke a Jewish atmosphere is a frequent narrative tool is Jewish American literature, like in the already mentioned examples of Cahan "treating Yiddish as a foreign language" (Wisse 272) or Singer's "*landsleit*" or Philip Roth's short story, "Defender of the Faith", in which a soldier's Jewish identity is unveiled by his comrade when he happens to say "shul" instead of "church" (Roth, Goodbye 165). Still, the exuberance of Yiddish words and even sentences in Ozick's text turns into the means of irony, as they are considered by Edelshtein the only authentic medium of conveying meaning and at the same time they are practically the obstacles hindering understanding. Therefore the text speaks about the difficulties regarding Yiddish not only in a descriptive but also in a performative way.

Telling a story in English about characters who allegedly speak and write exclusively in Yiddish has further consequences, too. First of all, the Yiddish words mentioned above stand out from the text although they are the only "true" samples of the "original" plot, which is one of the means of calling the reader's attention to the fictive nature of the narrative. Besides, Edelshtein accuses Ostrover of his spoiled use of Yiddish, which cannot be reproduced in the text—proving or refuting the indictment—so the contrast between the two authors is mirrored in a different way by Ozick, by the use of diverse genres. Ostrover's expresses himself in carefully constructed texts: samples of his fiction and the public dialogues of interviews and "Question and Answer" sessions. In opposition, Edelshtein's medium is the outdated, much less popular genre of poetry and the

various forms of private utterances: conversations, letters, jokes and stream of consciousness passages.

This opposition influences the participant constellation of the ironic structure as well. While all of the texts by Ostrover are on a professional level, the paragraphs told or written by Edelshtein make the impression of being contingent, occasionally amateurish and often hysterically fragmented—especially towards the end when Edelshtein gets feverish hallucinations—therefore inferior and less convincing. For example, the middle section of the story is a flashback from the end of the 1940s when Ostrover had a short liaison with Edelshtein's wife, both of them recording and publishing the incident afterwards as literature, in the form of a fable versus a four-line "malediction" (49), respectively. The tight structure and the elegantly impersonal voice of the fable ending in a funny punch line easily triumphs over the short poem displaying only an offensive, transparently personal tone and old-fashioned rhymes. This impression is enforced on the level of the plot as well. At the start, Baumzweig takes sides with Edelshtein but as the story unfolds he joins Ostrover's audience at a public reading laughing at an anecdote overtly parodying Edelshtein. Since the conflict between the two antagonists is a literary contest, Ostrover's superiority of style involves an overall victory, turning the original ironic constellation completely upside down. This general, social triumph gained through the medium of literature also highlights the prevalence of "fiction"—of what exists in the mind—over "reality"; which is in line with the Schlegelian understanding of irony.

The only poem by Edelshtein unanimously celebrated by all the characters as his best is one of his early pieces. Addressing his ancestors, "*Little fathers, little uncles, you with your beards and glasses and curly hair...*" (69), the speaker in the poem concludes "*I have no business being your future*" (70). The poem is quoted in a conversation by a young woman, Hannah when she is introduced to Edelshtein and recognizes him as the author of the poem above, which her grandfather used to tell her as a child. The poet is deeply impressed by being acknowledged by the future generation and tries to convince Hannah to translate some of his poetry into English but she rejects him. Thus the implicit irony of the poem is dramatized in the novella. The lyrical voice both celebrates his forefathers' tradition and grieves over its end, still, the only form of empathy he can offer for the ones addressed in the poem is joining them in an imaginary death: "*let me fall into your graves*" (70). Hannah's appreciation of Edelshtein's poem first gives him the hope that it might indicate her willingness to continue the tradition with his poem serving as a bridge between the generations. However, she takes the standpoint expressed in the poem "*I have no*

business being your future" so she ironically refuses to cooperate with the poet on the common ground of his own words.

Translation is the central concern of the novella. Ostrover becomes popular in English translation while Edelshtein blames his lack of success on not having a translator and most of the plot consists of his repeated attempts to get one in vain, via letters written to publishers and translators, phone calls, personal encounters and finally an overwhelming hallucinatory finale, in which the reader can no longer decide which sentences depict reality and which are only imagined by Edelshtein in his delirium. These last pages ironically reproduce the poet's plight: the more precisely they describe his state of mind focusing on the untranslatability of the tradition he represents the more excluded he gets from the communication between and the mental reality of the others.

Translation is the primary theme of the conversations, too. Various characters voice diverse aspects of the problem pointed out by Lawrence Venuti. "Translation never communicates in an untroubled fashion because the translator negotiates the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text by reducing them and supplying another set of differences, basically domestic, drawn from the receiving language and culture to enable the foreign to be received there" (468). Edelshtein emphasizes the loss resulting from the shift and, in accordance with him, Ostrover's translator also sees language as the primary component of a literary text, "Who makes the language Ostrover is famous for? [...] I'm the one" (55). In contrast, Ostrover accentuates the meaning of a literary work independent of the actual language transmitting it in a fable on the bad poet who is given the gift of writing in numerous languages by Satan but who has to throw every poem he wrote out the window "because it was trash anyhow" (61). A fable is an ironic genre in itself, as it communicates its often critical message only when the reader recognizes how the characters of the story represent human beings and behaviors alluded to by the author (or explained in the moral appended to the story). In this case, the irony is increased by the presence of its butt, Edelshtein, at the public reading of the text. When he, offended and furious, runs out of the room he is only comforted by a mad mathematician, Vorovsky, who gives the briefest summary of the novella's primary issue, "Translation is no equation" (66) but who cannot offer any other way out of the dilemmas indicated above than laughing at them. "Despair up your ass. I'm a happy man. I know something about laughter", he tells Edelshtein trying to console him, however, his argumentation works rather against himself as the chief symptom of his madness is the series of uncontrollable fits of laughter he has been suffering from for seventeen years, since he accomplished the

compilation of his mathematical dictionary, which he judges to be good only for toilet paper (65).

It is not easy to locate the position of the author among these conflicting opinions. Still, it cannot be neglected either for Ozick is not only the writer of the narrative but is also implied among its themes as a "so-called Jewish novelist" herself, frequently mocked by Edelshtein, for example in the following passage. "In a so-called novel by a so-called Jewish novelist [...] the hero visits Williamsburg to contact a so-called "miracle rabbi". Even the word *rabbi!* [...] You have to KNOW something! At least the difference between a *rav* and a *rebbeh*! [...] Otherwise where's the joke, where's the satire, where's the mockery? American-born! An ignoramus mocks only himself. *Jewish* novelists" (79). In other words, Edelshtein proposes to set a linguistic prerequisite for a proper Jewish identity: a solid knowledge of Yiddish. Apparently, this idea tends to recur in the field of Jewish American literature. In 2008, for instance, Leon Wieseltier gave a keynote lecture with the title "Language, Identity and the Scandal of American Jewry" blaming American Jewish authors for their "Jewish illiteracy". However, Wieseltier, unlike Ozick's character, claimed for proficiency not in Yiddish but in Hebrew. In the light of this still ongoing and passionate dispute, Ozick's self-ironic tableau of the literary milieu in the 1960s, which she was also part of, seems to highlight the complexity of the issue and the hopelessness of trying to settle the debate once and for all. At the same time, the character of Vorovsky embodying the extreme case of self-irony with his uncontrollable laugh demonstrates that simply laughing over the futility of any effort in this regard is sheer madness. So in my reading, Ozick's story playing out different ironies against each other dramatizes the recognition that in a complicated situation like a transition of identity one cannot take a plausible stand without acknowledging the subjectivity and the contingency, therefore the only temporal validity, of any such decision.

Ozick explained her own views on the issues above in the essay "Toward a New Yiddish", which is the published version of a speech she delivered at a conference in Rehovoth, Israel in 1970. There she investigates "the position of Jewish culture in the American Diaspora" (170) by giving an overview of some of the great cataclysms of Jewish history, highlighting two crucial periods. First she points out the role of the Academy of Yavneh in the survival of Jewish culture after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD (173-174) and draws a parallel between the Jewish community there and the one in the United States after the Holocaust claiming it to be the responsibility of Jewish American intelligentsia to preserve the values of Jewish culture

like the rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai and his colleagues managed to do in Yavneh by recording the rabbinical literature in the writings of the Aggadah. Then she suggests that the medium of the current survival for Jewish culture should be English considered as "New Yiddish" (174) transmitting Jewish tradition in a vernacular already in use and relying on the solid and great literature of the host language, like it happened in the case of Yiddish based on German. Consequently, Ozick argues that Jewish American authors should not try join mainstream American literature at the expense of giving up Jewish tradition. On the contrary, she says that the only opportunity for Jewish writers is to address minority issues or else they will not be able to say anything of importance. According to her by now famous metaphor, "If we blow into the narrow end of the shofar, we will be heard far. But if we choose to be Mankind rather than Jewish and blow into the wider part, we will not be heard at all; for us America will have been in vain" (177). Ozick's proposition sounds reasonable enough. The question still remains though: if a minority is supposed to get rid of its homelands, its language, its religion and all its customs incompatible with its host country—in this particular case, of everyday American life—for the sake of survival then what is left that could be blown into the narrow end of the shofar apart from the stories resulting in such questions?

3 THE HOLOCAUST IN JEWISH AMERICAN LITERATURE

3.1 Introduction: European Survivors and American Contemporaries

"I entered literature [...] [t]hrough silence" (907) writes Elie Wiesel in his crucial essay "Why I Write" on the position of the survivor. On the one hand, his writing is motivated by the compelling moral obligation of the witness to testify. "I believed that, having survived by chance, I was duty-bound to give meaning to my survival, to justify each moment of my life. I knew the story had to be told. Not to transmit an experience is to betray it; this is what Jewish tradition teaches us" (907). On the other hand, he constantly struggles with the unspeakability of the Holocaust.

> We all knew that we could never, never say what had to be said, that we could never express in words, coherent, intelligible words, our experience of madness on an absolute scale. [...] All words seemed inadequate [...] hoarse shouting, screams, muffled moanings, savage howling, the sound of beating [...] This is the concentration camp language. It negated all other language and took its place. Rather than link, it became wall. Could it be surmounted? Could the reader be brought to the other side? I knew the answer to be negative, and yet I also knew that "no" had to become "yes". It was the wish, the last will of the dead. [...] Remember, said the father to his son, and the son to his friend. [...] Such was the oath we had all taken: "If, by some miracle, I emerge alive, I will devote my life to testifying on behalf of those whose shadow will fall on mine forever and ever." (907-908)

The metaphor of silence in Wiesel's text refers both to the silence of the dead, who cannot talk any longer so they need the author lending them a voice and to the silence of language proving unsatisfactory for any narrative attempt on this subject. It is also in harmony with the concept of silence as a psychological symptom of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) syndrome. Trauma, as Cathy Caruth defines it in her essay on "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History", "describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (181). Accordingly, silence results from the traumatized individual's "effort to forget the appalling event, leading to the avoidance of any-trauma-related stimuli that activate the memory of the traumatic situation" (Kolář 7) usually accompanied by

“repetition compulsion, perpetually re-experiencing the overwhelming event(s) in flashbacks, dreams, hallucinations” (Kolář 7). Consequently, these two phenomena often appear in Holocaust literature.

For example, they are the two principles organizing the narrative structure of Edward Lewis Wallant’s Holocaust novel, *The Pawnbroker*, the title character of which is Sol Nazerman, a Holocaust survivor living in New York City. The primary plot taking place in the 1950s portrays the taciturn protagonist, who lives with his sister and her family and supports her lover and her family, too, yet is unable to have a meaningful, intimate conversation with any of them. The reader is informed about his concentration camp memories only in the form of hallucinatory flashbacks and nightmares written in italics interrupting the development of the plot at irregular intervals. “*Sol tried to object. He reached down for his voice but was able only to bring up an immense strangling pain*” (Wallant 276). The only person Sol feels attached to is his young nephew, Morton, who attends an art school so communicates not so much verbally as visually. He is glimpsed sitting at his table “drawing his Uncle Sol from a tiny snapshot” (Wallant 245) and he is the only person Sol wants to talk to after the climax of the story: the second trauma of a robbery and a murder the pawnbroker is forced to witnesses. “‘Morton,’ I want to speak to Morton,’ he said as soon as he heard the phone picked up at the other end. [...] ‘Morton,’ he insisted. It was as though only that word kept the drowsiness at bay” (Wallant 274). So the main plotline is defined by Sol’s silence whereas the passages in italics represent his repressed memories, and the wordless bond between Morton and Sol illustrates that communication regarding the Holocaust requires something beyond the capacity of ordinary language.

Language fails at the representation of Holocaust not simply because it lacks the vocabulary necessary to transmit experiences “of madness on an absolute scale” (907), as Wiesel put it. The other reason for its failure is its recognized corruption as the ultimate set of mental frameworks which themselves made the Holocaust possible. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák calls the attention to this in his essay on “The Outsider and the Involved: the Irony of Understanding” (“A kívülálló és az érintett: a megértés iróniája”), in which he celebrates Imre Kertész’s *Fateless* for its irony foregrounding the immense tension between the narrator-protagonist’s contemporaneous knowledge and the reader’s posterior interpretation of the tragic events (Szegedy-Maszák 401). In one of Szegedy-Maszák’s examples (401), the narrator comments on an elderly lady travelling on the same train to the concentration camp and dying of thirst: “But we knew that she was sick and old; under

these circumstances everyone, myself included, thought the event was completely understandable" (Kertész 55). This sentence as well as other frequent elements certifying the adolescent protagonist's compliance with the ideological system that victimized him make evident the essential problem of the only language available yet already disqualified to comprehend the events. So his memorably enigmatic and ironic final thoughts on "the happiness in those camps" (Kertész 191) might refer to the state of mind when his belief in language—and the social norms and consensual understanding it is supposed to represent—was still intact. The collapse of language and, inseparably, the collapse of identity result in a situation where neither the subject nor the media of communication available for him are reliable any longer so it is impossible for the narrator to write directly about his experiences; he can only allude to them ironically in Szegedy-Maszák's term, or self-ironically, as I prefer to call it.

Besides the inadequacy of language, the authenticity of the speaking voice is also problematic. Speaking on behalf of someone else—those who perished, as Wiesel claims—always involves the risk of misinterpretation. Even first generation survivors themselves do not have a full access to the entire tragedy and to the ultimate experiences of the deceased ones, or else they would not be alive and could not speak. In case of American contemporaries, the distance between the author and the theme is bigger therefore the result is more questionable. However, the moral obligation to address these issues is still present, or possibly more urging due to the unharmed contemporary's sense of guilt. This dilemma has frequently been addressed by several Jewish American writers. Arthur Hertzberg, for examples, explains that in his essay "A Generation Later".

> I did not die at Auschwitz nor did I survive it. As a statement of fact this is obvious, but I say it nonetheless because I am tired of the impertinent metaphors among the novelists and theologians who play-act with this theme. They must, for men must cope as best they can with the memory of their own or other people's helplessness. (61)

Cynthia Ozick is also conscious of the embarrassing trap of feeling compelled to address the subject of the Holocaust but being aware at the same time the she can never do that with fully satisfying authenticity.

> INTERVIEWER
>
> The Holocaust figures in many of your stories. Is the Holocaust a subject you feel you must confront in your writing?

> OZICK
> I write about it. I can't not. But I don't think I ought to. [...] Now we, each one of us, Jew and Gentile, born during or after that time, we, all of us, forever after are witnesses to it. We know it happened: We are the generations that come after. I *want* the documents to be enough; I don't want to tamper or invent or imagine. And yet I have done it. I can't not do it. It comes, it invades. (Ozick, *Paris Review*)

Consequently, Jewish American authors writing about the Holocaust often choose an ironic or self-ironic approach to their theme. Similarly to Imre Kertész, they emphasize their necessarily limited understanding of their subject and the obstacles to giving a true representation of it. In most of the cases to be analyzed in the following subchapters, this effect is achieved by the juxtaposition of two plotlines and at least two definitive viewpoints mutually questioning and re-interpreting each other. However, actual realizations of this basic pattern greatly differ according to the logic of the survivors' succeeding generations and the individual authors.

3.2 First Generation Survivors

Empathy is a key concept in the representation of the Holocaust by Jewish American authors contemporaneous with the World War II. By definition, most of them do not have a first-hand experience of the Holocaust therefore they can approach the theme only through empathy. Empathy is also of essential importance regarding this paper as it is the feature distinguishing self-irony from irony. Irony is "pure negation" (267) as Kierkegaard put it, whereas a self-ironic text is the result of the oscillation between the speaker's initial position and other contrasting yet equally justifiable alternatives contemplated with empathy. On the one hand, empathy is necessary for the community as it enhances tolerance and cooperation, on the other hand it might question and thus destabilize the individual's identity calling for its revaluation in a context where the speaker no longer possesses the central position but is observed only as one among other, similarly important subjects: the ones that the speaker empathizes with. The following short stories addressing the issue of the Holocaust from the point of view of the American contemporary reflect on these problems: the necessity but also the limits and effects of empathy.

The first two narratives to be discussed in this chapter are "representative short stories—Bernard Malamud's 'The German Refugee' [...] and Philip Roth's 'Eli, the Fanatic'— [... which] capture the complex national ironies and metaphysical dissonances that drive the narratives of departures and arrivals stemming from the Nazi era" (Muller 32). Besides their outstanding canonical position, they are also of interest for the decisive importance of ironical and self-ironical elements in both. Evelyn Avery, for instance, speaks of the "ironic and tragic 'German Refugee'" (xii), whereas Victoria Aarons locates the first appearance of ambiguity as a central structural principle of Roth's oeuvre in "Eli, the Fanatic".

> "I am me. They are them"—the ambiguous language with which Eli attempts to free himself only makes his uncertainty increasingly clear. The comically confused, shifting pronominal bantering between Eli and his antagonist—"You are us, we are you... They are you... No... You are you"— sets the conditions for the kind of doubling and redoubling that will haunt Roth's characters throughout his fiction (Aarons, "American Jewish Identity" 14)

"It's the commuting that's killing" (Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus* 250) says the title character in "Eli, the Fanatic" as he first enters the dim room of Rabbi Tzuref and the scene of Philip Roth's short story. In the context of the initial dialogue, Eli's remark refers to the transportation between New York City, where he works and the suburban town of Woodenton, where he lives but it also insinuates his middle-man position, which makes him the central character in the conflict between "The Jews of Woodenton" (262), as they call themselves, and the "Yeshivah of Woodenton" (262). The former label is chosen by the local community of well-assimilated second and third generation Jewish American immigrants while the latter includes the rabbi and eighteen children, all of them first generation Holocaust survivors. These two meanings of generations in a Jewish American context—outlined in Chapter 2.1—imply opposing ambitions: the Jews of Woodenton strive for assimilation and want to enjoy undisturbed what they have already accomplished along that way whereas the newly settled Tzuref and the children hold on to Jewish customs since there is nothing else left to them. Their arrival foregrounds the question of identity, which their already assimilated fellow citizens would like to forget about so the Jews of Woodenton try to get rid of the Yeshivah, entrusting Eli Peck, the young attorney to find some legal opportunity for it. The available formal excuse against the Yeshivah (Jewish school) is a local law that prohibits the establishment of any school in a residential area. Eli as the member and the chosen representative of the assimilated Jewish community

tries to mediate a compromise between his clients and the newcomers. In course of the narrative, the conflict of the two groups is gradually relocated into his own person both in a physical and a psychological sense, dramatizing how the social dissent turns into a crisis of identity on the level of the individual.

The contrast of the two groups is manifest on every level of the narrative from interpersonal relationships to language use or various symbolical elements. The Yeshivah is located on the top of a hill, above Woodenton, which might imply moral superiority, reminiscent of the topography in "The Conversion of the Jews" published in the same book as "Eli, the Fanatic". It consists of about twenty people but has only two discernible faces: Rabbi Tzuref and an unnamed, mute character mostly referred to as the "greenhorn" (255) or "greenie" (281) by the Jews of Woodenton, who, on the other hand, include several more or less elaborately portrayed characters with first and last names, families, friends, professions and explicitly verbalized opinions. In other words, the citizens of the town are represented as a group of individuals while the Yeshivah makes the impression of a monolithic community. Eli is under pressure in both sites: he is just about to become a father, which is considered by his wife and all their friends in Woodenton as both a happy perspective and some sort of psychological crisis in a man's life, whereas the Yeshivah is full of children who have just lost not only their fathers but all their families and homes, invoking the young lawyer's sympathy. Accordingly, the prevailing rhetoric is different, too: the Yeshivah is dominated by the rabbi's "Talmudic wisdom" (Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus* 267) relying on the historically accumulated communal knowledge of Judaism and voicing the similarly collective experiences of the Holocaust while Eli's wife is an ardent believer in Freudian psychotherapy, which concentrates on the individual's psyche. Eli is irritated by both, still he tries to negotiate between them although "[t]oo often he wished he were pleading for the other side; though if he were on the other side, then he'd wish he were on the side he was" (254).

Eli's double perspective is supported by the ambiguity of numerous textual elements. The sensitivity to the controversial interpretations of the same phrase in different contexts is evoked early in the story, during the first conversation of Tzuref and Eli, as a response to the attorney, who calls the rabbi's attention to the local regulation prohibiting the Yeshivah.

"The law is the law," Tzuref said.

"Exactly!" Eli had the urge to rise and walk about the room.

> "And then of course"—Tzuref made a pair of scales in the air with his hands—
> "The law is not the law. When is the law that is the law not the law?" He jiggled the scales. "And vice versa." (251)

Tzuref points out the contrast between the eternal divine Law of humanity and the ephemeral, man-made legislation, while Eli desperately tries to defend his fellow citizens' standpoint he is entrusted to represent. However, when he gets home, he argues just as desperately against his wife's psychological approach.

> "Eli, you're upset. I understand."
> "You don't understand.""
> She left the room. From the stairs she called, "I do, sweetheart."
> It was a trap! He would grow angry knowing she would be "understanding". She would in turn grow more understanding seeing his anger. He would in turn grow angrier... (257)

The narrator acutely analyzes the power struggle underlying the word "understanding", which is meant to express empathy but at the same time ironically implies aggression: the attempt to force an interpretative system on the other. Miriam's gesture of understanding means that she wants to diminish her husband's growing distress as just another symptom of Eli feeling upset about the coming of their baby, a minor discomfort to be treated by psychotherapy. However, this is the very approach Eli wants to elude: he rejects the all too familiar and selfish routine of ignoring the world and seeking solution exclusively in one's private sphere. Quite on the contrary, he wants to experience his anxiety to its full depth in order to act on the level of the community, motivated by what Hana Wirth-Nesher calls "Jewish Americans' ethical unease regarding their European brethren" (119). In line with the ambiguities above, the description given by Eli's friend of the Yeshivah self-ironically fits the assimilated inhabitants of Woodenton insensible to world history just as well. "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" (277).

Besides verbal ambiguities, other levels of the narrative are also rich in doubles. Most significant is the parallel between Eli and his counterpart, the "greenhorn". He is first glimpsed wearing his traditional kaftan: "Eli saw him. At first it seemed only a deep hollow of blackness—then the figure emerged" (253). The two young men are of similar age, and have similar roles providing the link between the two communities—the greenhorn does the shopping for the whole Yeshivah, being the only one who ever descends from the hill while Eli is the only Jew from Woodenton who ever enters the

Yeshivah— but they are just as much the opposite of each other, too. The man without a name never talks while most of the story consists of Eli's various communications—face to face dialogues, phone calls, letters etc.—and the newcomer possesses nothing whereas the attorney is a married and prosperous young professional. In an attempt to reconcile the two groups, Eli gifts his own green suit to the survivor so he can mix unnoticeably among the others in Woodenton; the pun hidden in the gesture is deeply ironic since the man is expected to be dressed in green in order not to be mocked as a "greenie". As a response, the man not only starts to wear the newly received clothes but leaves his kaftan and his underwear in a box for Eli, who also puts them on. The blackness of the traditional clothes are not simply in sharp contrast with the colorful world of Woodenton—"Harriet Knudson was giving her stones a second coat of pink" (287) —but they also allude to the unspeakable and universal tragedy, to death as the ultimate lack of light, which is in harmony with the muteness of the bestower. When Eli opens the box, the "shock at first was the shock of having daylight turned off all at once. Inside the box was an eclipse" (285). The exchange of clothes not only symbolizes an exchange of personalities but literally affects the local community as such: the citizens of Woodenton repeatedly mistake one young man for the other, resulting in a series of bitterly comic scenes. Moreover, the attorney himself feels a transformation of identity. When meeting his counterpart, "Eli had the strange notion that he was two people. Or that he was one person wearing two suits" (289).

The self-ironic conclusion of the story leaves all the ambiguities suspended. On the one hand, Eli finally yields to the Yeshiva people's call for empathic identification and visits his newborn son in the hospital dressed in the kaftan. On the other hand, his transformation is perceived and treated in the hospital as a nervous breakdown. In Allen Guttman's reading—determined by the context of his book *The Jewish Writer in America: Assimilation and the Crisis of Identity*—this ending suggests that "[t]here is only one path across the psychic abyss that separates Woodenton from the *yeshiva*—madness" (71). But even Eli's madness is a question left open by Roth, who both emphasizes the substantial need for empathy and simultaneously undermines this interpretation by depicting its destabilizing effects in a comic style.

While the self-irony in Roth's story questioned the identity of the protagonist representing assimilated American Jewry, Malamud's "The German Refugee" articulates dilemmas regarding Holocaust narratives. It is the story of "Oskar Gassner, the Berlin critic and journalist" (Malamud, *Complete Stories* 357) told by a first person Jewish

American narrator, a college student who makes his living by giving English lessons to refugees recently arrived to the United States. "To many of these people, articulate as they were, the great loss was the loss of language—that they could not say what was in them to say. You have some subtle thought and it comes out like a piece of broken bottle" (360). The student describes a summer's hard work spent in close cooperation on mounting language barriers and overcoming Gassner's psychological inhibitions in order to prepare him for his new job as a lecturer on the German progenitors of Whitman in the fall semester. The first lecture proves to be a success, still, Gassner commits suicide two days later, after receiving news that his gentile wife left at home was killed by the Nazis.

The turn is bitterly ironic not only as it suggests the ultimate inescapability of being victimized by the Holocaust in the conclusion of a narrative on someone's efforts who, apparently, has just been rescued. It is also ironic how the grand narrative of historical threat and liberation finally falls prey to the petty sentiments and inadvertences of a household romance. Gassner's wife stays in Germany since the couple has been somewhat estranged for several reasons, including the wife's mother, a "dreadful anti-Semite" (365). Still, the woman is killed because she converts to Judaism in the absence of her husband; presumably as a gesture expressing her love and wish for their reunion, ironically leading to their deaths and thus their final separation. So Gassner's suicide is motivated by his sense of guilt, an absurd yet frequent feeling even among survivors personally not responsible for anyone's tragedy (Prot 63). It adds to the ironic distance that the reader gets no direct information: the details are learnt from the mother-in-law's obviously not unbiased letter reporting on the circumstances of her daughter's death and from the narrator, who—by his mere presence as a language teacher and translator and also by his professional remarks—permanently calls the reader's attention to the difficulties and losses involved in translation. Therefore Malamud simultaneously celebrates literature—regarding Gassner's lecture, which provides a link between German and American cultures—and self-ironically highlights the inaccessibility of actual stories lying hidden beneath what can be verbalized—regarding communication breakdown in Gassner's family as well as his death not prevented by his friend and tutor—an observation often emphasized in Holocaust literature. Kenneth M. Price points out a similar double connotation implied in a passage by Whitman quoted in Gassner's lecture: "*And I know the Spirit of God is the brother of my own, / And that all the men ever born are also my brothers*" (Malamud *Complete Stories* 367). According to Price, "Malamud responds to the attractiveness of Whitman's dream of brotherhood *and* questions whether it can have any

meaning in an age haunted by the Holocaust" (85); a clear description of what I call a self-ironic attitude.

Another short story by Malamud, "The Loan" addresses the theme of the Holocaust somewhat indirectly. The plot takes place in the bakery of a Jewish Russian immigrant, Lieb, who is visited by his childhood friend, Kobotsky. The visitor asks for a loan for his wife, more precisely, to set up a stone on her grave, a gesture of commemoration he has not been able to afford for five years due to a whole series of misfortunes, including sickness, poverty and sudden death in the family. Lieb is on the verge of yielding but his wife, Bessie prevents him from sharing their meagre savings with the visitor by telling her own series of tragedies, finishing her reminiscences with the sad appraisal of her "elder brother in Germany, who sacrificed his own chances to send her, before the war, to America, and himself ended, with wife and daughter, in one of Hitler's incinerators" (Malamud, *Complete Stories* 98). The black humor lying in the competition of personal tragedies for the petty reward of 200 dollars pries into the most difficult questions of empathy. On the one hand, Bessie's ultimate, unsurpassably triumphant argument is the Holocaust: the moral imperative that she has to give meaning to her brother's sacrifice by sustaining her life and taking care of her future. This argumentation is also in harmony with the title, which might refer not only to the loan Kobotsky asks from Lieb but also to life received as a temporary gift, a loan—provided either by God or by one's ancestors—that one is obliged to use effectively. At the same time, the duty of commemoration is a substantial element of and the main motive for Holocaust literature. In that sense, Malamud ironically turns the usual logic of Holocaust fiction inside out: Bessie argues for the priority of life over the symbolical bond with the deceased ones relying on the Holocaust, a context in which commemoration is usually of utmost importance. The ambiguity is emphasized in the final scene of the story evoking the image of concentration camp crematoria. "Bessie [...] ran into the rear and with a cry wrenched open the oven door. A cloud of smoke billowed out at her. The loaves in the trays were blackened bricks—charred corpses" (99). Thus Malamud warns the reader that the prolonged conversation on death results in the baker forgetting about nourishing life. However, the image also serves as an involuntary yet symbolical reminder of the deceased ones haunting the story, in other words, as the very memorial Bessie has been successfully arguing against all through the conversation. Thus "The Loan" can be read as a self-ironic parable on the theme of survival after the Holocaust. The dilemma is not resolved but deepened by

the closing sentences. “Kobotsky and the baker embraced and sighed over their lost youth. They pressed mouths together and parted forever” (99).

Malamud’s narrative would be worth reading in comparison with another short story, “A Small, Good Thing” by Raymond Carver, as it shows numerous remarkable parallels with “The Loan” in many respects. Since Carver does not belong to Jewish American literature, a full-fledged analysis would go out beyond the scope of this study. Still, a few comparative observations might be revealing to the interpretation of both stories. “A Small, Good Thing” also concentrates on survival: its protagonists are young parents who just lost their son, Scotty, in a car accident on his birthday, right before the party. Since in the turmoil they completely forget about the birthday cake, the annoyed and uninformed baker keeps calling them asking “Have you forgotten about Scotty?” (Carver 399). Many elements of the final scene, in which the characters figure out the misunderstanding, resemble Malamud’s “The Loan”. Both uncanny conversations take place in a bakery and both contemplate on the issue of surviving after having lost a beloved person. However, the closure of Carver’s narrative seems to be just the opposite of “The Loan”. Malamud’s bread is charred while Carver’s baker feeds the grieving parents with sweet and appetizing “cinnamon rolls just out of the oven” (404). In contrast to Kobotsky’s final, bitter departure, Carver’s characters “talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving” (405). In other words, Malamud’s characters part because they have run out of words, whereas Carver’s story ends where introspection begins. The baker and the parents enter a conversation, the intimacy and depth of which is triggered by the tragedy. This open ending so characteristic of Carver’s minimalist style is interpreted as black humor by Jingqiong Zhou in his book on *Raymond Carver’s Short Fiction in the History of Black Humor*.

> [O]ne feature in Carver’s fictional forms of black humor, however, is an ending that can dislocate, or relocate epiphanies. [....] Carver’s fiction is replete with understatement, indirection, and suggestion. [....] Many of Carver’s stories [....] can bring characters to a point where they cannot see how much insight they will gain or what will come as a result of it. Insight, if there is any, is left suspended. (Zhou 12)

Apparently, Carver’s black humor results from the juxtaposition of incongruent yet undeniably coexisting facts: the young boy’s birthday and the day of his death, the baker’s petty annoyance and the parents’ fatal tragedy, the impossibility and the obligation of survival; and the open ending claims for a mental framework that could embrace all of

life's absurdity. Malamud's story, on the other hand, rather sets in contrast diverse possible interpretations of events in form of rational arguments for everyday life versus the moral and emotional duty of commemoration and various tragic personal narratives. Although Bessie wins the debate, the narrator's description of the final scene dominated by the burnt and the destructed friendship self-ironically works against the logic exposed on the level of the dialogues. Thus Carver's black humor reveals the absurdity of life whereas Malamud's self-irony emphasizes the unsatisfying nature of the available interpretive paradigms and personal responses.

Both Roth and Malamud represent the Holocaust from the contemporary American Jewry's point of view. Each of the three stories is based on attempts at and the failures of empathy, indicating "the untranslatability of both the trauma of the Holocaust and the culture of the survivors" (Wirth-Nesher 119). Thus the self-ironic structures allow the authors to articulate acute and dramatic questions pointing towards various possible interpretations, leaving the choice to the reader.

3.3 Second Generation Survivors

In an interview made with Art Spiegelman for the BBC on the occasion of his recently published *MetaMaus*, the writer starts his response with the funny observation that "there's something very mad about being interviewed about a book that's built around an interview that's built around another book around an interview" (Spiegelman, Interview 1:05—1:18). The repetitive structure of his remark not only parodies the several layers in and between his two books, *Maus I-II*, which tell the story of the author's father, a Holocaust survivor, and *MetaMaus: A Look Inside a Modern Classic: Maus*, which purportedly provides the reader with all the available background material and authorial comment Spiegelman felt worth sharing with his audience, including recorded conversations with his father and family photos as well as the author's feedback on his own work and its afterlife in the form of a great and thorough interview. He also insinuates that there is no unprocessed reality—raw documents, original story, authorial intent etc.—separable from fiction—the artefact itself—no artistic form—e. g. the printed book or its genre—separable from its meaning—e. g. messages directly exposed in an oral conversation—but themes and interpretations are interdependent, continuous constituents of the same phenomenon, which might even exchange positions, functions and media, depending on the actual situation and its participants.

Spiegelman's attitude illustrated by the quotation above defines his major work, *Maus I-II.*, an emblematic piece of Holocaust fiction addressing the theme of second generation survivors. Amy Hungerford calls it "self-reflexive irony" (96) in her book *On The Holocaust of Texts: Genocide, Literature and Personification* whereas Andreas Huyssen labels it as "self-reflexivity, self-irony" (30) in his essay "Of Mice and Mimesis". In harmony with the terminology used in this paper, I also examine the self-reflexive features of Spiegelman's book mostly under the headline of self-irony but numerous observations in my analysis inevitably coincide with other interpretations, whose writers—like Hungerford, for instance—prefer to categorize these elements as examples of irony. Either way, the doubts and questions expressed by Art Spiegelman's self-irony—or ironic self-reflexivity—primarily concern both his narrative and his identity as the author and the namesake narrator of the story but many of them have a relevance regarding Holocaust literature in general, too.

It can be argued that the double plot of *Maus* is driven by the intergenerational transmission of trauma: the idea that trauma may be transmitted from survivors of a traumatic event to their children, who then in turn experience their own identities as survivors, too (Hunger 92). This observation in line with what Eli Wiesel writes about his second generation survivor students in an essay, "The Heirs": "their parents' tragedy becomes their own, and they know it is up to them to give it meaning" (41). Similar demands seem to dominate the short, introductory chapter at the beginning of *Maus I*, in which the narrator appears as a child roller skating in the street with other kids but falling over and being abandoned by his companions. When he complains about the accident to his father, he receives the following enigmatic outburst: "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). The irrelevance of the answer to the actual incident ironically reveals that the young Art 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 about. Therefore *Maus*—the story of the son, Art, trying to reconstruct the story of the father, Vladek—can be read both as a response to the father's unspoken request for empathy and the narrator's attempt to overcome the inherited trauma. This double motivation is expressed in the self-ironic image closing the second book. It features a tombstone with the inscription "SPIEGELMAN" followed by the names of Art's parents, Vladek and Anja and their dates of birth and death. Below that, the ultimate line of the book is the author's signature repeating the same structure: "art spiegelman 1978—1992" (II/136), the period during

which *Maus* was produced. So the accomplishment of the work culminates in death insinuating both the ultimate identification with the victims and the liberation of Art, the artist as a mere "Mirrorman" (the meaning of the name "Spiegelman" in German) so far overpowered by the task inflicted upon him by his parents' fate.

Besides the issues of motivation and identity, the media of representation is another permanent source of self-irony. At the time when Spiegelman started to work on *Maus*, comics was still considered a genre of popular or "low" culture incompatible with such a tragic theme as the Holocaust. It is telling that *Maus II* "became the first graphic novel to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Literature" in 1992 (Stringer 262), so the success of *Maus I* was a crucial step for the emerging genre of the graphic novel to be acknowledged as literature. Among other critiques, Marylin Reizbaum also voiced her initial doubts regarding the form. "I could not avoid the question of degradation [...] in a work that makes a comic book of Holocaust lives" (123). However, Spiegelman very consciously and carefully turns the ostensible disadvantage of the only media available for him as a visual artist into the postmodern means of foregrounding the difficulties involved in telling *any* Holocaust story. On the one hand, there is the moral imperative of telling these stories; as Emily Miller Budick puts it in her essay on "The Holocaust in the Jewish American Literary Imagination", "[f]or these American Jews what is threatened with extinction in the forgetting of the Holocaust is not merely the events themselves, with their historical meanings and lessons, but Jewish identity itself" (218). On the other hand, there are the numerous questions of inauthenticity, in part already mentioned in the previous chapters, and increasingly striking in case of comics. Moreover, Paul de Man's observation that autobiography "deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores" (de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement" 930) is doubly valid for Spiegelman's narrative, which is Vladek's autobiography recorded and reconstructed by his son, who is simultaneously telling his own autobiography. As a response to all these anxieties, Spiegelman emphasizes the artistic and artificial nature of his book, his own deficiencies and the contingency of his solutions as well the conceptual and visual language both enabling and limiting his comprehension. Thus he repeatedly points out the ultimate impossibility of an adequate representation yet convincingly insists on the importance of struggling for a better understanding.

The length and the proportions of the present paper exclude the opportunity of giving a full, in-depth analysis of the entire *Maus I-II* yet it seems necessary to examine self-irony not only on the level of general narrative strategies but also in the

microstructures of the book. In addition, the intricate and essential relationship between textual and visual elements cannot be neglected in the interpretation of a graphic novel. Therefore I will focus on one page: page 41 in Chapter 2, Book II, selected as an exceedingly concise and complex example for numerous self-ironic tendencies characteristic of the whole work as well.

The title of the chapter is “Auschwitz (Time Flies)”. The subtitle in brackets reappears on the first page of the chapter (II/41) twice: textually on the top of the page, and visually as flies swarming all over the page. The pun is based on a double shift: the short sentence consisting of a noun and a verb and referring to temporality is misunderstood grammatically for an adjective and noun structure and this second interpretation is visualized. The presence of the insects is justified not only by the pun: in the first four pictures they emerge as minor annoyances disturbing the author immersed in his work, while in the last frame they enter a shockingly different context as maggot flies teeming above a pile of corpses representing the other plotline of the Holocaust. The reader’s attention is called to the ironic ambiguity of language by a second pun at the bottom of the page, too, where the word “shooting” implies both the cameraman’s activity and murder by gun. Thus Spiegelman dramatizes twice—both in image and text—the capacity of language for deconstructive irony, the various ways in which signs might contingently elude or even sabotage authorial intention by evoking unwished-for associations and by arbitrarily linking disparate contexts, like the indifferent flies timelessly wandering between the different scenes.

The two puns above are good illustrations to the debate over the adequacy of humor in the context of the Holocaust. Katalin Orbán, for instance, argues against Sander L. Gilman's opinion exposed in his essay: "Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah be Funny? Some

Thoughts on Recent and Older Films". She quotes Gilman, who "dismisses this black humor as 'virtually foolish in [its] inadequacy', laughter in response to this humor by others than the survivors as 'inexplicable' [...] 'Why is it that, if humor does have a function in ameliorating the effects of the Shoah, we are so very uncomfortable imagining laughter in the context of the Shoah?'" (Orbán 38-39). I agree with Orbán that should *Maus* "retain any 'comic, humorous, or witty content or intent,' this does not automatically mean that the work is a comic representation of the Holocaust" (38) since "most of the black humor and wit is related to the present family dynamic, relationship, and personalities, and to Art's problems of representation, which are haunted by the Holocaust, but are different from it" (38). (Quotations in Orbán's text are taken from Gilman's essay.) Both views are worth citing at length because of two of their distinctions essentially important and relevant to this paper. First, Gilman differentiates between survivors' versus other people's laughter in the context of the Holocaust, approving of the former and utterly rejecting the latter. This sharp contrast seems to support the substantial need for a terminological distinction between irony and self-irony: morally, there is a whole world of difference between self-ironically laughing at our own anguish "ameliorating the effects" of a desperate situation, in Gilman's words, or ironically laughing at someone else's distress, which I also disapprove of in such a tragic context. The second distinction is made by Orbán, who defends Spiegelman by pointing out that the subject of the humor in *Maus* is not the Holocaust but the author's own difficulties with his family and his writing. In other words, Spiegelman's humor is justified by Orbán as being not ironic over its theme, the Holocaust, but mostly self-ironic; a statement supported by the analysis of the two puns above as well.

Structurally, both puns above are enabled by juxtaposition, which is one of the principles organizing Spiegelman's book. Primarily, the two plotlines—Vladek's autobiography covering the 1930s and 1940s, focusing on his marriage and the Holocaust and Art's autobiography, concentrating on the period of writing *Maus*— are juxtaposed permanently, like in case of the terse facts and dates listed in the first four pictures of page 41. But the same approach is manifest on various other levels as well, like the level of characters and genres. For example, the second volume is dedicated both to the writer's newborn daughter and to his elder brother, who perished as a child during the war. The double motto: "For Richieu and for Nadja" (II/5) as well as the back covers of both volumes featuring maps of Central Europe and Auschwitz in the Nazi period along with maps of the writer's neighborhoods in New York as a child and then as an adult

emphatically enforce the invitation to read either plotline in light of the other. This double view consciously maintained all through the book becomes not simply a constant source of humor—like in case of the word "shooting"— but rather a permanent warning for self-revision, regarding both author and reader. Spiegelman's gestures of inserting not only documents—maps, family photos, quotations from contemporary articles etc.—in *Maus* but also "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" (I/100-103), his own former graphic narrative on his mother's suicide, permanently express his simultaneous ambition to remind the reader that what we read is not the truth but merely one of its possible representations and to offer as multifaceted an approach as possible, even if his attempts result in diverse aspects of the same element looking absolutely incompatible. This effort is most striking in the portrait of the father, who appears as a tragic hero in the Holocaust story and as a quarrelsome and petty-minded old man in the contemporary plotline, "the racist caricature of the miserly old Jew" (I/131), as Art comments on his own work-in-progress self-reproachfully. Spiegelman's doubtfully self-inquisitive remarks and his rapid shifts between positions—from son to father-to-be, from writer to the subject of his own story etc.—, genres, media etc. repeatedly and deliberately reveal that whatever he writes and draws is just one of the possible interpretations bound both by the subjective position of the author and by the available clichés of the discourse he relies on. Thus juxtaposition becomes one of the key techniques in Spiegelman's self-ironic narrative strategy.

The juxtaposition most powerfully dominating the page is the picture of the author who broods over a heap of dead bodies. According to Reizbaum, "[i]f nothing else has compelled us to wonder, here we must: Was *he* the murderer all along for telling—for telling in the way he was, for telling at all? (The subtitle of Miller's essay, by the way, is "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Murderer.")" (133). Personally, I disagree with this interpretation since it is the crew and not Spiegelman who is "ready to shoot", moreover, Spiegelman is the target of this imminent shooting therefore he seems to share more of the victims' position than that of the murderer. This reading is also in line with the overall tendency of *Maus*, which depicts Art's gradual identification with his father. For instance, the title of the first volume: "My Father Bleeds History" still keeps distance between narrator and protagonist whereas the title of the second book: "And Here My Troubles Began..." refers both to the father entering Auschwitz and to the increasing doubts and difficulties of the son. Still, Art' sense of guilt over the "critical and commercial success" (II/41) and the professional exploitation of his parents' personal tragedy is perceptible in these frames and is explicitly articulated in the following pages. However, it could also be

argued that his sense of guilt—often referred to all along the book—is rather rooted in the inherited feeling of survivor guilt or even a fear of inferiority in comparison to the idealized image of Art's young deceased brother. As the narrator tells about Richieu to his wife, "[h]e was mainly a large, blurry photograph hanging in my parent' bedroom. [...] They didn't talk about Richieu, but that photo was a kind of reproach. [...] It's spooky having sibling rivalry with a snapshot!" (II/15). In other words, *Maus* frequently offers diverse explanations for any single phenomenon, and it is almost impossible to exclude any of them as absolutely incorrect. My impression is that Spiegelman rather warns the reader to be cautious with condemnatory labels like "murderer". For example, he ends the first volume with applying the same word to his father when he learns that Vladek destroyed Anja's diaries after her suicide. It is self-ironic of the narrator that he calls the very person a murderer whom he represents in two volumes length as the victim of murderers since his exaggeration immediately insinuates that he cannot be right. At the same time, it sounds reasonable that extinguishing the mother's narrative feels like a murder for the son, especially in a context where narratives iare of utmost significance. So Spiegelman seems to suggest that there is no good choice: silence is just as reproachable as telling and thus inescapably distorting the story.

One of the most debated features of *Maus* is its representation of human beings as animals. On the one hand, these characters fit well into the genre of comics, which has a long tradition of anthropomorphic animals. On the other hand, Spiegelman turns this tradition inside out: in his book, it is not the animals that act and speak as if they were human but human beings are treated as if they were animals. His choice is partially grounded on Nazi propaganda, a sample of which is ironically used as the motto of the second volume. "Mickey Mouse is the most miserable ideal ever revealed... [...] Away with Jewish brutalization of the people! Down with Mickey Mouse!" (II/3) Spiegelman's ironic rejection lies in "taking that rhetoric and turning this notion of the subhuman back on itself" (Spiegelman, "Interview" 3.29-3:34), as he explains it in the above mentioned interview. He does not simply display Jews as mice, Germans as cats and Poles and Pigs but he also reflects on the arbitrariness of these clichés. For example, the narrator has a lengthy conversation with his wife on how she should be portrayed: as a frog, since he is French or as mouse, since she converted to Judaism (II/11-12). Or the narrator's psychiatrist ends their session saying that "I still have to walk my dogs" (II/46), foregrounding the difference between actual pets and Americans depicted as dogs.

The other frequent technique reminding the reader of the irony hidden in the animal characters appears on page 41, too, where the author sitting at his drawing board wears a mouse mask. The masks tend to recur in those self-reflexive passages which are primarily concerned with the difficulties of producing the book, like page 41. It is important to observe, though, that in the third frame it cannot be seen that the author wears a mask—we only know it from the neighboring pictures—; seen from that particular angle, the mouse mask appears to be his own face just as much as this illusion is maintained in most of the book. Thus Spiegelman not only points out that he represents his characters using simplifying and distorting clichés—as it happens with any symbolic representation to some extend—but carefully demonstrates how easy it is to mistake one's socially attributed role or identity—embodied by the mask—for his real face, which could signify his true self. It is worth noting that Spiegelman never draws a face without a mask. The actual features from his characters taken from real life are only recalled by photographs, which might help the reader to imagine them better but do not evoke a full sense of reality, either, since the photos are archaic, static and speechless portrays, who stand apart from the dynamic, dramatic story of the plot. Therefore Spiegelman simultaneously attempts to give an exceptionally multifaceted representation but self-ironically emphasizes the only partial authenticity of each approach.

The second generation Holocaust survivor's position is similar to that of the Jewish American contemporary to World War II. In both cases, the authors' dilemmas arise from feeling trapped between the moral obligation and the personal inadequacy of trying to address the theme of Holocaust. Each work analyzed so far responds to these doubts regarding identity and expression with some version of self-irony combined with other means of narrative strategies. However, each writer stresses different aspects of the same issue. Roth's primary concern is the ultimate inaccessibility of the Holocaust experience for ordinary outsiders; Bellow focuses on the tragic breakdowns of communication; whereas Spiegelman highlights the distorting tendency implied in any conceptual framework. The humor of the stories allows the writers to take the edge off these desperate observations as well as to offer multifaceted and attractive representations without the false illusion of a final resolution.

3.4 Third Generation Survivors

The narrative strategies of *Everything Is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer, a widely celebrated piece of third generation Holocaust fiction, show numerous similarities with *Maus*. Structurally, both novels consist of double plotlines: one is roughly contemporaneous with the time of writing and it depicts a young male protagonist's quest for identity through an attempt at discovering and retelling his family history, which makes up the other plotline. Both books foreground the difficulties of narration by highlighting the distorting quality of the transmitting media. In both cases, there is a narrator with the same name as the author, and Foer, just like Spiegelman, emphasizes his dilemmas and uncertainties by the means of self-irony and humor. However, there are significant differences between the two books as well. Besides their shared dilemmas regarding literature, the two authors articulate doubts concerning different aspects of Holocaust narratives. Most of the questions posed by Spiegelman are psychological—how much one can understand another person, to what extend is one's identity defined by belonging to a group and how family heritage influences one's ability to fulfill certain social roles etc.—whereas Foer concentrates on the political level, asking if there can ever be a consensual narrative acceptable for every opponent. In other words, Spiegelman as a traumatized second generation survivor aims at reconciliation with his personal heritage and identity while Foer as a third generation survivor seeks reconciliation with the former enemy.

One of the plotlines in *Everything Is Illuminated* is a hilarious picaresque. Foer's namesake, a young Jewish American student in his early twenties arrives in the Ukraine to visit Trachimbrod, the small shtetl which his grandfather escaped from during the Holocaust, and to find a woman called Augustine, who allegedly helped the grandfather flee Nazi persecution and to whom the grandson wants to express his gratitude for his own existence. Since he does not speak Ukrainian, Jonathan hires two local people to help him: a boy called Alex as a translator and his grandfather as a tour guide. Alex is a few years Jonathan's junior and an ardent student of English, portrayed as a parody of young common people in the post-Soviet area, who were enthusiastic in the early 1990s about the "ennobled country America" (Foer 3). His grandfather, who drives the car, claims that he is blind, which not only enhances the absurdity of their trip but also implies the irony of being guided in local history by someone who cannot—or, as it turns out, rather does not want to—see.

Foer plays a game similar to that of Gertrude Stein in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, in which Stein portrayed herself as if the book had been written by her companion named in the title. Similarly, Foer's personal story—the quest for his heritage and his identity—is told by Alex, while the author's autonomous narrator tries to reconstruct the history of Trachimbrod, which he never finds because it was completely destroyed during World War II. Thus with a self-ironic authorial gesture Foer makes both stories in the book be told by a highly incompetent outsider: Jonathan's work is hindered by his insufficiency of knowledge on local history and Alex lacks the necessary language skills in English. Besides, this structure allows Foer to play out various ironies against each other. For example, Alex as a narrator gives a rather disdainful portray of Jonathan, the protagonist: "When we found each other, I was very flabbergasted by his appearance. This is an American? I thought. And also, This is a Jew? He was severely short. He wore spectacles and had diminutive hairs" (31). At the same time, Jonathan as the author gives a similarly disdainful portray of Alex through the deficiencies of his language use. All in all, the double ironies add up to a self-ironic effect.

Jonathan and Alex are counterparts in numerous respects. They are of similar age, both of them are working on their first novel—Alex's novel tells the story of their shared trip, chapters of which he sends to Jonathan as the attachments of his letters commenting on the novel in progress and supplementing them with information after Jonathan's return back to the States—and their grandfathers both come from the same region, the neighboring shtetls of Kolki and Trachimbrod. Their narratives also supplement each other: Jonathan explores the past while Alex's text covers the present, and the two plotlines meet at the tragic intersection: the succeeding destructions of the two shtetls. On the other hand, they first act as enemies or at least rivals. Alex's family appears as representatives of Ukrainians infamous for their former anti-Semitic pogrom, while Jonathan's identity is defined by his Jewish refugee ancestors. At the beginning of the novel, Alex, who is familiar with the local situation and language, dominates over Jonathan: the American boy is forced to travel on the back seat of the car cramped up next to a dog although he is afraid of dogs, he receives no answers to his questions and he is repeatedly mocked for being a vegetarian. Later on, the power relationships turn upside down. It becomes clear that Jonathan is more or less the person that Alex would like to be once: he is not only a few years older and financially much better off but he possesses English as a mother tongue and lives in the United States, where Alex would wish to immigrate as an adult. Moreover, it is finally revealed that Alex's grandfather not only lived in Kolki but is also Jewish, who

concealed his identity all through his life because he is ashamed of having betrayed his best friend to the Nazis in order to save his family. This information turns Alex and Jonathan into something like brothers: as grandchildren of survivors of the same cataclysm, they embody highly different outcomes of the same story. However, this reconciliation is not free of doubts, either. The third generation's freedom of their burdensome past requires the elimination of the previous two generations: Alex's grandfather commits suicide not much after revealing his secrets; and Alex's father, who grew into a violent, dysfunctional man under his own father's hidden burden, is sent away from the family by Alex.

Self-ironic ambiguity prevails in the title of the novel, too. The word "illuminated" insinuates both revelation and destruction, as exposed most thoroughly in Chapter 29, which bears the title "Illumination" itself. On the one hand, most of the family secrets haunting the book and motivating the quest are revealed here. On the other hand, the central event of the chapter turns out to be a fire consuming the synagogue in Kolki, which is burnt by the Nazis, with almost all the local Jews deliberately locked up in the building. Thus understanding and annihilation appear as closely linked ideas both in the title of the book and in its final pages reporting on the grandfather's suicide. Foer exposes some of the various and controversial meanings of the title in an interview, adding that he "wouldn't call it 'ironic,' though. That implies distance. So much of the book has to do with perspectives, different ways of seeing things" (Foer, "Questions"). In other words, he rejects the label "irony" because it would involve the ironist's superior position over his subject—referred to as "distance" by Foer, who uses a horizontal term instead of a vertical one, yet the idea is quite similar—and he rather stresses the awareness of the simultaneous presence of embarrassingly incongruent meanings within the same phenomena and their narrative exploration, which is an essential feature of self-irony.

Foer himself, however, prefers to use the word "humor", which is not only an important aspect of the novel but a key term on its thematic level as well. Alex, for example, is anxious to distinguish between the involuntarily comic and the intentionally humorous. "*Do you think that I am a humorous person? I signify humorous with intentions, not humorous because I do foolish things. [...] Not desiring to be laughed upon in the wrong way*" (Foer, *Everything is Illuminated* 101). In another letter, also addressed to Jonathan, he writes: "*you asked me not to alter the mistakes because they sound humorous, and humorous is the only truthful way to tell a sad story*" (Foer, *Everything is Illuminated* 53). The apparent oxymoron condensed in the sentence is never fully explained but can be

interpreted in the context of the book as a proposition that a sad story always involves the tragic conflict of differently biased characters and an authentic representation must depict each of these, sometimes mutually exclusive aspects of the same series of events. The statement might also imply that humor brings the incongruities hidden in any narrative to the surface, quite in the spirit of deconstructionism. Another possible interpretation is suggested by Paul McDonald, who claims that "this novel celebrates the redemptive potential of humour" (51). This is well illustrated by one of the crucial scenes in which the so far insufferable tension between Jonathan, Alex and his grandfather is relieved by laughter triggered by the accident of a potato falling from the table to the floor. "Then I started laughing. Then the hero started laughing. We laughed with much violence for a long time. [...] It was not until very much in the posterior that I understanded that each of us was laughing for a different reason, for our own reason, and that not one of those reasons had a thing to do with the potato" (Foer, *Everything is Illuminated* 67). McDonald's idea of redemption in Foer's book might refer both to the third generation survivors' reconciliation with their past and to the reconciliation of former opponents. But as the prerequisite of this reconciliation is apparently the elimination of the previous generations, *Everything Is Illuminated*, in harmony with its title, seems to argue self-ironically both for the decisive importance of memories and at the same time for the essential need to move on.

The humor is often the result of what Katrin Amian calls "parodic destabilization" (163). It characterizes both narratives, which the book consists of, but the means by which it is achieved are entirely different. Jonathan's imaginary historiography takes "the form of magical realism" (Ascari 126) with abundant self-reflexive elements questioning his own book's authenticity and functionality. For instance, he inserts the self-reflexive allegory of a never accomplished house in his novel which both imitates and questions the actual work in progress.

> He loved the skeleton of makeshift beams and rafters more and more as construction progressed, loved them more than the house itself, and eventually persuaded the reluctant architect to draw them into the final plans. Workers, too, were drawn into the plans. Not workers, exactly, but local actors paid to look like workers [...] The blueprints themselves were drawn into the blueprints, and in those blueprints were blueprints with blueprints with blueprints [...] like a man on a desert island who retells and embellishes the only joke he can remember. His dream was for the Double House to be a kind

of infinity, always a fraction of itself—suggestive of a bottomless money pit—always approaching but never reaching completion. (162)

Another passage paraphrases one of the provocative postmodern dilemmas whether reality precedes fiction or the other way round. "Memory begat memory begat memory. Villagers became embodiments of that legend they had been told so many times" (258). In another example, Foer contemplates on the futility or even the oppressive nature of literature and history, which have a strong tendency to replace rather than record reality. "*The Book of Antecedents*, once updated yearly, was now continually updated, and when there was nothing to report, the full-time committee would report its reporting, just to keep the book moving, expanding, becoming, more like life: *We are writing... We are writing... We are writing...*" (212). Thus the parodies of various genres from annals through folk legends to mock documents and the subjective and magical destabilization of history in Jonathan's narrative are primarily the means of voicing some of the great dilemmas of postmodern literature.

In the other plotline, however, destabilizing "[h]umour is created by the disparity between Alex's idiosyncratic English and the standard form" (52), as McDonald points out. Jonathan's parody and criticism is mostly aimed at the conventions of formally constructed, written legacy whereas Alex parodies everyday language use. Both narratives permanently highlight the mediated nature and thus the unreliability of any utterance but in Jonathan's case this is the conscious strategy of the professional postmodern writer while Alex's naivety seems to divulge that ambiguity is not an exclusive feature of postmodern literature but it is a substantial component of ordinary life as well. For example, Alex, waiting for Jonathan's arrival, ironically observes that the guest might mistake decoration in Ukrainian colors for his own. "The station was not ordinary, because there were blue and yellow papers from the ceiling. They were there for the first birthday of the new constitution. [...] Perhaps he would think that the yellow and blue papers were for him, because I know that they are the Jewish colors" (31). The substantial necessity of a shared code not simply for comprehension but for mere survival, yet at the same time the arbitrariness and thus the only transitory validity of these codes is humorously exposed in the following, hilariously complicated sentence depicting the encounter of the urban travelers and some local people in the countryside. "I commanded the hero not to speak, because at times people who speak Ukrainian who hate people who speak a fusion of Russian and Ukrainian also hate people who speak English" (Foer, *Everything is Illuminated* 112).

Foer repeatedly directs the reader's attention to the fact that there is no truth; there are only consensual interpretations accepted and thus functioning as truth for a while. This idea prevails not only in the pointedly fictive shtetl history or the humorously distorted travelogue but in many of the micro-narratives of the book, too. The 120 times renewed mock marriage contract of a couple, for example, lists chronologically each of their conflicts and resolutions insinuating how carefully detailed individual agreements are necessary to maintain cooperation.

> The 120 marriages of Joseph and Sarah L The young couple first married on August 5, 1744, when Joseph was eight, and Sarah six, and first ended their marriage six days later, when Joseph refused to believe, to Sarah's frustration, that the stars were silver nails in the sky, pinning up the black nightscape. They remarried four days later, when Joseph left a note under the door of Sarah's parents' house: *I have considered everything you told me, and I do believe that the stars are silver nails.* [...] Their marriage contract still hangs over the door of the house they on-and-off shared nailed to the top post and brushing against the shalom welcome mat: It is with everlasting devotion that we, Joseph and Sarah L, reunite in the indestructible union of matrimony, promising love until death, with the understanding that the stars are silver nails in the sky. (208)

On the one hand, this is in striking contrast with the generalizing prejudices causing the tragic historical conflicts which are both the starting point and the permanent background of the plot. On the other hand, the parody raises doubts as well. Firstly, if a simple marriage of two people requires a document of 120 amendments, how long and detailed a contract should be so that it could harmonize with all the needs and interpretations of two or more ethnic, religious or other groups of people? Secondly, the very first item already makes it clear that consensus is sometimes very far from being equal to truth. Thirdly, the frequent revisions suggest that a shared interpretation does not promise stability either as it constantly changes according to the incalculable and ineluctable changes of the interpreters themselves.

Foer not only joins the Jewish American tradition of self-ironic fiction on Holocaust but also widens its horizon. As in case of contemporaries of the events and second-generation survivors, his self-irony is aimed not at the Holocaust itself but at its representation. However, *Everything Is Illuminated* adds to the list of dilemmas. While the primary concern for the first and the second generations was whether Holocaust can be

communicated—adequately represented and fully comprehended—at all, Foer focuses on the questions of reconciliation. Yet his emphasis on the unreliability of any narrative seems to insinuate his postmodern scepticism regarding the possibility of an all-encompassing, final, common understanding acceptable for every participant. His novel rather depicts the permanent reconfiguration of incompatible interpretations, which endlessly struggle for authority, and which can be tolerated and survived only with humor.

3.5 Holocaust Literature and Metafiction

Paul Auster is one of the most acknowledged contemporary American writers yet he is hardly ever discussed among Jewish American authors. Taking a look at some recent examples of canonizing authority, we can see that his work is completely absent from the *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* and his name is mentioned only once in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*. However, there are also critics who discuss his work in the context of Jewish American literature, like Kathrin Krämer in her monograph *Walking in Deserts, Writing Out of Wounds: Jewishness and Deconstruction in Paul Auster's Literary Work*, or James Peacock in *Understanding Paul Auster*. The reason for this ambiguity regarding Auster's canonization as a Jewish author by different scholars is presumably the fact that he almost never addresses Jewish issues as central concerns on the thematic level of his writing. As Lily Neilan Corwin points out, "[t]hough most of Auster's protagonists are Jewish and there are occasional references to the Holocaust, usually the effects of the Shoah and the difficulty in asserting a particularly Jewish identity are less blatant in his work than in Bellow's or Roth's" (123). Yet it can be argued that Holocaust literature is intensely present in Auster's oeuvre although in an indirect way, which is not very surprising of a writer whose work is so often studied as an outstanding example of metafiction. Moreover, many of Auster's self-reflexive, self-ironic gestures usually discussed as features of metafiction show remarkable similarities with ideas, narrative strategies and symbols familiar from Holocaust literature.

The New York Trilogy, Auster's first novel is mentioned by Amy J. Elias as an example of "intertextual metafiction" ("Postmodern Metafiction" 23). Dennis Barrone, on the other hand, prefers Linda Hutcheon's category "historiographic metafiction" regarding Auster's oeuvre.

> Postmodern fiction, or more precisely, historiographic metafiction is about "issues such as those of narrative form, of intertextuality, of strategies of

representation, of the role of language, of the relation between historical fact and experiential event, and, in general, of the epistemological and ontological consequences of the act of rendering problematic that which was once taken for granted by historiography—and literature" (Hutcheon xii). Paul Auster's fiction is about all of these issues, too. (21-22)

Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* quoted by Barrone above is of special interest for this paper as the author emphasizes in this book "the governing role of irony in postmodernism" (4) in general, and the substantial connection between irony and metafiction in specific, suggesting that "[h]istoriographic metafiction's [...] strategy subverts [...] through irony" (xii). But regardless of subcategories like historiographic or intertextual, Patricia Waugh's impressionistic list collecting the most prominent and most widely acknowledged features of metafiction also seems relevant to Auster's fiction:

> a celebration of the power of the creative imagination together with an uncertainty about the validity of its representations; an extreme self-consciousness about language, literary form and the act of writing fictions; a pervasive insecurity about the relationship of fiction to reality; a parodic, playful, excessive or deceptively naïve style of writing (*Metafiction* 2).

The metafictional qualities of Auster's work have been addressed in several book-length works, for example *Metafiction, Intertextuality and Subjectivity in Paul Auster's The New York Trilogy, The Book of Illusions and Oracle Night* by Stella Bogliani. Therefore the current analysis focuses only on those elements in some of Auster's works which seem to be in parallel with phenomena familiar from Holocaust literature outlined in the previous chapters. I will concentrate on three texts by Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, *The Book of Illusions* and "Why Write?" but the list could undoubtedly be extended by numerous further examples.

The first part of *The New York Trilogy*, "City of Glass" tells the mystery of Peter Stillman Jr., whose case is investigated by the protagonist, David Quinn under the pseudonym Paul Auster. The young Peter spent most of his life locked up in a dark room since early childhood as the victim of his father, who hoped to discover "God's language" (*New York Trilogy* 20) as a result of the lifelong experiment. Stillman's speaking name refers to his taciturn, enigmatic being, at the same time it does not reveal so much what he is but rather what he inherited from his autonomous father; a logic reminiscent of traumas passed on between generations, however, Peter Stillman senior is clearly not the traumatized person but the oppressor. William G. Little also speaks about "the survivor of

his father's Holocaust, Peter Stillman" (88). Stillman Jr. is not only characterized by the lack of language—which would enable him to communicate his experiences, a project never fully accomplished all through the novel—but also by the lack of colors. "Everything about Peter Stillman was white. White shirt, open at the neck; white pants, white shoes, white socks. Against the pallor of his skin, the flaxen thinness of his hair, the effect was almost transparent" (*New York Trilogy* 17-18). His absolute, blank whiteness, the absence of everyday colors, shades and distinctions insinuate the incommunicability of his experience. This symbol operates similarly to the color black used by Philip Roth in "Eli, the Fanatic", as analyzed in the subchapter 3.3. In addition, the futility of the father's search for God's language echoes the ideas of God's silence during the Holocaust. The dark room in the center of Auster's story recalls Eli Wiesel's thoughts in "Why I Write": "[w]herever one starts from one reaches darkness. God? He remains the God of darkness. Man? Source of darkness" (908). A similar idea is articulated by Geoffrey H. Hartman in his study "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies", who describes the traumatized subject's experience as "a solitude so vast that God Himself seems to be absent. In such a world mediation through speech has become impossible. What Lacan calls the symbolic order [...] presents itself only as an impossible desire, because of its violation" (542).

Accordingly, one of the central themes of *The New York Trilogy* is distrust in language. The anxieties regarding the corruption of language are articulated most succinctly by the elder Peter Stillman, who explains them to Quinn while collecting junk in the street:

> our words no longer correspond to the world. When things were whole, we felt confident that our words could express them. But little by little these things have broken apart, shattered, collapsed into chaos. And yet our words remained the same. [...] Hence, every time we try to speak of what we see, we speak falsely, distorting the very thing we are trying to represent (92-93).

His post-apocalyptic vision of language which used to work adequately but has become dysfunctional recalls Wiesel's post-Holocaust observation: "[t]he word has deserted the meaning it was intended to convey" ("Why I Write" 907).

Not only words but the larger units of expression are also questioned in *The New York Trilogy*. Madeleine Sorapure calls the genre of the novel a "'meta-anti-detective' story" (72), by which she means "an elaborate parody of the detective novel in which, despite the narrator's best intentions and efforts, there is no crime, no solution, and, by the end, no hero" (84). Barone extends Sorapure's argumentation by adding that Auster's

employment of the genre suggests more general doubts: the author "parodies detective novel conventions to comment upon processes of signification" (23). Since Linda Hutcheon points out that parody "both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies" (*Politics* 97), Auster's "meta-anti-detective" novel can be read as a self-ironic version of the mystery genre: a book simultaneously rejecting and confirming the literary conventions it is built upon.

Besides the available media of representation, the other source of uncertainty in *The New York Trilogy*, just like in Holocaust literature, is identity. Names, pseudonyms and autonomous names are passed between characters, like in case of the two Stillmans or Quinn, how is mistaken on the phone for a private detective called Paul Auster just like the author but who also produces his fiction under the penname William Wilson, a reference to a character by Edgar Allen Poe. In addition to the permanent game played with exchanged or hidden identities, Auster's protagonists' stories often unfold and their identities are created as the results of their attempts at reconstructing someone else's story, similarly to second or third generation survivors' stories like *Maus* or *Everything Is Illuminated*. Quinn investigates Peter Stillman's life in "City of Glass"; Blue spies on Black in "Ghosts"; and the narrator of "The Locked Room" is haunted by his childhood friend's, Fanshawe's disappearance and manuscripts. However, each of these investigations fails to discover and express the truth it is aimed at, in harmony with Holocaust literature, in which the ultimate inaccessibility and inexpressibility of the traumatic experience is a frequently recurring, crucial idea. "The Locked Room" is concluded by the narrator emphasizing his failure to apprehend his friend and the book written by him, confessing that "I read those words with my own eyes, and yet I find it hard to trust in what I am saying" (371). His remark regarding the uncertainty of the authorial position summarized here and characteristic of the whole novel sounds very similar to Wiesel's doubts: "[n]o, I do not understand. And if I write, it is to warn the reader that he will not understand either" ("Why I Write" 909).

Like *The New York Trilogy, The Book of Illusions* also consists of a structure of double plotlines familiar from *Maus* or *Everything Is Illuminated*. Its narrator, David Zimmer, tries to recover from the grief over his wife and children lost in a plane crash by immersing himself in writing a book, *The Silent World of Hector Mann*, a collection of essays on a silent movie actor, Hector Mann, who allegedly disappeared in 1929. Just like in Holocaust fiction, the present—in this case the 1990s—seems to be worth speaking about only to the extend it is the means of reconstructing the past. Although there is no direct reference to the Holocaust in Auster's novel, numerous elements might remind the

reader of Holocaust literature. Like Wiesel, who felt obliged to speak on behalf of the dead, Zimmer is also preoccupied with writing Mann's biography and with translating Chateubriand's *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, which bears the title "Memoirs of a Dead Man" (62) in Zimmer's translation. Another important shared feature with Holocaust fiction is the narrator's position as a survivor of both his own personal tragedy—the loss of his family—and of Mann's story.

The redemptive power of humor, which is the organizing principle of Foer's novel, is essential in this case, too. *The Book of Illusions* begins with the grief-stricken Zimmer sitting at home, unable to talk to anyone, watching TV drunk and alone, and happening to laugh at a silent movie scene: "it was the first time I had laughed at anything since June, and [...] I understood that [...] there was still some piece of me that wanted to go on living" (9). This laugh triggers the secondary plot: the investigation after Mann, the actor who was able to make Zimmer laugh. Besides, the book starts and finishes with complete destruction—all the characters who have a name die in the beginning and in the end as well, except for Zimmer in both cases—still, there is a decisive difference between the first sentence: "[e]veryone 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 on the plane, he went catatonic with depression; when all the characters die who participated in Mann's story, including Zimmer's lover, Alma, he is able to overcome trauma and—as the reader learns on the final pages—makes a new start in life, finding a new partner with time, too. In this sense, *The Book of Illusions* describes the process of overcoming trauma, another essential theme in Holocaust fiction illustrated both by Foer's and Spiegelman's books.

In addition to structural and thematic similarities, some of the vocabulary in Auster's novel also recalls the Holocaust. Zimmer gets involved in Mann's life when Alma, the actor's secret collaborator invites him to join Mann's family, explaining that she asks for Zimmer's presence "[b]ecause I need a witness" (105); and all of Holocaust literature is based on witnesses' testimonies. Besides, Anna relates to her own stigma, a big purple birthmark on her left face, similarly to the way Spiegelman turned the derogatory concept of mice designating Jews back against the Nazi rhetoric by voluntarily employing it in form of animal masks in *Maus*. Anna also turns her being stigmatized into a key feature of her identity, ironically using it against the people by whom she felt persecuted.

> 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).

The title of the third selected text by Auster, "Why Write?" seems to be a paraphrase of Eli Wiesel's often quoted essay, "Why I Write". The only difference is that Auster omits the personal pronoun, which clearly indicates the distance between the two authors' positions. Wiesel's essay is a confession on his Jewish identity and his Holocaust experiences presented as his personal motives for writing whereas one of the central concerns in Auster's stories is the problematic nature of identity. The similarity of the two titles can certainly be an involuntary coincidence, but in case of an author like Auster so well-versed in American and French literature, and in case of a book like *The Red Notebook*, which repeatedly calls the reader's attention to the utmost importance of coincidences, such a phenomenon is at least suspicious. Besides, intertextuality works even if a certain reference is not intended by the writer but is brought in the context by the reader. (It must be noted here that Auster's stories can also be read in light of Jean-Paul Sartre's crucial essay "Why Write" focusing on the interaction between the author's and the reader's freedom mediated by the literary text, a theme highly relevant to metafiction and intertextuality. However, this parallel is out of the scope of Jewish American literature so it will be not investigated in detail in the present paper.)

"Why Write" is composed of five allegedly true stories, an assumption often emphasized in *The Red Notebook*, which includes "Why I Write" as its last section. This structure is self-ironic in itself as the whole book claims to represent "reality" not fiction, at the same time the writer—notorious for the metafictional games with identities abounding in all his oeuvre—carefully inserts the sources of the anecdotes, some of which are taken from his own life, some others told to him by friends or recorded by complete strangers in letters addressed to him. Thus both the unreliability of the narrators and the distance between the experience and its recording are permanently emphasized, which are concerns belonging to the conventional techniques of metafiction used to focus the readers' attention to the created and thus fictive nature of *any* story.

The fourth anecdote tells about the post-war marriage of a young Belgian man and a German girl, whose fathers used to fight as adversaries during the World War II. More precisely, "[t]he German father had been a guard in the prison camp where the Belgian father had spent the war" (392) as a Prisoner of War. Auster concludes the story with a

happy ending. "As the woman who wrote me the letter hastened to add, there was no bad blood between them. [...] The greatest joy in both their lives is the grandchildren they have in common" (392). The story is reminiscent of the conflict and of the self-ironic resolution in *Everything Is Illuminated*, which simultaneously offered a positive outcome and questioned its validity by the context. Auster's protagonists are mentioned not by individual names but by their nationalities—"the German father" versus "the Belgian father"—however it is precisely these identities defined by national narratives that have to be overcome by each character in order to achieve family happiness. The narrator's remark that the woman writing the letter "hastened to" report on the harmony in their family, confirms the impression that such a substantial revision of identity is generally conceived as being far from unproblematic. Yet these problems remain utterly untold: the woman writing the letter uses the currently prevailing clichés taking reconciliation and the priority of the individual's life over one's belonging to a country for granted, just like the clichés of dominant national narratives during the World War used to be taken for granted. The narrator's pretended naivety with which he juxtaposes the two temporal and ideological layers without any attempt to explain the transition between the two has an effect of questioning the validity of both narratives and of motivating the reader for reflection on the gap between them.

The third story is based on a childhood memory. The narrator and other school children are hiking in the woods when a sudden storm hits upon them. Trying to flee to a local farm, they have to "crawl under a barbed-wire fence" (389) and one of the kids next to the narrator is struck to death by lightning. "It was the barbed wire that did it, I suppose. [...] I didn't think, One or two seconds later, and it would have been me. What I thought about was holding his tongue and looking down at his teeth. [...] Thirty-four years later, I still remember them" (390). Barbed wire is an emblematic motif of concentration camps often recalled in Holocaust literature just like the idea of unexpected, meaningless and violent death, the observation that survival is a question of sheer luck or the constraint of focusing on minor details because the trauma as a whole exceeds one's capacity to conceive it. But it is not so much motifs familiar from World War II that recall the Holocaust in the stories of "Why Write" but rather what Wiesel calls "the fear of forgetting" ("Why I Write" 908), in other words the drive behind the meticulous care with which Auster tries to record each life, unique, precious and vulnerable as they are, and the empathy with which he turns to each individual, as if any trifle incident stood for all humanity, as if our mere existence were a miracle.

Several more examples for direct and indirect references to the Holocaust made by Auster could be enumerated, from his early post-apocalyptic dystopia, *In the Country of Last Things*, which represented a city where our entire civilization has collapsed and human bodies are burnt for fuel by the central administration, and which originally bore the working subtitle "Anna Blume Walks through the 20th Century" (*A Companion to Twentieth Century United States Fiction* 532) to his essay on the "Book of the Dead" suggesting that in Jabés' poetry "[t]he question is the Jewish Holocaust, but it is also the question of literature itself" (571). But what I want to point out instead is rather the shared concerns of Holocaust literature and metafiction. One of these features is an intense awareness of intertextuality. In Wiesel's words:

> The presence of the dead then beckons in such tangible ways that it affects even the most removed characters. [...] Technically, so to speak, they are of course elsewhere, in time and space, but on a deeper, truer plane, the dead are part of every story, of every scene. [...] After Auschwitz, everything brings us back to Auschwitz. When I speak of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, when I evoke Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiba, it is the better to understand them in the light of Auschwitz ("Why I Write" 909-910).

Many of Auster's narrative strategies and themes are crucial in Holocaust fiction, too. His preoccupation with the position of the survivor and the ways trauma can be overcome; the decisive force of heritage and yet the uncertainty of identity; the distrust in language; the narrative structures in which the primary plot is often the result of a preceding plotline; the self-ironic employment of rhetoric and ideological conventions played out against each other; humor as a possible source of both psychological relief and of ambivalence; the ambiguous constraint to remember and to move on—all of these elements are equally prominent in metafiction and Holocaust literature. Besides, Auster's ultimate self-irony lies in his gesture of apparently neglecting his Jewish identity and at the same time addressing many of the crucial issues related to it indirectly yet forcefully. This might be interpreted as a way to exceed some outdated and burdensome literary and ideological conventions, many of which have so tragically failed in the past—for example the routine of being automatically labeled by belonging to a certain minority or thinking in terms of the necessary conflicts of majority society versus minority groups—yet to maintain the valuable ideas gained along the way. In addition, the intensely self-reflexive structure of narration accompanied by the mock naivety of the narrative voice and the ironically embarrassing ambiguities is likely to motivate the reader to reconsider first

impressions and implied ideologies, an imperative central to both metafiction and Holocaust literature.

4 THE DILEMMAS OF MINORITY CONTRA MAJORITY POSITIONS

4.1 Introduction: “The Jew” as a Metaphor

The awareness of minority position has always been an important component of Jewish identity. From the Israelite Exodus from Egypt commemorated by the annual holiday of Pesach through the Cossack pogroms as depicted, for example, in Isaac Bashevis Singer’s novel, *Satan in Goray*, to the vast corpus of Holocaust literature, there are numerous texts bringing Jewish experiences of a persecuted minority in the foreground. However, the experience of being oppressed is not unique to Jewry but is more or less shared by other minorities, too, as pointed out by several authors. Simone de Beauvoir, for instance, writes in the “Introduction” to her crucial feminist book, *The Second Sex* that “’[t]he eternal feminine’ corresponds to ‘the black soul’ and to ‘the Jewish character’” (44). Beauvoir subtly indicates with the quotation marks that these generalizing concepts involve the dangers of stereotypes therefore they are to be treated carefully and she “ends up drawing an impassable distinction between the situation of women and that of Jews” (Susan S. Shapiro 315) suggesting that “to the anti-Semite the Jew is not so much an inferior as he is an enemy” (Beauvoir 44). Yet the parallels drawn between the fates of various minority groups are dominant ideas often leading to productive debates in both popular and scholarly discourses on minority issues, thus being worth some investigation. Especially since any such comparison places diverse phenomena of minority experience in a double context, which tends to provide a fertile soil for ambiguities and for self-irony.

According to Karl Shapiro’s already quoted “Introduction” to his *Poems of a Jew*, Jewish identity has been widely conceived since the Holocaust as the metaphor for oppressed minorities.

> The hideous blood purge of the Jews by Germany in the twentieth century revived throughout the world the spiritual image of the Jew, not as someone noble and good, or despicable and evil, not as the father of Western religions or the murderer of Christ, but as man essentially himself, beyond nationality, defenseless against the crushing impersonality of history (xii).

His impression is confirmed by several colleagues, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. In the essayistic short story, “The Imaginary Jew” written by the confessional poet John Berryman in 1945, the first person singular narrator tells about an insult on the grounds of religion. While walking home in Manhattan, he is mistaken for a Jew and consequently

attacked by some Catholic Irishmen. The narrator keeps asserting in vain that he is Catholic himself, and in the appendix of the story he draws the conclusion: "My persecutors were right: I was a Jew. The imaginary Jew I was was as real as the imaginary Jew hunted down, on other nights and days, in a real Jew" (132). As James E. Young reads the story in his book on *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*, "'the imaginary Jew'" figured only one kind of 'Jewish knowledge' for Berryman: victimization" (116). The same impulse for discovering and expressing one's own vulnerability through identifying with the persecuted Jews, or in other words the attempt at understanding the victims from an assumed inner point of view and understanding ourselves through the metaphoric image of the Jew might account for the international popularity of a line by the Russian symbolist poet Marina Tsvetayeva: *Vse poeti zhidy zhyidi*, "All poets are Yids." (Hollander 40). The original poem was written before the World War II but it was made famous by the Jewish poet Paul Celan quoting it in Russian as an epigraph to a poem of his own written in German after the Holocaust. The Jewish American poet, John Hollander cites both fellow poets and the shared line as a central thought in his essay on "The Question of American Jewish Poetry". "It is not merely that modern poets and Jews are outsiders, by nature itinerant no matter how locally rooted. It is more that both [...] carry the burden of an absolutely inexplicable sense of their own identity and history" (40).

The metaphoric use of the Holocaust appears as a dominant idea in not only in primary literature but in the scholarly discourse on minority cultures, too. Ellen Schiff suggests in her book, *From Stereotype to Metaphor: The Jew in Contemporary Drama* that "[t]he Jew as outsider becomes a workable symbol when the misfortunes that befall him by sole reason of his ethnicity have their parallels in the adversities endured by other minority groups" (153). Similarly, Jeffrey C. Alexander writes in his essay on the "Social Construction of Moral Universals" that "[i]n each Holocaust Museum the fate of the Jews functions as a metaphorical bridge to the treatment of other ethnic, religious, and racial minorities" (64). He also adds that

> [i]n the 1960s and 1970s [... c]ritics of earlier American policy, and representatives of minority groups themselves, began to suggest analogies between various minority "victims" of white American expansion and the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. This was particularly true of Native Americans, who argued that genocide had been committed against them (52).

However, Efraim Sicher observes in his book on *The Holocaust Novel* that "the appropriation of the Holocaust as a metaphor for universal suffering by emerging minority groups" (xvii) is rather problematic since "[w]hat is not agreed upon is what constitutes legitimate use of the Holocaust" (xvii).

One of the most controversial examples for the metaphorical employment of the Holocaust is the poem "Lady Lazarus" by Sylvia Plath. The poem is a dramatic monologue delivered by the female lyrical self, who is recovering from a suicide attempt. She repeatedly blames various male figures addressed as "Herr Doktor" (18), "Herr Enemy" (18), and "Herr God, Herr Lucifer" (19) for her sufferings. Accordingly, her own condition is described by elements taken from stock imagery of Holocaust fiction: "my skin / Bright as a Nazi lampshade" (16); "My face a featureless, fine Jew linen" (16); "I turn and burn. [...] Ash, ash—[...] A cake of soap, / A wedding ring, / A gold filling" (18). Jacqueline Rose offers an overview on the opinions of many prestigious authors outraged by Plath's poem.

> 'The metaphor is inappropriate... I do not mean to lift the Holocaust out of the reach of art. Adorno was wrong—poetry *can* be made after Auschwitz and out of it... But it cannot be done without hard work and rare resources of the spirit. Familiarity with the hellish subject must be earned not presupposed. My own feeling is that Sylvia Plath did not earn it, that she did not respect the real incommensurability to her own experience of what took place'. [...] Wieseltier is not alone in this criticism. Similarly, Joyce Carol Oates objects to Plath 'snatching [her word] metaphors' for her predicament from newspaper headlines'; Seamus Heaney argues that in poems like 'Lady Lazarus', Plath harnesses the wider cultural reference to a 'vehemently self-justifying purpose'; Irving Howe describes the link as 'monstrous, utterly disproportionate'; and Marjorie Perloff describes Plath's references to the Nazis as 'empty' and 'histrionic', 'cheap shots', 'topical trappings', 'devices' which 'camouflage' the true personal meaning of the poems in which they appear'. (22)

Most of all, I agree with Heaney, who criticizes Plath for using Holocaust motifs as if they were in themselves unproblematic vehicles conveying the tenor of the speaker's personal concerns without deserving much attention on their own. Such an approach treats the Holocaust as a petrified set of clichés that belong to the past and thus need no further consideration regarding the present, which implies the double dangers of irreverently

forgetting the uniqueness of the historical events and victims as well as repeating the mistakes induced by past narratives precisely because they are regarded as merely past.

Adrienne Rich's "Yom Kippur, 1984" seems to be a much more balanced poem on the subject of persecution. It is a long meditation trying the answer the question posed in the first line: "What is a Jew in solitude?" (124) with a combination of personal examples, philosophical ideas and literary allusions. The question is self-ironic to start with as it simultaneously states and negates Jewish identity, since feeling oneself a member of a group or to be considered as such by others presupposes the existence of a definitive community. However, Rich emphasizes "solitude", the absence of any other person or community, also foregrounding the ambiguity hidden at the core of most lyrical poems in general: namely, that they are presumably the subject's most intimate meditations most publicly disclosed. So the poet's initial rhetorical question both creates a lyrical voice and questions the relevance of the only available information about its identity; a strategy consistently maintained all through the poem from the first "I", which appears not as the first person singular pronoun standing for the speaker of the poem but as a quotation from another poem by Robinson Jeffers to the grammatical oxymoron of shared solitudes: "when our souls crash together, Arab and Jew, howling our loneliness within the tribes" (127). Like Plath, Rich also relies on Holocaust imagery: "a solitude of barbed-wire and searchlights, the survivalist's final solution" (125). But her dramaturgy is quite different. "Lady Lazarus" culminates in the revenge of the female voice over the male enemy: "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (19), whereas Rich completely rejects the whole paradigm of strike and revenge bearing further revenge wishing to rejoice over the loss of the enemy. The speaker in "Yom Kippur, 1984" does not hope relief from designating any scapegoat, be it a man, a woman, a Jew, an Arab, God or Lucifer: "the pick-up with a gun parked at a turn-out in Utah or the Golan Heights / is not what I mean" (125).

In her vision "women and men are fellow-sufferers as Jews, Blacks, and homosexuals" (Murphy 110).

> "young scholar shot at the university gates on a summer evening walk, his prizes and studies nothing, nothing availing his Blackness / Jew deluded that she's escaped the tribe, the laws of her exclusion, the men too holy to touch her hand; Jew who has turned her back / on *midrash* and *mitzvah* (yet wears the *chai* on a thong between her breasts) hiking alone / found with a swastika

carved in her back at the foot of the cliffs (did she die as queer or as Jew?)" (Rich 126)

The lyrical self clearly identifies with the victims, yet the title self-ironically mentions the Jewish holiday Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement when one is expected to revise one's own crimes committed against others, not the crimes one has been victimized by, thus calling for self-reflection instead of revenge. Plath's exclamation marks are replaced here by questions seeking reconciliation although also revealing the embarrassing lack of satisfying answers. Besides, the structure based on the juxtaposition of different minority narratives exposes the underlying contradictions as well. Homosexuality, for example, is renounced by Orthodox Judaism while both Jews and homosexuals used to be persecuted by the Nazis, so the provocative question "did she die as a queer or as a Jew" (126) demands an answer that could go beyond already existing and obviously already failed conceptual frameworks. This demand is reinforced by the intertextual evocation of Whitman's poetry, as explained by Adrienne Rich in her essay "The Genesis of 'Yom Kippur, 1984'". The mockingbird mentioned in line 75 is a reference to Whitman's "out of the mockingbird's throat, the musical shuttle" (Rich 256) and the mockingbird as the species named after its habit to mimic other animals' voices is a self-ironic image in itself. Besides, Rich's list of crimes: the "'faggot kicked into the icy river, woman dragged from her stalled car,'and so on—is a kind of Whitmanesque catalogue, naming and evoking the different kinds of people that make up the American landscape, the American city. [...] The America of violence, the America that humiliates people on the grounds of their difference. Whitman himself welcomed those differences" (Rich 256). Thus Riches expresses her dissatisfaction with contemporary American society by ironically recalling the poetic form introduced by Whitman to voice her anxieties that "[t]his isn't the America that Whitman understood, that he conjures up in his poetry" (256).

A similar claim for the revision of identity is articulated by Isaac Deutscher in his essay "Who is a Jew?". He locates the essential common factor of diverse Jewish identities in their minority position, self-ironically explaining his idea by the metaphor based on the fate of another minority, the African American slaves. However, Deutscher does not stop at using the clichés of slavery as an illustration, taking that narrative for granted and settled. Instead, he invites the reader to explore the contradictions hidden in the complicated relationships of the two communities.

> The Jew in American or in Soviet society? [...] In each of these societies the position of the Jew is different. What common denominator is there between

> the attitudes, roles and functions of Jews in such different circumstances? [...] in the United States [...] the Jew is always aware [...] that in the Great Democracy he is 'the other' Negro: a white-skinned one. And how very often he gets his own back on the black Negro: in the Southern States more often than not it is the Jew who is one of the most fanatical upholders of white supremacy. How difficult it is in this tangle of emotions, fears, prejudices, and racial arrogance to find one's identity. (43)

In the introduction to his essay collection, *A száműzött nyelv* (*Language in Exile*), Imre Kertész's follows an indirect strategy regarding the issue of identity, which resembles Deutscher's approach quoted above. Kertész writes: "I like that sentence by Cioran in which he says he can best communicate with Jewish people because he, just like Jews, feels like "an outsider to humanity"; the most precise expression ever for the state of mind I lived in for decades[2]" [my translation]. Kertész's whole oeuvre is defined by his Holocaust experience, still—or rather as a result of that—he is reluctant to simply take over clichés on Jewish identity. Instead he creates a self-ironic distance from the core statement that he, a Jew himself, "like Jews, feels like 'an outsider to humanity'" by citing it from another text. In addition, his carefully chosen source is Cioran, a Romanian-French philosopher, who spent a significant part of his career in France, a country different from his original homeland, reminiscent of Kertész—who also lived abroad, in Berlin, for decades—and recalling the concept of exile in the title. Besides, in the context of the World War II—which haunts not only every book by Kertész but also Eastern European public discourse at the time of writing and publishing *A száműzött nyelv*—Cioran as Romanian was supposed to be an adversary to the Hungarian Kertész. Moreover, the young Cioran used to sympathize with fascism in the 1930s (Stone 11). So in Kertész's sentence stereotypical Jews as well as their former enemy as well as the supposedly lucky survivors of the conflict feel like "an outsider to humanity", no matter if they live in Romania, Hungary, France or Germany any time during the second half of the twentieth century. But if anyone, from either side of the barricade and at any time anywhere in Europe feels like that then the question emerges who could be imagined as the "insider"? As a result of these multiple layers, Kertész simultaneously affirms and questions his Jewish identity in the sense of being an outsider as well as raising general doubts whether

[2] „Szeretem Cioran-nak azt a mondatát, amely szerint főként zsidókkal tud igazán szót érteni, mert akárcsak a zsidók, ő is „kívül érzi magát az emberiségen": soha még ilyen pontos megfogalmazása az állapotnak, amelyben évtizedekig éltem." (Kertész, *A szánűzött nyelv* 5)

one's identity can be defined by birth, country, profession or any other factor. Understanding his statement requires from the reader a careful and thorough revision of numerous stereotypes regarding identity as conceived in the post-war European context.

The diverse examples above have been collected to illustrate that Jewish identity reconsidered in the context of other minorities is a frequent theme of Jewish literature often resulting in self-irony. Therefore, the following subchapters will examine the relationship between representations of Jewish identity and other minority positions in various situations. In case of Israel, the conflict between the position of the oppressed minority—the persecution of the Jews as the historical background to the foundation of the Israeli state—and that of the oppressive majority—in relationship to Palestinians—is united within Jewish identity. The subchapter on African American and Jewish American identities focuses on the parallels between these two American minority groups with different backgrounds but sometimes rather similar ambitions. Finally, the last subchapter concentrates on the coincidence of two different and often antagonistic minority positions within one identity: the stories of female Jewish authors address issues of feminism emerging in a specific Jewish environment. In each case, minority position, which is a key component of Jewish American identity, is represented in a double context as it is also embodied by the African American counterpart or by the Palestinian opponent, or is repeated, although in a rather different version, by the feminist standpoint. The questions and dilemmas arising from these controversial situations often result in the uncertainty of the narrator's and the characters' identities, an enhanced self-reflexivity of narratives and thus self-ironic narrative strategies. Obviously, the discourse on these issues is far from being unilateral. To name just one of the countless examples, Toni Morrison engages in the same debate with the motto of her novel on slavery. "The dedication of *Beloved* to "Sixty Million and more" who died during slavery and the Middle Passage has been read as a comparative reference to the six million victims of the Holocaust" (Durrant 4). Therefore the picture could be complete only with a study on the representations of these themes by Palestinian, African American and non-Jewish feminist authors as well. However, these works fall out of the scope of the present paper so they could be addressed only in a subsequent analysis.

4.2 Identity and Politics in the Diaspora and Israel

"*Whose* Jewish experience?" (12) ask many of Gold's friends and relatives when he tells them that he has been asked "to write about the Jewish experience in America" (11). The protagonist of Joseph Heller's novel, *Good As Gold*, is skeptical about the mission, too.

> "How can I write about the Jewish experience," he asked himself on the Metroliner returning to New York, "when I don't even know what it is? I haven't the faintest idea what to write. What in the world for me was the Jewish experience? I don't think I've ever run into an effective anti-Semite. When I grew up in Coney Island, everyone I knew was Jewish. [...] We had an Irish family on our block with a German surname and there were always a couple of Italians or Scandinavians in my class who had to come to school on Jewish holidays and looked persecuted. I used to feel sorry for them because *they* were the minority." (11)

Gold's father also questions his son's competence: "'What does *he* know about being Jewish?' he roared. 'He wasn't even born in Europe'" (30). Heller's humorous game of turning minority position inside out by changing the perspective from a the overall scale of American society to the local milieu of a New York City neighborhood confirms the suggestion in the "Introduction" to this chapter of the present paper that minority position is usually conceived as an essential factor of Jewish identity. On the other hand, the whole first section of his novel called "The Jewish Experience" self-ironically reveals that there is no such thing as one definite, general "Jewish Experience". Every character entering the dialogue on this theme insists on it that there are as many Jewish experiences as there are people voicing them.

Jewish identity is substantially different from the point of view of someone living in Europe or in the America, in the Diaspora or in Israel, at the same time each of these perspectives is challenged both by each other as well as their local political contexts. Cynthia Ozick starts her already quoted speech, "Toward a New Yiddish"—originally delivered at a conference in Israel— by quoting a Jewish author, George Steiner, born in Europe, who "offered Exile as a metaphor for the Essential Jew, and himself as a metaphor of Exile" (Ozick, "Toward a New Yiddish" 154). Steiner, like the fictive Gold's father, sees European Diaspora as the source of authentic Jewish identity. In contrast, Ozick argues for the outstanding importance of American Jewry as the greatest Jewish

community surviving World War II thus destined to maintain the tradition. Yet another approach is outlined by Hannah Hever explaining "the tension between Jewish ethnic continuity and Zionist discontinuity" (205) in her essay on "Mapping Literary Spaces: Territory and Violence in Israeli Literature".

> We have, on the one hand, a story of Jewish continuity, of the Jewish people returning to their land and undergoing a process of territorialization. On the other hand, there is a parallel story of rupture and rebellion: the story of the Hebrews' rejection of the Diaspora Jew. The "New Jew", the newly territorialized Hebrew, seeks to shed his or her Jewish past in order to assume citizenship in the Israeli state. (205)

On this complicated map of diverse Jewish identities, Heller depicts the satirical portrait of the assimilated American Jewish Bruce Gold, who tries to succeed in the field of American politics. However, he is reminded of his Jewish identity the first moment he gets contacted by his friend, Ralph offering him a job at the White House.

> "That's why it's good you're a Jew."
>
> That word *Jew* fell with a crash upon Gold's senses. "Why, Ralph?" he managed to say. "Why is it good to have someone... who is Jewish?"
>
> "That will make it easier at both ends, Bruce" Ralph explained with no change of tone. "Jews are popular now and people don't like to object to them. And a Jew is always good to get rid of whenever the right wing wants us to." (Heller, *Good As Gold* 53)

However, the ironically self-contradictory rhetoric of politics does not exclusively apply to Jewish subjects in Heller's parody; he unveils this hypocrisy as a general feature of political life.

> "What would I have to do?"
>
> "Anything you want, as long as it's everything we tell you to say and do in support of our policies, whether you agree with them or not. You'll have complete freedom."
>
> Gold was confused. He said delicately, "I can't be bought, Ralph."
>
> "We wouldn't want you if you could be, Bruce," Ralph responded. "This President doesn't want yes-men. What we want are independent men of integrity who will agree with all our decisions after we make them." (Heller, *Good As Gold* 52-53)

Heller starts *Good As Gold* with the standard disclaimer putting his killing satire between quotation marks: “This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental” (4). On the other hand, he continues with a motto self-ironically contradicting the ostensible distance just created between reality and fiction: “I dedicate this book / to / The several gallant families / and / Numerous unwitting friends / whose / Help, conversations, and experiences / play / so large a part” (5). Philip Roth plays a very similar game, just the other way round, in his novel, *Operation Shylock*, which allegedly tells about an operation in which Roth participated as the agent of the Israeli intelligence service. At the end of the book, the narrator’s Israeli contact, Cheeseburger tries to convince him to employ the disclaimer for reasons of discretion demanded by international diplomacy. Roth rejects the suggestion, claims his book to be documentary, and resolves the political dilemma by omitting the details of the operation itself. Thus his novel focuses on the preliminary events getting him involved in the actual action, which is ironically absent from the text. The self-ironic game regarding the reality components of both books increases the incisively sarcastic effect of the most provocative remarks by both authors.

Sylvia Barack-Fishman writes in her essay on “Homelands of the Heart: Israel and Jewish Identity in American Jewish Fiction” that “[f]or Roth’s Jewish characters in *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*, personal identity is intimately tied up with Jewish identity and with Israel. In his books—as in reality—secular and traditionalist Jews in Israel and in America each have very different assumptions about what makes a Jew Jewish” (282). The possible positions concerning these dilemmas of identity are voiced by separate characters in *Operation Shylock*. The first person narrator and protagonist, called Philip Roth, embodies the assimilated Jewish American author, highly reminiscent of the real Philip Roth as known from his documentary texts. Self-ironically, his counterpoint also names himself Philip Roth. He is an ardent advocate of the Palestinian cause, who preaches his doctrine: “Diasporism: The Only Solution to the Jewish Problem” (32), an ironic reverse of Zionism, claiming that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can only be resolved by the Israeli Jews returning to their original European Diaspora homelands. The third Jewish position is articulated by the Mossad agent, who first introduces himself to Roth under the persona of an American millionaire, Smilesburger, financially supporting Israel. Finally, the Palestinian standpoint is represented primarily by a friend of Roth’s from college, George Ziad, “a Harvard-educated Egyptian enrolled at Chicago to study

Dostoyevsky and Kierkegaard" (119) returning to Israel in order to become "not a stone-throwing Arab [... but] a word-throwing Arab" (121).

Structurally, *Operation Shylock* is built on a series of self-ironic doubles, parallels and splits. The title itself is a self-mocking allusion to Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*, which depicts a condemnatory picture of its Jewish title character, Shylock. Roth, the narrator and his doppelgänger, whom he calls Moishe Pipik, and whom many of the characters mistake for Roth for a while, can be understood—and are actually understood at certain points in the novel by the primary Roth himself—as two aspects of a split personality: "this Pipik of mine is none other than the Satiric Spirit in the flesh, and the whole thing a send-up, a satire of authorship!" (199). "The derogatory, joking nonsense name that translates literally to Moses Bellybutton" (115) is taken from Roth's childhood memories, in which his uncle and other relatives called naughty children or adult schlemiels Moishe Pipik. However, the name implies not only a sense of inferiority but also a reference to Moses, who transmitted God's laws to the Jewish people. Therefore Roth simultaneously deplores and admires Pipik: "Pipik, who sent you to me in my hour of need? Who made me this wonderful gift? Know what Heine liked to say? There is a God, and his name is Aristophanes. *You* prove it. It's Aristophanes they should be worshipping over at the Wailing Wall—if he were the God of Israel I'd be in shul three times a day!" (204). Similarly, Ziad feels split, too. Although he was fed up during his American school years with his father's worship of their Arabic heritage, he feels compelled to take his place after the father's death and he ends up seeing his own wife and son recoiling from the plights his mission afflicts on them, the same way as he used to feel as a boy.

Roth concludes that "I was thinking that the only son I'd seen yet in Greater Israel who was *not* in conflict with his father was John Demjanjuk, Jr. There there was only harmony" (144). His conclusion is highly ironic asthe senior John Demjanjuk's trial for World War crimes is just going on as a secondary plotline of the novel, placing the primary plotline happening at the time of the First Intifada in the historical context of the Holocaust. Demjanjuk is also a double himself, as either he is falsely identified with the former dreaded guard of Nazi concentration camps—as he claims—and in this case he is the unlucky doppelgänger of the real mass murderer; or they are the same person—as he is accused of—and in that case his later self of an amicable American grandfather is completely split from his former self of a war criminal. Consequently, John Demjanjuk Jr.'s apparently resolute belief in the innocence of his father appears as either as simple-

mindedness or as a mere lie in the context of all the other characters facing the ambiguities of their lives.

> Why couldn't the Jews be one people? Why must Jews be in conflict with one another? Why must they be in conflict with themselves? Because the divisiveness is not just between Jew and Jew—it is within the individual Jew. Is there a more manifold personality in all the world? I don't say divided. Divided is nothing. Even the goyim are divided. But inside every Jew there is a *mob* of Jews. The good Jew, the bad Jew. The new Jew, the old Jew. The lover of Jews, the hater of Jews. The friend of the goy, the enemy of the goy. The arrogant Jew, the wounded Jew. The pious Jew, the rascal Jew. The coarse Jew, the gentle Jew. The defiant Jew, the appeasing Jew. The Jewish Jew, the de-Jewed Jew. Shall I go on? Do I have to expound upon the Jew as a three-thousand-year amassment of mirrored fragments to one who has made his fortune as a leading Jewologist of international literature? Is it any wonder that the Jew is always disputing? He *is* a dispute, incarnate! (334)

The rhetoric of Roth's exuberant list above works self-ironically. On the one hand, its repetition of the word "Jew" ostensibly serves the purpose of emphasizing that Roth's statement gives a picture of the Jewish people and of himself as one of them. On the other hand, the same repetition gradually turns the proper noun into a word with the effect of a pronoun while the middle of the section with so general adjectives as good, bad, new, old etc. reveals that Roth's observation is valid for anyone, independently of ethnicity, who has the courage to face the complex and controversial nature of one's own personality and heritage.

The split is present in the novel not only on the level of two plotlines, two historical contexts or among and within the characters but also regarding the concepts of the imaginary versus the real. Besides playing with the genre of his own book either as a memoir or as a piece of fiction, Roth addresses this theme in many other components of *Operation Shylock*, too. Roth offers two alternative endings to his own story, indicating the arbitrariness of any fiction. There are travel diaries written by Leon Klinghoffer—a Jewish man killed by Palestinian terrorists—presumably discovered but later on turning out to be fake. Or there is a character called Apter, who is Roth's cousin, a Holocaust-survivor, who lives in the streets of Jerusalem on selling paintings of the local sights.

> In Apter's stories, people steal from him, spit at him, defraud and insult and humiliate him virtually every day and, more often than not, these people who

> victimize my cousin are survivors of the camps. Are these stories accurate and true? I myself never inquire about their veracity. I think of them instead as fiction that, like so much of fiction, provides the storyteller with the lie through which to expose his unspeakable truth. (48)

Highlighting all these ambiguities regarding truth versus fiction and blurring the line between the two, Roth foregrounds the crucial problem of identity in his novel: the split within Jewish identity in the context of the fight between Palestinian and Jewish people in Israel.

The conflict can be read as the collision of two grand narratives. On the one hand, there are the victims of the Holocaust—and of other, not infrequent periods when Jews, as a minority, were persecuted in Europe as—who rightfully seek for a land where they can feel safe. On the other hand, there are the Palestinian people living in Israel, who take over the position of the minority feeling persecuted as a result of the Zionist movement. The problem of split sympathy and thus of split identity is clearly addressed, among many other texts, in the Nobel Acceptance speech by Eli Wiesel, who in the first passages identifies with the victims of the Holocaust and then cannot resist to voice his sympathy for the Palestinian victims, either.

> This honor belongs to all the survivors and their children and, through us to the Jewish people with whose destiny I have always identified. [...] Human rights are being violated on every continent. More people are oppressed than free. How can one not be sensitive to their plight? Human suffering anywhere concerns men and women everywhere. That applies also to Palestinians to whose plight I am sensitive but whose methods I deplore when they lead to violence. Violence is not the answer. Terrorism is the most dangerous of answers. They are frustrated, that is understandable, something must be done. The refugees and their misery. The children and their fear. The uprooted and their hopelessness. Something must be done about their situation. Both the Jewish people and the Palestinian people have lost too many sons and daughters and have shed too much blood.

Similar concerns are articulated in *Operation Shylock*, self-ironically, by the Mossad agent Smilesburger echoing the phrases of post-colonial criticism.

> What we have done to the Palestinians is wicked. We have displaced them and we have oppressed them. We have expelled them, beaten them, tortured them, and murdered them. The Jewish state, from the day of its inception, has been

> dedicated to eliminating a Palestinian presence in historical Palestine and expropriating a land of an indigenous people. The Palestinians have been driven out, dispersed, and conquered by the Jews. To make a Jewish state we have betrayed our history—we have done unto the Palestinians what the Christians have done to us: systematically transformed them into the despised and subjugated Other, thereby depriving them of their human status. (349)

Obviously, Roth cannot offer a resolution to the dilemma, as it is indicated in the plot by the emphatic and ironic absence of the Mossad operation, in which he allegedly actively participated. But due to the self-ironic structure, both the dilemma and the point where one can no longer avoid the responsibility of taking stands are clearly expressed.

Michael Chabon addresses the same issue of Israeli-Palestinian conflict in his novel, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. The plot takes place an alternative history, in which Jewish refugees of the Holocaust were admitted in the United States and settled down in the Sitka District of Alaska, according to the Slattery Report, a plan that actually existed but was never implemented. The hilarious detective story gives a frosty parody of Israel, with conflicts between Jews and local Native American instead of Palestinian people, and with a protagonist, Detective Landsman just as much at odds with his own identity as the narrator of *Operation Shylock*. However, Chabon's thought experiment ironically leads to the same outcome as actual history: the Jewish community is tolerated by the States only as a temporary settlement, therefore their need to find a permanent homeland does not change, and eventually a local Jewish maffia in Alaska initiates a terrorist attack against Jerusalem, simultaneously parodying Palestinian terrorism and the Jewish invasion of Israel.

The arbitrariness of borders is expressed by the metaphoric character of Zimbalist, the boundary maven, responsible for the Jewish ritual enclosure called eruv, who is also a key participant in the terrorist plot.

> Landsman has put a lot of work into the avoidance of having to understand concepts like that of the eruv, but he knows that it's a typical Jewish ritual dodge, a scam run on God, that controlling motherfucker. It has something to do with pretending that telephone poles are doorposts, and that the wires are lintels. You can tie off an area using poles and strings and call it an eruv, then pretend on the Sabbath that this eruv you've drawn—in case of Zimbalist and his crew, it's pretty much the whole District—is your house." (53)

While Landsman puts “a lot of work into the avoidance” of his Jewish identity, the most decent and devout Jewish character of the novel is, self-ironically, his colleague and best friend, Berko, born to a Native Indian mother by a Jewish father, in other words, not Jewish according to orthodox Judaism. Similarly to Roth’s book, the conclusion of Chabon’s novel offers no general resolution for the community, either. The only optimistic perspective is spared for the individual: Landsman reunites with his ex-wife with the hope that “[a] mere redrawing of borders, a change in governments, those things can never faze a Jewess with a good supply of hand wipes in her bag” (269).

The dark humor of Chabon’s, Roth’s and Heller’s books alike explore the ambiguities of Jewish identity in a world dominated by aggression. The conflicts between individual and community become especially visible when individual sympathy and group loyalty point into opposite directions, as in many scenes of *Operation Shylock*. Although each novel features a Jewish protagonist, the self-ironically expressed uncertainties regarding identity have a greater relevance to the chances and dilemmas of the individual in the precarious field of politics.

4.3 African American and Jewish Identities

The situation of Jewish American and African American people facing similar minority issues with very different historical backgrounds but equally aspiring for social integration in the United States has resulted in complicated relationships between the two communities ranging from solidarity to more or less latent conflicts. For example, E. L. Doctorow ostensibly rounds off his novel, *Ragtime*, with a happy ending.

> One morning Tateh looked out the window of his study and saw the three children sitting on the lawn. Behind them on the sidewalk was a tricycle. They were talking and sunning themselves. His daughter, with dark hair, his tow-headed stepson and his legal responsibility, the schwartze child. He suddenly had an idea for a film. A bunch of children who were pals, white black, fat thin, rich poor, all kinds, mischievous little urchins who would have funny adventures in their own neighborhood, a society of ragamuffins, like all of us, a gang, getting into trouble and getting out again. Actually not one movie but several were made of this vision. (269-270)

The idyllic tableau above is a miniature version of the great social tableau depicted by Doctorow. The three children are descendants of the three families whose intertwined

stories make up the plot taking place in New York City in the first decades of the 20th century. The protagonists are not so much individuals as representatives of social categories, which is indicated by the way they are designated not by names but by the functions they fulfill: there are a WASP Father and a Mother with their young tow-headed son; a poor Jewish immigrant, Tateh—the Yiddish word for father—with his little daughter; and an African American couple, Coalhouse Walker, his lover, Sarah and their baby. The last family might seem an exception, however, Coalhouse Walker's name and fate are closely reminiscent of the literary character, Michael Kohlhaas created by Heinrich von Kleist, whereas Sarah is a house servant, in whose profession it is usual to be called by one's first name, so they are just as much the embodiments of abstract types as the others. In harmony with *Ragtime*'s genre, historical fiction, this set of Everyman-like protagonists is supplemented with a wide range of characters bearing the names and recalling the biographies of actual celebrities of the period.

> [H]istorical-fiction worlds bring together fictional persons with historical counterparts (e.g., Sigmund Freud) and fictional persons without such counterparts (e.g., Coalhouse Walker). The story of *Ragtime* is a blend of events lifted from chronicles of the day (Robert White's murder) with those freely invented by the fiction maker (Coalhouse Walker's "uprising" and occupation of the Morgan Library). (Duležel 94)

Apparently, *Ragtime* represents the society of the United States as a successful melting pot. The three families are united in the end: Tateh marries Mother and makes a career in Hollywood, where they bring up the three children as siblings. At the same time, Doctorow permanently and self-ironically emphasizes that all the reader sees is imaginary: the final idyll turns in the vision of a filmmaker, the novel is full of characters modeled on literary predecessors and types taken from sociological theories, and this context foregrounds that the lives of historical figures as we know them are also always the construction of the creative mind producing fiction. Thus the novel attempts to understand American identities in terms of ethnic origin and history yet simultaneously questions the validity of the available narratives and their implied paradigms, including its own version.

Ragtime fits well into a long tradition of stories by Jewish American authors sensitive to the plight of African American people, from Gertrude Stein's already mentioned *Melanchta* to the texts discussed in this chapter. Doctorow represents Coalhouse Walker as a tragic hero with exceptional talents and morals yet ineluctably victimized by society for ethnic reasons. Similarly, Tillie Olsen's short story, "O Yes"

"portrays the dissolution of a childhood friendship between the black Parialee and the white [...] Carol [... describing] the inevitable pain of girls growing up to face the restrictions of a middle-class culture" (*Oxford Book of Women's Writing* 111). Likewise, Dorothy Parker—"who once called herself 'a little Jewish girl trying to be cute'" (Bunkers 25) but who is on the periphery of the Jewish American canon because she was a mainstream American author yet she hardly ever addressed Jewish themes—firmly rejected any kind of discrimination against African American people, too. For instance, one of her short stories, "Arrangement in Black and White" gives a sharp satire of racist discourse. The protagonist, a WASP upper middle class lady arrives to a party organized in honor of an African American singer and she is eager to be introduced to him. Although the story is supposed to represent her conversations first with the host and then with the celebrated guest, the text consists almost entirely of her monologue, which ironically illustrates the very racist rhetoric the speaker allegedly argues against.

> "Well, I think you're simply marvelous, giving this perfectly marvelous party for him, and having him meet all these white people, and all. Isn't he terribly grateful? [...] I don't see why on earth it isn't perfectly all right to meet colored people. I haven't any feeling at all about it—not a single bit." (19)
>
> "Come on, let's us go on over and talk to him. Listen, what shall I do when I'm introduced? Ought I to shake hands? Or what? [...] I wouldn't for the world have him think I had any feeling. I think I'd better shake hands, just the way I would with anybody else. " (21)

Employing irony, Parker clearly makes her point of standing out against African American people's segregation. However, the Jewish position in the twentieth century debate over minority rights in the American society implies ambiguities, too, as explored in Cynthia Ozick's essay "Literary Blacks and Jews". On the one hand, she writes that "Jews have always known hard times, and are therefore are naturally sympathetic to others who are having or once had, hard times" (93). On the other hand, she admits that in an "America felt simultaneously as Jewish Eden and black inferno" (95) the "[b]lack distrust of this heritage of Jewish sympathy is obviously a social predicament" (94). Her argumentation is based upon the analysis of two relevant narratives by Bernard Malamud: the short story, "Angel Levine" and the novel, *The Tenants*, and she reads Malamud turning more pessimistic in the meantime as reflected by "the redemptiveness of 'Angel Levine' and the murderous conclusion of *The Tenants*" (94).

The central issue of "Angel Levine" is identity. The first description of the protagonist, Manischevitz, an aging Jewish tailor, represents him reading his newspaper, focusing on the moment when "he realized, with some astonishment, that he was expecting to discover something about himself" (Malamud, *Complete Stories* 158). Then the title character arrives, and their first conversation is again preoccupied with the theme of identity. To Manischevitz's question, "Who are you?" (159), the unexpected visitor, a young African American man gives a humorously circuitous answer foregrounding the uncertainties regarding identity: "If I may, insofar as one is able to, identify myself, I bear the name of Alexander Levine" (159). Accordingly, the recognition of identity is at the stake of the whole story as Levine promises help only if the tailor acknowledges that his visitor is an angel. The uncertainties of identity derive from the double paradigms simultaneously defining the logic of the narrative. On the one hand, "Angel Levine" was written in 1955, the year of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which brought civil rights in the foreground of public interest in the United States. In that sense, the optimistic conclusion of "Angel Levine" celebrates the characters overcoming racial segregation. On the other hand, the short story is a paraphrase of Job's parable and the two contexts permanently counterpoint and each other.

Manischevitz is introduced as a modern Job, who "in his fifty-first year suffered many reverses and indignities" (157). He lost all his money due to a fire in his workshop; his son was killed in war; his daughter eloped with a lout; he is so sick he can hardly work and his wife is dying. When the young African American man enters Manischevitz's flat and claims to have brought him salvation, the situation is ironic in many respects. First of all, Manischevitz feels he is the victim of some transcendental irony. "The tailor could not rid himself of the feeling that he was the butt of a jokester. Is this what a Jewish angle looks like?" (160). "What sort of mockery was it—provided that Levine was an angel—of a faithful servant who had from childhood lived in the synagogues, concerned with the word of God?" (159). It is also provocatively humorous how the supernatural and the ethnically different are rank by the old man as equally inconceivable. "A black Jew and angel to boot—very hard to believe" (161).

The humor lying in the disparity of the two contexts—the religious plot and the reality of New York in the mid-fifties where it takes place—develops further during the succeeding visits paid by the tailor to Harlem as in his final despair Manischevitz tries to find the first rejected Levine. On his trip, he peers into a synagogue where a small group of African American men are studying the Torah.

> "Neshoma," said bubble eyes, pointing to the word with a stubby finger. "Now what dat mean?"
>
> "That's the word that means soul," said the boy. He wore eyeglases.
>
> "Let's git on wid de commentary," said the old man.
>
> "Ain't necessary," said the humpback. "Souls is immaterial substance. That's all. The soul is derived in that manner. The immateriality is derived from the substance, and they both, causally an otherwise, derived from the soul. There can be no higher."
>
> "That's the highest."
>
> "Over the top."
>
> "Wait a minute," said bubble eyes. "I don't see what is dat immatierial substance. How come de one gits hithced up to de odder?'" (163-164).

The community is a parody of a congregation not only because of their ethnicity unusual from the tailor's point of view but also because each of the participants is designated by some physical defect or premature or too advanced age. Especially telling are the boy's eyeglasses symbolizing that one cannot directly read the soul—the theme of the discussion—but always sees it through some distorting media: the body or the text. The contrast of the erudite debate and the slang conveying the ideas also humorously illustrates the distance between spirit and substance, thought and reality, God and human beings. The scene can be read as a symbol of heaven, especially if compared to the following site, a bar, where the tailor eventually encounters Alexander Levine. The place, Bella's Bar is reminiscent of hell with its red and black colors and its teeming, drunken, noisy crowd. Levine is sitting at a table drinking whisky and playing cards—the devil's bible—then he takes a dance with the owner, Bella, dressed in a frivolous purple gown. Thus Levine with his underworld features and his role of testing Manischevitz's faith corresponds to the character of Satan in Job's story. However, the tailor also tests the angel. "Carrying the jest further" (159), he asks his guest to "say the blessing for the bread [... and] Levine recited it in sonorous Hebrew" (160). Besides, the offensive racist remarks of both sides are ironically played out against each other. "Should he say he believed a half-drunk Negro was an angel?" (165), asks Manischevitz himself, whereas the local people at Bella's bar shout at him: "Exit, Yankel, Semitic trash" (165). So in spite of the happy ending, "Angel Levine" implies just as many conflicts as *The Tenants*.

However, I agree with Cynthia Ozick that these tensions are more explicit in *The Tenants*. It is an allegorical novel on two young writers, the only people living in a huge

house doomed to be demolished and replaced by a new construction soon. Lesser, the professional Jewish writer is a regular tenant just about to finish his third novel whereas his colleague, whereas Willie is writing his first book and settles down illegally in one of the empty apartments seeking seclusion for his work. Their complicated relationship consisting of friendship as well as rivalry both in the field of literature and in love finally turns into a desperate fight ending with two protagonists tearing each other into pieces in a scene which can be read both as a piece of fiction written by either of the fictive authors or as reality experienced as a nightmare.

Although *The Tenants* is not a humorous narrative but an overtly tragic vision on the failing dialogue between two minorities in a society ripe for total reconstruction, yet it includes a scene illustrating the redemptive power of humor. When Lesser is threatened by some of Willie's African American friends he is saved by Willie suggesting that he and Lesser should play the dozens, a traditional game of exchanging insults between the participants (Malamud, *The Tenants* 121). Ironically, their most openly offensive dialogue serves not only as an opportunity of relief for the whole community but also as a gesture solidifying the two men's friendship. This solidarity is expressed in the penultimate passage of the novel, too: "Each, thought the writer, feels the anguish of the other" (230). The context leaves it deliberately suspended whether the sentence is thought or written by one writer or the other, an ambiguity that might be interpreted as a moment of harmony amidst their shared agony. However, the novel is concluded by neither of them but by their Jewish landlord, Levenspiel, who pleads for mercy. As the owner of the property, he embodies the financial and social power Willie fiercely argues against all through the novel. Thus Levenspiel having the last word self-ironically questions the hope of sympathy and cooperation between the two tenants, which Lesser tried to advocate for all through the book and which its conclusion also tries to suggest.

Besides these two narratives, Emily Miller Budick also reads "The Jewbird", another short story by Malamud as a parable on the shared fate of Jewish and African American people.

> Although most critics do not include "The Jewbird" among Malamud's contemplations of black Americans, the fact that the Jewbird is a blackbird, named Schwartz, seems to me to make this link inevitable (*schwartzer* is the Yiddish word Jewish Americans use to refer, usually condescendingly, to blacks). (Budick, *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* 14)

In the story of black humor, the imaginary "jewbird"—an amicable parody of the eternal outcast—finally falls victim to the hatred of a man, Mr. Cohen, whose family gives lodging and food to the homeless, speaking bird. Although Mr. Schwartz makes himself useful by tutoring the son, he is finally driven out by the father into the winter cold where he dies.

> In the spring when the winter's snow had melted, the boy, moved by a memory, wandered in the neighborhood, looking for Schwartz. He found a dead black bird in a small lot by the river, his two wings broken, neck twisted, and both bird-eyes plucked clean.
>
> "Who did it to you, Mr. Schwartz?" Maurie wept.
>
> "Anti-Semeets," Edie said later. (Malamud, *Complete Stories* 330).

The bitter self-irony, with which Malamud represents a Jewish man, Mr. Cohen as the archetype of anti-Semitism and the victim in the form of an animal, directs the reader's attention to the fact that any kind of discrimination is substantially the same.

Saul Bellow performs a very similarly self-ironic gesture at the end of his novel, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. He outlines a great and colorful tableau of middle class New York City in the 1960s seen from title character's point of view. Sammler is an aging Holocaust survivor surrounded by diverse characters representing various lifestyles. Since most of them are related to his family, the whole narrative is dominated by an intense awareness of the Holocaust and its victims. Still, in the end it is an African American pickpocket who is almost beaten to death by a bag full of small metal sculptures and trinkets with Jewish symbols made by Sammler's former son-in-law, an Israeli artist (Bellow, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* 290-291). On the one hand, the pickpocket is a negative character haunting the whole novel, repeatedly threatening Sammler and initiating violence in the final situation, too, so his being killed could be considered more or less righteous. On the other hand, the fight represented with ethnic characters allows Bellow to point beyond the framework of the usual ethnic paradigms and give voice to an ultimate despair over aggression as a definitive force in history and in contemporary American society as well.

Philip Roth explores the parallels between Jewish American and African American identities in his novel, *The Human Stain*. The first person singular narrator, Nathan Zuckerman—an alterego of Roth in many of his novels—tells the biography of his friend, Coleman Silk. As Elaine B. Safer writes, Roth

> satirizes, ridicules, and tragically deplores an aspect of the political scene of post-World War II society; here it is the intolerance of the right minded, the

> illiberalism of the liberals, and the fanaticism of the conservatives. The range of humor in *The Human Stain* constantly shifts from the grim tone of black humor to farce. Roth often makes us aware that we live in a world of black humor. (117)

The black humor indicated by Safer results from the juxtaposition of various discourses on identity permanently and ironically played out against each other.

The protagonist, Coleman Silk is in the focal point of changing paradigms concerning identity in the United States during the twentieth century. Born in the late 1920s in an African American family, Silk rejects a life determined by his ethnic origin. Making use of his atypical outlook and encouraged by his trainer, he enrolls in the army claiming to be Jewish in order to avoid the segregation his parents suffered from. Breaking up with his family, establishing his career as a professor of ancient Greek literature at Athena College and marrying a Jewish woman, Silk lives a long and successful life with his fictive identity until the ironic turn when he is forced to resign because he is accused of racism by two African American students misunderstanding a word of his, citing it out of context. While the oppressive ethnic policy of the first half of the century is clearly rejected by the narrator, the liberal hypersensitivity regarding ethnic issues and politically correct language use is depicted as equally ridiculous and off the point, since both paradigms foreground the ethnic aspect of identity at the expense of the individual.

However, Silk's complete refusal to think in terms of ethnic identity does not offer a solution, either. He not only loses contact with his mother and his siblings but his lies spoil his relationship with his son, Mark, too. Mark turns orthodox Jewish seeking the tradition he did not get from the family and when his father blames him for his professional failures and the lack of trust between themselves Coleman Silk's argumentation recalling Mark's childhood and his own devoted participation in his upbringing ironically speaks against itself.

> All the stuff we did and then to come back at me with this mentality? After all the schooling and all the books and all the words and all the superior SAT scores, it is insupportable. After all the taking them seriously. When they said something foolish, engaging it seriously. [...] Answering your questions. Your every questions. Never turning one aside. You ask about your grandparents, you ask who they were and I told you. They died." (174-175)

On the one hand, Coleman truly behaves as a responsible father providing his children and family with all the care and support they might wish for. On the other hand, Mark's

suspicion about the fictitious paternal Jewish grandparents dying during the World War II is more than justified even though he never gains any direct proof of that. Thus Coleman Silk's character goes along all the three possible paths regarding the relationship of individual and community proving each of them to be a dead-end street: the oppressive conservative value system, in which the individual's identity is predetermined by his ethnic origin; the liberal views of the 1990s, with their often aggressive demands for equality and their exaggerated sensitivity concerning ethnic categories; and Silk's own attempt at trying to step out all of these discourses each proves to be a failure in Roth's parody.

Not only Jewish American and African American identities are contemplated in light of each other. *The Human Stain* is a carefully balanced structure of double or triple versions of similar themes, situations and characters functioning as ironic counterpoints. Coleman Silk's lifelong struggle with ethnic identity is set in parallel with his relatively young lover's, Faunia Farley's life story including typically female types of predicaments from childhood abuse through divorcing a violent husband to her financially defenseless situation due to her lack of education In a tragicomic outbreak, she compares her immeasurable personal losses to those of Silk's: "it's not a big deal. Two kids suffocating and dying, that's a big deal. Having your stepfather put his fingers up your cunt, that's a big deal. Losing your job as you're about to retire isn't a big deal" (234). Besides, Silk's main plotline focusing on the parallel fates of Jewish and African people in the United States is supplemented by a subsidiary plotline on Faunia's former husband, Les Farley, a Vietnam veteran suffering from PTSD syndrome and trying to reintegrate into society. The sadly burlesque scene of his first visit to a Chinese restaurant initiated by other veterans so that Les can relearn to live among Asian Americans, is a classic example for the black humor prevailing in *The Human Stain*.

> And the horror—a deranging horror against which there was no protection—of the smiling gook handing him a menu. The outright grotesquerie of the gook pouring him a glass of water.
>
> [...]
>
> "Fuckin' waiter," Les said.
>
> "He's not a waiter, Les. His name is Henry. He's the owner." (217)

Les Farley keeps thinking in terms he learnt in Vietnam, calling the Chinese waiter a "gook"—using the derogatory word from the time of the Korean War—and interpreting his approach as an attack. His friends, on the other hand, keep reminding him that these categories are not valid any longer: the people around them are Chinese and not

Vietnamese, moreover, they are all American, the place is an innocent restaurant and not a battlefield, and, above all, the person serving at their table is not just one of a crowd of faceless enemies but an individual with a proper name, Henry. Representing the two mutually exclusive discourses simultaneously, Roth raises the awareness that what one is inclined to consider as reality—an everyday lunch with friends, for example, or the way one thinks about fellow citizens—is already predetermined by implied discourses that are to be questioned whenever they become a threat for the individual or the community.

The self-ironic juxtaposition of these similarly organized passion stories, each with a very different content but showing remarkable similarities, enables Roth to pose adequate questions without pretending to offer general answers. On the contrary, he seems to evoke and parody many dominant political, social, literary and scientific discourses of the twentieth century—slogans of the Anarchists, the Civil Rights Movement and Feminism, ideas of New Humanism, Holocaust literature and the Yale deconstructionists etc.—not so much in order to call attention to the unsatisfying nature of any of them but rather to emphasize the individual's responsibility in applying them to particular situations. On the one hand, each character is represented as the victim of his or her personal narrative. Even Delphine Roux, the daughter of a wealthy and prestigious French family, an attractive young woman advancing fast in the academic ranks conceives of herself as a person trying to flee an overdominant mother and thus falling victim to her first-generation immigrant status doomed to remain hopelessly single. Yet in the world of the novel, where everybody feels to be a victim, the very same characters also appear as the victimizers themselves, if seen from another character's point of view standing for a different discourse: be it Silk betraying his family, Roux persecuting Silk, Les Farley harassing Faunia, or Faunia neglecting her children. While each of the characters uses the available discourses as exemptions from the major crimes and petty failures they have committed, it becomes clearer with each ironic turn of the plot that each of these paradigms can offer only partial explanation and none of them can absolve anyone from individual liability.

In the self-ironic narratives discussed above, Jewish American authors represent African American characters simultaneously as both the rival and the fellow victim. Exploring the parallel motives in their fates with the techniques of humorous juxtaposition and ironic revision in alternating contexts, these stories can reveal the limits of the available discourses on ethnic issues while they also employ the reconciliatory power of humor.

4.4 Female Points of View

"Sometimes I feel I have seen too long from too many disconnected angles: white, Jewish, anti-Semite, racist, anti-racist, once-married, lesbian, middle-class, feminist, exmatriate southerner, *split at the root*—that I will never bring them whole" (238), writes Adrienne Rich in "Split at the Root". According to its subtitle, her text is "An Essay on Jewish Identity" (224) yet it also addresses other essential aspects and complicated issues of the author's identity, which derive from her multiply ambiguous position. Born to a Jewish father and a gentile mother from the south, then married into a traditional Jewish family and bearing three children for her husband whom she later left after her coming out as a lesbian, Rich finally feels compelled to come to terms with what she calls "my own ambivalence as a Jew; the daily, mundane anti-Semitisms of my entire life" (224).

> My mother is a gentile. In Jewish law I cannot count myself a Jew. If it is true that "we think back through our mothers if we are women" (Virginia Woolf)—and I myself have affirmed this—then even according to lesbian theory, I cannot (or need not?) count myself a Jew. (225)
>
> If I call myself a Jewish lesbian, do I thereby try to shed some of my southern gentile white woman's culpability? If I call myself only through my mother, is it because I pass more easily through a world where being a lesbian often seems like outsiderhood enough? According to Nazi logic, my two Jewish grandparents would have made me a *Mischling, first-degree*—nonexempt for the Final Solution. (226)
>
> I had three sons before I was thirty, and during those years I often felt that to be a Jewish woman, a Jewish mother, was to be perceived in the Jewish family as an entirely physical being, a producer and nourisher of children. [...] I felt [...] unable to sort out what was Jewish from what was simply motherhood or female destiny. (I lived in Cambridge, not Brooklyn; but there, too, restless educated women sat on benches with baby strollers, half-stunned, not by Jewish cultural expectations, but by the middle-class American social expectations of the 1950s). (235)

As it can be seen from the quotations above, Rich rejects the idea of individual identity conceived as an item belonging to an easily labeled category. She rather juxtaposes several disparate paradigms: Judaism seen from within and as part of the Nazi rhetoric as well as various trends of feminism. Similarly to many other female Jewish American writers, she

claims not only for the recognition but also for the revision of these, often controversial discourses on identity.

But the comparative contemplation of the available, diverse paradigms requires time for self-reflection. Tillie Olsen addresses this need and the first steps towards a self-conscious identity in many of her works, from "*Tell Me a Riddle* (1961), a collection of four short stories [...] a classic of working-class literature" (Gelfant 89) to her "feminist classic, *Silences*" (Berke 185). The latter starts with a confessional essay on various types of silences in an writer's life: "*natural* silences [... the] necessary time for renewal" (6), "*hidden* silences; work aborted, deferred, denied" (8), "[c]ensorship silences" (9), "prevalent silence [...] the absence of creativity where it once had been" (9) and "foreground silences, *before* the achievement" (10). Olsen concludes that the meagre proportion of female writers in the literary world is due to their hidden silences and prolonged foreground silences.

> Where the gifted among women (*and men*) have remained mute, or have never attained full capacity, it is because of circumstances, inner or outer, which oppose the needs of creation. Wholly surrendered and dedicated lives; time as needed for the work; totality of self. But women are traditionally trained to place others' needs first, to feel these needs as their own [...] their sphere, their satisfaction to be in making it possible for others to use their abilities. (17)

In harmony with Olsen's ideas outlined above, silence is also at the center of the novella, "Tell Me a Riddle", which bears the same title as the book it was first published in. Self-irony in this story is aimed not so much at the ambiguity but rather at the absence of identity, at least in case of the female protagonist. The narrative tells about the final years of a quarrelsome, elderly Jewish couple. The source of their permanent conflict is their different visions regarding their years after retirement. The husband would like to sell their house, which was big enough to raise five children and is therefore too big for the two of them so he wants to move to a retirement community called Union Haven where he would be relieved of the difficulties of house maintenance, "the troubling of responsibility, the fretting with money" (689) and could enjoy "[h]appy communal life" (689). However, these pleasures seem inaccessible for his wife, "an entirely physical being, a producer and nourisher of children" (Rich 235) "traditionally trained to place others' needs first" (Olsen, *Silences* 17). As she explains to her daughter, Vivi: "'For him it is good. Not for me. I can no longer live between people.' 'You lived all your life for people', Vivi cried. 'Not with.'" (695). Therefore the old woman prefers the solitude of her home after all the

decades spent in service of her family, oppressed by “the perverse logic of exhausted house-wifery” (691), and her only wish is “[n]ever again to be forced to the rhythm of others” (691). Ironically, their constant debate is not represented as a heated dialogue but as the fight of silences. Whenever the old man argued for his point, “she turned off her ear button, so she would not have to hear” (690) and when the wife started a monologue on her point of view, “it was he who turned on the television loud so he need not to hear” (691). The difference in the ways they avoid each other is also telling: the wife tries to flee into her silent, inner self, whereas the husband seeks refuge in TV broadcasts imitating community life.

The couple are completely defined by their marriage. They are introduced as such in the opening sentence: “For forty-seven years they had been married” (689). The reader does not even learn their names until the final pages, since they are only referred to by the roles they fulfill in their family, as Ma and Dad almost all through the story. Besides, the husband keeps calling his wife various improvised mock names: “Mrs. Enlightened! Mrs. Cultured!” (692), “Mrs. Take-It-Easy” (693), “Mrs. Live Alone and Like It” (694) or “Mrs. Miserable” (711). His irony works as it has an appreciative audience in the family and among his friends. In contrast, humor is not an available option for the wife. When her grandson asks her: “Tell me a riddle, Grammy” (700) she is compelled to answer: “I know no riddles, child” (700). The symbolical significance of the short dialogue is confirmed by raising it into the title. It not only highlights the grandmother’s lack of verbal skills but also the fact that riddles belong to the realm of carefree communication conveyed just for its sheer pleasure, a luxury she has never had time for. Moreover, knowing a riddle would involve knowing the punchline, the solution, and she is preoccupied with the painful absence of such answers concerning her own life. In other words, she cannot tell a riddle because she is herself the riddle unable to articulate herself. Accordingly, her name, Eva—the archetypal name for the eternal feminine and the first female ancestor—is first pronounced by her husband only on her deathbed, as if he recognized her existence only in the moment of losing her. In return, she also says his name, David, only towards the end. However, this gesture is burdened with heavy, nonverbal irony as it is immediately succeeded by Eva—who is suffering from fatal cancer—starting to vomit. The ambiguity of the wife’s calling for the husband to help, along with her simultaneous efforts to get rid of him and their undigested common past—a theme that explicitly predominates the whole deathbed section as well as being metonymically symbolized by the act of vomiting—clearly expresses the controversial relationship of the couple: the deep intimacy as well as

the irresolvable discord between them. In that sense, it is in parallel with another scene at the beginning of the story, when the husband leaves after a fierce fight.

> She was not in their bed when he came back. She lay on the cot on the sun porch. All week she did not speak or come near him; nor did he try to make peace or care for her. He slept badly, so used to her next to him. After all the years, old harmonies and dependencies deep in their bodies; she curled to him, or he coiled to her, each warmed, warming, turning as the other turned, the nights a long embrace. (694-695)

Tradition is a central theme in the story. Ostensibly, Eva rejects it both in the personal and the religious sense of the word. When she is offered to be visited by a rabbi in the hospital, she refuses to talk to him. She asks her family to fill in the form on her data writing "Born, human, Religion, none" (697). Later, as the couple visit one of their daughters, Hannah, who married a religious Jewish man, and she respectfully asks her mother to light the Sabbath candles for the sake of the children so that "[f]rom the past they should have tradition" (697), Eva rejects the request, being reluctant to "look back on the dark centuries [...c]andles bought instead of bread" (698). On the other hand, she is an ardent reader of Russian and Yiddish authors like Chekhov and Peretz (690). Similarly, staying at the house of another daughter, Vivi, Eva is unable to hold her newborn grandchild since she feels to have an unsurmountable distance between herself and "Vivi in the maze of the long, the lovely drunkenness" (701) of mothering. In contrast, she develops an intense relationship with her adult granddaughter, Jeannie, appreciating not only her efforts as a professional visiting nurse to take care of her grandmother but also her ambitions as a visual artist. For example, Eva is deeply interested in a piece of Mexican folk art, "Pan del Muerto, the Bread of the Dead" (707) prepared by one of Jeannie's patients and the two of them agree on its importance. Self-ironically, Eva seems to acknowledge tradition only via a tradition different from her own. Apparently, it is not so much heritage what she rejects but rather the transmission of unreflective automatisms from one generation to the other. She asks: "Heritage? But when did I have time to teach? Of Hannah I asked only hands to help" (698), and she concludes in her long, fragmented, delirious stream of consciousness monologue: "[a]ll that happens one must try to understand" (709), "[a]n unexamined life not worth" (711). In harmony with Eva's views, reconciliation is also achieved through reflection at the end of the story. Jeannie draws a sketch of their grandparents holding hands and David, shocked by Eva's agony, seems to rediscover and reproduce their deeply buried intimacy due to this representation: "as if he

had been instructed he went to his bed, lay down, holding the sketch as if it could shield against the monstrous shapes of loss, of betrayal, of death—and with his free hand took hers back into his. So Jeannie found them in the morning" (714).

Similarly to Tillie Olsen, Grace Paley also emphasizes the importance of succeeding generations in recognizing one's identity and revising priorities in "Faith in a Tree", one of Paley's stories on the protagonist, Faith Darwin. Her name implies the dilemma of religious versus materialist ideologies, however, the title of the narrative humorously insinuates that the belief in scientific interpretations of the world is also a question of conviction. The mutually mocking combination of the two approaches—an exceptionally clear example of bisociation—provides the humor of the description at the beginning of the story. "One God, who was King of the Jews, who unravels the stars to this day with little hydrogen explosions, He can look down from His Holy Headquarters and see us all" (175). The first person singular narrator introduces herself and her surroundings in the same playful tone, self-ironically imitating patriarchal religious and business rhetoric: "me, the creation of His soft second thought, I am sitting on the twelve-foot-high, strong, long arm of a sycamore, my feet swinging, and I can only see Kitty, a co-worker in the mother trade—a topnotch craftsman" (175-176). Thus Faith both describes her social situation and voices her uneasy feelings caused by her status of a full-time mother. She flees from it upwards, both in the spatial and spiritual senses of the word. Perching in a tree, she takes the archetypal position of the ironist, mapping her urban, multicultural environment and outlining sketches or rather caricatures of the people below. However, her irony is not completely fulfilled as it lacks audience: her humor can be enjoyed only by the reader and not by any of the characters, with whom she keeps chatting but her attempts at intellectual interpretation and her humor are restricted to her solitary, written monologue. The turn comes when a protest march against the war in Vietnam enters the park. Faith and her colleague mothers converse about it in the same casual tone as they have talked about the everyday issues of their lives but Faith's son copies one of the sharply ironic slogans on the pavement. "In a fury of tears and disgust, he wrote on the near blacktop in pink flamingo chalk [...] "WOULD YOU BURN A CHILD? and under it, a little taller, the red reply, WHEN NECESSARY. And I think that is exactly when events turned me around" (194). Shocked by her son's response, Faith descends from the seclusion of her private and intellectual life and joins the community.

> Her identity is no longer portrayed in terms of opposing choices—between Jew or American, between domesticated wife of lonely single mother, between

dedicated mother or career activist. No longer interested in seeking such a mutually exclusive definition of herself, Faith finds satisfaction within the parameters of each of these designations. (Mandel 92)

In contrast to Olsen or Paley, Erica Jong's concentrates not on the social but rather on the sexual aspect of feminism. The issues raised by her debut novel, *Fear of Flying*, are succinctly summarized in the introduction to the samples from her oeuvre in the anthology *Redressing the Balance: American Women's Literary Humor from Colonial Times to the 1980s*.

> Of all the popular feminist novels that were published in the 1970s, Erica Jong's semiautobiographical *Fear of Flying* (1973) was not only the most financially successful but also the most sensational. Reviewed extensively by both male and female critics in popular and academic publications, *Fear of Flying* evoked both praise and damnation for its sexual frankness and raunchy language. Like other "consciousness-raising" novels emerging from the women's movement, *Fear of Flying* deals with female ambivalence about love versus career and the need for security versus the desire for independence, as well as with the conflict between male definitions of women's nature and roles and women's experiences of themselves and the world. However, Jong's work is unique in her use of often rollicking humor to expose the discrepancies between accepted notions of female and male sexuality and between her heroine, Isadora Wing's sexual fantasies and the reality of her experiences. (386)

Some other critics like Sabine Sielke also interpret the irony, self-irony and humor of the novel in terms of feminism.

> Susan Robi Suleiman is one of the few critics who recognize the self-irony and mocking tone in which *Fear of Flying* is soaked. Jong's book, she claims has an "ironic awareness of [its] own unconventionality," of the "flaunting use of obscenities in a novel signed by a woman and published by a major press." Suleiman reads Jong's use of obscene language as a "self-conscious reversal of stereotypes, and in some sense a parody of the tough-guy narrator heroes of Henry Miller and Norman Mailer," calls her "reversal of roles *and* of language" a usurpation of "both the pornographer's language and his way of looking at the opposite sex" (9). [...] *Fear of Flying* [...] turns out to be a case of mimicry, woman's interim strategy of miming, parodying, paraphrasing, and

> quoting male discourse while herself remaining “elsewhere.” Puzzling over the question “What do you women want?” writes Jong, Freud “never came up with much” (24). Neither does Isadora Wing.” (Sielke 170)

Erica Jong herself sees Isadora Wing, the protagonist-narrator of *Fear of Flying* similarly in her retrospection, *Fear of Fifty: A Midlife Memoir*.

> Her self-mockery and her humor became her survival tool, because only through irony can you say X and mean Y. I think Isadora touched women of my generation because so many of us are similarly split. We are our mothers, but we are also women of the future. We earn our own livings, support our own children, fight for our careers in a world that still does not give us economic equality with men, but that dark undertow is pulling us back to our mothers, making us feel guilty even for the crumbs of autonomy we achieve.

All these opinions emphasize self-irony and humor as the means of voicing dilemmas arising from the Isadora’s position as a female character trying to find and express her identity in a world dominated by male discourses, adding that irony is the means of overcoming these discourses by provocatively parodying and thus destabilizing them. However, Jewish heritage is present in the novel, too, and it also becomes an essential source of self-irony both as patriarchal tradition and as a minority culture in itself. Isadora’s mother is preoccupied with her children’s marriages like the stereotypical Jewish mother depicted in Melvin J. Friedman’s essay, “Jewish Mothers and Sons: The Expense of *Chutzpah*”, in which he claims that “[t]here is no such thing as a ‘famous’ or ‘successful’ Jewish mother (she is usually too busy making her son ‘famous’ and ‘successful’ to have any time left for herself” (161). Isadora’s mother gives an advice to her daughter in the same spirit. “‘Women cannot possibly do both,’ she said ‘you’ve got to choose. Either be an artist or have children’” (Jong, *Fear of Flying* 56). Isadora speaks about her sister’s Chloe’s marriage in the same mocking tone characteristic of the whole novel: “Chloe, of course, married a Jew. Not a domestic Jew, but an import. (Nobody in the family would stoop to marrying the boy next door.)” (60), adding the self-ironically verbatim quoted criticism on her position without a family of her own in Yiddish “[so] I was the only sister *ohne kinder*” (61). Chloe’s views ironically recur in the attitude of Isadora’s Chinese husband, Bennett. “‘Better find a nice Chinese girl,’ I said. It wasn’t racism, just my skittishness about marriage. [...] ‘I don’t want a nice Chinese girl,” Bennett said. ‘I want you.’ (It turned out Bennett had never taken out a Chinese girl in his whole life—much less screwed one. He was all hung up on Jewish girls” (47-48). So marriage is

represented both as an escape for Isadora from a patriarchal Jewish subculture and as a similar opportunity for Bennett trying to flee his own minority culture. The ironic tone of the novel thus expresses the individual's need to revise norms encoded not only in patriarchal society but in ethnic cultural traditions, too.

The individual is brought into the foreground as soon as the opening sentence of the novel, since the setting for Isadora's quest for herself starts with a journey to Europe, to a conference on psychoanalysis organized in Vienna. "There were 117 psychoanalysts on the Pan Am flight to Vienna and I'd been treated by at least six of them. And married a seventh" (5). On the one hand, Freudian doctrines, especially the sexual liberation of the self from oppressive conventions have a great impact on Isadora's rhetoric. On the other hand, a treatment that has already proved to be inefficient six times does not sound very assuring to start with, and the self-reflexivity encouraged by Freud seems to lead to destabilizing self-irony instead of answers in Isadora's initial description of psychoanalysis.

> "The Jewish science," as anti-Semites call it. Turn every question upside down and shove it up the asker's ass. Analysts all seem to be Talmudists who flunked out of seminary in the first year. I was reminded of one of my grandfather's favorite gags: Q: "Why does a Jew always answer a question with a question?" A: "And why should a Jew *not* answer a question with a question?" (10)

Isadora tries to break free from family constraints according to the Freudian recipe: by courageously facing her sexual fantasies on the "zipless fuck"—a sexual adventure without commitment—and by actually getting involved in a love affair. However, psychoanalysis, established by a man, self-ironically reminds her of the Jewish heritage communicated to her by another man, her grandfather. At the same time, the relationship between Talmudic and Freudian self-reflection is an observation ironically quoted from "anti-Semites", so even her restraints cannot be read without restraints.

The penultimate scene of the novel is the dramatically self-ironic realization of Isadora's fantasies. She is travelling on a train, and the conductor tries to seduce or rape her. Isadora is shocked and manages to run away, yet a few minutes later she realizes that her idea of a true, instinctive inner self has been just one among the numerous other untrustworthy beliefs.

> [I]t downed on me how funny that episode had been. My zipless fuck! My stranger on a train! Here I'd been offered my very own fantasy. The fantasy

> that had riveted me to the vibrating seat of the train for three years in Heidelberg and instead of turning me on, it had revolted me! (417)

The same gesture of overwhelming, ultimate self-irony seems to predominate in Cynthia Ozick's novel, too. Ambiguity already appears at the level of the title. The working title of the book was *Lights and Watchtowers*, borrowed from the medieval Jewish scholar, Al-Kirkisani, who wrote a book under the same title (Ozick, "Interview"), and whose teachings provide an essential basis for the novel both thematically and theoretically. Sounding too didactic, however, this title was eventually discarded by Ozick. The American edition of her book in 2004 was published as *Heir to the Glimmering World*, and a year later the British version came out as *The Bear Boy*. This latter phrase is a metaphoric nickname of a character modeled after Christopher Robin Milne, whose obituary first triggered Ozick's novel. She read about his troubled relationship with his father and started thinking about the complications deriving from a situation of a flesh-and-blood person getting too much entangled with his fictive doppelgänger. As she says in an interview made by Robert Birnbaum, "I began to think, 'What happens to a human being if he isn't allowed to become a man? What happens to a little boy who is so embellished and over-interpreted and made into a fable and legend and who the whole world worships as that the idea of a little boy?' So that was the origin of it". As a tribute, the first page of the novel represents the most widely known photo of Alan Alexander Milne and his son holding the teddy bear who inspired Winnie-the-Pooh.

The problem of interpretations is at the center of the whole book. It is brought in the focus as early as in one of the two mottos taken from Frank Kermode's essay "The Man in the Macintosh": "Yet the world is full of interpreters ... So the question arises, why would we rather interpret than not?" (Ozick, *Heir* 3). Interpretation is also the theme of Al-Kirkisani's above mentioned religious treatise, the *Book of Lights and Watchtowers*, a philosophical and theological code based on the Talmud. Its author was a leader of Karaism, an obscure Jewish movement flourishing at the end of the first millennium. Karaism is important in Ozick's novel not only as one of her major character's research field playing pivotal role in the plot—a shared interest in Karaism brings together some of the characters—but also as the source of many substantial philosophical questions. The Karaites opposed the Rabbanites because the Karaite movement accepted only the Tanach (the Old Testament in Christian terms) as the words of God but rejected the Halacha (the collection of rabbinical laws based on the interpretations of Tanach) as fake, human fabrications. Al-Kirkisani's title, however, emphasizes not only pure ideas, "Lights" but

human viewpoints, “Watchtowers”, too. Ozick’s gesture of replacing the concept of clear guiding lights and stabile viewpoints by the metaphor of uncertain “glimmering”, expresses doubts concerning both paradigms and subjects.

The central subject in Ozick’s novel is a young girl, called Rose Meadows. She is the first person singular narrator of most of the text. Her narrative follows a neat chronological order and is mostly restricted to her simultaneous knowledge, only rarely supplemented by an impersonal voice providing retrospective information on preliminary circumstances or on events happening in her absence and other details rounding off or explaining the life stories and personalities of certain characters. This unnamed third person singular narrator can very well be Rose at an older age, for the story is recorded decades later than the plot took place, and she might have learnt a lot more about the actions, the characters and their opinions in the meantime. The long period between action and writing is clearly indicated by sentences like the following. “Only many decades later would I come to agree with Ninel about the useless delusions of literature” (Ozick, *Heir* 58). The primary plot starts in 1935 and covers roughly two years. The novel is spatially condensed as well: most of the actions take place in a house in the Bronx which serves as a meeting point for diverse people and their fates. In this extremely limited time and space, Ozick gives a comprehensive tableau of the era, which she achieves by characters with detailed preliminary biographies turning them into representatives of certain social and cultural segments of their age.

The novel consists of three intertwined family stories. The families not only come from different social backgrounds but they are also associated with different cultural paradigms and literary traditions. Moreover, each group is also divided both practically and spiritually. Rose Meadows is an eighteen-year-old orphan, who lives for a while with a distant relative called Bertram. They are everyday American citizens living in small towns and belonging to the lower middle class, thinking about the world and themselves in terms of Marxism and feminism, the two great theoretical systems of the age demanding essential changes of social paradigms. The most devout believer of these ideas is Bertram’s ardent communist girlfriend, Ninel. “It was not her real name, it was a Party name, in honor of Lenin. ‘Just try spelling it backward,’ Bertram told me” (Ozick, *Heir* 23), writes Rosie. With her reverse name and her female body but aggressively masculine behavior, her character can be read as a parody on the communist leader. Ninel also has a disastrous effect on Bertram’s family life: she chases away Rosie, who takes a job as an au pair. In line with the emphasis on social issues, Rosie, the primary narrator mostly follows the

realist tradition of storytelling. There are only a few books mentioned in the novel, but it just makes them more significant. For example, Rosie's reading list includes *Hard Times* and *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens or *Middlemarch* by George Eliot. In addition to realism, the female aspect is also brought in the foreground by frequent allusions to Rosie's favorite book, *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen.

Rosie's employers, the Mitwissers are The Family, the central group of people in the novel. They are bourgeois immigrants from Germany: Rudolf Mitwisser, a historian of Karaism, his wife, Elsa, and their five children. According to Ozick's fiction, Elsa used to be a collaborator and secret lover of Schrödinger, one of the greatest scientists renewing physics at the beginning of the 20th century, while Rudolf is an acknowledged scholar in the field of humanities, thus they stand for hard and soft sciences and metonymically for European high culture. Their story fits well into the mainstream of Jewish American literature, a major theme of which is the assimilation process of Jewish refugees fleeing from the Nazis. Ozick herself addressed these issues in a former novella of hers, *Rosa*. In *Heir to the Glimmering World*, however, the traditional story about the newcomer's difficulties with integrating into American society is self-ironically turned inside out. Here it is the American girl, who feels a sense of displacement and tries to integrate in the Mitwisser family. The reader can follow this process step by step, as depicted by Rose. "Some weeks later, when I dared to say this to Anneliese—'I sometimes feel like a refugee myself'—she shot me a look of purest contempt" (4). "It disturbed me that the Mitwisser children spoke of home. They were as homeless as I was" (42). "We had been eight; or, rather, they had been seven, and I a hireling, never an intimate" (90). Finally, the "Mitwissers were an organism, and I was part of its flesh" (306). Rose's inverse Holocaust story can be read as a personal narrative on the revaluation of Jewish American identity under the influence of European Jewish refugees arriving to the United States during and after the World War II, and thus it is in parallel with Roth's "Eli, the Fanatic".

The third family is represented in the primary plotline by the Bear Boy, James A'Bair, the fictive counterpart of Christopher Robin. As a young child, he became the protagonist of a series of children's books called "The Bair Boy, popularly transmuted into the Bear Boy" (Ozick, *Heir* 47) written and illustrated by Jim's father. Therefore, the first literary genre associated with him is children's tales. The enormous fortune deriving from the copyrights, which he inherited after the early death of his father—and which allows him to take a whimsical worldwide journey full of adventures associating the genre of picaresque or, with regard to the American context, road movie—might also remind the

reader of fairy tales. However, there is an essential conflict between father and son, and later on within the personality of Jim, due to the blurred dividing line between fiction and reality. The title of the first book in the series: "*The Boy Who Lived in a Hat*" (Ozick, *Heir* 49) metonymically refers to the problem: the father places the fictive kid into a hat prepared by the mother, but the playful gesture reduces the real child's existence to the imagination of his parents. "His father had created a parallel boy; his father had interpreted him for the world. The Bear Boy was never himself. He was his father's commentary on his body and brain" (Ozick, *Heir* 121). Jim could not naturally develop, he had to sit model for his father's drawings instead of playing with his friends, his schoolmates stared at him as a rarity, everybody was interested in him only as the embodiment of the Jim known from the books, and no one cared for him as a flesh and blood child, as a real, whole, independent personality. As an adult the "hour came when the first boy, the boy born Jim, despised the second boy, the make-believe boy. He despised him, he renounced him, he threw him away. The fiery coldness (it was bitterness, it was rage) released him; he was free" (Ozick, *Heir* 211). However, James had no adult self that could handle the freedom gained by the rejection of the despised, fictive self and by his money. So it is precisely his absolute freedom which after a while turns into an aimless, bored nonsense. His family story is an inverse narrative, self-ironically turning upside down the fairy tale of the American Dream instantly fulfilled and becoming utterly empty within only two generations.

Jim suffers from a lack of identity because of his rejection of a false identity. That is why he makes friends with Rudolf Mitwisser financially supports his research on Karaism, and thus all his family—who also suffer from the loss of their identities resulting from their displacement. Jim asks "[h]ow was he [...] different form the Karaites, who rejected graftings on the pristinely God-given? He too rejected graftings. He was born unencumbered, nakedly himself, without a lace collar. The author of the Bear Boy had grafted on the lace collar" (Ozick, *Heir* 212). However, there is no fact without interpretation, as we are reminded by Elsa and modern physics, or by the mistakes of the Karaites recognized by professor Mitwisser. "The Rational Mind, argue the Karaites (but they do not notice that they are arguing Talmudically, since Talmudic argument is what they disdain)" (Ozick, *Heir* 74). The observation that the wish for an ultimate, unadulterated truth is ab ovo failed to doom is expressed in the plot by Jim's suicide. At the same time, the opposite of Jim's nihilism, undiscerning faith ironically leads to a similar outcome as well according to the logic of the novel; Ninel, the enthusiastic

communist portrayed in a caricaturistic way dies young in Spain as a volunteer in the Civil War during her quest for an identity derived from her devout belief in the existence of an absolute truth.

Therefore two major issues of Jewish American fiction: identity and faith appear together in the novel. However, their combination self-ironically overwrites traditional narratives. There are serious theological oppositions in Ozick's book but these do not take place between the orthodox Israelite and the Gentile. All the major characters—except for James A'Bair—are of Jewish origin but neither of them practices their religion and apparently no one attributes a great significance to religion in the US. This is emphasized by the ironic turn in the plot that Professor Mitwisser is originally invited and supported by a Christian college, who misread Karaism for Charismites—a minor branch of Christianity—but once the Professor arrives they are symphatic enough not to send him back. Each character is an atheist on somewhat different grounds: James because of his nihilism, and Rosie's deceased father for a similar lack of concern. "'I don't hold with it,' he said. 'I've got bigger troubles than worrying about who runs the universe'" (Ozick, *Heir* 15). Bertram and Ninel reject religion because of their communist convictions, whereas Elsa Mitwisser does the same on scientific bases. Even the professor, a scholar of Jewish studies "had raised a wall between belief and the examination of belief" (Ozick, *Heir* 67), in other words he was engaged in Karaism not as a believer but as an objective historian. So in Ozick's world the question of identity seems to be sought independently from religion, moreover, both extremities concerning faith—the lack of it, as in case of Jim as well as the unquestioned zeal, as in case of Ninel—seem to have fatal effects. However, the conventional feminine answer familiar from 19th century family sagas: identity determined not by great theoretical frameworks but by domestic life does not seem satisfying either. By the end of the novel, practically each character's fate is neatly rounded off by marital happiness, money or death. But even the happy endings are based on failures, lies and bitter compromises. Rudolf's and Elsa's carriers are broken although they are financially safe due to the money inherited from Jim. Their eldest daughter, pregnant with Jim's baby, gets married to Bertram. Private resolutions without any intellectual or social aspiration do not appeal as very attractive any longer.

Rosie Meadows chooses none of the ways above. She gets confidential with one character after the other along the story, she identifies or at least sympathizes with almost each point of view for a while—mostly as part of the plot, but at least as a narrator—but in the end she is detached from all of them. She leaves the story alone, possessing precisely

and symbolically the same 500 dollars with which she arrived to the Mitwisser family. So she has or is not more than previously—she is only different. The remark made about Al-Kirkisani seems to be valid for her as well. “He accepts, he receives, in order to refuse” (Ozick, *Heir* 261). Moreover, it also describes Ozick’s approach, who carefully maps the traditions and paradigms defining the thinking of an everyday urban Jewish American girl living on the East Coast in the second half of the 20th century. She recollects and self-ironically paraphrases many of the major themes and narratives of 20th century Jewish American fiction: questions regarding family, faith, immigration, the relation to Europe and to the Holocaust, and powerful ideologies like communist and feminist movements. Placing her narrator, Rosie Meadows, in the context of various characters representing diverse but interdependent traditions, Ozick voices the imperative to acknowledge the complexity of our cultural heritage as well as the unwillingness to subject ourselves to any of its precarious categories without reservations.

The female point of view prevails in all the texts studied above. However, none of the authors address merely feminist concerns but they rather juxtapose primarily female concerns and other issues of identity. Tillie Olsen expresses the wish for a self-conscious identity for those who lack that because of their difficult status in society because of either financial reasons or conventional gender roles. Similarly, Grace Paley connects the ideas of social responsibility and a dominantly female point of view. In Erica Jong’s approach, Judaism appears both as a patriarchal tradition oppressing women and as a minority culture oppressed by majority society. Rich and Ozick reveal the contradictions implied in various ideologies defining the second half of the 20th century in the United States. Each author criticizes traditions and current paradigms by ironically paraphrasing them and thus self-ironically articulating the uncertainties and dilemmas of the subject.

5 CONCLUSION

The first chapter in Paul McDonald's book, *Laughing at the Darkness: Postmodernism and Optimism in American Culture*, bears the title "Postmodernism, Humour and the Jewish American Ethnic Identity" (25). The author focuses on "the best known Jewish American humorists to have emerged in the late 1950s and 60s: Joseph Heller, Lenny Bruce, Mel Brooks, Woody Allen and Philip Roth" (25), and he makes the following important distinction.

> [T]heorists like Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer [...] famously criticised popular comedy: they suggest that the laughter evoked by mainstream comedy becomes a 'placebo which it feeds to the population... through television and film in order to divert them from reflecting on their inauthentic existence'. The new Jewish humour by contrast is less of a diversion and more of a challenge: it allowed more critical engagement partly because it was open and discursive, rather than formulaic and reductive. (26)

McDonald's views are worth mentioning not only because he discerns a change in the American sense of humor in the decades immediately after the World War II and he associates the shift with Jewish American identity. The opposition he sets up between the postmodern style introduced by the authors he calls the "new wave of Jewish humorists" (26) and the comedies produced by their predecessors is also relevant to this paper as it seems to be in line with my initial proposition for the need to distinguish between self-irony and irony. McDonalds claims that the popular comedy before the shift diverts the audience's attention from themselves and their laugh is the result of their recognizing an indirectly expressed, fixed second meaning whereas the humor after the turn is "open and discursive", in other words it invites for self-reflexive engagement and multiple interpretations.

In various literary theories, several attempts have been made at such distinctions. As described in detail in the "Introduction" of this paper, Kierkegaard distinguishes between teleological and non-teleological irony; Ernst Behler differentiates classical, rhetorical irony from irony after Romanticism; Wayne Booth writes about "stable" as opposed to "unstable" irony; and Candace Lang preserves the term "irony" for the first type while she calls the latter "humor". I follow Lang's logic but I prefer the term "self-irony" for the second type in these oppositions for two reasons. Firstly and most importantly the word "self-irony" brings in the

foreground the substantial relationship between the self-reflexive instability of the subject and the plurality of meanings. Secondly, self-irony is already in use in such a sense to some extend in English and even more frequently in several Eastern European languages like Hungarian. By no means do I want to suggest that self-irony would be unique to Jewish American literature, however, Eastern European terminology might be worth more consideration in case of authors and texts that are just as much rooted in Eastern European as in American culture. Besides, Jewish American people had to face several challenges of identity during their history in the twentieth century and self-irony is by definition an apt device to articulate the subject's doubts and uncertainties arising from the multiplicity of referential systems. Therefore I have focused on those texts in Jewish American fiction which address various themes of identity crisis and I have analyzed the ways self-irony is present in them. I have also investigated the irony and humor in these works as these concepts are often closely intertwined.

I have used humor as a general concept understood as the result of Arthur Koestler's bisocation, including irony and self-irony as well as other phenomena with a funny effect. I have also tried to sort out the features distinguishing self-irony from irony. In my reading, irony is a finite rhetorical device which offers an ostensible, literal meaning in apparent contradiction with the context and an implied, second meaning, inviting the audience to get the irony by recognizing the latter. Thus the author and the audience are accomplices, who, due to their shared laugh, gain superiority over the butt of the irony, which might be a person as well as a set of beliefs. In contrast, self-irony evokes multiple contexts involving controversial interpretations for the same phenomenon without deciding in favor of either. Self-irony thus operates "like the duck/rabbit image" (57), an ambiguous picture first published in a German humor magazine in 1892, made famous by Ludwig Wittgenstein and also used by Linda Hutcheon in her book *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* to illustrate the "oscillating yet simultaneous perception of plural and different meanings" (64).

Welche Thiere gleichen ein-
ander am meisten?

Kaninchen und Ente.

While in case of irony, the second, implied meaning clearly dominates over the literal one, self-irony leaves the dilemma suspended as neither interpretation is predominant. This approach allows the author to point out doubts and questionable elements regarding complex situations with due references to parallels and without erasing the uniqueness of the individual case by providing the reader with an immediate, again falsely generalizing answer.

Self-irony can be present at any level of a narrative. It may be manifest in the authors' playing with their own identities, as we have seen it with Isaac Bashevis Singer's various pseudonyms or Paul Auster's metafictional gestures. Most frequently, the source of self-irony is the narrator, like in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* or Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*. But these novels as well as Bernard Malamud's paraphrases of biblical parables question the media of expression, too: the genres, symbols, traditional interpretations and other literary conventions involved in communication; or they can express doubts regarding language in general as in Cynthia Ozick's "Yiddish, or Envy in America". Self-irony can rely on intertextual references, as in Adrienne Rich's "Yom Kippur, 1984" as well as on an exaggerated rhetoric revealing the hypocrisy of various discourses familiar from everyday life and from politics through their parody, as in Joseph Heller's *Good As Gold*; or it can unfold from a dramatic situation like in case of the "zipless fuck" dream realized and immediately rejected in Erica Jong's *The Fear of Flying*. Many of the protagonists have also proved to be self-ironic from Philip Roth's "Eli, the Fanatic" to Cynthia Ozick's Rose Meadows. Besides, self-irony might prevail in a text as a whole, as in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* by Michael Chabon or it might appear just in some of its microstructures, like in Abraham Cahan's "A Ghetto Wedding" or Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev*. In addition, remarkable parallels have been observed between self-ironic texts and the ideas of Freudian psychoanalysis destabilizing the subject

by self-reflection as well as certain essential doubts in Holocaust fiction and metafiction regarding the questionable authenticity of the subject, the distrust in language and in conventional categories concerning identity.

For practical purposes, I have narrowed down the scope of my study to the field of twentieth century Jewish American fiction, a corpus outlined by "a self-conscious re-visioning of a Jewish narrative tradition" (42) in Tresa Grauer's words. I have examined the literary representations of several issues requiring the revision of identity from various stages of immigration and assimilation through the Holocaust to the Jewish relationship with other minorities. However, the focus of my investigation was not so much the thematic aspect of these texts but rather the wide variety of ways in which self-irony, irony and humor operates in them. The humor of most narratives analyzed in this paper derives from the permanent juxtaposition of disparate contexts as in Cynthia Ozick's "The Pagan Rabbi" or Bernard Malamud's "The Silver Crown". Many of the stories are organized along dichotomies which are self-ironically questioned and which, as a result, tend to break down, like in Philip Roth's "The Conversion of the Jews" or Bernard Malamud's "Angel Levine". Another tendency is various ironies played out against each other ultimately turning into self-irony as in Isaac Bashevis Singer's "The Joke" or Cynthia Ozick's *Heir to a Glimmering World*. In narratives like "The German Refugee" by Bernard Malamud or *The New York Trilogy* by Paul Auster, empathy has proved to be an essential feature of self-irony destabilizing the central position of the subject. Finally, the redemptive power of self-irony and of humor can be observed in books like Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* or Paul Auster's *The Book of Illusions*.

Numerous works of great relevance have fallen beyond the scope of this study. It might be worth mentioning just a few examples for these necessarily omitted but exciting themes. The aspect of humor in the biblical story of Isaac has been often discussed as his name "Isaac, or Yitzhak [...] in Hebrew means "he will laugh" (Randall 86), in memory of the scene when the news of his birth was received by his parents, Abraham and Sarah with laughter. However, an additional analysis on the self-irony of the narrative could be even more exciting with special regards to the positions of the author, the ironist, the butt of irony and the interpreter in case of a biblical narrative and a protagonist who is both the venerable forefather of the Jewish people defined by their covenant with God and the embodiment of laughter, a gesture frequently considered to undermine any solemn and solid, monolithic conceptual system. Another book worth attention could be *Lucinde* by Friedrich Shlegel, one of the most influential theorists of irony. Both the irony and the

autobiographic references in this romance have been thoroughly investigated, however, it might also be interesting to reconsider the self-irony of this work in the light of the fact that the tile heroine is modeled after Schlegel's future wife, Dorothea, who was born as Brendel Mendelssohn, daughter to Moses Mendelssohn, the Jewish philosopher who initiated the movement of Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century. A third line of special interest for me as a Hungarian student of self-irony in Jewish American literature would be the exploration of the self-ironic aspects of twentieth century Jewish Hungarian writers' work. A preliminary list of relevant texts might include Frigyes Karinthy's legendary humor manifest in various genres from his poem "Struggle for Life" or his travesties of the greatest contemporary authors belonging to the literary generation "Nyugat", which he strongly identified with, to the immense corpus of his humorous sketches; Jenő Rejtő's pulp fiction parodies; some of Antal Szerb's novels, like *Utas és Holdvilág* (*Journey by Moonlight*) representing the protagonist's quest for himself as the process of complete destabilization, or his mock gothic novel, *A Pendragon-legenda* (*The Pendragon Legend*) with its parody of the literary scholar, or even certain passages in his grand historical summaries of Hungarian and world literature; *Emberszag* (*The Smell of Humans*) by Ernő Szép or *Sorstalanság* (*Fateless*) by Imre Kertész, which are unique among other first-generation survivor testimonies on the Holocaust because both books address their tragic theme in a self-ironic way although their self-ironies are immensely different as the tone of Szép's book verges on explicit humor whereas Kertész destabilizes its rhetoric by ironically overstraining it; the genre of "one minute stories" established by István Örkény as well as his play *Pisti a vérzivatarban* (*Stevie in Bloodbath*), which offers a tragicomical overview of mid-twentieth century history in Hungary from the point of view of an Everyman protagonist; and the list would undoubtedly be worth extending.

Twentieth century Jewish American fiction seemed to be a promising field for a first investigation of self-irony due the strong sense of textual tradition and the series of identity challenges predominant in the work of Jewish American writers. Yet the concept of self-irony, as illustrated by the examples above, might prove to be fruitful in the study of other texts as well, especially in our multicultural context at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when the coexistence of individuals and communities with diverse identities is one of the most crucial current issues. Self-irony allows both the author and the reader to explore the challenges and ambiguities involved in the simultaneous presence of multiple referential systems, preserving the genuine features of each while calling for revisions that

can point toward possible resolutions. At the same time, it foregrounds the awareness of the temporal validity—or in Richard Rorty's term, the contingency— of any such reconciliation. Thus self-irony both as a rhetorical device and as a "mode of existence" (Lang 1) might enhance tolerance without erasing essential differences but helping individuals as well as communities to deal with them relying on the redemptive power of laughing at ourselves.

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aláírás