Blacks in the Jewish Mind

Forman, Seth

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The New York Intellectuals and Their “Negro Problem,”
1945–1966

You can’t turn Black experience into literature just by writing it down. —Harry Lesser in Bernard Malamud’s The Tenants

Lesser, you tryin to fuck up my mind and confuse me. I read all about that formalism jazz in the library and it’s bullshit. You tryin to kill off my natural writin by pretending you are interested in the fuckin form of it.

—Willie Spearmint in Bernard Malamud’s The Tenants

Comparisons of contemporary Black intellectuals with the famed “New York Intellectuals” of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s provide a convenient backdrop for the discussion of the approach to art, politics, and race of that mostly Jewish group of intellectuals Norman Podhoretz once referred to as the “family.”¹ The New York Intellectuals constituted a loosely knit group of writers and critics who came of age during the 1930s to challenge the Communist influence in American intellectual life.² Over the next fifty years, and through roughly three generations of writers, these intellectuals used a small coterie of low-circulation, high-brow journals like Partisan Review and Commentary to heavily influence the direction of politics, literature, art, and culture in the United States.³ Specifically, the New York Intellectuals attempted to foster a unique combination of anti-Communist, left-wing politics, and high modernism in literature and the arts. While their legacy is a hotly debated topic among academicians today, it is probably fair to say that the New York Intellectuals succeeded in delegitimizing the Stalinist influence in American cultural life and played a
large role in the transfer of the modern art scene from Paris to New York in the 1950s. But by the 1960s, the reappropriation of revolutionary Marxism by the New Left, the ascendancy of Black radicalism, and the romanticization of the Third World required that the New York Intellectuals reposition themselves in relation to the new radicalism. This resulted in the shattering of long-time friendships among the New York crowd and the splintering of the group. Combined with the subsequent deaths of a few key writers and the general dispersion of the American intellectual scene, this rupture has inspired some critics to lament the demise of the public intellectual. Most notably, Russell Jacoby in his 1987 book *The Last Intellectuals* writes disparagingly of university domination over American intellectual life and declares the New York Intellectuals the greatest and last group of critics to reach a large, educated public. In the late 1990s, some critics suggest, a number of Black intellectuals, most of them associated with universities, have stepped into this void to take a public role in a United States consumed with issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and popular culture. Black academics like Cornel West, bell hooks, Gerald Early, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. are said to have revived the role of the public intellectual, “bringing moral imagination and critical intelligence to bear on the definingly American matter of race—and reaching beyond race” to voice what one critic calls “the commonality of American concern.” The extent to which the writing of these Black academics has bridged the gap between their highly specialized fields and often radical opinions and an educated general public has been the topic of at least one devastating critique. But the comparison of the Black intellectuals with the New York Intellectuals of the past is instructive as much for the differences between the two groups as it is for the characteristics they share.

Some of the points at which the two groups diverge have much to do with the changing intellectual climate over the past few decades. The Black intellectuals are far more at home delving into the various forms of popular culture and deriving meaning and significance from them. In this they have participated in the general blurring of the lines between “high” culture and “low” culture that has occurred since the 1960s and which for all practical purposes has erased a distinction that was central to the modernist concerns of the New York Intellectuals. It is also the case that most of the Black intellectuals have risen to prominence within the academic fortresses of American universities, usually in Black studies departments, whereas most of the New York writers began their careers as free-lance critics and essayists, a distinction that is vital to understanding the role of Jewish intel-
lectuals in American life and one that will be discussed more fully in the conclusion to this chapter. But most important, the New York Intellectuals and the Black intellectuals arrived at their feelings about their own identities as Americans from highly divergent starting points. "Although the New Yorkers are perhaps best known for their Jewishness," writes Robert Boynton, "it wasn't until relatively late in their careers that they made their ethnic heritage a conscious component of their intellectual lives. By contrast," Boynton continues, "most Black public intellectuals have had the concept of Blackness at the very center of their thinking from the start." The New York Intellectuals were primarily second-generation immigrants who spent most of their early years trying to convince themselves and anyone else who would listen that their Jewishness did not matter on the most important questions in life. By contrast, the Black intellectuals, having been born into the firmament of the civil rights revolution of the postwar decades, were indoctrinated with the belief that politics and race are intricately and intimately connected. "What Marxism was to Lionel Trilling, Clement Greenberg, Philip Rahv, and company, Black nationalism is to West, Gates, Hooks, et al.: the inspiration, the springboard, the template, but also the antagonist and the goad," writes professor Martin Berube. In other words, the Black intellectuals were born Black; the Jewish intellectuals had to discover their Jewishness. While one must appreciate the increasingly dominant role of universities in American intellectual life, an understanding, at some level, that the Black intellectuals have come to prominence with a surfeit of institutional support, whereas the New York Intellectuals had to prove to the world that they were "Americans" before gaining widespread recognition, suggests that the Black past weighs far more formidably on the formation of American institutions than the Jewish past ever has. This point is central to an understanding of the historic role played by Blacks and Jews in the United States and, by extension, to the roles of Black intellectuals and Jewish intellectuals in American culture. That Black intellectuals have gained national prominence writing primarily about being Black, while the New York Intellectuals gained prominence, at least initially, by putting as much distance between themselves and their Jewishness as possible speaks volumes about this social dynamic. That the New York Intellectuals understood implicitly the rather inconsequential nature of the cultural relationship of Jews to the United States is evinced in their attempts to balance the requirements of Jewish culture and American culture, of modernism and politics, and of race and art. Looking back, the efforts of the New York Intellectuals to create a truly cosmopolitan
high culture based on the standards of Western modernism may have been an impossible dream, given the ferocity of the current opposition to such a goal. But it was also probably more successful than any other attempt before or since to create a common high culture in the United States in which all can share equally. Perhaps more interesting is the way in which the New York Intellectuals struggled with their own place as Jews in creating such a shared culture, and the intellectual acrobatics some of them engaged in when they discovered that the Black experience in the United States did not lend itself to the ideals of ethnic choice and the aesthetic autonomy of art upon which so many of them had staked their careers.

**Jewishness and the New York Intellectuals**

In a well-known essay, Irving Howe wrote that the New York Intellectuals represented perhaps America’s only claim to an intelligentsia and ascribed to them the following characteristics: they were anti-Communist, radical, and had a fondness for ideological speculation; they wrote literary criticism with a strong social emphasis; they “revel[ed] in polemic”; they strove self-consciously to be “brilliant”; they played a role in the internationalization of American culture, “serving as a liaison between American readers and Russian politics, French ideas, and European writing”; and they were “by birth or osmosis” Jews. Howe’s inference that all of the intellectuals associated with this group were Jews is, of course, not true. Non-Jewish associates of the group included such notables as Elizabeth Hardwick, Dwight MacDonald, Edmund Wilson, Mary McCarthy, F. W. Dupee, William Barrett, James Baldwin, and Richard Chase, as well as such “kissing cousins” as Robert Lowell, Ralph Ellison, John Berryman, Murray Kempton, Michael Harrington, and James Agee. Nevertheless, Norman Podhoretz, a member of the third and last generation of New York Intellectuals, justified the term “Jewish” to describe this milieu on the basis of “clear majority rule and by various peculiarities of temper.” The overwhelming majority of New York Intellectuals were of Jewish background, and the concerns and preoccupations of the group over the decades reflected its Jewish composition.

Given the Jewish makeup of this intellectual family, it is interesting to note how completely the New York Intellectuals reflected the crisis of Jewish ambivalence in America. Largely the children of immigrant Jews
who wanted to break free of their parent’s tradition-bound world, the New York Intellectuals originally viewed themselves as “marginal men” caught between a Jewish culture they no longer wanted and an America that did not fully accept them. The sociologist Daniel Bell has written that for the bulk of Jewish intellectuals, the anxiety was translated into the struggle between fathers and sons: “Few generational conflicts have had such exposed nakedness, such depths of strain as these.” A poignant depiction of this strain takes place in Isaac Rosenfeld’s novel Passage From Home. The protagonist, Bernard, describes a scene in which his father enters his bedroom, walks around, and stops in front of the bookcase, staring at the books. “He always seemed to regard them as strange and remote objects, symbols of myself, and they related to him—it was with his money that I had bought them—and yet as alien and hostile as I had myself become.” “Nobody,” Irving Howe wrote, “who has been brought up in a Jewish family . . . can read this passage without feeling that there is true and accurate perception.”

This feeling of marginality among the New York Intellectuals explained a great deal about their attraction to radicalism in the 1930s. They sought not to hide their Jewishness or to pass for non-Jews but to “overcome” their Jewishness by putting it behind them. In fact, being of Jewish background seemed to endow them with a special gift for radicalism. As Jews, most of the intellectuals had been restricted from careers in universities and other avenues of employment and had witnessed the frightening rise of anti-Semitism in the United States between the world wars. This only compounded their feelings of alienation derived from the history of persecution their parents brought with them to America and fastened them on the side of the persecuted. Unlike the non-Jewish radicals of the period, therefore, the New York Intellectuals were also attracted to radicalism because it allowed for a degree of continuity with their Jewish past and served as part of their transition from the ghetto to the larger society. In the end, wrote one historian, they “joined because the radical movement provided specific outlets for . . . [their] talents . . . and because it allowed them to apply their heritage in a new and appropriate manner, rather than requiring to cast it off. . . . They planned to be emissaries from their parents’ world, not exiles.”

The Jewish intellectuals did not convert or renounce their Jewishness, then, but neither did they strongly affirm it. In a February 1944 symposium entitled “Under Forty: American Literature and the Younger Generation of American Jews,” conducted by the Contemporary Jewish Record, the pre-
cursor to *Commentary* magazine, many of the core players in the first generation of this New York Intellectual milieu expressed their ambivalent feelings toward being Jewish.\(^{19}\) The most prominent literary critic of the group, Lionel Trilling, maintained that “as the Jewish community now exists, it can give no sustenance to the American artist or intellectual who is born a Jew.”\(^{20}\) The art critic Clement Greenberg voiced similar feelings, writing that “Jewish life in America has become, for reasons of security, so solidly, so rigidly, restrictedly, and suffocatingly middle class. . . . No people on earth are more correct, more staid, more provincial, more commonplace, more inexperienced.”\(^{21}\) The writer and critic Alfred Kazin asked what was Jewish about the American Jew—“What does he believe, especially in these terrible years, that separates him at all from our national habits of acquisitiveness, showiness, and ignorant brag?”\(^{22}\)

To the extent that Jewishness offered the New York Intellectuals the psychological posture of “alienation” and put them in an advantageous position to lead the political or cultural avant-garde, they flaunted it. The poet Delmore Schwartz, for example, declared that, through anti-Semitism, “the fact of being a Jew became available to me as a central symbol of alienation, bias, point of view, and certain other characteristics which are the peculiar marks of modern life, and I think now, the essential ones.” But for the most part, Jewishness was allowed no broader claims.\(^{23}\)

Nevertheless, a number of postwar developments seriously challenged alienation as a common mode of identity for the New York Intellectuals. During the 1940s and 1950s, the decline of anti-Semitism resulted in the widespread recognition of the work of some New York Intellectuals, and the broad audience of mass-circulation magazines began to open up for many of them. The novels and criticism of such writers as Saul Bellow, Isaac Rosenfeld, Delmore Schwartz, Lionel Trilling, Alfred Kazin, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth began to attract widespread attention, as did the art criticism of Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, and Meyer Shapiro. Other New York Intellectuals found jobs in universities that had previously been closed to them, all of which made further declarations of alienation seem unbecoming. Another factor in the postwar changes was the experience of the New York Intellectuals with the Communists during the war. Disturbed by the willingness of the Communist groups on American soil to countenance Stalin’s dictatorship, as well as by the barbarity visited by fascism on Europe, the New York Intellectuals began to regard the middle class as an important bulwark against totalitarianism.\(^{24}\) Eventually, the impact of the Holocaust occasioned a reevaluation of what being
Jewish meant to the New York Intellectuals. The Holocaust weighed heavily on the psyche of the New Yorkers in a way they did not realize until much after the war, a delayed response that Irving Howe called a kind of "culture lag," a "recognition behind reality." The Holocaust obviously caused Alfred Kazin to rethink his disdain for the common Jews about whom he had written with such derision during the war. In his autobiographical New York Jew, Kazin wrote, "[I]n my private history of the world I took down every morsel of fact and rumor relating to the murder of my people... I could imagine my father and mother, my sister and myself, our original tenement family of 'small Jews,' all too clearly—fuel for the flames, dying by a single flame that burned us all up at once."26

Before the war, Irving Howe confessed that the sense of Jewishness in intellectuals like himself tended to be overshadowed by a commitment to cosmopolitan culture and socialist politics. "We did not think well or deeply on the matter of Jewishness—you might say we avoided thinking about it," Howe wrote.27 But after the war, many Jewish intellectuals found it difficult and unnecessary to continue subordinating their Jewishness to other commitments and he came to regard himself as a "Jewish intellectual with cosmopolitan tastes," as efforts "to grapple with the Holocaust, all doomed to one or another degree of failure, soon led to timid reconsiderations of what it meant to be Jewish."28

The impact of the Holocaust on the New York Intellectuals was demonstrated by the torrid response evoked by Hannah Arendt's essay Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, which appeared originally in the New Yorker magazine.29 Reporting from Israel on the trial of the Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann, Arendt tried to fit the Nazi slaughter of the Jews into her highly regarded theory of modern totalitarianism.30 Essentially, Arendt saw Eichmann and the other Nazi officers who oversaw the destruction of European Jewry as "banal" rather than personally evil, mere cogs in the wheel of a highly technical system that defied conventional political categories. Arendt also implicated the Jews in their own destruction, charging that the Jewish councils, some of which had cooperated with the Nazi authorities, were a part of the totalitarian system. The response to Arendt's reportage was fierce. Both Howe and his colleague Lionel Abel, not satisfied with writing critical reviews, held a symposium and protest meeting about the book at the Hotel Diplomat in midtown Manhattan at which a throng of New York Intellectuals and others pounded tables and shouted their views on the Arendt thesis. Norman Podhoretz not only wrote a critical review of Arendt's essay in Commentary
but debated Arendt in the spring of 1965 in a University of Maryland gymnasium packed with supporters for both sides. Podhoretz had written his critical review despite personal fears that doing so would end his close relationship with Arendt. The relationship did in fact cool considerably. Howe later said of Arendt’s book that it was one of the most troubling intellectual events of the 1960s for him and that this was so probably because of the guilt he experienced over his initial tepid response to the Holocaust.

But if the greater acceptance of Jews in America and the Nazi Holocaust forced some of the New York Intellectuals to reconsider their American-ness and their Jewishness, these reevaluations were not consistent or uniform within the group. Some New York Intellectuals became enthusiasts of the existentialist Jewish philosopher Martin Buber or of Hasidism. Irving Howe began a long career of translating and publishing Yiddish literature. Alfred Kazin discussed his Jewish immigrant upbringing in A Walker in the City (1951), and Lionel Trilling even wrote about “Wordsworth and the Rabbis.” But of the efforts by some writers like Harold Rosenberg, Clement Greenberg, and Paul Goodman to redefine their Jewishness in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Irving Howe explained that they “wrote with some wariness, as if determined not to surrender the stance of marginality; they were fearful of even appearing to return to the parochialism of middle-class Jewish life.” In general, the tolerance expressed by some New York Intellectuals for the American middle class was not shared by all and certainly did not extend to the American Jewish community or to religious observance. As Norman Podhoretz noted, “If most of the contributors to the 1944 [Contemporary Jewish Record] symposium later came to discover great fascination and virtue in traditional Jewish culture, very few of them ever acknowledged the unfairness of the charge that Jewish life in America bore no trace of the admirable characteristics of the Jewish past.”

By and large, after World War II the New York Intellectuals faced a question similar to the one faced by the American Jewish community as a whole: what should constitute Jewish identity and distinctiveness when the walls of exclusion and prejudice come tumbling down? The Holocaust and the expanding opportunities of the postwar decades rendered “alienation” obsolete as a mode of Jewish identity, a fact evinced by the reaction of the New Yorkers to the Beat writers of the 1950s; but their relationship to Jewish life and thought remained ambiguous.
Alienation and the Black Hipster

Black culture has often constituted something of a counterculture in the United States, and Black men have long been associated with the national "id." Lively debates have racked the social sciences over the origins of Black culture in the New World, but there is no doubt that a distinctive Black cultural style dating back to the days of slavery had emerged in the United States, based on resistance to white oppression and, in many instances, the repudiation of white norms. In the twentieth century the confluence of large-scale Black migration to Northern cities, Black ghettoization, and the hope arising from new opportunities saw the maturation of this Black "counterculture." By the 1920s, Black culture took the forms of the hot jazz music of Louis Armstrong and the new Black urban style. Jazz music was both dangerous and liberating in that it provided an expressive outlet for the idea that the human body might be the most important source of freedom and happiness in a world marked by oppression and sadness. The "hipster" was the name given to the new Black man of the streets who developed a cultural style that would, in succeeding decades, become the dominant motif in American popular culture. The hipster was heir to a Black cultural legacy that, along with music, dance, and dialect, was perhaps its most persistent idiom: the archetypical Black male renegade who refuses to abide by the law, practices intimidation, and often garners the stamp of the "bad nigger." The "bad nigger" has long been a source of pride among Blacks, dating back to a time when runaway slaves were called "ba-ad nigger" by other slaves. In the 1920s and the decades that followed, the "hipster" was in many ways a manifestation of the "bad nigger," a miscreant who experimented with new variations on the theme of Black deviance.

By the late 1940s, a number of white radicals had become attracted to the "hip" culture of "bebop," a technical innovation in jazz music developed by Black musicians, which also served as a protest against the failure of the commercialized "swing" movement. As LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) explains in his book Blues People, bebop functioned as a reaction against white swing and placed Black music once again "outside the mainstream of American culture." To the hedonistic sensibility already prevalent in the jazz world, the hipsters added an unmistakable note of social and political revolt. For some white radicals, bebop offered the authenticity and cool cynicism they found impossible to retrieve from Cold War-obsessed mass culture and the complacent political liberalism that accompanied it. A number of white intellectuals, in particular the "beat" writers
Herbert Huncke, William Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac, paid homage to this Black underworld, but a few intellectuals associated with the New York crowd did as well.  

No one even marginally associated with the New York Intellectuals went as far as the novelist Norman Mailer in championing the liberating image of the "bad nigger." In his famous essay "The White Negro," Mailer insisted that the Black male was the quintessential modern man, alienated from all things but his most basic needs and the antidote to mind-numbing suburban conformity. The Black man in America, Mailer wrote, had two alternatives—to live a life of complete subjugation or to live a life of constant danger—and this condition allowed him to break the dull monotony of middle-class life to become America's only true existentialist, "the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war, relatively quick death by the State . . . or with a slow death by conformity . . . then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death . . . to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self."  

There had been after World War II, according to Mailer, a ménage à trois of the Black male, the Bohemian, and the white juvenile to form the white hipster, and Mailer enlisted the Black hipster's white counterpart in the cause of undermining the values and myths of the 1950s. "The hipster cuts through and exploits the hypocrisy of the period," wrote the critic Morris Dickstein, and "transcended the sham of suburban religiosity and churchgoing." The hipster, both Black and white, was an American "countermyth" that served for radicals like Mailer to replace revolutionary Marxism as a way to shake America out of what they believed was an insidious postwar serenity. "In his search for a sexual life which will suit his orgiastic needs," Mailer wrote in defense of his controversial essay, "the hipster willy-nilly attacks conventional sexual morality. . . . If capitalist society is grounded upon property relations, these relations are wed to monogamy, family, and the sexual strictures which maintain them."  

Mailer received some support from a few of the New York critics who themselves were not content with the level of America's discontent. While many of these critics conceded that Mailer was prone to indulge in bouts of hyperbole and public posturing, they believed that the image of the white hipster was a compelling one whose defiance of American norms was worthy of serious attention. "In a queer but real sense, the hipster is the monk of the present Dark Ages," wrote the critic George Steiner. "The
Hipster is a living indictment of the American dream—of the belief in material success and ‘well-adjustments.’” For Norman Podhoretz, Mailer alone among the writers of the 1950s approached the issue of sex on its own terms and brought to the subject a readiness to find the meaning of these terms. The literary critic Diana Trilling also believed in the efficacy of Mailer’s project. His willingness to ask the ultimate question we are all faced with in our time—from which, the ego or the id, shall we derive our moral sanctions—and his success in facing the enormity of that question convinced Trilling that Mailer’s talent was more than trivial.47

But, for the most part, the New York critics agreed that the Black hipster remained as much a myth as Mailer’s imaginary white hipster. According to these critics, the white hipster and the Black hipster were not representative character types. One writer observed that, just as white hipsters disparaged Black hipsters when they weren’t around for being narrowly interested in white women, the Black hipsters were prone to saying among themselves “man, those fay cats are pretty cool and don’t want us to be Uncle Toms, but they still want us to be spooks. They don’t really dig us as a people; they just dig us for our music and our pot.”48 For this reason, Ned Polsky remarked, the idealization of the Black male by many of the radical intellectuals and beatnik writers of the 1950s was “an inverted form of keeping the Nigger in his place.”49

Ironically, Norman Mailer, who seemed to model his own personality on the white hipster, could not himself make the connection with the Black hipster he so strongly believed in.50 The Black writer James Baldwin, a homosexual who had called Mailer’s essay “downright impenetrable,” wrote that his relationship with Mailer suffered in the 1950s from the white writer’s refusal to give up the myth of Black sexuality. “The sexual battleground . . . is really the same for everyone, and I . . . was just about to be carried off the battleground on my shield . . . so how could I play, in any way whatever, the noble savage.”51 Baldwin explained that matters between the two were not helped much by the fact that the Black jazz musicians in Paris among whom they found themselves did not consider Mailer in any way “hip.” Mailer did not know this, according to Baldwin, and Baldwin could not bring himself to tell him. “He never broke through to them . . . ,” wrote Baldwin, “and they were far too ‘hip’ . . . even to consider breaking through to him. They thought he was a real sweet ofay cat, but a little frantic.”52

For the most part, those New York Intellectuals who thought more often and more seriously about their own Jewish identities and about the
relationship of Black Americans to society and culture did not subscribe to
Mailer's idealized view of Black existence and preferred more specific trea-
tises on the condition of Black Americans. Irving Howe, the editor of Dissent
when that magazine published Mailer's article, wrote that he was “over-
whelmed, delighted to have the piece” after Mailer had sent it to him but that
he later experienced guilt over having printed the article in full, including
parts that explicitly endorsed violence. “I should have fought with him about
that one passage,” wrote Howe, “the existential analysis of those hoodlums
beating up the storekeeper—which I now think is pretty much nonsense.”
Mailer himself later admitted to having second thoughts about the article,
saying that he was afflicted by self-doubt at the time and was using drugs and
that had written the piece primarily for the satisfaction of his own ego rather
than to influence public opinion. Norman Podhoretz may have been one
of the first critics to hold up Mailer as a serious high-brow talent, but to the
romanticization of Black men he gave no quarter. “I doubt if a more idyllic
picture of Negro life has been painted since certain Southern ideologues tried
to convince them things were just as fine as fine could be for the slaves on the
old plantation.”

Nat Hentoff, a young New York journalist and jazz critic, agreed that
Black Americans “do use their senses more than the ‘squares,’ and that in
this respect theirs is a more intense way of life.” But Hentoff felt strongly
that the life of the typical Black American was anything but the “enorm-
ous” one Mailer had made it out to be. Aside from the sexual confusion
and impotence experienced by Black men due to their economic depend-
ence on women, Hentoff felt that “fundamentally Mailer appears to be
unaware of the depth of anxiety, desperation, and sheer physical discomfort
which ghetto living imposes on all the poor, hip and square.” Hentoff,
in effect, joined many social scientists in excoriating those who lionized
the Black male because they had ignored the likelihood that many gen-
erations of ghetto pathology had seriously discredited the myth of Black
sexual potency. James Baldwin put the point most succinctly when he asked
of his friend Mailer, “Why malign the sorely menaced sexuality of Negroes
in order to justify the white man’s sexual panic?”

This underside of the Black ghetto was seen keenly by another Jewish
intellectual associated with the New York crowd, Seymour Krim. Krim, a
marginal figure in New York Intellectual circles, wrote about the excite-
ment he found in the Black community in Harlem, but he was notably
more realistic about the condition of Blacks than Mailer was and about
how his Jewishness influenced his view of Black Americans. Krim admitted
that more “than most white or non-Negro men I have haunted colored society, loved it . . . sucked it through my marrow.” Coming from a comfortable, Jewish, middle-class family, Krim explained that it was a “sense of identification stemming in part from my being the unreligious modern American Jew who feels only the self-pitying sting of his identity without the faith” that gave him his “girlish, milky notions about the natural greatness of Negroes.”

When Krim became a teenager, his love for jazz and his “raging enslavement to sex” came together for him in the Black woman, the “jazz queen, someone who loved to ball, could never get enough, was supreme physically, rhythmically, ecstatically—‘oh, baby, give it to me!’” Krim found himself frequenting jazz joints and prostitutes in Harlem, and he learned to appreciate Harlem’s life and bounce—“the entire place was a jolt to anybody with a literary or even a human imagination.”

Interestingly, the Harlem bars were more alluring to Krim than the downtown white ones because, he admitted, society had judged him to be superior to the rest of the patrons. This made Krim, for the first time in his life, comfortable associating with both sexes. In this, Krim felt very much like a Southern “white cracker,” whose psyche was impregnable because he always had an inferior class of people below him. “It was an astonishing revelation,” wrote Krim, “to realize that you could be a better person—more attentive, calmer, happier . . . for the wrong reasons.”

Nevertheless, by his third month of Harlem cruising he had become aware of the “low, cruel, ignorant, selfish, small-minded side of uptown life.” Krim’s senses were “humbled time and again by the sight of men beating women, hustlers drunkenly cursing and clawing each other . . . or how some date I was out with was afraid to go home to her old man (the pimp she lived with).” The human good Krim appreciated so much in Harlem, the good that “lay just an inch away from its flip into unarguable nastiness,” often took that “flip” into nastiness. “I could never immunize myself . . . to the garbage in the streets . . . the pawnshops five to a block, the rat-infested tenements . . . the feverish traffic in drugs, the hordes of sullen-faced, corner-haunting hustlers, the waste of money on adolescent trinkets, the wild red rage on the broken-beer bottle 5 A.M. streets and the ceaseless stealing.”
Jewish Cosmopolitanism and the Black Writer

Linked almost congenitally to rationalism and modernism, the New York Intellectuals in the postwar period rejected alienation and nihilism as cultural ideals. As Norman Podhoretz explained it, the proclivity of the 1950s bohemians for “bop” language and jazz was a way of demonstrating their contempt for “coherent, rational discourse which, being a product of the mind, is in their view a form of death.”65 That the New York Intellectuals did not share the alienation of the beats or the Black hipster reveals the primacy of the “cosmopolitan” ideal in their criticism. Implicit in their rejection of the idealization of the Black man was the belief that nothing about an individual should be inferred from his past. The modern culture of the West, they felt, provided the foundation for the emergence of a sophisticated modern culture that would transcend the artificial borders that divided regions, races, nations, and sexes. The task as the Jewish intellectuals first saw it, according to the historian Terry Cooney, “was to extend the reach of secular rationality; to escape the bounds of provincialism; to raise American culture to the level of the most advanced European literature; and to construct in the process a society that would welcome members of all groups as full participants.”66 For the most part, the New York Intellectuals seemed to be enthusiastic adherents of an ideal that proclaimed that an ethnic heritage or philosophical tradition should be preserved to the extent that it could expand the horizons of knowledge but that to the extent that it cut one off from other experiences it should be discarded. This cosmopolitan ideal, according to the historian David Hollinger, is “decidedly counter to the eradication of cultural differences, but counter also to their preservation in parochial form.”67

Underlying the cosmopolitan ideal was a belief in the “polyvocality” of the individual, the belief that individuals could speak with many voices and should be free to pledge their allegiance to a variety of social categories. Harold Rosenberg gave the most succinct description of the cosmopolitan approach to the modern condition when he explained that “being born a Jew does not save us from . . . the modern condition of freedom to make ourselves according to an image we choose.”68 There was “room in the contemporary human being to be many things and nothing,” and what Rosenberg valued most about America was that “being an American means being free precisely in that the American possesses that room, and can keep multiplying and transforming himself without regarding . . . his nationality.”69 The New York Intellectuals valued modern literature precisely be-
cause of its complexity and multiple meanings. In literature, as in life, they avoided any commitments that would limit the scope of their experience.

While a number of recent scholars have shown that the constant effort to recreate ethnic orientations, to tear down old boundaries that separate people and build new ones, gives the ethnic perspective in literature an increasingly modernist slant, the New York Intellectuals, on the whole, did not see this modernist potential in ethnic particularism. If the New York Intellectuals had entered the war between consent and descent over which would rule the relationship of ethnicity to American culture, they had landed decidedly on the side of consent. The New York Intellectuals did not see ethnicity, particularly as it pertained to their Jewish background, as a dynamic or enervating force, but rather perceived it as a static and confining vessel of the past. Perhaps this is why it was not until the late 1950s that the New York Intellectuals identified Henry Roth's 1934 Call It Sleep as a great modernist novel. As one writer has pointed out, Roth's novel was at least as Jewish and certainly more modernist than the work of Delmore Schwartz, and yet the New York Intellectuals picked up Schwartz as a group hero and not Roth. If one could argue that the New York Intellectuals were turned off by the proletarian tone of Roth's novel, rather than its Jewishness, more indicting evidence of their negative view of ethnicity in literature comes from the response of some New York Intellectuals to the rising interest in Yiddish literature in the 1950s. When Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, a well-known Yiddish writer, published A Treasury of Yiddish Stories in 1955, the editors themselves commented that Yiddish literature had been largely second rate and that none of the Yiddish writers could rightfully be placed with the long list of Western literary immortals. Howe later said of his own work with Yiddish literature that he approached it "with the detachment of an anthropologist" and that he had considered it a kind of a side job—"one day a week away from the Viet Nam war and the polemics with leftist ideologies into which I had locked myself." Norman Podhoretz commented after reading the book that he found "the pleasure I derived was quite unlike the pleasure I get from good fiction. It was the pleasure of old world charm and quaintness, titillating but not challenging, and therefore not to be taken too seriously." For better or worst," Podhoretz wrote on a separate occasion, the New York Intellectual "made a moral decision not to be . . . confined by his Jewishness; he wanted to be a man of broad cultivation and wide sympathies."

The power of modern art for the New York Intellectuals derived from
its ability to uphold its independence from ideology. Clement Greenberg summarized the position on art and politics of the New Yorkers when he wrote, “True, I may be a socialist, but a work of art has its own ends, which it includes in itself and which have nothing to do with the fate of society.” The idea of the aesthetic autonomy of art, a concept long associated with modernism, was central to Greenberg and the other New York Intellectuals. As Norman Podhoretz explains, art for the New Yorkers was not a means to an end, of liberating the masses or bringing about revolution. “For better or for worse . . . I do not regard literature as an end in itself . . . I do not go to literature for the salvation of my soul . . . and I do not expect it to redeem the age, but only to help the age become less chaotic and confused.” The New York Intellectuals understood that art, particularly the modern novel, was infused with political meaning, but they believed it was the singularly tough task of the critic to determine when the political “interruption” of a piece of literature was welcome and when it was not. “We had meant, I think,” wrote Irving Howe, “that a work of literature has distinctive properties and must be perceived and judged according to categories distinctive to its kind.”

These strongly held views about the relationship of ethnicity and politics to a work of art brought the issue of Black literature to the serious attention of certain New York Intellectuals. The race revolution of the middle to late 1960s had as one component a breakthrough in Black writing and publishing that the New York Times called nothing less than a “Black Revolution in Books.” At the helm of the “Black Arts movement” were Black writers like James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, LeRoi Jones, Eldridge Cleaver, and Julius Lester, among others, who wrote works of fiction saturated with political and racial self-consciousness. “The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community,” wrote Larry Neal, the spokesperson for the new Black Aesthetic, who insisted on the wedding of art and politics. Black writers found themselves at the center of the political ferment of the 1960s, leaving a number of New York Intellectuals in a position vis-à-vis the infiltration of politics into Black writing strikingly similar to their position in the 1930s, when a renascent Partisan Review broke away from the Communist-inspired, socially conscious proletarian literature of that decade. Initially, the New York Intellectuals believed that, like Jews, Black Americans would be able to share in the cosmopolitan culture of the New York writers, but some began to doubt this possibility after the promise of full racial integration had failed to bear fruit by the early 1960s.
The challenge of the Black Arts movement to the cosmopolitan outlook of the New York Intellectuals must be seen in the context of the nation’s changing intellectual life, particularly the rise of Black Power and the New Left. In the 1960s, disillusionment with the use and misuse of Western economic and military power in the Third World drew many intellectuals toward an extreme cultural relativism. In the hands of radicals, the idea that there was value in the study of all civilizations was transformed into the idea that “people of color” and women, those groups that had historically occupied subservient roles in the West, perceive the world differently from white men and that there is no received “canon” or agreed-upon body of great imaginative works. From this viewpoint, universal standards of truth and beauty do not exist, and texts and ideas are no longer acts of individual self-expression but merely ways of exercising power. Hence, texts are “authorless,” reflecting the political perspectives of social groups, not of individuals. Writers become important, or “great,” to the extent that they communicate the experience of the group they are presumed to represent.81 One of the key notions embodied in the new critical thinking involved the idea that members of minority groups and women possessed a racial or gender consciousness that not only governed their artistic interpretations but rendered such work inaccessible to “outsiders.” In other words, the idea that all humans were, through the use of reason, capable of entering the experience of others, or that any human could step outside of his or her own experience to communicate ideas to others, was repudiated. Accordingly, the theories of critics like Richard Gilman, who suggested that white critics engage in a moratorium on judging Black writing, and the Black poet LeRoi Jones, who argued that white listeners could never understand the music of Black jazz musicians, gained widespread acceptance.82

The idea that there existed unbridgeable gulfs between people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds, or between any human beings, was anathema to the cosmopolitan ideal cherished by the New York Intellectuals. The assumption that race, ethnicity, or gender is first and foremost in a person’s experience negated the view that humans were capable of a variety of identities and psychic connections. The New York Intellectuals took the view that if the canon of Western literature was deficient in any area, it was in the failure of Western intellectual elites to seek out important creative works by minority writers and women; but by no means should literature be judged by the extent to which it relates the experiences of these groups.83
Interestingly, the response of the New York Intellectuals to the new critical thinking unfolded closely around the life and work of the Black writer James Baldwin. As the former Commentary staffer Nathan Glazer recalled, Baldwin began his career by writing for the journals controlled by the New York Intellectuals such as Partisan Review and Commentary, journals with editors and contributors who had hope for American pluralism and race relations. Glazer wrote of Baldwin, “[H]ow he came to us I don’t recall, but I do recall our pleasure that a remarkable young Black writer—how remarkable we didn’t yet know—had come to us.”

Glazer explained that Baldwin wrote poignantly about the Black condition in America and that his position on Black leadership was not very different from the way the Jewish intellectuals writing in Commentary felt toward the “official” Jewish community. “The Negro press supports any man, providing he is sufficiently dark and well-known—with the exception of certain Negro novelists accused of drawing portraits unflattering to the Negro race,” Baldwin had written. This was “exactly what a Jewish writer, thinking of the difficulties of Isaac Rosenfeld and Philip Roth, might have written,” Glazer explained.

In two of his earliest essays—“Everybody’s Protest Novel” and “Many Thousands Gone”—Baldwin had criticized the treatment given to the Black experience in the genre of protest novels, from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s abolitionist Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) through Richard Wright’s Native Son (1940) and Black Boy (1945), for their “rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.”

Baldwin saw Stowe’s figure of Uncle Tom, the Black slave who is “Jet-black, woolly haired, illiterate” and “phenomenally forbearing,” and Wright’s Bigger Thomas, the snarling, menacing, Black murderer and sexual predator, as symbols used by both writers to protest the condition and the history of Black Americans. While Stowe used the Uncle Tom character to express the virtuous rage of a white abolitionist and Wright created Bigger Thomas to destroy the myth of Uncle Tom, Baldwin saw that both images of the Black male failed to contend with the possibility of his humanity. The whole idea of Bigger Thomas, Baldwin wrote, “carries, implicitly, the most remarkable confession: that is, that Negro life is in fact as debased and impoverished as our theology claims.”

Many in the New York Intellectual world were deeply taken by Baldwin’s attacks on Black protest literature. Nevertheless, by 1963 Baldwin had become disillusioned with the idea of integration and more sympathetic
to Black nationalism. Baldwin’s historic 1963 essay, The Fire Next Time, about the Black Muslims, reflected a sense of the simmering rage that existed in the Black community and that would, after the urban riots of the mid-1960s, become a prominent feature of Black political discourse. Baldwin did not agree with the entire program of the Black Muslims, which included the effort to establish a separate Black nation on United States soil, or with their belief that the dignity of Black Americans could be salvaged only by the use of violence. But Baldwin did agree with the Muslims’ assertion that the “white man’s heaven is the Black man’s hell”; that what the Muslims said about the evils of white America were essentially correct; and that if something was not done about it soon, Blacks might understandably turn to violence. Baldwin also retained a high degree of ambivalence toward the efficacy of racial integration by asking, “Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?”

Baldwin’s essay hit home with the New York Intellectuals because it marked a shift in the Black writer they believed most closely shared their commitment to the cosmopolitan ideal. Some New York Intellectuals were convinced by Baldwin’s shift that perhaps the Black experience weighed so heavily on Black writers that here, too, something other than aesthetic judgments must be employed in evaluating the work of art. In other words, perhaps for the time being, the Black writer in America, due to the verities of his historical experience, could not take his place as an equal in the culture of high modernism. What is perhaps most interesting about the reactions of certain New York critics to these developments is the way in which their reflections about Blacks were so thoroughly commingled with their Jewish identities.

Norman Podhoretz, Leslie Fiedler, and the Fantasy of Miscegenation

Norman Podhoretz was one intellectual whose disillusionment with Baldwin inspired a brisk response that, when combined with the history of his early tenure as editor of Commentary magazine, reveals much about the Jewish identity of the New York Intellectuals. Until this stocky and combative intellectual took over the editorship of Commentary in 1960 at the precocious age of thirty, the magazine had been liberal under the editorship of Elliott Cohen but generally restrained by a staunch anti-Communist line. When Podhoretz took over, he brought the magazine to the left, interspersing articles by young radicals like Staughton Lynde, H. Stuart Hughes,
and Paul Goodman with the usual *Commentary* articles. More important, Podhoretz believed strongly that the Jewish community in the United States was neither monolithic in its desires nor fully aware of its needs, and he was determined to make *Commentary* a forum for this ambivalence. The “new *Commentary,*” according to Podhoretz, “bespoke, and reflected, a more advanced stage of acculturation than the old, and was accordingly more general than Jewish in emphasis.”90 Between 1960, when Podhoretz took over, and 1966, the circulation of the magazine grew from roughly twenty thousand to sixty thousand by appealing to a readership that was “neither especially religious nor much Zionist” but that “keenly awaited *Commentary* every month as if it were a public realm in which Jews were permitted to live on the questions.”91 Perhaps the changes Podhoretz effected were best summed up by a letter to the editor in April 1961 in which the author wrote “though I read many periodicals regularly, *Commentary* became one of them only a few months ago, for the magazine interests me precisely to the extent that the new editorial regime has de-Judaized its contents.”92

It was probably no coincidence that the most radical thing Podhoretz would do with *Commentary* in his early years there was prompted by James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time.* Baldwin’s essay had confirmed for Podhoretz the already strong sense of skepticism with which he viewed liberal integrationism, and in his controversial article “My Negro Problem—and Ours” it is possible to see precisely how Podhoretz’s vague “cosmopolitan” sense of Jewishness was reflected in his assessment of the role of Black culture and of Jewish culture in American life.93

Podhoretz was less disturbed by what Baldwin had to say in his essay than by what he felt was the poor treatment he had received from Baldwin throughout the writing of it. As he tells the story in his autobiographical *Making It,* in keeping with the new radicalism of the magazine Podhoretz had asked Baldwin, a friend of the “old” *Commentary,* to write a piece on the Black Muslim movement. Baldwin agreed to do it, and the two met regularly and communicated by mail throughout the composition of the work. Following a period of a few weeks in which there had been no communication, Podhoretz phoned Baldwin about the progress of the piece, only to be told by Baldwin that he had sold it to the *New Yorker* magazine for twelve thousand dollars, roughly twenty times the amount *Commentary* was able to offer. “I was thunderstruck,” wrote Podhoretz; no “greater violation of the ethics of the trade could be imagined.”94 Not knowing what to do and believing that legal action against Baldwin would
be “unseemly,” Podhoretz told almost everyone he knew about what had happened and found that the responses people gave to his story were, in his judgment, far more understanding and forgiving than they would have been if a white writer had done what Baldwin allegedly had done. At a meeting with the Black writer over drinks, Podhoretz told Baldwin that he had dared to do what no white writer would have done because he knew white guilt would exonerate him. After Podhoretz explained to Baldwin that he suffered from no such guilt, Baldwin urged him to get his feelings down on paper. Just as Podhoretz had played a role in encouraging Baldwin’s essay, Baldwin encouraged Podhoretz to write his.

The result was “My Negro Problem,” a mea culpa in which Podhoretz described his lifelong difficulty trying to reconcile the liberal belief that all Black Americans were persecuted with his own experience of being victimized by Blacks. The concept that Blacks were always oppressed was almost as difficult for Podhoretz to grasp as a young Jewish boy growing up in Depression-era Brownsville as was the idea that all Jews were rich. The only Jews Podhoretz knew were poor, and the only Blacks he knew were the ones who were doing the persecuting—“and doing it, moreover, to me.”

Podhoretz went on to describe a number of boyhood incidents in which he was bullied by Black boys from his neighborhood, the most formative one being the time Podhoretz was waylaid by two Black classmates with a baseball bat while he was standing alone in front of the brownstone walkup in which he lived. As an intellectual writing about this incident, Podhoretz tried to understand why the interethnic battles, which were common among white ethnic groups, seemed to have a special intensity when the opposing groups were Black and white. “Why, why should it have been so different as between the Negroes and us?” he pleaded. Podhoretz argued that the usual explanation—that Black Americans hated whites because of the “entrapment that poisons the soul of the Negro” and that whites hated Blacks because of an unacknowledged guilt—contained some truth, but that this was not the whole issue. The answer came from the idea propounded by both James Baldwin in his essay “Nobody Knows My Name” and Ralph Ellison in Invisible Man (1952)—that white people refused to see Black Americans and that this perceptual deficiency worked in both directions. Black Americans knew that what whites saw in them was the color of their skin and that in white eyes they were all alike, and therefore something less than human. Similarly, despite having lived a life that would appear to exonerate him from the white world’s sins, Podhoretz
found that his own white skin was enough to mark him in Black eyes as the enemy, even though he was not, “and in a war it is only the uniform that counts and not the person.”

Podhoretz admitted that this psychological projection operated on him, for he looked at Black boys in his neighborhood as symbols, “the very embodiment of the values of the street—free, independent, reckless, brave, masculine, erotic.” Conversely, Podhoretz believed the noontime lunches of spinach and potatoes his mother prepared for him, his prudent behavior in the face of authority, and the hat and mittens his mother forced him to wear in the winter were secretly envied by the Black boys. The upshot of all the psychological dueling was that just as—“we have it on the authority of James Baldwin”—all Black Americans hate whites—all whites “are sick in their feelings about Negroes.” Podhoretz did not deny that all whites, including immigrant Jews, might have received certain benefits just by virtue of having white skin, but he insisted that in his own case, and in the case of most of the Jews he had grown up with, having white skin had not been noticeably beneficial. Just as Podhoretz believed himself to be only marginally better off than the Black street toughs who beat him up as a youngster, so he saw no particular advantages accruing to a white writer like himself that had been denied to a Black writer like James Baldwin. In fact, both the Black street toughs and Baldwin appeared to share significant advantages vis-à-vis white liberals in their respective realms. What disturbed Podhoretz most was that, in seeing all whites as similarly situated, Blacks and white liberals were not only blurring important differences in the social status of whites but encouraging bigotry in Blacks that would never be tolerated in whites. “There are the writers and intellectuals and artists who romanticize Negroes and pander to them, assuming a guilt that is not properly theirs. And there are all the white liberals who permit Negroes to blackmail them into adopting a double standard of moral judgement, and who lend themselves . . . to cunning and contemptuous exploitation by Negroes they employ or try to befriend.”

Most of the New York writers considered Baldwin, on the basis of his early essays, to be a Black intellectual in almost exactly the same sense as most of them were Jewish intellectuals. “As they [Jewish intellectuals] had moved out of the milieu into the broader world of Western culture, he [Baldwin] had too, taking his bearings as a writer not from ancestral ethnic sources but from the traditions of the literary mainstream,” Podhoretz once wrote. But The Fire Next Time, along with the soft response of white liberals to Baldwin’s alleged professional duplicity, had caused Podhoretz...
to doubt the efficacy of integration. The only possible solution to America's racial problem that Podhoretz could imagine was a wholesale fusion of the races through miscegenation. Podhoretz believed that there should be little cause for distress in the Black community if this were to happen, for there was little in the Black past that Blacks should want to preserve: "His past is a stigma, his color is a stigma, and his vision of the future is the hope of erasing the stigma by making color irrelevant, by making it disappear as a fact of consciousness." Podhoretz later admitted that his solution of miscegenation was rather naive since, as Ralph Ellison subsequently pointed out to him, the children of mixed racial sex would be considered Black. But Podhoretz was not proposing miscegenation as a viable solution so much as he was promoting the idea that the result of racial fusion would be the most desirable outcome to America's racial dilemma. It is perhaps most revealing that Podhoretz had come to this conclusion about Black culture and the Black past by way of his own ambivalence as a Jew. "In thinking about the Jews I have often wondered whether their survival as a distinct group was worth one hair on the head of a single infant. Did the Jews have to survive so that six million innocent people should one day be burned in the ovens of Auschwitz?" Podhoretz had earlier recorded similar feelings about the Jewish faith. Proclaiming the likelihood of the emergence of a new religion that would gradually take over the world and displace those currently in existence, Podhoretz reassured the Jewish readers of *Commentary* in his first year at the helm "that one ought to feel a sense of 'historical reverence' to Jewish tradition, even, or perhaps especially, if one is convinced that the curtain is about to drop on the last act of a very long play." It is no wonder, then, that as a Jew Podhoretz had few qualms about his idea of intermarriage with Black Americans, who are predominantly Christian. When he asked himself if he would want his daughter "to marry one," Podhoretz answered, "No, I wouldn't like it at all. I would rail and rave and rant and tear my hair. And then I hope I would have the courage to curse myself for railing and ranting, and to give her my blessing." It should be noted that such a positive view of racial mixing appears to be a distinguishing characteristic of the New York critics. Miscegenation has appeared in the literary mind of non-Jewish whites, but it has mostly been regarded with prurient disdain. This has been as true of such American literary giants as William Dean Howells, George Washington Cable, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, and Allan Tate as it has for out-and-out racists like Thomas Dixon. Essentially, these writers reflected in
their work the commonly held notion that miscegenation amounted to racial pollution and often used the dangers of racial mixing to justify continued racial segregation. But for at least a few of the ambivalent Jewish intellectuals, miscegenation was seen in a positive light, holding forth the promise of a universally accessible modern culture that historical Black stigmatization appeared to have rendered impossible. Whereas the opposition to miscegenation on the part of white gentile writers stemmed from the belief in the purity of the white race, the cosmopolitan New York Intellectuals who wrote positively of the idea of racial mixing are notable, at least on some level, for their lack of concern for the sustenance and continuity of Jewish culture. As one writer recently put it, "Jewish intellectuals often saw themselves as prophets of cultural misogyny, standing above all parties and peoples, transcending rather than imitating the divisions among others." Podhoretz’s attraction to the idea of sexual fusion as a solution to the American race problem was shared by Leslie Fiedler, the brilliant iconoclast who had been the first critic to identify interracial, homosexual love as a central motif in American literature. Fiedler insisted that within some of the most highly regarded American classics “are disturbing sexual overtones, which combine with and are reinforced by an uneasy ambivalence toward the problem of race relations.” Where homosexuality contradicted the national myth of masculine love, Fiedler believed, the white man’s relationship with the Black and the American Indian contradicted the myth of equality, and in American literature these two hypocrisies often come together in the fantasy of boyhood love between two males of different color. The most famous examples Fiedler pointed to included Richard Henry Dana’s Two Years Before the Mast (1840), the Leatherstocking tales of James Fenimore Cooper (1826–1841), Herman Melville’s Moby Dick (1851), and Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn (1892). “In Dana, it is the narrator’s melancholy love for Kanaka, Hope; in Cooper, the lifelong affection of Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook; in Melville, Ishmael’s love for Queequeg; in Twain, Huck’s feeling for Nigger Jim.” Just at the moment when the world’s great novels would give us heterosexual passion in all its varieties, Fiedler argued, in American literature “we come instead on the fugitive slave and the no-account boy lying side by side on a raft borne by the endless river toward an impossible escape, or the pariah sailor waking in the tattooed arms of the brown harpooner on the verge of their impossible quest.” The white renegade male, then, joins himself to the colored male who has always been a renegade. “Behind the white American nightmare
that someday, no longer tourist, inheritor, or liberator, he will be rejected, refused, he dreams of his acceptance at the heart he has most utterly offended.”

By the early 1960s, Fiedler commented that the task of mythologizing the relations between Black Americans and whites had passed to the Black writer, “to the descendants of Jim rather than those of Huck,” and he took a position on much of this literature that was typical of that of other New York Intellectuals. Richard Wright’s *Native Son* was too much of a reaction against the image of Uncle Tom to enable it to outlive the cause that occasioned Wright’s wrath. “Uncle Tom and Bigger Thomas, Tom and anti-Tom, are not very different in the end: wooly-haired sniveler and Black bully both sacrificing the possibility of authenticity and full humanity in order to provide ‘satisfaction and security’ for those bound to them by ties of mutual terror.” On Ralph Ellison’s attempt to escape the protest genre in his *Invisible Man*, on the other hand, Fiedler wrote that the book lacked authenticity. “Ellison’s invisible protagonist... seems a secondhand version of the Black man in America, based on a European intellectual’s version of the alienated Jew.” Fiedler believed the Black American was unable to escape his historical condition. “As long as the Negro remains a Negro... a part of his self consciousness must be the consciousness of our offenses against him... without a hatred equal to our guilt, he would not know himself for what he is, that is, what we made him.”

By the mid-1960s Fiedler was beginning to suspect that the ultimate assimilation of Black Americans through male love and friendship that he had identified in the American literary tradition was beginning to take place, and he also suspected that both colored and white were becoming a “tertium quid” that more closely resembled the white myths about the Black American than it did the actual lives of either. In the achievement of the “tertium quo,” Fiedler believed, the Jew, the middle-man, could play a special role.

In Fiedler’s view, such books as Norman Mailer’s *An American Dream* (1965), Nat Hentoff’s *Call the Keeper* (1966), and Jay Neugeboren’s *Big Man* (1966), as well as his own *The Last Jew in America* (1966), indicated that the job of recreating the Black image away from the old WASP clichés had now fallen to Jewish writers. Ironically, though, Fiedler believed the interests of the Jew and the Black American were irreconcilable. It had become abundantly clear to Fiedler that equality of opportunity would not grant everyone, particularly those who had been brutalized as thoroughly as Black Americans had, a decent life or the possibility of prosperity. This
realization, Fiedler thought, would bring nothing but despair for Jews, whose enlightened liberalism would now be the third religion they would have to give up, having already lost orthodoxy and Stalinism/Trotskyism, all within the same century. But there was hope. On a plane to Jerusalem, a man who worked for a Jewish adoption agency told Fiedler that the number of Jewish girls giving birth to illegitimate Black babies was mounting spectacularly. Fiedler had personally spoken with mixed-race couples and found that most of them consisted of "pretty blond Jewish girls and Negro men." From this Fiedler surmised that the Jewish girls were breaking the old sexual taboos against the Black American and that this could very well mean the "beginning of the end" of America's racial nightmare. A new mythology was being invented "though like all new myths this one, too, contains within it one very old, indeed, the myth of the Jewish daughter, Hadassah...dancing naked for our salvation before the gentile king."\(^{115}\) The only problem Fiedler could foresee arising from marriage between Jewish girls and Black men was an increase in Black anti-Semitism, since some Black radicals had accused Jewish women of emasculating Black men. But he preferred to live in the hope of intermarriage between Jews and Blacks, "convinced of its superiority to all the weary mythologies of mere politics."\(^{116}\)

The radicalism of miscegenation as a solution to the race problem is testimony to the agony Jewish intellectuals experienced in trying to reconcile the situation of the Black American with the exalted idea of a shared culture, and the ease with which a few of them espoused Jewish intermarriage indicates that their commitment to Jewish distinctiveness was perhaps no more intense than their commitment to Black distinctiveness.

**Irving Howe and the Black Writer**

The belief that the Black experience represented an insurmountable obstacle to achieving a truly integrated high culture perhaps weighed heaviest on Irving Howe. The weaknesses Howe found in the work of Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time* and *Another Country* (1962), and of Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man*, convinced him that Black American writers could not stay true to themselves without letting some measure of social protest seep into their work, and he addressed the attempts of both writers to declare themselves liberated from the necessity of social protest. In his widely read and controversial 1963 essay, "Black Boys and Native Sons," Howe gave pow-
erful expression to the view that the severity of the Black experience necessarily proscribed the Black writer.\textsuperscript{117}

If it was true, as Baldwin had written, that "literature and sociology were not one and the same," then Howe felt it was also true that one "writes out of one thing only—one's own experience." Accordingly, Howe wrote in "Black Boys," "What, then, was the experience of a man with a black skin, what could it be in this country? How could a Negro put pen to paper, how could he so much as think or breathe, without some impulsion to protest."\textsuperscript{118} The Black writer must confront his own experience in America, Howe thought, and only through this confrontation could he achieve true authenticity. For Howe, Richard Wright's \textit{Native Son} was the greatest achievement in Black writing. "What is more, the very act of writing a novel, the effort to confront what Bigger Thomas means to him, is for such a writer a way of dredging up and then perhaps shedding the violence that society has pounded into him."\textsuperscript{119}

Howe believed that it was necessary for Wright, as it was for all Black novelists, to face the terror and violence of the Black past because of one "primary and inescapable truth . . . that violence is central in the life of the American Negro, defining and crippling him with a harshness few other Americans need suffer." It was the necessity to confront the violence in his life that saddled the Black writer with a handicap Howe felt might ultimately keep Black writers from joining the cosmopolitan world of high letters. "Bigger Thomas may be enslaved to a hunger for violence, but anyone reading \textit{Native Son} with mere courtesy must observe the way in which Wright, even while yielding emotionally to Bigger's deprivation, also struggles to transcend it. That he did not fully succeed seems obvious; one may doubt that any Negro writer can."\textsuperscript{120} Consistent with his lifelong belief that the social world must sometimes impinge on artistic independence, Howe explained that the special circumstances at hand necessitated a different standard of judgment. "To say this," wrote Howe, "is not to propose the condescension of exempting Negro writers from moral judgement, but to suggest the terms of understanding, and still more, the terms of hesitation for making a judgement."\textsuperscript{121}

The discomfort Howe felt with employing special criteria for the judgment of Black literature became apparent by his qualifying hesitance. He agreed that Baldwin had scored a major point when he criticized protest novels for cutting away the positive dimension of Black life; he also acknowledged that the posture of militance exacted a heavy price from the writer, a price that includes the reader's inclination to believe that in Black
life “there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse.” But in his equivocation, Howe attested to his belief in the primacy of the social world in the affair at hand. “All one can ask, by way of reply, is whether the refusal to struggle may not exact a still greater price.”

Ralph Ellison registered on Howe’s consciousness because of his alleged attempt to deny or escape his experience as a Black American in his novel *Invisible Man* and in comments he had made after receiving the National Book Award in January of 1953. On this occasion Ellison said of *Invisible Man* that, in order for the novel to fully capture America for its “rich diversity” and “magical fluidity and freedom,” he had been forced “to conceive of a novel unburdened by the narrow naturalism which has led, after so many triumphs, to the final and unrelieved despair which marks so much of our current fiction.”

In “Black Boys,” Howe argued that *Invisible Man* was a “brilliant but flawed achievement,” which stood with *Native Son* as the major works composed by Black Americans, and the one novel that came closest to a nonprotest novel. The story of the journey from South to North of the young Black boy, from childhood humiliations at the hands of whites, to a Southern Black college, from job to job in the North, and finally into the hands of the Harlem Communists, avoided “for long stretches” the formula of protest that Baldwin had eloquently described, yet was not so perfectly free from the “ideological and emotional penalties” suffered by Black Americans in the United States. The brilliance of the novel was Ellison’s “rich and wild inventiveness” and his ability to capture the “hidden gloom and surface gaiety of Negro life.” But Ellison could not avoid getting caught up in the “idea of the Negro.” What irked Howe most was the hero’s assertion at the end of the novel, as he “finds himself” in some unspecified way, that “my world has become one of infinite possibilities.” Howe called this technique of proclaiming self-liberation a favorite strategy of the 1950s but a strategy that “violates the realities of social life, the interplay between external conditions and personal will.” It was impossible, Howe felt, to define one’s individuality without dealing with social barriers that stood in the way. “Freedom can be fought for, but it cannot always be willed or asserted into existence. And it seems hardly an accident that even as Ellison’s hero asserts the ‘infinite possibilities’ he makes no attempt to specify them.”

Howe’s contention that Baldwin and Ellison masqueraded as “Native Sons” to hide the fact that they were “Black Boys” evoked a reply of
judged by those high standards of modern culture. "I can only ask that my embodiment of hell. "He seems never to have considered," wrote Ellison of Howe, that "American Negro life... is also a discipline... There is a fullness, even a richness here; and here despite the realities of politics, perhaps, but nevertheless here and real. Because it is a human life." 127

Claiming the right to polyvocality that the Jewish intellectuals claimed for themselves, Ellison wondered why, if Howe believed Wright had an authentic Black American tone, that was the only authentic Black tone. "He [Wright] had his memories and I have mine, just as I suppose Irving Howe has his." 128

As his reply to Howe unfolded, it became obvious that Ellison had attempted to claim for the Black writer the role of the cosmopolitan intellectual that had appealed so much to the Jewish writers and that a succeeding generation of Black critics would try to retrieve after the Black Arts movement of the 1960s. 129 Ellison insisted that his literary ancestors were Tolstoy, Hemingway, Marx, T. S. Eliot, Pound, and André Malraux, more so even than Richard Wright, and he pleaded for his work to be judged by those high standards of modern culture. "I can only ask that my fiction be judged as art; if it fails, it fails aesthetically, not because I did or did not fight some ideological battle," Ellison wrote. It is worth noting that, while Howe never identified himself as a Jew in his essay, Ellison took the liberty of doing so. "Thus I felt uncomfortable," Ellison wrote, "whenever I discover Jewish intellectuals writing as though they were guilty of enslaving my grandparents, or as though the Jews were responsible for the system of segregation. Not only do they have enough troubles of their own, as the saying goes, but Negroes know this only too well." 130

Howe, in the words of the critic Daniel Aaron, did not believe the Black writer could go the route of other ethnic American writers in passing from "hyphenation" to "dehyphenation," in which minority writers pass from the periphery to the center of society, "viewing it no less critically, perhaps, but more knowingly." Speaking of Howe, Aaron wrote that "Even the well-wishers of the Negro, it seemed, were imprisoned by their liberal stereotypes, asserting unequivocally that all Negroes had identical experiences, bore the same psychic wounds, suffered the same slights and irritations." "By the same logic," Aaron continued, "the Jew was somehow betraying himself and Jewry in the act of transcending his Jewishness." 131 Omitted from Aaron's critique, however, was Howe's explicit declaration...
that the Black experience in America was so different in kind from that of the Jews, or of any other group, that it was impossible for a Black to work outside of that experience, whereas a Jewish writer in America quite possibly could.

It is here that Ellison’s statement that Howe had been identifying himself with the white power structure by assuming a guilt for Black misery for which Jews can not properly be blamed takes on real meaning. Ellison had written that this phenomenon was typical of Jewish intellectuals and that it was unfortunate, because he considered “the United States freer politically and richer culturally because there were Jewish Americans to bring to it the benefit of their special forms of dissent.” But he did not allow for the possibility that Howe’s identification with the suffering of Black Americans itself constituted a special form of Jewish dissent. As Cynthia Ozick has written of the Howe-Ellison exchange, Howe may indeed have been unconsciously identifying, as Ellison had charged, but it was as a Jew and not with the white power structure. “Howe’s call for the ‘impulsion to protest’ was not a matter of burnt cork,” wrote Ozick; “he was not coming on as a make-believe Negro (and certainly not as a make-believe member of the ‘power structure’), but rather as a Jew responding implicitly and naturally—i.e., vicariously—to an urgent moment in history, applying to that moment the ‘benefit of [his] special form of dissent.’”

It is probably appropriate here to read Howe’s critique in the context of his lifelong struggle with Jewish identity, for Howe obviously felt that his own experience as a Jew made far less of an impression upon his consciousness as a writer than Ellison’s experience as a Black man had made on his. When socialism reached an impasse in the postwar years, Howe said that his “reconquest of Jewishness” had become an important project in his life. But even Howe could not explain what this “reconquest” meant. “I had no aptitude for religion, little taste for nationalism, and rarely a wish to go back to old neighborhoods.” Howe explained that Jewish intellectuals like himself in the postwar period “were living through a confused experience of self-acceptance . . . we were now learning to accept the ease that might come from acknowledgment and even taking pleasure in ties with a past that, in any case, had become an integral part of our being.” “History,” he wrote, “was handing out cruel blows, teaching cruel lessons.” When Howe died, in 1993, his friend and critic Leon Wieseltier wrote that he could not count the number of breakfasts over which Howe had lamented the decline of the secular Jewish world. He had lived with the
feeling that he was a “man without contemporaries,” Wieseltier wrote. Not even his substantial commitment to the translation of Yiddish literature enabled him to “solve . . . the problem of ‘Jewishness’.” Howe’s view of Jewish culture as a relic of the past is revealed by his comments regarding the overwhelming popular reception of his landmark history of the Jewish immigrant world of New York’s Lower East Side, *World of Our Fathers* (1976). Many Jews turned to this book, Howe felt, because it provided a fragment of a past no longer available to them, upon which they could sentimentally fasten a fading national or religious identity. “Some of this turning back strikes me as a last hurrah of nostalgia. Each day, necessarily, it keeps getting weaker and sillier.” It is instructive to note in this respect that, even for the purposes of his debate with Ellison, Howe remained insistent over the years that he did not approach the discussion from any particular Jewish standpoint, that, in other words, while Ellison could not help writing from his Blackness, he himself was free to choose the lens through which he viewed the world. Given the discomfort Howe experienced with defining his Jewishness, it is not unreasonable to assume that his view of the Black writer and his predicament was informed by his own sense of Jewish loss and that it was not with condescension but with envy that he looked at the Black writer, who, at least for the time being, would not have to engage the cryptic forces of loss and remembrance. Perhaps Howe felt that the anxiousness of Ellison and Baldwin to announce their liberation from the historical pressures of the Black experience was not only a literary impossibility but a personal impropriety as well.

Be that as it may, the only thing that can be said with certainty about the Howe-Ellison exchange is that it reflected the difficulty a “Jewish intellectual with cosmopolitan tastes” had in determining the boundary line between the pressures of the social world and art. Howe himself admitted to having been guilty of waging his own personal battle over the point where ethnicity ends and art begins in his bout with Ellison. By the early 1960s, after the Black Arts movement had rejected Ellison’s point of view in favor of a nationalist and separatist style in Black writing, Howe sheepishly acknowledged victory but conceded that his own view had been mired in indecisiveness. “My view that the Negro writer, while trapped in a historical situation that makes protest all but unavoidable, nevertheless seeks to find ways of mediating between the gross historical pressures that surround him” would strike the literary intellectuals “as a token of equivocation, if not worse.”
Blacks and Jews in American Intellectual Life

The Black American, both in the literary world and in the social world, posed a major obstacle to the cosmopolitan ideal cherished by the New York Intellectuals. The cosmopolitan ideal was antithetical to the “cultural populism” fostered by the Communists of the 1930s, which had emerged again in the 1960s, giving life to the idea that cultural and social minorities, such as Black Americans, ethnic groups, gays, and women, could achieve cultural enfranchisement through the validation of their group membership. As one scholar described this friction between intellectual viewpoints, cultural “production came to be valued not for its aesthetic or intellectual distinction but for its representative powers... The New York Intellectuals also faced the problem of cultural enfranchisement, but...[t]hey looked for enfranchisement...through the entry into the already existing universality of European culture.”

Unable to countenance the thought of living in a world where a shared culture was not possible, and fully aware of the insurmountable nature of America’s race problem, the Jewish cosmopolitans negotiated the race crisis in a variety of ways. Irving Howe believed that, at least for the time being, Black writers would continue to be shackled to the Black past, unable to achieve literary authenticity without first “protesting” against social conditions, and prohibited from reaching the true aesthetic heights of cultural modernism. Norman Podhoretz and Leslie Fiedler dreamed of washing away the Black experience and its scars—benevolently, to be sure, but away nevertheless—through the surreal solution of miscegenation. Whatever else one can say about these attempts to deal with America’s race problem, they deeply reflected the Jewish ambivalence of the cosmopolitan intellectuals. That American intellectual life would one day become as disconnected and fractious as some of the Jewish cosmopolitans feared it would is perhaps not as significant as the case with which some of them approved of marrying off Jewish daughters to preserve that ideal.

Before one rushes to judgment, however, it is necessary to view the Jewish ambivalence of the New York Intellectuals and the approach they took towards race and culture in light of the realities of Jewish life in the United States. The history of the Jews in American literature before the 1940s and 1950s is instructive in forging an understanding of this phenomenon. While there were a few celebrated individuals like Abraham Cahan and Ludwig Lewisohn, American Jews played only a tiny, unimportant role in American letters before the war. Moreover, the role that these isolated
individuals did play had little to do with their being Jewish but rather was related to their having learned to "pass." Norman Podhoretz has written that the ability to operate in an unobtrusive manner within accepted literary terms may have been a prerequisite for this kind of passing.\footnote{In the 1930s, there were a number of talented Jewish writers in the United States, but their work was still confined to the experience of the Jewish ghetto, which served to prohibit its wider appeal. But the decline of anti-Semitism and the greater acculturation of Jews after World War II served to create a tension between the promise of assimilation and the life of the immigrant past that was distinctly American, a tension through which American Jewish writers were able to find their entrance into the literary imagination. The Jewish imagination by itself was not capable of weighing on the American literary conscience in any significant way. It had first to be transformed before it could resonate widely. It is true that the famous Jewish triumvirate of Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth has been given all the highest honors that American letters can bestow upon a writer. But works by these authors have had an appeal that is tied to their transitional nature, the way they have gone about exploring the circumstances surrounding the transformation of the Jews from a foreign immigrant people to a native American one: they therefore do not really qualify as reflections of authentic Jewishness or of a vibrant Jewish culture.\footnote{Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that the Black American, the socially most marginal yet historically most integral American, finds his way into so many stories and novels by American Jews. Whether it be the little Black boy in Roth's \textit{Goodbye Columbus}, the Black (Jewish) angel in Malamud's "Angel Levine," the young Black feminist in Jo Sinclair's \textit{The Changelings}, the militant writer Willie Spearmint in Malamud's \textit{The Tenants}, the Black pickpocket in Bellow's \textit{Mr. Sammler's Planet}, or the heroic ghetto youth in Edward Louis Wallant's \textit{The Pawnbroker}, the Black character or the theme of race represents an effort by the author to engage a people organically connected to the United States. Given the precariousness of his own cultural foundations, it was incumbent upon the American Jewish novelist to look outside his tradition for literary sustenance, and he often found it, predictably, in the Black American and his mighty epic. In the words of Ralph Ellison, "what the Jewish American writer had to learn before he could find his place was the American-ness of his experience. He had to see himself as American and project his Jewish experience as an experience unfolding within this pluralistic society."}142 Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that the Black American, the socially most marginal yet historically most integral American, finds his way into so many stories and novels by American Jews. Whether it be the little Black boy in Roth's \textit{Goodbye Columbus}, the Black (Jewish) angel in Malamud's "Angel Levine," the young Black feminist in Jo Sinclair's \textit{The Changelings}, the militant writer Willie Spearmint in Malamud's \textit{The Tenants}, the Black pickpocket in Bellow's \textit{Mr. Sammler's Planet}, or the heroic ghetto youth in Edward Louis Wallant's \textit{The Pawnbroker}, the Black character or the theme of race represents an effort by the author to engage a people organically connected to the United States. Given the precariousness of his own cultural foundations, it was incumbent upon the American Jewish novelist to look outside his tradition for literary sustenance, and he often found it, predictably, in the Black American and his mighty epic. In the words of Ralph Ellison, "what the Jewish American writer had to learn before he could find his place was the American-ness of his experience. He had to see himself as American and project his Jewish experience as an experience unfolding within this pluralistic society."143

While it is true that the New York Intellectuals may not have played a
large role in helping to sustain or to reinvent American Jewish culture, one can only wonder what could have been achieved had they adopted such a project as their own. It is useful in this regard to explore the fate of those “other” twentieth-century New York Jewish intellectuals for whom Jewishness was indeed central and to whom a volume of essays has been dedicated. 144 With the benefit of hindsight, it now appears that the cultural impact, on both American Jewish life and the broader cultural life of the United States, of these “Jewish” Jewish intellectuals has been perhaps no greater, and possibly somewhat less, than the cultural impact of the New York Intellectuals who did not make Jewishness central to their work. These are the “affinitively” Jewish intellectuals who wrote for such journals as the Jewish Frontier and the Menorah Journal and who, unlike their cosmopolitan counterparts at Partisan Review and Commentary, were celebrated not by gentiles and “non-Jewish” Jews but by the international Jewish community that had “remained within the perimeter of Zionism, Yiddishism, Judaism, and Jewish culture in its infinite variety.” 145 These “Jewish” Jewish intellectuals included the Labor Zionists Hayim Greenberg, Ben Halpern, and Marie Syrkin; the Menorah Journal editor Henry Hurwitz; the Yiddishist Maurice Samuel; the militant Zionist Ludwig Lewisohn; and the theologians Mordecai Kaplan, Will Herberg, and Milton Steinberg, all writers who made Judaism or Jewishness the defining mark of their intellectual pursuits. These intellectuals were “nominatively” Jews, and the central theme underlying the volume dedicated to them is that, while the “Jewish” Jewish intellectuals have not garnered the widespread recognition of their cosmopolitan counterparts, their work is perhaps more worthy of preservation because of its peculiarly Jewish nature. “The effort is a very Jewish one,” writes the editor Carole Kessner of the purpose for her volume The “Other” New York Jewish Intellectuals: “commitment to the preservation of the worthy past and its incorporation into the present for the sake of the future.” 146 Kessner acknowledges that in this endeavor she has been influenced by the work of the author and critic Cynthia Ozick. In her famous critique of Jewish cosmopolitans, Ozick defended Jewish writers with a strong Jewish consciousness on the grounds that their achievements are generally longer lasting and serve to strengthen Jewish culture. 147

But the fate of Jewish culture and Jewish intellectuals in the United States may be more complicated than Ozick presumes, and her assumption that the specifically Jewish work of Jewish writers will survive among Jews, if not among the general public, appears now to be a shaky proposition. Ozick’s premise seems to depend on the survival of a thriving Jewish cul-
Jewish intellectuals were immersed in the business of creating or sustaining Jewish community can now look for inspiration to the work of Trude­ whom preferred to live out their lives in diaspora? What segment of the worthy projects that, except for post-Holocaust theology, are no longer approaches to twentieth-century Judaism. 150 Nevertheless, most of the affirmed Jewish intellectuals feature in Kessner’s volume seem to be possessed of concerns from a different time period, issues peculiar to a specific generation of immigrant intellectuals trained in European universities but unable to find an intellectual niche in the United States. Most of these Jewish intellectuals were immersed in the business of creating or sustaining support for a Jewish state, of championing the Yiddish language, of defining an American pluralism in which Jewish expression would be acceptable, or in reaffirming a Jewish relationship with God after the Holocaust, all worthy projects that, except for post-Holocaust theology, are no longer sufficient to inspire a Jewish community languishing in the cultural malaise of the 1990s. As the Jewish historian Henry Feingold has written of these “Jewy” Jews, not only did they pay their price in fame by confining themselves to the Jewish arena, but this arena itself was fast fading. “The ‘other’ intellectuals lived at the tail end of a dying culture.” 151

It is with this in mind that the work of the cosmopolitan New York Intellectuals must be evaluated. The historical forces of freedom and assimilation that operated on the New York Intellectuals are the same historical forces that continue to operate on the American Jewish psyche, probably to a far greater extent than the cultural forces of Yiddish, Hebrew, or even Zionism. In this sense the New York Intellectuals spoke directly to the primary question facing most American Jews at the end of the twentieth
century: how can one be Jewish in a free, secular society? If the New York Intellectuals chose to emphasize their own transition from being Jewish to being Jewish American, it was because the tension caused by that transition was available to them as the most prepossessing component of their Jewishness.

That the New York Intellectuals themselves were unable to resolve the tension between universalism and particularism puts them in the company of just about everyone else who has tried, perhaps because that is the kind of tension that never really dissipates. Perhaps their greatest indiscretion was not recognizing the power of ethnic identity as a dynamic and changing phenomenon that need not have restricted their ideas about modernism and culture. The New York Intellectuals were well aware of the multiple meanings created by the peculiarly modern dilemma of "double consciousness." They knew, perhaps better than anyone else, that in the contemporary world one can have multiple identities and live in a void between two cultures. But few of them ever looked to ethnicity for the creation of new artistic forms or innovations. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the three New York Intellectuals highlighted in this study—Irving Howe, Norman Podhoretz, and Leslie Fiedler—all proffered the belief in later writings that, with the completion of the Jews' transition from being Jewish to being American, American Jewish writing disappeared as a significant genre in American literature.

This is also probably the reason that, when New York Intellectuals have decided to return to their Jewish roots, as in the case of Alfred Kazin's *A Walker in the City* or in Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers*, it has usually been in the form of nostalgic remembrances of a time long past. As Howe has written of the popularity of *World of Our Fathers*, perhaps it enabled Jews "to cast an affectionate backward glance at the world of their fathers before turning their backs upon it forever and moving on. . . . My book was not a beginning, it was still another step to the end." But if the New York Intellectuals were not sufficiently visionary to foresee the possibility of a Jewish literature in the United States beyond the ghettos they had left behind, this was because of the compromises they, as Jewish writers in America, were forced to make before broad public recognition could be bestowed upon them, compromises that Black writers in the United States, to return to our opening analogy, were not forced to make to obtain similar recognition. One must indeed compare the fates of the cosmopolitan Jewish intellectuals with that of Black intellectuals in the United States to fully appreciate the terms upon which acceptance of Jewish

writers and critics has been predicated. Norman Podhoretz has pointed out that Ludwig Lewisohn ceased being of any importance in the American literary world after he became a militant Zionist and that his decline was in dramatic contrast to the skyrocketing fame and acclaim that James Baldwin experienced when he underwent his conversion to Black nationalism with *The Fire Next Time*. This contrast between the fates of Black and Jewish writers in the United States continues today. The Black intellectuals who are now being compared to the New York Intellectuals have risen to prominence having first distinguished themselves by their analysis of racial subjects. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. has written, “it is the birthright of the Black writer that his experiences, however personal, are automatically historical.” Thus, Cornel West becomes a bestseller with his book *Race Matters* (1993), and bell hooks rises to prominence with her book on race, feminism, and culture *Outlaw Culture* (1994), as do Derrick Bell with his mordant look on race relations in the United States, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1992), and Michael Eric Dyson with *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* (1995). By contrast, the New York Intellectuals had to first gain prominence by writing books on non-Jewish subject matter before they were afforded the prestige commensurate with their talent. Alfred Kazin had first to write his sweeping survey of American literature, *On Native Grounds* (1942), before he could be comfortable writing *New York Jew* (1978). Irving Howe had to write *William Faulkner: A Critical Study* (1962) before *World of Our Fathers* (1976), Norman Podhoretz *Doings and Undoings: American Writing in the Fifties and After* (1963) before *Making It* (1968), and Lionel Trilling *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) before “Wordsworth and the Rabbis” (1955). As the scholar and critic Ruth Wisse has written of the early New York Intellectuals, the “failure of this predominantly Jewish intellectual community to address the plight of the Jews was as pronounced as its successful advancement into the mainstream of American culture.”

What, then, is one to make of the New York Intellectuals, these Jewish writers who seemed to know implicitly that there were certain conditions that had to be met before their work could garner widespread public interest? While the record of the cosmopolitans is nowhere near as admirable as that of the “Jewish” Jewish intellectuals in areas of specific Jewish concern, particularly with regard to the Holocaust and support for the state of Israel, they did deal, in a singularly skilled and noble fashion, with the larger question of being both Jewish and American. The New York Intellectuals allowed generations of Jewish intellectuals and educated lay peo-
people to sustain their sense of Jewishness by creating an independent intellectual community that brought the highest critical standards to bear on questions of intense importance to American Jews afflicted with the dementia of double consciousness. As one New York Intellectual described the virtue of *Commentary* magazine, "one could, it seemed, be actively Jewish just by reading about the Jews' history, debating the place in culture of Jewish ritual law, or discerning the American 'emancipation' in the elegance of the magazine's prose."^{158} This must be recognized as a novel contribution not only to Jewish life in the United States but to the entire idea of ethnic identity and acculturation in a free society. If the New York Intellectuals left the womb of the Jewish immigrant ghettos to make names for themselves, only to return to their roots to find them buried in increasingly shallow soil, they should at least be credited with coming closer than anyone else has before or since to bridging the void that separates the Jewish from the American.