

Social semiotics and memory in contemporary Jewish American fiction

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Abstract: Despite being largely influenced by Israeli literature, contemporary Jewish American writers rarely draw upon Sephardic culture. This indicates a detachment from questions like the political ones Israeli writers emphasize, and points towards a tendency to focus on the search for identity in a new country. The aim of this paper is to take a semiotic approach in examining this phenomenon from the standpoint of the Hebraism of American culture. I will take into account concepts of social semiotics to expand the analysis of discursive praxis, focusing also on extra and pre-textual elements. This will ultimately lead us to matters of memory, immigration, filiation and search for a national and cultural identity, which, in turn, must be seen from a historical viewpoint that cannot be set apart from discourse analysis itself.

Keywords: semiotics, Jewish American literature, memory

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Introduction

I expect any reader to ask me one question when they first see the title of this paper: “What is social semiotics?” However, the main point of dispute in my paper should actually be another part of the title. A more difficult question to answer is, in fact: “What is Jewish American fiction?” or, more broadly, “What is Jewish American literature?” From that point, some new questions arise: why not simply talk about Jewish literature? Is there something really peculiar to the Jewish literature written in the United States?

Some possible answers to the first questions would be: a) it is literature written by American-born Jewish writers; or b) literature written by Jewish authors about America; or even c) literature written by Americans about Jews. Nonetheless, as we shall see, all of these answers will be problematic. What would we do, for instance, about Saul Bellow, possibly the most famous Jewish American writer of all times, who was actually born in Lachine, Quebec (and is, therefore, Canadian)², or Isaac Bashevis Singer, born in Poland? What about Bernard Malamud, another icon of this kind of literature, who was not at all observant of religion and described himself as a writer who just happens to be Jewish? And then, on the other hand, could we ever consider Norman Mailer a Jewish American writer just because he was Jewish and born in New Jersey?

I certainly do not think that those are the right criteria to define Jewish American literature. My thesis is that there is an underlying *Yiddishkeit* that becomes apparent in the writings of some authors and that can be found through the analysis of their use of language, metaphors and non-verbal signs. However tempting it might be for us to analyze this *Yiddishkeit* through Jewish tradition alone, it would not be a very sensible approach to try and use the Jewish hermeneutics of the 1st and 2nd centuries – namely, the hermeneutic system of Rabbi Akiba – to examine modern and contemporary American literature. If we tried to do that, like so many scholars of literary theory have been doing with Jewish

² Cf. also BELLOW, Saul. Starting out in Chicago. In: RUBIN, Derek (ed.). **Who We Are: on being (and not being) a Jewish American writer.** New York: Schocken Books, 2005, p. 5: “But I started to recall what it was like to set oneself up to be a writer in the Midwest during the thirties. For I thought of myself as a Midwesterner and not a Jew. I am often described as a Jewish writer; in much the same way one might be called a Samoan astronomer or an Eskimo cellist or a Zulu Gainsborough expert. There is some oddity about it. I am a Jew, and I have written some books. I have tried to fit my soul into the Jewish-writer category, but it does not feel comfortably accommodated there.”

poetry³, it is very likely that we would find ourselves in the pitfalls that Umberto Eco calls “overinterpretation”⁴: roughly speaking, pushing a text to suit the reader’s interpretation. Instead, in order to avoid leaving room for any kind of hermetic semiosis, I will try to focus on the semantic isotopy: “a complex of manifold semantic categories making possible the uniform reading of a text.”⁵ Thus, we need something more than mere Jewish hermeneutics, which brings us to the first question: what is social semiotics, after all? In fact, I will go a bit further than that and also explain *why* social semiotics.

Theoretical Approach

An interesting approach to interpreting the literature of a specific ethnic or religious group is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The subject-matter of CDA are texts produced in the various domains of social-cultural life. The discourses produced in every sphere of social activity always bring traces of their context and this is why Norman Fairclough’s tridimensional proposal⁶ involves the analysis of (a) **social praxis**, in which the social matrix of discourse, the orders of discourse and its ideological and political effects are analyzed; (b) **discursive praxis**, in which we analyze interdiscursivity, intertextual chains, coherence, the conditions for discursive praxis, and the manifest intertextuality; and (c) **textual dimension**, through which the author proposes the analysis of the interactional control, cohesion, ethos, meaning of words, and creation of words and metaphors besides grammar, in which three systems are examined: transitivity, theme and modality. In adopting such a perspective, we must consider ideological and hegemonic questions, for there is no language that is totally set apart from ideology.

Social semiotics, in turn, is mainly concerned with human semiosis as an inherently social phenomenon in its sources, functions, contexts and effects. It is also concerned with

³ Scholars like Harold Bloom, John Hollander and Geoffrey Hartman. Cf. WOLOSKY, Shira. On contemporary literary theory and Jewish American poetics. In: *KRAMER, Michael P.; WIRTH-NESHER, Hana (ed.). The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 250-268.

⁴ Cf. ECO, Umberto. . *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 45-66.

⁵ GREIMAS, A. J. *Du sens*. Paris: Seuil, 1979, p. 88 (as translated by ECO, Umberto. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 62).

⁶ Cf. FAIRCLOUGH, Norman. *Critical discourse analysis*. London: Longman, 1995.

social meanings built through the totality of semiotic forms, through texts and semiotic praxes, in all kinds of human societies in all historic periods.

Different representation systems bring along ideological complexes, understood as “functionally related [sets] of contradictory versions of the world, coercively imposed by one social group on another on behalf of its own distinctive interests or subversively offered by another social group in attempts at resistance in its own interests. An ideological complex exists to sustain relationships of both power and solidarity, and it represents the social order as simultaneously serving the interests of both dominant and subordinate.”⁷

Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress point out that that which composes ideological complexes are actional models (classifications of the kinds of social agents, actions, objects etc.) and relational models (specifications of required behavior, allowed or prohibited to determined social agents).

Since we are concerned with the conditions for the production and reception of the texts in the environment in which they are produced, another important concept is that of logonomic systems – from *logos*, thought, or thought-system and *nomos*, rule, norm – understood as “a set of rules prescribing the conditions for production and reception of meanings; which specify who can claim to initiate (produce, communicate) or know (receive, understand) meanings about what topics under what circumstances and with what modalities (how, when, why.)”⁸

Accordingly, texts are multimodal construals, and writing is just one way of representing the message, which is itself culturally determined and constantly redefined within the social groups which it signifies. Language, from this perspective, is seen as part of a social context, and cannot be considered without other systems of representation.

From an analytical social semiotic standpoint, one must analyze the verbal and non-verbal signs within a specific context and/or according to a specific ideology and attribute to them a compatible meaning, according to the values of the society which uses them, the social group which creates them, and the occasion and frequency in which they are used.

⁷ HODGE, Robert; KRESS, Gunther. **Social Semiotics**. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988, p. 3.

⁸ HODGE, Robert; KRESS, Gunther. **Social Semiotics**. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988, p. 4.

The analytical perspective is centered not only in the relation between sign, significant and the signified, but also in the message, the text, the discourse, the ideology, and the modality contained in them, until one can view language as inserted in a situational context which, in turn, is inserted in a cultural context. Social semiotics does not see the text as a mere set of signs, but as a semantic unity, the result of a product (the sign) which went through a process (linguistic or non-linguistic) in order to become what it is.

My proposal, thus, is to use such instruments to amplify the analysis of discursive praxis within the tridimensional perspective of Fairclough, focusing also on extra and pre-textual elements (pictures, acknowledgements, dedications, prefaces). I must call the reader's attention, however, to the fact that the kind of enterprise I am partaking here by no means intends to be structuralist or poststructuralist and I henceforth also reject – at least for the purpose of this analysis – the approach taken by those who commit to the distinction between fable and fiction as described by Michel Foucault:

In every work with a narrative form one needs to distinguish between fable and fiction. The fable is what is related (episodes, characters, functions they exercise in the narrative, events). Fiction is the narrative system, or rather the various systems according to which it is “narrated” [“recite”] – the narrator’s stance toward what he is relating (depending on whether he is part of the adventure, or contemplates it as a slightly detached observer, or is excluded from it and comes upon it from the outside), the presence or absence of a neutral gaze that surveys things and people, providing an objective description of them as they unfold, and so on. The fable is made up of elements placed in a certain order. Fiction is the weaving of established relations, through the discourse itself. Fiction, an “aspect” of the fable.⁹

⁹ FOUCAULT, Michel. Behind the fable. In: FOUCAULT, Michel; FAUBION, James D. (ed.). **Foucault: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology**. Vol. 2. Transl. Robert Hurley et al. New York: The New Press, 1998, p. 137.

Some Examples

Although it might be tempting to give special attention to the lexical choice in the novels I will examine, there are many other elements that will definitely bring us closer to the world-view these authors are trying to communicate, so I will refrain from using “deconstruction” techniques, although they would point us to interesting directions in cases like Jonathan Wilson’s explanation of why he could not be a Jewish writer in England, where he mentions going to the “Happy Holiday School” – the name English Jews found suitable to substitute “summer camp”, since they wanted, by all means, to avoid the usage of the word “camp”¹⁰, because of the unavoidable association it brings with “concentration camps”.

Leaving that parenthetical aside, we shall focus on this side of the Atlantic Ocean. What contemporary Jewish American novels have in common is, firstly, a change of locus (compared to modern Jewish American Literature, or modern and contemporary Jewish Israeli literature). The United States of America, very commonly New York City, takes the place of the Eastern European *shtetlekh* (towns/villages). What remains in most novels, however, is the role of the Jew as being essentially intellectual and intellectually driven: Oskar Schell, the 8-year old character (and one of the narrators) of Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*¹¹ had the habit of observing his father circle typos and grammar mistakes he found in The New York Times. Although that is mentioned *en passant*, the red ink correction markings appear again (in a graphic form) in a different context, from pages 208 to 216 of that book, in a letter.

Another interesting point – and probably the most important one – is the recurrence of aspects of memory and forgetting, especially when related to feelings of loss. Jonathan, Jonathan Safran Foer’s character in *Everything Is Illuminated*¹² is a collector. All throughout the story, while he travels from the U.S. to Ukraine in search of his true family history and someone he saw in a photograph, he picks up things and puts them in Ziploc

¹⁰ WILSON, Jonathan. How I became a Jewish writer in America. In: *RUBIN, Derek (ed.). Who We Are: on being (and not being) a Jewish American writer*. New York: Schocken Books, 2005, p. 152.

¹¹ FOER, Jonathan Safran. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005.

¹² FOER, Jonathan Safran. *Everything Is Illuminated*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002.

bags so that he can later pin them to the wall that represents everything he has ever lived. His collection includes meaningful items like the photograph that originally set him to his journey, but also things one would never think of keeping, like dirt collected from the soil of some city he traveled through.

In Foer's second book (*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*), Oskar Schell is not a collector of objects, but a collector of feelings. He keeps a sort of journal he calls his "Book of Feelings". Interestingly, he also keeps track of all the lies he tells and goes back to his journal to describe his feelings of "heavy boots" (an expression he uses to describe his state of extreme self-consciousness) every time he tells one of them. He also keeps a journal entitled "Things that happened to me" that contains, among other things, pictures of keys, flying airplanes, humping turtles, and a picture of a body falling from the World Trade Center (that he convinces himself might be his dad). All these pictures appear in the book, distributed unevenly throughout the story.

We can definitely see a strong concern of keeping memories, as if they could just disappear one day, when you least expect it. And, as a matter of fact, they can. This is what Nicole Krauss shows in her first book, *Man Walks Into a Room*¹³, which, in spite of not dealing so strongly with this *Yiddishkeit* that I have talked about, goes a lot more deeply into questions of memory when her main character, Samson Greene, a young and popular professor at Columbia University, is found wandering in the Nevada desert and remembers nothing, not even his own name. He then becomes an emigrant from his own life, a feeling that appears to be quite representative of American Jews of the second post-war generation, which, in fact, is one of the reasons why they tend to be depicted as relating more easily to their grandparents, i.e. the real survivors from World War II, than their own parents. This might be the reason why Krauss dedicates her second novel, *The History of Love*¹⁴, to her grandparents, who taught her "the opposite of disappearing"¹⁵. Again, we find a very strong statement against forgetting in the way this dedication is presented: with pictures of her four grandparents right below the words.

¹³ KRAUSS, Nicole. **Man Walks Into a Room**. New York: Doubleday, 2002.

¹⁴ KRAUSS, Nicole. **The History of Love**. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005.

¹⁵ KRAUSS, Nicole. **The History of Love**. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005, dedication.

This brings us back to Oskar Schell's "Things That Happened to Me" journal. Its main content, shown in a backwards sequence of pictures at the very end of the book¹⁶, like I said, is a picture of a man falling from the World Trade Center on 9/11 and he tries to convince himself that that man is his dad, not only because he needs "closure" (and not just being left with the feeling that his father is still missing), but also because he needed to create a final memory of his dad, to go with the answering machine message he had left a few hours before the plane hit the second tower (where he allegedly was), and that Oskar replayed over and over. Meanwhile, totally unable to connect with his mother, who seems to be overly busy and somewhat disturbed by the loss of her husband, Oskar becomes really close to his grandmother and sees her as the only person who could help him figure out the mysteries of some of his father's life.

Alma Singer, one of Nicole Krauss's characters/narrators in *The History of Love* also creates memories. Her mother, like Oskar's was very traumatized by her husband's death (in this case, because of cancer) and refuses to talk to her children about him. Alma then invents stories about her deceased father so that her little brother can have at least some memories of him, since he was too young to remember anything when his father died.

In another section of that book, narrated by character Leopold Gursky, this man in his eighties is just trying to be remembered. Living by himself in a small apartment, he often checks on one of his neighbors and vice-versa just to make sure they are both still alive. He goes to Starbucks and spills coffee on himself on purpose, just so that people will notice him. However, he is not afraid of death, or the nothingness that it may represent. He is afraid of not being remembered.

The old man (the third narrator) in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, in turn, did not only want to be remembered, but he wanted to remember and to be seen. When he starts losing the ability to say some words – until he is no longer able to talk – he starts carrying around a notepad where he would write things to communicate with people, and he tattoos the word "yes" on the palm of his left hand and the word "no" on the palm of his

¹⁶ FOER, Jonathan Safran. **Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close**. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005, pp. 327-355.

right hand. These are definitely words he will need to remember, and pictures of the tattooed hands are shown on pages 260 and 261.

I must point out that although this book has many images randomly distributed throughout the pages (I mean, the pictures do not immediately succeed their description), I definitely disagree with critics who say that the four novels I mentioned use techniques of stream of consciousness. From all four, the only one that may fit that description is *Man Walks Into a Room*. The other three have somewhat linear narratives. What may confuse the critic, however, is the fact that they all have various narrators and one narrator's story is always somehow interwoven with another's – and a careless reader might mistake this for a simple exercise of stream of consciousness. The same thing applies for the pictures in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*: they are not placed in a particular order to create a feeling of stream of consciousness. They are not meant to make the reader follow the thoughts of the narrator or character. They are there as a memory exercise, so that when the reader sees, for example, a picture of a cat on page 191 they will remember the cat was mentioned right in the beginning of the book and is quickly being alluded to on page 190.

On that note, it is also interesting to examine Art Spiegelman's comics (you may know him from his famous graphic novel *Maus*¹⁷). In one of them, suggestively entitled "My Struggle"¹⁸ he talks about growing up in Queens (NY) with his parents who survived Auschwitz and about the incredible amount of repressed memories he has had. When he introduces a character, his child (who appears wearing a Superman costume), he simply says "Dash is four years old, and his sister is almost nine (two of their grandparents survived Auschwitz)."¹⁹

So, what is it about memory that drives these characters (and maybe authors, too) so strongly?

What we see in contemporary Jewish American writings (something that does not show as strongly in writings of modern authors like Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud) is

¹⁷ SPIEGELMAN, Art. **The Complete Maus**. London: Penguin, 2003.

¹⁸ SPIEGELMAN, Art. Mein Kampf. In: *RUBIN, Derek. Who We Are: on being (and not being) a Jewish American writer*. New York: Schocken Books, 2005, pp. 138-139.

¹⁹ SPIEGELMAN, Art. Mein Kampf. In: *RUBIN, Derek. Who We Are: on being (and not being) a Jewish American writer*. New York: Schocken Books, 2005, p. 138.

a search for memory and identity, but not the search for their American identity. Since contemporary authors write about the second generation of immigrant Jews who were born in America, a generation that did not hear directly from their parents the actual stories of the Holocaust, they want to find the missing link. Their parents did not worry about that, because they were the sons and daughters of the survivors and their main concern was belonging, being accepted as an American in a country that still saw them as foreigners and survivors. They made such an effort to fit in and blend among other citizens that the memories of the Holocaust almost skipped a generation.

This second generation, however, is no longer worried about belonging in this country. They do not have a problem with their national identity: they are Americans *and* they are Jewish²⁰, and they really see themselves as a fitting part of those worlds. For them there is no point looking for their roots in Israel, because that is not where they came from. They belong there as much as their grandparents felt they belonged in America. Thus, there is an increased effort for them to be set apart from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict or whatever other political situation in that sense, but that does not mean they completely overlook that matter. I remember sitting in a talk given by Nicole Krauss in August 2006, one day after Uri Grossman, son of Israeli writer David Grossman, was killed in a conflict in Southern Lebanon. She did request a minute of silence in his memory, but avoided talking for a long time about the conflict itself. I do not think this is due to sheer evasion. From my point of view, these authors think such conflicts concern them just as much as they concern any other American citizen. Just because – and here I will paraphrase Malamud – “they happen to be Jewish”, that does not mean they have to take a stand in middle-Eastern conflicts. This is the reason why they do not write in the exact same style of David Grossman or Amos Oz and, instead, just look at them for inspiration.

The search for a Jewish identity that they set for their characters is not territorial (since their territory is, in fact, America), but a cultural search that may inspire the

²⁰ Although in some cases, especially for the Orthodox Jews, this may still be an issue for dispute. Cf. KRAUSS, Nicole. **The History of Love**. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005, p. 97: “Then again, you could always just stick with half English and half Israeli, since – ‘I’M AMERICAN!’ I shouted. My mother blinked. ‘Suit yourself,’ she said, and went to put the kettle on to boil. From the corner of the room where he was looking at the pictures in a magazine, Bird muttered: ‘No, you’re not. You’re Jewish.’”

recollection of old memories and the making of new ones. This lays the ground upon which we have to consider matters of memory and identity in the light of history and agree with Cynthia Ozick when she says she reserves her “respect for writers who do not remain ignorant of history (a condition equal to autolobotomy), who do not choose to run after trivia, who recognize that ideas are emotions, and that emotions are ideas; and that this is what we mean when we speak of the insights of art.”²¹

Concluding Remarks

It looks as though our course of study has led us to the following problem: “has history finally melted into memory? And has memory broadened itself to the scale of historical memory?”²² Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss such an issue, for it is not my intent to extend this study into an analysis of the relations between social semiotics and history, I will try to shed some light on a path that may be taken by those willing to delve deeper into this theme.

In part III, chapter 2 of his *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur presents a very insightful approach of the problem of the *Yiddishkeit* with regard to history. In part of the section entitled “The uncanniness of history” he discusses Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi’s book, *Zakhor*²³, on the problem of Jewish existence. Ricoeur makes a very compelling argument for the point I tried to get at above when he says that

The singularity of the Jewish experience lies in the secular indifference to the historiographical treatment of a culture itself eminently charged with history. It is this singularity that seems to me to be revealing with respect to the resistance that any and all memory can oppose to this treatment. In this sense, it exposes the crisis that, in a general manner, history as historiography produces at the very heart of memory. Whether personal or collective, memory

²¹ OZICK, Cynthia. Tradition and (or versus) the Jewish writer. In: RUBIN, Derek (ed.). **Who We Are: on being (and not being) a Jewish American writer**. New York: Schocken Books, 2005, p. 23.

²² RICOEUR, Paul. **Memory, History, Forgetting**. Transl. Kathleen Blamey; David Pellauer. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 396.

²³ YERUSHALMI, Yosef Hayim. **Zakhor: Jewish history and Jewish memory**. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982.

*refers back by definition to the past that continues to be living in virtue of the transmission of the transmission from generation to generation; this is the source of a resistance of memory to its historiographical treatment.*²⁴

We can thus see that contemporary Jewish American fiction makes a good case study for historiography, from a critical standpoint. If we take Maurice Halbwachs' saying that "History starts only when tradition ends,"²⁵ we can perhaps understand how Jewish history has thrived in the United States: through memory, and not through historiography. However, if Ricoeur wants to say that the Jewish culture has a memory "charged with meaning but not with historiographical meaning," I would say that the end of that tradition needed to build up the Jewish historiography and its meaning in America is now brought about by the breakthrough in the history-telling and story-telling represented by this generation depicted in a deeper search for memory and meaning. Yerushalmi said that "if Herodotus was the father of history, the fathers of meaning in history were the Jews,"²⁶ and perhaps this new "obsession" with memory is an indication of the kind of meaning these contemporary Jewish American writers are looking for in their history. Hence, I have to disagree with Foucault and say that in the case of contemporary Jewish American fiction, fiction is an aspect of fable, just as much as fable is an aspect of fiction, since the fable, or what is related (i.e. episodes, characters, events, as Foucault put it) is now clearly an aspect of the narrative system, of the narrator's stance toward what he is relating, which is fiction itself. I must say that the elements placed in a certain order have become a mere aspect of the weaving of established relations through discourse itself – and this is one very distinctive characteristic of contemporary Jewish American fiction which makes it such a rich subject matter for social semiotic analysis.

²⁴ RICOEUR, Paul. **Memory, History, Forgetting**. Transl. Kathleen Blamey; David Pellauer. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 398.

²⁵ HALBWACHS, Maurice. **The Collective Memory**. New York: Harper & Row, 1980, p. 78.

²⁶ YERUSHALMI, Yosef Hayim. **Zakhor: Jewish history and Jewish memory**. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982, p. 8.