

## WHO IS AN AMERICAN BLACK, CATHOLIC, OR JEWISH WRITER?

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Outside of Catholic journals and newspapers, one seldom meets the term "Catholic writer" even though for years the literary establishment has spoken of Jewish and Black writers. What difference, if any, is there among these terms to justify the exclusion of "Catholic writers"? One facile answer would be that since "anti-Catholicism has always been the anti-Semitism of the American intellectual,"<sup>1</sup> the neglect of Catholic writers parallels the treatment of young Jewish intellectuals decades ago when they tried to gain positions in the literature departments of the country.<sup>2</sup> But the problem is not just simply a matter of the critics' recognition or neglect, it involves also the writers' perception of themselves and the readers' motivations and interests, all of which lead to a tangle of definitions and explanations. The tangle results from putting all the definitions on the same level, or considering them from the same viewpoint. If we would compare the various definitions and see the particular viewpoints and purposes, we might be able to discern what critics and readers really mean to say when they use such terms as "Black," "Catholic," or "Jewish" writer in the context of American literature.

### BLACKS

The easiest of these definitions should be that of the "Black writer," since people decide who belongs in this category by judging according to readily perceived external factors. Such a judgment, however, may be a mere continuation of prejudice in the realm of literature inasmuch as writers are being considered according to their skin and not by their books. In his famous reply to Irving Howe, Ralph Ellison illustrates the danger of critics, both white and black, who base their literary

evaluations on preconceived notions of race. In "Black Boys and Native Sons," Irving Howe maintained that the angry polemic style of Richard Wright was the only authentic mode for a Black writer and that people like Baldwin and Ellison were not quite true to their experiences as blacks.<sup>3</sup> A similar criticism exists among those who adhere to the ideals of the Black Arts Movement.

Ellison, replying in what became a two-part essay "The World and the Jug," refused to be limited by a critic's prefabrications and insisted on his right as a black and as a writer to go out from his experience to address truths of human existence in America that could strike a responsive chord in a reader of whatever race.<sup>4</sup> Ellison seems to accept the notion especially advocated by his namesake, Ralph Waldo Emerson, that there are universal truths which can be shared with other human beings of different ages, races, and beliefs.<sup>5</sup> In "Self-Reliance" Emerson said: "Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense." If writers take their individual experience to the human core, it will influence readers of whatever circumstances.

The danger of assuming that because a writer belongs to a certain group, he or she will or should write in a predictable way seems to be quite prevalent as we read through the critical material. However, as a means of gathering together writers of a group to see the various ways their writing has taken them, the use of such terms as "Black writer" is natural. Just as there are many distinct differences among American white writers as described in literary histories, differences which come from the philosophy of the times, historical events, and geographical locations, so Black writers are similarly influenced. Consequently Black writers cannot be relegated simply to one response to their experience as blacks. Naturally, anger at what is perceived as the majority can be one legitimate response, but even this reaction changes its focus depending upon the Black writers' experience of slavery, segregation, discrimination, and prejudice, which differ according to time and location. A Revolutionary War period writer like Phillis Wheatley, influenced by Neo-classicism, treated freedom in her poems but not nearly to the extent that Frederick Douglass did, who had escaped from slavery and lived in the North at a time when the Abolitionist Movement was gaining strength.

Furthermore, there are differences according to the readership the writers seem to have in mind. The writers of the Black Arts Movement write for blacks, developing imagery, style, themes, etc., that they feel represent the true Black traditions and help foster Black identity and self-confidence. On the other hand, Ralph Ellison and Robert Hayden, without denying their Black heritage, do not limit their themes and readership, and consider their works open to all.

Despite these differences there does not seem to be any confusion concerning the group membership of Black writers. Such a confusion is more a problem with Catholic and Jewish writers. The bigger problem for Black writers concerns the appropriate Black world view and the purposes of Black writing. These arguments extend to the criticism of Black writing as well.

The Black Arts Movement writers maintain that non-blacks can neither write about black characters nor can they rightly evaluate or appreciate Black writing.<sup>6</sup> Although it is true that creation of character depends upon experience, and that a reader's or critic's experience similar to the events of the story can make such a person more aware of certain nuances in expression and action, these conditions do not invalidate a non-black's approach to Black literature, provided that the non-black allow the Black literature to speak for itself. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. appreciates Richard Gilman's honesty in not attempting to evaluate Black literature (all critics should know their personal limitations), but he questions whether what may be true in individual cases should be made a general rule: "But, when his abdication begins to be writ large amongst his white confreres (as it now does), it would seem surely that a profound collapse of faith in the indivisibility of the human family and in the unity of culture has everywhere become a notable feature of the period."<sup>7</sup>

For a long time Black writing has been characterized by events outside it, such as the institution of slavery and the various injustices and inequalities imposed by discrimination and prejudice. For the sake of achieving political and even psychological goals, a militant, more parochial, writing may be necessary. If we look at other minority groups in America we find a similar necessity. For example a large part of Catholic writing until the 1960s was written mainly to bolster

pride in the Catholic heritage and to assure believers that they could be both good Catholics and good Americans. Paul Messbarger in *Fiction With a Parochial Purpose* shows indeed how fiction was used for non-literary purposes but he also shows indirectly by references to many unknown works how most of this material is no longer read now that conditions have changed. The same fate will meet much of the current writing; many works will serve their limited purpose and fade away, whereas others, which address more perennial human dilemmas, will be influential for generations.

Several times in his article, "Black Literature," Nathan A. Scott, Jr. points out another deficiency, how writing merely out of protest formulas has actually been counterproductive by producing a stereotyped, dehumanized portrait of the blacks.<sup>8</sup> Scott draws upon essays by James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel" and James W. Tuttleton, "The Negro Writer as Spokesman," to corroborate his position. He concludes by comparing the Black Arts Movement to the inflexible formula writing of the Proletariat novels of the 1930s.<sup>9</sup>

Whatever valid psychological and sociological uses separatist fiction has, these uses are fundamentally of temporary value and hence should not be extended as a requirement for all Black writing. Black writers must be free to pursue their view of the world as honestly as they can, unhampered by peripheral, though from another perspective good and even necessary, considerations. Treating writers parochially is but a stage, a necessary tactic until writers of a particular minority group can be fully recognized both in their individuality and in their communality, both in the areas they differ and in the areas they share with the nation as a whole.

To conclude this section: it would seem that the term "Black writer" can be useful, necessary, detrimental, challenging, and important. It is useful for arranging a variety of writers for the education of non-black readers. It is necessary for the encouragement and authentic self-pride of black readers. It is detrimental insofar as it would refuse to acknowledge universal human traits and the power of literature to communicate. It is challenging as it makes critics find and develop the characteristics of the group's writing. And, until Black writers are better known and until blacks can live and interact more freely in American

society, the term is important. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. expresses it well:

And thus for the black writer to explore and exhibit the rich complexity of Negro life is for him not only to assist his own people toward a deeper understanding of themselves but is for him also to be an agent of self-discovery for the nation at large . . . finally, there is an insurmountable impropriety involved in the discussion of black American writers under a special rubric reserved for them alone. But, for the moment, given the carelessness with which the critical community generally canvasses their work, they must, as it would seem, be so treated, if any assessment of their accomplishment is to be guaranteed at all.<sup>10</sup>

## CATHOLICS

If Black writers may be easily identified by race, Catholic writers should be easily identified by religion. Yet, the definition of a Catholic writer is much more troublesome because of the ethnic variations and because some Catholics may give up the practice of their faith and blend in with the "native" American "majority." Thus there are a number of possibilities that could be considered in assigning writers to the "Catholic" category. Are the writers practicing their faith? Were the writers raised as Catholics? Do the writers deal with Catholic subject matter? What about novels like *Death Comes to the Archbishop* written by a non-Catholic but very Catholic in subject matter? What about novels like *Wise Blood* or *The Violent Bear It Away* which contain not the least bit of external Catholicism but were written by a conscientious Catholic?

One very narrow definition of the "Catholic novel" takes into consideration the author's belief, subject matter of the novel, purpose of writing the novel, and audience: "a work by an American Catholic novelist who wrote for an American Catholic audience, employing specifically Catholic materials, from a Catholic point of view."<sup>11</sup> Paul Messbarger himself calls this definition "severely restrictive," but in view of the full title of his book, *Fiction With a Parochial Purpose: Social Uses of American Catholic Literature, 1884-1900*, his definition is clearly appropriate for that level of literature which represents a "culturally underdeveloped group sensitive to its minority status, particularly one for whom religion is the chief mode of identification."<sup>12</sup>

These works were written to build up and encourage the Catholic community and keep the younger generation from converting to Protestantism in their Americanization process. Even as late as the 1950s much Catholic writing reflected a minority mentality anxious to be accepted and to have its traditions recognized for their contribution to the development of the country.

The weakness of such literature, given the siege-mentality, is that anything may be judged good as long as it is written by a member of one's group. As Paul Messbarger so clearly states and in terms that could be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, also to some Black and Jewish critics:

Ideological assumptions obscured fair and accurate assessments: works whose authors were Catholics must by definition be superior to those of non-Catholics.

The result of this critical attitude was a harvest of mediocrity.<sup>13</sup>

Flannery O'Connor even more bluntly warns against novelists abandoning their sensitivity for the sake of following some supposed official line: "When the Catholic novelist closes his own eyes and tries to see with the eyes of the Church, the result is another addition to that large body of pious trash for which we have so long been famous."<sup>14</sup>

Two other definitions of a Catholic writer take into account the changes that came over the American Catholic Church in the 1960s and released a new spurt of Catholic writing. The first, by Michael Quillan, stresses the influence of Catholicism upon the characters: "The term 'Catholic' is used here to refer to a novel concerned with probing the effects of a Catholic heritage on one or more of the main characters, whether or not the primary purpose coincides with acceptable doctrine."<sup>15</sup> In this definition Quillan takes Catholic writers outside the earlier expectations that they represent Catholic doctrine. His formulation is moving toward a more sociological discussion of Catholic writing, i. e., treating Catholicism as a way of life rather than as a set of theological beliefs. In fact, as I will suggest later, a sociological, literary-critical approach to writers brought up as members of a minority group in urban neighborhoods may be a way of drawing upon the particular minority's traditions while at the same time seeing these traditions in the context of similar struggles by other minority groups. Thus the city neighborhood writers of different minorities may

have many things in common with each other that they do not have in common with writers who are of their same race, religion, or ethnic group, but who were brought up in small towns or rural areas.

The second definition, more a description, by George Devine and William J. Toohey, puts the Catholic experience as the individual background from which the Catholic writers, just as any other writers, transform their experience and vision into literature: "Now there is a new sort of Catholic novel, not simply defending and not simply criticizing the faith and practice of Catholicism, but more often using the Catholic experience as the setting for a series of human experiences worth sharing artistically."<sup>16</sup> Too often, however, Catholic novels after the Second Vatican Council described traumas of the writers' childhood during the siege-mentality period. Now in the mid-eighties we can expect a new group of young writers, like Alice McDermott, who have had an entirely different experience of the Church.

These two definitions assume that the writers in question have been born and raised Catholics to the extent that Catholicism is part of their personality. Even though these writers may have given up the religious aspects of Catholicism later, they still retain certain ways of imagining and thinking. James Joyce is perhaps the most famous example of a fallen-away Catholic whose writings are full of Catholic images and expressions. In America Mary McCarthy in her *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* eloquently testifies to the ways that Catholicism has influenced her life even though she lost her faith in God when she was a teenager.

Converts like Walker Percy may not have participated much in the life of the Catholic ethnic collectivity, but they can be even more alert to the Catholic view of the world. And perhaps it is just this view of human beings and God and life that best characterizes the "Catholic writer," if we so choose to use that term. Percy very explicitly claims that as a writer he has a particular view of human beings influenced by Catholic (or more generally, Christian) belief. He explains that:

man is neither an organism controlled by his environment, not a creature controlled by the forces of history as the Marxists would say, nor is he a detached, wholly objective, angelic being who views the world in a God-like

way and makes pronouncements only to himself or to an elite group of people. No, he's somewhere between the angels and the beasts.<sup>17</sup>

James Carroll echoes the main points of Percy's view and adds a few distinguishing attitudes:

The Catholic writer's starting point is the Biblical view of the world as fallen, but not despairing. That is what I think of as a Catholic world view—acknowledging the fallen condition of human beings, but insisting on treating them as saved by God. It's not the same thing as the fundamentalist Christian world view which stamps **SAVED** on everything and then doesn't worry about it anymore. The Catholic world view is much more attuned to the tragedy of life.<sup>18</sup>

Flannery O'Connor, who in several essays addresses the question of a Catholic writer, would probably favor the definitions of Percy and Carroll to those which are more theological or more sociological. In a letter to the anonymous friend "A", O'Connor writes:

I liked most of Waugh's answers but he has too narrow a definition of what would be a Catholic novel. He says a novel that deals with the problems of faith; I'd rather say a Catholic mind looking at anything, making the category generous enough to include myself.<sup>19</sup>

In general, however, O'Connor shies away from the term. In this respect she is something like Hemingway who said he did not like to talk about his religious preferences for fear of being called a "Catholic writer."<sup>20</sup> In a letter to Elizabeth Bishop, O'Connor writes: "Although I am a Catholic writer, I don't care to get labeled as such in the popular sense of it, as it is then assumed that you have some religious axe to grind."<sup>21</sup>

Here the "popular sense" would seem to be the parochial encouragement and/or doctrinal explications that characterized most American Catholic writing. Since O'Connor rejects that kind of Catholic writer and makes her own meaning so broad as to say "a Catholic mind looking at anything," then the line between a writer who embraces the Catholic faith and any writer who shares a similar world view would be very thin. As the following quotations from her essays show, O'Connor considers external factors a rather inaccurate gauge for measuring Catholic authors.

First of all, she does not approve of the term itself: "The very term

'Catholic novel' is, of course, suspect, and people who are conscious of its complications don't use it except in quotation marks." She immediately continues with her broad definition: "If I had to say what a 'Catholic novel' is, I could only say that it is one that represents reality adequately as we see it manifested in this world of things and human relationships."<sup>22</sup> Note that this representation of reality is not externally Catholic in O'Connor's view: "The Catholic novel can't be categorized by subject matter, but only by what it assumes about human and divine reality."<sup>23</sup> Then O'Connor goes on to present a view of human beings similar to the phrases used by Percy and Carroll, with the added element of the power of grace to bring about the unexpected in a character.<sup>24</sup> She notices that in the choice of what characters to depict, Southern Catholic writers may feel very close to fundamentalists who take their faith seriously, even though the fiction that results from these Catholic writers "will be a strange and, to many, perverse fiction, one which serves no felt need, which gives no picture of Catholic life, or the religious experiences that are usual with us, but I believe that it will be Catholic fiction."<sup>25</sup>

In the above quotations O'Connor explicitly acknowledges that the previous conceptions of Catholic writing as serving certain needs of the group or presenting Catholic life favorably or using images and events typically Catholic, are not pertinent in her more general view of Catholic writing. With this general view in mind, her conclusion that a Catholic novel may be written by a non-Catholic should not appear too paradoxical:

This all means that what we roughly call the Catholic novel is not necessarily about a Christianized or Catholicized world, but simply that it is one in which the truth as Christians know it has been used as a light to see the world by. This may or may not be a Catholic world, and it may or may not have been seen by a Catholic.<sup>26</sup>

What emerges as very important in O'Connor's conception is the view of reality as comprising both natural and supernatural realms and a view of the human being as created by God and able to participate in both realms. The fact of belonging to what is known as the Church Visible (living, baptized, practicing Catholics) is not as important as having a common view of the world. This radical conception

is found also in the essay "Novelist and Believer," where O'Connor indicates the "spiritual" elements of a writer true to his craft: "The novelist and believer, when they are not the same man, yet have many traits in common — a distrust of the abstract, a respect for boundaries, a desire to penetrate the surface of reality and to find in each thing the spirit which makes it itself and holds the world together."<sup>27</sup>

As if the above considerations were not enough to make her position concerning Catholic writers clear, O'Connor even goes so far as to say that readers may derive more from reading other great writers than from reading the very few acknowledged Catholic writers like Bloy, Bernanos, Mauriac, and Greene. Having named these four, O'Connor says:

But at some point reading them reaches the place of diminishing returns and you get more benefit reading someone like Hemingway, where there is apparently a hunger for Catholic completeness in life, or Joyce who can't get rid of it no matter what he does. It may be a matter of recognizing the Holy Ghost in fiction by the way He chooses to conceal himself."<sup>28</sup>

The last sentence of the above quotation introduces the problem of the reader's selective perception. Toward the beginning of the essay "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," O'Connor states that she is not going into detail about the Catholic novel but would "assume that novelists who are deeply Catholic will write novels which you may call Catholic if the Catholic aspects of the novel are what interest you."<sup>29</sup> She is saying that novelists present their view of the world, giving readers a life to deal with according to their own experience and interest. Different readers will emphasize different aspects, one of which may be the Catholic part. O'Connor is, in effect, warning critics and readers against making their wishes prescriptive; they are first to accept the world of the novelist and, if possible, approach it from perspectives other than their own usual one. She recommends: "Such a novel may be characterized in any number of ways, and perhaps the more ways the better."<sup>30</sup>

As such, then, the term "Catholic writer" refers to the writer's theological-philosophical concept of the world, which the readers or critics may avert to if they wish. Other approaches and interpretations are possible, but in selecting these the reader or critic should be honest

enough not to deny the religious-philosophical basis of the writer's vision when it is present. It is not intellectually honest, for example, to accept the religious imagery in Hopkins for discussion and interpretation and then to reject the source of the inspiration by saying that "as an educated man, Hopkins, of course, did not believe any of it." Granted that some readers and critics may overdo the religious influence in a writer's work, at least they recognize that the influence is there. To take a parallel case: a critic may not want to propound the specific influences of being raised a Black in Oklahoma, but that critic may not deny that those experiences influenced the work of Ralph Ellison.

Given the intolerance of religion among some academic circles, the term "Catholic writer," however deficient, may be necessary until religious belief is accepted as valid an approach to interpreting the human condition as Naturalism, Marxism, and Existentialism are. In an interview with Anthony Burgess, Graham Greene said that he was not a "Catholic novelist" but "a novelist who happens to be Catholic."<sup>31</sup> This statement would not endear Greene to the more separatist or parochial critics, but it does put emphasis properly on the work as an object that has been fashioned by human vision and talent. Long ago Henry James instructed readers to grant the artist the vision and subject and to judge only how well the artist executed that *donnée*. Graham Greene himself feels that though he does not use the term "Catholic novelist," he does consider "the theme of human beings lonely without God" as "a legitimate subject."<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, the term is useful for making known Catholic cultural contributions to those who tend to disregard or dismiss anything coming from that group. As was mentioned in the first section, when a particular minority group is accepted in its distinctive as well as its shared characteristics, the need for a special term to call attention to it may dwindle away. Finally, it should be noted that as a minority group, Catholics, especially those Catholics of Irish, Italian, and Polish backgrounds that settled in urban neighborhoods, were held together by their religious faith, and their identities were forged in the combination of church, home, and school. Consequently, as in the case of the Blacks where there is a difference between those who grew up in

the urban ghettos and those who lived in the rural South, so with Catholics, the fact of a common faith (instead of a common race) must be modified with the consideration of whether that faith is a product of the city neighborhood or not. Taking the urban neighborhood into account, we can see that a "Catholic novel" like *Studs Lonigan* shares more with a Black novel like *Go Tell It on the Mountain* or a Jewish novel like *Call It Sleep* than it does with the short stories of the Catholic writers J. F. Powers and Flannery O'Connor.

## JEWIS

Black writers are categorized by race, Catholic writers by religion, but Jewish writers may be listed somewhat by both "race" and religion. As a religion Judaism maintains a sense of being "God's people" in contrast to the other nations who are outsiders. However, due to historical conditions, Jews were dispersed throughout Europe where they became the outsiders and had to keep to themselves. To the religious notion of being a "chosen people," then, must be added the centuries of enclosed living which had the effect of developing an ethnic group. Like Black writers, Jewish writers face the problem of being expected to "defend" or bolster their "race."<sup>33</sup> Like Catholic writers, Jewish writers are expected to describe special religious rituals or recognizable group elements. Despite these complications, Jewish writers were the first of the three groups to be treated more seriously by the literary establishment.

Yet problems remain. As a member of an ethnic group, does a Jew also have to be affiliated in order to be considered a Jew? And if the Jew is affiliated with a synagogue, are there not rather large differences in outlook between a Reformed Jew and an Orthodox Jew, and maybe even a Conservative Jew? Since 80-90% of the present Jewish-American population is said to be related in some way to the Polish and Russian immigrants of the nineteenth century, and since many of these present-day Jews are unaffiliated, should not more emphasis be given to the ethnic, or even better, the urban background of twentieth-century American Jewish writers?

In the case of Catholicism, Andrew Greeley makes the point that

Catholics in their individual lives flow freely from one identification to another. That is, at times they prefer to link themselves to the religious aspects of Catholicism, at times to their Irish, or Italian, or Polish, etc. ethnicity, and at times to being a general American.<sup>34</sup> It would seem that Jews also, to some extent, have the freedom to choose their degree of identification with Judaism and with the Jewish ethnic collectivity. What Blacks and Jews and Catholics of pronounced Catholic ethnic backgrounds have in common is the barrier of prejudice which attributes certain attitudes and values to the writers regardless of what they have written. Some prejudice naturally arises from the failure of the minority group to assimilate, nevertheless, it must be said that assimilation is not an absolute in itself. Since the late 1960s, thanks to the "Black is beautiful" influence, there has been less of a tendency to stress assimilation, and more of a tendency to accept differences within the unity of the nation. Probably Greeley's image of a mosaic with permeable boundaries best illustrates the current aspiration. Certainly it is better than either the concept of the melting pot which tends toward amalgamation and disappearance of ethnicity or the concept of a simple mosaic which tends toward separation and lack of communication.<sup>35</sup>

Since critics usually talk about Jewish writers without troubling to define them, they seem to assume that everyone can recognize a Jew and Jewishness. Philip Rahv deplors this critical practice because it causes a writer like Bernard Malamud to be viewed in the company of writers "with whom (excepting his Jewish ancestry) he has virtually nothing in common."<sup>36</sup> In his objection Rahv distinguishes between having an ethnic background and accepting and using the emotional and spiritual qualities of that background. Rahv explains in more detail:

The truth is that many writers are Jewish in descent without being in any appreciable way "Jewish" in feeling and sensibility; and I am noting this not in criticism of anyone in particular but simply by way of stating an obvious fact usually overlooked both by those who "celebrate" the arrival of American Jews on the literary scene and by those who deplore it. It is one thing to speak factually of a writer's Jewish extraction and it is something else again to speak of his "Jewishness," which is a very elusive quality and rather difficult to define.<sup>37</sup>

This distinction warns against too easily categorizing all members of a group. While it is true that members of a group share childhood experiences which leave their marks, whether the individual writers reject, accept, or modify these influences is another question and it can only be decided upon examination of the works produced.

In the *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing* Mark Shechner accepts the task of describing "Jewish Writers," but he makes clear that he feels the term is merely a means for talking about writers of Jewish descent. He states plainly: "Neither 'Jewish writer' nor 'Jewish fiction' is an obvious or self-justifying subdivision of literature, any more than Jewishness itself is now a self-evident cultural identity."<sup>38</sup> He speaks of the large number of writers of Jewish descent and then justifies the term "Jewish writer" not so much for the literary characteristics it provides but for the social-historical fact it represents.

Although Shechner employs ethnic descent as but a genial common denominator, other critics give more importance to ethnicity and have suggested that critics and readers who share the writer's background have a superior advantage over other readers and critics of that writer's work. Leslie and Joyce Field take up this assumption that a group's experience is peculiar to it alone and ask Bernard Malamud whether he feels his writing, despite his rejection of the Jewish-American writer label, "reveals a special sense of a people's destiny that more often than not cannot be fully grasped in all its nuances and vibrations by those who are not fully sensitized to that people or its destiny?"<sup>39</sup> They continue the question, wondering whether only Russians can understand Dostoevsky's themes, whether "only blacks can truly appreciate the plight of black America," or whether only the Yiddish can realize the silent communication that goes on among some of Malamud's characters. Malamud answers decisively:

I'm sensitive to Jews and Jewish life but so far as literature is concerned I can't say that I approve of your thesis: that one has to be of a certain nationality or color to "fully grasp" the "nuances and vibrations" of its fiction. I write on the assumption that any one sensitive to fiction can understand my work and *feel* it.<sup>40</sup>

Another facet of Jewish writing is revealed by Irving Howe who

sees the writers in a love-hate relationship with their childhood home. Earlier Chaim Potok had spoken of the rebel tradition in American literature and how many writers of Jewish descent felt wounded by that heritage and attempted to reject it.<sup>41</sup> But whereas Potok argues for a positive evaluation of Jewish traditions, Howe represents the Jewish heritage as but a wall to bounce against and once it is gone, then the Jew has become an ordinary American. What Howe says about the rejection is worth quoting at length because it connects this kind of Jewish writer with writers of adolescence like J. D. Salinger or Truman Capote or writers of small-town tyranny like Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis:

The imaginative sustenance that Yiddish culture and the immigrant experience could give to American Jewish writers rarely depended on their awareness or acknowledgement of its presence. Often, it took the form of hidden links of attitude and value. At the least, it could provide a social milieu seen as representing moral rigidity, ingrown provincialism, and immigrant bias, from all of which young literary protagonists would then take off in search of freedom and autonomy. It hardly mattered how the background of Yiddish served in the fiction of American Jewish writers, just as long as it was still *there*, the starting point from which writers could move on private journeys of spirit.<sup>42</sup>

Jewish writers like these, who call attention to their social milieu by their conflicts with it, would best be served by a more sociological approach based on the urban neighborhood.

Finally, there are writers whose imaginative, religious, and psychological outlooks are greatly influenced by Judaism and who allow these influences to mark their work in a positive way. Irving Malin's definition of this group of writers comes close to the religious interpretation of Catholic writers with the exception that he insists upon living as a Jew from birth, but in the more religious definition of a Catholic writer, Walker Percy, a convert, is as much a Catholic writer as Flannery O'Connor, a born-Catholic. Malin says:

Obviously my definition of American-Jewish literature is limited. I do not hope to embrace any work containing Jews as necessarily "Jewish," nor do I certify any work by a Jewish writer (that is, one born a Jew) as "Jewish." ONLY WHEN A JEWISH (BY BIRTH) WRITER, MOVED BY RELIGIOUS TENSIONS, SHOWS "ULTIMATE CONCERN" IN CREATING A NEW STRUCTURE OF BELIEF, CAN HE BE SAID TO CREATE "JEWISH" LITERATURE.<sup>43</sup>

Malin very accurately and honestly admits that his approach is theological and, as such, it is limited in the scope of authors it can treat. The problem often found in dealing with Black, or Catholic, or Jewish writers, is that the critics claim too much for their writers. If like Malin, critics would announce their particular limited perspective, then certain writers could be examined more exactly and thoroughly under that condition and the other writers could be left to a different approach.

To use terms like "Black," "Catholic," or "Jewish" is to employ words which describe race, religion, ethnic group, historical circumstances, etc. These words have little to do directly with literary interpretation and evaluation. No doubt for some writers to a large extent, and for all writers to some extent, the Black, Catholic, or Jewish background is an influence in the writing, but the fact of a somewhat common background does not mean that all the writers of that group can be identified by certain common characteristics as, for example, the British Neoclassic writers can be distinguished from the Romantics.

In conclusion: The better-known writers do not want to be categorized as spokesmen for a particular group but as writers for all human beings. Some of the writers with a more religious perspective on life may have their works read from a religious-philosophical approach. Other writers with deeper feelings in regard to their background may have their works treated from a historical-sociological approach. In general, however, critics and readers use the adjectives "Black," "Catholic," and "Jewish" loosely to gather a variety of writers from similar minority backgrounds and learn how their particular experience helps elucidate what it means to be living in America in the twentieth century. In the future, if the interest in Black, Catholic, and Jewish writers continues, it may be advisable to stress the sociological approach and reduce the minority groups to an overarching term like "urban neighborhood."

#### Notes

- 1 Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *The Irish Diaspora in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 5. In a note McCaffrey says that this observation is

- often made; he cites in particular Michael Novak and John Tracy Ellis.
- 2 Abraham Chapman, "Introduction," *Jewish-American Literature: An Anthology* (New York: New American Library, 1974), pp. xxix-xxx.
  - 3 Cf. Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," in *Decline of the New* (New York: Horizon Press, 1970), pp. 176 and 180. In a section, dated October 1969, which was added to the book edition of this essay, Howe claims that he and Ellison are actually closer in their views than they are with critics of the late 1960s who take a more militant stance. Despite his demurral, Howe still gives the impression of being prescriptive when he states how and what a Black writer should write.
  - 4 Cf. Ralph Ellison, "The World and The Jug," *The New Leader*, 9 Dec. 1963 and 3 Feb. 1964, in *Shadow and Act* (1964; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1966), pp. 115-147.
  - 5 Cf. Ralph Ellison, "Hidden Name and Complex Fate," Address delivered at the Library of Congress, 6 Jan. 1964, in *Shadow and Act*, pp. 167-168.
  - 6 Cf. the chapter, "White Nationalism," in Addison Gayle, Jr., *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), in which Gayle details how white critics try to prescribe to Black writers.
  - 7 Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "Black Literature," in *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 310.
  - 8 Scott, pp. 298 and 309.
  - 9 Scott, p. 308.
  - 10 Scott, pp. 340-341.
  - 11 Paul Messbarger, *Fiction With a Parochial Purpose: Social Uses of American Catholic Literature: 1884-1900* (Boston: Boston University Press, 1971), p. 114.
  - 12 Messbarger, p. 64.
  - 13 Messbarger, p. 65.
  - 14 Flannery O'Connor, "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers," in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), p. 180. This book is the source of all further references to O'Connor's essays.
  - 15 "Since Blue Died: American Catholic Novels Since 1961," *Critic*, 34 (Fall 1975), 25.
  - 16 "Post-Vatican Complexities Fill Fiction," *National Catholic Reporter*, 16 Nov. 1973, p. 15.
  - 17 John Carr, "An Interview with Walker Percy," *Georgia Review*, 25 (Fall 1971), 325.
  - 18 "Whatever Happened to the Catholic Novel?" *Sunday Visitor*, 2 Nov. 1980, p. 5.
  - 19 *The Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), p. 236.
  - 20 Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (1969; rpt. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1972), pp. 281-282.
  - 21 *The Habit of Being*, p. 391.
  - 22 "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers," p. 172.
  - 23 "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," p. 196.

- 24 "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," p. 197.
- 25 "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," p. 207.
- 26 "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers," p. 173.
- 27 "Novelist and Believer," p. 168.
- 28 *The Habit of Being*, p. 130.
- 29 "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," p. 192.
- 30 "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," p. 192.
- 31 Anthony Burgess, "A Talk With Graham Greene," *Saturday Review*, May 1982, p. 46.
- 32 Burgess, p. 46.
- 33 Cf. the reaction against the early stories of Philip Roth, and Roth's defense, "Writing About Jews," *Commentary*, 1963, in *Jewish-American Literature: An Anthology*, pp. 694-708. Also, Isaac Bashevis Singer, *A Young Man in Search of Love* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), p. 109: "A Yiddish writer, my editor argued, was honor-bound to stress the good in our people, the lofty and sacred. He had to be an eloquent defender of the Jews, not their defamer."
- 34 Cf. Andrew M. Greeley, *The American Catholic: A Social Portrait* (New York: Harper, 1977), p. 28, especially the following quotation: "American society does not force you to be or not to be Catholic; it leaves Catholicism open to you as a world view and also open as a means of self-definition. Catholicism is a collectivity, an ethnic group which is available for your use if you want to use it."
- 35 Greeley, pp. 21 and 28.
- 36 Philip Rahv, "Note on Bernard Malamud," in *Literature and the Sixth Sense* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1969), p. 280.
- 37 Rahv, p. 281.
- 38 Mark Shechner, "Jewish Writers," in *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, p. 191.
- 39 Leslie and Joyce Field, "An Interview with Bernard Malamud," in *Bernard Malamud: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Leslie and Joyce Field (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 12. Cf. also Grace Farrell Lee, "Seeing and Blindness: A Conversation With Isaac Bashevis Singer," *Novel*, 9 (Winter 1976), 151.
- 40 Field, p. 12.
- 41 Cf. Chaim Potok, *The Jew Confronts Himself in American Literature*, Leo Dehon Lecture Series (Hales Corners, Wisc.: Sacred Heart School of Theology, 1975), pp. 3 and 6.
- 42 Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976), p. 597.
- 43 Irving Malin, "Introduction," *Contemporary American-Jewish Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. Irving Malin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 7.