Identity and Religious Traits in Jewish Literature: A Hansenian Reading of the Short Fiction of Bernard Malamud and Nathan Englander

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Abstract
At the end of the 1970s, Irving Howe and Ruth Wisse predicted the demise of Jewish American fiction as a result of the process of acculturation affecting Jewish communities. However, the booming literary production of a younger generation in recent decades has called into question this announcement of the death of Jewish American fiction. Based on Marcus Hansen's theory of the third generation return, the current paper seeks to explore issues of identity and religion in the writing of Bernard Malamud and Nathan Englander, representatives of the second and the third generation of Jewish fiction, respectively. Malamud's storytelling portrays an all-embracing vision of Judaism in that all his characters are universal projections of humanity, while Englander's view on Judaism is that of a Jew raised in the strict yeshiva. However, his Orthodox upbringing permeates his writing entirely, shaping the unabashed way in which he views Jewish Orthodoxy and the *Shoah*.*

Key words
Jewish American short fiction; Marcus L. Hansen; acculturation; Jewish Orthodoxy; Holocaust

1. Introduction

In the study of contemporary Jewish American literature, it has become commonplace to refer to Irving Howe's 1977 prediction of the impending demise of Jewish American literature. Howe claimed that the decline of the boom period of Jewish American fiction was a direct consequence of its dependence on the immigration experience and that, as might be expected, an ensuing "depletion of resources" would lead to a "thinning-out of materials and memories" (Howe 1977: 16). Some ten years later, Leslie Fiedler added support to Howe's dictum in his contention that "the Jewish American novel is over and done with, a part of history rather than a living literature" (Fiedler 1986: 117). These critics ascribed the problem to the acculturation or Americanization which affected Jewish

communities, viewed as an ineluctable process of the dissolution of Jewish components in the American cultural melting pot.

Howe predicted that once the ethos of immigration had lost its importance to the Jewish experience the literary and cultural diversity in the work of the triumvirate Bellow-Malamud-Roth would soon be on the wane. However, it is probably the case that neither Howe nor Fiedler were acquainted with Marcus Lee Hansen's 'law' of the third generation return. Hansen, a Norwegian-American himself, determined that this principle was "derived from the almost universal phenomenon that what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember" (1938: 9). Bearing this 'law' in mind, Adam Meyer argued that "had he [Howe] been more versed in Hansen's theory, he might have seen Ozick for what she turned out to be, the precursor of the third generation of Jewish American fiction writers who would return to an exploration of their Jewish roots in their texts" (Meyer 2004: 110). To be sure, Meyer analyzed the production of Jewish American writers in the last decade of the twentieth century and saw a general return to Jewish Orthodoxy, just as Andrew Furman had anticipated a few years earlier (2000a: 16–19).

This paper seeks to determine whether the applicability of this universal principle accounts for the thriving condition of the youngest generation of Jewish American writers that emerged during the 1990s. In my analysis, I am indebted to Meyer's articulation of Hansen's dictum in his attempt to expose the limitations of the Howe doctrine, and how Meyer might thus elucidate the revival of Jewish American fiction in the final decades of the twentieth century. In this sense, Meyer acknowledges the role played by Cynthia Ozick as one of the earliest representatives of the third generation of Jewish American writers and the leading figure in an elite of younger authors – Thane Rosenbaum (1960), Michael Chabon (1962), Allegra Goodman (1967), Nathan Englander (1970), Myla Goldberg (1971), Tova Mirvis (1972), and Jonathan Safran Foer (1977) – who began their literary career in the mid and late 1990s. Thus, following Hansen's 'law,' I will discuss the possibility that one of the representatives of Meyer's third generation of Jewish American writers, Nathan Englander, continuously exerts in his fiction an unprejudiced return to Judaism as a self-assertion of his Jewish identity. Unlike Malamud or Roth, members of the second generation of Jewish writers whose fiction usually eludes to Judaism, Englander's fiction deals overtly with matters related to religious Orthodoxy, Jewish identity and reinterpretations of the *Shoah*. My approach will take the form of an examination of both Jewish identity and Jewish Orthodoxy in Bernard Malamud and Nathan Englander, two of the most effective Jewish storytellers and notable representatives of two different generations. Compared to Franz Kafka, Philip Roth, and Bernard Malamud (Lyons 2007: 65), Englander garnered public recognition with the publication of his first volume of short fiction, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges* (1999), which led David Mesher to claim that Englander "seems the heir apparent to Malamud's 'silver crown' as king of the American Jewish story" (Mesher 2000: 129), I will then conclude the study with an analysis of "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank," one of Englander's best-known stories and a fine reflection of his understanding of Jewish Orthodoxy and his view of the Holocaust.

2. Acculturation and Assimilation, the Death Knell of Jewish American Fiction

“The career of American Jewish literature,” affirmed Ruth Wisse, “would seem to have reached a turning point” (1976, 40) after a burgeoning and fertile period which began at the end of the Second World War. Wisse announced the end of “the golden age of Jewish American fiction,” as Andrew Furman (2000a: 4) refers to this period, as a result of the exhaustion of such themes as the marginality and victimization associated with Jewry in Western Literature. Furthermore, Wisse foresaw that the reasons for such a decline could be found in the combined effect of literary saturation and diluted Jewish culture. She argued that the strength of Jewish literature “derives from the peculiar tension of the Jew who is native to two cultures, while fully at home in neither; hence, the more fully the Jew becomes integrated into the larger culture, the less the tension and the fewer the creative energies generated from it” (Wisse 1976: 40). In this regard, Wisse saw assimilation as a major threat to Jewish creativity. The fiction of some reputed American Jewish novelists offered conspicuous examples of “assimilation” – Bellow himself had objected to being included in the Jewish triumvirate, and even Roth, who had also claimed to be not a Jewish writer but a writer who happened to be a Jew,[1] had initiated a process of *deJudaization* in his fiction (Wisse 1976: 41).

On similar lines, Irving Howe predicted the demise of Jewish fiction on account of the loss of those strategies that enabled writers to collect and assemble recollections of sentiments of nostalgia, return, hatred, or guilt, all of these being familiar feelings which serve to make up shared memory, the cornerstone of Jewish fiction (Howe 1977: 5). The immigrant experience being a key element in Jewish fiction, Howe wondered about the future of American Jewish writing after the effects of the “Americanization” process which ensuing generations of Jewish writers would undergo. Some years later, Morris Dickstein noted that young Jewish writers in the late sixties “were living much the same lives as other Americans,” something which would facilitate their rapid assimilation into mainstream American society (Dickstein 1997: 33). All these commentators concurred in asserting that assimilation and loss of identity were decisive factors in the future of American Jewry. Nonetheless, the evolution of Jewish American fiction ignored the death knell which had been announced. Not only has the process of acculturation into American society failed to diminish the creativity of younger generations, but, on the contrary, it has yielded a reassessment of Jewish identity.

Despite its enormous influence in Jewish studies, Howe’s claim has been shown to rest on a significant limitation in terms of its own inception. According to Meyer, Howe’s peculiar interpretation placed excessive importance on the immigrant experience of Yiddish speakers from Europe into America, thus diminishing the specific character of American Jewishness. Critics such as Leslie Fieldler (1986), Sylvia Barack Fishman (1991), Sanford Pinsker (1997), and Daniel Walden (2002) also called into question the demise of American Jewish fiction as predicted by Howe. Thus, Fishman saw the rise of a new genre of American Jewish fiction which was “unabashedly religious in its sensibility” (Fishman 1991: 35), while Pinsker observed that “What Howe hadn’t counted on [...] was the staking out

of fictional claims on essentially new territories, ones that an older generation of Jewish writers largely ignored or only addressed from oblique angles" (qtd. in Furman 2000a: 16–17).

In a seminal article published in *Shofar,* Adam Meyer contended that this new boom might be understood in light of Hansen's thesis of the return of the third generation. In an address delivered in 1938, Hansen, a leading sociologist of the time, accounted for the existence of different sentiments towards the problem of immigration. In his view, the first waves of immigrants arriving in the US became a problem until they moved westwards and dispersed within the mainland. With the passing of time, a new difficulty emerged, "the problem of the second generation" as the children of those first generation immigrants were subjected to the criticisms of the native (mainstream) Americans and those of their elders (Hansen 1938: 6). They felt neglected and labelled as incorrigible, becoming "convinced that they were not like the children from the other side of the tracks" (1938: 7) a prejudice that drove them into a life of delinquency. The problem facing the second generation was how to inhabit two worlds at the same time—abiding by the religion, language and customs of their ancestors at home, while at the same time seeking assimilation away from home. In this regard, Hansen claimed that the problem was eventually resolved when these children became economically independent. Thus, they strove to forget everything: "the foreign language that left an unmistakable trace in his English speech, the religion that continually recalled childhood struggles, the family customs that should have been the happiest of all memories" (Hansen 1938: 7). Being always under suspicion, the members of this second generation aimed to embrace "Americanness" as a form of self-denial of their own ancestry, their attitude being considered as a sort of apostasy by the foreign-born.

Such pessimistic view was soon dropped, with the appearance of a third generation of immigration which sought to remember its past. Hansen reflected on the principle of third generation interest and how he believed that those "grandchildren" felt proud of their "grandparents" and aimed to acknowledge an ancestry which had been denied and rejected by their "parents." Hansen argued that a policy of forgetting drove members of the second generation to show no interest in its history, or to write about it. However, when the third generation emerged, its members did not share those sentiments of alienation that their parents had suffered, precisely because, "they were American born and their speech was the same as that of those with whom they associate" (Hansen 1938: 10). Hansen believed that this revival usually takes place after fifty or sixty years, by which time a proud third generation has begun to flourish.

Hansen's principle on ethnic history, however, has been called into question. John Higham observed that "Hansen's law" remained "insubstantial and unconvincing" (qtd. in Sollors 1986: 322), while Thomas J. Archdeacon saw that, rather than anticipate an ethnic revival, the theory in fact diminished the force of ethnicity (Archdeacon 1990: 51). Despite these claims, the changing trends in recent decades in the US, the perception and "modus vivendi" as a sign of identity of the "three generation system" still rings true today in many immigrant communities who currently live in secluded pockets of population in the US. Indeed, it is very

noticeable how the children of small immigrant communities tend to welcome assimilation as a means of integration into the host country, while rejecting their parents' culture, language, and traditions. In this regard, the re-assessment of this principle and its metaphorical articulation by Adam Meyer lent Hansen's dictum a fresh new interpretation in our understanding of Jewish American fiction.

3. Bernard Malamud, a "Second-Generation" (Jewish American) Writer

Meyer applied Hansen's theory to the presence of Jewish American writers in America. He noted the existence of three generations – in his particular use of the term – since their arrival at the end of the nineteenth-century.[2] According to Meyer, the "Big Flood" or "New" wave of immigration[3] brought immigrants from Eastern and Southern European countries from the 1880s to mid-1920s. During this period, many Jews fled to America as a result of the antisemitic sentiment in Eastern Europe. Such immigrants managed to earn a living in the new country, while also exerting a considerable influence on American literature, in that they brought the immigrant milieu along with them. Meyer argues that the writers who were members of this "first generation" – Abraham Cahan, Henry Roth, Mary Antin, and Anzia Yezierska – began "democratizing American literature through adding their Jewish voices to it" (Meyer 2004: 109).

The second generation of Jewish American writers spanned a period from the end of the 1930s through the 1960s. In Meyer's view, these writers sought to forget the themes of the previous generations by actively distancing themselves from Jewish religious traditions (2004: 109) because they considered their heritage "to be a burden they were not willing to bear" and "an obstacle to the fulfillment of their American dream" (Náhliková 2010: 18). As Fishman observes, until the late 1960s this community of American Jews celebrated assimilation as "the irresistible trend of the future" (Fishman 1991: 39). Among the most notable figures, the triad formed by Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth stands out, although Meyer includes Norman Mailer and Arthur Miller, both of whom were "abandoning Jewish concerns" (Meyer 2004: 109). In accordance with Hansen's thesis, these authors evoke a "generation" determined to forget its ancestors' legacy prior to its assimilation into the new culture.

Malamud can be seen as conforming to the paradigm of the second-generation writer. Born in Brooklyn in 1914 to Russian Jewish immigrant parents, he was raised with virtually no cultural nourishment. Mark Schechner claims that Malamud "knew nothing of Torah and Talmud, of ritual and ancient lore. Of the folklore of Ashkenazy Jewry, he knew his generation's share but no more" (Schechner 2000: 354). Malamud acknowledged that his mother never inculcated a Jewish tradition in him, and that this helped him to distance himself from Jewish Orthodoxy: "it helps to have had a Jewish mother, but I'm a Jew pretty much because at a certain point in my youth I felt the need to define myself as one" (Malamud 1996: 182). For him, being referred to as a Jewish writer did not reflect his idea of humanity and his own conception of what being a Jew was. "I handle the Jew as a symbol of the tragic experience of man existentially," Malamud said

in an interview, and "I try to see the Jew as universal man. Everyman is a Jew though he may not know it" (qtd. in Abramson 1994: 147). As Michaela Náhliková rightly points out, Malamud takes a humanist stance, a platform from which he separates Judaism (i.e. religion) and Jewishness (i.e. Jewish history, culture and philosophy without religion) (2010: 15). He is not interested in focusing on Jewish Orthodoxy, but on Jewish identity, and his goal is not "to describe Orthodox Jews realistically or teach his readers something about Judaism or Jewish culture" but "to capture the search for identity and humanity in a chaotic postwar world (13). Thus, his conception of Jewishness[4] is all-embracing and universalizing, devoid of excessively complex cultural or identity implications. He uses a metaphorical or symbolic conception of what being a Jew implies – the moral aspirations and the sufferings of his characters are meant to be regarded as universal to humankind, a position that also extends to his longer fiction (Abramson 1994: 148).

Many characters in Malamud's stories struggle for identity. This is the case with Morris Bober, the protagonist of *The Assistant* (1957), who believes that being a Jew is above all about being a good person, and that this has nothing to do with nationality and language (Náhliková 2010: 21); or the case of Arthur Fidelman, the protagonist of "The Last Mohican," who, when asked by Shimon Susskind, a Jewish refugee, whether he speaks Yiddish, responds that he expresses himself best in English (Malamud 1998: 202). Fidelman, an assimilated Jewish American who travels to Italy to study the painter Giotto, brings with him the opening chapter of his planned book, which he carries inside his "new pigskin-leather briefcase" (200). But the problem of identity faced by Fidelman is that he does not care for his past and refuses to treasure his ancestors' memory – he is only interested in his job and avoids getting involved in other people's problems. So when Susskind, who follows him around like a shadow, continually asks Fidelman to give his old suit to him, Fidelman refuses to do so and instead gives him a few dollars as a proof of his solidarity.

Robert Alter observed that, though most of Malamud's characters are "avowedly Jewish, [Malamud] has never really written *about* Jews, in the manner of other American Jewish novelists" (Alter 1966: 71). His are hackneyed figures whose misadventures and adversities broadly equate them with the Jewish *schlemiel* – a sort of unlucky, clumsy, foolish immigrant with broken English for whom things never turn out right – the *schlimazel,* "the hapless soul who is invariably at the wrong end of the bungling" (Alter 1966: 72), or the *schnorrer*, a drifter or professional beggar. Examples abound in his storytelling. For instance, in "The First Seven Years," Sobel, a Polish *schlemiel*, who has worked for five years as assistant shoemaker alongside his boss, Feld, becomes infatuated with Feld's daughter Miriam, and is forced to work for two more years before claiming her hand, a knowing wink to the Genesis story in which Laban agrees to give Jacob the hand of his daughter Rachel in marriage in return for seven years' work. In "Take Pity," the ex-coffee salesman Rosen, a Jewish *schlimazel,* is infatuated with Eva Kalish and repeatedly offers her financial help to save her and her daughters from starvation following the death of her husband. Rosen eventually tries to commit suicide in order to allow Eva to inherit his money and insurance policies. The end of the story shows Eva who, with beseeching eyes, visits Rosen's apartment to ask for

help while a scorned and infuriated Rosen shouts at her before slamming down the window shutters. In these stories, Malamud is less interested in Jewish identity as a trait, and far more concerned with the metaphorical projection of his characters, as well as in their moral redemption through suffering.

As regards the *Shoah*, second-generation Jewish American writers tended not to evoke the Holocaust directly; instead, as Andrew Furman (2000b: 95) notes, many writers dealt with it allusively, or else, their novels and short stories explored the trauma which continued to plague survivors after their liberation in a somewhat perfunctory way. This also rings true for Malamud. In some of narratives, the Holocaust is addressed discreetly with subtle evocations, usually at the close of the story. Again, in "The First Seven Years," Sobel is described as "a grown man, bald and old with his miseries, who had by the skin of his teeth escaped Hitler's incinerators" (Malamud 1998: 77). In "Take Pity," Eva tells Rosen that she cannot go anywhere because her husband left her children to starve. When Rosen implores her to seek help from her relatives, she replies, "My relatives Hitler took away from me" (Malamud 1998: 176). In "The Last Mohican," Fidelman, in his search of Susskind, visits a Jewish cemetery. There he finds tombs crowned with stained stones. One of these, which he finds lying on the ground, says: "'My beloved father/ Betrayed by the damned Fascists/ Murdered at Auschwitz by the barbarous Nazis/ *O Crime Orribile*'" (Malamud 1998: 215).

Malamud addresses the themes of Jewish identity and the suffering of the Holocaust in no more than five or six stories. Having not been witnesses to the Holocaust, he and other second-generation Jewish writers faced a difficult task which, in the words of Ellen Fine, consisted of imagining "an event they have not lived through, and to reconstitute and integrate it into their writing – to create a story out of History" (qtd. in Berger 1997: 2). In one of his "Italian" stories, "The Lady of the Lake," Henry R. Levin, an American traveler visiting the Lake Maggiore region in Northern Italy who is ashamed of being a Jew – he had changed his name to Freeman – denies his identity twice as he suspects that Isabella, a mysterious Italian girl who feigns aristocratic origins and with whom he has fallen in love, hates Jews. Only at the end of the story and after a third denial does Isabella reveal her breast to Freeman, showing a tattooed number as proof of her suffering, since as a small girl she had been sent to Buchenwald concentration camp by the Italian Fascists. Levin-Freeman embodies the typical attitude of a member of the second generation: a denial of his roots and his Jewish identity serves to shatter his plans to marry Isabella, who is proud of her Jewish culture and the suffering of her people.

In "The German Refugee," Oskar Gassner flees from Germany for New York in the summer of 1939, leaving behind his daughter and his Gentile wife, who he believed in "her heart, was a Jew hater" (Malamud 1998: 362). Employed by the Institute of Public Studies, Gassner is asked to give a lecture on the literature of the Weimar Republic, although he does not speak English. He hires a teacher, Martin Goldberg, the narrator, who painstakingly helps him improve his broken English. Gassner's progress coincides with the Nazi invasion of Poland. The story ends when Gassner commits suicide after having successfully delivered his address. Later on Goldberg discovers, after reading a "think packet of letters from

his wife" (Malamud 1998: 367) that Frau Gassner, despite desperately waving "her bronze crucifix" at the Brown Shirts, was caught and shipped in a lorry to a border town in Poland where it was rumored she was shot in the head.

Malamud's Jewish characters become the epitome of the oppressed, whether they are immigrants, like Sobel and Eva Kalish who arrived in America after the passing of the Displaced Person Act of 1948, Holocaust survivors, like Isabella, or Holocaust refugees, like Oskar Gassner. As Philip Rahv puts it, one of the most recognizable traits in Malamud "is his feelings for human suffering on the one hand and for a life of value, order and dignity on the other" (qtd. in Howe 1977: 12).

4. Nathan Englander, or the Return to Jewish Orthodoxy

In his reframing of Hansen's theory, Adam Meyer determines that writers of the third generation look back on the past so as to recall those issues which their immediate literary forebears disregarded. Contrary to Howe's principle, this third generation does not hold on to the milieu of immigration as a means of expressing identity. Sylvia Barack Fishman claims that the exploration of Jewish Orthodoxy is for many Jewish American writers "a personal quest for spiritual identity" as it "provides an opportunity to investigate the confrontation between individual freedom and group continuity" (Fishman 1991: 35). In the same vein, Tresa Grauer notes that the general rise of interest in identity began in the 1960s as a result of the revolutionary politics of that decade, which demanded "the greater political inclusion and representation of previously marginalized groups" (Grauer 2003: 270). Against such a background, American Jewry sought to find new alternatives which could help redefine Jewish identity. The younger generations turned their eyes to themes which had either been disregarded in the past or which were now re-examined from a different perspective –a return to the *Shoah* (post-Holocaust fiction), a re-assessment of the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, especially after the Six-Day War, the presence of Zionism, or even conspicuous aspects of religious Orthodoxy.

One of the major themes here is the importance that younger generations of Jewish American writers confer on the Holocaust. Fishman observes that the *Shoah* appears as a central preoccupation for end-of-the-century Jewish American writers, in an attempt to recall the persecutions, massacres, and expulsions which occurred in early Jewish history (Fishman 1991: 43). Similarly, Meyer notes that Howe failed to see the importance of the *Shoah* and how it has become a significant "area of emphasis for literary productions by many younger Jewish American writers, particularly the not insignificant number of those who are children of Holocaust survivors" (Meyer 2004: 105). To be sure, Hilene Flanzbaum and Daniel Mendelsohn, grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, travelled to Europe in order to trace their family's traumatic past – in the case of Mendelsohn, his journey to Ukraine in search of his uncle Shmiel Jäger was chronicled in *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* (Lemberg, 2015: 146).

This new batch of writers suffer neither feelings of shame nor an inferiority complex, this mainly, in Nathan Glazer's view, because they have "no psychologi-

cal hang-ups about exploring its past and its heritage" (qtd. in Meyer 2004: 109). It is of note that when this generation put aside any feelings which threatened their Americanness, their primary interest shifted to a thorough examination of their ancestry, culture, history, and religion.

One of the authors who has claimed a direct return to Orthodoxy is Nathan Englander. Englander burst onto the American literary scene in the mid-1990s. The publication of his early stories coincided with the release of other collections by Jewish American authors, namely Steve Stern, Elena Lappin and Ehud Havazelet. This happy coincidence prompted David Mesher to refer to the revival of Jewish fiction as the "Malamud factor," which he defined as an "interweaving of traditional and modern elements as characters struggle towards a new life while carrying the emotional baggage of the old" (Mesher 2000: 120). Indeed, such a mixture of elements is frequent in Englander's stories, which entwine Jewish folklore and history with Jewish traditions and ceremonies, religious observance and laws. At the same time, his characters, some of them living in Royal Hills, a fictional Jewish community in New York City, struggle to cope with the stifling parochialism of that community within a cosmopolitan society.

Englander was born into a Jewish Orthodox family on Long Island, New York, in 1970. In interviews, he has expressed his opposition to the strict education he received:

> I had a right-wing, xenophobic, anti-intellectual, fire-and-brimstone, free thought-free, shtetl-mentality, substandard education. During some formative period or another, I had basic theological questions. None of the men in charge of my religious education were equipped to deal with them. And so I began to look elsewhere; I began to read literature. (Englander 2003: 20)

Englander lived in Jerusalem and his life in Israel is reflected in his second volume of short stories. One of the best-known, "Sister Hills," chronicles the lives of two religious Israeli families on a Jewish settlement above a Palestinian village in Samaria. In this narrative, Englander proves not only his strong interest in the complex (and convoluted) history of contemporary Israel, but also his deep concern for religious Orthodoxy. Unlike many of his classmates from his Orthodox yeshiva who went to Israel and returned as Hassidic Jews, Englander experienced a conversion which resulted in him becoming a secular Jew or, as he prefers to describe himself, "a God-fearing atheist" (Gussow 1999). This conversion into secularism, however, does not prevent him from looking back at his former Orthodoxy.

His debut-collection, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, is, in the words of Frank Caso, "a superb short story collection that reveals the tension between the sacred and the profane for Orthodox Jews" (1999: 1150). It received the PEN/ Malamud Award in 2000 and it was followed by Englander's foray into longer fiction, *The Ministry of Special Cases,* a novel set in Buenos Aires in 1976 during the "Dirty War" period. His second volume of short stories, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank,* won the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award and was a finalist for the 2013 Pulitzer Prize.

Defined by Bonnie Lyons as ‘edgy,’ Englander’s stories explore identity issues in close association with the ritual practices of Orthodox Judaism. His characters grapple with problems that arise from spiritual, moral or even sexual crises. In “Reb Kringle,” Englander explores the spiritual crisis experienced by Reb Yitzhak, a rabbi who is forced by his wife to do a job he regards as “a sin:” playing Santa Claus for “goyishe [i.e. Gentile] children” at a local department store, this as a means of paying their synagogue debts (Englander 1999: 142-143). But Englander also exploits his comic bent in the anthologized “The Gilgul of Park Avenue,” a rather unusual story of the religious conversion undergone by Charles Morton Luger, a Protestant financial analyst who, on his way home in the backseat of a taxi, experiences a spiritual epiphany which turns him into an Orthodox Jew (Englander 1999: 109). In Judaism, the process of the transmigration of the soul is known as *gilgul*, and the *baal teshuva* is the person who embraces Orthodox Judaism. In a sense, Luger experiences a sudden religious, yet comic epiphany which, to some extent, reminds us of the gradual spiritual change undergone by Englander himself, even though Englander’s spiritual return takes the opposite direction if compared to that of Luger’s.

The Holocaust constitutes a central topic in Englander’s storytelling. In “The Tumblers” (*For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*) a group of simple folks from Chelm escape from Auschwitz by passing themselves off as acrobats after boarding a circus train. In “Camp Sundown,” published in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank*, Agnes Brown and Arnie Levine, a couple in their mid-seventies, are attending a summer camp which they see as the Holocaust camp of their childhoods. In this parodied version of an extermination camp, the residents even accuse another camper, Doley Falk, of being a guard from their former Nazi camp which eventually leads to the residents, agitated by Arnie, drowning Doley in the camp lake (Englander 2013: 179).

Nonetheless, the most intense re-assessment of the Holocaust is dealt with in “What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank,” the eponymous story that opens Englander’s second collection. The title pays homage to Raymond Carver’s hugely influential story “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” although the protagonists’ conversations do not focus on ‘love’ but on what it means to be Jewish. The fact that Englander takes Carver as his literary forebear rather than, for example, Amos Oz or Shalom Aleichem is, in the words of Hilene Flanzbaum, proof that Englander is claiming “American” to be his primary identity (Flanzbaum 2019: 206). However, despite the overt allusion to Anne Frank, Englander’s story does not deal with the Jewish girl deported to Auschwitz. “The use of ‘Anne Frank’” notes Jennifer Lemberg “[...] offers insight into how American Jews relate to the Holocaust in the present day” (Lemberg 2015: 140).

The scenario set also mirrors that of Carver’s: two married couples meet around a kitchen table and spend the evening conversing, drinking shots of vodka and smoking marijuana (cigarettes in Carver’s story). Debbie and her husband, the unnamed narrator of the story, live in Florida and receive a visit from Lauren, Debbie’s childhood friend, and her husband Mark. This émigré American Jewish couple live in Jerusalem and have just arrived in Florida to visit Mark’s elderly

parents who, due to their poor health – both are Holocaust survivors – cannot fly out to Israel. While Debbie turned secular after years of study at a yeshiva school, Lauren married Mark and emigrated to Israel, where the couple became Hassidic Jews, taking the names Shoshana and Yerucham, respectively. Thus, unlike Englander, who travelled to Israel and became secular, Lauren and Mark moved to Jerusalem on a spiritual quest and embraced Orthodoxy.

What comes next is an allegorical reading of Englander's story through the lens of Hansen's theory. In my view, it is arguable that Debbie and her husband may be considered, metaphorically speaking, as members of the "second" generation of immigrants, whereas Mark and Lauren would belong to the "third" generation, despite both middle-aged couples probably being in their thirties, and thus belonging to the same generation.[5] The "regression" from one generation to another embodied in the characters of Mark (Yerucham) and Lauren (Shoshana) is not chronological, then, but spiritual, a "generational" *gilgul* analogous to that of "The Gilgul of Park Avenue," which Meyer analyzes as "a humorous description of Jewish return" (2004: 115). To be sure, in his analysis Meyer blurs the intergenerational framework in which characters are inscribed as a means of adapting his reading to the theoretical parameters of Hansen's Law.[6] In his allegorical reading of Englander's "The Gilgul of Park Avenue," Meyer contrasts characters of the "second" generation (Dr. Birnbaum or Sue Morton) with that of Charles Morton Luger, who after the *gilgul*, becomes "spiritually" a member of the "third" generation of American Jews, those who make a return to Judaism, with religion and culture becoming "a focal part of their life" (Englander 1999: 119).

I believe that in Englander we can see the articulation of a similar situation in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank," where the Holocaust acts as a backdrop to this poignant story. To be sure, the case of these born-again Mark and Lauren should be interpreted as a "third generation" return to Judaism even although, as I have noted, they are both, chronologically speaking, members of the "second" generation. Their conversion, not as radical as Luger's, brought about a dramatic change in their behavior regarding observance of Hassidic rituals (diet, demeanor – and physical appearance – thus, Lauren uses a wig while Mark wears a long beard down to the middle of his stomach), but quickly points out that he did not inherit from his father that he got it.[7] For Mark, being a "real" Jew is not about wearing the outfit, it is "about building life in a vacuum" (Englander 2013: 24) and raising a large family: he and his wife have ten children, all of them girls, a fact which secures the matrilineal descent, still effective in Orthodox communities.

As the story opens, the narrator notes that Mark is "lecturing us on the Israeli occupation" while, in a rather stoical manner, criticizing how confident Americans are, given that they housed "even terrorists" – an implicit allusion to the 9/11 terrorists who had been trained in Florida (Englander 2013: 3-4). Despite Mark and Lauren both being American citizens, their embracing of Hassidism also coincides with a readjustment in their new identities, as well as a self-distancing from any traits of acculturation. Thus, Mark and Lauren manifest a lenient attitude towards the consumption of alcohol and criticize how Americans and "assimilated" American Jews – a direct reference to the narrator and Debbie –

educate their children. Indeed, in Mark's view the attitude that Americans have with not letting their own children see them drinking is a very American characteristic: "'It's the whole American puritanical thing, the twenty-one-year-old drinking age and all that. We don't make a big deal about it in Israel, and so the kids, they don't even notice alcohol'" (Englander 2013: 8).

In contrast to this couple, the narrator and his wife can be seen as representatives of the "second" generation who have turned away from the strict legacy of the yeshiva school in favor of an integration into broader American society. However, there seems to be a latent difference between the two of them. While the narrator is an archetypal member of the "second" generation, one who despises the culture of his ancestors (namely, Orthodoxy) – he even refuses to call their visitors by their Orthodox names which he regards as pretentious (Englander 2013: 5) – Debbie sees herself at the liminal place where the "second" and "third" generations meet: "'There is such a thing as Jewish culture,'" says Debbie, "'One can live a culturally rich life'" (Englander 2013: 24). This issue is further corroborated by the narrator who characterizes his wife and Lauren as two young women who were living in New York "on the edge of two worlds" (Englander 2013: 8). Furthermore, while Lauren embraced Hassidism so decisively – she is "culturally Jewish," as Flanzbaum notes (2019: 215) – Debbie may have decided to remain on the very edge of those two worlds, making it difficult to place her fully as a member of the "third" generation exactly because of this liminal existence. On the contrary, Mark defies Debbie's opinion when he affirms that "'Judaism is a religion. And with religion comes ritual. Culture is nothing. Culture is some construction of the modern world'" (Englander 2013: 24–25). This sort of culture shock will resurface later on when the two couples discuss the Holocaust.

A hybrid lifestyle also brings about comic situations arising from the ignorance of Orthodox rituals. Although brought up in a yeshiva school, Debbie seems to have disengaged long ago from Hassidic rituals. An amusing situation arises when the couples begin to smoke pot: "Are you sure" asks Debbie when she passes on them a joint packed in an Altoids tin "you guys are allowed to smoke pot that comes out of a tin that held non-kosher candy?" (Englander 2013: 20). Similarly, the narrator pokes fun at their guests' hassidism when he refers that the expression *ultra*-Orthodox sounded "like a repackaged detergent – ORTHODOX ULTRA,® now with more deep-healing power" (Englander 2013: 5). Furthermore, he even gently mocks their Orthodoxy when he finds out that Lauren is on Facebook – "'These are very bad Hassidim,' I say, and we laugh at that" (Englander 2013: 20).

Englander skillfully manages the dramatic moments as the action moves smoothly from issues of traditional/secular Jewish identity to the anxiety derived from the remembrance of the *Shoah*. In fact, tension in the story builds when Mark makes explicit his understanding of Jewish identity. Although Debbie had become secular, her adolescence furnished her with a feeling of Jewishness and, just like Ruth in Jonathan Rosen's *Eve's Apple,* who has a passionate interest in Anne Frank, she is obsessed with the Holocaust and its victims (an "unhealthy obsession," recalls the narrator). Although she belongs to a generation whose grandparents were born in the Bronx, Debbie, just like many Americans, was

taught to live the *Shoah* as if she had been a child survivor, a notion that causes great discomfort in her husband. This attitude, although "unnatural" – indeed, the narrator criticizes her as a poser – is not alien to American culture, as Flanzbaum (2019: 207-212) has shown. And this biased perception of the *Shoah,* this 'sugarcoating' of the Holocaust, as Alvin Rosenfeld calls it (qtd. in Flanzbaum 2019: 210), is subjected to criticism by Mark, since he considers that such an interest in the Holocaust is in fact closer to an American secular identity rather than to a Jewish religious attitude: "'What I'm trying to say, whether you want to take it seriously or not, is that you can't build Judaism only on the foundation of one terrible crime. It is about this obsession with the Holocaust as a necessary sign of identity. As your only educational tool'" (Englander 2013: 24). Hence, Debbie is therefore portrayed as a liminal character who is victimized by her own husband, being accused by him of pretending to be someone who she is not, and, at the same time, by Mark, who seems to be disgusted with the American appropriation of the *Shoah*.

Unlike other Jewish writers such as Cynthia Ozick, who only revisits the Holocaust through her imagination, Englander provides a fair depiction of the catastrophe, a perspective which brings him closer to Malamud. However, in this story Mark's surprising attitude towards the Holocaust in this story cannot be understood by Debbie, who is horrified by Mark's comparison:

> "Our concern," Mark says, "is not the past Holocaust. It is the current one. The one that takes more than fifty percent of the Jews this generation. Our concern is intermarriage. It is the Holocaust that's happening now. You don't need to be worrying about some Mormons doing hocus-pocus on the murdered six million. You need to worry that your son marries a Jew."
> "Oh my God," Deb says. "Oh my God. Are you calling intermarriage a Holocaust?" (Englander 2013: 26)

Mark sees intermarriage between Gentiles and Jews as a second *Shoah*, a second catastrophe which threatens the existence of Judaism and the matrilineal descent. Assimilation, the exhibition of a hyphenated identity, a trait manifested by second-generation members and which marks the end of the Jewish American *experience* as Howe declared, is therefore viewed by Mark as a menace to the visibility of Jews in America and, by extension, in the rest of the world.[8]

The story's ending is both enigmatic and revealing, and has been cited as an example of the "What If? School of fiction" (Pinsker 2014: 342). After having spent the entire afternoon drinking whisky and smoking the pot purloined from Trev, the hosts' son, the two couples decide to move on to the well-stocked pantry, a "secret hiding place" and play "the Anne Frank game" or "the Righteous Gentile Game." For Debbie, who played the game in her adolescence, it is a thought experiment to find out which of their friends or neighbors are righteous Christians and would be willing to hide Jews in the event of an American Holocaust. Hiding a Jew implies risking the life of all those involved and their families and everybody seems to find reasons to have close Christian friends who would potentially willing to save their lives. However, the hide-and-seek game takes a sudden

unexpected turn. When Shoshana suggests playing the game against themselves, Debbie insists that she has no doubts about her husband hiding her and her son (Englander 2013: 34). It is Mark's turn and he remains hesitant when faced with such a paradoxical situation: "'But if I weren't Jewish, I wouldn't be me.' 'That's for sure,' I say. 'He agrees,' Mark says. 'We wouldn't even be married. We wouldn't have kids.'" (Englander 2013: 34). Mark – the Hassidic Yerucham – cannot just simply pretend not to be a Jew. In his view, his identity as a Jew is so engrained in his being that not being a Jew would impede his marrying his Jewish wife. The story nears its conclusion and Mark has to determine whether he would save his wife's life in the event of a second Holocaust. Shoshana sets the scene, closes the pantry door, and says: "'You're not Jewish, and you've got the three of us hiding in your pantry'" (Englander 2013: 35). The three of them stare at Mark, waiting for an answer. There is a dilemma that needs to be faced and Marks feels trapped in his indecisiveness: "'So would I hide you?' he says, serious. And for the first time that day, he reaches out, as my Deb would, and puts his hand to her hand. 'Would I, Shoshi?'" (Englander 2013: 35). Mark's long silence is perfectly understood by all those "hiding" in the pantry and, Shoshana, appalled, pulls back her hand in silence:

> She does not say it. And he does not say it. And he does not say it. And from the four of us, no one will say what cannot be said – that this wife believes her husband would not hide her. What to do? What would come of it? And so we stand like that, the four of us trapped in that pantry. Afraid to open the door and let out what we've locked inside.
>
> (Englander 2013: 36)

The final showdown faced by Mark sheds a new light not only on his idea of identity, but also on his commitment to his wife. The "Anne Frank game," a game that Englander himself admitted having played with his sister in their adolescence, ceases to be a childish game and becomes a deadly serious business, a twisted, epiphanic moment in which Mark's silence reveals a horrific secret – he would hide Shoshana, but, if he were a Christian, he would finally turn her in.

5. Conclusion

As Donald Weber noted, Hansen's maxim became "the most influential" and "compelling model for charting the patterns of Americanization and ethnic revival" during the 1950s (Weber 1991: 320). Despite misgivings expressed by certain of Hansen's critics,[9] the principle, as Adam Meyer shows in his articulation of the "second" and "third"-generation Jewish American writers, still remains a useful and relevant approach in that it supports the notion that the "second" generation seeks to abandon traits of their foreign origins, a feature which may be absent in members of the "third" generation. The process of *de-Judaization* undergone by members of the famous triad of Jewish American writers may have prevented them from immersing themselves in Jewish religious and theological matters in

a period during which the debate about identity matters was still in its infancy. Indeed, Sara Bershtel and Allen Graubard anticipated that in the American society, "more and more Jewish Americans are discovering, rediscovering, or intensifying some impulse to Jewish identity" (Bershtel and Graubard 1992: 4). Moreover, Tresa Grauer reminds us that the new emphasis on "covenental concerns" among Jewish American writers would emerge in the 1990s and that Nathan Englander would be one of those authors spearheading a group of writers who unashamedly exhibited an interest in a return to Orthodoxy (Grauer 2003: 274–275).

It is noteworthy that Jewish American authors such as Michael Chabon, Nathan Englander, Allegra Goodman, and Jonathan Safran Foer have moved away from the immigration experience and focused their attention on a redefinition of Jewishness, sometimes evoking a quite distinctively secular Jewish American milieu in their fiction. They have begun to write about Jewish Orthodoxy, the traumas derived from the Holocaust, or Israel as a sacred land, in a wholly new light. The emergence of a generation of "literary grandchildren" of Jewish American writers had also been anticipated by Andrew Furman, who included here the names of Nessa Rapoport, Rebecca Goldstein, Steven Stern, to name but a few. These writers announced that "the regeneration of Jewish American fiction had begun" (Furman 2000a: 177). Nathan Englander, as a representative of the "third" generation of Jewish American writers, is currently carving out a niche for himself in Jewish American literature which follows in the footsteps of Malamud although the conspicuous treatment of Jewish identity was absent in the latter author. As a member of the "third" generation, Englander has begun to stake out fictional modes which deal explicitly with Jewish history, religious observance and political issues from and on the edge, as Bonnie Lyons notes (65).

In "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank," the moral judgement with which Englander presents for his readers does not fall within the "natural" boundaries of Judaism; on the contrary, the Lauren/Shoshana and Mark/Yerucham dichotomy appeals to readers in such a way that they end up asking what makes us human. All in all, Englander's narrative, as Flanzbaum rightly reminds us, lends itself to a discussion on the importance of being humans, not merely American, Jewish or Hindu (Flanzbaum 2019: 206), Englander does not deal with Judaism as an insider, but does so as a writer who has finally freed himself from all cultural constraints and religious dogmas and traumas in an attempt to offer fresh new perspectives which, although they may be comic or parodic, embrace issues such as the *Shoah*, Jewish religious traditions, and the Israeli occupation of Palestine. As Victoria Aarons has observed, the literature of this new contemporary generation of writers, of which Englander is a fine representative, engages with past history as a means of moving it into a more open future (2019: 8). Englander's storytelling, just like that of other writers who began working at the turn of the century, may well take the limits of Jewish literature beyond the traditional boundaries of Jewry.

Notes

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[1] "I have never conceived of myself for the length of a single sentence as an American Jewish or Jewish American writer ... As a novelist, I think of myself and have from the beginning, as a free American and ... as irrefutably American, fastened throughout my life to the American moment, under the spell of the country's past, partaking of its drama and destiny, and writing in the rich native tongue by which I am possessed" (qtd. in Aarons 2019: 16).

[2] Despite the fact that Hansen uses the term in a chronological sense, Meyer seems to give a much broader meaning to the word "generation," a concept that does not necessarily take into account the chronological factor. In my view, Meyer's concept of "generation" might more usefully be seen as synonymous with "family" or "lineage."

[3] The "Old" immigration wave had occurred between 1820-1880.

[4] I used the term "Jewishness" with exactly the same connotation with which Irving Howe used it. He referred to "a body of inherited traditions, values, and attitudes" which, although it sometimes suggests "a certain vagueness," points to "the diffusion of a culture heritage" (1977: 10).

[5] The use of inverted commas with the "second" and "third" generations attest to the metaphorical reading of this story.

[6] In America, the penchant for generational categories might be seen as intimately linked to issues of identity. Werner Sollors provides further support for the idea of an intergenerational exchange, arguing that in American culture: "it is possible for one man to be both second and third generation. He may be numerically second generation, though third generation 'in spirit'... but act second generation–until a life crisis brings out his true third-generation character formation and destiny" (Sollors 1986: 219).

[7] There is a plausible reason to believe that Mark's father nicely fits into the second-generation mold. Unlike his son, he decided to remain in Florida as many other children of the Holocaust did. In the story, there is an anecdote which situates him as a member of the "second" generation. Mark accompanies his father to the golf course where his father is a member and accusses him of forgetting his Yiddish – "I didn't forget my English any more than your *Yiddish is gone*" – a direct accusation of the typical assimilation attitude exhibited by second-generation members (Englander 2013: 10; added emphasis). Furthermore, while Mark is helping him to get changed, Mark's father, despited his son's initial excitement, does not wholly partake in his son's enthusiasm when Mark sees that the person sitting next to his father in the locker room is a Holocaust "survivor" with almost the same tattooed number as his father's. For Mark's father this is an episode which he would have preferred to have gone unnoticed.

[8] Hilene Flanzbaum recalls that in 2009, the Israeli government spent $800,000 on a campaign that warned of the threat posed by foreign Jews who deliberately choose to marry Gentiles (Flanzbaum 2019: 215).

[9] While John Higham observed that Hansen's notion remained "insubstantial and unconvincing" (qtd. in Weber 1991: 322), Thomas J. Archdeacon felt that Hansen's purpose was rhetorical and "that he [Hansen] may even have been speaking with tongue in cheek" although he "must have considered his principle to be at least a good generalization" (Archdeacon 1990: 49).

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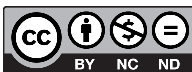

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