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# Teaching Jewish American Literature in a Spanish Context

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## I.

Eurydice (the Spanish branch “Eurydice España rediE” – *red española de información sobre Educación*) is a network that supports European cooperation within the framework of lifelong learning and provides information on education systems and policies in 37 countries – the 28 Member States of the European Union,<sup>1</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland, and Turkey. The “General Introduction” of the well-known report entitled *Teaching Reading in Europe: Contexts, Policies and Practices* published by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency opens like this:

The written word is present everywhere and therefore reading is a fundamental skill which is increasingly needed in almost every sphere of life. *A wide range of reading skills, including digital reading, are essential for an individual's personal and social fulfilment*, for taking an informed and active part in society and exercising full rights of citizenship. Furthermore, *these skills are essential for entering and advancing in the labor market. Those with inadequate reading skills have their life chances limited in today's society*. In essence, acquiring the ability to read well is a

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<sup>1</sup> The years when the Member States joined the European Union are given parenthetically: Austria (1995), Belgium (1958), Bulgaria (2007), Croatia (2013), Cyprus (2004), Czech Republic (2004), Denmark (1973), Estonia (2004), Finland (1995), France (1958), Germany (1958), Greece (1981), Hungary (2004), Ireland (1973), Italy (1958), Latvia (2004), Lithuania (2004), Luxembourg (1958), Malta (2004), The Netherlands (1958), Poland (2004), Portugal (1986), Romania (2007), Slovakia (2004), Slovenia (2004), Spain (1986), Sweden (1995) and United Kingdom (1973). Britain will withdraw from the European Union in March 2019 following Brexit referendum held in June 2016.

basic requirement for the social and economic demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century society (7; emphasis added).

This statement, which addresses the significance of the reading competence, focuses on two key issues. First, it points out that if an individual does not master this skill, his/her personal development will be severely curtailed (see, among others, Carter and Long, *Teaching Literature* 16-19); and second, a lack of command will hinder his/her access to the labor market (consult, for example, Sánchez Canales, “Competencia lectora” 11-12). In the section entitled “Scope” – included in the report – the reading competence or skill “is defined as the comprehensive aptitude to understand, use and reflect on written language forms in order to achieve personal and social fulfilment” (7). While the 2011 European Commission report underscores the importance of developing a good reading skill, it fails, however, to take up a major reading-related issue that teachers should be attentive to in their classes: reading is/as a pleasurable activity. To my mind, motivating students to read should be a priority. However, this priority should not come at the expense of academic rigor. Undoubtedly, combining these two goals is a most challenging, but stimulating and eventually rewarding task. In fact, this is what I did for years when I taught Jewish-American authors at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid (hereafter, UCM). In the Faculty of Philology of this university, as well as in other Spanish universities where “English Studies” can be studied, there are courses devoted not only to U.S. canonical literature but also to ethnic literatures, literature of minorities and of the Diaspora. In the case of the UCM, teaching Jewish-American authors is an effective way to address a number of competences included in courses like “Ficción Contemporánea en los Estados Unidos”<sup>2</sup> and “Literatura de Etnicidad en los Estados

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<sup>2</sup> This is the link to the syllabus of “Ficción Contemporánea en los Estados Unidos”: <https://www.ucm.es/estudios/grado-estudiosingleses-plan-802224> (Accessed October 8, 2016).

Unidos: Literatura Afronorteamericana y de la Diáspora.”<sup>3</sup> Section III, which pays special attention to Mary Antin, Abraham Cahan, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth and Chaim Potok, focuses on the benefits of exposing university students of literature in terms of competences to be acquired as specified in these two courses.

## II.

Although it seems obvious that students will benefit from better literature classes if teachers succeed in presenting reading as a pleasurable activity, the ways to carry it out are not so clear. In *How to Read and Why* (2000), Harold Bloom claims that “[r]eading well is one of the great pleasures that solitude can afford you, because it is, at least in my experience, the most healing of pleasures” (19). In Bloom’s claim, there are other two key words that should not be overlooked: “solitude” and “healing.” To be sure, reading is an inherently solitary task because, as Bloom explains, “finally you are alone, going on without further meditation” (19). There is a third component pertaining to reading, the supposed cathartic, “healing” effect that it provokes. What does this mean? What does Bloom imply by the use of the adjective “healing”? Reading in this context might be thought of as therapeutic because it is a soul-searching task that leads the mind to return “to its needs for beauty, truth, and insight,” and ultimately helps human beings to come to terms with themselves (*Where Shall Wisdom* 1). At the outset of *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (2004) Bloom says that “I have only three criteria for what I go on reading and teaching: aesthetic splendor, intellectual power, wisdom” (1). Bloom’s “three criteria” not only contribute to better “individual’s personal and social fulfilment,” as specified in the “General Introduction” of the report *Teaching Reading in Europe*, but they are also essential to developing a good reading competence. This skill is one of the

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<sup>3</sup> This is the link to the syllabus of “Literatura de la Etnicidad en los Estados Unidos: Literatura Afronorteamericana y de la Diáspora”: <https://www.ucm.es/estudios/grado-estudiosingleses-plan-802232> (Accessed October 8, 2016).

key elements of the European Union's competence-based approach. What is more, developing students' reading competence has been a priority since the implementation of the so-called "Bologna Declaration" – initiated in a number of European universities in the academic year 2010-2011. First, by virtue of the signature of the "Bologna Declaration" by ministers of Education from 29 European countries in 1999, and, second, thanks to the adoption of the "Budapest-Vienna Declaration" in 2010, the European Commission aimed to create what is known as "The European Higher Education Area (EHEA)" – "Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior" (EEES) in Spanish. The Commission's main goals have been, among others, (1) the promotion of mobility and employability of European citizens; and (2) a shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach in education through the development of students' competences. (Throughout this 10-year-plus process, universities have undoubtedly played a major role in the betterment of a European cultural area.)

As explained previously, "competence(s)" is a fundamental concept in present European education policies. The European Commission, which has been working with EU countries for years, aims to improve "key competences" – "knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will help learners find personal fulfilment and, later in life, find work and take part in society."<sup>4</sup> These include not only traditional skills such as Maths and Science, foreign languages and literacy but also "horizontal skills" such as learning to learn, cultural awareness and creativity. In terms of "horizontal skills," a "key competence" is "cultural awareness." Chapter 5 "The user/learner's competences" of *The Common European Framework of Reference for Language: Learning, Teaching and Assessment* (2001) devotes considerable attention to "cultural awareness." It explicitly says that

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<sup>4</sup> For further information, consult [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/competences\\_en](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/competences_en) (accessed 1 June 2016).

“[k]nowledge, awareness and understanding of the relation – similarities and distinctive differences – between the ‘world of origin’ and the ‘world of the target community’ produce an intercultural awareness.”<sup>5</sup> The importance of “cultural awareness” includes literary analysis of texts in English, and Modernist and Postmodernist Movements such as Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Cultural Studies, and Multiculturalism, among others.

In the next section, I will attempt to demonstrate not only that teaching works of Jewish-American novelists such as Antin, Cahan, Bellow, Roth, and Potok, to give just a few examples, is highly recommended if the competence of cultural awareness is to be acquired but also the relevance of Jewish-American fiction<sup>6</sup> as a way to teach competence-based literature in Spain as an epitome of the European educational model.

### III.

If we look at the syllabus of the course “Literatura de Etnicidad en los Estados Unidos,”<sup>7</sup> we can see that the so-called “attitudinal competence” focuses on linguistic, literary and cultural aspects. The “attitudinal competence” is crucial because it helps students to build up knowledge from a cognitive, behavioral, and affective perspective. In terms of the “specific competence,” the aim is to enable students to make sound judgments from an aesthetic, historical, literary standpoint. Without a doubt, Mary Antin’s *Promised Land* (1912) and Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), among others, are ideal novels to work on these competences.

A first element that Mary Antin’s *Promised Land* and Abraham Cahan’s *Rise of David Levinsky* share is that although Yiddish was their primary language, they chose English as their vehicle of expression allowing them to more effectively voice their

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<sup>5</sup> *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Cambridge, U.K.: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2001: 103. Also available at ([http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf)) (accessed 30 June 2016).

<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of Jewish-American writing as a genre, see Cappell, *American Talmud*.

<sup>7</sup> See link in note 3.

immigrant experience. In linguistic terms, Antin's and Cahan's English brought about a new variety of American English infused with Yiddish syntax, inflections, and words. (This is a trait also studied in Jewish-American writers of the next generation such as Bernard Malamud,<sup>8</sup> who, unlike Antin and Cahan, were born on American soil.)

In Mary Antin's chapter XX "The Heritage," linguistic assimilation proves the importance of education—and especially of literacy and English language education—as the surest way to climb up the career ladder. She writes:

*Having traced the way an immigrant child may take from the ship through the public schools, passed on from hand to hand by the ready teachers; through free libraries and lecture halls, inspired by every occasion of civic consciousness; dragging through the slums the weight of private disadvantage, but heartened for the effort by public opportunity; welcomed at a hundred open doors of instruction, initiated with pomp and splendor and flags unfurled; seeking, in American minds, the American way, and finding it in the thoughts of the noble,—striving against the odds of foreign birth and poverty, and winning, through the use of abundant opportunity, a place as enviable as that of any native child,—having traced the footsteps of the young immigrant almost to the college gate, the rest of the course may be left to the imagination. Let us say that from the Latin School on I lived very much as my American schoolmates lived, having overcome my foreign idiosyncrasies, and the rest of my outward adventures you may read in any volume of American feminine statistics (*The Promised Land* 359-360; emphasis added).*

Without a doubt, Antin's keen interest in education epitomizes the Jews' devotion to learning as the way to assure success in the New World.

For its part, *The Rise of David Levinsky* is a largely autobiographical novel whose protagonist, while rejecting orthodoxy, somehow regards it as a buttress to the authentic Jewish experience. I have chosen some passages where the narrator expresses a certain

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<sup>8</sup> For an in-depth study of Malamud's fiction, consult, for example, Avery, *The Magic Worlds*; and Aarons & Sánchez Canales, *Bernard Malamud: A Centennial Tribute*, which compiles essays from France, Germany, Greece, Spain and the United States.

attachment to his life in Russia. For example, chapter VII included in “Book XIV, Episodes of a Lonely Life” opens like this: “Am I happy?” (*Rise of David Levinsky* 525). A few lines below the reader perceives that in spite of the protagonist’s success in the Promised Land, he misses in a way the old times when he felt more attuned to his fellow countrymen. Part of his unhappiness is likely to stem from this feeling:

The gloomiest past is dearer than the brightest present. In my case there seems to be a special reason for feeling this way. *My sense of triumph is coupled with a brooding sense of emptiness and insignificance*, of my lack of anything like a great, deep interest (526; emphasis added).

I know bachelors who are thoroughly reconciled to their solitude and even enjoy it. I am not. No, I am not happy (526).

Most of the people at my hotel are German-American Jews. I know other Jews of this class. I contribute to their charity institutions. *Though an atheist, I belong to one of their synagogues* (528; emphasis added).

[...] *I often long for a heart-to-heart talk with some of the people of my birthplace*. I have tried to revive my old friendships with some of them, but they are mostly poor and my prosperity stands between us in many ways” (528-529; emphasis added).

Like Antin’s protagonist, Cahan’s David seeks fortune in the New World. Unlike her, his way to climb up the career ladder is not through education but through hard work. The passages above show that David succeeds in making his fortune at the expense of deep self-alienation.

To my mind, approaching these two novels from a biographical standpoint is very effective because it allows us to place “an emphasis on the parallels between the trajectories of fiction and the trajectories of an individual life” (Showalter, *Teaching Literature* 89). In effect, an obvious advantage of using this approach is that it helps to establish parallels between the writer’s fiction and life. This is not only a valuable resource to develop the “attitudinal competence” pointed out above but it also engages



individuals in lifelong reading, a major goal set by the already cited *Teaching Reading in Europe: Contexts, Policies and Practices*.

A second circumstance accounts for the suitability to introduce autobiographical writing like Antin's and Cahan's in a Spanish university context: the fact that during the 1950s and 1960s millions of Spanish people emigrated to more prosperous European countries – e.g. Germany and Switzerland – and South American countries like Argentina and Brazil. A significant number of the students exposed to this kind of texts have grandparents who knew the hardships of emigrating. Consequently, engaging students through references to their grandparents' own experiences is easier and more effective. More recently – two decades or so ago – the once outward movement was reversed and Spain became a destination for millions of immigrants. No wonder then that nowadays it is very likely to have in the same classroom students not only from other European countries – e.g. Bulgaria, Poland, Romania and Russia – but also from Asia – mainly from China – and from South America – including, but not limited to, countries like Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela. A large number of students, who typically prefer the novel and/or the short story over poetry and/or drama, are happy to find that “[a]s teachers of literature in the twenty-first century, we are most likely to be teaching the novel” (Showalter, *Teaching Literature* 88).<sup>9</sup>

While it is true that introducing first generation, Jewish-American narratives such as Mary Antin's *Promised Land* and Abraham Cahan's *Rise of David Levinsky* is ideal to

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, after an undergraduate seminar called “Jewish Identity and Performance in the U.S.” taught by the authors at Princeton in fall 2010, Dolan and Wolf shows how effective using performance may be as a pedagogical tool for Jewish studies. One of the interesting aspects is that they combined textual analysis and improvised performances: “While our class frequently looked closely at texts and discussed passages from plays and critical essays, we often organized the class around both planned and spontaneous performance. In this way, the students’ embodiment was an ever-present feature of the seminar” (“Performing Jewishness” 203). What they refer to as “performative tasks” led their students to what they call “to inhabit Jewishness” (205). Extrapolating this experience to a Spanish context is a most appropriate way to work on the “attitudinal competence,” among others.

work on linguistic, historical, cultural and literary aspects, introducing a novel such as Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man* (1944), is advisable to explore two major themes – e.g. World War II and alienation – addressed by Jewish-American fiction writers of the next generation such as Norman Mailer, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth and Bellow. (Since World War II is cross-curricular in “English Studies,” it is an excellent topic to introduce these novelists’ works as part of a number of course syllabi.)

In reference to the novelists above, Malcolm Bradbury explains that “one can see the transformation of the older tradition of Jewish-American writing. Now the theme was no longer the immigrant victim struggling for place and recognition in the New World,” as was the case with the aforementioned Antin and Cahan – alongside Anzia Yezierska's *Hungry Hearts* (1920) and *Bread Givers* (1925) and Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934), among many others – but “rather that of the Jew as modern victim forced by history into existential self-definition, a definition that was not solely religious, political, or ethnic” (Bradbury, *Modern American Novel* 165). Malcolm Bradbury adds that many war and post-war Jewish-American novels

became complex explorations of the individual's place as beneficiary or exile in the contemporary world, and are largely conducted as metaphysical enquiries, speculations on the predicament of disoriented modern man in a world of urban anonymity, behavioural indifference, and the totalitarian massing of social force. Humanism was the aim, but it was hard to forge in the face of disjunctive modern experience (165).

I find that Bradbury's explanation fits Bellow's *Dangling Man* and *The Victim* (1947) perfectly well. Clearly influenced by European existentialist writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, among others, Bellow's first two novels depict marginal characters – Joseph and Asa Leventhal, respectively – who find it difficult to fit into society.<sup>10</sup> In

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<sup>10</sup> For an extended study of the theme of existentialism in Bellow's early works, see for example Aharoni and Sánchez Canales, “Alienation and Marginality.”

*Dangling Man*, Joseph is waiting to be abducted, and he “dangles” in the meantime. He is trapped between civilian and military life, and the consequence is that he feels at a loss. Like Antoine Roquetin in Sartre’s *La Nausée* (1938) and Raymond Meursault in Albert Camus’ *L’Étranger* (1942), Joseph feels paralyzed, confused. At the outset of the novel, the city’s hustle and bustle contrasts with the protagonist’s passivity:

I have begun to notice that the more active the rest of the world becomes, the more slowly I move, and that my solitude increases in the same proportion as its racket and frenzy. [...] I grow rooted to my chair. It is a real, a bodily feeling. I will not even try to rise. It may be that I could get up and walk around the room or even go to the store, but to make the effort would put me in a disagreeable state (*Dangling Man* 13).

There is, however, a huge difference between the Jewish-American novelist and his French counterparts. While Sartre’s and Camus’s respective heroes have resignedly accepted their fate, the Bellovian character struggles to overcome the agonistic situation he has been going through until he eventually comes to terms with himself. When Bradbury says that “[h]umanism was the aim,” what he means is that in Bellow’s (fictional) world there is room for freedom and therefore for hope.<sup>11</sup> When Joseph is called up in the end, his final cry, “Long live regimentation,” paradoxically brings about his liberation because he ceases to be a dangling man (191). When Asa Leventhal asks “Who runs things?” at the novel’s end, one may think that it is God, or perhaps that nobody does – if approached from an existentialist perspective – or who knows whether it is “man himself” (*The Victim* 264). Ada Aharoni explains that

Asa is not the driver of his symbolic “train” of life, but he can choose the “stations” he wants to alight at. The possibility of choosing the right “station” or values or orientations in life, is also

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<sup>11</sup> For an extended analysis of the theme of humanism in Saul Bellow’s fiction, see, among others, Clayton.

symbolically rendered in *The Victim*, having missed a stop there is no return; the dark train of life continues on its way (Aharoni, “Bellow and Existentialism” 47).

In reference to *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, Peter Hyland thinks that “[t]he essential bleakness that the two books share can be accounted for in part by the fact that they were under the immediate shadow of World War II” and that they “reflect a more general unease about the insecurity and fragmentation of modern urban life” (Hyland, *Saul Bellow* 15-16). In spite of the grim era the America of the mid-1940s had been going through as depicted in both novels, Bellow firmly believes in the individual’s ability to get ahead because he/she is free. In a 1963 interview where Bellow’s fiction up to that time is defined as having “a single, dominant theme, it is this one of freedom,” Bruce Cook reproduces a most significant claim made by the novelist during his interview:

Our period has been created by revolutions of all kinds – political, scientific, industrial. And now we have been freed by law from slavery in many of its historical, objective forms. The next move is up to us. Each of us has to find *an inner law by which he can live*. Without this, objective freedom only destroys us. So the question that really interests me is the question of spiritual freedom in the individual – the power to endure our own humanity (Cook, “Saul Bellow” 17-18; emphasis added).

To my mind, the “inner law by which he can live” echoes what Augie March calls “the axial lines” in Bellow’s 1953 eponymous novel (*Adventures* 454-455). “Spiritual freedom” and “humanity” are at the core of Bellow’s fiction,<sup>12</sup> two major themes covered in the other Universidad Complutense course presented here and called “Literatura de los Estados Unidos desde 1950.”

While it is timely to approach Mary Antin’s and Abraham Cahan’s fiction in “Literatura de Etnicidad en los Estados Unidos” from a biographical stance, for a course

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<sup>12</sup> For an in-depth study of themes like identity-formation, existentialism and the place of America in a globalizing world, among others, in Bellow’s fiction, see Aarons, *Cambridge Companion*.

like “Ficción Contemporánea en los Estados Unidos,” it is very appropriate to analyze the literary texts introduced in class in terms of intertextuality, facilitating the acquisition of the “general competence.”<sup>13</sup>

Saul Bellow’s *The Dean’s December* (1982) – which explores the themes of freedom and the defense of the human being – is an in-depth reflection on romantic poetry.<sup>14</sup> In large part because of the countless references Bellow makes to Blake, Shelley and Yeats, among others, this novel is the perfect text to approach Jewish-American literature from an intertextual standpoint.

A claim like “the burden of Romantic poetry is absolute freedom” (Bloom, *Ringers in the Tower* 39) is subscribed by Albert Corde, the protagonist of *The Dean’s December*. Corde, a former journalist and currently the dean of an unnamed university, is a good reader of the romantic poets. Just like them, he denounces social injustice and inequalities that are annihilating the modern individual. To give an example, at one point of the novel Corde describes the Chicago of his time as “Cain’s city built with murder,” an explicit reference to the third line of Blake’s poem “Then She Bore Pale Desire” (c. 1777).<sup>15</sup> Chicago embodies for Corde – and Bellow – what Babylon embodied for William Blake: war, lust, scientific determinism. In a word, anything that entails decadence and the human being’s degeneration.<sup>16</sup> In Allan Chavkin’s explanation, “[f]or Code, Chicago has degenerated into a kind of Babylon where science, religion, and sex are distorted” (Chavkin, “*The Dean’s December*” 23). Apart from Blake’s “Cain’s city built with murder,” Corde also quotes “An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king,” which comes from P. B. Shelley’s “Sonnet: England in 1819” (1839). The line does not

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<sup>13</sup> See note 2.

<sup>14</sup> For an extended analysis of this theme, see, among others, Chavkin, “*The Dean’s December*” and “Bellow and English Romanticism”; and Sánchez Canales, “Romantic Spirit.”

<sup>15</sup> See Sánchez Canales, “Influence of Romantic Poetry” 144.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed study of the impact of the city on the Bellovian character, see Aarons, “Special Issue.”

only point to the tyrannical king George III but to the tyrannical system, which Corde sees in his own country whose society is, like that of the England denounced by Shelley, divided by rulers who “neither see, nor feel, nor know.”<sup>17</sup>

In one of his Harper’s articles, Corde uses the phrase “those dying generations” – the third line of W. B. Yeats’ “Sailing to Byzantium” included in his 1928 *The Tower* – to summarize the atmosphere of decadence the dean perceives around him. While the Irish poet feels hopeless about the fate of civilization, Corde feels in despair about what he calls the “underclass,” a group of impoverished black people who live in detoxification centers, prisons and slums. Corde blames the Chicago politicians for the unbearable situation created in his city. Like the romantics, the Bellovian character needs to escape the city and return to a more natural environment in order to come to terms with himself.

Curiously, Philip Roth also resorts to a line of Yeats’ “Sailing to Byzantium” to reflect on the theme of decadence. In Roth’s case, he specifically deals with the problems of becoming an old person and the difficulties of trying to feel alive even when the individual is growing into “a dying animal”:

Consume my heart away; sick with desire

And fastened to a dying animal

It knows not what it is (“Sailing to Byzantium” 21-23; *The Dying Animal* 102).

Yeats believed that in order to escape his mortal condition, it was imperative to leave the “country for old men” – i.e., his fatherland Ireland – and travel to Byzantium, his embodiment of the cornerstone of European civilization, a place where sages can become the “singing-masters of my soul” (20). Roth’s alter ego David Kepesh is an elderly teacher

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<sup>17</sup> For an extended analysis of Shelley’s poetry, see for example Leighton, McNiece and Weisman. For a study of the presence of Shelley’s poetry in Bellow’s *The Dean’s December*, see Sánchez Canales, “Romantic Spirit” 115ff.

of literature who is having a love affair with a lady half his age called Consuela Castillo. About half way through the story Kepesh tells his lover that “if you turn this to sixty, the beats will be seconds” (*The Dying Animal* 102).<sup>18</sup> The scene where this line appears deals with the classic maxim “tempus fugit.”<sup>19</sup>

The above are just a few examples of how integrating Jewish-American fiction into a general course on US literature in the Spanish curriculum is not only possible but it is also imperative for, at least, two reasons: (1) the variety and quality of the writers studied in this essay has been extensively proved; and (2) the novels – and short stories – of authors like Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, to give just two examples, work in literature classes very well. In the case of Bellow and Roth, the fact that their fiction is full of literary references facilitates a comparative analysis, and thus, students of literature within a Spanish context are exposed not only to Jewish-American writing but also to other writers about whom they had read little or nothing in the course of their university studies. This kind of approach fosters a study of the themes, background, etc. in both the aforementioned Jewish-American writers and those alluded in texts analyzed in the classroom. Elaine Showalter provides a good suggestion for what can be done when a teacher approaches a postmodern novel like the ones pointed out above:

I organize the texts thematically, as well as chronologically, in terms of dystopias, female gothics, fairy tales, reimaginings, magical realism, postcolonialism, metafiction; and theoretically, in terms of defamiliarization, intertextuality, breaking the frame, hybridity, and hyperreality. All of these can be made part of the technique of the course as well, incorporated into lectures, and made available for student discussion (Showalter, *Teaching Literature* 96).

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<sup>18</sup> For a study of the Kepesh-Consuela relationship, see Safer, “*The Dying Animal*” in *Mocking*.

<sup>19</sup> For a more extended analysis of the presence of Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium” in Roth’s *Dying Animal*, consult, for instance, Trendel, “Master and Pupil,” and Sánchez Canales, “European Literary Tradition.”

In *Teaching Literature*, Showalter alludes to “the complex interactions of region, race, gender, class, and narrative technique” (88). Chaim Potok’s reference of “core-to-core culture confrontation”<sup>20</sup> is an excellent choice to address the issue of “race” – and the concept of “the other”<sup>21</sup> – through Jewish-American fiction in a Spanish context.<sup>22</sup>

As Potok explains, “core-to-core culture confrontation” typically occurs when someone is located at the heart of his/her own culture, knows that culture, constructs the world through the value system of that culture, and then encounters core elements from another culture. This is the case with two characters of his novel *The Chosen*: Danny Saunders, placed at the heart of Hasidism, encounters an element from the core of the general culture in which we all live – the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud. And Reuven Malter – a non-Orthodox Jew – comes into contact with Danny’s world. Until their mutual understanding eventually leads to their mutual acceptance, the Malter/Saunders confrontation somehow reveals the existing clash between the individual and his/her tradition.<sup>23</sup> Potok’s interest focuses on the premise that we are born and brought up in a reduced world – family, neighborhood, community, town, city and country. At the same time, we are exposed to influences from beyond that little world. Typically, these influences are at odds with those values we have been – and are still being – taught in our own world. We are bound to experience a clash of values or – to use Potok’s term – a “core-to-core culture confrontation” because influences come to our ideas from the core, that is to say from the heart of that outside, alien world. It is then that

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<sup>20</sup> For an extended study of Chaim Potok’s concept “core-to-core (culture) confrontation,” see for example Potok, “Martin Buber,” Walden, “Potok’s *Asher Lev*,” and Sánchez Canales, “Significance.”

<sup>21</sup> See Goffman, *Imagining Each Other* for a book-length study of the Jewish-Black relations from a literary point of view.

<sup>22</sup> For an in-depth analysis of Potok’s works, consult Walden, *Chaim Potok and Conversations*.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Purcell’s “Potok’s Fathers and Sons,” where through the theme of the father-son relationship he explores the values of Chaim Potok’s Jewish background in *The Chosen*; also consult Potok, “Martin Buber” 45ff in which he analyzes Martin Buber’s well-known “I-It” and “I-Thou” relationships whose influence is, to my mind, perceived in Potok’s 1967 novel. For a study of the presence of Buber’s “I-It” and “I-Thou” relationships in *The Chosen*, see Sánchez Canales, “Significance.”



a person finds his/her inherited values to confront those of the mainstream culture. The fanatic, who is a zealous guardian of faith, fails to assimilate part of those outside values into his/her own tradition (Potok, *The Chosen* 147).<sup>24</sup>

I would like to borrow Elaine Showalter's phrase "teaching as a spiritual journey" to summarize how "student-centered" classes are regarded nowadays (*Teaching Literature* 34-35). At one point in her explanation, Showalter says that according to the professional specialist in Education Parker J. Palmer, it is essential to create

a "learning space" characterized by "openness, boundaries, and an air of hospitality." Most important is the hospitality which does not "make learning painless" but rather makes possible the painful things "without which no learning can occur – things like exposing ignorance, testing tentative hypotheses, challenging false or partial information, and mutual criticism of thought" (Showalter, *Teaching Literature* 34).

I think that this explanation somehow connects with Harold Bloom's three criteria – "aesthetic splendor, intellectual power, wisdom" (*Where Shall Wisdom* 1). Additionally, teachers should engage their students by trying to avoid lecturing. As Showalter recalls, Prof. Martin Bickman "came to the conclusion that lecturing is an active form of thinking *for the teacher*, but a passive form for the listener" (49; emphasis in original). In "Teaching Jewish Literature in the South," Erin G. Carlston gives a perfect example of how his students may be placed at the center of the teaching/learning process. At one point of the interview, he explains how his classes benefit thanks to some of his students' Jewish background.

*It's especially helpful to me to have the more religiously knowledgeable students, because that's my weakest area. I'm okay on basic theology, but don't know much about liturgy and have almost no Hebrew. When religious ritual comes up in our readings, I may not even recognize it, let alone*

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<sup>24</sup> Potok explains the concept of "core-to-core confrontation" in Chavkin's "A MELUS Interview" in more detail.

know how to talk about it. *I lean heavily on my students there and have been lucky that I've always had enough of them who were able to translate Hebrew, explain textual references, and so on* ("Teaching Jewish Literature" 195; emphasis added).

It is crucial to make a change in focus – whenever possible “student-centered” rather than “teacher-centered,” as in Carlston’s case – and to place more emphasis on Jewish-American fiction – as in my case. Reading and analyzing novelists like Antin, Cahan, Bellow, Roth and Potok, among others, offers an excellent opportunity to explore major literary issues such as the Jewish immigrant experience and Jewish-American identity. But not only this. Almost two decades have passed since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century so it is probably good to try to come up with an answer for a question like the one Victoria Aarons raises in the “Introduction” to *Third-Generation Holocaust Narratives: Memory in Memoir and Fiction* (2016): “Are we finding *something else*, something new in the literature in the decades surrounding the new millennium? (xi). Considering that this volume explores the fiction of writers with no first-hand experience of the Holocaust, it is no wonder that these “narratives of collision and collusion ... are works that make imperative the ethical demands inherent in reading well, in engaging in the shared experience of reading responsibly” (xv).

It is clear to me that providing university students with a comprehensive understanding of Jewish-American literature from a cultural, historical, literary, aesthetic perspective will be to the advantage of their learning not only in a Spanish context but also on a European scale.

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