The yoking together of Hebrew and Yiddish with Jewish seems natural enough. The earliest marker of an Israelite/Jewish nationhood/peoplehood/religion was made through the Hebrew language. And it was this language that remained the medium for religious expression and for experience of specific peoplehood over the centuries. And as for Yiddish, it became the lingua franca of the most populous segment of Jewry in modern times. It is a paradoxical language, an image of both linguistic and cultural intermingling, a factor of both assimilation and persistent separateness as it was taken beyond its Germanic confines into the more extensive reaches of Eastern Europe. It was here that Jewry carved out or was carved out into virtually segmented entities of the Pale of Settlement and the shtetl, and it was this tongue, sometimes residual, that has persisted in many other parts of the world until the present day. Hebrew was restored in national and Zionist ideology, again paradoxically, as the original and therefore untranslatable language with its distinctive historical associations. But it also became the sign of the new, the resurgent Israel, a counterweight to the ‘decadence’ of the diaspora, and was transformed into the language of the Land of Israel and the State of Israel as well as of its literature. Yiddish, the language associated with the diaspora, shared the fortunes of that diaspora and naturally declined in the process of cultural and linguistic absorption. But it also had to contend with the challenge of resurgent nationalisms and the monoglot societies that they embodied. There is Hebrew in Israel, a state akin to other nation states in its sense of exclusivity, with its own language. And there is Yiddish, the linguistic phase of a society functioning within empires, subject to the passing of that condition. Of course the larger picture became increasingly dominant as the Jews necessarily lived and tried to survive within these other cultures.

Thus the story of Modern Jewish Literature is a product, as well as a pro-

ducer, of the changing condition of the modern world, a world no longer composed of blocks of polyglot empires. This literature has been buffeted between nations struggling for their own cultural identity, sometimes exclusive, sometimes claiming inclusivity. The very existence of such a problematic body as Modern Jewish Literature is constantly thrown into doubt by these magnets. Not only does vernacular literature—that in English, German, French, Russian, Spanish etc.—necessarily and inevitably bear the marks of the cultural environment, but so too do the apparently ‘Jewish’ languages. Both Hebrew and Yiddish are culturally influenced if not swamped by the prevalent winds of the day, and their literatures move with the times. But they also tell a more specific story as determined by geography, history and the changing scene. Thus a dialogue is set in motion. To a large extent the current range of books noted here illustrates that story in graphic detail as they testify to the ongoing fascination, on the part of observers, scholars, critics and writers, with the nature of this perplexing and inexhaustible interaction. And not only is the historical and sociological event of the interaction itself analysed and described, but so are the specificity and the quality of the literature produced.

This quandary is well illustrated in the relatively recent stance of major diaspora Jewish literature. The leading American poet Charles Reznikoff (1894–1976) was a key figure in the Objectivist movement, a link between the generations of Pound and Williams. But his position also opened up a questioning of the relationship between Jewish intellectuals and modernity. If we view this group, that around Louis Zukofsky (1904–1978), as consisting of specifically Jewish poets too, we can also see their distinctiveness as modernists. To do this though, we have to set Jewish culture—within the American context too—in the overall frame, and we can then get a greater appreciation of Reznikoff. The movement known as Objectivism arose in the thirties under the paternal direction of Pound, saw itself as empirically based, socially engaged and linguistically compressed. Thus it tended to reject rhetorical flourishes, Symbolism or Romanticism of any sort, and to replace them with a more disciplined Imagism. For this, and here lies the nub, the poets sought their model in the Greeks. But although Reznikoff also sought to appropriate Hellenism, he found it necessary to complement it with a healthy dose of Hebraism. Thus he was very much associated with the renaissance of Jewish historical and cultural interest so apparent in the circles of journals such as Menorah and, later, Commentary, as well as in the resurgent research into Judaica in the universities. Thus a new tendency entered into American poetry, one, however, which was not prominently observed in the prevalent adoration of the Pound/Eliot tradition.

Both as a prelude to the New and for an insight into the major literature by both non-Jewish and Jewish writers in the most populous Jewish regions, the new study by Gabriella Safran of late nineteenth-century literature within the Russian Empire is timely and significant; especially so if the subject under examination is the ability of the Jew to be absorbed into the environment under Russian control. The writers discussed here—one Jewish, Grigory Bogrov; one Polish Catholic, Eliza Orzeszkowa; and two Eastern Orthodox Russians, the major authors Nikolai Leskov and Anton Chekhov—have all written fic-
tion about Jewish assimilation. Safran demonstrates that in the Slavic tradition of reading, individual figures, particularly if arresting and artistically successful, were generally seen as types and thus could serve as representative models for attitudes, potential or actual, in the real world. We cannot forget that this literature is so often didactic and that the writer is also a teacher. The issue that Safran raises here, through the literature examined, is whether absolute assimilation is possible, let alone desirable. And the uncertainty is compounded by the misunderstanding of the terms of identity and the conflation of ethnicity and religion. For the anti-Semite, such distinctions might be casuistic or irrelevant. But the writer and reader have to understand them. Historical considerations also come into the equation, as Tsarist policy changed, particularly following the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. There was a pronounced move from the attempt to encourage assimilation or absorption into the Russian population on the part of the 'liberal' Czar to the declaration made by Alexander III's minister of the interior, Nicholas Ignatiev: 'The western frontier is open for the Jews'. This expressed the governmental desire that the Jews emigrate. As for the Jewish writer, it was really only in the twentieth century that we see authentic absorption into the mainstream of Russian literature where they even offered their own classics, such as those of Mandelstam and Babel, to parallel the giants of Hebrew and Yiddish writing. For the non-Jewish Russian writer the Jew could signal a concern and measuring rod to construct his own national identity. For both the depiction of fiction corresponded to actual society, whether it was present, and could thus serve as a warning, or whether it seemed to offer an ideal and a challenge.

The situation can seem very different in Anglo-American literature where the function of the writer is so different, in which societies, languages and cultures have been progressively absorbed into the English sponge, and where systematic disabilities have been eroded. But as David Brauner suggests in the subtitle of his book, the Jew still seems to be a separate entity and so the literature of representation must recognise that reality. Whether there is a distinctive Jewish literature written in the English language must depend much on the particular framing of the answer expected. In the USA there is inevitably a more likely possibility of a sympathetic readership with shared experiences, as well as authorial terms geared to that considerable cultural community. The Jewish population is larger and more concentrated and the institutions are more developed. America too is more pluralistic. But what of the literature itself? For Brauner, the leitmotif remains ambivalence, a duplicated life and a persistent two-way apprehension. Each definition of the subject of Jewish identity demands further refinement. Jewishness carries multivalence. It is thus not undefined, but multi-defined. The subject of this book is actually the way that Jewish writers explain themselves and therefore represent themselves. But such a project, as the subtle argument demonstrates, has multiple ramifications, since the presentation of the subject rests on the perception of the object and also carries the supposed involvement of the addressee as well as of the 'other'. Jewish writing here can become an investigation into the mind of the Jew as mediated by the fictional text.

A more direct and perhaps less ambivalent Jewish literature is that written
in Yiddish. Yiddish of its nature sits on the borders of languages and cultures, deriving from German yet self evidently and obstinately Jewish. Yiddish literature reached maturity in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, particularly in the work of the great comic satirists and story-tellers Mendele Moykher Sforim, Sholem Aleichem and Y. L. Peretz. But the focus altered following the abortive revolution of 1905 in Russia, a period when Jewish demography was transformed. That new literary forms were sought and found, and that Yiddish literature was also revolutionised following the passing of the generation of Mendele et al., is the subject of Krutikov’s fascinating study. New techniques, as observed by critics such as Bakhtin and Lukacs, mark out Yiddish fiction in particular. We have the representation of many voices within a given work, i.e. polyphony, so that weight is given to a multiplicity of characters and viewpoints (Bakhtin). The insight, as provided by Lukacs, is that fiction as a closed form closely replicates the state of modern bourgeois society. What characterises Krutikov’s work is the way in which he brings literary theory to bear on the study of this crucial period of Yiddish fiction as well as the linkage with historical crisis. The period was not only one of radical change and shift in general but has been particularly decisive in Jewish history too. In essence, many aspects of the Jewish traditional world passed away, society was metamorphosed, the shtetl virtually disappeared and emigration took place on a massive scale, with all the concomitant relocation involved. Writers, and specifically here writers using a quintessentially Jewish language to record the Jewish experience, had to find and explore new tools to transmit the substance of the changing experience. The difficulty of this approach is twofold: firstly to combine the diachronic with the synchronic, i.e. not just to portray literature over a long period but also to present the interactions within a given time-frame, and secondly to represent not just one text or body of work (parole) but also the larger context from which the particular text may be taken (langue). The study of this phase, that which includes the fiction of such as Asch and Bergelson, is much enriched by such considerations.

Contemporary Hebrew fiction may seem to offer an alternative to the contextuality imposed on Jewish literature in other languages. It is after all, since its concentration on the Land and then the State of Israel, both in terms of the origin of the writers and the prime locus of its action, seemingly self-contained, deploying a minority language and treating of a society geographically cut off. But Alan Mintz’s book focuses on the reception of Hebrew literature in America. There are various obvious reasons for the symmetry between the two societies despite the vast distance between them. The USA has the largest Jewish community in the world. It sources a great part of the Israeli enterprise, and it serves as a model in its enterprise culture. English is inevitably the principal language of translation too, and so the American market is also primary. Mintz charts both the progression of Israeli fiction and the increasing number of translations in the USA. But he also notes with regret the lack of a serious intellectual encounter with the work amongst the American intelligentsia, one certainly based neither on the poor quality of the fiction itself nor on the inferiority of the translations. There are apparently proportionally more translated titles of Hebrew fiction in German and
Italian than in English. Is this surprising for a country with such a relatively large Jewish population? Only if the Jewishness of the readership of the population is a significant factor in book-buying habits. And apparently it is not. It is not Italian, Dutch or Spanish Jews who particularly demand and purchase Israeli titles, and clearly other factors are decisive in book selection on the part of the punter. Israeli literature is exciting in its own right, as well as offering a large-scale attempt to come to terms with its corporate and individual identity.

Another book which treats the issues of Jewish identity, particularly in the regions joint and separate of Israel and America, also raises issues of ideology and literary nuance. In this series of contributions, produced in honour of Gershon Shaked on the occasion of his retirement, an attempt at dialogue is made to clarify many of the issues over which the authors have ranged here. The potentially linking factors are presented: a common ancestry and history, the theory of a Zionist identity, and Jewish feeling and self-description. But the nagging disquiet at the parting of the ways persists. The fact is that although the present derives from the past, it must also deviate from it. History and literature are indeed held together, but they also diverge. As Iser says here, quoting Shaked: ‘History is the thing that happens. Literature is the way of looking at it.’ It is probably healthiest to accept things for what they are and then find out they have been regarded so that we may the better view them.

It can be seen, both in the study of new Jewish literary material and in the reassessment of European literature in toto, that there are many ways in which Jewish literature has become a factor in the modern world. This is especially the case in the twentieth century in the various guises of modernism and post-modernism. It is not merely a coincidence that such a cluster of fine studies of American, Russian and British, as well as Hebrew and Yiddish, new literature have appeared virtually simultaneously. On the contrary, they testify to an element which is sometimes not totally accessible, is often hidden by misleading overgrowth, but which still remains vibrant. There is a powerful Jewish literature present on the contemporary scene, expressed in many languages, specifically Jewish or otherwise, and assuming many forms.