

Judaica Librarianship: The View from the Humanities

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It is important to remember that the state of the humanities cannot be described as a monolith. These days some disciplines are experiencing boom times, while others are not. Statistical evidence, for example, suggests that the study of history is in decline in American colleges and universities, whereas the study of foreign languages is experiencing a tremendous upsurge, with Latin particularly in demand. Meanwhile, despite ambivalent statistical evidence, enormous changes are taking place in the accepted view of what should be taught under the banner of English. In the last ten or fifteen years, English departments have begun to teach not only English and American literature but also foreign literatures in translation, film, popular culture, folk culture, literary theory without the literature itself, creative writing, and expository writing.

The presentations earlier in this conference have made repeated references to the remarkable growth of Jewish studies, both as a program in the undergraduate and graduate curriculum and as a subject for scholarly research. In light of the widely divergent recent experiences of even the disciplines of the humanities that are represented in all of the 3,200 colleges and universities in America, I think we need to ask how best to explain the remarkable growth of Jewish studies. This field has not simply been carried along by a tide that has favored all fields of the humanities.

Some factors are obvious: the subject is no longer exclusively of interest to Jews; the subject is intrinsically interdisciplinary, and thus benefits from the general increase of interest in interdisciplinary work; and, like most interdisciplinary fields, this one invites participation by scholars in many areas.

In some ways, the growth of Jewish studies is characteristic of the growth of other branches of religious studies. For example, at the National Endowment for the Humanities we see a great many proposals for the revision of the curricula of college and university religion departments, often predicated on the goal of making them less theological and more humanistic. A number of Jesuit colleges and universities hope to receive NEH help to revise the religion curriculum in ways that would, in effect, make it more secular. In some ways, this develop-

ment parallels what appears to be happening in Jewish studies.

But the recent institutional history of Jewish studies resembles that of religious studies less than it does ethnic studies, area studies, and some other so-called new fields in the curriculum. I think the differences among the patterns of growth of these fields are instructive. Women's studies, for example, was introduced originally as a construct that, it was argued, would create new subjects and new conceptions of subject matter to make the curriculum more "relevant" to the larger numbers of female students who began to appear on campuses in the 1960s. That rationale stands in contrast to the one that was advanced most frequently during the past decade for the introduction of Asian studies programs on campus. The argument was made less frequently on the basis of the characteristics of new populations of Asian-American students than on the grounds that the study of Asia was an overlooked and important subject for general education as a whole.

Nothing is inevitable in the way in which a field develops its institutional form. Women's studies, for example, after a period of existing solely in separate programs and departments, has in many places been incorporated into traditional departments and fields. Ethnic studies programs, on the other hand, which often stubbornly remained separate units in colleges and universities, have during the recent period of budget strictures not survived at all in many institutions.

Another way to obtain the view "from the humanities" is to step away from the generalizations about various institutional programs and to review the trends suggested by the many individual and institutional applications submitted to NEH. (I recognize that the endowment's guidelines radiate signals to the field that influence the mix of applications that are in fact submitted, but the temptation exists nonetheless to look at trends in applications as if they were valid barometers for the state of particular fields of scholarship.)

The Access program, for example, makes grants to libraries and archives for purposes that are related to organizing, arranging, describing, and making accessible important collections of materials. I can assure

you that applications have been received from — and grants made to — many of the libraries with major Judaica collections and almost all of the archival repositories that contain significant Judaica holdings. In short, Judaica has not been overlooked by the endowment, nor has the endowment been overlooked by Judaica collections that are looking for financial support.

Access grants in Judaica have supported, in the main, efforts to make manuscripts and archival collections available through the arrangement and description of their contents. We have also received a few applications for bibliographic compilations of published materials and a few for microfilming the contents of overseas collections.

There is further good news to report. Although many applications are not funded, my impression in reviewing applications received over the past few years is that most Jewish studies and Judaica applications to the Access program have been considered by peer evaluators to be on worthy and significant topics. That is, the flaws of these proposals are, for the most part, technical. It is thus reassuring to note that while not all applicants make a good case that they will do what they say they want to do according to a methodology and work plan in which evaluators have confidence, a higher percentage of applicants are trying to do something that, in the view of peer evaluators, is significant.

In the Access program the endowment emphasizes the support of those collections that have national and international significance to scholars and other users. Judaica applications do well when measured against this yardstick, as well. Within the past several years, for example, grants were awarded to support the processing of the World Jewish Congress Archives; the bibliography of Jewish Research Literature; the E.N. Adler Collection's Genizah Cataloging Project; the organization and preservation of materials from the Cairo synagogue; the archival processing and preparation of a guide to the Bund Archives; and — as you already know — Bella Weinberg's preparation of a Yiddish authority file for RLIN.

Why do Judaica proposals do so well in the Access program? I was prepared to believe, based on my reading of editorials in past

issues of *Judaica Librarianship*, that your field might be in a state of disarray. But my impression at this conference is that it is a very energetic field, confident in its progress, and possessing unusual coherence. Even so, and granting that library collection development and the growth of teaching programs frequently go hand in hand, I continue to search for the reasons why the field of Judaica librarianship seems to be so healthy even in institutions whose major Judaica collections are not part of multipurpose research and teaching institutions.

A second NEH grant program also offers some clues about the state of Judaica librarianship and Jewish studies. The Translations program, as some of you know, supports efforts to translate into English texts that originally were written in other languages and for which the case can be made convincingly that a large number of people need to read the text and could not reasonably be expected to read the original language. In the Translations program we have noted a significant increase in the number of proposals to translate Yiddish works. These proposals frequently argue that the resulting translation will be valuable to both scholars and general readers. Curiously, we have seen no parallel increase in the number of proposals to translate Hebrew texts. These remain a small and steady part of the application pool. Those that the Endowment does receive are intended primarily for scholars.

Perhaps you know why these trends exist. The best I can do is to tell you about a few other trends that may have bearing on the patterns in Hebrew and Yiddish. For example, there seems to be an increasing number of proposals to translate German texts, mostly philosophical treatises; and there is an increasing number of proposals to translate East European texts, mostly twentieth-century political documents.

Also, proposals to translate Chinese and Japanese materials have, for some time, been one of the largest component language groups represented in the Translations program, but, for an equally long time, these have had a very low success rate in the competition for funds. This record stands in contrast to the record of Latin and Greek proposals, which are small in number but enjoy a high success rate. The first conclusion I tend to draw from some of these trends is that in boom fields like East Asian studies the best scholars have many other available ways to use their time in addition to translating texts. In classics, by contrast, the essentially philological work that is at the heart of the act of translation appears to be already considered an impor-

tant activity, so the number of first-rate classicists who choose to use their time doing translations remains large.

Equally suggestive are the *Publisher's Weekly* statistics on translations into English from Hebrew and Yiddish (those that appeared as hardbound and trade paperbacks). Four years ago, the number of new Hebrew titles translated into English was close to the number of Swedish and Danish and lower than the numbers for Latin and Dutch. But over the past four years, a marked increase has occurred in the number of Hebrew translations. Hebrew can now be grouped with Latin and Dutch, not Swedish and Danish. Translations from Yiddish, meanwhile, throughout this period have been few — ten to fifteen per year in comparison with thirty to forty for Hebrew. The numbers for Yiddish are even smaller than those for Swedish and Danish.

In both the Translations and Access programs the success rate for Judaica and Jewish studies proposals is about average. It is worth noting that in the Access program a very large number of applications are received for support of Judaica collections in relation to the size of the field. Thus even with an average rate of success, a relatively large number of grants are made each year. In a recent Access application cycle, for example, there were 166 applications under review, of which nine were in Judaica. Even two grants would represent an above-average success rate.

In summarizing the comments made by reviewers and panelists, I think it is also fair to say that Jewish studies and Judaica librarianship are fields in which one is more likely to stumble upon longstanding controversies than in most fields. A relatively large number of the proposals that the endowment receives in Jewish studies and Judaica receive sharply divided specialist reviews.

Most of the speakers at this conference have acknowledged a trend toward greater coordination among libraries and between librarians and scholars. In this regard, your field is like most fields of the humanities. One of the most exciting dimensions of these increased efforts at coordination is the prospect of greater international cooperation. One logical next step, for example, might be to address the need to enhance access by American scholars to the Hebrew manuscript collection of the Jewish National and University Library. The internationalization of scholarship is an important theme in the humanities today partly, I suspect, because new technology now makes it possible for scholars in scattered places around the globe genuinely to work together. Organizations such as the

International Research and Exchanges Board, the Social Science Research Council, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China — all of which the endowment supports heavily — also provide great assistance in these efforts.

The internationalization of scholarship and of librarianship suggests a number of opportunities. Since Menahem Schmelzer gave us an ample list of worthwhile projects earlier today, I'd like to mention only one additional activity. Most of you know, I think, that the endowment frequently seizes upon public celebrations and anniversaries in order to give emphasis to opportunities for work in the humanities that, while always worthwhile, can be conducted on a grander scale if connected to the anniversary. Having just finished a multiyear initiative on the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution, the endowment is now beginning to focus on the 1992 Columbian Quincentenary. Not surprisingly, the government of Spain is also planning a major celebration, and its theme — even more than the American — suggests opportunities for you. The Spanish theme goes something like this: Spanish culture derives principally from two other cultures, the Arabic and the Jewish; these mixed with medieval Christianity and produced an amalgam, unique among the countries of Western Europe, that made possible an era of Renaissance entrepreneurial activity; this peculiarly Spanish culture opened up the Western hemisphere. Please understand that I am oversimplifying a theme that the Spaniards themselves would admit is necessarily expressed in overly simple terms. I think you can see nonetheless the opportunity for Judaica librarianship. One project, already announced by the Spaniards, for example, is likely to lead to the reestablishment of the Toledo School of Translators, which was, as you know, an excellent example of the thirteenth-century fusion of Christian, Arab, and Jewish culture and was destroyed only at the time of the Inquisition. I would urge you to think about projects of international scope that would make materials available to scholars throughout the world, including North American, Spanish, and Latin American repositories.

Let me conclude by returning to the general question of the "view from the humanities" of Judaica librarianship. Although the state of Judaica librarianship suggests both encouraging and discouraging facets, I prefer to congratulate you on your progress, note your optimism, and urge you to pursue the many promising opportunities that are open to you. As in the past, the endowment continues to be eager to help you.