PERSONAL CONTINUUMS:
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION AND FICTIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF ABRAHAM CAHAN, ANZIA YEZIERSKA, AND HENRY ROTH

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ABSTRACT

The title of this thesis, "Personal Continuums: The Autobiographical Fiction and Fictional Autobiographies of Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, and Henry Roth", suggests that there is a significant pattern in the work of all three writers which lies in the close literary connection between their autobiographical fiction and fictional autobiographies. The phrase "personal continuum" was used by Roth to describe his attempt to regenerate himself as a writer thirty years after the publication of ***Call It Sleep***. It is a useful expression because it describes all three writers' search for some form of continuity or connection between fiction and autobiography. Although the details vary, Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth all experienced a degree of literary success with their autobiographical novels, followed by a period of artistic silence, which they all managed to overcome by regenerating themselves as writers through highly fictionalized forms of autobiography.

Aside from Chapter One, which introduces Cahan's work and compares Cahan's ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** to William Dean Howells's ***The Rise of Silas Lapham,*** the chapters alternate between an analysis of each writer's fiction and autobiographical work. The juxtaposition of chapters on Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth's fictional work with chapters on their autobiographies has the effect of mirroring two particular autobiographical genres as well as two distinctive periods in each writer's life. Thus, the organization of the thesis into pairs of chapters which alternate between autobiographical fiction and fictional autobiography helps to highlight the process of dialectical self-analysis which preoccupied all three writers. In Chapter Three, Chapter Five, and Chapter Seven, I treat Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth's autobiographical narratives respectively as a continuation of their previous work, thus revealing a "personal continuum", or in other words a form of narrative continuity with their personal and literary pasts.

Dedicated in loving memory to Stephen Steinberg

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INTRODUCTION

The title of this thesis, "Personal Continuums: The Autobiographical Fiction and Fictional Autobiographies of Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, and Henry Roth", suggests that there is a significant pattern in the work of all three writers which lies in the close literary connection between their autobiographical fiction and fictional autobiographies (a term I shall define below). The phrase "personal continuum"[1] was used by Roth to describe his attempt to regenerate himself as a writer thirty years after the publication of *Call It Sleep*. It is a useful expression because it describes all three writers' search for some form of continuity or connection between fiction and autobiography. Although the details vary, Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth all experienced a degree of literary success with their autobiographical novels, followed by a period of artistic silence, which they all managed to overcome by regenerating themselves as writers through highly fictionalized forms of autobiography. I have limited my study to these three writers since their work is, in my opinion, the most noteworthy of the first generation of Jewish-American writers in English. Like Allen Guttmann in his study, *The Jewish Writer in America*, I have avoided discussing the pre-1882 literature of Jewish-American writers of Sephardic or German descent, since it was the post-1882 wave of immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe which resulted in the creation of the Jewish-American community and literary tradition as we know it today.[2] That Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth are all Jewish, emigrated to the United States, lived in New York's Lower East Side, spoke Yiddish as their mother tongue, but wrote almost exclusively in English, underlines the shared literary, historical, and cultural sources of their writing. And I think that it is safe to claim that their work is representative of the literary concerns, themes, and problems of the first-generation Jewish-American writers who wrote in English.

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[1] Roth also used the phrase "private continuum", *Shifting Landscape*, p. 260. I prefer to use the phrase "personal continuum" in the title since it expresses the fact that each writer's "private continuum" became an accessible, "personal continuum" when they overcame their writing block and managed to write again.
[2] Allen Guttmann, *The Jewish Writer In America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 12-13.

Aside from Chapter One, which introduces Cahan's work and compares Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* to William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham,* the chapters alternate between an analysis of each writer's fiction and autobiographical work. The juxtaposition of chapters on Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth's fictional work with chapters on their autobiographies has the effect of mirroring two particular autobiographical genres as well as two distinctive periods in each writer's life. Thus, the organization of the thesis into pairs of chapters which alternate between autobiographical fiction and fictional autobiography helps to highlight the process of dialectical self-analysis which preoccupied all three writers. It is interesting to note that just as Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth's fiction becomes increasingly autobiographical as the twentieth century unfolds, their autobiographies become progressively more fictional. In fact Roth described his "second novel", *Mercy of a Rude Stream,* as a "mixed bag", since he uses his diaries from 1938-40 as a starting point, but then shifts into a highly fictionalized narrative--hence my use of the term "fictional autobiography".

I do not want to venture that this pattern of self-discovery and regeneration through autobiographical fiction and autobiography described above is totally unique, setting the genre of first-generation Jewish-American novels and autobiographies completely apart from other twentieth century English or American writers or genres, but merely to show how the pattern develops in their individual work. Therefore, in addition to being a critical analysis of first-generation Jewish-American fiction and autobiography, this thesis is also a study of each writer's personal literary development.

What I have attempted to do is to isolate and analyze a noticeable pattern in the fiction and writing experience of Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth. I have used this pattern to illuminate both their earlier fictional and later autobiographical work, thus providing new readings of their literary works. Those readings have been informed by my perception of them as writers and individuals, rather than by any single critical approach, theoretical or otherwise. In the end, it became apparent that autobiography motivated as well as dominated their writing. However, I found it increasingly difficult to distinguish between their fictional and autobiographical work. This confusion, or rather fusion, of the two genres is built

into the idea of a "personal continuum", since for each writer continuity requires an overlapping of autobiographical fiction and fictional autobiography.

Although the wave of Jewish immigration to the United States has been studied extensively from a sociological point of view, a thorough critical study of the literature produced by this first generation of Jewish-American writers has either been neglected or characterized by continual misinterpretation and misreading of key texts. This is, I believe, the case regarding previous critical analyses of Cahan's ***The Rise of David Levinsky***, Yezierska's ***Hungry Hearts*** and ***Bread Givers***, and Roth's ***Call It Sleep***. Thus, I felt that a close empirical study of Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth's key fictional works was long overdue. In addition, I have not only attempted to update and rectify the readings of the texts mentioned above by adding new information gathered from private collections and from my interview with Roth, but also included discussions of important texts which have been neglected by the critics, such as Cahan's ***The White Terror and the Red***, Yezierska's ***Salome of the Tenements***, and Roth's later work. This process of reevaluation of the writer's entire work has usually resulted in a discussion of the previously ignored or undervalued literary qualities of individual works. However, what is even more surprising than the lack of criticism of Cahan's ***The Rise of David Levinsky***, Yezierska's novels, and Roth's ***Call It Sleep*** is the fact that their autobiographical work, namely Cahan's ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben***, Yezierska's ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse. My Story***, and Roth's essays and autobiographical stories collected in ***Shifting Landscape***, have been completely neglected by critics as works of individual literary worth. Although some critics have occasionally referred to Cahan and Yezierska's autobiographies or to Roth's ***Shifting Landscape***, they have all approached the writer's autobiographical material as a source of factual reference rather than as a form of self-creation that is closely related--if not irrevocably connected--to their earlier fictional work. Hence, in Chapter Three, Chapter Five, and Chapter Seven, I treat Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth's autobiographical narratives respectively as a continuation of their previous work, thus revealing a "personal

continuum", or in other words a form of narrative continuity with their personal and literary pasts.[3]

A final word should be said about obvious omissions from this study. I am not concerned with all American writers who have been identified as first-generation American Jews since I chose to deal exclusively with novelists. Therefore, some first-generation Jewish-American poets and playwrights have been neglected even though they wrote in English. The most obvious exclusion from this thesis has been of Jewish-American writers who wrote in Yiddish, such as Sholem Asch, Sholom Aleichem, Morris Rosenfeld, Jacob Gordin, and Jacob Adler. Isaac Bashevis Singer's work, which has been translated into English and adopted only in the past few decades as a part of the American literary tradition, belongs simultaneously to an Old World Yiddish tradition as well as to the second wave of Jewish emigration to the United States that was initiated by the Second World War and rise of fascism in Europe. I chose not to discuss the works of the Jewish-American Yiddish writers since I was interested in locating the point where Jewish and American cultures met and fused, which could only logically take place in English. Hence, I see Cahan's work as the true origin of the Jewish-American novel and show that he made a conscious attempt to attach this genre to an American tradition through ***The Rise of David Levinsky***. Works by Jewish-Americans of German descent, such as Isaac Friedman's ***By Bread Alone*** (1901), Edward Steiner's ***The Mediator*** (1907), James Oppenheim's ***The Nine-Tenths*** (1911) have been excluded due to reasons of origin mentioned above. Individual works by first generation Eastern European immigrants, such as Ezra Budno's ***The Fugitive*** (1904), Arthur Bullard's ***Comrade Yetta*** (1913), Rose Cohen's ***Out of the Shadow***, and Elias Tobenkin's ***Witte Arrives*** (1916) have been either ignored or mentioned in passing due to the poorer quality and less influential nature of their work. Some readers may feel that Ludwig Lewisohn, Mary Antin, Fannie Hurst, Edna Ferber, and Gertrude Stein's works should have been included. However, none of them lived in or grew up in the Lower East Side and thus their literary sources were not the same as Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth's. Finally, a study of writers such as Ben Hecht, Albert Halpert, Arthur Miller, Daniel Fuchs, Samuel Ornitz,

[3] In Roth's case, the autobiographical content is merely a springboard for his regeneration as a novelist.

Nathaniel West, Meyer Levin, Irwin Shaw, Charles Reznikoff, and Henry Miller belongs to a dissertation on second-generation Jewish-Americans, since they were all born in New York.

PART I

Abraham Cahan

CHAPTER ONE

ONTO THE AMERICAN SCENE

INTRODUCTION

Abraham Cahan's entire work, especially his autobiographical novel, ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** (1917), and five volume autobiography, ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben***[1] (1926-31), supports Jerome Buckley's observation that:

> [a]s the twentieth century approaches, it proves increasingly difficult to distinguish between the autobiography invaded by fiction and the first-person fiction involving the autobiography of the author.[2]

Not only is this phenomenon of the increasingly autobiographical novel and fictional autobiography illustrated respectively by Cahan's ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** and ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben***, but also a unique pattern of dialectical self-analysis in two autobiographical modes can be seen in the fictional and non-fictional autobiographical writing of the three authors studied in this thesis. Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, and Henry Roth all experienced a form of mental or creative block after writing autobiographical fiction, and were only able to write again by reverting to a largely fictionalized autobiographical mode.[3]

These first three chapters on Cahan will attempt to show that all of his work is pervaded by a highly subjective impulse, a characteristic which Isaac Rosenfeld describes, with reference to ***The Rise of David Levinsky***, as the text's "immediacy of revelation".[4] Although not all of Cahan's work is as candid as the first-person narrative of ***The Rise of David Levinsky***, almost all contain numerous autobiographical details and references. Alvin Rosenfeld has suggested that Cahan's use of the first-person autobiographical narrative arises out of a need to "jettison

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[1] See Chapter Three, footnote 1, for an explanation why I refer to Cahan's autobiography as ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben*** rather than ***The Education of Abraham Cahan.***

[2] Jerome Buckley, ***The Turning Key*** (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 115.

[3] Although the form of Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth's autobiographies varies, a pattern of increasingly fictional autobiography can be seen as one progresses temporally from Cahan's autobiography to Yezierska and Roth's.

[4] Isaac Rosenfeld, "America, Land of the Sad Millionaire", ***Commentary***, 14 (1952), p. 135.

the past so as to reach some stasis of identity in a normal, less perplexed present, to weld a unity of self out of the confusions of doubleness".[5] This "doubleness" or polarity, as I prefer to call it due to Cahan's inability to completely reconcile this sense of division, manifests itself in his choice of Yiddish primarily for his non-fiction and English for fiction, his intense yearning for the Old World and simultaneous affirmation of the New World, his inclination towards realism and flights of romantic idealism, and above all his achievement of public success which is undermined by a deeper, overwhelming feeling of personal failure, sterility, and emptiness. In fact, practically all of Cahan's work can be seen as a means of attempting to reconcile these two major threads of success--as an English writer, Yiddish newspaper editor, Socialist speaker, and labour organizer--and failure--on a more personal level as revolutionary and husband. Thus, I will attempt to show in the first three chapters how Cahan works between the dominant myths of the Old and New World, namely the American myths of success and assimilation and Jewish myths of failure and alienation.

In this first chapter, I shall discuss Cahan's relationship to American, Russian, Yiddish, and English literature in order to provide an introduction to ***The Rise of David Levinsky.*** The second chapter will consist of a formal analysis of ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** and reevaluation of its literary merit. In the third and final chapter on Cahan, I will focus on his autobiography, ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben***, in order to examine the way Cahan's fictional and non-fictional autobiographical narratives overlap, or in other words to analyze that grey area of his work where fact and imagination merge.

The effect of William Dean Howells's work on Cahan will serve as a starting point for my introductory chapter to ***The Rise of David Levinsky.*** Although Cahan and Howells's relationship has been discussed previously, this is the first study to my knowledge that examines the influence of ***The Rise of Silas Lapham*** on ***The Rise of David Levinsky.***[6] I shall discuss Howells's attempt to alter the path of

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[5] Alvin Rosenfeld, "Inventing the Jew", ***Midstream***, 21 (1975), p. 55.
[6] In addition, although it has been noted that Cahan read Charles Dickens avidly and translated sections of ***The Personal History of David Copperfield*** into Yiddish for the ***Jewish Daily Forward***, the narrative influence of Dickens's first-person autobiographical Künstlerroman--also narrated by an orphan named David--on Cahan's has never been discussed before.

American literature, the personal factors which motivated him to write ***The Rise of Silas Lapham***, and the reasons he failed to achieve his aesthetic goals in this autobiographical novel. In Chapter Two I hope to show that David Levinsky's self-analytical and confessional first-person narrative reveals a history of personal motives and impulses that comes much closer to a realism rooted in "personal experience" and accurate psychological portrayal than ***The Rise of Silas Lapham***. Special emphasis will be placed on the sexual content of ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** since this was the one aspect of the novel which Howells disliked. It is this honest, confessional treatment of sex that makes the novel so contemporary, and the relationship between David's business and sexual drives has interesting roots in Cahan's own past.

HOWELLS'S LITERARY PATH: NARROWING THE GAP BETWEEN FICTION AND NON-FICTION

The novels William Dean Howells wrote between 1882 and 1890, especially ***A Modern Instance*** (1882), ***The Rise of Silas Lapham*** (1885), ***Annie Kilburn*** (1889), and ***A Hazard of New Fortunes*** (1890), illustrate his increasing social conscience as well as a new degree of subjectivity and autobiographical content in the American novel. Howells led the literary movement in America towards "truth" in fiction grounded on personal experience, and his conscious attempt to alter the orientation of the American novel is evident in a letter written to his father in 1870 concerning his next novel, ***Their Wedding Journey*** (1872).

> At last I am fairly launched upon the story of our last summer's travels, which I am giving the form of fiction so far as the characters are concerned. If I succeed in this--and I believe I shall--I see clear before me a path in literature which no one else has tried, and which I believe I can make most distinctly my own.[7]

The real summer travellers, Mr and Mrs Howells, became Basil and Isabel March in ***Their Wedding Journey***, fictional characters that Howells used nine times in later novels and stories.[8] Howells was already promoting his empirical approach to literature in 1867, when he wrote to a young poet that, "[n]o other literature is worth writing [...]

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[7] William Dean Howells, ***Life in Letters of William Dean Howells***, ed. by Mildred Howells, Volume I (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1928), p. 162.

[8] James Woodress, "William Dean Howells", in ***Dictionary of Literary Biography*** (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1980), p. 278.

except that which expresses the life one has lived".[9] His simple and straightforward test of literature placed its greatest emphasis on the search for truth.

> We must ask ourselves before we ask anything else, Is it true?--true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women? This truth, which necessarily includes the highest morality and the highest artistry--this truth given, the book *cannot* be wicked and cannot be weak.[10]

Thus the novelist, according to Howells, has a moral responsibility to link fiction to personal experience, and good literature must ultimately be judged by each reader according to his or her own life. Howells believed that autobiography is "the most precious contribution to men's knowledge of each other", and added that inventive writing reaches its greatest ethical heights when it enables men to know each other better by giving the reader the "facts in man's consciousness or experience".[11] Thus he puts an enormous obligation on the writer and reader to bridge the gap between fiction and non-fiction. However, autobiographical details--the "facts in man's consciousness or experience"--are not always clearly or factually expressed in literature and thus often inaccessible to the reader. It seems, in theory, that Howells wants to deny fiction its potential as a medium through which a writer can work out his or her own conflicts by constructing alternative environments, choices and relationships. Ironically, this is exactly what he used fiction for, at least in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*.

THE RISE OF WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS: THE STIRRINGS OF A SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

Many critics refer to the psychological impasse and crisis of social conscience which Howells suffered in the mid-1880s, pointing especially to his remark that, "[t]he bottom dropped out" of his world while writing *The Rise of Silas Lapham*.[12] However, it wasn't until the year after the publication of the novel, as a result of the Haymarket riots in 1886, that a radical change in Howells's social and political ideology

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[9] Everett Carter, *Howells and the Age of Realism* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1954), p. 89.
[10] Edwin Cady, *The Road to Realism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1956), p. 70.
[11] Carter, *Howells and the Age of Realism*, p. 99.
[12] Kenneth Lynn, *William Dean Howells: An American Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 281.

occurred. His public support for the Haymarket suspects isolated him from Boston society, especially from his ultra-conservative, anti-Semitic literary friends, namely Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell, Charles Eliot Norton and Henry Adams; eventually, his dismay at the execution of the Haymarket "anarchists" led to his reassessment of Boston society and subsequent departure to New York. While writing ***The Rise of Silas Lapham***, however, Howells was still ideologically and physically connected to Boston's Brahmin society although there are signs that he was moving towards a new social perspective. He attempts in ***The Rise of Silas Lapham*** to come to terms with his wealth, fame, and social ambitions, and as a result he provides occasional glimpses of the social upheaval caused by the massive waves of immigration to the United States. However, although these brief glances provide interesting insights into Howells's own personal anxieties in 1884-85, one can't help feeling that the "facts" in Howells's conscience concerning this social change do not get a full and convincing treatment in the novel: Howells seems to fall short of his own requirements for good literature in ***The Rise of Silas Lapham***.

Howells's social aspirations, desire for wealth, and affiliation with Boston society were major influences and sources of personal conflict while writing ***The Rise of Silas Lapham***. His desire for wealth is clearly displayed in a letter to Charles Eliot Norton dated 13 August, 1866, in which he wrote, "I don't believe that when I am rich as I one day intend to be [...] I shall ever leave Cambridge at all".[13] Howells proved the second half of this sentence false when he moved to Boston's fashionable Beacon Hill in 1884, the very same year he began writing ***The Rise of Silas Lapham***. Directly after his move to Beacon Street, Howells had begun to show faint stirrings in his social conscience, which is detected in a letter written to his father dated August 10, 1884.

> There are miles of empty houses all around me. And how unequally things are divided in this world. While these beautiful, airy, wholesome houses are uninhabited, thousands of poor creatures are stifling in wretched barracks in the city here, whole families in one room. I wonder that men are so patient with society as they are.[14]

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[13] Kermit Vanderbilt, ***The Achievement of William Dean Howells*** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 109.
[14] Lynn, ***William Dean Howells: An American Life***, p. 279-280.

Ironically, Howells himself was not only "patient with society" as it was in the two years between writing this letter and ***The Rise of Silas Lapham***, but also he was planning, like Silas, to get his daughter into Boston society, contemplating a move to Beacon Hill, frequenting the fashionable Saturday Club, and securing connections with Boston's intellectual and literary elite. Nevertheless, a certain uneasiness and feeling of marginality initiated by his move to Beacon Hill seems to have been projected by Howells onto Silas Lapham in order to resolve his own anxieties concerning his "backcountry origins" and social climbing in Boston.[15]

Silas's feelings of insecurity and second-class status are illustrated by his uneasy declaration, in an interview for Bartley Hubbard's "Solid Men of Boston" series, that he was born so close to Canada that he "came very near being an adoptive citizen" of the United States.[16] The new house which he plans to build in order to facilitate his daughters' entry into Boston society represents an attempt to bridge the social gap between his aspiring, newly-rich family and the socially superior but financially declining Coreys. Silas's comment to Persis, "Why don't you get them [Irene and Penelope] into society? There's money enough!",[17] exposes his naive belief that class promotion is connected purely to money. In the revised edition of ***The Rise of Silas Lapham***, Silas's desire to move is based solely on aspirations for social mobility, but Kermit Vanderbilt points out that in the original text published in ***Century*** magazine, the Laphams' move from Nankeen Square to the Back Bay is directly related to the racial transformation, and thus economic "decline" of the neighbourhood.[18]

> [Persis] Is it true that the property of the established owners is worth less than they paid?
> [Silas] It's worth a good deal less. You see, they ***have*** got in--and pretty thick, too--it's no use denying it. And when they get in, they send down the price of property.[19]

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[15] William Dean Howells, ***The Rise of Silas Lapham*** (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), intro. Howells was a self-made and self-educated man whose upbringing in an agrarian environment and social aspirations show his uncanny likeness to Silas.
[16] Ibid., p. 4.
[17] Ibid., p. 30.
[18] Vanderbilt, ***The Achievement of William Dean Howells***, p. 116.
[19] William Dean Howells, "The Rise of Silas Lapham", ***Century***, 7 (1884), pp. 23-24.

The words "they *have* got in" refer to the Laphams' new Jewish neighbours, the Liliengartens, who moved into the house across the square, and Persis sighs despairingly that "[t]hey've [the Jews have] all got money".[20] Howells's own claim that the ironic intent of the passage was to expose and rebuke "civilised" bigotry, turns ironically into a denial of his own racial fears. In a letter to Norton in 1869, Howells wrote:

> [o]ur Sacramento Street has lately become much less desirable than it was: Irish have moved in, and I think it would be part of prudence to sell the house if I could find a good purchaser. I'm afraid it will depreciate on my hands.[21]

In 1884, fifteen years after this letter, it was no longer the Irishman but the Jew who was threatening the social order by moving upwards and outwards into middle-class neighbourhoods, thus explaining the transference of Howells's xenophobia from the Irish in the letter to the Jew in the novel. The irony of the expurgated section is not connected to the exposure of "civilised bigotry" as Howells claimed; it is a result of Silas's inability to see that his new wealth and desire to move into a better neighbourhood put him in exactly the same position as the upwardly-mobile Liliengartens. Howells could have revised this passage to clarify his irony, but he simply cut it out, thus dismissing the problem with the same ease that he showed by ignoring the anti-Semitism of his literary friends.

The location of Silas's new house on the edge of a salt marsh reiterates the marginality and insecurity of his social position; the reference to the nasty smell of the marsh when pumped dry suggests the unnaturalness and unpleasantness of the physical and moral foundations upon which the house was built. In addition, the house represents not only Silas's present wealth and future aspirations, but also it is connected to his past in the form of his ex-partner, Rogers, whom Silas forced selfishly out of the Mineral Paint Company despite the fact that Rogers's financial backing saved the failing business. Howells has Rogers appear for the first two times in the novel at the Back Bay house, which highlights the fact that it was Rogers who enabled Silas to build the house by saving him from bankruptcy.

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[20] Vanderbilt, *The Achievement of William Dean Howells*, p. 116.
[21] This is from a letter written to Norton dated November 7, 1869. Quoted in Vanderbilt, *The Achievement of William Dean Howells*, p. 123-124.

Persis's criticism of Silas's behaviour toward Rogers later results in Silas's attempt to make up to his ex-partner by lending him money for a new business enterprise. But prior to this attempt by Silas to compensate for his wrongdoing, the narrator highlights Silas's flaw as well as the novel's moral lesson in a highly didactic manner.

> [Silas] had been dependent at one time on his partner's capital. It was a moment of terrible trial. Happy is the man forever after who can choose the ideal, the unselfish part in such an exigency! Lapham could not rise to it. [...] [The wrong] seemed to have an inextinguishable vitality. It slept but it did not die.[22]

Howells forces this idea of the "inextinguishable vitality" of moral injustice with a heavy-handed symbolic act, when Silas unwittingly burns down the house. Its loss represents Lapham's ultimate failure to enter society, as well as the dissolution of the last source of capital which could have saved his Mineral Paint Company from collapse. However, it is unconvincing that Silas's attempt to correct such a wrong would result in such an exaggerated form of retribution. In fact, the burning down of the house can be seen as the easiest narrative means of allowing Silas to abandon Boston and retreat to Vermont, and as a result neither Silas nor the author has to come completely to terms with his social and financial ambitions.

Silas's unconscious setting alight of his house is connected to a previous unconscious blunder made at the Coreys' dinner party while under the influence of wine. The dinner represents the Laphams' potential entry into Boston society through the marriage of their daughter and Tom Corey. However, Silas's excessive bragging is highly embarrassing to the Coreys, illustrating the social reality of the gap which separates the Laphams from acceptance by Boston society. His boasting while drunk is a reaction to his pathetic inability to respond when sober to Bromfield Corey's remark that Boston's poor, suffering in the sweltering summer heat, should abandon their atrocious accommodations and force their way into the vacated houses of the rich. The suggestion is a ridiculous--and at most temporary--solution to the problem, yet it is made in almost the exact same words that Howells used in his letter to his father above.[23] When Mrs Corey urges her husband to "consider what havoc such people would make

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[22] Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, p. 50.
[23] See footnote 14 above.

with the furniture of a nice house!", Bromfield simply agrees with his wife's argument, "That is true [...] I never thought of that"--a ludicrous reversal which is challenged only by minister Sewell's praise of the poor for their patience.[24] Here, Howells touches gingerly on the real fears of Boston's Brahmin society who felt threatened by the rapid rise of post-war immigration to the United States, which resulted in poor living and working conditions, hundreds of industrial strikes, and a new balance of political power, illustrated by the election in 1884 of Boston's first Irish Catholic Mayor, Hugh O'Brien.[25] In the 1870s, Howells privately voiced his own fears concerning immigration when he wrote that he was waiting:

> with an anxious curiosity the encounter of the Irish and the Chinese, now rapidly approaching each other from opposite shores of the continent. Shall we be crushed in the collision of these superior races?[26]

Though one may argue that Howells takes a democratic interest in "these superior races", his real interest in the Irish (whom he refers to as "the intruder") and Chinese is directly related to his fear of the "collision" that threatens to destroy both his race and the society to which he has become so attached. At the end of the 19th century, Howells confessed that his earlier "convictions were all democratic, but at heart I am afraid I was a snob".[27] For a moment at the dinner party it is Bromfield Corey rather than Silas who resembles Howells most, and the complexity of Howells's personal conflicts begins to appear: like Bromfield, Howells raises the question of social inequality only to drop it without a fight; like Lapham, he wants to "speak up and say that he had been there himself, and knew how such a man felt [to be poor]" but lacks the courage.[28] Howells seems to be caught between his attraction to Boston society and feelings of guilt, which correspond to his growing social awareness in his writing. At the end of the novel, however, Howells inclines more toward Mr and Mrs Corey's belief in the destructive potential of the poor when Silas, the bankrupt entrepreneur, burns down his own house.

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[24] Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, p. 194.
[25] Ibid., introduction, p. xxiii-xxiv.
[26] William Dean Howells, "A Pedestrian Tour", in *Suburban Sketches* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1875), p. 71-72.
[27] Vanderbilt, *The Achievement of William Dean Howells*, p. 107.
[28] Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, p. 194.

Before Lapham's loose tongue brings on him the contempt of the dinner party, he manages to defend his ideals of heroism, camaraderie and belief in the virtues of the commonplace man, only to unveil yet another source of guilt and uneasy conscience. Silas recounts how Jim Millon got killed in the process of saving his life during the Civil War. Although Silas attempts to repay his debt to Jim by supporting Jim's wife and daughter, monetary compensation for a life is impossible; thus his debt to Jim can never be completely erased. Howells, however, ties Molly and Zerilla's poverty directly to Silas's post-war prosperity. They are not only economic victims of the war, but also depend on his charity for survival. Silas's feelings of guilt are illustrated by his long silence concerning the matter, which is only broken under the influence of wine. Although Howells briefly addresses the trauma and guilt resulting from the Civil War in the Millon story, he leaves the reader with only a glimpse into the lives of those most affected by the war. Jim's wife and daughter get too scant a treatment, and Howells's description of the "region of depots", cheap hotels, and "ladies and gents" dining rooms where Zerilla Millon Dewey, her husband, and her mother live allows the reader only a brief look at an increasingly problematic side of life in the United States between the Civil War and mid-1880s. Howells fails to look closely at the extent of the damage caused by the Civil War which resulted in real emotional and economic problems for the victims, and thus suppresses his personal conflicts concerning these problems in a similar way to Silas.

THE RESOLUTION

The resolution of ***The Rise of Silas Lapham*** is unsatisfactory because the motives and impulses of the characters do not seem to be "true to life" in accordance with Howells's own standard. Instead they act according to his desire to resolve his personal and ideological conflicts in Boston with an idealized solution. The marriage of Tom and Penelope, for instance, strikes me as an artificial attempt to fuse two distinctly opposed cultural worlds; Tom combines the sophisticated, urban culture of his parents and business enthusiasm of his self-made mercantile grandfather, and Penelope, who was named after her Puritan grandmother, is a self-cultivated, country girl with naturally acquired aristocratic manners. As Vanderbilt remarks, it is the "wedding of a

streamlined Brahminism and a de-provincialized agrarian America",[29] or in other words all of the best Anglo-Saxon qualities. On one hand, Howells sees the moral solution in the regression to agrarian values, while on the other he attempts to merge old agrarian and new urban values in a marriage of the best elements of the pre-existing Anglo-Saxon culture in face of a threat by the new immigrant cultures. He not only ignores the positive qualities of these immigrant groups, who were on the verge of radically altering the future of the United States, but also the fact that not all immigrant groups held the agrarian values associated with Jeffersonian Democracy. Silas's return to Lapham, Vermont indicates Howells's desire for refuge in an idealized view of the agrarian life of a past antebellum democracy: the conclusion suggests that Silas's moral lapse can be healed only by reversing his financial success. However, Silas's resolution of his financial dilemma does not accurately resemble the decisions of the industrialists in the 1870s and 80s, which were exclusively practical and material decisions and not moral ones; like the Robber Barons, Silas does attain his wealth by ruthless means, but unlike Silas they were able to separate their business morality from their private morality: their form of repayment to society--or moral healing--was left to their posthumous philanthropy. Thus Howells's ethical resolution and domestic focus mystifies the social reality, substituting a moral view in place of a critical view of laissez-faire economics. One is left thinking at the end of the novel that Silas's financial tragedy and moral rise is forced rather than realistic. Fate seems to play an overly deterministic part in the story of a man who, it seems, could easily have stayed on his farm and kept his partner, thus avoiding financial collapse and need for moral recuperation. It is interesting to note that instead of retreating ineffectively to his home in Ohio after the Haymarket affair, Howells moved into the city of the future, New York, where his social awareness and criticism could develop and surface freely as it did in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), set in Manhattan.

A PROVIDENTIAL MATCH: ABRAHAM CAHAN MEETS WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

A Hazard of New Fortunes was the product of Howells's first winter in New York, from 1888-89. In 1891, he decided to make New York his

[29] Vanderbilt, *The Achievement of William Dean Howells*, p. 137.

permanent residence in order to take on the editorship of ***Cosmopolitan*** magazine, and also because by the early 1890s New York had become both "the literary capital of the nation and the center of the publishing industry", or in other words, it was the place for a writer to be.[30] Coincidentally, in the same year that Howells moved to New York, Abraham Cahan began to fulfil his literary ambitions with the publication of his first short story, "Mottke Arbel and His Romance", and his political ambitions by his attendance as a walking delegate at the Second Congress of the Socialist International. In 1892, Cahan met Howells, whose books Cahan had read avidly and whom he admired more than any other American writer, including Henry James, due to Howells's attention to the "details of American life" and interest in "social concerns".[31] This meeting, which Howells arranged in order to collect first hand material for his utopian novel, ***A Traveler from Altruria*** (1894), occurred at a perfect time in Cahan's career. It seems to have stimulated both his Yiddish socialist writing and his English literary development. Cahan translated sections of Howells's ***A Traveler from Altruria*** into Yiddish for the ***Arbeiter Zeitung***, and responded to this critique of American society with his own didactic work, ***Raphael Naaritzokh*** (1896),[32] a moral fable in Yiddish which describes the conversion of a carpenter from his own simple Utopianism to a clearly defined Marxism.[33] Even this highly didactic socialist piece has an autobiographical element, for Cahan was both a carpenter's apprentice in Vilna and a Utopian of sorts when he joined the Am Olam movement before he converted to Marxism in America. However, Cahan gradually shifted away from the blatantly Marxist stories and criticism of his Yiddish writing to a more personally-oriented English writing; it is important to highlight the fact that this shift in language and content occurred after his meeting with Howells in 1892, when he translated his first story, "Mottke Arbel and His Romance", into English and published it with the title "A Providential Match". Mildred Howells came across "A Providential Match" by chance in the February, 1895 edition of ***Short Stories***, and after Howells had read it with approval, Cahan was

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[30] Woodress, "William Dean Howells", p. 288.
[31] Rudolph Kirk and Clara M. Kirk,"Abraham Cahan and William Dean Howells", ***American Jewish Historical Quarterly***, 52 (1962), p. 29.
[32] Also transcribed from the Yiddish as ***Rafael Naarizok*** by Theodore Pollock, p. 418, and as ***How Raphael Na'aritzokh Became a Socialist*** by Ronald Sanders in ***The Downtown Jews***, p. 193.
[33] Ronald Sanders, ***The Downtown Jews*** (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969), p. 193.

summoned again to the Howells' home where he was encouraged to write more stories. This invitation to dinner by his literary idol and Howells's praise of his story made Cahan feel "both young and old, humble and proud--an American sense of having arrived".[34] Thus Cahan's meetings with Howells in 1892 and 1895 can be seen as a literary and cultural rite of passage, marking his symbolic transformation from Yiddish journalist to American writer. It seems highly likely that he would not have become a serious writer in English and author of ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** without Howells's initial encouragement; thus the title of Cahan's autobiographical novel, which was written and published at a low-point of critical appreciation for Howells's work,[35] can be seen as a tribute to Howells for his support of Cahan's English literary career.

CAHAN, HOWELLS, AND TURGENEV

In ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben***, Cahan relates a very interesting incident concerning the end of his meeting with Howells in 1895. Cahan describes how just before he left the house Howells:

> went over to a finely-carved bureau and removed a letter from a drawer--a letter from Turgenev to him. Turgenev praised a work of Howells' which he had read, and spoke in a friendly manner about their meeting. The letter was written in excellent English. Only one word, "physionomy" [*sic*] wasn't used according to English usage.[36]

This dramatic conclusion to Cahan's momentous meeting with Howells is crucial since Turgenev's praise of Howells's work mirrors Howells's praise of Cahan's story; in addition, Turgenev and Howells's meeting, like Howells and Cahan's, was friendly and had a positive outcome. The explicit literary reference to Turgenev, Howells's possession of the cherished letter of praise, its place in the "drawer" of a "finely-carved bureau", and Turgenev's "perfect" English--which Cahan ironically corrects inaccurately in order to emphasise his superior English--are developed in order to show a literary connection between Turgenev and Cahan through Howells: Howells was the American writer most influenced by the Russian school of realism, and Cahan places himself symbolically as Howells's, and indirectly Turgenev's, chosen disciple.

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[34] Kirk, "Abraham Cahan and William Dean Howells", p. 30.
[35] Woodress, "William Dean Howells", p. 295.
[36] Kirk, "Abraham Cahan and William Dean Howells", p. 34.

Thus, it can be said that the meeting in 1895 between Cahan, the aspiring Yiddish journalist and English writer, and Howells, the famous American literary critic and realist writer, stands out as the symbolic encounter of two developing literary traditions, Jewish and American, which, with the influence of Russian realism, helped to give birth to the genre that is commonly referred to as the Jewish-American novel. Howells himself acknowledged the fusion of these three traditions in Cahan's work when he wrote in his review of Cahan's ***The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto***, that Cahan:

> sees things with American eyes, and he brings in aid of his vision the far and rich perceptions of his Hebraic race; while he is strictly of the great and true Russian principle in literary art.[37]

Howells realized from his conversation with Cahan about Russian literature that Cahan's ability to read the Russian realist writers in their original language and his wide knowledge of contemporary Russian literature qualified him as one of the pre-eminent Russian critics in the United States; in addition, Cahan's articles in English on "Realism" (1889) and "The Younger Russian Writers" (1899), and his Yiddish translations of Tolstoy's "The Kreutzer Sonata" (1895) and "The Death of Ivan Ilych" (1918) made him one of the most outspoken American advocates of Russian literature. The literary "principle" that Cahan learned from Turgenev was that of verisimilitude, "the gift of making things seem real", or the absolute naturalness of his writing which emphasized the subordination of plot to the close study of character and depiction of setting.[38] Although Cahan later claimed to prefer Tolstoy's work, it was Turgenev's novels, especially ***Rudin*** (1855), which influenced Cahan most considerably. Turgenev was the first Russian realist Cahan read as a youth, and he was still encouraging his colleagues at the ***Commercial Advertiser*** to read ***Rudin*** in the 1890s.[39] In his article, "The Mantle of Tolstoy" (1902), Cahan wrote that:

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[37] William Dean Howells, "New York Low Life in Fiction", ***New York World*** (1896), p. 18.
[38] Abraham Cahan, "The Younger Russian Writers", ***The Forum***, 28 (1899), p. 121.
[39] Moses Rischin, "Abraham Cahan and the New York ***Commercial Advertiser***", ***American Jewish Historical Society***, XLIII (1953), p. 20.

> *Rudin* is instinct with human pity, and this all-forgiving pity is what makes it one of the most characteristically Russian novels ever written.[40]

Turgenev's Dmitri Rudin resembles Cahan's narrator, David Levinsky, especially when Rudin confesses that:

> [n]ature has given me much, but I shall die without doing anything worthy of my powers, without leaving any trace behind me. [...] A strange, almost farcical fate is mine; I would devote myself--eagerly and wholly to some cause,--and I cannot devote myself. I shall end by sacrificing myself to some folly or other in which I shall not even believe.[41]

The similarity between Turgenev's Rudin and Cahan's Levinsky lies not only in the melancholic tone of their confessions, but also in the fact that like Levinsky, Rudin is an intellectual who becomes a "practical businessman" before he dies anonymously in the "Revolution of the *ateliers nationaux*" which had "already been almost suppressed" when he was shot--the "folly" that he had predicted.[42] Although Levinsky does not become a revolutionary, he does sacrifice himself to the folly of the American myth of success which, at the end of his narrative, he no longer believes in. Rudin's fate, like Levinsky's and Cahan's, is that at his core he remains an intellectual obsessed with words; as Rudin says, "[w]ords indeed have been my ruin; they have consumed me, and to the end I cannot be free of them".[43] The same is true of Cahan and Levinsky who are unable to free themselves from words, as their autobiographical narratives confirm.

THE AMERICAN SCENE

In 1896, Cahan arrived on the American literary scene with the publication of his first collection of short stories, *The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto*, which Howells not only helped to get published but also boosted critically by hailing Cahan as the "new star of realism".[44] In the same article, Howells praised Stephen Crane for his ability to portray a "true picture of life

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[40] Abraham Cahan, "The Mantle of Tolstoy", in *Grandma Never Lived in America*, ed. by Moses Rischin, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 534.
[41] Ivan Turgenev, *Rudin* (London: William Heinemann, 1917), p. 198-199.
[42] Ibid., p. 259.
[43] Ibid., p. 253.
[44] Howells, "New York Low Life in Fiction", p. 18.

on the East Side", but he clearly preferred Cahan's stories. Ironically, after reading Howells's review, Crane not only wanted to meet Cahan since he wondered "how in the name of Heaven [Cahan] learned how to [write so well]", but also that he had a "delicious feeling of being some months ahead of [Cahan] critically".[45] Although Crane's ***Red Badge of Courage*** (1895) may have put him ahead of Cahan as a precursor of the imagist poets as well as the novelists of the 1920s, his slum fiction such as ***George's Mother*** (1896) and ***Maggie*** (1896) displays a lack of the "perfect knowledge" of the New York slums and its inhabitants which Howells admired in Cahan's ghetto stories. Crane's lack of perfect knowledge of the East Side was due partly to the fact that rather than living there to collect material for ***Maggie*** in 1891, he made trips into the Bowery from his brother's house in Lake View, New Jersey in order "to study the color of the city and the effect of the slums on the morals and the manners of the poor".[46] Yezierska would have called Crane a "slummer", a derogatory word for the fashionable bohemian artists of the 1890s and early 1900s; like Crane, who claimed that "poverty [was] beneficial to his art!",[47] many "slummers" of the period assumed a similar creative posture by either pretending to be poor, or by making journeys there like Henry James in ***The American Scene***, in order to collect their literary material. Crane's strength in ***George's Mother*** lies in his descriptions of the things which he knew best, such as barroom brawls and gang mentality, rather than in a perceptive and sympathetic portrayal of the East Side characters. Compared to Cahan's abundant humour and empathic treatment of his characters in ***The Imported Bridegroom***, whom Howells praised for their "noble aspirations" despite their often "grotesque" natures,[48] Crane's prose in ***George's Mother*** often sounds stilted if not platitudinous, for example when he describes the Johnsons living "like animals in a jungle".[49] In ***Maggie***, Crane appropriates a conventional myth of the slum girl--beaten as a child, betrayed by her alcoholic mother, "spoiled" by Pete "her jude feller", forced out of her home by her family into a life of prostitution, and scorned hypocritically by the same people who forced

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[45] Kirk, "Abraham Cahan and William Dean Howells", p. 38.
[46] James B. Colvert, "Stephen Crane", in ***Dictionary of Literary Biography***, ed. by Donald Pizer and Earl Harbett (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1982), p. 104.
[47] Ibid., p. 105.
[48] Howells, "New York Low Life in Fiction", p. 18.
[49] Stephen Crane, ***George's Mother***, in *The Work of Stephen Crane*, ed. by Wilson Follett, (New York: Russel & Russel, 1963), p. 25.

her out--which was readily available at the time both in newspaper articles and in fiction, such as Edgar Fawcett's novel ***The Evil that Men Do*** (1889). Like Jacob Riis and Hutchins Hapgood, Crane clearly wrote about the New York slums from the outside, as a critical observer with a highly moralistic and often grating ironic narrative tone, whereas Cahan's writing, like Yezierska's and Roth's, is that of a knowledgeable insider and is irrevocably connected to his own experiences in the Lower East Side Jewish community. This fact accounts for the highly subjective, autobiographical nature of Cahan's fiction, which can be observed in the numerous parallels and similarities between the Cahan's protagonists and himself. In an article on Cahan in 1896, Dexter Marshall commented that Cahan's "recently published novel" ***Yekl*** is:

> the first work in which a true "insider" has striven to picture the life of that crowded slice of Central Europe, which, set into the mosaic of the New World's greatest seaport city, has come to be known everywhere as "The East Side".[50]

Marshall is correct to call Cahan's stories the first fiction by a "true insider", and for this reason I disagree with Leslie Fiedler who believes that the Jewish-American novel has its origins ironically in the novels of Henry Harland, a non-Jew who posed as a Jewish author under the alias "Sidney Luska".[51] Harland's "Jewish-American" novels, ***As It Was Written*** (1885) and ***The Yoke of the Thorah*** [sic] (1886),[52] deal with assimilated, up-town German-American Jews, using the rather unrealistic, overly-romanticized Jewish characters and the Jewish ethnic content merely for its exotic interest. ***As It Was Written***, which like ***The Yoke of the Thorah*** has many misspellings and factual inconsistencies in terms of its Jewish references, is a highly romanticized love story with a detective story plot that bears more

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[50] Dexter Marshall, "The Life of A. Cahan, Novelist", in Kirk, "Abraham Cahan and William Dean Howells", p. 44.

[51] Leslie Fiedler, "Genesis: The American-Jewish Novel Through the Twenties", ***Midstream***, 4 (1958), pp. 23-24. Mr Fiedler comments that it is ironic that the "first Jewish-American novelist was not a Jew at all, or that, more precisely, he was the creation of his own fiction, an imaginary Jew", p. 24.

[52] Ibid. The spelling "Thorah" is incorrect in the title of the novel and suggests Luska/Harland's ignorance of and real distance from Judaism. Luska's work is far from being called either realistic or the original Jewish-American novel, for the Jewish and American cultures met at the border of the Lower East Side and New York, and not uptown between assimilated Jews and upper-class Americans.

than a few traces from Wilkie Collins's ***The Moonstone***. Unlike Cahan's historically and psychologically accurate portrayal of Jewish-American life in ***Yekl, As It Was Written*** is far from qualifying as the original Jewish-American novel.

That Howells preferred Cahan's writing to Crane's excessively "tragic" fiction is evident when he commented that:

> [t]he artistic principle which moves both writers is the same; but the picturesque, outlandish material with which Mr. Cahan deals makes a stronger appeal to the reader's fancy. He has more humor than the American, too, whose spare laughter is apt to be grim, while the Russian cannot hide his relish of the comic incidents of his story.[53]

Although Howells is right that Cahan's stories are more humorous and thus more appealing to the reader than Crane's, he is wrong to attribute this interest in the "comic incidents" solely to Cahan's "Russian" background. His humour originates from the Yiddish tradition of Mendele Mocher Seforim, Sholom Aleichem, and I.L. Peretz's stories which Cahan grew up with in Vilna, continued to read in the United States, and later promoted by publishing in the ***Jewish Daily Forward***. Irving Howe remarks that the folk experience that acted on Mendele Mocher Seforim--and likewise Cahan--draws simultaneously from various traditional and modern sources such as:

> the Hasidic wonder tales and the grotesque fictions of Gogol; from the comic legends about Hershel Ostropolier, a kind of Jewish Till Eulenspiegel, and the fiction of Chekhov; from folk stories about the Rothschilds and the world-view of Cervantes.[54]

It is true that Cahan followed Turgenev's example by placing more emphasis on his folk tradition. However, Cahan's folk tradition was Yiddish rather than distinctively Russian. For instance, no direct narrative influence of Ivan Krylov's ***Fables*** like "The Liar", which Cahan read and translated into Hebrew as a youth, or other Russian folk stories can be detected in Cahan's writing, whereas references to Morris Rosenfeld's poetry, biblical stories, Talmudic anecdotes, and Yiddish folk songs--especially Eliakum Zunser's[55]--are abundant in his work. The fact that Cahan wrote his stories about the ghetto in

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[53] Howells, "New York Low Life in Fiction", p. 18.
[54] Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, ***A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*** (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), p. 25.
[55] Abraham Cahan, ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1969), p. 5.

English shows that he acted as a kind of cultural interpreter of the Jewish Lower East Side to the English-speaking community; likewise, his translation of Bret Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp", Mark Twain's "The Story of the Bad Little Boy", and Edgar Allan Poe's "A Tell-Tale Heart" into Yiddish illustrates his didactic role of preparing the way for his kind of psychological realism amongst the Jewish reading population. In addition, by translating these American stories as well as Tolstoy's "The Kreutzer Sonata" in 1895 and "The Death of Ivan Ilych" in 1918 into Yiddish, Cahan was continuously measuring up his own writing to that of his favourite writers from Europe and America. Cahan was also interested in the Russian and English realist novelists due to the fact that their novels were rooted in a long tradition of intellectual history, and thus had the strong theoretical foundation that was lacking in America. As Alfred Kazin remarks:

> realism in America, which struggled so arduously to make itself heard and understood, had no true battleground, as it had no intellectual history, few models, virtually no theory, and no unity.[56]

It is not surprising, therefore, that Cahan's interest in American literature focussed on those writers like Howells with strong connections to the European realist movement. The stories which Cahan chose to translate into Yiddish deal, like his own ghetto tales, with an unexpected change in the moral atmosphere of the story, as in Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp"; or, they illustrate Cahan's interest in the darker side and more marginal characters in the American literary tradition, as demonstrated by his translation of the tales by Poe and Twain with unexpected moral twists in plot and characterization. As Waldinger remarks, in Twain's "The Story of the Bad Little Boy" Cahan saw "that an American writer could mock the religious sentimentality that he, too, had always condemned": Cahan was relieved to know that "such a 'representative American' as Mark Twain was on his side".[57]

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[56] Alfred Kazin, ***On Native Grounds*** (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), p. 13-14.

[57] A. Waldinger, ***Abraham Cahan as Novelist, Critic, and Folk Advocate*** (Ph.D. Dissertation, 1971), p. 176.

AN IMMIGRANT'S VIEW OF THE MYTH OF SUCCESS

In *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Cahan focuses on the experiences surrounding David's emigration from Russia to New York in 1885 in order to supplement Howells's treatment of the myth of success with an immigrant's view of the myth. Cahan exploits the myth to show not only that Levinsky's success is achieved at the expense of his personal happiness, but also how immigration fractures Levinsky's life, separating him permanently from his family, religious past, and Old World community. Cahan's narrative approach differs from Howells's since he increased the amount of autobiographical content, placed more emphasis on the sexual aspect of David's development, and chose the first-person point of view, which Howells believed was too narrow in range and thus avoided. Although Howells didn't object to Cahan's use of the first-person narrative, he did criticize the erotic content when he wrote to a friend that:

> Abraham Cahan has done a pretty great autobiographical novel, but it is too sensual in its facts, though he is a good man. Why do they want to get so much dirt in?[58]

It has been suggested that Howells was merely too old to appreciate Cahan's form of naturalism, but his rhetorical question above, with its blatant racial slur in the equation of Jews ("they") and sex ("dirt"),[59] illustrates that the gap between Howells and Cahan's social background and literary taste was never completely bridged. As James Woodress remarks, Howells was a product of the Victorian Age with its taboos and delicacies, and therefore neither could nor would treat sex with the candour allowed the twentieth-century novelist.[60]

David Levinsky's narrative frankness concerning business and sex, which Rosenfeld refers to as the narrative's "immediacy of revelation", is the novels strongest quality.[61] However, despite the candour and apparent simplicity of Levinsky's narrative, the inextricable mingling of

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[58] Howells, *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells*, p. 375.
[59] See footnotes 19 and 20 above, where Howells's other racist comments about the Jews in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* are presented with the impersonal pronoun, "they".
[60] Woodress, "William Dean Howells", p. 273.
[61] The candid treatment of the relationship between sexes was not limited to Cahan's writing alone, but was of primary concern for all three first-generation, Jewish-American writers in this thesis, since it was the central source of conflict between the Old World Jewish parents of the shtetl, whose religious customs had changed little since the 12th century, and their children, who grew up and married in a much more liberal American environment.

fiction and factual details from Cahan's life--many of which appear almost verbatim in his articles and autobiography--makes this apparently straightforward first-person autobiographical narrative into a complex fusion of David Levinsky's fictional life and Abraham Cahan's disguised confession, a point which I shall discuss in more detail in the following chapter. As Avrom Fleishman comments, "those [autobiographical novels] which do figure their authors are among the most psychologically complex and aesthetically satisfying works of autobiographical literature".[62] This is also true of George Eliot's ***The Mill on the Floss***, the first novel that Cahan read in English, and of Charles Dickens's ***The Personal History of David Copperfield***, which had a major influence on ***The Rise of David Levinsky***.

THE INFLUENCE OF ELIOT AND DICKENS'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVELS ON *THE RISE OF DAVID LEVINSKY*: BILDUNGSROMAN OR KÜNSTLERROMAN?

In retrospect, it is of great interest that George Eliot's ***The Mill on the Floss*** was the first novel Cahan read in English since it was a formative literary experience that seems to have deeply affected Cahan's literary style and choice of content . Cahan creates David for similar reasons Eliot did Maggie, in order to atone somehow for his half-suppressed sense of guilt in having repudiated the conventions and proprieties of his own religious and cultural inheritance:[63] neither Eliot nor Cahan could endure the prospect of rootlessness, of being "cut off from the past".[64] Like ***The Mill on the Floss***, ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** is an autobiographical novel which falls roughly within the Bildungsroman tradition. David Levinsky is a typical Bildungsroman hero in that he is a child of some sensibility who grows up in a provincial town, which he leaves due to the social and intellectual constraints placed upon his imagination and ambitions; he leaves his home in order to make his way to the city, where his real education--especially sexual--begins and demands that he appraise his values and leave his adolescence behind in order to enter maturity. However, David's initiation is not complete in the sense of the traditional Bildungsroman plot since he doesn't visit his old home to

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[62] Avrom Fleishman, ***Figures of Autobiography*** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 199.
[63] Buckley, ***The Turning Key***, p. 123.
[64] Jerome Buckley, ***Seasons of Youth*** (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 111.

demonstrate his success or the wisdom of his choice, and like the later heroes of the Bildungsroman he is less able than a Phillip Pirrip or an Ernest Pontifex to see how the processes of money-making contribute to his true enrichment of spirit.[65]

The fact that ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** can be described as a novel of "all around self-culture" with a conscious attempt on the part of the hero to cultivate his experience, places the novel more in the tradition of the late English Bildungsroman, which Jerome Buckley remarks has also been a kind of Künstlerroman or tale of the orientation of an artist.[66] Like Jude the Obscure, David Levinsky is an aspiring intellectual, like Pip, an orphan who leaves home to make his way in the world, like Maggie Tulliver, predominantly self-educated, and like David Copperfield, an artist of sorts. It can be argued that ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** is a disguised Künstlerroman despite the fact that Levinsky becomes a sweat-shop boss rather than a writer. Even though Levinsky laments over the fact that he never became a writer and points to his success as cloak manufacturer as a "mistake", he does come across as an "intellectual" with an artistic sensibility.[67]

> I think that I was born for a life of intellectual interest. I was certainly brought up for one. The day when that accident turned my mind from college to business seems to be the most unfortunate day in my life. I think that I should be much happier as a scientist or writer, perhaps.[68]

In addition, Levinsky remarks after reading Thackery's ***Vanity Fair*** that:

> [i]t seemed to me that anybody in command of bookish English ought to be able to turn out a work like ***Vanity Fair***, where men and things were so simple and so natural that they impressed me like people and things I had known. Indeed, I had a lurking feeling that I, too, could do it, after a while at least.[69]

It is ironic (and completely overlooked by critics) that David Levinsky does actually fulfil his intellectual promise and become a writer by narrating his life story. Although he regrets that he is childless and

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[65] I am greatly indebted to Jerome Buckley in my discussion of the Bildungsroman, especially his chapter "The Space Between" in ***Seasons of Youth***, pp. 1-27.
[66] Buckley, ***Seasons of Youth***, p. 13.
[67] Cahan, ***The Rise of David Levinsky***, p. 529.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., p. 165.

claims that his "past and present do not comport well", he manages to unite his past and present in the text, which he leaves behind as a token of immortality. Like Levinsky, Cahan fulfils his literary promise by finally writing ***The Rise of David Levinsky***, a project which was conceived as early as 1896 and begun in 1898 as ***The Chasm*** but not finished until 1917. However, the "tragedy" of David's success, his regret that he never became a writer, reflects Cahan's dissatisfaction that he never achieved the literary prominence which he had hoped for in the 1890s. Cahan was unable, like Dickens in ***David Copperfield***, to adapt a happy ending to his autobiographical novel since it didn't apply to his personal situation; the conclusion of ***David Copperfield***, which ends with Copperfield's marriage to Agnes and successful literary career, is inextricably connected to the fact that Dickens was the father of a large family and an established novelist by the time he wrote ***David Copperfield***, two achievements which Cahan could not fully claim for himself. In addition, although Cahan adapted conventions from the Victorian novel, such as descriptions of scenes of poverty or distress which he set against the background of New York rather than London, his inability to provide a happy ending to ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** is deeply rooted the Jewish literary tradition--and here I refer to biblical as well as Yiddish texts. For example, in Reuben Asher Braudes's Yiddish story "The Misfortune", the narrator remarks that "[Reb Nochumtzi] knew from the holy books that to be rich is a pure misfortune".[70] The narrator of "The Misfortune" believes that King Solomon, "was certainly a great sage" since he prayed to God "[g]ive me neither poverty nor *riches*!"[71] In addition, King Solomon:

> said that "riches are stored to the hurt of their owner," and in the holy Gemoreh there is a passage which says, "Poverty becomes a Jew as scarlet reins become a white horse."[72]

This passage from the Gemoreh was slightly altered by Anzia Yezierska for the title of her autobiography, ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse***. Thus, contrary to Louise Levitas Henriksen, Yezierska's daughter, who comments that "I've always assumed she was the ghetto sage who

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[70] Reuben Braudes, "The Misfortune", in ***Yiddish Tales***, ed. by Helena Frank (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1912), p. 16.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.

invented [the proverb] out of her personal necessity",[73] the danger of riches is an ageless biblical theme which was developed in the Gemoreh, became the ghetto proverb quoted in the title of Yezierska's autobiography, and was appropriated by Cahan for ***The Rise of David Levinsky***. Thus Levinsky's alienation and unhappiness due to his riches places the novel more in the Jewish literary tradition than previous critics have claimed: David Levinsky even compares himself to his biblical namesake when he pretends to be "David fighting Goliath" at the beginning of the novel.[74] The use of King David as a foil for David Levinsky was, as Fleishman comments, "usually in behalf of satiric reduction of the contemporary".[75] Like King David, who's sin or fall from grace lies in his seduction of Bathsheba after watching her bathe from the top of a roof--a scene which Roth adapts for the rooftop scene when the boys watch Genya bathing in ***Call It Sleep***--Levinsky's seduction of Dora is irrevocably connected to his business success and moral decline, which I shall discuss in the next chapter. David's unhappiness and "tragic" fate at the end of the novel is more in the tradition of Jude the Obscure and Maggie Tulliver than that of David Copperfield, and yet ***The Personal History of David Copperfield*** had more influence on Cahan's narrative technique than any of the Bildungs- and Künstlerromane mentioned above.

DICKENS'S *THE PERSONAL HISTORY OF DAVID COPPERFIELD*

In ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben***, Cahan relates that he "spent nights reading" through the "full set of Dickens' work" which he bought in 1883. Dickens's influence on Cahan is evident in short stories such as "A Providential Match", where the description of Rouvke Arbel's desire to marry is "borrowed" from the famous "Barkis is willing" scene in ***David Copperfield***, and in the "Imported Bridegroom" and "Circumstances", where Flora and Boris read respectively ***Little Dorrit*** and ***Dombey and Son***.[76] Of Dickens's novels, ***The Personal Life of David Copperfield*** appears to have influenced Cahan the most: both autobiographical novels have first-person narrators named David, relate personal histories full of trials and obstacles to success, and stress

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[73] Anzia Yezierska, ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse*** (London: Virago Press, 1987), p. 11.
[74] Cahan, ***The Rise of David Levinsky***, p. 5.
[75] Fleishman, ***Figures of Autobiography***, p. 90.
[76] Like Borris, David Levinsky also receives a copy of ***Dombey and Son*** from his English teacher, Bender, in ***The Rise of David Levinsky***.

the importance of home and marriage to the orphan; in addition, both Davids fall in love with a woman named Dora, and both narratives are disguised public confessions of the author. As Trevor Blount comments, the autobiographical content of ***David Copperfield*** is "unmistakeable, and there is the inevitable feeling that we are being privileged to come much closer in this work than elsewhere to Dickens the man: that in a way David ***is*** Dickens".[77] The same can be said of ***The Rise of David Levinsky***. Cahan created David Levinsky in order to reflect indirectly, through the figure of sweat-shop boss, on his own position as the "boss" of the ***Forward***, the largest foreign language newspaper in the United States. Through Levinsky, Cahan could exaggerate his bourgeois tendencies and express the conflicts which resulted from becoming a successful socialist literary figure who resided comfortably uptown on 59th Street when he wrote ***The Rise of David Levinsky***. The economic competition between the German and Russian Jews for control over the cloaks and suits industry documented in ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** was a perfect theme for Cahan since it was analogous to similar conflicts--in which Cahan was personally involved--between the German and Russian Jews for control of the Socialist Party and press at that time. In addition, Cahan was both interested and involved in the formation of the Cloak-makers' Union, of which Levinsky was briefly a member, and he claims to have made the first socialist speech in Yiddish at the first Cloak-maker's Union meeting in 1882.

THE RISE OF DAVID LEVINSKY: THE CREATIVE CRISIS

It is interesting that Cahan began to experience a creative block in the late 1890s, for he was unable to complete his intended autobiographical novel, ***The Chasm***. Sanders remarks that the title of Cahan's uncompleted novel:

> seems to have represented Cahan's psychological dilemma, just as its story focused upon that dichotomy in his life's experience: for it was to be an epic novel of Jewish emigration from Russia to America.[78]

To be more specific, it was intended as a fictionalized version of the "Memoirs of a Russian Emigré", and thus we can see that Cahan

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[77] Charles Dickens, ***The Personal History of David Copperfield*** (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), pp. 16-17.
[78] Sanders, ***The Downtown Jews***, p. 244.

already had the first-person narration in mind for *The Chasm* which he used in *The Rise of David Levinsky*. Cahan stated in an interview with Dexter Marshall in 1896, that his new novel would:

> deal with the young Russian Hebrews who, finding themselves shut out of the colleges and professional life in their own country, are coming to America in great numbers to study and practice professions. [...] They are lawyers, doctors of medicine, chemists, civil engineers, dentists--every profession in fact and they succeed here because they have a chance.[79]

It is significant that the first profession Cahan mentions is "lawyers", since it was during this period that he took up law for a second time. However, Cahan's intention in 1896 to write a novel about the success of "Russian Hebrews" (illustrating his support of the myth of success which he also propagated in his article "The Russian Jews in America"), had shifted by 1900 into a "history of the struggle for the abolition of the sweat-shop, the industrial struggle between Jewish labour and Jewish capital".[80] Hutchins Hapgood, a close friend and colleague of Cahan's at the *Commercial Advertiser*, reported in 1900 that Cahan's next novel (*The Chasm*) was nearly finished, and in it he intended to depict the "chasm between the East Side Talmudic Jews and their more prosperous German-American brethren".[81] However, for some unknown reason the novel was never published, and Cahan seems either to have reworked this material later into *The Rise of David Levinsky*, or to have abandoned it due to his shifting perspective concerning the initial theme of the success of the Russian Jew in America. Cahan's initial intention of writing a novel in the "rags to riches" vein was clearly disrupted in the late 1890s by Cahan's own financial and ideological crises, the loss of his job at the YMHA, and by his decision to leave the socialist *Forward* and later to join the capitalist *Commercial Advertiser* in 1897. The *Commercial Advertiser*, "one of the oldest papers in New York", not only appealed to a readership of old and wealthy New York families, but also it was sustained by financial support from the "multi-millionaire railway magnate, Collis P. Huntington"--and thus a rather unusual paper for a "socialist" like

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[79] Marshall, "The Life of A. Cahan, Novelist", in Kirk, "Abraham Cahan and William Dean Howells", p. 50.
[80] Hutchins Hapgood, "Chronicle and Comment: Cahan's *The Chasm*", *The Bookman* (1900), p. 429.
[81] Ibid.

Cahan to be associated with.[82] It is interesting to note that the "new head of the cloak-and-suit department in the Great Bazar"[83] to whom David Levinsky makes his most crucial sale and breakthrough to manufacturing success is also named Huntington. Between 1897 and 1902, when Cahan wrote for the *Commercial Advertiser*, he began to reevaluate his socialist views and position concerning the Russian Revolutionary movement and pogroms of 1881-2, which later resulted in his novel *The White Terror and the Red.* Cahan's most blatant feeling of guilt was rooted in his regret at not having participated in the Russian revolutionary movement, a feeling he tried to work out in *The White Terror and the Red.* Twelve years later, in *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Cahan portrayed the failure to remain true to both his political ideals and to his aspiration for an education in the United States through the image of Levinsky's fickleness--his inability to maintain any one dominant religious belief or ideal. Pavel Boulatoff and David Levinsky, the protagonists respectively of *The White Terror and the Red* and *The Rise of David Levinsky*, represent the two extreme poles of Cahan's identity: Pavel symbolizes the heroic revolutionary that Cahan did not have enough courage to become, and David is the figurative representation of the rich, powerful and bourgeois boss which Cahan feared he had become by 1917. Thus, despite the fact that *The Rise of David Levinsky* was published twelve years after *The White Terror and the Red*, which suggests truncation and discontinuity in Cahan's literary career, he was intensely involved in both novels with the two extreme sides of his personality.

THE NOVEL AS ALTERNATIVE

Cahan's polarity between 1905 and 1917 is clearly manifested by the birth dates and development of the main protagonists of his two novels, *The White Terror and the Red* and *The Rise of David Levinsky.* Abraham Cahan was born in 1860, the year before the emancipation of the serfs. In *Bleter Fun Mein Leben*, Cahan relates that one of his first memories of a visit to Vilna when he was three was of the gallows in the field where the Polish landowners "had been executed as rebels"

[82] Rischin, "Abraham Cahan and the New York *Commercial Advertiser*", p. 12.
[83] Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, p. 331.

in the year of the national uprisings.[84] As I will discuss in Chapter Three, one of Cahan's primary intentions as an autobiographer is to document his development as a successful revolutionary and socialist, which he does not completely succeed in doing. For this reason it is interesting to note the years in which the main protagonists of Cahan's two novels were born. Pavel Boulatoff, the Prince turned revolutionary terrorist in ***The White Terror and the Red***, was born in 1856, and David Levinsky, the Talmud scholar turned businessman, in 1864. The eight years difference between Pavel and David's births, and four years between Cahan's birth and his heroes' is crucial to note since it places the birth of the autobiographer and author right between the two extremes of successful revolutionary hero--a highly romantic projection of self--and the lonely but financially successful businessman--a slightly invented but highly realistic aspect of Cahan's self. When one considers the historical events between Cahan's birth in 1860 and emigration to America in 1882, such as the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, the Polish uprisings in 1863, and growth of the revolutionary underground in the 1870s, he seems to be implying in his two novels that had he been born four years earlier he might have taken a more active part in the revolution, like Pavel, or had he been born four years later, he might have turned into a sweat-shop boss rather than newspaper boss. It is interesting that Cahan's revolutionary, Pavel, turns twenty-five and marries in the year of the Tzar's assassination, for it is the same age that Cahan marries: this is significant since Cahan's ideal marriage was that between two revolutionaries, which is depicted by Pavel and Clara's marriage in ***The White Terror and the Red***. Their marriage occurs, on one hand, at the moment of the terrorist's greatest success, and on the other hand, in the same year as the pogroms that followed the assassination and marked the end of the first phase of the revolutionary movement. It becomes clear at the end of the novel that Cahan was ideologically divided by the pogroms, which, rather than the Tzar's assassination, becomes the major concern and concluding crisis of ***The White Terror and the Red***.

Cahan's division between his revolutionary and Jewish identities is evident in ***The White Terror and the Red*** by the two contrasting

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[84] Abraham Cahan, ***The Education of Abraham Cahan*** [***Bleter Fun Mein Leben***], trans. by Leon Stein, Abraham Conan, and Lynn Davidson (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), Volume I, p. 4.

revolutionary figures, Pavel the Russian Prince and Parmet the Jew, who, like Cahan, abandons the revolution in Russia to form a socialist community in America.[85] Cahan was motivated to write about the pogroms of 1881-82 primarily by the Kishniev massacre of 1903, which forced him once again to reevaluate his connection to the revolutionary movement in the light of Russian anti-Semitism. However, the event which ***The White Terror and the Red*** builds up to is not only the pogroms but also the critical moment in which his characters have to decide whether, like Parmet, to leave Russia, or like Pavel, to stay there to fight for the revolution and to become a martyr if necessary. Hence the pogroms of 1881-82 could be said to be the most important event in Cahan's life, and coincidentally these pogroms join the end of ***The White Terror and the Red*** historically to the beginning of ***The Rise of David Levinsky***. For this reason, ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** can be read as the sequel to ***The White Terror and the Red*** which Cahan intended but never completed.[86]

THE POGROMS IN *THE RISE OF DAVID LEVINSKY*

The event that initiates David's flight to America in ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** is the murder of his mother, which occurs shortly after "the epidemic of anti-Jewish atrocities of 1881 and 1882",[87] and is therefore an indirect result and symbolic representation of the pogroms. Thus Cahan connects the violent murder which broke David's interest in the Talmud and Judaism to the very same pogroms which forced Parmet to America. That Pavel was not Jewish partly explains his reason for being able to stay in Russia, and it is Parmet's Jewish identity which seems to have been responsible for his flight to the United States. Like Parmet, David's religious conflict at the beginning of his autobiography is directly related to the pogroms. Similar to many characters in Cahan's short stories, Parmet competes with Pavel

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[85] It is interesting that Pavel and Parmet both resemble Cahan's self-portrayal as a revolutionary in his autobiography; for example, Parmet uses a trunk to screen "his face from view" (Chapter XIII), and "the hair at his temples till he looked as he used to" (p. 237) when he was a Talmud scholar, both disguises which Cahan used to avoid detection by the police in the scene of his escape from Russia described in ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben***.

[86] For proof of Cahan's intention to write this sequel to ***The White Terror and the Red*** see Hutchins Hapgood's review in "Fact and Fiction", p. 561. Hapgood remarks that sequel was intended to be about the immigrant to the US and his lost idealism.

[87] Cahan, ***The Rise of David Levinsky***, p. 52.

for the love of the same woman, but loses her and abandons his homeland. Thus, ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** is also connected thematically to ***The White Terror and the Red*** by this idea of fleeing from home. In addition, David's inability to achieve his highly desired education at City College can be read as a failure to remain true to his ideals, which Cahan certainly felt guilty for and which he illustrated by Parmet's decision to abandon the Russian revolutionary movement. Cahan's own interest in the Russian underground increased significantly upon his arrival in New York and his numerous articles and novel allowed him to take a more active role, thus alleviating his guilt. But underneath, Cahan seems to have felt both like Parmet and especially Pavel, who before his transformation into the revolutionary identity of Nikolai, chastises himself for being a mere "phrasemonger" rather than a "real man", i.e. an active revolutionary.[88]

The reason that ***The White Terror and the Red*** fails as a novel is that, although Cahan was very knowledgeable concerning the historical details of the underground movement in Russia, the revolutionary activity which he attempted to depict realistically was completely outside of his own personal experience: it was something which he had to idealize in romantic terms, as illustrated by Pavel and Clara's marriage; and it was something he had read about but never really participated in as Pavel does when he carries explosives to the Terrorists for the assassination attempt on the Tsar. ***The Rise of David Levinsky***, however, succeeds for the very same reason that ***The White Terror and the Red*** fails. Cahan not only participated directly in the transformation of the cloak-and-suit trade, lived in the Lower East Side Jewish ghetto, and experienced immigration first hand, but also he became a successful but melancholic and self-critical boss like Levinsky. Thus the portrait of David Levinsky--even if somewhat exaggerated or disguised--is an accurate portrayal of Cahan's internal conflicts. David Levinsky, the religious scholar and intellectual turned businessman, is a totally new kind of protagonist in the American novel; like Cahan, he is primarily a Jewish intellectual whose "success" in America is a undermined by the fact that he fails to get an education, or in other words to reap the promise of America in the terms which he conceives it before his arrival in the United States. Levinsky is a much more complex character than any of Cahan's

[88] Abraham Cahan, ***The White Terror and the Red*** (New York: Arno Press, 1975), p. 44-45.

previous characters; in fact, he is an anomaly, for the Russian "intellectual" turned sweat-shop boss was a rarity in the ghetto. That doesn't mean that Levinsky is unconvincing or unrealistic. On the contrary his psychological complexity renders a highly convincing and realistic self-portrait; the reason for his psychological complexity stems from the complexity of "Cahan's own rich, full life in America", which, as Bonnie Lyons comments, "is in fact almost a paradigm of the American immigrant dream".[89] In the end, Cahan's choice of the Talmudic scholar as businessman had its source in his own personal division and emotional crises: his socialist ideology and desire for literary fame and financial success were always in conflict with each other.

[89] Bonnie Lyons, "David Levinsky: Modern Man as Spiritual Orphan", *Tulane Studies in English*, 23 (1978), p. 89.

CHAPTER TWO

ABRAHAM CAHAN'S *THE RISE OF DAVID LEVINSKY.*

INTRODUCTION

Abraham Cahan's autobiographical novel, ***The Rise of David Levinsky***, has been praised as a "great immigrant novel" and interpreted as a "novel of the Diaspora Jew", as an "exemplary business novel", or as Bonnie Lyons put it, a novel of "modern man as spiritual "orphan" in search of his parents, of legitimate authority".[1] However, few critics have recognized the novel's literary qualities such as its complex characterization, the beauty of its structure, and most of all Cahan's unprecedented psychological realism. Cahan's use of the first-person narrative for his autobiographical novel was an innovative advance for the American novel and helped to give birth to the psychological realism of writers like Anzia Yezierska and Henry Roth. Not only did Cahan take William Dean Howells's desire to fuse autobiography and fiction a step further than his mentor, but also he combined the business and romance plots in ***The Rise of David Levinsky***, which rendered his portrayal of the businessman's psyche more complex than Howells's and made the novel more unified than ***The Rise of Silas Lapham***. As I mentioned briefly in the introduction to Chapter One, the purpose of this chapter is to provide a formal analysis of the novel, to reevaluate ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** on aesthetic terms, and to correct some critical misinterpretations of the novel.

THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN CAHAN AND LEVINSKY

In his article "The Lonely New Americans of Abraham Cahan", Sanford Marovitz remarks that:

> [a]lthough autobiographical elements are pervasive in the novel, Levinsky and his creator are thoroughly different individuals, for the two men diverged in thought with their arrivals [sic] in America.[2]

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[1] Bonnie Lyons, "David Levinsky: Modern Man as Spiritual Orphan", ***Tulane Studies in English***, 23 (1978), p. 85.
[2] Sanford Marovitz, "The Lonely New Americans of Abraham Cahan", ***American Quarterly***, 20 (1968), p. 204.

This is simply not true: Levinsky and Cahan are neither "thoroughly different individuals" (with emphasis on the word "thoroughly"), nor do they completely "diverge in thought" upon their arrival in America.[3] Although I would hesitate to say that Cahan and Levinsky are the same character, they did share similar conflicts as successful American immigrants, and the psychological realism of the story is a direct result of Cahan's translation of his own personal experiences and conflicts into fiction.

Cahan and Levinsky differ more before their arrival in America than after. For example, Levinsky's father was the "watchman of an orchard" who died when David was three, and Cahan's father was a *melamed* and died when Abraham was an adult; Levinsky studied the Talmud until he was twenty but Cahan stopped at an early age; finally, Levinsky's mother refused to let him become an apprentice in Antomir since she wanted him to become a learned Jew, whereas Cahan was forced to become a carpenter's apprentice, which, similar to Dickens's experiences at the blacking factory, traumatized him. These differences are crucial since they illustrate those events in Cahan's childhood which influenced him the most: his father's role in the community both as a *melamed* and son of a famous rabbi, Cahan's departure from his religious studies at an early age, and his apprenticeship as a carpenter which, unlike Dickens in ***David Copperfield***, he suppresses in ***The Rise of David Levinsky***. However, despite these differences, it is interesting to note how similar Levinsky and Cahan's autobiographical narratives become upon their arrival in America. Not only do real figures and events in Cahan's life (some prior to his arrival in America) appear in Levinsky's fictional narrative, but also the similarities between Cahan and Levinsky are manifold and need to be enumerated: both are great "dreamer[s] of day dreams",[4] have young neighbours named Red Esther and Black Esther, love to watch the Russian soldiers, and

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[3] In her article, "David Levinsky: Modern Man as Spiritual Orphan", Bonnie Lyons go so far as to say that Levinsky is a spiritual prototype of the immigrants' descendants, even though his conflicts are clearly those of a first-generation immigrant, and that he shows a "lack of any values" (p. 92). However, it is precisely the fact that Levinsky values education, Judaism, his mother's passionate devotion, and the idea of family life that he writes his autobiography.

[4] Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1969), p. 5.

move from small towns to Vilna, where they pursue their religious studies; David's arrival in Hoboken and description of the cat on the pier is exactly the same as Cahan's description of his arrival in America in "Going to America" (1899) and *Bleter Fun Mein Leben*; both men are "essentially intellectuals", and David claims to have a "passion for newspaper editorials" and "national politics" which hints at Cahan's role as editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*;[5] Levinsky abandons his dreams for an education and Cahan his law studies in the United States, and neither one of them argues for a return to Old World values; both regret their failure to obtain a formal education in America and become successful bosses; both fail to have children, identify strongly with the Lower East Side Jewish community, envy the social standing of the German Jews in New York, and are proud of the successes of the Russian Jews; they are both attracted by Spencer's thought, become members of the Cloak-maker's Union, and like Cahan, Levinsky does express an interest in socialism even though he often contradicts himself on this point; both write melancholic autobiographical narratives, take pride in their misery, and confess feelings of guilt about their departures from home; finally, both Levinsky and Cahan end up as successful public figures who lead frustrated private lives. Thus the novel presents Cahan's polarized self--which David refers to both as his inner and outer, past and present identities--much more than previous scholars like Marovitz have asserted, and it is less a critique of the late nineteenth century businessman than a form of personal confession.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL AND DAVID'S FEELING OF DUALITY

No previous critic, to my knowledge, has commented on the symbolic as well as thematic importance of the structure of *The Rise of David Levinsky*, which corresponds to Levinsky's feeling of duality. He describes this duality at the end of his narrative with the phrase that his "past and present do not comport well", and adds that he "seems to have more in common with [his] inner identity" as a Talmud scholar than as "David Levinsky, the well-known cloak-manufacturer".[6] The phrase "inner identity" refers to Levinsky's "childhood days", and it is that youth which he attempts

[5] Ibid., p. 329.
[6] Ibid., p. 530.

to relive and recreate through his narrative. As Isaac Rosenfeld remarks:

> The story is a simple one and fundamentally Jewish in conception, as it consists of an extended commentary on a single text, somewhat in the manner of the Talmud.[7]

David's life becomes this "single text" which is full of "extended commentary" and pervaded with Talmudic dualities. His description of his feeling of duality while reading the Talmud suggests an interesting parallel between the religious ritual of reading the sacred text and the artistic ritual of creating a contemporary, almost equally sacred autobiographical one.

> It is with a peculiar sense of duality one reads this ancient work. While your mind is absorbed in the meaning of the words you utter, the melody in which you utter them tells your heart a tale of its own. You live in two distinct worlds at once.[8]

This idea of living "in two distinct worlds at once" while reading the Talmud corresponds to Levinsky's division as an autobiographer, a division between the meaning of the "words" he writes in the narrative and the feelings connected to the events of the past--the underlying "melody" or tone of the text. His confessional autobiographical narrative is a kind of substitute for the Talmud, and likewise the act of writing his life story becomes a replacement for his former occupation reading, reciting, and interpreting the holy text. Levinsky's attempt to unify his life through autobiographical narrative, or in other words to bridge the gap between his past and present in order to give it meaning, is an important metaphor for the life of the immigrant, who, in Yezierska's words, is caught "between worlds".[9] David alternates between his two identities as Talmud scholar and American businessman, which illustrates his division between the past and present, the Old World and New, and the American myths of success and assimilation and Jewish myths of failure and exile. Thus, this theme of duality is so important to him and so appropriate for his narrative since it

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[7] Isaac Rosenfeld, "America, Land of the Sad Millionaire", *Commentary*, 14 (1952), p. 131.
[8] Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, p. 35.
[9] Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers* (London: The Women's Press, 1984), p. 154.

represents both the duality of his life as an immigrant in America and the dual structure of his text about that life.

The fourteen books of *The Rise of David Levinsky* are arranged thematically in seven diametric pairs--i.e. piety and sin, home and exile--in order to highlight the novel's structural duality. The first book, "Home and School", portrays the division between the maternal and paternal worlds, introducing the theme of duality that is extended throughout the following thirteen books. Cahan juxtaposes the devout nature of home and school in Book One and the intrusion of sin in Book Two; the loss of his mother in Book Three and his discovery of a substitute mother and temporary home in Book Four; his "greenhorn" experiences in America in Book Five and his first steps towards assimilation in Book Six; the erection of a new temple in Book Seven and the destruction of that temple in Book Eight; his discovery of a new home in America in Book Nine and the loss of that home for a career on the road in Book Ten; and finally his last attempt to establish a family and home with the Tevkins in Book Eleven and his ultimate failure and feeling of alienation and unfulfilment in Book Twelve. The two middle chapters, Book VII--My Temple, and Book VIII--The Destruction of My Temple, divide David's Old World values, such as his religious belief and desire for an education, from his New World occupations, such as his sexual adventures and business success.[10] The following two chapters, "Dora" and "On The Road", repeat the motifs of the loss of his mother/lover figure and exile from home; in addition these two chapters help to develop the connection between David's sexual drive and romantic unfulfillment, in the "Dora" chapter, and his quest for money and power, illustrated by his episode with Huntington in "On the Road". The first paragraph of the first book, in which David reflects on his "metamorphosis" and "inner" identity, and the last paragraph of the last book, which returns the reader to his reflection on the past in the first page of the narrative, illustrates the circular form of the narration which Steven Kellman notes is a common attribute of the "self-begetting novel".[11] Kellman defines the self-begetting novel as the "kind of novel whose very form

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[10] Although David has erotic encounters prior to Book VII, his first real sexual contact with a woman other than a prostitute occurs in the "Dora" chapter, when he seduces Dora Margolis.
[11] A "sub-genre" of the Künstlerroman.

demonstrates [a] radical longing to overcome a generation gap by merging parent and child into one enduring unit"; it is a novel which "begets both a self and itself", and thus it is often a "portrait of a fictive artist being born"--a point discussed briefly in the last chapter.[12] According to Kellman, the "self-begetting hero" is usually a bastard or an orphan, must create his identity "all alone", and occupies the "center stage" of his narrative, all of which apply to David Levinsky. In addition, Kellman adds that:

> [s]ex preoccupies the self-begetting novel's lonely and aging hero, who somehow succeeds in giving birth to twins--self and novel. The protagonist is typically solitary and single, yet his efforts are depicted as terminating in personal rebirth. And he conceives his projected novel through the explicit trope of gestation.[13]

Levinsky's preoccupation with sex and use of the metaphor of gestation in ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** (for example, David refers to his arrival in America as a "second birth")[14] is connected to an urge towards immortality which had to be achieved by both Levinsky and Cahan through literature since neither one had children. Thus Cahan's literary monument, ***The Rise of David Levinsky***, conforms to Kellman's definition of the "self-begetting novel", and it could easily have been considered in his study along with his other so-called "self-begetting" texts such as Marcel Proust's ***A la recherche du temps perdu*** (1913-27), James Joyce's ***A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*** (1916), Aldous Huxley's ***Point Counter Point*** (1928), and Henry Miller's ***Tropic of Cancer*** (1934).

Like George Eliot, who created the symbol of authorial consciousness in the river which flows through, absorbs, and embraces all in ***The Mill on the Floss***, Cahan created the symbol of authorial consciousness in the "metamorphosis" of a Talmudic scholar into a businessman who takes part in the transformation of the women's clothing industry. Cahan chose David's profession as a cloak manufacturer since the main characteristic of the industry was its "fickleness", as David puts it, or in other words the need to

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[12] Steven Kellman, ***The Self-Begetting Novel*** (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 7.
[13] Ibid., p. 8.
[14] Cahan, ***The Rise of David Levinsky***, p. 86.

adapt constantly to the external demands of the market.[15] Thus by using these figures of "metamorphosis" and "fickleness" to depict the rapid transformation respectively of an industry and individual, Cahan was able to fuse the idea of immigration and assimilation with the change and growth of industrial, urban America. It is not surprising that Cahan chose the autobiographical form for his novel about immigration, since the attempt to discover some sort of continuity between the past and present is a central concern for both the immigrant and autobiographer, and one which manifests itself in the highly autobiographical content and narrative approach of the three writers in this thesis: all of whom emigrated to the United States, grew up or settled in the Lower East Side, wrote primarily in English about their experiences in the New World, and experimented extensively with the autobiographical genre.

DAVID'S MOTHER AND CAHAN'S

Aside from David, Mrs Levinsky is the most important figure in the novel and therefore their relationship needs to be discussed in considerable detail. Although I don't want to belabour the fact that their relationship is an oedipal one, a theme which Roth reworked in *Call It Sleep*, I think that it is important to highlight Cahan's general treatment of sexual relations in *The Rise of David Levinsky* both as a literary achievement and breakthrough for the American novel. David's narrative honesty, or in other words his explicit treatment of adolescent desire, sexual development, prostitution, and seduction was highly innovative for the traditionally puritanical American literary scene. It should be noted that Cahan published the original draft of *The Rise of David Levinsky* in a series of four magazine articles in 1913, the very same year that D.H. Lawrence published *Sons and Lovers*. Therefore, it wasn't only in America but also in Europe that such an open treatment of sexuality and the oedipal theme was of an innovative and pioneer nature.

As I'll discuss in more depth in the next chapter, Cahan felt extremely guilty not only for having left his family, but also for failing to write to his parents for the first eleven years that he was in America. In *Bleter Fun Mein Leben*, he expresses his feelings of

[15] Abraham Cahan, "The Autobiography of an American Jew: The Rise of David Levinsky", *McClure's Magazine*, 43 (1913), p. 125.

guilt for abandoning his parents specifically in terms of his relationship to his mother.

> With painful irony I thought that I was so engrossed in my sympathy with all humanity, that I acted like a murderer towards my own mother.[16]

Although Cahan clearly exaggerates his guilt here, his description of himself as a "murderer" is very revealing with regards to ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** for two reasons. First, this feeling of having indirectly caused his mother's death--which accounts for the use of the term "murderer"--is directly connected to his portrayal of the murder of Mrs Levinsky in ***The Rise of David Levinsky***. It is important to remember that David was indirectly responsible for her death since she was murdered by the Gentiles in the Sands district while attempting to seek justice for David's beating by the Sands boys. Secondly, Levinsky remarks later on in the narrative that Mrs Levinsky, the woman he boarded with in America (and clearly a mother figure due to her name), was so "intolerable to [him]" that he "could have murdered her".[17] The repeated use of the murder motif clearly illustrates the duality of Levinsky's feelings towards his mother: on one hand reminiscing with love and sorrow for his murdered mother in the Old World, and on the other, full of irrational hatred and animosity towards her foil in the New World. Thus David's love/hate relationships with the other women in the text, which represents another aspect of duality, has its source in his suppressed love/hate relationship with his mother

Levinsky's principal conflict is rooted in his relationship with his mother, which pervades all aspects of his life--religious, educational, financial, emotional, and sexual. The depth of his emotional attachment to his mother and childhood is evident when he admits that he loves:

> to brood over [his] youth. The dearest days in one's life are those that seem very far and near at once. My wretched boyhood appeals to me as a sick child does to its mother.[18]

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[16] Abrahm Cahan, ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben***, Volume III, quoted in Theodore Pollock, ***The Solitary Clarinetist*** (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1974), p. 151.
[17] Cahan, ***The Rise of David Levinsky***, p. 111.
[18] Ibid., p. 3-4.

The metaphor of the "sick child" which David uses to describe his "boyhood" suggests the unhealthy nature of his attachment to his mother. David not only broods in the sense of meditating over his childhood, but also in the sense of giving birth to, or hatching, his memories--thus becoming a kind of mother substitute in one of the first examples of this trope of gestation. Although both parents are dead when David writes his autobiography, his memory and love of his mother has a divine or religious quality that seems to have replaced his faith in God.

> These words of hers [of endearment] and the sonorous contralto in which they were uttered are ever alive in my heart, like the Flame Everlasting in a synagogue.[19]

"Holiness", in David's personal religious symbolism, was "something burning, forbidding, something connected with fire", and thus her words, which he compares to the "Flame Everlasting", take on a divine dimension.[20] Not only is his memory of her sacred, but in addition his text is a means of preserving her memory and immortalizing her words. It is specifically the memory of his mother's "passionate devotion" which connects David to Judaism after her death, since he enters a synagogue *only* on the anniversary of her death in order to "place a huge candle for her soul, attend all three services, without omitting a line, and recite the prayer for the dead with sobs in my heart".[21] Although David abandons Judaism for atheism, he neither forgets nor profanes his memories of his mother, and he remains faithful to her in an oedipal sense by never marrying: to a large extent his marriage to another woman is hindered by his quasi-religious (but also part oedipal) attachment to his mother. However, one should also point out that Mrs Levinsky's piety and martyrdom--both of which initiate David's feelings of guilt--are partly responsible for his desire to escape from Vilna and Judaism. In other words, her death followed by his emigration to America is a kind of release from the emotional demands of the family and religious demands of community--especially its strict emphasis on piety and sin.

Mrs Levinsky, whom David refers to as either "mother" or "mamma" (and we never learn her first name), becomes a larger-

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[19] Ibid., p. 4.
[20] Ibid., p. 5.
[21] Ibid., p. 239.

than-life figure, a kind of universal Jewish mother--now considered a cliché--which reappears in both Yezierska and Roth's fiction. She is "passionately devout", defends David both inside and outside the Jewish community regardless of the dangers involved, admonishes Jewish women for flirting, never remarries after her husband's death, never beats her son unlike other Jewish mothers in Antomir, envies women with prayer-books, and even gives alms to those who are "far better off than she".[22] She is willing to sacrifice anything, including her life, for David, and it is this sense of domestic faith and self-sacrifice which influences his development the most. As Hannah Arendt remarks concerning this period of immigration, "[t]he Jewish family, at any rate, proved to be a more conserving force than Jewish religion".[23] This applies to David since it is the death of his mother--his only surviving parent--which results in his loss of faith and interest in the Talmud. The remainder of his narrative can be seen as an unsuccessful search for a substitute faith, since his various new "religions", as he calls them, such as a secular education, devotion to Dora, belief in Spencer's thought, love of Anna Tevkin, and religion of family life all fail him. Home is his real temple, and once he loses his mother he loses his home and religion forever. David attempts from that moment on to find a new home, with Rabbi Sender and his wife, Mrs Dienstog, Mrs Levinsky, the Margolises, and the Tevkins, but, like his search for new religions, each substitute family fails to be a permanent solution. His search for a home ends only in the revelation that he has been uprooted forever, which is clear when he writes:

> While on the road I would feel homesick for New York, and at the same time I would feel that I had no home anywhere, that my mother was dead and I was all alone in the world.[24]

Here his "homesickness" and loneliness are undeniably connected to the loss of his mother. However, "homesickness" now becomes a kind of general yearning for the past which can never be fulfilled; he adds that he "was forever homesick, not for Antomir--for my native town had become a mere poem--but for a home".[25] Thus

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[22] Ibid., pp. 11-12.
[23] Hannah Arendt, "The Jews and Society", in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: André Deutsch, 1980), p. 64, footnote.
[24] Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, p. 325.
[25] Ibid.

Cahan took the Jewish myth of exile and applied it to the situation of the immigrant in the figure of "homesickness", which pervades both Levinsky's narrative (and Cahan's autobiography) as the constant, unfulfilled yearning for the unrecoverable past.

PIETY AND SIN

I have mentioned that Mrs Levinsky is a kind of saint figure and martyr, whose loving kindness and religious piety lives in David's memory way beyond her death. However, despite his mother's piety, her poverty forces David into a premature confrontation with sex, which is irrevocably attached to the question of sin. David's unhealthy intimacy with his mother is a direct result of their poverty since they are not only forced to share their basement room with three other families, but also to sleep in the same bed as a result of their lack of space. David remarks that his roommates include a bookbinder who is crazy for his "second wife", which has the "inevitable" result "that the secrets of sex should be revealed to me before I was able fully to appreciate their meaning".[26] In his description of Red Esther, the bookbinder's daughter, David underlines the involuntary nature of his first personal contact with sex and sin. He hates Red Esther like "poison" since she not only humiliates him by mocking his way of speaking but also because she would:

> press her freckled cheek against my lips and then dodge back, shouting, gloatingly:
> "He has kissed a girl! He has kissed a girl! Sinner! Shame! Sinner! Sinner!"
> There were some other things that she or some of the other little girls of our courtyard would do to make an involuntary "sinner" out of me, but these had better be left out.[27]

David's relationship with Red Esther is repeated almost identically later in the narrative by his relationship with Matilda, who also mocks him and gloats over his fall when she gets him to kiss her; it is important to stress the fact that although David is the one who is led to sin by Red Esther and Matilda in the Old World, he reverses this role in America by trying to seduce Mrs Dienstog, Mrs Levinsky, and Dora Margolis in order to lead them to sin. David's

[26] Ibid., p. 13.
[27] Ibid., p. 9.

attitude towards women is full of contradictions. For example, he finds Red Esther initially repulsive and avoids her, but later fantasizes about her and desires to have sex with her--part of the love/hate dichotomy discussed above. His problematic relations with the opposite sex seems to be the result, paradoxically, of a quest for a woman as saintly and pious as his mother combined with a desire to revenge himself on women by forcing them to sin, as he was by Red Esther and Matilda.

Cahan demonstrates the economy of his writing in these early chapters when he deals with the polarity between piety and sin in the Jewish community. For example, after describing Mrs Levinsky's piety, he manages in two pages to represent the principal examples of piety and sin in Antomir: the description of prostitution on "That Street", defined simply as a place which it was "sin to go near", is followed by another illustration of his mother's "unusual tolerance" and role as "father confessor to one of the prostitutes"; likewise, David's secret trips to "That Street" in order to see "half naked women" is followed by a wedding scene which he observes and describes as "something inexpressibly beautiful and sacred".[28] However, the sacredness of this ceremony is desecrated by Napthali, an older boy whose "devilry" or sexual jest about the wedding couple is a "startling revelation" which unveils the mystery of sex.[29] Thus Cahan's emphasis on sex begins to develop into a much wider, more general theme of the moral opposition of sin and piety. David's sexual curiosity is connected to the growth of his intellectual curiosity and search for knowledge, a clear reference to the myth of the fall of man for tasting the forbidden fruit from "the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil".[30] He relishes the "devilry" of Napthali's sexual jest since it clarifies or illuminates something which had mystified and confused him; later it is Napthali's secular knowledge, in the form of religious scepticism, which helps to puncture both his unsubstantiated belief in God and the "spell" of the Talmud, a point which I'll discuss at more length in relation to the influence of the Haskalah movement on Eastern European Judaism.

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[28] Ibid., p. 14.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Robert Graves, ***Hebrew Myths*** (London: Arrow Books, 1989), p. 81.

PARADISE LOST: NO PAPA AND NO MONEY

Like Silas Lapham, David is a marginal character, but unlike Silas, he feels excluded from his own community. He comes from the "poorest family" in Antomir, and attributes this poverty and feeling of social alienation to the absence of his father, which he refers to as a "great blank in our family nest, that it was a widow's nest; and the feeling of it seemed to color all my other feelings".[31] David "keenly misses" his father, and his feelings of envy and self-pity pervade the entire narrative. For example, he remarks that "I was ever awake to the fact that other little boys had fathers and that I was a melancholic exception", and wonders if other people are sorry for him "[b]ecause I have no papa and we have no money".[32] David's memory of his father, who was a watchman "of an orchard", is limited to two events: when his father handed him "a huge yellow apple" at the gate of the orchard, and of his father's body "under a white shroud on the floor".[33] The references to the gift of the apple and death of his father coincides with the myth of expulsion from the Edenic orchard which his father--simultaneously a figure of God and temptation--watched over, thus suggesting a sense of paradise lost. Thus it is clear that David's feelings of emotional and financial deprivation, or in other words his poverty and sole dependence on his mother, are a direct result of the absence of his father. Similar to David Copperfield, Levinsky's loss of his father intimates that the end of childhood occurs at an early age in the East European shtetl. In fact, the end of childhood is described in mythical terms as a premature expulsion from Eden.

If home represents the maternal element of the Jewish community and David's sexual development, then school is the location of his paternal influence and intellectual development. Reb Shmerl, David's excessively violent *cheder* teacher, and Reb Sender, the passionately devout *melamed* in Vilna, are clearly created by Cahan as means of distancing himself from his troubled relationship with his father: Cahan's father was a devout *melamed*, like Sender, and his uncle was his first *cheder* teacher, similar to Shmerl.[34] Levinsky's experiences

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[31] Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, p. 5.
[32] Ibid., p. 4, 6.
[33] Ibid., p. 4.
[34] Similar to Dickens who distanced himself his father by making David into an orphan and creating Mr Micawber and Mr Dick in *David Copperfield*.

at Reb Shmerl's *cheder* are extremely painful, especially his feeling of exclusion from classes where the boys were taught to write since his mother couldn't afford these extra lessons.

> The feeling of envy, abasement, and self-pity with which I used to watch the other boys ply their quills is among the most painful memories of my childhood.[35]

This confession is important since it reveals one of the motivating factors behind Levinsky's and (if the novel is read as a form of disguised confession) Cahan's desire to become a writer: his envy of the others boys' privileges, social standing, and especially their exclusive right to knowledge. David has to learn how to write on his own, and when he is caught surreptitiously practicing at school he is scolded as an "ink-thief" and forbidden to "come to school before the beginning of exercises".[36] Thus once again the search for knowledge is associated with sin and hindered by his poverty. He adds that "very often [he] was the scapegoat for the sins of other boys" at school since the "schoolmaster could not afford to inflict [punishment on a pupil who deserved] it because the culprit happened to be the pet of a well-to-do family".[37] This treatment is epitomized by Reb Shmerl, who:

> seemed to prefer the flesh of plump, well-fed boys, but as these were usually the sons of prosperous parents, he often had to forego the pleasure and to gratify his appetite on me. There was something morbid in his cruel passion for young flesh something perversely related to sex, perhaps.[38]

The fact that David is a scapegoat leads him to question the unjust attribution of punishment (and its perverse sexual nature) in the *cheder* since it is merely a result of his poverty rather than his performance. Thus David needs to break away both from this poverty and the irrational behaviour of the religious community to a more just community and rational form of knowledge, represented later by his desire to flee to America in order to get an education there. However, money, rather than the study of the Talmud, confers power and prestige in the New World, and thus it is predictable that David's means of "avenging" himself on Shmerl by

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[35] Ibid., p. 17.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., p. 18.

becoming "omnipotent and formidable" would naturally require his financial rather than intellectual success.

It is interesting that David's response to his punishment and abuse in Shmerl's *cheder* is to develop both "a singular faculty for bearing pain" and a "relish for flaunting my martyrdom, for being an object of pity".[39] This is the key to his personality, if not to his entire narrative since, on one hand, he emulates his mother's own martyrdom, and on the other hand, he appeals constantly to the reader to pity him. David has a strong masochistic streak which is connected to his attraction to the role of the outsider. In fact, his "romantic" attraction to Sarah-Leah, Shmerl's daughter, results from his identification with her as "the outcast of [her] family just as I was the outcast of her father's school", and his unsuccessful romance with Sarah-Leah results in further feelings of alienation and jealousy.[40] David strives for a position of singularity or difference from the community throughout his life and narrative, be it as the poorest student from the poorest family in the Old World, or as the alienated lover and successful businessman in America. It is not surprising when he tells us later that "[t]he more I achieved, the more painful was my self-pity", because achievement only accentuates his self-pity as an outsider, thus increasing the pleasure of his pain.[41] The role of the rich and successful businessman appeals to him for two reasons: he satisfies his masochistic streak and self-pity by alienating himself from the generally poor Jewish Lower East Side community, and it is a means of revenge on the same community for his humiliating poverty and role as scapegoat in the religious school. This desire for revenge is illustrated by his reaction to Reb Shmerl:

> In my helplessness I would seek comfort in dreams of becoming a great man some day, rich and mighty, and avenging myself on him. Behold! Shmerl the Pincher is running after me, cringingly begging my pardon, and I, omnipotent and formidable, say to him: "Do you remember how you pinched the life out of me for nothing? Away with you, you cruel beast!"[42]

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[39] Ibid., p. 18-19.
[40] Ibid., p. 21.
[41] Ibid., p. 377.
[42] Ibid., p. 19.

The most important decisions of Levinsky's life, such as to emigrate to America and to go into business, are portrayed by David a means of revenging himself respectively on the Jewish community and his aristocratic boss in New York, Jeff Manheimer. And this desire for revenge and "omnipotence" is clearly tied to a quest for social promotion through money rather than education. Ironically, although David ultimately achieves this goal of success by becoming a rich man, he is unable to take revenge on Shmerl--when he sees him many years later in New York--due to feelings of "compunction": he is equally helpless as a rich businessman in America as he was when only a poor student in Shmerl's Antomir *cheder*.[43] Pain and self-pity motivate and inspire David to write his life-story, and towards the end of his narrative he remarks that "there is a kind of pleasure in this [dull] pain".[44] Hence it is clear that the key to Levinsky's ambition for money and power lies in his feelings of deprivation, envy, and desire for revenge during his childhood.

REB SENDER

Just as David's mother represents devoted love and religious piety at home, Reb Sender, the solicitous paternal figure at the Preacher's Synagogue, is an extremely devout man whom David loves "passionately". Like Cahan's father, Sender is a *melamed* who loves to chant Jewish melodies, and the fact that Sender and his wife take care of David for a short while after Mrs Levinsky's death clearly makes him a substitute father figure.

> You are like a son to me, Davie. Be good, be genuinely pious; for my sake, if for nothing else. Above all, don't be double-faced; never say what you do not mean; do not utter words of flattery.[45]

Sender's warnings to David to "be genuinely truthful", "modest", "humble", and "simple"[46] illustrate the traditional moral values of the Jewish religious community which David alternately reveres and disdains in his narrative. Although he fails, in practice, to heed Sender's advice, he does attempt to make up through his narrative for his lack of piety and business deceptions by presenting the

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[43] Ibid., p. 504.
[44] Ibid., p. 312.
[45] Ibid., p. 32.
[46] Ibid., p. 41.

reader with an honest, self-critical, and unflattering self-portrait as a means of redemption. But this redemptive honesty does not exclude criticism of the community and its inflexible orthodoxy. For example, Sender also warns David of the necessity to repress his sexual desire, which is equated with Satan in the Talmudic maxim of the blinding of Rabbi Mathia, who gouges his eyes out in order to avoid the temptation of women.

> [Reb Sender:] Remember David, "He who looks even at the little finger of a woman is as guilty as though he looked at a woman that is wholly naked."[47]

David is approaching sixteen when Sender warns him to "beware of Satan", and his desire to be pious must fight against his "feeling of forbidden curiosity" for young women with whom he wants to sin.[48] The strict nature of the sexual codes established by orthodox Judaism, illustrated by this Talmudic maxim above, has a major effect on David's development and his religious studies: the "forbidden fruit" of sexual experience, the lure of Satan, and Napthali's devilish sexual joke all appeal to David since they represent his quest for empirical knowledge, which he later describes as his "hankering" for "adventure". However, there is no outlet in Vilna for the expression or sublimation of adolescent desire other than study of the Talmud. This creates a major psychological and moral crisis for David since his curiosity sets off fantasies of naked women which interrupt his studies--"[t]he worst of it was that these images often visited my brain while I was reading the holy book"[49]--causing surges of guilt and periods of repentant self-restraint. In retrospect, Levinsky believes that "the relations between men and women" in Judaism "is largely a case of forbidden fruit and the mystery of distance"; he adds that Judaism creates a "great barrier" between the sexes which "adds to the joys and poetry of love, but it is responsible also for much of the suffering, degradation, and crime that spring from it".[50] By criticizing the excessively restrictive nature of sexual relations in the Jewish community, Levinsky is preparing us for his conversion to atheism, which represents a means of breaking through the "barriers" or moral codes which lead to his suffering, thus enabling

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[47] Ibid., p. 39.
[48] Ibid., p. 34.
[49] Ibid., p. 44.
[50] Ibid., p. 42.

him to conquer sin. David's conversion to atheism begins way before he even sets foot in America, and he is clearly influenced by the "Free Thought" propagated by Napthali, his best friend at the Preacher's Synagogue in Vilna. However, it is important to note the order of the events which lead up to David's desire to abandon Judaism and to immigrate to America since both are initiated by the death of his mother.

THE DEATH OF MRS LEVINSKY AND DAVID'S LOSS OF FAITH

The murder of Mrs Levinsky severs David's strongest connection to Judaism. This is supported by his comment directly after her death that his "former interest in the Talmud was gone" and the "spell" of the Talmud "was broken irretrievably".[51] In addition, prior to Mrs Levinsky's murder, David would see the "Divine Presence" shining down on him while reading the Talmud, but after her murder the image of God is replaced by "the face of [his] martyred mother" which would "loom before" him.[52] Mrs Levinsky's death coincides with two other important events in David's life, the "epidemic of anti-Jewish atrocities of 1881 and 1882" which are indirectly responsible for her murder,[53] and the influence of the Haskalah movement, represented by Napthali who reads books on "modern science, poetry, fiction, and, above all, criticism of our faith".[54] The timing of Napthali's question--"Do you really think there is a God?"--is extremely important since it occurs directly after Mrs Levinsky's death, or in other words when David's belief in God was most vulnerable.[55] Although David tries to defend his belief in God against Napthali, he realizes that he "had nothing clear or definite to put forth".[56] Levinsky wants to show us that the death of his mother leads not only to a loss of interest in the Talmud and questioning of his belief in God, but also to a total lack of meaning in his life which is so typical for modern man.

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[51] Ibid., p. 59.
[52] Ibid., p. 56.
[53] This is made clear by Cahan since Mrs Levinsky actually goes to the Sands district twice: once before the pogroms when a boy "set his dog" at David, which Mrs Levinsky successfully avenges (p. 10); and once after the pogroms on a similar mission which results in her death.
[54] Ibid., p. 57.
[55] Ibid., p. 55.
[56] Ibid., p. 56.

> My surroundings had somehow lost their former meaning. Life was devoid of savor, and I was thirsting for an appetizer, as it were, for some violent change, for piquant sensations.[57]

Once David's religious belief is dismantled he is confronted with an inner chaos and vacuum which he describes with metaphors of thirst and hunger. Thus he discovers a secular, metaphorical language in which his spiritual dissatisfaction may be satisfied or overcome, and it is at this moment that the word America appears in his narrative, luring him westward to appease his hunger for adventure and knowledge.

David's relationship with Matilda, the daughter of the Jewish family that puts him up after his mother's death, represents his lure to the modern world and further destabilizes his wavering faith. He is drawn to Matilda not because of her looks but because of her alien, worldly, aristocratic characteristics: she is the daughter of a rich merchant, speaks Russian, received a German education, and her "Gentile name" has a "world of charm for [his] ear".[58] The inherent "charm" of Matilda's life is related to her role in the community as a rebel and iconoclast; he is fascinated by the fact that she exposes her hair, a sexual taboo associated with prostitution, and due to her infamous divorce from her husband on the grounds that she didn't love him--an untraditional reason for divorce and an unparalleled act in the community. Her ability to break the communal taboos attracts David since it represents a triumph over the community and form of liberation which he himself desires. She tantalises him with the possibility of transformation by tucking his "side-locks behind [his] ears", and chastises him for his backwardness and naivete concerning the greater world.

> Look at the way you are dressed, the way you live generally. Besides, the idea of a young man like you not being able to speak a word of Russian! Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Why, mother says you are remarkably bright. Isn't it a pity that you should throw it all away? Why don't you try to study Russian, geography, history? Why don't you try to become an educated man?[59]

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[57] Ibid., p. 59.
[58] Ibid., p. 67, 69.
[59] Ibid., p. 71.

Matilda reverses all of the traditional Jewish values by calling the study of the Talmud a "waste" of intelligence and "crime", but this does "not shock [David] in the least" since it merely reinforce his own newly-formed opinions.[60] For example, David had already shown a keen interest in the letters from Jewish immigrants in America since they enabled him to seek out "information about the country and the opportunities it held out to a man of my type".[61] His "type" is clearly that the dreamy and fickle idealist, who is already straying from religious belief and the communal values in search of power, money, and knowledge.

Matilda's role is a dual one: on one hand, she represents the saintly mother-figure, like Mrs Levinsky, who encourages him to study and provides him with money for his education; but on the other hand, she is a devilish temptress who leads him to sin, which is illustrated, ironically, by giving David the money he needs to abandon his community and religion in front of the synagogue: "She stalked hastily away, her form, at once an angel of light and a messenger of death, being swallowed up by the gloom".[62] Although she disappears from his life almost like an apparition, she later reappears in the New World like a "living memory of his youth"[63] to plague his conscience by questioning his happiness in the light of his financial success. Matilda is a prophetic figure as well, since she foresees David's complete transformation in America and fall from Judaism.

> "When you are in America you'll dress like a Gentile and even shave. Then you won't look so ridiculous. Good clothes would make another man of you." At this she looked me over in a business-like sort of way.[64]

Matilda, like Mrs Levinsky and Dora Margolis, is another example of Cahan's complex and highly realistic description of female characters. She is the modern seductress turned ardent socialist who is able to see through David's flights of fancy and idealism. Matilda shows him that his desire to become an "educated man" and "hero of an adventure" are bound to fail, both in Russia and America. This is illustrated when she dresses him in her brother's impressive

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[60] Ibid., p. 72.
[61] Ibid., p. 65.
[62] Ibid., p. 80.
[63] Ibid., p. 503. See also p. 384.
[64] Ibid., p. 75.

gymnasium uniform, which stimulates him to profess his love to her in a highly inflated romantic language. However, this scene is a parody of his romantic and intellectual ambitions, since she quickly punctures both his inflated romantic language and educational aspirations: she scolds him for making unjustified romantic presumptions--"you forget your place, young man!"--, and humiliates him by commanding him to take off the uniform and warning him "not [to] forget that you are *not* a *gymnasist*".[65] Although David claims to be in love with Matilda and that he would stay in Russia to marry her, his intention behind marrying Matilda is directly connected to his ambition to attend university--"I developed the theory that if I abandoned my plan about going to America she would have her father send me to college with a view to marrying her".[66] Once he has the money to pay for his boat ticket and is on the way to America, he loses all interest in Matilda. David's real romance is with America rather than Matilda, and he describes his flight from Russia in heroic terms. However, although he constantly refers to himself as the "hero of an adventure", his emigration to America is possible only with Matilda's money rather than his own insufficient savings. David's desire to emigrate is directly attached to his need to raise capital, and thus his transformation from religious scholar to capitalist begins with the idea of departure, not upon arrival in America, where the loss of his beard, side-locks, and clothes is merely a symbolic act. His real repudiation of faith and identity takes place in the Old World.

ARRIVAL

David is aware before he leaves Vilna that the United States is "a godless country", in the words of Matilda, and that "America [is] a land of dollars, not of education", where one "becomes a Gentile".[67] The possibility of transformation in America is directly linked to the quest for financial success and sexual adventure:

> Then it was that the word America first caught my fancy.
>
> The name was buzzing all around me. [...]
>
> I succumbed to the spreading fever. [...] The United States lured me not merely as a land of milk and honey,

[65] Ibid., p. 80, 76.
[66] Ibid., p. 77.
[67] Ibid., p. 72.

> but also, and perhaps chiefly, as one of mystery, of fantastic experiences, of marvellous transformations. To leave my native place and to seek my fortune in that distant, weird world seemed to be just the kind of sensational adventure my heart was hankering for.[68]

America is less important to David as a mythical paradise--"a land of milk and honey"--than as a substitute home and religion: the "mystery" of America replaces the "spell" of Judaism, and the alluring descriptions of America, as well as the word "America" itself, supplant the pious words of the Talmud. However, ironically, upon his arrival in New York, David begins an on-going search for connections to the past. This is evident when he settles in the Lower East Side ghetto, which resembles a more affluent Antomir shtetl, and uses the story of his mother's death to arouse sympathy and attain financial aid from Mr Even, who had heard about his mother's murder. David's initial failure as a peddler and push-cart salesman in New York results in a yearning and desire for contact with his old religion, romances, and home, which is illustrated by his relationship with the Jewish prostitutes in the ghetto.

> My wild oats were flavored with a sense of my failure as a businessman, by my homesickness and passion for Matilda. [...] Sometimes I would stop from business in the middle of the day to plunge into a page of Talmud at some near-by synagogue, and sometimes I would lay down the holy book in the middle of a sentence and betake myself to the residence of some fallen woman.
>
> In my loneliness I would look for some human element in my acquaintance with these women. I would ply them with questions about their antecedents, their family connections, as my mother had done the girl from "That" Street.[69]

The fact that David's visits to these "fallen women" increase in proportion to his financial failure, illustrates the close connection between his sexual and financial drives, which I shall discuss in more detail below. His fascination with the Jewish prostitutes, who he says were "excommunicated" from the New York Jewish ghetto community, reflects his own feelings of excommunication from Antomir, loss of innocence, unrestrained misconduct, and self-disgust. In fact, his meetings in New York with Argentine Rachael,

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[68] Ibid., p. 59-60, 61.
[69] Ibid., p. 125-6.

the Jewish prostitute from Antomir, remind him vividly of his childhood experiences which he desires to recapture by reenacting his mother's intimacy with "the girl from "That" Street"; the feeling of homesickness causes him to search for Argentine Rachael's family connections, which parallels his own search for connections to Antomir and a new mother figure. The most obvious manifestation of his desire to find a substitute mother occurs when David moves from Mrs Dienstog's house in order to board with Mrs Levinsky, who not only has the same name as his mother, but also seems to inspire an enthusiasm for life and religion that reminds the reader of his life in Antomir prior to his mother's death. David's physical desire surfaces freely in the home of this unrelated Mrs Levinsky, whose lips he attempts to kiss in her husband's absence. She seems to bring out his contradictory feelings of love and hatred in a way that was impossible with his mother in Antomir. His unnatural yearning for his mother is illustrated by the fact that almost all of his relations with women in New York are with maternal figures such as Mrs Dienstog, Mrs Levinsky, and Dora Margolis. Later on in David's life (and narrative) Meyer Nodelman pin-points David's central problem when he remarks:

> Your own mother--peace upon her--cannot be brought to life until the coming of the Messiah, so do the next best thing, Levinsky. Get married and you will have a mother [...].[70]

David makes his decision to shave his beard and lose the last traces of his greenhorn status at Mrs Levinsky's house in America since he believes that he can earn more money by looking like an American. His first major transformation, however, occurs shortly after arrival in America--ironically after having just prayed to be a good Jew--and it is directly connected to his desire for social status and acceptance as an American.

> I was mentally parading my "modern" make-up before Matilda. [...] I was all in a flutter with embarrassment and a novel relish of existence. It was as though the hair-cut and the American clothes had changed my identity.[71]

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[70] Ibid., p. 358.
[71] Ibid., p. 101.

David confirms Matilda's prediction that he would quickly assimilate to America, and his new identity produces elated feelings of social promotion, especially his new title as Mr Levinsky. But he recognizes that more important than looking like an American, one should be able to talk like one, that adopting the language of his new home is the strongest means of shedding one's status as a greenhorn. Not only does he rapidly absorb English, but also he seems to have an uncanny grasp of his English teacher's favourite words, "[d]iligence", "perseverance", and "tenacity",[72] all characteristics which he possesses in abundance. However, the last word, "tenacity", is not included in Benjamin Franklin's list of virtues, and it was, perhaps, Silas Lapham's lack of tenacity that led to his financial collapse. Unlike Silas Lapham, David does not separate his business ethics from his private ethics, which is highlighted by the connection between his business and sexual drives and deceptions in the "Dora" chapter.

THE "DORA" CHAPTER: BUSINESS AND PLEASURE

In his generally excellent study of Cahan and the Lower East Side, Ronald Sanders describes Cahan's portrayal of Dora Margolis as "vivid" and admits that the "Dora" chapter is one of "the best sections of the book".[73] However, Sanders seems to miss the key importance of the "Dora" chapter, which is the longest, most pivotal chapter of the novel. According to Sanders, David's "episode" with Dora "does not fit well into the novel's scheme", which is simply not true. The "Dora" chapter comes directly after David decides to go into business as a cloak manufacturer, and it is crucial thematically since it illustrates the fact that David's rising business success runs parallel to his sexual adventures, in this case his seduction or conquest of Dora. Sanders adds that the chapter illustrates Levinsky's "failure in love" but "not on the spiritual grounds that Cahan is seeking to portray everywhere else in the novel".[74] I assume that the phrase "spiritual grounds" refers to David's moral downfall, and here my interpretation of the novel differs radically

[72] Ibid., p. 135.
[73] Ronald Sanders, *Downtown Jews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 432.
[74] Ibid.

from Sanders's. He seems to simplify the real nature of David's relationship with Dora when he remarks that her:

> passions are reserved for her small daughter and then, after a time, for Levinsky, whose love she nevertheless ultimately refuses out of her sense of duty as a wife and a mother.[75]

This statement, which implies that Dora does not have sex with David, allows Sanders to avoid the issue of Dora's--and David's--moral downfall; although she does ultimately force David to leave her house, she is seduced by Levinsky in one of the most climactic scenes of the novel. The fact that David's financial and sexual successes converge in the same chapter is not only crucial to the plot but also gives the key to David's character: in spite of his success in both areas, he is unable to achieve spiritual or romantic fulfillment. Sexual consummation results, ironically, in the loss of his lover and alienation once again since David is forced to leave the Margolis's home after he seduces Dora. However, his failure and alienation boost his drive for success and feelings of self-pity, which, as I have discussed above, gives him a perverse form of pleasure.

David goes to the Margolis's house in order to raise money for his business venture, and thus his relationship or sexual "adventure" with Dora (which develops gradually out of this first visit) is linked directly to his business "venture". Cahan's characterization of Dora, the first realistic portrayal of the frustrated Jewish-American mother in an American novel, is a major accomplishment. Similar to David's mother, Dora wants her child to get a good education, but unlike Mrs Levinsky she beats Lucy and is envious of her daughter's American-born status. David's relationship with Dora follows the self-contradictory nature of his previous relationships with women: he claims that Dora "did not interest" him when Max leaves them alone in order to search for money for David, but later Dora's "clear, fresh, delicate complexion" and Max's warnings not to fall in love begin to have the opposite effect. Cahan portrays a very common problem amongst Jewish immigrants in his description of the Margolises, namely the failure of traditional arranged marriages in the New World: Dora, who married

[75] Ibid.

her husband at the age of nineteen, admits to Levinsky that her marriage was not based on love. David represents the possibility of love and education to Dora since, in spite of his failure to gain a university degree, she perceives David as an educated man. Therefore, it is understandable that she eventually gives in to him in an attempt to have at least one of the things of which she has always dreamed, namely love.

While David's memory of Dora begins to "haunt" him, a "fairy tale" occurs in the reorganization of the Western Firm, which gives David the boost he needs to insure his fabulous success as cloak manufacturer. It is directly after this business success that David, infused with new confidence, begins to put Max Margolis's own maxim, that "[e]very woman can be won",[76] into practice with Max's own wife. Deception plays a major role in Levinsky's successful business ventures, and he extends his belief that "business honor and business dignity are often a luxury which only those in the front ranks of success can indulge" to his private relationship with Max--whose wife he seduces and to whom he later lies. Max invites Levinsky to move into their new apartment as a boarder, which he and his wife found specifically to make space for David. He even refers to David as a "boarding son-in-law",[77] and the complex nature of their triangular relationship is reflected by the dual meaning of this term: it makes David a son-in-law both to Max and his wife but also a lover or husband to Dora. In addition, David refers to Dora as a "mother-in-law" who is "attentive like a lover", and as a "mother and a wife" in one.[78] Thus when Max invites David to live with them and then leaves Levinsky alone with Dora because of his late hours at work, he clears the path for the "downfall" of his wife.

The seduction of Dora begins with the first kiss between David and Dora, which is followed by a shift in Yiddish from formal to informal forms of address. Dora not only confesses her unhappiness to David, but also that she had dreamed of a marriage for love, which she regrets that she did not have. Then in the following scene, she gives in once again to David's kisses, addresses him with

[76] Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, p. 116.
[77] Ibid., p. 252.
[78] Ibid., p. 287.

the term "dearest", and finally, after David's confession of love, comments:

> I don't know where this will land me. It seems as if a great misfortune had befallen me. But I don't care. I don't care. I don't care. Come what may. I can't help it. At last I know what it means to be happy. I have been dreaming of it all my life. Now I know what it is like, and I am willing to suffer for it. Yes, I am willing to suffer for you, Levinsky.[79]

Dora's repetition of the words "I don't care" three times emphasizes her resolve to give her self to him: she clearly knows what she wants. David reveres Dora for her "fortitude" and her "saintliness" but it is precisely because of her purity--he constantly refers to the "snow white" chastity of her skin--and his idolization of her that he wants her to fall.

> I idolized Dora. It seemed to me that I adored her soul even more than I did her body. I was under her moral influence, and the firmness with which she maintained the distance between us added to my respect of her. And yet I never ceased to dream of and to seek her moral downfall.[80]

His idolization of Dora results in a split between his "immaculate" gentlemanly behaviour at home and his debauchery outside: he makes frequent calls at the apartment of a prostitute, where he tries to imagine that he is having sex with Dora. After David returns from a sales trip, Dora is jealous since she thinks he wants to arrange a marriage with another woman, and when their lovers' spat is resolved,[81] her previous iron will finally gives way.

> [Dora] "Thank God it wasn't a real *shadchen*! I thought I was going to commit suicide," she said.
> I seized her in my arms. She abandoned herself to a transport of gratitude and happiness in which her usual fortitude melted away.[82]

Although it is not explicitly stated in this episode that David and Dora do have sex, the words "seized her", "abandoned herself",

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[79] Ibid., p. 280.
[80] Ibid., p. 291.
[81] David explains that the *shadchen* (marriage broker, match-maker) who visited their home was really a "conspiracy name for a man who would bring an employer together with cloak-makers who were willing to cheat the union" (p. 295), which illustrates the overlapping of the themes of business and sexual deception.
[82] Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, p. 296.

"transport of gratitude", and "melted away" are common sexual metaphors which build up to, and imply a successful climax. Thus Dora does completely give in to David, and her moral "downfall" and Jeff Manheimer's business "downfall" (Cahan intentionally uses the same words) occur simultaneously in the "Dora" chapter.

I find it hard to believe that every critic has overlooked the fact that Dora and David consummate their affair. The evidence, however implied or muted, is clearly in the text. That David and Dora actually have sex is made clear not only by the fact that Dora appears the following morning with the "appearance of one doomed to death", but also due to Dora's admission of her affair with David to her husband. Max later tells David that "[Dora] has confessed everything" about their relations,[83] and David adds that:

> [Max] quoted a brutal question which he had once put to her concerning her relations with me, and then he quoted Dora as answering:
> "Yes, yes, yes! And if you don't like it you can sue me for divorce."[84]

David clearly lies to Max when he says that nothing happened between Dora and himself, and even admits in an aside that he "declared mutely that my oath referred to the truthful part of my declaration only--that is, exclusively to the fact that I no longer met Dora".[85] In other words, Dora's confessions as well as the accusations by Max are true! Several years later, when Levinsky meets Lucy Margolis by chance and learns that her mother has had another child, he is "seized with an odd sort of curiosity" and asks how old the child is. This curious desire to know the child's age has only one explanation: he wants to know if the child is his! In any case, David's seduction of Dora, which parallels his business success, results in his exile from this temporary home, brings on a physical collapse, increases his sense of alienation and loneliness, and inspires him to work harder. David dwells in his self-pity and admits that his frustrated love gives him a kind of pleasure, which spurs his desire for business success: thus his failure in love is a type of muse which inspires his desire for success. And his self-

[83] Ibid., p. 315.
[84] Ibid., p. 318.
[85] Ibid., p. 319.

portrayal as a lonely, frustrated, alienated lover complements his image as a successful businessman.

BUSINESS AND DOLLARS

David's humiliating failure in New York as a street-peddler and degradation as a worker not only increase his sexual drive but also stimulate his desire to become a rich businessman. After David takes Gitelson's advice to become an apprentice at the cloak-making factory, he develops a passion and intellectual interest in his job similar to that which he had formerly applied to study of the Talmud. However, his work in the factory also makes him feel guilty since he has still failed to attain a college education, his original goal. Although David claims that he plans to use his job as a "stepping stone to his life of intellectual interest", or in other words to study at City College, his interest in the university constantly wavers. In fact, his narrative is full of contradictions and rationalizations concerning his ultimate failure to attain a university degree. For example, David says he needs to raise six hundred dollars for living expenses before he can attend City College, where tuition was free. Then he comments that a strike upset his financial calculations, which is followed by his statement that it actually increased his wages! However, he proceeds to put off his college career yet again--a clear sign of his "fickleness". David proclaims that a college education was a "symbol of spiritual promotion" and that a "college diploma was a certificate of moral as well as intellectual aristocracy".[86] Thus his abortive attempt to go to college can be interpreted as a failure to attain the moral rise he desired. When his wages are increased at the factory it gives him a sense of self-importance and power that overwhelm his desire for intellectual promotion: social advancement rather than moral and intellectual promotion is his real goal. This becomes evident in the crucial "spilled milk" episode with Jeff Manheimer, whom David envies for his "German parentage" and "American birth" and despises for treating his Russian workers "as an inferior race".[87] David's decision to go into business, which he describes alternately as a "scheme", "venture", "adventure", and "new dream", is the outcome of a fight with his boss, and it is motivated by his desire

[86] Ibid., p. 169.
[87] Ibid., p. 187.

for revenge in a plan to steal the Manheimer Brothers' best designer, Chaikin.

> The idea took a peculiar hold upon my imagination. I could not look at Ansel Chaikin, or think of him, without picturing him leaving the Manheimers in a lurch and becoming a fatal competitor of theirs. I beheld their downfall. I gloated over it.[88]

The desire for revenge, which was the primary motivating force behind David's desire to become rich at Shmerl's *cheder*, is responsible for his decision to become Chaikin's "manufacturing partner". He immerses himself in this business venture because of his humiliation by Manheimer, and as a result his first step is to raise money. This leads to his climactic sexual adventure with Dora Margolis described above. The fact that David abandons his college aspirations was predicted by Matilda when she warned him that America was a land of "dollars and not education", and he even admits that he desires to go into business to be more like an American.[89] David calls City College his "bride elect", but like his romance with Dora, whom he calls his "bride to be" despite the fact that she was married, his dream to go to college is ultimately shattered. Instead, in one of the most symbolic scenes of the novel he abandons his religious devotion to the "temple" of education, and pays homage to his improvised money belt and its contents--which illustrates his conversion to a new religion of money.

> My savings, and with them my sense of my own importance in the world, grew apace. As there was no time to go to the savings-bank, I had to carry what I deemed a great sum on my person (in a money-belt that I had improvised for the purpose). [...] the consciousness of having that wad of paper money with me was never wholly absent from my mind. It loomed as a badge of omnipotence.[90]

Money rather than education gives him a feeling of power and virility strapped around his waist, and he wants to use it as a

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[88] Ibid., p. 189.
[89] Ibid., p. 260. David comments that he "was forever watching and striving to imitate the dress and the ways of the well-bred American merchants with whom I was, or trying to be, thrown. All this, I felt, was an essential element in achieving business success; but the ambition to act and look like a[n American] gentleman grew in me quite apart from these motives", p. 260.
[90] Ibid., p. 174.

means of revenge for his previous humiliations. In addition, like the checkbook which he carries in his pocket, money not only gives him a sense of tremendous possibility, but also it symbolizes David final irreversible worship of mammon.

OUTCAST LOVER, LONELY BUSINESSMAN

David's exile from the Margolis's house is the climax of the sexual theme of the novel and the chapter "On The Road" illustrated David's final business breakthrough when he gets a contract from Huntington. Huntington, who was practically unapproachable by salesman like David, provides an intellectual challenge to David which is comparable to the sexual challenge posed by Dora in the previous chapter. In addition, David's attempt to get a contract with Huntington is also a means of getting revenge on Loeb for humiliating him in front of other salesmen. The remainder of the novel can be seen as David's futile attempt to find a home and substitute religion. Following Levinsky's exile from Dora's home and success with Huntington, he makes another attempt to create a traditional Jewish home in America by becoming engaged to Miss Kaplan, whose family was noted for being religious scholars. Although he eventually breaks off this engagement, prior to this he comments that he wants to visit Antomir with Miss Kaplan on their honeymoon, and that if they have a daughter he plans to name her after his mother. Clearly David's search for family respectability and solidity through a traditional marriage (out of convenience rather than love) with Miss Kaplan, is a means of returning to Old World values and customs; but, like his desire to go to university in the United States, it remains an unrealized dream. When Matilda, the ardent socialist and Levinsky's first love, comes to America she says that she knows "of course that [Levinsky] is a rich man", but asks him if he is "a happy man".[91] David is not happy primarily because of his loneliness. However he cannot resolve this problem of loneliness since his "inseparable" ideal of a woman and home, which appears as a solution to his loneliness, is simply impossible and unattainable for him in America.

> The wish to "settle down" then grew into a passion in me. The vague portrait of a woman in the abstract seemed never to be absent from my mind. Coupled with

[91] Ibid., p. 508.

> that portrait was a similarly vague image of a window and a table set for dinner. That, somehow, was my symbol of home. Home and woman were one, a complex charm joining them into an inseparable force.[92]

His relationship with Anna Tevkin is yet another means of finding a home and returning to the past since her father was the same man that Cahan had heard about in his youth from Napthali. David's attempt to marry Anna Tevkin by first befriending her father, goes back to Napthali's story about Anna's father, who arranged his marriage to his wife through "a long series of passionate letters addressed, not to his lady-love, but to her father".[93] This form of romance, which Levinsky attempts to repeat in order to marry Abraham Tevkin's daughter, may have been successful in the Old World but is simply impossible in the New World with Tevkin's American-born daughter. At the end of the novel, Levinsky is left somewhere between worlds, alienated both from his past and from the Jewish community in America. It is important to note that Cahan's unfinished novel about the success of the Jews who came to America was titled ***The Chasm***, and a chasm of alienation remains at the end of David's narrative. David is alienated on one hand due to his rejection by Anna Tevkin, the American-born Jewish woman, and on the other hand by his own inability to marry a Gentile woman since he is "frightened" by the idea of intermarriage and is afraid that the marriage will fail.[94] Likewise, a chasm of money separates him from his Old World shipmate, Gitelson, and his lack of education alienates him from Jake, his New World friend who becomes a doctor. Levinsky ends up as a lonely, frustrated lover who considers his success a tragedy. However, his agonies stimulate his business activities as well as his desire to narrate his memories of the past. The entire narrative is inspired by the "pain" and "tragedy" of his success, for David gets pleasure from dwelling in pain and self-pity. Levinsky turns to his past because he has neither a future nor a family to tell about his past for him. The prospect of death compels him to create his own literary monument to insure his immortality. However, contrary to Bonnie Lyons's comment, Levinsky is a sympathetic character who clearly does have values.[95] He values

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[92] Ibid., p. 376-7.
[93] Ibid., p. 57.
[94] Ibid., p. 527.
[95] See footnote 3.

Judaism (even though he doesn't believe in God), his mother's "devotion" to him, and his abstract ideal of the family. And his honest portrayal of his life and values, even if he was unable to put them into practice, illustrates his desire for redemption.

CONCLUSION

Unlike Silas Lapham, David's belief in his goods doesn't end in his moral rise and financial collapse, but rather in his financial success and moral downfall. At the end of his narrative, Levinsky remains isolated from the Lower East Side Jewish community in spite of his generous donations to various local religious and philanthropic organizations. However, his connection to the Jewish community is still strong enough after thirty-five years both to compel him to write his own story, and to prevent him partly for racial reasons from marrying the Gentile woman he meets at the end of the narrative. Intermarriage represents a complete assimilation to America that is impossible for the first-generation immigrant after all since it would mean losing the last cultural attachment to one's own ethnic group. As David shows us in his narrative full of references to Jewish religion, customs, people, and places this contact and identification with the Jewish community is vital despite the fact that he is no longer a religious Jew.

Levinsky's financial success is achieved at a great emotional expense and loss, and the feelings of loss and alienation seem to precipitate his final realization that the Old World of his childhood cannot be revived--no matter how much money he has made. Thus Cahan touches on one of the major sources of conflict for future Jewish-American writers, i.e. the psychological effect of the loss of cultural ties and search for a new identity. David's last religion, which he refers to as his "religion of the family", exists simply as a futile yearning for something that resembles his family life in the past.

> I had no creed. I knew of no ideals. The only thing I believed in was the cold, drab theory of the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest. This could not satisfy a heart that was hungry for enthusiasm and affection, so dreams of family life became my religion.[96]

[96] Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, p. 380.

Unlike Silas Lapham, Levinsky cannot return to the Old World at the end of his narrative for the simple reason that he could no longer call Antomir or Vilna home after the pogroms and death of his mother. Thus David is the archetypical immigrant, simultaneously cut off from his birthplace and alienated from his new home. In ***The Rise of David Levinsky***, Cahan creates a historical biography without attempting to resolve the massive social problems of the late 19th century, but unlike Howells in ***The Rise of Silas Lapham*** he doesn't ignore them: they are represented by David's humiliating poverty as a Talmud scholar in Antomir and immigrant in New York's Lower East Side ghetto. In David's own words, the "inflexible nature" of the Jewish religion and his desire to "avenge" himself for his humiliation in the Old World are, to a large degree, responsible for his tenacious ambition for success--which obsesses him in spite of its harmful spiritual and psychological effects. The problems of spiritual malaise and alienation which pervade Cahan's novel and his autobiography were shared by other Jewish-American writers such as Anzia Yezierska, whose writing I'll discuss in Chapters Four and Five. In conclusion, Cahan's ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** is a highly realistic psychological portrait of a first-generation Jewish immigrant's dilemma in America, and the novel is not only more convincing than ***The Rise of Silas Lapham*** but also more contemporary and unified than Howells's most widely read novel. It's time to republish it!

CHAPTER THREE

ABRAHAM CAHAN'S *BLETER FUN MEIN LEBEN*

INTRODUCTION

Abraham Cahan published the first three volumes of his Yiddish autobiography, ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben***,[1] in 1926, nine years after ***The Rise of David Levinsky***, his last and most successful novel in English. A moderate amount of research has been done on Cahan's fiction as well as on the major influences of his literary and political development. However, all previous critics and biographers of Cahan have failed to analyze his most monumental work, namely his five volume autobiography, as an aesthetic creation which is full of the inventions, molestations, and omissions normally associated with fiction. As Paul Eakin remarked:

> Most readers naturally assume that all autobiographies are based on the verifiable facts of a life history, and it is this referential dimension, imperfectly understood, that has checked the development of a poetics of autobiography.[2]

In short, this is the first formal literary study of Cahan's autobiography, and like Eakin in his study of Mary McCarthy, Henry James, and Jean-Paul Sartre's autobiographies, I shall argue that "autobiographical truth" in ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben*** is an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation.[3] The goal of this study is to discuss the way Cahan either wittingly or unwittingly displays himself through his use of metaphor,

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[1] The title, ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben***, would have been much more faithfully and appropriately served by a literal translation, ***Leaves from My Life***, which picks up on the dual meaning of the Yiddish title: the fact that the autobiography is written in short sections or leaves, and that the word "Bleter" refers not only to a leaf but a page of a newspaper which was Cahan's lifelong preoccupation. Therefore, the English title, ***The Education of Abraham Cahan***, strikes me as a somewhat forced comparison to Adams's ***The Education of Henry Adams***, which unlike Cahan's autobiography was published posthumously, written in the third rather than first person, and originally intended for and distributed to Adams's family and closest friends. For this reason, I have decided to use the Yiddish title to refer to the English edition.

[2] Paul Eakin, ***Fictions in Autobiography*** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 3.

[3] Ibid.

recurring motifs, and obvious omissions. It will be necessary to observe Cahan's shifting intentions in order to analyze the way he uses fiction to recreate himself as a literary persona. As A. Fleishman comments:

> the unstable character of autobiographical intention is one of the inveterate conditions that call on the autobiographer to fictionalize--that each shift of intention generates a new fiction in behalf of a totalized account of one's life (the ultimate fiction).[4]

One can detect a pattern in the autobiography by looking at the way motifs, omissions, and metaphors are used by Cahan to shape his life into a personal myth. A discussion of the motifs and metaphors will include the relation between religion and taboo, language and the forbidden, sex and revolution, success in work and frustration in love, and finally the themes of yearning and loneliness which may help to outline Cahan's central intentions in *Bleter*.[5] I hope to show not only that the "self" that is at the centre of *Bleter* is necessarily a fictional structure, but also that the autobiography is written in a similar rhetorical style and thematic vein to *The Rise of David Levinsky*. It is not merely coincidental that David Levinsky, the fictional narrator of Cahan's autobiographical novel, and Abraham Cahan, the author-narrator of *Bleter*, assume narrative voices which often sound remarkably similar. However, I am not at all suggesting that David Levinsky and Abraham Cahan are one and the same person. Levinsky is, on one hand, the fictional version of what Cahan could have become had he been born four years later, and on the other, an extreme representation of what Cahan feared he had become: the successful but alienated and spiritually empty American immigrant. Levinsky's story fits so conveniently into the American myth of success that he loses his ability to identify with his old self; in addition, he is Everyman, encompassing the entire range of Jewish-American males, the businessman but also religious scholar, the orphan but also son, the boss but also worker, the success but also failure, which makes it possible for every male reader to identify with him. In this chapter I hope to reveal a clearer, fuller picture of Abraham Cahan, the author behind *The Rise of David*

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[4] Avrom Fleishman, *Figures of Autobiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 10.
[5] From now on I will refer to *Bleter Fun Mein Leben* as *Bleter*.

Levinsky and the narrator-hero of *Bleter* through a formal analysis of the first two volumes of Cahan's autobiography.

CRITICAL PROBLEMS AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

One significant problem encountered by the author of this study is that although Cahan's complete autobiography is composed of five volumes, only the first two volumes have been translated from Yiddish into English. My inability to read the complete autobiography in Yiddish makes it impossible to discuss either the work as a whole or Cahan's Yiddish, especially the shift in dialect from Lithuanian Yiddish to Americanized Yiddish which he makes at the end of Book One in order to describe his arrival in the "Golden Land". In reality, Cahan has to revert to his old dialect in order to talk about "The Old Country" in an unadulterated Lithuanian Yiddish since he spoke a highly Americanized Yiddish in the 1920s. However, knowledge of this linguistic shift enables one to note that his reconstruction of the past is possible only by using the language he himself used in the past.

Although the present study of *Bleter* is admittedly incomplete, it seems clear from comments by Cahan's critics and biographers that the first two volumes of the autobiography ("The Old Country" and "The Golden Land"), which cover his first thirty years, are the most important for an understanding of Cahan's personal development and crucial turning-points in his life. Although Volumes One through Three of the original Yiddish edition were published simultaneously in 1926, the editors of the English edition chose to translate and publish only the first two volumes of the autobiography in 1969. Leo Stein, one of the translators of *Bleter*, remarks in his preface to the English edition that they were planning to translate and publish the last three volumes. However, this project was either abandoned or not considered viable for reasons of merit or lack of interest in the extensive details of Cahan's literary career. According to Leo Stein, Volume Three is mainly concerned with the founding of the *Jewish Daily Forward* and in it "Cahan describes his journalistic innovations, his battles over language and editorial policy".[6] The fourth and fifth volumes were published in 1928 and 1931, and they provide an "account of Cahan as a literary figure and journalist" in

[6] Abraham Cahan, *Bleter*, introduction, p. viii.

Volume Four, and descriptions of his trips to Europe, participation in the international socialist movement, and a study of the famous Leo Frank case in Volume Five.[7] Cahan's last two volumes appear to deal primarily with his successful battles and achievement of fame as a socialist editor and American writer. However, this public success is undermined by the sterility of his private life which deprived him of an audience of children and grandchildren. In addition, Cahan's assimilation or Americanization is undercut by his reversion to Yiddish at a time when the ghetto began to break apart due to the lack of new Jewish immigrants to the United States which resulted from the restrictive anti-immigration laws of the 20s. As Cahan's Yiddish-speaking audience dispersed and declined in number so did his fame and significance as a revolutionary Yiddish editor. Thus the autobiography is intended to prevent his achievements from gradually receding into oblivion.

The advantages of looking only at the first two volumes of *Bleter* are numerous. First, it enables one to analyze a narrative which presents the theme of the two worlds, Old and New, that is also taken up in the 20s by Anzia Yezierska. Secondly, the first two volumes contain the essence of Cahan's personal development and success, which Irving Howe incorrectly believes is first located in Volume Four.[8] Volumes One and Two bring us to Cahan's budding career as a journalist but do not involve us in the lengthy details of his journalistic rise. The seeds of success, however, are already evident in the way he displays himself as the hero of these first two books. Thus, my main concern is more with the confessions of the autobiographer of Volumes One and Two than the memoirs of the famous Yiddish daily editor and realist writer of the following three volumes.

A CRITIQUE OF CAHAN CRITICISM

The most prevalent shortcoming of previous Cahan studies is the critics' tendency to use Cahan's autobiography as a purely factual historical document, willfully ignoring his "explicit posture as autobiographer in the text".[9] A. Waldinger's stimulating and informative doctoral thesis, *Abraham Cahan as Novelist, Critic, and*

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[7] Ibid.
[8] Irving Howe, "Becoming an American", *Commentary*, 49 (1970), p. 88.
[9] Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, p. 4.

Folk Advocate (1971), uncovers and analyzes many of the literary and political sources of influence on his fiction. However, although Waldinger attempts to conduct a "historically and sociologically based study of Cahan's fiction" in order "to show that the artist in Cahan was never separate from the socialist folk politician, and that the Jew stood behind both as a kind of ultimate identity",[10] he falls prey to Cahan's own tendency of making his subject seem larger than life. Waldinger's inclination towards idolization can be clearly seen in the rather abrupt conclusion of his study with an analysis of his hero's greatest literary achievement, *The Rise of David Levinsky*. By ending his criticism of Cahan's "fiction" in 1917, Waldinger ignores not only the thirty-four years of Cahan's life following his last novel, but also one of his most productive decades, from 1921-1931, in which, despite his inability to write an intended sequel to *The Rise of David Levinsky*, he managed to write the first three volumes of his autobiography.

Another critical weakness of Waldinger's thesis is his tendency to over-emphasize Cahan's public side and to shy away from his private side, especially the subjects of sex and marriage which are so central to the fiction. As Henry Adams commented in his autobiography, "[s]ex is a vital condition, and race only a local one".[11] It is ironic that although Adams and Cahan recognized the importance of sex and marriage in their writing, both men almost totally suppress any references to their marital relationships in their autobiographies. A huge gap appears in Adams's autobiography due to the complete omission of any references to his wife's suicide in 1884, which subtly underlines the tone of failure that runs throughout Adams's narrative; likewise, Cahan's marriage to Aniuta Bronstein is limited to a half-page notice and several brief references despite the fact that the Cahans had been married for approximately five years when the second volume of *Bleter* ends. It is interesting that Cahan often reveals more about his marriage in his early autobiographical fiction than in his autobiography; this suggests that he found a middle course in fiction which satisfied his personal need for confession and at the same time placed it at

[10] A. Waldinger, *Abraham Cahan as Novelist, Critic, and Folk Advocate* (Ph.D. dissertation, 1971), preface, p. vii.
[11] Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946), p. 441.

several removes from the literal fact in order to shield himself from undue self-pity and public misjudgement.[12] Ironically, Cahan's successful career as an author of American fiction was partly initiated by his failing marriage and sense of inner void, and a dichotomy of outer success and inner failure can be clearly seen in the themes of success, as writer and editor, and failure, as husband and revolutionary, which run throughout his fiction and autobiography. His early fiction during the ***Commercial Advertiser*** years (1897-1902), especially "Circumstances" (1897) and "Tzinchadzi of the Catskills" (1901), reveals his polarization in a period which marks not only his transformation from Yiddish journalist to successful American journalist and man of letters, but also the disruption of his marriage and intense longing for contact with the Old World. It is this duality or polarization which accounts for Cahan's obsession with the two types of autobiographical narrative represented by ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** and ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben.***

Like Waldinger's dissertation, Theodore Pollock's doctoral thesis, ***The Solitary Clarinetist: A Critical Biography of Abraham Cahan, 1860-1917*** (1959), lacks either a literary analysis of ***Bleter*** or personal criticism of the author. In addition, Pollock intentionally limits his biography to what he describes as Cahan's four significant roles, as American author, Yiddish editor, journalist, and socialist, thus ignoring his more private role as husband and more anomalous role as autobiographer. Pollock's approach is reductionist and therefore a dangerous one for a biographer. Like Waldinger, Pollock never asks if the "facts" described in ***Bleter*** aren't actually what William Dean Howells called "the witchery of invention which steals into [the autobiographer's] narrative and makes us read the delight of their fiction into their fact".[13]

Melech Epstein's ***Profiles of Eleven*** (1965) might have directed Pollock towards a more balanced biography of Cahan due to Epstein's brief but insightful analysis of Cahan's literary motivation, and by his comments concerning the Cahans' marriage. However, I disagree with Epstein's statement that the autobiography lacks "objectivity

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[12] Jerome Buckley, ***The Turning Key*** (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 119.
[13] William Dean Howells, "Editor's Easy Chair", ***Harper's Monthly Magazine***, CXIX, p. 796.

and suffers from numerous omissions".[14] First, the omissions do not detract from the narrative but rather enrich it by underlining the author's intentions in the most economical way. Secondly, autobiography, unlike biography, is both a purely subjective genre and an artistic creation. As Oscar Wilde commented: "[a]ll artistic creation is absolutely subjective".[15] Even in ***The Education of Henry Adams, An Autobiography*** and Gertrude Stein's ***The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas***, which might be considered as exceptions to this rule due to the fact that they were written in the third person, neither Stein nor Adams could avoid being both the "author" and "subject" of their autobiography. The title of Stein's "autobiography" is deceptive since the main subject of ***The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*** is Gertrude Stein. Thus the title and third-person narrative are respectively a means of disguise as well as a unique way of uniting a biography (of Toklas) and autobiography (of Stein) in one narrative.

CAHAN'S BEGINNING INTENTIONS

In his excellent study of Cahan, ***Downtown Jews***, Ronald Sanders uses Cahan's life to illustrate the historical development of the entire Jewish community of the Lower East Side. Sanders seems to have captured Cahan's autobiographical intentions most accurately in the structure of his book: like Franklin, whose autobiographical "act of conceiving, discovering, or inventing himself almost exactly coincides with the birth of America",[16] Cahan's life story coincides with the arrival, assimilation and success of the Lower East Side's Russian Jews.[17] In addition, Franklin uses the memoir as a means of "converting, using, and incorporating his desires, inner conflicts, doubts, and frustrations into a model life which in its turn can also be used by posterity";[18] likewise, Cahan's autobiography is written for his Yiddish readers--his only heirs, so to speak--as a model of success and assimilation. Cahan often recognizes the "sense of

[14] Melech Epstein, ***Profiles of Eleven*** (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965), p. 52.
[15] Buckley, ***The Turning Key***, p. 5.
[16] James Cox, "Autobiography and America", ***The Virginia Quarterly Review***, 47 (1971), p. 258.
[17] Ronald Sanders, ***The Downtown Jews*** (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), Chapter 1.
[18] Cox, "Autobiography and America", p. 257-258.

opportunity"[19] in America which Franklin promoted, and he appears to have identified with the American myth of rags to riches whose key to success was self-help and self-education: "I was the poor boy from Vilna who had educated himself by his own efforts".[20] In fact, Cahan's admission that Joseph Pulitzer, the owner-publisher of the ***New York World***, was a role model for him is direct proof of his belief in Franklin's philosophy of Industry, Frugality, and Perseverance.

> In [Pulitzer], the burning Jewish spirit of enterprise, along with his rare energy for work, found American channels for the achievement of success.[21]

Thus Cahan wanted not only to be the Russian Pulitzer of the Yiddish press but also the Benjamin Franklin of Jewish-American autobiographers, the self-inventor whose act of conceiving himself coincides with the birth of Jewish America.

The shifting nature of Cahan's intentions as an autobiographer is directly related to his polarization which I discussed above. On one hand, Cahan is the typological American hero of his story, "insofar as he writes of his own [life as a] repetition of historic acts".[22] He presents himself alternatively like Columbus, the first Jew to discover and promote the potential of the New World, like Washington, the father of the Lower East Side Jews, and like Franklin, the first successful, socialist, revolutionary publisher of the Yiddish community as well as the first autobiographical self-inventor of the Russian Jews. However, on the other hand, another Cahan lurks behind this somewhat mythical and monumental American figure of nobility and success. The other Cahan is full of yearning, loneliness, discontent, and is poignantly aware of the fact, similar to his favorite writer Tolstoy, that his greatest happiness lies in his childhood memories. This side is displayed most evidently in the melancholic voice of the narrator who implies, in the second paragraph of his autobiography, that his decision to write ***Bleter*** in 1923-26 was influenced by his first visit in fifty-eight years to his birthplace.

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[19] Cahan, ***Bleter***, p. 244.
[20] Ibid., p. 161.
[21] Ibid. p. 359.
[22] Fleishman, ***Figures of Autobiography***, p. 57.

> I was about five-and-one-half years old when we moved to Vilna and I did not see Podberezy again until fifty-eight years later when I visited there in 1923. But even after fifty-eight years I retained in my mind a clear picture of the little town. Had I been a painter I could have pictured, anytime during those years, every detail of the town.[23]

As Roy Pascal observed, the significance of autobiography is more truly understood as the revelation of the present situation of the autobiographer than as the uncovering of his past.[24] The very beginning of the narrative illustrates Cahan's nostalgia, melancholy, yearning for the past, and desire as an artist to reinvent the vivid world of Podberezy in the 1860s from New York in the 1920s. His first memory--crying while standing in the hole of an old, torn sofa which he had fallen into--is crucial since it introduces one of the most important symbols of the autobiography (the sofa), as well as the recurring motifs of "the feeling of sadness" and yearning that pervade the narrative: "[a]long with the sofa I remember a feeling of sadness, and I remember I cried but I cannot remember why".[25] It can be said that the sofa, which has a big hole and summons up feelings of sadness and nostalgia, is emblematic of Cahan's melancholic autobiography. His earliest memory--falling into the big hole in the sofa--can also be seen as a metaphor of circularity which is central to all autobiographies: it marks the birth of Cahan as a self-conscious individual as well as self-reflexive autobiographer while simultaneously foreshadowing the death of the elderly, retrospective narrator. Cahan's narrative is pervaded with similar moments of sadness, yearning and loss. There is a sense that this past can only be recreated through language, that nothing remains of this world represented by the narrative, and that deep down in Cahan's psyche is a recognition of this void, abyss, or breach with the past. It is this melancholic tone and sense of physical and psychological separation from the past that makes Cahan's voice so similar to David Levinsky's.

> When I think of my youth in a superficial, casual way, it seems to be separated from the present by a wider ocean than the one that lies between my American home

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[23] Cahan, *Bleter*, p. 3.
[24] Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 11.
[25] Cahan, *Bleter*, p. 3.

> and my Russian birthplace. I arrived in this country with four cents in my pocket. That was twenty-two years ago. Now I am recognized to be one of the leading men in the cloak and suit trade in the United States. Surely the contrast is striking enough. And yet, it is not always that the distinction comes home to me. Indeed, whenever I take a look at my inner self, it impresses me as being precisely the same as it was twenty-two, or thirty years ago; and then my present station, power, the amount of worldly happiness at my command, and the rest of it, strike me as something unreal.[26]

As Ronald Sanders remarks, one need only substitute the words "Yiddish press" for "cloak and suit trade", and David Levinsky seems to become Abraham Cahan.[27] However, what is most important about this quote is the fact that it shows that the narrator's voice is obsessed with the past and with the feelings of sadness and melancholy which clearly connects ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** to ***Bleter***.

MOTIFS AND METAPHORS: LANGUAGE AND THE FORBIDDEN

There is a recognizable pattern in ***Bleter*** of Cahan's tendency to describe his development in terms of an attraction to the "forbidden" or "taboos" such as the Russian grammar book, Russian schools, Russified Jewish girls, Russian revolutionary politics, Russian revolutionary activists, and Russian realistic literature. Pollock points out that the first forbidden object to attract Cahan is the Russian grammar book, but this is not exactly true. Cahan is drawn to any sort of forbidden language, and his earliest interests, in the language of sex and Russian, are partly responsible for his romantic conception of the love affair between two revolutionaries in ***The White Terror and the Red*** (1905). Cahan describes one of his first experiences of attraction to the language of sex in a scene that is strikingly similar to Henry Roth's description in ***Call It Sleep*** of David stealthily listening to his mother and Aunt Bertha's conversation about Genya's lover in the Old Country.

> Often I heard things an eight- or nine-year-old shouldn't hear.
>
> Once, one of the Kovno coopers, who respected my father's learning, came to him for advice. They sat at

[26] Abraham Cahan, "The Autobiography of an American Jew: The Rise of David Levinsky", ***McClure's Magazine***, 30 (1913), p. 92.
[27] Sanders, ***The Downtown Jews***, p. 419.

> the table near the sleeping bench. I was close by. They did not send me away, thinking perhaps that I did not understand their talk. But I understood more than they realized.
>
> I did not know everything but I knew that married couples could do things forbidden to unmarried couples. No one was permitted to see what they did. I also knew there were certain times when a man was not allowed to touch his wife, not even to take a spoon from her hand. I understood these were private matters, not to be discussed. But that was exactly why I was curious about them.[28]

Cahan's emphasis is not on the act itself but on its cultural significance as a taboo. Like David Schearl, the obscure language of sex stirs Cahan, and a desire to grasp or unravel the full meaning of the coded language enchants him. The fact that Cahan's father and the cooper conduct the conversation "near the sleeping bench" on the back of which Cahan drew his "dreams and fantasies" suggests a connection between language, creativity, fantasy, and eroticism which he associates with the sleeping bench. The passages directly following this scene recount other attractions to the obscurity of erotic language and sex: Abraham listens supposedly "out of earshot" to his Uncle Shneur talk with his father of "such things";[29] he overhears a goose dealer tell "how in accordance with Jewish law he abstained from having relations with his wife at a certain time of the month";[30] Cahan's friend, Isaac, tells him a sexual joke "about the mechanics of that which I still did not know. I listened in the hope of learning";[31] and the two Esthers make him sense "in their bodies and in their bearing and in their speech and manners a tenderness and a gentleness we "men" did not have".[32] So before Cahan shows any sign of interest in Russian, he displays an insatiable curiosity and attraction to the first language of taboo, namely sex. This attraction to the "forbidden" and obscure is one of the most important motifs in the narrative, and it partly explains his attraction to other "forbidden" languages: to Russian, which was initially forbidden since it was considered the first step towards apostasy; to revolutionary literature, since it dared to say what was not allowed and posed the threat of possible imprisonment; to

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[28] *Bleter*, p. 28.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid., p. 29.
[32] Ibid.

Yiddish, since it was considered an improper language to write in; to the kind of American journalism promoted by Lincoln Steffens at the *Commercial Advertiser*, since it broke the conventional reporting style and crossed social boundaries; and to English realism, which promoted a straightforward treatment of "the less romantic aspects of the relations between the sexes".[33] If Cahan was a revolutionary, it was primarily due to his revolutionary use of language rather than any other revolutionary achievements or acts, which makes him a kind of modernist.

THE SEEDS OF CONVERSION

Before I discuss Cahan's attraction to Russian, it is important to underline the fact that one of Cahan's primary intentions in "The Old Country" is to show that his abandonment of Judaism (or to put it another way, his interest in the Russian language, nihilism, literature and atheism) was encouraged by his father and paternal grandfather's own tendencies towards reform. The Haskalah movement, prompted by the Jewish intelligentsia "trained in modern Russian culture" who "urged that Hebrew be cultivated as the language of modern Jewish culture",[34] already had quite a strong influence in the Vilna area by the time of Cahan's birth in 1860. In Mendele Mocher Seforim's Yiddish novel, *The Nag* (1863), which was one of Cahan's favorite books, Isrulik's refusal to agree to an arranged marriage before his bar mitzvah (as was the custom of the orthodox Jews in Vilna at the time) demonstrates the strong influence of reform in the Vilna area and breakdown of religious customs and belief in the shtetl.

> I told her nothing but the plain truth, that what I had in mind was to study everything taught in the regular school, pass the examination, and enter a university to "study for a doctor," so as to become useful both to myself and to people in general.
>
> "Mother," I tried to convince her, "things are really not the same nowadays as they were in the past. It's high time, by God, to open our eyes to all these happy early marriages, to all these great joys of our beardless fathers. [...] Were I, however, to become a physician,

[33] Moses Rischin, "Abraham Cahan and the New York *Commercial Advertiser*", *Publication of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 43 (1953), p. 11.
[34] Cahan, *Bleter*, p. 31.

> new vistas would open up before me and I would get on in the world.[35]

For Cahan and Yezierska (both children of religious teachers, or *melameds*), the main result of the reform movement in the shtetl was to encourage young men and women to put a profession or career before marriage. Like Isrulik, Cahan yearned to enlarge his vistas due to a feeling of constriction by the rituals and beliefs of Orthodox Judaism, and although he had no desire to become a doctor, he did eventually study and practise law in New York for a few years. Cahan was expected to follow in his father and grandfather's footsteps as a religious scholar, a role designated to him by his priestly descent as a Cahan (also spelled as Cohen): "Others often cautioned me to persevere in my studies and to conduct myself in a manner befitting the grandson of a rabbi".[36] However, although Cahan points out that his grandfather was "the pride of our family and the people of Podberezy" due to a "knowledge of Hebrew" that was "greater than that of the majority of rabbis of his time", he readjusts his relationship to his grandfather by inserting a fact concerning his grandfather's less orthodox religious pursuits which Cahan discovered as an adult: "Years later, I found that one of the notebooks was a lexicon of synonyms".[37] In other words, he mentions this obscure and iconoclastic secular work since it is blatant proof of his grandfather's influence by the Haskalah movement. Thus Cahan wants to create the impression that his own polarization between religious and secular, or Jewish and gentile, pursuits can be partly attributed to the man who was supposed to be Cahan's spiritual model and to make him "feel [his] own importance" and religious obligations as the great man's grandson.

Although the Jewish community played a significant role in Cahan's life, there is a clear movement away from orthodoxy towards secular reform as illustrated by his father's increasingly unorthodox interests such as Hebrew literature and Yiddish songs. An enlightening incident occurs after Cahan's description of his grandfather's respected place in the community and before his

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[35] Mendele Mocher Seforim, ***The Nag*** (New York: Beechhurst Press, 1955), p. 16, 17.
[36] Cahan, ***Bleter***, p. 5.
[37] Ibid.

introductory description of his father's job as *melamed*. Coincidentally, it is at this time that Cahan notes he was "beginning to notice words and speech".[38] One conversation that sticks in his memory is about his father's nephew, Benchka, a "goodlooking", "shy", "earnest" Yeshiva student who often took meals with the Cahan family. What is most surprising is that Cahan's description of Benchka sounds remarkably like Cahan's older self: the handsome, defiant, daydreamer who is drawn to atheism and thus falls into disgrace.

> He seemed to move among us as if he were wrapped in a mist that insulated him from worldly matters.
> Then suddenly he was gone from Podberezy. People whispered about him. I sensed he had fallen into disgrace. I heard talk about Benchka and Constantinople; my father cursed his name; my paternal aunts sighed and groaned. Later, when we were living in Vilna, I learned what a great crime Benchka had committed: he had renounced our faith. We heard no more of Benchka.[39]

Thus Cahan is foreshadowing his own conversion which later resulted in a similar reaction by the family and breach between him and his father.[40] Although he later claims that he had made up with his father before he left for America, only his mother and his aunt accompanied him to the railway station when he departed for Velizh. Despite his comment that "[his father] was coming along", which in its imperfect tense suggests that it never happened, only his mother and aunt seem to be present at the departure.[41] In addition, Cahan admits that he didn't write to his family once during the first ten years he was in New York. His first meeting with his parents in eleven years (1893) plagued him with feelings of guilt and melancholy due to the huge cultural and ideological gap that now separated them. It was this trip to Europe that inspired him to write fiction in the 1890s; similarly, his trip exactly thirty years later to Podberezy in 1923 plunged him back into another nostalgic mood which motivated him to write his autobiography. Cahan was

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[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., p. 6.
[40] Ibid., directly following this description Cahan relates his "crime" of desecrating his father's tobacco grinding ritual which portends his desecration of the Sabbath several years later, p. 6-7.
[41] Ibid., p. 163.

motivated by guilt and regret, and these emotions found their outlet in both his fiction and autobiography.

THE FALL

It is interesting that Cahan describes his first contact with Russian after a relatively long section on the "holy aura" of the Sabbath.[42] The Sabbath section ends with an idyllic family scene of father reading the *Midrash*, mother a Yiddish translation of the *Pentateuch*, and little Abraham the *Sefer Ha-Yosher*, a book of morality in Yiddish. The description of his father's Sabbath appearance signals the first time that Cahan slips into the present tense in his narrative--"Dressed for the Sabbath, my father emerges through the door of our tavern"[43]--which suggests the urgency of his identification with his father, as if he were trying to revive him from the dead.[44] Cahan is proud not only of his father but also of the beauty of the Sabbath service in the synagogue: "I would feel the beauty in the synagogue--beauty for the eye and the ear and the heart".[45] The pervasive beauty of the Sabbath service, coupled with the peaceful and united family at the end of the Sabbath meal, appear in Cahan's retrospective glance as a kind of undisturbed paradise from which he is later cast out. The myth of the fall from grace is a common form of biblical typology found in autobiographical narrative, and it is often used as a structural device which Martha Rank Lifson discusses in terms of paradise, fall, and recreation.

> What occurs next in the sequence of events [after the timelessness of childhood Eden], is the fall from Eden, the loss of harmony, and a new and sharp experience of pain, death, chaos, darkness, and sin.[46]

Cahan describes this period of timeless childhood paradise and family harmony as "a treasured song, a godly song"[47] which is a metaphor that recurs often in his narrative and is often associated with his father. The section which directly follows this description of the Sabbath idyll seems clearly to represent the disharmony or

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[42] Ibid., p. 37.
[43] Ibid., p. 36.
[44] Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, p. 249.
[45] Cahan, *Bleter*, p. 36.
[46] Martha Lifson, "The Myth of the Fall", *Genre*, 12 (1979), p. 50.
[47] Cahan, *Bleter*, p. 38.

destruction of this paradise or "treasured song", where time and sin emerge during a self-conscious decision to break specific taboos--in this case religious, sexual, as well as linguistic taboos.

> The first year that I remember in numbers is 1869. One winter evening in January of that year, as I was undressing for bed, my mother noticed me hiding something in my pocket. It was a small Russian primer. "Where did you get this?" she demanded.[48]

When the above passage is considered within the context of the myth of the fall, a clear connection between religious and sexual taboos can be observed. Cahan, shamelessly undressing in front of his mother, becomes simultaneously aware and ashamed of that "small Russian primer" hidden "in [his] pocket".[49] Here the new Russian grammar and new sexual taboos overlap. The scene is so traumatic that it marks the first moment of chronologically-remembered time, the end of timeless childhood, and a new awareness of pain and sin associated here with evil: "I was a ben yochid, an only son, with the right ear pierced in order to avert evil".[50] Cahan admits that "[i]n the normal events my parents would have seen to it that I learned some Russian", but although they "terminate" his "financial arrangement" with a tutor, they cannot "terminate" his desire to continue learning the forbidden language, "I would try to read every scrap of Russian I could find. I read all the Russian labels on the bottles in our tavern".[51]

The following section describes Cahan's next sin with a more typological language of the biblical fall. Here, Cahan and his gang from the courtyard attempt to steal apples, like Saint Augustine, from the storehouse in the alley just opposite the shochet, "where crowds would assemble with their kapuras, sacrificial chickens, on Yom Kippur eve".[52] Thus the places of sin and temptation--the storehouse--and purification and righteousness--the *shochet*--are physically and morally opposed.

> Once we dug a tunnel under the wall of the storehouse. In turn, each boy reached through for an apple. When it was my turn, I stretched my arm through and closed my fingers around an apple.

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[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid., p. 39.
[52] Ibid., p. 41.

> I was about to draw it out when--a fiend had my finger. It held on. I could not free myself. Eventually the rat let go. I pulled my arm out without an apple.[53]

The scene is important since it shows Cahan's polarized self: on one hand, he is portrayed as yielding to temptation, but on the other hand, he is suddenly seized on the verge of breaking some taboo by a "fiend" or a "rat"--admonitory examples respectively of conscience and sin--and withdraws frustrated but still wracked with guilt. The next section in ***Bleter*** illustrates this point. At the age of nine and without his parents' permission, Cahan enrolled in a government school where he could learn Russian. Connected to his desire to learn this language was his knowledge that Russian is a "forbidden" language.

> I anticipated that my father would be angry with me for enrolling without his knowledge. Instead, when I returned home and told him what I had done, he was proud of me, saying I had shown noteworthy bravery for one so young.[54]

Although Cahan stays in the class, his first inclination is to pull out of the school, which proves to be impossible even though he brings his father there to help him get permission to leave. As in the Russian grammar book episode, Cahan's desire to learn the "forbidden language" is made to seem an irreversible process and one which he even goes so far as to attribute to the Jews: "It was the Jewish intelligentsia, wishing to spread secular education among the Jews, that exerted pressure on the officials [to teach Jews Russian]".[55] Shortly afterwards, Cahan's father makes the "astounding proposal" to enroll Abe in the Rabiner school which Cahan remarks could only mean "to turn [a Jew] into a goy".[56] Thus Cahan attempts retrospectively to rid himself of his guilt, which was rooted in a personal desire to learn Russian, by attributing this sin which clearly led to conversion to both the Jewish intellectuals and his father. To learn Russian means to become a "goy" or apostate, and this conversion is foreshadowed by Benchka, encouraged by his father, and aided by the "evil"

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[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid., p. 42.
[56] Ibid., p. 47.

influences of Vilna. Even though Cahan's father is ultimately dissuaded from sending Abe to the Rabiner school by Abe's maternal grandfather, his intentions are more important than the results. As with the grammar book, forbidding something only makes Cahan desire it more intensely.

FUSION OF MOTIFS: BIRTH OF A JOURNALIST AND WRITER

Already by the end of the third chapter of "The Old Country", Cahan begins to fuse the major motifs of his life in order to demonstrate a kind of providential development of the Yiddish editor and English writer. However, before I discuss how he fuses these motifs, it is necessary to look closely at a story he retells in his narrative which he heard at his *cheder*. This story gives us some insight into his preoccupation as author of an autobiography, and into the meaning of his narrative in particular.

> Once a youngster whom we had with us on the porch told a story that I have never forgotten.
>
> In that story a treasure is being sought. The man digs deeper and deeper. Suddenly, from deep in the earth, a human voice is heard. Someone is singing. It is a sleeping child. The deeper the digging, the louder and more beautiful becomes the singing voice. The digger is bewitched. Now he no longer seeks the treasure. Instead, he must find the child. But the more frantically he digs, the more beautiful and the more distant is the melodious voice.
>
> That is all I remember. It still intrigues me. Where had the lad found the story? From whom? In what book?[57]

This sounds less like a story he heard than a dream, which fuses the motifs of the idyllic past of the child, the self-analytical present of the digging man, and the future, where the "digging" man dies and joins the "buried child" under ground. It is interesting that the man searches for the singing child on one narrative level (in the story), and Cahan searches in vain for the source of his friend's story on another level (in his autobiography). The story is not important to Cahan as a boy but to Cahan the autobiographer, whose attempt to recreate or rediscover the world of his childhood is analogous to the man digging for the treasure and then the child. The "song" of the sleeping child, which simultaneously lures the man away from the treasure and tempts him to continue digging, reminds

[57] Ibid., p. 51.

one of Cahan's description of his idyllic childhood in Podberezy as a "treasured song".[58] The motifs of success, here represented by the treasure, and of the unrecoverable world of his childhood, symbolized by the ever-receding voice of the sleeping child, illustrate Cahan's polarization as narrator of his autobiography. His first intention, to describe the method and achievement of his success in his autobiography, gets sidetracked by the beautiful and somewhat haunting voice of his childhood. In the process of describing this discovery of success the autobiographer begins to "dig deeper", a metaphor for introspection as well as for the obstructed path to the earliest memories: the deeper the man digs, the more beautiful but also more distant the voice becomes. This point supports my statement above of Cahan's portrayal of his first five years at Podberezy as an unattainable paradise that is symbolized by Cahan's father's melancholic and moving Sabbath songs. However, this world of his childhood is beyond reach, and the juxtaposition of the frantically digging man and ever-receding child's voice illustrates the unbridgeable gap between the past and present which is the void at the heart of his narrative. The past can only be simulated through language, which can only hint at the beauty of the past (the child's voice) without being able to reproduce or capture it. Cahan is intrigued by the story for the same reason he is intrigued by autobiographical narrative. It is his only means of attempting to bridge the gap between the present and past, and a sense of futility and sadness is evident in both the story and the retelling of it.

The physical location where Cahan hears the story of the "digging man", as well as the story's position in the narrative, highlight its crucial importance and relevance to our understanding of the famous author of ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** and editor of the ***Jewish Daily Forward.*** Cahan tells the reader that his *cheder* was moved to the same building that housed the "famous" Rom printshop, whose large Yiddish press could be seen through the windows adjacent to the *cheder* on the first floor, and whose smaller Russian section was on the upper floor of the two story building. This move brings together the four major influences and interests of his life: the Jewish religious institution, the Yiddish press, his

[58] Ibid., p. 38.

fascination with literature or story-telling, and his attraction to foreign languages (here Russian). The description of the physical location of the *cheder* and Yiddish press on the first floor is crucial since it juxtaposes his Jewish and Yiddish interests which were later fused in his career as editor of the largest Yiddish daily and foreign language newspaper in the United States. The print shop, which fascinates him in every detail, can be seen through the windows on the wall opposite the *cheder*. The fact that the Rom press was "famous" is an important element of its attraction, and here it is suggested as a primary influence in Cahan's interest as a Yiddish journalist and editor of a Yiddish press.

If the lower floor represents Cahan's non-fictional, journalistic interest in Yiddish, the upper floor of the building represents his romantic, imaginative, and creative side that is lured by new languages and new stories which "stir" him, an illustration of the powerful effect of foreign words on the youth. Cahan and his friends tell stories on the "upper porch" of the floor above the *cheder*, and it is important to note that "[t]he Russian press room opened onto" their story-telling area.[59] Here Cahan highlights his imaginative side which is merged with the "taboo" inherent in all things Russian. The narrative location of the story-telling underlines his inclinations towards Russian and away from Judaism since we are told about it directly after a section that outlines the external threats to his religious convictions such as war, anti-Semitism, the cholera epidemic, and especially the proposal by his father that he attend the Rabiner school. The story about the man digging for treasure is followed by a highly "forbidden activity" that prefigures his later career as a socialist editor.

> Once we found a whole box of pied type and grabbed handfuls. Later, the rebbe caught us selling the "printings." He frightened us with a terrible warning that we could be arrested--not for stealing but for possessing printing materials without authorization. A long time later I learned how sternly the government controlled such materials and what this meant in terms of free press.[60]

This story is remarkably similar to that of stealing the apples but now the guilt is connected to the possession of the forbidden type

[59] Ibid., p. 51.
[60] Ibid.

and the boy's conscience is not the "fiend" or "rat" but the "rebbe". Cahan's conscious didacticism surfaces here. He shows us the development of the successful newspaper editor and revolutionary journalist who is already selling the "printings", unconsciously involved in, if not anticipating the revolutionary political question of a "free press". Thus he attempts to show that the seeds of revolutionary propagandist and socialist editor were planted early in his development. Cahan, ever conscious of sin, follows this incident with an obscure passage about failing to pay for--in essence stealing--cookies from a girl. His failure to pay up promptly "embarrasses him" and although he doesn't have to account for his debts when he learns that her recent absence is due to her marriage, he remains plagued "with the question: 'What of my sin?'"[61] The transformation from religious *cheder* adolescent to socialist adult requires a way of avoiding sin, which he eventually discovers in his conversion to atheism. Thus atheism takes on a distinctly religious function of the conquest of sin. In any event, Cahan attempts to show that this apostasy was already predetermined in "The Old Country".

CONVERSIONS: FROM JUDAISM TO ATHEISM AND SOCIALISM

Cahan's desire to master new languages is a central motif in his autobiography, and perhaps the best means of understanding his conversion from Judaism to atheism and socialism. As Eakin remarks:

> the achievement of speech becomes the controlling metaphor for the constitution of self, suggesting that the autobiographical act functions as a second acquisition of language.[62]

The "constitution" of Cahan's "self" is clearly displayed in terms of the achievement of different kinds of speech, each representing a stage in his development: the speech of the self-conscious, sexually aware child, of the language of transformation and escape (Russian), of the socially superior Vilna dialect, of revolutionary jargon, of Jewish nationalism (Yiddish), of the developing artist (English), and finally the unifying language of autobiography. In each case, the acquisition of a new type of speech represents either intellectual progress or social ascent.

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[61] Ibid., p. 53.
[62] Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, p. 237.

Cahan's decision to learn new languages or dialects (especially Russian) is directly related to a desire for social promotion that is initiated by his family's economic and social decline, which he clearly resents. Although Cahan inherited an elevated social position as a "descendant of the priestly [Cahan or Cohen] tribe" in Podberezy,[63] he became keenly aware of the stigma attached to his "country cousin" dialect from Podberezy which branded him as a "lower order of being" when his family moved to Vilna.[64] His ability to "acquire the new accent and vernacular easily" resulted in his assimilation to Vilna's Yiddish society which entitled him to "[point] out others as country cousins".[65] Thus his linguistic transformation enabled him to achieve the desired superior status in Vilna.

Similarly, Cahan's attraction to the son of Abraham David also illustrates the connection between language and social promotion, since he is drawn to David's son both because of his language and envied position as a student at the Rabiner school.

> I also remember Abraham David, the fur dyer, and his son who studied at the Rabiner school. When the young man was with ordinary Jews, he spoke as we all did, but for me it seemed it was the language of another world, a world both Jewish and non-Jewish.[66]

It is interesting that Cahan is the only one who seems to notice that David's son's Yiddish is tinged with a flavor of "another world"; this is due to the fact that he associates David's son directly with the school in which he desires to study where classes were conducted exclusively in Russian, the language of temptation, taboo and conversion. However, unlike the language of a scholar at the Rabiner school, which represents social ascent and thus lures Cahan, the language of the carpenter's workshop, where he is sent as an apprentice due to his father's financial difficulties, exemplifies social decline and therefore disgusts him.

> Friday morning the carver began an important piece of work. He carved the pattern of a flower in full bloom onto a board. His sister-in-law came into the shop. She was dark and attractive.
> "What is that?" she asked, pointing to the work.
> He answered her in shocking language. She lowered

[63] Cahan, *Bleter*, p. 34.
[64] Ibid., p. 13.
[65] Ibid., p. 14.
[66] Ibid., p. 59.

> her eyes but did not protest against the insult. Perhaps she was accustomed to his rough talk. But I wasn't. I turned red with embarrassment and frightened at the thought that this was the language of the world to which I now belonged.[67]

Cahan leaves the apprenticeship primarily due to the fact that he resents any form of social decline, and here it is related primarily to the carver's vulgar language. The only way for him to escape from the vulgar "world" of the carpenter's shop to the aristocratic world of his daydreams, is by entering the forbidden world of the Rabiner school where he can learn Russian properly.

Cahan's desire to leave the carpenter's shop is partly motivated by the birth of his brother, Isaac, which occurs a few months after Abraham's bar mitzvah, diminishes Cahan's status in the family, and exacerbates the feeling of social decline which he felt when forced into the position of carpenter's apprentice.

> I remember that as soon as I was shown my new brother [...] the midwife whispered to me, "Now you have a brother; now you are cheaper; you are no longer a ben yochid," I left the house and ran.[68]

Although Cahan later claims that his brother was a "welcome arrival to me", he clearly resents a "cheapening" in any form, either by his apprenticeship, the birth of his brother, or his father's business failure. The motif of running away from home--especially from the poverty and failure related to his father--recurs later in Cahan's departures from Vilna and Russia. In both cases, his departure is connected to a desire for social respectability, a quest for self-improvement that is often portrayed heroically. Cahan's love of uniforms--especially military and school uniforms--is clearly related to this desire for social respectability and official acceptance: his detailed description of the gymnasium uniform is followed immediately by the comment that, "[t]his was an extraordinary time--one that deeply influenced my own developing ambitions".[69] Cahan is preparing us for one of his "marvellous transformations" through clothing, which resembles David Levinsky's when he cuts his sidelocks in the novel's most significant act of apostasy and assimilation.

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[67] Ibid., p. 67.
[68] Ibid., p. 64.
[69] Ibid., p. 75.

> Four years of study and then a petty official post, a teaching position, brass buttons and a frock coat, a cap with a cockade--what better career was there for a boy of my circumstances? But tuition for the gymnasium or realschule was prohibitive, beyond the reach of my father's slender purse.[70]

> My dearest wish, my fondest hope, is finally fulfilled. I am a student at the Vilna Teacher Training Institute--eating government meals, wearing a government uniform.[71]

There is a slight reproach levelled at his father at the end of the first quote; Cahan really wanted to go to the gymnasium since "the Institute was held to be a bit lower [than the gymnasium]".[72] Thus, it is not surprising that as soon as he gains entry to the previously forbidden Vilna Institute his interest in the place dissolves and is replaced by a new desire to enter the Vilna gymnasium, which he never manages to attend. His envy of the students at the gymnasium was connected to the fact that they were heading for careers as doctors and laywers whereas the Insitute students were only training to be teachers. He was extremely lonely and unhappy at this period, which foreshadows the increasing unhappiness and yearning that accompanied his increasing success and importance in America: "The more acquaintences I had, the more miserable, lonesome, and inferior I felt. Everyone seemed bigger and more important than I".[73] Perhaps his envy and feeling of inferiority account for his desire to become a lawyer, famous socialist figure, editor, and writer in the United States.

Cahan's interests turn increasingly towards new taboos during his four years at the Institute, and his attraction to his schoolmate, Herska Levinson, once again illustrates the connections between breaking religious and sexual taboos.

> Being older, he had had sex experiences which were still a mystery to me. When he spoke of these with the same cynicism he showed toward religion I would wish for more respectable, more romantic language.[74]

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[70] Ibid., p. 76.
[71] Ibid., p. 105.
[72] Ibid., p. 123.
[73] Ibid., p. 130.
[74] Ibid., p. 76-77.

In essence, Cahan is stirred both by Herska's provocative erotic language and his atheism. Though he criticizes Herska's cynical and unromantic attitude towards Judaism, Cahan proves to be an even "better atheist" than Herska since atheism finally provides him with the means of renouncing his feelings of sin and guilt. Cahan's new fearlessness and dismissal of God creates a new challenge to propagandize his new belief, an early form of didacticism which Cahan later perfects as a socialist editor and speaker: "I proclaimed my atheistic ideas to all. I remember one of my friends from the horse market whom I had propagandized".[75] Thus the next logical step to take, from atheist to revolutionary, is not a very big one especially when one keeps in mind the messianic nature of the "vast movement" of 1873-74 which "inaugurated the revolutionary era".[76] Stepniak, one of Cahan's favourite writers on the revolutionary underground, describes the leaders of the revolutionary movement as "missionaries of Socialism", and locates the "apotheosis" of the first period of revolutionary activity between 1874 and 1878--a period which corresponds exactly to Cahan's gradual involvement in revolutionary politics.

> The type of propagandist of the first lustre of the last decade was religious rather than revolutionary. His faith was Socialism. His god the people.[77]

Thus it is not surprising that Cahan often describes his conversion to socialism in religious terms, which enabled him to substitute his new political faith for Judaism.[78] Cahan's attraction to the "quasi-terrorist"[79] Land and Freedom party who wanted to spread their Populist ideology to the Russian folk, illustrates his desire for acceptance by the gentile world; the fact that their political "mission" was to convert the Russian-speaking folk and later Russian-speaking workers to the movement was undoubtedly a

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[75] Ibid., p. 89.
[76] Stepniak, *Underground Russia* (London: Smith, Elder and Company, 1883), p. 24-5.
[77] Ibid., p. 15.
[78] He also appears to want to divest himself of his Jewish background when, for example, he envies his Petersburg cousins for their inability to speak Yiddish (p. 160): its odd that Cahan would envy another's inability to speak Yiddish, which strikes me as a mild form of self-hatred.
[79] Lionel Kochan and Richard Abraham, *The Making of Modern Russia* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1983), p. 215.

primary motivating force for Cahan. However, his desire to become involved with the "egalitarian" revolutionary circle in Vilna was combined with a strong attraction to the aristocratic roots of the converted nobility who led the revolutionary movement in the 1870s such as Dimitri Pisarev, the son of an impoverished Russian nobleman, Elena von Racowita, the daughter of a Bavarian diplomat and wife of a Count, Sergius Schevitsch, a Noble-born Russian educated in Germany and England, Michael Bakunin, member of an aristocratic family and cousin of a Czarist general, Sofia Perovskaya, the daughter of a Petersburg governor-general, and Prince Peter Kropotkin, a prolific writer and descendant of an ancient Russian family. His idealization and envy of those with superior social status explain Cahan's attraction to these revolutionary heroes. However, he also idolizes Jewish revolutionaries like Ferdinand Lassalle, who attracts him primarily because of Cahan's identification with Lassalle's "restless gropings beyond his middle-class Jewish origins in search of a gesture that would transform him, now into an aristocrat, now into a proletarian".[80] Cahan was drawn to socialism not only by the romance of doing something illegal, as Pollock suggests, but also due to his association of the revolutionary movement with these converted aristocrats and Jews. One shouldn't forget that Cahan considered himself as a convert to socialism from the priestly Cahan tribe. Hence the gesture of conversion to socialism seems to appeal to him at least as much as the ideology itself.

LITERATURE AND REVOLUTION: THE READER AND BYSTANDER

Within a year of his bar mitzvah and his brother's birth, Cahan becomes an atheist, loses his interest in Hebrew literature, and gains an avid interest in Russian folk songs and literature, especially Gogol and Turgenev. The birth of his brother and his family's desperate economic situation in 1874 were vital influences in his conversion to atheism and later socialism. He begins to show how he developed both into a revolutionary and the hero of his autobiography through "hard work" and a bit of "pure chance". However, the more he attempts to portray himself as the hero of his

[80] Sanders, *Downtown Jews*, p. 61.

autobiography, the more obvious and frequent are the narrative molestations and inconsistencies.

Cahan's discovery of secular literature and the Vilna library has such an important influence on his life that it is portrayed heroically, as a crucial victory and turning point in his life. Though Cahan discovers the Vilna library at the age of fourteen, it isn't until he was over fifteen that he "had the courage" to enter the building with "Vilna Public Library" written on it in alluring gold letters, making it emblematic of the new temple of the apostate. Once again the religious terms of conversion increase: Cahan learns that it is as "easy to enter the library as to enter [a] Chassid's synagogue", discovers that the library has both rules and dress requirements just like a synagogue, and comments that "[t]he Vilna Public Library became for me a temple of learning and inspiration".[81] Although Cahan 's desire to read Turgenev at the Vilna library forces him to get a new suit, his spiritual transformation hinges just as much on his change of clothing as it does on the material he reads there. The suit, combined with the works of Turgenev, makes him feel more "gentile", and it is his ability to accomplish this "victorious" transformation from Jew to gentile that pleases him the most.

> Now I entered, removed my purple capote and, resplendent in my own new jacket, handed the outer garment to the porter. He gave me a round brass check with a number on it. Victorious, I entered the reading room, soon had my Turgenev at the reading table and felt ten times more gentile than I had ever felt before.[82]

Cahan is excited both by the apostasy of the act and by the knowledge that he was reading "Turgenev's lines on the death of Gogol in an article for which he had been arrested"; however, he admits to doubts that he "really understood Turgenev".[83] Although he claims that his main enjoyment of Turgenev comes from the "beauty of his writing",[84] it is ironically a language that he fails to understand; although he reads Ostrovski's *The Storm*, Dobrolyubov's critique of the play, Pisarev's works, and a critique of

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[81] Cahan, *Bleter*, p. 95, 97.
[82] Ibid., p. 96.
[83] Ibid., p. 97.
[84] Ibid.

Chernishevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* because they were "forbidden", he fails to grasp why the books had been banned.[85] Once again, part of the lure is the need to decode the language, and this process of textual interpretation resembles the Talmudic study which Cahan gave up and supplants with Russian revolutionary literature. Thus it is not surprising that Cahan talks of this initial ideological transformation in religious terms, with the Vilna library as a *cheder* and temple substitute.

At the age of sixteen, Cahan clearly begins to show the effects of his reading on his behavior. The first sign of a literary influence on his vivid adolescent imagination is evident in his description of the Goosery hideaway where he and his schoolmates read adventure stories and conduct sexual games with the girls they can lure there: "It was the kind of hideaway [that] an author of cheap mysteries would have chosen as headquarters for his gang of thieves or counterfeiters or kidnappers".[86] This cameraderie with the older boys fills him with "stimulating impressions and experiences", and Cahan's attraction to closed, utopian (often male) societies recurs throughout his narrative.[87]

> Here began the restless stirrings, spiritual and physical, which come to a young man in the years when his body and mind begin to bloom into adulthood.[88]

It is interesting that Cahan associates his spiritual (read political) growth with his physical desires since a connection between sexuality and revolutionary politics is evident not only in this adolescent phase but throughout his life. Cahan claims that they spent many "lusty hours of the sort one does not write about" at the Goosery with girls of "respectable families", "not street girls".[89] However, the same youth who supposedly participates in these "lusty" assignations later proves to be so naive and self-conscious

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[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid., p. 99.
[87] Other examples are the Sabbath synagogue service, the cantors' meetings at the Cahans' brandy storage, the *cheder*, the Rabiner School, the Vilna Institute, the Goosery, the Narodnaia Volia group, the Am Olam movement, *Die Freie Zeit*, the *Commercial Advertiser*, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, and the numerous literary and social clubs to which Cahan belonged.
[88] Ibid., p. 102.
[89] Ibid., p. 100.

with one of the "young ladies" from the Vilna gymnasium that he is even afraid to kiss her!

> Afterward, I regretted my lack of courage. Had I understood her? Had she really wanted me to kiss her? Me, the one with the crossed eyes? Why had she walked with me in the deserted street near the river bank so late at night? If she had really meant it, she must now think me a "schlimazel."[90]

Cahan considers the relationship with a gymnasium "Fräulein" as a purely intellectual one consisting of taking walks, treating each other in the spirit of equality, and loaning books to one another; not only must she "speak Russian fluently, have a modern approach, and a command of the social graces", but after establishing her "equality" she is expected to "proceed to make the most of her feminine helplessness".[91] In other words, Cahan is both surprised and repulsed when the gymnasium girl asserts her female sexuality rather than playing her expected non-threatening, "helpless" role. Cahan uses his "crossed" eyes as an excuse in this scene with the gymnasium girl, but we are told that his eye infection occurred way before the Goosery days when he used it as a convenient excuse to leave a drawing class. His eyes, which cause him so much embarrassment with the gymnasium girl, didn't seem to hinder him previously at the Goosery. Thus it is not too farfetched to assume that Cahan was only an observer of his older friends' sexual encounters at the Goosery and still sexually inexperienced during his years at the Vilna Institute.

The point concerning sex is crucial since Cahan's "physical" development, i.e. his sexual "stirrings", plays a central role in his political or "spiritual" development. When one compares Cahan's descriptions of the "lusty" hours in the Goosery to his traumatic encounter with the "young lady" from the gymnasium, one begins to sense that he is afraid of any physical encounter with women. His frustrated desire for platonic courting has direct repercussions in his inclination towards the terrorist fraction of the Land and Freedom party, whose reputation for self-denial in sexual matters must have attracted him. The substitution of Cahan's interests in the sexually forbidden by the political or literary forbidden

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[90] Ibid., p. 136.
[91] Ibid., p. 131, 132.

supposedly occurs at the Goosery when Aaron Lieberman's disturbing underground pamphlet reaches them.

> This leaflet was the first underground, forbidden writing I had ever seen. We didn't understand fully the ideas it communicated but we were all shaken by it.[92]

This incident is pivotal not only because it seems to break up the group, but also because Cahan contradicts himself more frequently in the process of portraying his sexual and political development which suggests that he is hiding something. This becomes clear later when he claims that he was brought into contact with his first "forbidden" writing at the Vilna Institute, which was long after the Goosery incident above.

> Departing, [Halperin] drew from his pocket a forbidden pamphlet and handed it to me. It was the first underground pamphlet I ever held in my hands. I handled it with reverence and a feeling of exalted excitement as I realized that it was published by the same group that had sought to blow up the Czar's train.
>
> I will never forget that moment. I felt it as a turning point in my life. The pamphlet came from people who lived as brothers, who were willing to face the gallows for freedom.[93]

This description is reminiscent of the discovery of the "Russian primer" in his pocket which created tension between Cahan and his parents. Cahan equates learning Russian with reading underground literature since both led him away from Judaism and caused his relationship with his parents to deteriorate. However, the motif of the fall from grace in the scene with the Russian primer is now transformed into a kind of symbolic revelation which results from his reading of underground literature. But if his first contact with forbidden literature was so "unforgettable", then why does he claim that his first encounter with "underground, forbidden writing" occurred at the Goosery? It seems clear that Cahan is trying to predate his real interest in revolutionary politics by merging the eroticism and male camaraderie of his Goosery days with the camaraderie and terrorism of the revolutionary underground which he learns about later in the Institute. Thus Cahan's political

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[92] Ibid., p. 101.
[93] Ibid., p. 142.

development is exaggerated and his sexual development blurred in order to disguise his difficulties and insecurities during his adolescence at the Vilna Institute.

The two recurrent themes of literary and erotic taboos merge at the Goosery, where the former "shakes" him and the latter excites him. The pattern is reversed at the Institute: as his political courage rises in the Institute when he defends himself from a teacher's verbal assault and is punished for his insubordination, his sexual courage fails him in the scene with the gymnasium student. Cahan, the pseudo-hero of the "lusty" Goosery group, transforms himself into the political hero of the Vilna Institute--the first to defend himself from his teacher's tyranny and abuse. He subtly implies a growing socialist consciousness with roots in Judaism and inspiration by the realists when he comments how he reads Tolstoy's *War and Peace* during his "imprisonment" on "Yom Kippur", the holiest Jewish holiday which is observed with fasting and prayer. However, Cahan clearly exaggerates his own courage by comparing his relatively trivial insubordination to the terrorism of the revolutionaries who were imprisoned, tried, and executed for their attempted assassination of the Czar. Although Cahan idolized the terrorists of the Land and Freedom party, his commitment to the revolution was purely intellectual. However, that doesn't prevent him from identifying with the cause of the terrorists.

> I cannot say that the three days of my "imprisonment" made me feel deeply sympathetic toward the secret fighters for freedom. But as I paced my "cell" I realized that I was being punished for telling Dadikin the truth. And the revolutionaries were also being punished for telling the truth.[94]

Cahan then contradicts himself when he says, "the admiration, sympathy and awe" for those who blew up the Czar's dining room "were those of a bystander".[95] First he claims he has no sympathy for them, but then he both sympathizes with them and is awed by them. However, he reproaches himself after the latter admission of sympathy by comparing himself to a bystander, the position which Cahan seems to have had at the Goosery and one which he felt he had taken towards the revolution throughout his life. On one hand

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[94] Ibid., p. 141.
[95] Ibid.

Cahan re-invents himself in the image of his revolutionary heroes, but on the other hand, he seems to distort his real participation at the Goosery and exaggerates his association with the Land and Freedom party. This feeling of having been a bystander rather than participant in both groups results in Cahan's greatest sense of guilt and self-reproach.

It is clear that Cahan has a cowardly side as well as a blatantly prudish streak, which explains his inability to kiss the young woman from the gymnasium, his desire for a more romantic language from Herska Levinson, and his silence concerning the supposedly "lusty" hours which he took part in at the Goosery. In his revealing preface to his Yiddish translation (1895) of Tolstoy's "Kreutzer Sonata", Cahan offers "an account of two revolutionaries who fall in love while they are printing illegal leaflets" as his example of an ideal and "possible" relationship.[96] The key to the failure of Cahan's marriage to Aniuta might lie in his relationship with the gymnasium girl who wanted to kiss him; in both cases he expected a platonic and highly intellectual relationship with the revolution as their mutual interest but was shocked to discover that this gymnasium "Fräulein" was a liberated, independent-minded and sexually demanding woman. As Sanders has suggested, the revolution itself "becomes [Cahan's] justification for an ecstasy of painfully expressed eroticism", and his love for a woman is attached, like the Revolution itself, to a messianic promise. Unfortunately, although Aniuta Bronstein, the gymnasium girl from Kiev, seems to have attracted Cahan due to her intelligence, education, and interest in the revolution, Cahan wanted her to assume the role of "feminine helplessness" which he expected from the gymnasium girl.[97]

THE PURITAN REVOLUTIONARY

Cahan is drawn to his first real revolutionaries in Vilna due to the "certain manner that set them apart". This is his first real contact with an active revolutionary organization and he is overwhelmed by the egalitarian nature of this mixed group of Jews and gentiles.

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[96] Ibid.

[97] This is clearly illustrated in Cahan's highly autobiographical story, "Circumstances".

> They talked to me as to an equal! As if I were one of their own! No distinction between Jew and gentile! In the spirit of true equality and brotherhood![98]

Cahan begins to write with the missionary zeal of a newly converted believer. What draws him to this movement aside from its egalitarianism is a kind of asceticism and puritanism in its approach to politics.

> Worrying about public approval or what impression one was making on the ladies was sharply criticized. Unless it interfered with one's mission, one was expected to be contemptuous of public opinion and to maintain a serious approach to life.[99]

It is clear that Cahan is attracted to the Spartan traditions of the underground movement; like his conversion to atheism which removed the feeling of "sin", his conversion to anarchism eases his conscience about sex since the erotic is subordinated by the political, or to put it another way, the sexual act is sublimated by the violence of terrorism.

> Why should I be bothered by the petty fact that my eyes were not straight? Who cares if my appearance was not pleasant? I was above such foolishness. There were more important things to worry about. This is what I told myself. And these were not empty words. Earlier, I had felt relief at being rid of the belief in God, hell and punishment in the next world. Now I felt another heavy load slip off my heart. What a difference between the love and friendship [i.e. without sex] I felt in this underground world and the barracks atmosphere of the Institute [and Goosery]![100]

Cahan substitutes a quasi-religious goal in the place of a sexual one. Now he is more concerned with how to obtain stolen type--the revolutionary forbidden--than with stealing kisses--the sexual forbidden.[101] As a result, his political importance must increase in the narrative. It is for this reason that he compares his insubordination and imprisonment with the terrorists'; it is also why he distorts his role in the revolutionary movement. His primary interest in the radical underground seems to arise out of his sexual frustration which effects him so profoundly that he searches for a

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[98] Ibid., 145.
[99] Ibid., p. 147.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid., p. 149.

comparable forbidden activity as a substitute. His self-portrayal as a member of the Russian underground movement is enthusiastic to the point of being zealous, but his description of his failure to kiss the "Fräulein" from the gymnasium is thoroughly melancholic and reminds one of Levinsky's failure in his sexual relations.

> There were hours when I ached with melancholy, with longings and sadness. The pain grew worse when I perceived the first signs of spring through the Institute windows.[102]

Cahan is afflicted by his loneliness and inability to have sexual contact. This bothers him so much that he takes "long walks" to sublimate his libido but "dresses like a dandy" to give the impression that he is successful with the ladies: "Thus [clad in the very height of fashion] I sought to walk away from my envy, my depressions, my loneliness".[103] The man here is unquestionably polarized and disturbed at heart. These are the first signs of the longings and yearnings of the parvenu. But before these yearnings are fully developed as a theme in the narrative, Cahan has to make his heroic departure from his homeland.

EXIT HERO: OUR COLUMBUS

Cahan is employed as a teacher after his completion of the Vilna Institute, and he is filled with pride and self-importance as the "center of attention" in Velizh, due to his "brown teacher's frock coats and our distinctive hats with their teacher's badge".[104] To show how far he has drifted from Judaism, he relates an incident at the Velizh synagogue where he is shamed by his inability to read the half-Torah without stuttering only seven years after his bar mitzvah. Cahan then begins to "build up his library" with revolutionary books and pamphlets amongst other books in order to "fit my new position".[105] On the surface Cahan is referring to his "position" as a teacher in the provinces, but he also "builds up" his image to the reader as a revolutionary, which is even more important to him.

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[102] Ibid., p. 136.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid., p. 164.
[105] Ibid., p. 162.

> I put my books and my rare magazines in their places, feeling certain that in so isolated a town as Velizh, the police would not recognize their true nature.[106]

The society life of Velizh fascinates Cahan, and his own life now begins to merge with that of the characters in his favorite Russian novels: Turgenev's aristocrats and idealists like Rudin, Chekhov's gentry, Tolstoy's populist princes, and Dostoevsky's nihilist revolutionaries and terrorists. When Cahan visits the aristocratic Luchov family he explicitly informs us that he travels by carriage to their estate, learns of their revolutionary sympathies, and receives a copy of *Das Kapital*. Although Cahan claims that he read *Das Kapital* immediately, "absorbing the profundity of the philosophy", he later admits he didn't understand it until he re-read it four years later in New York. When his friends in Vilna get caught for their possession of revolutionary literature, he begins to exaggerate his importance as a wanted terrorist. For instance, he is proud of the fact that his students accuse him of having assassinated the Czar Alexander when the police enter the classroom to question him. However, it is odd that he claims to be "from the underground" merely as a result of the police searches and questioning, rather than for his active participation in the terrorist attack on the Czar. His "underground" activity was clearly limited to his reading of illicit material and sharing it with his friends rather than actively distributing socialist propaganda or taking part in terrorist attacks. Despite the fact that Cahan was in danger due to his contact with revolutionaries and possession of underground literature, he makes it seem as if his capture was a top priority for the police in their efforts to destroy the revolutionary movement.

> By this time, I was certain, the trains were being watched by gendarmes who had been given my description. And I was easy to recognize. There were my eyes.[107]

Unlike the Lochovs, the true revolutionaries in Velizh who are placed under "house arrest", Cahan is only put under surveillance by the police. He seems to want to situate himself at the center of the revolutionary movement, an egocentric tendency which he later repeats when he describes his train leaving Russia as the very one

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[106] Ibid., p. 167.
[107] Ibid., p. 177.

which marked the exodus of Russian Jews to the United States.[108] Cahan's imagination is hard at work concerning his emigration, and he seems to be immersed in the romantic aspects of escape; his melodramatic description of the police seems to come out of an adventure story or romance novel, "[i]n they marched with their gleaming uniforms, their spurs and swords clanking".[109] But it is important to point out that before Cahan describes his heroic escape to America, he admits that he "could not accept [his] role as teacher" in the provinces and was searching for an excuse to leave Velizh, "continuously there rang in my head the question, "How can I get out of here?""[110] Cahan is not only torn between his desire for a government uniform and career, on one hand, and his yearning to be a member of the revolutionary movement, on the other, but also by the fact that he was simultaneously "homesick for Vilna" and "homesick for the bigger world I had not yet come to know".[111] Thus, although Cahan describes his escape from Velizh as if he were an important revolutionary figure, he is clearly split: dissatisfied with his position and homesick, yet also yearning to see the "bigger world". Yearning and discontent are the real motivating forces of Cahan's escape, and his description of his escape highlights the fact that his self-portrayal as escaping revolutionary is meant to cover up his guilt as negligent son and arm-chair revolutionary.

The details of Cahan's escape are extremely significant. First, Cahan's escape forces him to change his name to "Lifshitz" and then "Kruglanski", and his disguise as a yeshiva student requires a change of clothing: "I put an ordinary cheap hat on my head and twisted two strands of hair down the side of my face, making them look like the sidelocks of a pious Jew".[112] The fact that Cahan emigrates to America under a false name and disguised as religious scholar is revealing, especially if one compares the fleeing yeshiva boy to David Levinsky, the *cheder* scholar who ultimately transforms himself into the successful American businessman. Cahan claims to be traveling as a matchmaker for his brother, "to inspect the bride and bargain for the dowry", and then pretends to be a sugar dealer--merging Levinsky's religious and business "identities" with a hint of

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108 Ibid., p. 196.
109 Ibid., p. 173.
110 Ibid., p. 170.
111 Ibid.
112 Ibid., p. 176.

Levinsky's frustrated quest for a bride throughout the novel. Stepniak commented in *Underground Russia* (1884) that "[w]ith [the revolutionaries] everything relating to the Revolution is called 'business'".[113] On one hand, David Levinsky's conversion from religious scholar to "businessman" appears to be a distortion of Cahan's revolutionary activity, and on the other hand, Levinsky's desire to study in the new world is a truer account of Cahan's real reasons for "escaping" from Russia. Later Cahan changes his story again when he claims that he is evading military service to a Jew in Mohilev who puts him up. Here, his disguise as yeshiva boy has a deeply disturbing effect on his "identity".

> As we walked down the hall I checked out the details of my identity. My trousers were properly tucked into my boots, my scarf was around my neck, I reached under my old hat and gave my sidelocks a few extra twists, for by this time I had cut my hair so as to have real sidelocks. I had pangs of remorse every time I contemplated myself in the mirror because I had come to look like a real yeshiva boy.[114]

Cahan not only begins to lose his "identity", but he also starts to feel remorse about his flight from home and his avoidance of real involvement in the revolutionary movement. His escape requires him to make the most crucial decisions of his life, and it is at this point that narrative omissions and inaccuracies begin to appear with increasing frequency. For example, Cahan remembers Elia, Mohilev's son, as the manager of the travel office in Nevel who had sold him a ticket, but in this scene above Elia remarks that Cahan was his "teacher in Velizh".[115] Then, while disguised and fleeing, Cahan hears his first news of the pogroms which followed shortly after the assassination of Czar Alexander II. Although Cahan is mildly self-critical for the first time while discussing the anti-Semitic massacres, he fails to tell us if he supported the pogroms as the sign of an oncoming revolution as his Land and Freedom party did. But how can Cahan tell his Yiddish readers of 1926 that he supported the pogroms? Instead, he avoids a personal confession by simply outlining the division of the revolutionary movement after the first pogrom between those who believed that "the pogroms that followed

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[113] Stepniak, *Underground Russia*, p. 89.
[114] Cahan, *Bleter*, p. 180
[115] Ibid., p. 179.

their act of terror were the beginning of that uprising [the revolution]", and those who interpreted the anti-Semitic violence as a means of making the "peasant lose sight of the true cause of his misery--a despotic, thieving government".[116] Cahan claims that he "longed to work in behalf of the freedom of the Russian people", but then decides not to turn back and help the revolution progress in the desired direction;[117] he notes that he could emigrate to Paris or Switzerland where other revolutionaries had fled in order to "study and continue my revolutionary activities as an exile, working for the day when I would return to my country as an illegal",[118] but after the pogroms he suddenly decides to join the American-bound Am Olam movement--which he abandons as soon as he arrives in New York. Hence there is some truth to the story he invents during his flight from Russia that he is evading his "military service", i.e. his active participation in the terrorist movement. Instead of becoming a socialist revolutionary, he decides to escape to America and joins the Am Olam group in order to realize the "wonderful communist life" by establishing a new socialist utopia in the Golden Land.

> I paced my room in a fever. America! To go to America! To re-establish the Garden of Eden in that distant land. My spirit soared. All my other plans dissolved. I was for America![119]

Cahan's narrative is confusing and his decisions are blatantly influenced by an odd mixture of utopian socialist thought and the works of Cooper and Mayne Reid's American adventure stories for boys which he read avidly in Russia. These adventure stories directly influence his attraction to the Am Olam group, which desired to settle somewhere in the western United States. Although the Am Olam group did want to establish a commune, its ideology was far from the universal socialism that Cahan claims to have believed in at the time: it was a nationalistic movement with the hope that a great Jewish community based on sound socialist ideas would flourish in the United States. However, an ethnic ghetto run primarily on socialist principles is not the same as the universal brotherhood of

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[116] Ibid., p. 184.
[117] Ibid., p. 186.
[118] Ibid., p. 174.
[119] Ibid., p. 186-87.

the socialist movement. This makes one question Cahan's veracity concerning his loyalty to universal socialism as opposed to the chauvinistic socialism of the Am Olam movement, and his interest in the latter typifies Cahan's role in the Lower East Side Jewish community and subsequent support of Israel.

Cahan leaves to settle the New World clearly divided, on one hand, by his heroic yearnings--"They swarmed around Elia and me--he the hero of his family, I the hero of all the others who had gathered"--, and on the other hand, by the painful awareness that his contact with his family was cut off way before in his departure from Vilna.

> My last evening in Mohilev! I had become very much a part of the family. Three weeks had passed like a dream. Now, suddenly, the dream was ended. I had not thought when I left Velizh that I was starting such a long journey. This was the point at which I was cutting myself off from my past, from those I loved. Would I ever see them again?[120]

Although Cahan claims to "be the hero" of all "the others who had gathered" to see him and Elia off, the absence of his own family at the departure is painfully felt and weighs heavily on his conscience. He feels a yearning to make contact with his family but is unable to write them a comforting letter in his own name, pretending that the letter is from a friend of his for no obvious reason. Perhaps Cahan is hiding the fact that he was afraid his parents might tear up a letter in his name. In any case, he then describes himself like the new Columbus--"The name of my ship was *Marusia*"[121]--in order to portray himself as a folk missionary on a voyage of discovery for his people. On the second leg of the journey, from England to Philadelphia, he becomes the linguistic pioneer of the Jews, translating for the English captain and his Jewish mates. However, Cahan is simultaneously the hero of his narrative and the prodigal son. As hero he "was certain [the police] had his description", and disembarking at Rogachov feels "as if I were walking a pirate's plank as I descended from the ship".[122] But no one appears to be looking for Cahan, whose crossed eyes made him easy to spot in spite of his disguise. In fact, a man on the way to Kiev guesses

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[120] Ibid., p. 188.
[121] Ibid., p. 189.
[122] Ibid., p. 193.

immediately that Cahan is a university student, which was accurate in the sense that it pierced his disguise and identified him as intellectual in flight. The "proud socialist" who claims he was "not just running away like an ordinary immigrant"[123] is also a frightened socialist plagued with guilt, filled with a feeling of loneliness and longing for his home, illustrated when he observes a marriage in Brody: "So they had banished the loneliness and the longing that gnawed at their hearts".[124] The couples are able to "shed the canons of behavior and discipline" of their homes, while Cahan is trapped by the "canons" of his new religion--socialism--under the disguise of his old--that of the yeshiva student. Thus both the heroic socialist pioneer and yearning prodigal son are combined in one person. But the romance as hero continues in "The Golden Land", where the loneliness and yearning of the Jewish-American writer and editor increase with his success.

"THE GOLDEN LAND": YEARNING FOR HOME

Cahan's yearning for home increases significantly in New York. For instance, he juxtaposes a description of his school lessons in Mr Wright's English class with a passage on his longings for home. Perhaps his desire to enter a public school amongst "boys who ranged in age from ten to fourteen" was really a way of trying to reproduce the *cheder* environment and Rabiner School days of his childhood in Russia.[125] Like Levinsky, Cahan is so obsessed with the past that almost everything encountered in the New World summons up a memory of the "The Old Country". Mr Farrell, who taught the boys singing, reminds Cahan of his yeshiva friend, Eliya, and the word "bob-o-link" which he learns during a music lesson is "embedded" in his memory. The reason becomes clear later when Cahan hears the "clarinet" like sound of the bob-o-link which reminds him of the same melancholic birdsong that he heard as a child and thus associates with Russian: like the singing child in the story of the digging man, the singing bird symbolizes Cahan's childhood. In addition, the melancholic "clarinet" sound of the bird evokes memories of his days at the Vilna Institute, where he was forced to play the second clarinet since it was the only instrument

[123] Ibid., p. 205.
[124] Ibid., p. 208.
[125] Ibid., p. 239.

left when he was released from his "imprisonment". In addition, the sad, sonorous tone of the clarinet is an appropriate description of Cahan's melancholic and longing tone when he writes about Russia from the United States.

> I suffered more than most greenhorns. Almost every night my dreams were filled with vistas of Vilna or visions of my father and my mother, my only little brother, my aunt and my uncle and their children, my comrades and acquaintances. I dreamt of Velizh but more often of Vilna. My heart would be filled with a crushing longing.
>
> My longing made my new homeland distasteful to me.[126]

While sleeping, Cahan is similar to the singing child of the "digging man" story. He jumps at any opportunity to make contact with home. When he meets Popov, another "exiled" revolutionary, he is "bewitched" by Popov's nostalgic stories of Russia.

> Popov was easygoing and at times I doubted the sincerity of his interest in the Russian revolutionary movement. But I could never doubt the intensity of his homesickness for Russia. He talked endlessly about his homeland. Because I was no less homesick than he, I would listen to him endlessly.[127]

Cahan seems to wallow in his feelings of melancholy and nostalgia, which pervade his autobiography and are the central forces of his attraction to Yiddish in America.

> I felt at home with my Russian-speaking friends. But I felt a strong attraction to the Yiddish language, more than I had ever felt in Russia. Whenever I met a landsman whom I hadn't seen for some time, I would pounce upon him in Yiddish and draw great satisfaction from our conversation.[128]

His return to "simple Yiddish" is a return to the language of his home, "like my mother used to talk", a desire to make contact with the Old World which is further illustrated by Cahan's joy when he meets the carver "from the old country", and the tailor "who had made our clothes".[129] The Yiddish songs of Eliakum Zunser make Cahan melancholic to the point of crying, as related by Hutchins

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[126] Ibid., p. 241.
[127] Ibid., p. 267-68.
[128] Ibid., p. 281.
[129] Ibid.

Hapgood in *The Spirit of the Ghetto*.[130] Yiddish songs seem to elicit Cahan's deepest emotions, and song was most closely associated by Cahan with his father's "strong voice" and sad Sabbath songs.

> My father was a passionate lover of song--a connoisseur of synagogical music. He treasured the singing and the rehersals at which he spent many evenings with me on his lap.[131]

The word "treasured" recurs here in relation to song, but here Cahan treasures the memory of his father's treasured songs. He describes himself "mesmerized" by the "song" while sitting on his father's lap, and thus we have a modification of the motif of the sleeping-singing child in the half-singing, half-mesmerized man-child figure. Cahan, the narrator, attempts literally to recreate this unity with his father in the narrative by recollecting the song that used to transport him to a "fantasy world", but which now transports him back to the past on his father's lap. Yiddish is the language that connects the present and past, and as Rosenfeld suggests, the decision to maintain Yiddish as an essential language in the New World was also a decision to perpetuate "doubleness".[132] If English promises access to a "larger" and "brighter" world of the future, as Rosenfeld remarks, than Yiddish enables Cahan to gain access to the smaller, darker, remembered world of Vilna.[133] This doubleness, which Epstein describes as Cahan's "divided feelings", is evident in a letter in Yiddish to his friend Spivak between 1883-84. Epstein writes:

> The letters reveal an inner despair: "It is a joke," Cahan writes. "I debate, I argue, I get excited, I shriek, and in the middle of all this, I remind myself that I am a vacant vessel, an empty man without a shred of knowledge, and I begin to blush. I am ashamed of myself."
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> In another letter he complains about his divided feelings. He lacks orientation and does not see the end. He is strongly envious of Frey, Adler, and Most, who have firm foundations. He has nothing to lean on. He wants to study and again study. In all these letters, socialism is never mentioned.[134]

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[130] Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p. 101.
[131] Cahan, *Bleter*, p. 9.
[132] Alvin Rosenfeld, "Inventing the Jew", *Midstream*, 21 (1975), p. 55.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Epstein, *Profiles of Eleven*, p. 63.

Cahan's voice as a letter writer, with his ambitions to study and description as a "vacant vessel", is even closer to David Levinsky's and much more revealing than in his autobiography. The fact that socialism is not mentioned is interesting since he was, with few exceptions, unable to fuse his socialist propaganda with his literary creations. His duality is further illustrated by the fact that almost all of his fictional work was written in English, whereas the majority of his journalistic writing, his history of the United States, and his autobiography were written in Yiddish. Cahan seems to have turned to English fiction as a means of disguised confession, and when he experienced a block he retreated to Yiddish, where his tone tended to be more didactic than personally revealing. It has been suggested that he failed to write the proposed autobiographical novel, ***The Chasm***, in the late 1890s due to a blocking which resulted in his return to Yiddish journalism; similarly, his inability to write the sequel to ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** and nine years of silence before the publication of ***Bleter*** suggests another period of blocking which provoked another return to Yiddish in his autobiography. ***Bleter***, written after Cahan's trip to Europe and during a period of nostalgia in the 20s, is Cahan's attempt to reorganize his past through the sentimental voice of the successful American. However, like Levinsky, Cahan's outer success in ***Bleter*** is only a thin layer which covers a much deeper feeling of failure and yearning for the past.

CONCLUSION

Much more can be said about Cahan's feeling of yearning and his narrative inconsistences, especially relating to his transformation from anarchism to socialism in the United States. Cahan often resorts to simplification and didacticism in order to blur the contradictory nature of his narrative. For example, he claims that the socialists' beliefs and his own as an anarchist "have enough in common" to help form a union.[135] However, forming a union was a blatantly anti-anarchist belief. In addition, he is reproached for supporting the socialists while still an anarchist,[136] but attempts to defend himself by saying "[i]n my heart I already knew that

[135] Cahan, ***Bleter***, p. 301, 305.
[136] Ibid., p. 322.

anarchism was not for me".[137] Cahan considers his betrayal (a word he doesn't use but which accurately describes his behavior) of the anarchists as a turning point in his life. His conversion to social democracy after the Henry George campaign is meant to illustrate his development as a socialist journalist, speaker, and union organizer, three roles which he was to master in the next fifty-odd years. The man who turned his interest to the Russian revolutionary movement in the United States suddenly loses interest in a movement which was no longer dangerous or forbidden.

> What kind of socialism could it be [in the United States] without conspiracy? What good was the fruit if it wasn't forbidden?[138]

The heroic struggle in Russia was simply not the same in the United States, and for this reason the achievement of heroic status required some ideological shifting by Cahan. Later, the man who claimed that he had no desire to have anything to do with "the trade unions [in the United States] since there was no danger in working with them"[139] suddenly emerges as an ardent supporter of the trade union movement at the turn of the century. Instead of idolizing the converted aristocratic Russian revolutionaries, Cahan begins to idolize the converted socialist writers in the States, especially William Dean Howells, whose home, he claims, had both an "aristocratic" and spiritually "noble" air to it.[140] Cahan's retrospective account enables him to show his incredible knowledge of the socialist press and labor movement, especially in the Lower East Side. But his intention to portray himself as a socialist "hero" and voice of the workers is achieved by distorting his real position and role in the movement. He was neither the first Russian Jewish socialist nor was he the first socialist daily editor in the Lower East Side, but he was the ghetto's best socialist propagandist and its most successful writer. His paternalistic role as editor of the largest foreign-language daily newspaper in the United States, as well as his representative role as English author of mainly Lower East Side

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[137] Ibid., p. 330.
[138] Ibid., p. 228. Cahan also remarked that, "[a]ctually, what I considered to be my convictions were in truth a mishmash of ideas", *Bleter*, p. 314.
[139] Ibid., p. 255.
[140] Rudolph and Clara Kirk, "Abraham Cahan and William Dean Howells", *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, 52 (1962), p. 33.

Jewish stories, gave him a unique perspective as interpreter for and representative of the Jews in America. However, it is only at the very end of Book Two that Cahan begins to realize and admit his limitations. Like most of Cahan's fictional heroes by the end of his stories, emptiness and failure overwhelm Cahan in his autobiography and have the last say. What the autobiographer yearns for is his long-lost, idyllic past. Perhaps that's why Cahan reverted to Yiddish after ***The Rise of David Levinsky***: it was easier on his conscience. When one looks closely at ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben***, Cahan's reputation as supremely successful, integrated Jewish-American seems less solid, more imagined than real. In Cahan's case, like Levinsky's, the objective means of gauging his success are misleading since his fame and achievements are undermined by a feeling of sterility and personal failure.

It is not surprising that Cahan took to socialism with religious fervor and preached it with missionary zeal. But in reality his socialism--which began with nihilism and developed into populism, anarchism, and then social democracy--moved more to the center with the years. This point is supported by his surprising speech denouncing the communists in 1924, by the ***Jewish Daily Forward's*** support of Roosevelt in the 30s, and its acceptance of advertising in the 40s. Cahan cannot be blamed for popularizing his socialist beliefs, but his account of his life belies his propagandist tendencies for the purposes of distortion. He wants his Yiddish readers to reminisce with him about the good old days, but he also desires a renaissance of socialist belief at a time when socialism was declining and anti-Semitism increasing. Cahan's life is full of ironies which highlight his polarization. Despite his flight from Judaism and the role of religious leader in Vilna, his revolutionary destiny came to a Jewish end as an editor of the ***Foward***; it is also ironic that the writer who showed the futility and emptiness of the myth of success based on Franklin's model of Industry, Frugality, and Perseverence in ***The Rise of David Levinsky***, uses this myth of success in his autobiography to show his successful Americanization and to present it as a model for other American Jews. The main differences between Cahan and Levinsky lie in their politics, their careers, and their terms of success. However, Cahan was mildly critical of his socialism, had a good grasp of the literary marketplace, lived uptown in a fashionable house, died relatively rich, and surprisingly made

no philanthropic gestures in his will. Like Tzinchadzi in "Tzinchadzi of the Catskills", Cahan was a frustrated expatriate whose role in the New World could not be divested of a kind of marginality; like Boris in "Circumstances", he was a frustrated lover and revolutionary; like Levinsky, he was the sterile adult who regretted his childlessness and was overwhelmed by a feeling of emptiness and despair. Cahan's excessive nostalgia in the 1920s accounts for his autobiography, and the entire era reeks of decline and death: of the ghetto, Orthodox Judaism, Yiddish journalism, and socialism.[141] Cahan and David Levinsky don't seem so far apart after all. The one thing which binds them more than anything else is their melancholic yearning rather than fulfilment. C.S. Lewis equates this yearning with "Joy", which he defines as: "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction".[142] Cahan's Yiddish readers were able to understand and share this feeling of unsatisfied yearning the best. Although Cahan's autobiography is full of important successes and victories, his return to his past through Yiddish undermines his full assimilation to the United States. Like Levinsky, he remains forever cut off from his past and alienated from America. This theme of alienation, which is most powerfully stated in his autobiography of the 1920s, was taken up by another Jewish-American writer of that period, Anzia Yezierska.

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141 Sanders, *The Downtown Jews*, p. 443.
142 Buckley, *The Turning Key*, p. 91.

PART II

Anzia Yezierska

CHAPTER FOUR

VERSIONS OF THE SELF: THE FICTION OF ANZIA YEZIERSKA

INTRODUCTION

In 1931, the year that Abraham Cahan ended his long literary career (1892-1931) with the fifth and final volume of his autobiography, ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben*** (1926-31), Anzia Yezierska was in the process of finishing ***All I Could Never Be*** (1932), her sixth and last book of fiction. Yezierska didn't complete another book until 1950, when her autobiography, ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse***,[1] was published, thus putting an end to eighteen years of silence and obscurity. In Louise Levitas Henriksen's recent biography of her mother, ***Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life*** (1988), Henriksen attributes the cause of the abrupt end to Yezierska's career as a fiction writer to the "Depression and new literary fashions" which resulted in the "dismal" sales of "her sixth book".[2] Henriksen believes that "[t]he fad for Anzia Yezierska had apparently passed", and adds that, "[i]t seemed as if she had been stunned into silence by the last, savage criticisms [*sic*] of her sixth book in 1932".[3] However, although the Depression may have had a stifling effect on Yezierska,[4] her previous novel, ***Arrogant Beggar*** (1927), was also an artistic failure, sold poorly, and received mostly unfavourable reviews. Therefore, contrary to Henriksen's analysis, it would be more accurate to say that ***Arrogant Beggar*** and ***All I Could Never Be*** illustrate a gradual, rather than sudden, loss of her literary powers.[5] Yezierska realized not only that ***All I Could Never Be*** marked the end of a phase in her career, but also that her further literary success depended on her ability to mature as a writer. In other words, she was aware of a need to depart from the self-restrictive and self-centred genre of the autobiographical novel which she had exhausted by 1932, and

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[1] Which I shall discuss in Chapter Five.
[2] Louise Levitas Henriksen, ***Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life*** (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), p. 2.
[3] Ibid., p. 248.
[4] And also on Henry Roth and an entire generation of American writers.
[5] In both novels, a thinning out of Yezierska's subject matter due to constant repetition and revision can be observed. See Chapter Five, footnote 5.

which, one might say, had imprisoned her. This is illustrated by a letter she wrote to her friend and literary critic, William Lyon Phelps, dated October 20, 1932, and thus written just after the publication of *All I Could Never Be*.

> This novel ends the cycle of my experiences as an immigrant. I have started something entirely new. A play. And I know about as much of the technique of play writing as I knew about the writing of novels. I feel like a person who has set out in an air-ship across unknown seas--how--where will I come out in this new venture? God only knows. But Ah--the thrill of wrestling with dreams forever beyond us.[6]

Yezierska's letter to Phelps reveals a central element of her writing which I shall discuss and analyze in this chapter: the highly autobiographical nature of her fiction, which, as she explicitly states above, depicts her own "experiences as an immigrant". However, although Yezierska's own personal experiences are almost always the subject of her fiction--she admitted that writing was a "confession--not a profession"[7]--her identity is elusive since it is constantly in flux. As she put it: "I am alive, and the only thing real in my aliveness is the vitality of unceasing change".[8] Yezierska's work as a whole can be viewed as a "cycle" of fictionalized self-portraits since she always dramatizes her own shifting point of view through a succession of Jewish immigrant heroines from the Lower East Side ghetto who seek a place and vocation in America.[9] All of her novels, and almost all of her stories, deal with her protagonists' desire for self-expression, which is often related to their choice of vocation as a teacher[10] or artist--usually a writer. I shall argue that Yezierska's entire work is unified by a need to justify her own choice of vocation as a writer, and it is for this reason that most of her stories examine the question and act of writing itself. It is important to point out that her decision to become a writer, or in

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[6] William Lyon Phelps, *Autobiography With Letters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 907.
[7] Anzia Yezierska, *Children of Loneliness* (London: Cassell and Company, 1923), p. 5.
[8] Ibid., p. 7.
[9] The repetition or minor variation of Yezierska's heroines' names--Shenah Pessah, Sara Reisel, Sara Smolinsky, Sophie Sapinsky, Rachel Ravinsky, Hanneh Hayyeh, Hanneh Breineh--underlines the assertion that each character represents a slightly different fictionalized version of the author's self.
[10] Which Yezierska was before she became a writer.

other words to transform herself from the unemployed actress, Hattie Mayer, into the exotic artist, Anzia Yezierska, was only achieved through a series of returns: by reappropriating her original name for the creation of her literary persona, by returning to the ghetto which she had left two decades prior, and most important, by rediscovering or inventing the ghetto idiom which she had shed through years of education and assimilation.

RETURN TO THE OLD SELF: THE BIRTH OF THE ARTIST

It is not a coincidence that Anzia Yezierska's autobiography, ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse***, begins with a fictionalized version of her emergence as a writer, for in many ways Anzia Yezierska, the ghetto author, was a creation: both Yezierska's persona as a writer and her fictional heroines were invented, public versions of her self, and the success of her fiction is irrevocably connected to her self-creation as an artist-writer. In her biography of her mother, Henriksen remarks that Yezierska's surname was originally "Yeziersky", and relates that Anzia's family changed their name to "Mayer" when they arrived in America in 1890. Hence, Anzia Yeziersky, the ten year old Jewish immigrant, became Hattie Mayer in 1890 and was known by the latter name for the next twenty years. However, between 1910 and 1915, Hattie's name and identity shifted numerous times due to her two marriages, separations, and continual search for a vocation. She became respectively Anzia Mayer, Mrs Anzia Mayer Gordon, Mrs Anzia Levitas, and finally Miss Anzia Yezierska. As Henriksen remarks, the transformation of Hattie Mayer into Anzia Yezierska occurred officially in 1915, after the publication of her first short story, "The Free Vacation House".

> When was [Arnold Levitas's] wife "Hattie," and when did she turn into Anzia? Some of her old friends and relatives could not forget the old name. But to her newer friends and younger relatives, especially after her first story was published, Hattie, taking on the persona of the artist-writer, had become indisputably Anzia.[11]

Henriksen fails to mention that although this change appears to be a reversion to her old name, it was a slight variation of that name--Yezierska rather than Yeziersky. This is important since it put her

[11] Henriksen, *Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life*, p. 66-67.

in opposition to her brother, who had taken the name "Mayer" when he arrived in America in 1888, and her father, whose surname in the Old World, "Yeziersky", she had modified. Yezierska's adoption of a pseudonym illustrates both a symbolic rejection of patriarchal society[12] and self-projection into the roles of exotic writer and "new woman". She was beginning to invent herself as a romantic figure--the "sweat-shop Cinderella" heroine--in both the fairy tale and "rags to riches" formulas. By giving her original name a more Russian flavour, Yezierska took advantage of the fact that Russian Jewesses were the rage in New York in the early teens (when she decided to become a writer), which the Methodist, Nellie Frost, complains about in Elizabeth Stern's autobiographical novel, ***I Am a Woman—and a Jew:***

> "A poor little Methodist hasn't a chance here in New York! If you aren't an interesting Jewess, not a person wants to notice you!" She spoke, with mischief, of Rose Pastor Stokes [a friend of Yezierska's who had married the millionaire philanthropist, Graham Stokes], of Mrs. Rose Walling, of all the Jewesses who were then holding the imagination of New York in a strange captivity.[13]

Thus Yezierska's Russian-Jewish pen name was created as a means of appealing to the public interest at the time in captivating Jewish women from the Lower East Side ghetto. However, her tendency to fictionalize and dramatize her life was not confined to the public, as even her own daughter (and biographer) remarks that:

> [i]t's hard to find Anzia's real face [...] in the slick pictures and accounts of her life. The smoothing over and sentimentalizing were mostly her fault.
>
> Whenever she talked about herself, to interviewers or even to intimates, she had a way of rearranging or inventing the facts to suit her current feelings.[14]

Here, Henriksen puts her finger unwittingly on Yezierska's greatest talent: the way she merged fact and fiction in her life and literary creations so skillfully that no one seemed to notice. The successful transformation of Hattie Mayer, the unemployed actress and school

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[12] She no longer had a name which resembled her father's since he too had become a Mayer in New York, nor was she to be perceived as married since she changed her official title to Miss after leaving Arnold Levitas in 1915.

[13] Elizabeth Stern, ***I Am a Woman—and a Jew*** (New York: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1986), p. 61.

[14] Henriksen, ***Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life***, p. 1-2.

teacher, into Anzia Yezierska, the "sweat-shop Cinderella" writer, was itself a major accomplishment. But in addition, Yezierska managed to combine the two personas of Hattie Mayer, the immigrant girl, and Anzia Yezierska, the woman writer, in a series of fictional heroines who were not just closely related to, but interchangeable with her self-invented persona as a writer. This is illustrated by the image of herself as a primitive, uneducated writer from the Lower East Side ghetto which Yezierska promoted in interviews and further supported through her fiction. In other words, her fiction and public appearances actually acted as sources of misinformation which helped to create the role of exotic artist that she desired to live out. The invention and promotion of this fictional self can be seen in the three central myths which Yezierska created: that she had emerged directly out of the ghetto, that she had practically no education, and that she had little interest in the art of writing. The perpetuation of these myths for almost seventy years illustrates how successful Yezierska was in creating a literary persona and host of fictional identities which were interchangeable.

PROPAGATING A MYTH OF THE SELF

As Mary Dearborn remarks, Yezierska's "distortions of factual particulars show how well she took to the mythmaking process and the extent to which she could turn events to her own advantage".[15] Yezierska propagated the myth that she had emerged directly from the ghetto as a writer in both her fiction and autobiography, and she did this so successfully that even contemporary critics such as Irving Howe, Helen Golub, and Charles Angoff have continued to believe it.[16] But as Henriksen relates, Yezierska left the Lower East Side in 1897, at the age of 17, and had been away for almost twenty years before she began to write. Both the reviews of *Hungry Hearts* and interviews with Yezierska following her sudden success in 1920 show how she helped to create this myth of herself as an uneducated writer from the ghetto seeking for recognition and self-expression--a myth which has been put straight only recently by Henriksen's biography, *Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life*, and Mary

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[15] Mary Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), p. 145.

[16] See Howe's account in *World of Our Fathers*, p. 269, Golub's in "Eat Your Heart Out: The Fiction of Anzia Yezierska", p. 51, and Charles Angoff's in "Mame-Loshen on Literature", p. 11.

Dearborn's ***Love in the Promised Land: The Story of Anzia Yezierska and John Dewey.***

In Frank Crane's review of ***Hungry Hearts***, Yezierska's choice of exotic, Russian pen name had its desired effect since Crane misspelled it, thus making it even more exotic and noticeable. According to Crane, who received his information directly from Yezierska, she had received "comparatively little education" and managed miraculously to emerge "from a sweat-shop worker to [become] a famous writer".[17] Dissatisfied with the sales of ***Hungry Hearts***, Yezierska had barged into Crane's office in order to publicize her new book, "told [him] her passionate story" in a "way to rejoice the heart of a newspaper person", and captivated Crane in exactly the same way she had John Dewey in 1917.[18] In other words, she purposely dramatized herself, transforming her language by making it more passionate and simple (as she had done in her stories) in order to appeal to Crane--a self-promoting publicity stunt. In fact, it was Crane's ensuing article that attracted Samuel Goldwyn's attention and resulted in the film contract for ***Hungry Hearts*** which made Yezierska famous over night. Yezierska was fully aware of her appeal to the reading public as a primitive and exotic writer and actually wanted to beguile Crane into identifying her with the characters she was writing about: in the same way that she typified the exotic origin of her characters to Crane, who equated her with "Poland", she represented a living version of her intriguing and exotic characters to her readers. However, although this was the way Yezierska presented herself to the public, it was a fictional role that she played due to her desire for success and recognition. Yezierska adapted both her language--which Crane describes as "a few swift words of keen beauty, redolent with individuality"--and demeanour to suit the popular image of the passionate, captivating, and primitive Jewess from the ghetto.[19] But as Henriksen comments, she was not the primitive she was taken to be; this was the sophistication of her guise.[20] Unlike her older sisters who worked exclusively in shirtwaist sweat-shops, she was educated in public schools, was awarded a scholarship to attend New

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[17] Frank Crane, "Anzia Yezyierska" [*sic*], ***Globe and Commercial Advertiser***, (1920), p. 12.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Henriksen, ***Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life***, p. 6.

York City Normal College, earned a degree in domestic science from Teachers College, studied acting at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, and took writing courses at Columbia University. Not only was she a keen student of literature and an avid reader, but also she received literary advice and encouragement from some of the most prominent American philosophers, teachers, and writers of the time, such as John Dewey, Rose Pastor Stokes, Henrietta Rodman, Gertrude Stein, Zona Gale, and Dorothy Canfield Fisher. However, what is even more outstanding than Yezierska's successful dramatization of the role as primitive ghetto artist is the way she invented a Yiddish-English idiom so perfectly that no one realized that it was created or put-on. This sophisticated artlessness of her narratives, which has only recently been noted by Henriksen and Dearborn, forces us to reevaluate her achievement as a writer.

Yezierska needed to reenter the ghetto through the Yiddish idiom of her past, which she achieved by listening to her sister, Annie, who corrected her narratives to make them sound more like the authentic Yiddish-English idiom of the Lower East Side Jews. Thus it was through her sister's ghetto idiom and experiences, which Yezierska used as material for "The Free Vacation House" and "The Lost Beautifulness", that she found her voice and subject matter. Henriksen relates that in order to get her stories published, Yezierska had to rewrite them several times, each time "injecting stronger feelings, inventing harsher incidents to make it more dramatic, so that it no longer resembled Annie's experience or Hattie's original story".[21] Hence, her talent for the melodramatic was put to use not only in the invention of herself as a primitive writer from the ghetto, but also in the writing of the stories themselves. As Mary Dearborn remarks, "[Yezierska] herself very consciously constructed and repeatedly refined the mythical scenario of the immigrant who had exchanged an Old World ghetto for a New".[22] Her desire to write, Dearborn adds,

> was born out of an equation of self-expression with the formation of identity itself. Only by writing could she "make herself for a person."[23]

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[21] Ibid., p. 22.
[22] Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land*, p. 34.
[23] Ibid., p. 81.

Thus through writing, Yezierska simultaneously discovered and created a place for herself in America. However, her emergence as an independent, unmarried, "new woman" writer--which she accomplished ironically with the aid of her married sister--was not an anomaly as many critics have previously claimed. On the contrary, her development as a writer grew organically out of the American literary scene of the period.

A HUNGRY HEART IS HEARD

Although early critics of Yezierska's work such as Gertrude Atherton perceived Yezierska as a literary "genius",[24] implying that she was a natural literary talent, her literary breakthrough and sudden success in 1920 had, in reality, required almost ten years of hard work to achieve; in addition, her creative development was influenced greatly by the social climate and literary scene in America between the late-1890s, when Yezierska left her home in search of a vocation, and post-War years, when she was officially recognized as an artist. It is necessary here to point out a previously ignored but important literary connection between Anzia Yezierska and Abraham Cahan: both Cahan and Yezierska's literary careers were launched by the very same publisher, Houghton Mifflin, and both books--*The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto* and *Hungry Hearts*--were collections of short stories written by and about Jewish immigrants from the Lower East Side ghetto. Richard Brodhead observed that although the literary "genteel" attempted to keep the literary field clear of references to disturbing social or sexual subjects, there was "a new variegation of the literary scene" at the turn of the century:

> Houghton Mifflin, the high Bostonian publishing firm par excellence and the chief promoter of the idea of standard author and classical text, [...] published *The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto* by Abraham Cahan, the first major Jewish-

[24] Gertrude Atherton writes, "[s]he is the most remarkable case of sheer genius fighting its way through an impenetrable thicket and imposing itself upon an unsympathetic world that I have any knowledge of", in "Fighting Up From the Ghetto", *The New York Herald*, (1923), p. 8.

> American author and the first immigrant writer [...] to assert a strong American literary voice.[25]

This new "variegation of the literary scene" which made the publication of Cahan's work possible in 1898 can be compared to the equally volatile and innovative post-World War I years (when ***Hungry Hearts*** was published) which Henriksen has described as a "period of experiment and innovation in the United States--and of violent reactions against them".[26] The fact that Houghton Mifflin published both Cahan and Yezierska's first books illustrates not only how it helped to give birth to an innovative new genre of Jewish-American literature,[27] but also how it promoted the immediate incorporation of that genre into American literary culture. Although it is ironic that the most genteel American publishing company boosted Cahan and Yezierska's careers, it is not surprising since it shows that the American reading public was intrigued by the exotic subject matter as well as the treatment of the myth of success which preoccupied both writers. Yezierska went a step further towards fame and success than Cahan by promoting her book--and image as a "sweat-shop Cinderella"--when she accepted Goldwyn's offer to write the screen play for ***Hungry Hearts*** and a three year, $30,000 Hollywood contract. However, what makes Yezierska unique is the way that she later attempted to reject this role as "sweat-shop Cinderella" and "rags to riches" success story, as I'll discuss below with reference to ***Salome of the Tenements*** (1923). This constant shifting of roles in real life and its effect on Yezierska's fiction makes her work extremely complex and interesting.

As Frank Crane remarked, the publication of ***Hungry Hearts*** in 1920 "put [Yezierska] at once in the front rank of American authors".[28] This was due to the fact that ***Hungry Hearts*** was highly innovative in form, style, and content. Although her stories of Jewish heroines from the ghetto striving for a means of self-expression and a vocation were undoubtedly influenced by the ethos

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[25] Richard Brodhead, "Literature and Culture", in ***Columbia Literary History of the United States***, ed. by Emory Elliott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 478-79.

[26] Henriksen, ***Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life***, p. 187.

[27] Houghton Mifflin also published Mary Antin's ***The Promised Land*** (1912) and ***They Who Knock at Our Gates*** (1914).

[28] From a review of ***Hungry Hearts*** received by Hinshaw & Stuhlmann, the Literary Agents for Houghton Mifflin, in ***The Anzia Yezierska Collection***, Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University.

of the "new woman" portrayed in the works of Olive Schreiner, Kate Chopin, Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow, and Gertrude Stein, Yezierska shifted the traditional portrayal of the "new woman" from a middle-class to a working-class figure. As Cecelia Tichi remarks, the "new woman" figure which appeared in women's fiction in the 1890s "was an important part of the era's flouting of middle-class convention".[29] Thus, Yezierska--similar to Stein in *Three Lives* (1909)--not only widened the scope of the "new woman" figure to include Jewish working-class women from the ghetto, but also created a passionate, immediate, and distinctive narrative voice to attack the conventions and ideals of American democratic society as a whole. The material for Yezierska's writing came directly from her experience as an immigrant, but she was also influenced and emotionally supported by John Dewey, whose Pragmatism has been described as, "the philosophical expression of the tendency around the turn of the century [...] to articulate a native American expression in all aspects of culture".[30] Thus, from both a philosophical and literary point of view, Yezierska's work has distinctively American origins and influences: *Hungry Hearts* illustrates her place in the American literary tradition described as "women's regionality"--a feminist offshoot of the local colour school, of which Sarah Orne Jewett was a precursor. Even though Yezierska claimed that Olive Schreiner's autobiographical novel, *The Story of and African Farm*, influenced her greatly,[31] *Hungry Hearts* is much more similar to Jewett's short story cycle, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Both writer's fiction lingers in the reader's mind as a kind of ballad; and both *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and *Hungry Hearts* have a "quality of voice that is exclusively the writer's own, individual, unique. A quality that one can remember without the volume at hand".[32] Unlike Jewett's pastoral third-person narrative, Yezierska's narratives (mostly first- but sometimes also third-person) are

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[29] Cecelia Tichi, "Women Writers and the New Woman", in *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, p. 590.
[30] David Sidorsky, ed., *John Dewey: The Essential Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), introduction, p. xii.
[31] The phrase describing Shenah Pessah's "visions opening upon visions of new, gleaming worlds of joy and hope" in "Wings" could easily come from either Schreiner's *Dreams* or the chapter "Dreams" in *The Story of and African Farm*.
[32] Willa Cather, "Introduction", in *The Best Short Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959), p. xi.

passionate, urban, soul-searching and romantic. However, the language which Jewett and Yezierska's characters speak to each other is a native tongue, or local idiom. As Willa Cather remarks in her introduction to *The Country of the Pointed Firs:*

> [t]he "sayings" of a community, its proverbs, are its characteristic comment upon life; they imply its history, suggest its attitude toward the world, and its way of accepting life. Such an idiom makes the finest language any writer can have; and he can never get it with a notebook. He himself must be able to think and feel in that speech--it is a gift from heart to heart.[33]

It is interesting that Yezierska's first collection of short stories was called *Hungry Hearts*, for the title suggests the theme of the search for self-expression, or yearning for articulation, which unites the stories thematically. Similar to *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, when one reads *Hungry Hearts*, one "feels all the pleasure of being actually present";[34] or as William Lyon Phelps remarked about *Bread Givers*, "[Yezierska] has in one sense no literary style. One does not seem to read, one is completely inside her soul".[35] Phelps's comment underlines two important points concerning Yezierska's writing: first, "style" has a negative connotation for Phelps and many critics of the 1920s since it suggests a kind of artifice. *Bread Givers* seems to reveal an emotional truth to Phelps about Yezierska, which is illustrated by his comment that she "writes about life not as a reporter, slummer or reformer but as one who has lived it before describing it".[36] Secondly, Phelps equates the narrator's "soul" with Yezierska's since one only has to read her work to be "inside her soul". This supports my argument above that Yezierska was successful in getting the public to read her stories and novels as predominantly autobiographical pieces.

If Yezierska's literary style--her regionalism--can be said to have grown out of the "new woman" fiction of the late 1890s and early 1900s, her search for a vocation, which is a central theme of her writing, was more noticeably influenced by a number of non-

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[33] Ibid., p. xvii.
[34] Martha Hale Shackford, "Sarah Orne Jewett", in *The World of Dunnet Landing*, ed. by David Green (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), p. 359.
[35] From *The Anzia Yezierska Collection*, Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University.
[36] Ibid.

fictional books which she read around the period of her marriage to Jacob Gordon in 1910 and to Arnold Levitas in 1911. From 1910 to 1915, Yezierska constantly vacillated between her desire to find a satisfactory vocation and inclination to accept the conventional role as housewife and mother. In 1911, after her marriage to Gordon ended due to her refusal to accept sex as a part of their marriage, Yezierska read Olive Schreiner's ***Women and Labour*** (1911) and Ellen Key's ***Love and Marriage*** (1911):[37] Dearborn remarks that in the same year Yezierska was pregnant and married to her second husband, whom she was soon to desert, she sent an inscribed copy of ***Love and Marriage*** to a friend.[38] Yezierska was probably also familiar with Charlotte Perkins Gillman's ***Women and Economics*** (1898), but even if she wasn't, her dismissal of married life, like her repudiation of a profession as a domestic science teacher in 1917, shows how she was influenced by Schreiner and Key's books which preached women's independence and the right to choose a vocation of one's choice. Her rejection of sex in the first marriage, of domesticity in her second, and once again of sexual passion in her relationship with Dewey in 1917-1918, was a common form of rebellion against conventional gender roles practiced by many American (and European) women writers of the time. However, her renunciation of marriage was not only influenced by her reading but also by her literary role models, especially Olive Schreiner, whom Yezierska tried indirectly to make contact with during a trip to Europe in 1923 by meeting Havelock Ellis (who wrote the introduction to Ellen Key's *Love and Marriage*). Schreiner was in love with Ellis but recoiled, like Yezierska, both from sexuality and the institution of marriage. In her letters to Ellis, Schreiner admits that she is "afraid of [him]", and adds,

> "I can't marry, Henry, I can't. And some awful power seems to be drawing me on. I think I shall go mad. I couldn't. I ***must*** be free you know, I ***must*** be free. . ." "Oh Henry, when passion enters a relationship it does spoil the holy sweetness."[39]

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[37] Dearborn quotes Floyd Dell's description of *Love and Marriage* as the "Talmud of sexual morality". According to Dearborn, Dell was "himself a supporter of sexual freedom if not of the new woman", in *Love in the Promised Land*, p. 74.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Doris Lessing, *A Small Personal Voice*, ed. by Paul Schlueter (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 113.

Yezierska was clearly wavering in 1910-15 between the idea of love as service in marriage,[40] represented by Em in Schreiner's *The Story of and African Farm*, and the desire to be independent, represented by Lyndall, who hardens her heart "like iron", shutting men out of her life.[41] In *Bread Givers*, Sara Smolinsky is called "blood and iron" by her father, and similar to Lyndall and Schreiner (whose pseudonym was Ralph Iron), Sara has to "harden her heart" in order to win her independence and find a vocation. Thus the example set by women writers such as Schreiner who rejected either marriage or sexuality between 1897 and 1920 (Yezierska's formative years) is important since she appears to have been influenced by both their lives and writing.[42] And as Elaine Showalter remarks:

> [m]any ambitious women [during this period] had forgone marriage and satisfied their emotional needs in intimate friendships with other women, or in communal female living in women's colleges or settlement houses. What they sacrificed in sexual passion they made up for in independence and the freedom to devote all their creative energies to their work.[43]

Similarly, Yezierska began to realize through both women's fiction and non-fiction that her independence (especially sexual) was a vital means of attaining her freedom, happiness, and desired vocation.

In addition to difficulties imposed by gender, Yezierska's goal to become a writer was also complicated by her orthodox religious background. However, she was by no means an exception amongst Jewish women in America at the time. Mary Antin, Elizabeth Stern

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[40] In a letter to Arnold Levitas, Yezierska wrote, "From now on I shall focus all my energies, all my thoughts just to serve you. The two of us together will do some great things for the world...", in Henriksen, *Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life*, p. 43.

[41] Dearborn comments that Yezierska's "rejection of this patriarchal ethos, however much it may have reflected an incipient feminism, at this point was motivated by her desire for a vocation of her own, a desire to be more than a wife and mother and to attain more than material wealth", in *Love in the Promised Land*, p. 37.

[42] For example, Jane Addams, Sarah Orne Jewett, Olive Schreiner, Willa Cather, and Gertrude Stein all rejected traditional gender roles, conventions, and relationships. In addition, Dearborn believes that Yezierska was also influenced (through her friendship with Henrietta Rodman) by the radical Greenwich Village couples such as "Ida Rauh and Max Eastman, John Reed and Louise Bryant, Hutchins Hapgood and Neith Boyce, Susan Glaspell and George Cram Cook" all of whom "sought to redefine traditional marriage", in *Love in the Promised Land*, p. 71.

[43] Elaine Showalter, "Women Writers Between the Wars", in *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, p. 823-4.

(alias Leah Morton), Rose Pastor Stokes, and Rose Cohen all wrote about the difficulty of finding a vocation in America as an immigrant woman from an Orthodox Jewish family. Stern and Yezierska are similar in that both recognized the need to be in opposition to the Jewish patriarchal structures, to suffer privation, and to struggle in the process of becoming a writer.[44] In her autobiographical novel, *I Am a Woman—and a Jew*, Stern's fictional heroine resembles Sara Smolinsky in Yezierska's *Bread Givers* since she "alone, of all the children resisted [her father]".[45] Like Yezierska, Stern married in 1911, "did not know whether [she] wanted to be a wife, living in my husband's love or a woman building her career", believed that love must be beautiful and not "sordid", saw sex as a violation of self, and was faced with the problem that a childless woman was considered a failure according to Orthodox Jewish doctrine.[46] In addition, Stern and Yezierska both rejected their fathers' Orthodox Judaism but not the beauty of the Jewish faith, desired happiness outside of the traditional life of the Jewish ghetto, created heroines who yearn for men who represent an "ideal unattainable", and dedicated their lives to writing (Stern did this after a career in social work and Yezierska after becoming a domestic science teacher). Similar to Stern, Mary Antin, and Rose Cohen, Yezierska rebelled against all gender limitations; and her unyielding persistence to transform herself from an unemployed actress into a successful writer was only accomplished by breaking through the traditional stereotypes and prescribed roles for women in America at the time.

YEZIERSKA'S *HUNGRY HEARTS* AND THE SHORT STORY CYCLE

At first sight, *Hungry Hearts* appears to be merely a collection of stories about romantic women from the Lower East Side who describe their search for the democratic ideal and promise of America in an unabashed and passionate Yiddish-English idiom of the ghetto. A closer reading of the book reveals that although the stories are not in chronological order, they are thematically related: they portray the gradual development of inarticulate Jewish working women from

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[44] Joyce Carol Oates, "Imaginary Cities: America", in *Literature and the American Urban Experience*, ed. by Michael Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), p. 17.
[45] Stern, *I Am a Woman—and a Jew*, p. 2.
[46] Ibid., p. 70-71.

the bottom of the social scale, such as Shenah Pessah the janitress and Hanneh Hayyeh the laundress, to fame and success as a writer, illustrated by the anonymous first-person narrator of "How I Found America". In addition, the order of the stories demonstrates Yezierska's tendency towards increasingly autobiographical content: from highly fictionalized accounts of her relationship with John Dewey in "Wings" and "The Miracle" to a predominantly autobiographical account of her own development as a writer in "How I Found America". To a large extent, all of the women characters in *Hungry Hearts* represent Yezierska's own search for self-expression, a theme which both pervades her work and demonstrates her perpetual need to justify her desire to write. Yezierska's tendency to create many fictional versions of a single experience (such as her affair with Dewey which appears in different guises in "Wings", "Hunger", "To The Stars",[47] *Salome of the Tenements*, *Arrogant Beggar*, and *All I Could Never Be*) shows how her writing served as a means of finding alternative forms of self-definition through fiction: writing had a cathartic function since it enabled her to diminish the pain connected to certain traumatic or disturbing experiences. However, writing was also an anguishing, self-destructive process for Yezierska since she had to fracture her identity in order to produce numerous fictional versions of her self. She even described writing as an act of "vivisection",[48] spilling of blood, and self-immolation: like her heroines, she is simultaneously burning up with the desire to write and burning herself out in the process of writing.

Hungry Hearts is unconventional since it is closer to a short story cycle than to a mere collection of short stories. This makes it an interesting text to compare to Sherwood Anderson's, *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), which appeared the year before *Hungry Hearts* was published. Coincidentally, both books deal largely with the search for self-expression and for a vocation as a writer: *Winesburg, Ohio* ends with George Willard's voyage to New York City where he goes in order to become a writer, and *Hungry Hearts* concludes with Yezierska's story about how she became a writer. Like Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*, which had a great influence on Yezierska and

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[47] In *Children of Loneliness*.
[48] Ibid., p. 3.

Anderson,[49] *Hungry Hearts* and *Winesburg, Ohio* capture the essence of their characters' lives and aspirations through the use of local idiom. Both authors portray a series of characters from a common background who are unable to express themselves initially, but ultimately find a voice either through the narrator or on their own. For example, in *Winesburg, Ohio*, "[Biddlebaum] the silent began to talk, striving to put into words the ideas that had been accumulated by his mind during long years of silence";[50] Elizabeth Willard's one hope is that her boy, George, "will be allowed to express something for [them] both";[51] Doctor Parcival hopes that George will be able to write the book that he "may never get written";[52] and at the end of the novel, Kate Swift warns George that he must not "become a mere peddler of words. The thing to learn is to know what people are thinking about, not what they say".[53]

Likewise, Yezierska focuses in *Hungry Hearts* on the inarticulate groping of her heroines for self-expression. Shenah Pessah, the lonely ghetto "janitress and laundress", feels "choked" and stifled in the darkness of her basement flat and yearns for an end to her emotional deprivation and isolation. When John Barnes, the young, aspiring academic arrives fortuitously at her tenement door looking for a room to rent, she is immediately drawn to him. John appeals to her not only due to her hunger for love, but also because he represents a tangible alternative to her future in the ghetto either as wife to the highest bidder or drudge for her uncle. However, John and Shenah's brief romance is doomed from the very beginning since Shenah is in fierce rebellion against the patriarchal ethos of the ghetto which emphasized marriage as the end of all Jewish women's lives.

> Don't take pity on my years. I'm living in America, not in Russia. I'm not hanging on anybody's neck to support me. In America, if a girl earns her living, she can be fifty years old and without a man, and nobody pities her.[54]

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[49] Yezierska actually visited Gertrude Stein on her trip to Europe in 1923.
[50] Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), p. 33.
[51] Ibid., p. 40.
[52] Ibid., p. 56-7.
[53] Ibid., p. 163.
[54] Anzia Yezierska, *Hungry Hearts* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap Publishers, 1920), p. 15.

Thus, her desire for independence and vague yearning for a vocation exists prior to meeting John Barnes, and even at their first meeting she asks John expectantly if he is "maybe a teacher or a writing man"--both vocations which Yezierska herself chose.[55] Hence, John is merely the personification of Shenah's desire for artistic expression, which is why she describes him as "a framed picture of her innermost dreams".[56] He is more important to her as a symbol of her search for beauty, love, and a vocation than as a potential lover or husband.

Although it is not explicitly stated that Shenah wants to become a writer, it is certainly implied. She is lifted "on wings with high thoughts" by Olive Schreiner's *Dreams*, wants to express herself through her clothes,[57] teaches Sam Arkin how to write his name in the following story, "Hunger", and eschews Sam's love (as John had hers) in order to strive for the "life higher"--thus rejecting the idea of a home, husband, babies, and a bread givers for a life on her own. "I got a head, I got ideas", Shenah says to Sam, and informs him that she needs to express herself through words:

> I feel the emptiness of words--but I got to get it out. All that you suffer I have suffered, and must yet go on suffering. I see no end. But only--there is a something--a hope--a help out--it lifts me on top of my hungry body--the hunger to make from myself a person that can't be crushed by nothing nor nobody--the life higher![58]

Although Shenah's quest for the "life higher" is motivated partly by revenge--her "defiant resolve" to "[s]how [John] what's in [her]"--she is also aware of her debt to him for opening "the wings of [her] soul", that is, for giving her the romantic experience which becomes the inspiration and subject matter for her writing.[59] Similar to Sara Reisel in "The Miracle", Shenah's love for a man is not as important as the desire for expression which is born out of that love; and like many of Yezierska's heroines who become teachers, clothing designers, or writers, she needs to find an alternative form of self-

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[55] Ibid., p. 4.
[56] Ibid., p. 3.
[57] This is a common metaphor describing her desire for self-expression which Yezierska also uses in *Hungry Hearts* and *Salome of the Tenements*.
[58] Yezierska, *Hungry Hearts*, p. 64.
[59] Ibid.

definition outside of marriage, namely through work. However, Shenah's passionate desire to express herself is described as a "cruel" form of "self-absorption which "burns her up alive", and thus the self-destructive nature of this yearning for expression begins to emerge since it describes the consuming--if not impossible--need to express all of her stifled ambitions and desires.

In the "The Lost Beautifulness" and "The Free Vacation Home", Yezierska allegorizes the search for a vocation as a writer in the story of Hanneh Hayyeh, who searches for beauty and justice in her domestic life. Mrs Preston, Hanneh's employer, calls Hanneh an "artist laundress" (similar to Shenah Pessah) since she is "so filled with love for the beautiful that [s]he has to express it in some way. You express it in your washing just as a painter paints it in a picture".[60] Yezierska fuses a third-person narrative in "The Lost Beautifulness" with a large amount of dialogue in order to allow Hanneh Hayyeh to tell the story of her frustrated search for beauty and justice in America. Despite her poverty, Hanneh Hayyeh wants to celebrate her son's return from the war in Europe by using her meagre salary to make her kitchen beautiful. When she proudly shows her landlord her newly-decorated kitchen he immediately decides to raise her rent. Hanneh, inspired by Mrs Preston's explanation of "democracy", seeks for justice by taking her landlord to court, but she loses the case and is thrown out of her apartment as she can no longer afford to pay her rent. In the climactic scene of the story--which foreshadows the devastating effect of the volatile combination of high ideals, a passionate desire to create something beautiful, and the social pressures connected to money which stifled Yezierska herself--Hanneh demolishes her newly-decorated kitchen, which was emblematic both of her artistic inspiration and her soul: "Her body ached, and she felt her soul ache there--inside her--like a thing killed that could not die".[61] Thus Yezierska emphasizes through Hanneh Hayyeh (and later Hanneh Breineh), that married women are often trapped by their domestic lives where their desire for beauty and self-expression is either futile or stifled. It is obvious that the portrayal of the wasted artistic potential of both Hanneh Hayyeh and Hanneh Breineh in ***Hungry Hearts*** is a means of justifying Yezierska's own rejection

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[60] Ibid., p. 76.
[61] Ibid., p. 94.

of domestic life and marriage for a writing career in 1915, the year she left Arnold Levitas and published her first short story, "The Free Vacation House".

It is interesting that none of the romances between Yezierska's unmarried heroines in ***Hungry Hearts*** and their lovers end in marriage,[62] and in the case of Hanneh Hayyeh and Hanneh Breineh, who are already married, their husbands are either absent or relegated to the background. In fact, there is a definite shift in ***Hungry Hearts*** away from romantic relationships with male figures to friendships with unmarried working women. Although Shenah is "lifted" with hope by John in "Wings", and Sara Reisel by her godlike teacher in "The Miracle", Hanneh Hayyeh's inspiration comes from Mrs Preston, Sara Reisel and the narrator of "How I Found America" find America respectively through Miss Van Ness and Miss Latham, and Sophie Sapinsky is inspired by Hanneh Breineh's passionate language and discovers that Hanneh's life is a rich source of literary material. Thus Yezierska shifted her emphasis in ***Hungry Hearts*** from romance or marriage as the means of finding a place in America explicitly to work--a shift which is also evident in ***Salome of the Tenements*** and ***Bread Givers***. Sara Reisel, Sophie Sapinsky, and the narrator of "How I Found America", all find some sort of understanding and acceptance in ***Hungry Hearts*** from women--American alter egos--who, like Yezierska, were unmarried, lived alone, and had become teachers. Thus, Yezierska begins to dismantle the "romantic feminine myth of love and marriage as [a] woman's whole experience".[63] She seems to be saying by the end of ***Hungry Hearts*** that only an unmarried woman with a vocation and similar desires as her heroines could possibly understand and support their efforts to express themselves.

The experience of emigration or uprooting from the Lower East Side ghetto lies at the heart of Yezierska's heroines' desire to write. In "My Own People", Sophie Sapinsky literally tears herself away from her family in order to pursue a writing career, which they condemn as a rash decision since it means giving up the "peace of

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[62] Although Sara Reisel does marry at the end of "Where Lovers Dream", she fails to marry David, the man of her dreams. Instead she marries Sam merely "because he came along and wanted me", in ***Hungry Hearts***, p. 161. Thus marriage, for Sara, is also a disappointment and a trap.

[63] Showalter, "Woman Writers Between the Wars", p. 827.

home" and "security of a regular job" to suffer "hunger, loneliness, and want".[64] However, Sophie's decision to depart from home to pursue an insecure future as a writer resembles her parents' decision to emigrate to the United States. Sophie even describes her writing metaphorically as a kind of emigration or "running away" that is prompted by her search for "peace" through self-expression.

> Whether I can write or can't write--I can't stop writing. I can't rest. I can't breathe. There's no peace, no running away for me on earth except in the struggle to give out what's in me. The beat from my heart--the blood from my veins--must flow out into my words.[65]

Writing and leaving home are not only painfully necessary experiences for Sophie but also inextricably connected events: Sophie is able to pursue a writing career only after leaving home, and the departure itself provides her with the emotional material and central theme of her writing. However, similar to the narrator of the next story, "How I Found America", Sophie is plagued by doubts and haunted by the fear that she will not be able to justify her decision to cut herself off from her family and past in order to become a writer.

> Perhaps her family was right in condemning her rashness. [...] Would her writing ever amount to enough to vindicate the uprooting of her past? Would she ever become articulate enough to express beautifully what she saw and felt?[66]

This self-doubt and insecurity, which pervades Yezierska's work, became so overwhelming in 1932 that it resulted in a nervous breakdown and stifled Yezierska for the next eighteen years.

It is paradoxical that although Sophie attempts to isolate herself from her family and ghetto community in order to become a writer, she finds her source of inspiration in Hanneh Breineh, the very woman she tries to shut out of her life. Sophie begins to "see her own life in Hanneh Breineh's", to learn from Hanneh's ability to burn "through the depths of every experience", and to apply Hanneh's verbal spontaneity to her own writing.

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[64] Yezierska, *Hungry Hearts*, p. 228.
[65] Ibid., p. 229-30.
[66] Ibid., p. 228.

> Her efforts to write were like Hanneh Breineh's efforts to feed her children. Behind her life and Hanneh Breineh's life she saw the massed ghosts of thousands upon thousands beating--beating out their hearts against rock barriers.[67]

Writing becomes a substitute for bearing children for Sophie, and later in her autobiographical essay, "Mostly About Myself", Yezierska describes writing as a "labour more bitter, more violent, than childbirth".[68] Thus Yezierska's heroines' devotion to their careers as writers, designers, or teachers, can be seen to replace the need for sexual or marital commitment. This is another reason why the romances between her heroines and their lovers rarely end in union: the rejection or failure of romance often results in their isolation, which could be a blessing for thought and creativity. Sophie not only attempts to justify her choice to become a writer by depicting the wasted life and artistic potential of Hanneh Breineh, but also begins to portray her own search for a vocation as a kind of mission. She describes her simultaneous discovery of a literary source and a narrative voice in passive terms, as if she were becoming the prophetic voice of her people, "[a]t last it writes itself in me! [...] It's not me--it's their cries--my own people--crying in me!"[69] On one hand, Sophie isolates herself both by leaving her family and by attempting to shut out the Jewish community in order to write, but on the other hand she realizes that this very same Jewish community is the source and inspiration of her writing. The desire to write leads to intense emotional turmoil which simultaneously "feeds and devours" Yezierska's heroines: thus, writing is not only life-supporting but also pernicious.

Hungry Hearts ends with an autobiographical piece called "How I Found America", and here we see the trend in Yezierska's fiction towards almost entirely autobiographical fiction. The fact that the first-person narrative, "How I Found America", was included in *Hungry Hearts* implies that it is an integral part of this fictional short story cycle. In addition, the anonymous narrator resembles the heroines from almost all of the previous nine stories: like Sara Reisel, she lived in a mud hut in the Old World, like Shenah Pessah, she doesn't want to be a "hand" but to work with her "head", and

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[67] Ibid., p. 235-236.
[68] Yezierska, *Children of Loneliness*, p. 6.
[69] Yezierska, *Hungry Hearts*, p. 249.

like Sophie Sapinsky, she is inspired to write by an American woman whose understanding symbolizes her acceptance by America. Although the figure of Miss Latham was possibly drawn from Yezierska's friend, tutor, and source of inspiration, Henrietta Rodman, Yezierska created (and sought after) an idealized woman figure and feminist model in order to justify her decision to become a writer. She discovers America because she finds an American woman who is not only like her but also understands her passionate desire for self-expression and a career as a writer. Later in *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, Yezierska ends her autobiography with a scene with Mrs Cobb, a simple American woman poetess who gives her the understanding and support for which she was looking. It is clear that these friendships with American women are symbols of self-regeneration and newly-found self-confidence. But there is always the constant fear and self-doubt underlying all of Yezierska's writing, voiced by the narrator of "How I Found America" when she asks Miss Latham, "[d]o you think like the others that I'm all wrapped up in self?"[70] Mrs Latham replies that the narrator's "egoism and self-centeredness [...] is only the smoke of repression".[71] Unfortunately, Yezierska was later asphyxiated by the "smoke" of her "repression" and "self-centeredness". She even confessed in "Mostly About Myself" that:

> I am aware that there's a little too much of I--I--I, too much of self-analysis and introspection in my writing. But this is because I was forced to live alone with myself so much. [...] So my thoughts, instead of going out naturally to the world around me, were turned in upon myself.[72]

Like Sherwood Anderson, Yezierska reached a point where she couldn't break out of the self-centred stories which made up the "cycle of her experiences": she "turned in upon [her]self" so completely that she collapsed.

SALOME OF THE TENEMENTS

According to Yezierska's account in *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, her second book was supposed to be *Children of Loneliness*, which she described to Goldwyn as a "double-murder story", "the mystery

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[70] Ibid., p. 295.
[71] Ibid., p. 296.
[72] Yezierska, *Children of Loneliness*, p. 5.

of a guilty conscience", whose plot was "the expiation of guilt".[73] This explanation to Goldwyn underlines Yezierska's need to reassess her departure from her cultural origins and choice to live out the Hollywood myth of success--both of which were major sources of guilt. Similar to Hanneh Breineh in "The Fat of the Land", Yezierska was trapped between her poverty-stricken past in the ghetto, to which she could no longer return, and her riches and success in Hollywood, which she chose to abandon in 1922. It's likely that she was working on ***Children of Loneliness*** during her time in Hollywood,[74] but the completion of this book was interrupted by a new project, ***Salome of the Tenements***. Thus Yezierska's sudden Hollywood success disrupted her development as a writer since it demanded longer texts than she had previously written, forcing her prematurely out of the short story genre. In addition, her experiences in Hollywood, especially Montague Glass's revision of the screenplay of ***Hungry Hearts*** with a happy ending, disillusioned her, and as a result she began to reject the "sweat-shop Cinderella" and "rags to riches" myths. This is illustrated in ***Salome of the Tenements*** by Sonya Vrunsky's rejection of money, fame and social status as Manning's wife followed by her return to her own people,[75] which is analogous to Yezierska's rejection of Hollywood and return to New York in 1922.

Although ***Salome of the Tenements*** has many shortcomings, it is an interesting text for several reasons: it uses both Christian and Jewish figures such as Salome, Hagar, Esther, and Mona Lisa to describe a woman's plight between two different cultures; it presents an "anti-myth which rejected the sentimentalized version of the poor but virtuous girl who captivates and marries the kind American millionaire and lives happily ever after", as if in reaction to the Hollywood myth about herself as a Cinderella;[76] and finally, it shows, using clothing and design metaphors, that Yezierska's career as a writer was all important to her--which is demonstrated by Sonya's dedication to her vocation as a clothing designer at the

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[73] Yezierska, ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse*** (London: Virago Press, 1987), p. 72.

[74] According to Henriksen, she had started writing it directly after the publication of ***Hungry Hearts*** in 1920.

[75] Represented by her relationship with Jaques Hollins, alias Jaky Solomon, the successful clothing designer from the ghetto.

[76] Carol B. Schoen, ***Anzia Yezierska*** (Boston: Twayne Press, 1982), p. 39.

end of the novel. In addition, Sonya's decision to leave Manning's aristocratic home in order to return to a life of poverty and hard work in New York suggests that Yezierska was preparing for her own return to the source of her writing.

In the first chapter, "Salome Meets Her Saint", Sonya Vrunsky, a reporter for the *Ghetto News*, falls in love with John Manning during an interview. Sonya, who is described alternately as a "Salome of the tenements" and as a "Ghetto Princess" like "Esther", is portrayed from the very beginning of the novel as a woman vacillating between two cultures. The biblical reference to the Salome story, which occurs twice in the New Testament (Matthew: 14, 1-13, and Mark 6: 14-16) and once in Josephus's *History of the Jewish Wars* (where Salome's name is actually mentioned), illustrates Yezierska's increasing interest in Christian figures and a perception of her self as an "apostate". The story of Salome and Herodias was particularly appropriate to Yezierska for two reasons: first, Herodias, who confounded the laws of her country by divorcing herself from her husband while he was alive, married Herod, the Tetrarch of Galilee, her husband's brother.[77] This marriage (a sin since both Herod and Herodias were married when they eloped) is analogous to Yezierska's two marriages: to Jacob Gordon, which was annulled due to her refusal to consummate the marriage, and then to Arnold Levitas, which, despite the religious ceremony, was not officially recognized and made their daughter, Louise, illegitimate at birth. Second, Salome, the exotic dancer, seduces Herod through her art and, on Herodias's request, demands the head of John the Baptist for criticizing the marriage between Herodias and Herod. This aspect of the story appealed to Yezierska since she needed to work out her failed marriages with Gordon and Levitas and her disappointing affair with John Dewey. Henriksen comments that "Anzia, who had lied to and tricked both her husbands, readily understood the need for trickery and ruthlessness", and thus she implies that Yezierska's creation of Sonya--whom Henriksen describes as "invincible in her determination to capture the man she wanted by trickery and lies when necessary"--was a self-portrayal.[78]

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[77] Flavius Josephus, *Die Geschichte des Jüdischen Krieges* (Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitäts-Verlag, 1972), p. 536.
[78] Henriksen, *Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life*, p. 170.

Similar to the Salome of Heinrich Heine's *Atta Troll*, Sonya Vrunsky is a woman of great beauty without morality, scruples, or self-restraint.[79] As Françoise Meltzer remarks, "Salome, the figure from the Scriptures, whose dance resulted in the death of John the Baptist [...] is uncontainable by the frame of any moral or ideological system".[80] Hence, the use of the Salome story demonstrates Yezierska's desire to redefine her own identity and mythical role as "sweat-shop Cinderella" through the rebellious and iconoclastic figure of Sonya Vrunsky. Although the plot of *Salome of the Tenements* was inspired by Yezierska's friend, Rose Pastor, who married the famous millionaire philantropist, Graham Stokes, the novel was undoubtedly a means of working out of her own past and present identities: as a wife to Jacob Gordon, platonic lover to Dewey, and successful Hollywood writer. Yezierska's polarization between her desire for ambition and fame and yearning for romantic love can be seen respectively in the Salome/Manning and Gittel/Lipkin relationships: the former represents Yezierska's ambition to rise through marriage with Gordon (who was a prominent and well-to-do lawyer), and the latter represents her old persona in the ghetto, where she was in love with her sister's poet lover--who was also named Lipkin.[81] It is not merely a coincidence that both Sonya and Gittel's romances fail since they are based on Yezierska's own disappointing relationships with men. Even at the end of the novel, her union with Hollins, who appreciates her artistic talents and supports her desire to work, is platonic, idealistic, and regenerative. Thus Yezierska presented her fantasy of a perfect working situation (and "marriage") in Sonya and Hollins's supportive relationship at the end of the novel.

The character, Sonya Vrunsky, is a disconcerting fusion of the stereotypes of virgin and temptress: her "virgin bloom" and "nun-like austerity" on the outside contrasts with the magic of her "femininity" which "flamed through this unrevealing uniform" of her puritanical exterior.[82] John Manning, who transfigures women "into

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[79] Françoise Meltzer, *Salome and the Dance of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 16.
[80] Ibid., p. 15.
[81] In *Bread Givers*, Sara Smolinsky also falls in love with her sister's lover, the poet Lipkin.
[82] Anzia Yezierska, *Salome of the Tenements* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1923), p. 12.

Madonnas of love"--i.e. virgins who give birth to messiahs--becomes the personification of messianic hope to Sonya.[83] He is described as "a god", "saint", and "deliverer" who comes to save her soul. But John and Sonya's intentions, desires, and cultures clash. He wants to "fathom the mystery of [Sonya's] personality", suggesting more than a platonic penetration of soul, and she wants to "wrap [her] soul around him like a living flame", another vague sexual image.[84] The story which begins with Sonya's first meeting with John in the ghetto, documents her brazen desire for power, fame, and money by luring Manning into marriage. Sonya eventually captures him, along with a new social status, through lies; and like Salome, she uses her clothing in an artful manner to seduce him. However, Gittel, Sonya's colleague at the newspaper and literary foil, pin-points Sonya's real interest in John as a means of quick social ascent when she tells Sonya, "[y]ou are only a creature consumed by the madness to rise".[85] The spinsterish Gittel resents Sonya's "wildness" and use of sensuality to get her man, especially since Sonya has captivated the heart of the man whom Gittel loves, namely Lipkin the poet. However Sonya's quest for John is based on two contradictory desires which eventually come into conflict: the desire to "save her soul" and the "Lower East Side" by working together with Manning, and a desire to rise out of the poverty of the ghetto through marriage which Sonya achieves by "selling her soul" to Honest Abe for money--a financial agreement which eventually ruins Sonya and John's marriage. In addition, her pursuit of John is pervaded with conflicting emotions since it is part sexual fantasy--she dreams of John "kissing her lips, clasping her to his heart, his being flowing into her being till she swooned in blinding bliss"--and part sexual deception: she seduces John, deceives him into marriage, and then refuses to have sex with him.[86]

If John represents the saint who is going to lift Sonya socially, Jacques Hollins is the man who understands her quest for beauty. Hollins is the "oracle of 5th Avenue" and "god of clothes", who puts the artistic touches onto Sonya's body, giving her the ability to express her longings through his designs. Sonya remarks that

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[83] Ibid., p. 14.
[84] Ibid., p. 64, 54, 16.
[85] Ibid., p. 18.
[86] Ibid., p. 228.

"[her] soul is in rebellion" searching for "clothes to express [her]", and here the metaphor of clothes for writing begins to emerge.[87] Like Yezierska, Sonya is mad about clothes, and similar to Shenah Pessah in "Wings", she wants to use clothing as a means of expressing herself. Sonya feels a "kinship with [Hollins]--a divine understanding of beauty" since Hollins had succeeded and risen through his art; in addition, she gets a "personal thrill that came from the racial oneness of the two of them", as he too is a Jew.[88] So Sonya is polarized between these two men and their two cultures: John, who brings out her virginal quality, transforms her into a Madonna figure, and offers her a way out of the ghetto, and Jacques Hollins, who brings out her desire for self-expression, understands her, and appreciates her sensuality and femininity. Manning wants to use Sonya as a medium for his own self-expression--"within her lay the power to make articulate his life's purpose"--,[89] whereas Hollins, who understands her desire for beauty and self-expression because he is an artist, is rejuvenated and inspired by her; in addition, Manning wants to absorb her mysterious power,[90] whereas Hollins wants to appreciate her power and nurture it. The narrator's preference for Hollins over Manning is too obvious to a reader aware of Yezierska's relationship with Dewey: the novel becomes Yezierska's means, through the figure of John Manning, of rejecting John Dewey's "uplifting love" and destroying the myth which she had created around the affair in order to go on, thus putting Dewey behind her. It also provided Yezierska with a way of working out her return to her sources (which is represented by Jacques Hollins/Jaky Solomon), or in other words, to reject her Hollywood success and return to New York. However, the novel is more complex since Yezierska also criticizes her own puritanism. Sonya confesses to John that she's "choked with great desires that I had no chance to live out", and it soon becomes clear that she's referring to sexual repression.[91] Although Sonya manipulates men, such as when she takes advantage of her "conquering beauty" to get Rosenblat to help her--"In my hand I hold your whole lying

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[87] Ibid., p. 42.
[88] Ibid., p. 46.
[89] Ibid., p. 45.
[90] Ibid., p. 64.
[91] Ibid., p. 60.

respectability"--,[92] or when she uses her "dominating presence" to "bedevil" her landlord, Honest Abe, her sexuality is used purely as a form of power.[93] Manning likes Sonya's "unscheming naturalness", but ironically she schemes to catch him. Thus, contrary to Manning's belief, Sonya is not "unveiled by artifice", and as the narrator remarks, "she had indeed been successful, because the effect of spontaneous beauty and simplicity was exactly the impression she desired to create".[94] Here Yezierska is evidently commenting on her own art as a writer and self-promotion as a primitive from the ghetto. Both her novels and literary persona were veiled by her simple, exotic Yiddish-English idiom, which, in reality, were cunningly contrived. It is interesting that Mona Lisa is Sonya's "erstwhile patron saint", and as the narrator remarks, "was she saint or devil? Not even the artist who painted her knew".[95] The same can be applied to Sonya and Yezierska: both are Salomes of the tenements striving to be Mona Lisas; they are "ghetto princesses" (one fictional and one real) trying to redefine themselves in order to defy categorisation either as a "sweat-shop Cinderella" or "rags to riches" success story. Although Sonya's marriage to John gives her a feeling of delirious triumph since it appeases her ambitions--"she, Sonya, only a year a go a Hester Street nobody, had in one leap made herself the mistress of the Manning house"--her sudden rise, similar to Yezierska's in Hollywood, is followed by an equally rapid fall.[96] And this fall, which is partly a result of her confused role-playing as virgin and temptress, is related to her repression (represented in the novel by Sonya's puritanism). Similar to Yezierska whose marriage to Gordon was motivated by her social ambitions and didn't last one night, Sonya is not prepared to consummate her marriage to Manning. When John approaches Sonya at night, "his body edging closer became an invasion of her soul when it was wrestling with such cruel problems".[97] Only after Sonya rejects John--"[h]e lay a long while wondering what had happened to the ardent passion of his

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[92] Ibid., p. 88-89.
[93] Ibid., p. 99.
[94] Ibid., p. 120-121.
[95] Ibid., p. 142.
[96] Ibid., p. 155-156.
[97] Ibid., p. 228.

priestess of romance"--does she try to appease him.[98] However, her offer is clearly one of platonic love: "Real love, real tenderness, the imaginative subtlety that makes togetherness beautiful, were not in him".[99] One must be wary of the narrator's criticism of the "shallowness" of John's love, for like Sonya, Yezierska had rejected Dewey and Jacob Gordon once it became evident to her that they were physically interested in her. She was neither able to reciprocate Gordon and Dewey's physical passion nor was she willing to accept it as a part of a loving relationship. Thus, contrary to Dearborn, who believes that Dewey treated Yezierska "very shabbily",[100] it's apparent that Yezierska created Sonya as a means of justifying her "shabby" treatment of the men in her life. Even Yezierska's daughter criticizes her mother for being "always frankly exploitative" and "self-centered in her dealings with others".[101] Like Sonya, Yezierska took advantage of her exotic image and passionate language to further her career, but when passion arose in the men she had seduced to help her, she refused to reciprocate with physical passion, stepped aside out of fear, and used fiction to revise the events. John Dewey's accusation of Yezierska was perhaps the most accurate since he claimed that she didn't want love but merely to dramatize the need for love, or as Adele Lindner puts it in *Arrogant Beggar*, "I'm trying to tell you I was only in love with the idea of being in love with a man of your kind".[102] Later, Yezierska became more critical about her role-playing, especially in *Arrogant Beggar* when Arthur Hellman asks Adele Lindner:

> [a]re you sure you're not just playing a part from your romantic Russian novels? Not just dramatizing yourself as one of the persecuted--one of the Insulted and the Injured.[103]

The fact that Yezierska was more interested in Dewey for his aesthetic appreciation of her writing rather than his love is evident when she states that, "[Dewey] made me realize that art is the climax of human experience. You don't know what happened to you until

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[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid., p. 229.
[100] Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land*, p. 121.
[101] Henriksen, *Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life*, p. 209.
[102] Anzia Yezierska, *Arrogant Beggar* (London: William Heinemann, 1927), p. 211.
[103] Ibid., p. 213.

you create with it".[104] Thus, once again, she substitutes her vocation as an artist for sexual passion, which is underlined by the innuendo in her reference to art as the "climax" of human experience. As a novel about her affair with Dewey, ***Salome of the Tenements*** can be read both as a fantasy, and as a way of showing the impossibility of a lasting relationship with him (for he was already married). But on the other hand, it can also be seen as a way of expiating her guilt and impotency as a wife to Gordon and lover to Dewey.

After Sonya's divorce from Manning, which symbolizes her rejection of money, fame and social prestige, she becomes a "Hagar" wandering in a wilderness towards an unknown goal",[105] returns to the ghetto, sinks back into poverty in a women's shelter, becomes a waitress--which she gives up because of the customers' lechery--, and then finds a job as a "sample hand" in a factory, where she works "like a thing possessed". It is at this stage that Sonya gives up her desire for love and substitutes it with her passion for work. Now "for the first time in her life", as a sewer and clothing designer, "she was doing the work she loved for the love of it".[106] In the last two chapters, "Understanding" and "Revelation", Yezierska works out her own problems concerning her search for a vocation, identity as a Jew, and need to justify her rejection of Hollywood and return to New York. However, there are many problems at the end of the novel which makes it contrived and unconvincing. For example, although Sonya confesses, "what hypocrisies I practiced in the name of love", she is portrayed by the narrator as a of kind martyr--"the cross"--rather than a woman who had abused Manning by luring him through lies into marriage;[107] and although she experiences a fall from riches and social prestige with Manning to poverty with Hollins, the narrator wants the reader to believe that Hollins, rather than Sonya, is the one who is rejuvenated by the relationship. Manning is described as an "animal with bestial passion for the exotic" and Hollins as a "primitive Oriental guarding his woman".[108] So what occurs is essentially a shifting of myths and stereotypes, a kind of

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[104] Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land*, p. 140.
[105] Yezierska, *Salome of the Tenements*, p. 242.
[106] Ibid., p. 267.
[107] Ibid., p. 284.
[108] Ibid., p. 283.

simplification which readjusts Sonya's relationships with men and her past according to her (and the author's) needs. The relationship between Sonya and Hollins represents the promise of a vocation rediscovered, but it is a vague and idealistic union which doesn't appear to have a lasting future. She is plagued by her inability to completely free herself of her past, namely her romance with Manning at the beginning of the novel which inspired her with the desire for self-expression.

> As one from a height she watched with puzzled wonder her bruised soul struggling to tear itself free from the past. But she could not rid herself of the past nor get hold of the present. The past from which she had tried so hard to tear away was always present with her.[109]

Thus Sonya makes a full circle by the end of the novel: she started out dressing herself with Hollins's help to catch Manning but returns to Hollins for safety, inspiration, rewarding work, and a sense of belonging to the people she had left. Her desire for intellectual and spiritual companionship with Hollins is not convincing and Yezierska seems to be looking for a overly idealized relationship with a man. However, the fact that Yezierska ends the novel on a positive note, in a regenerative union, indicates that she still hoped or believed that change was possible both romantically and artistically. Hence, the relationship between Hollins and Sonya is a reaffirmation of Yezierska's identity as writer, and it shows that she was in the process of preparing herself for some sort of reconciliation with her past.

RETURN TO THE GHETTO: *BREAD GIVERS*, *ARROGANT BEGGAR*, AND *ALL I COULD NEVER BE*

Although *Bread Givers* was evidently "based on the events of [Yezierska's] own childhood and youth",[110] it is actually a fictional recreation of her past which reveals how Yezierska attempted symbolically to unite the two separate worlds of the Jewish Lower East Side ghetto and gentile America. In the same way that *Salome of the Tenements* shows how Yezierska used fiction to prepare herself to reject Hollywood and return to New York, *Bread Givers* illustrates how she was preparing herself in 1924-5 for a

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[109] Ibid., p. 280.
[110] Henriksen, *Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life*, p. 215.

reconciliation with her father, who had criticized her departure from home and decision to become a writer. In the Winter of 1925, shortly after the publication of *Bread Givers*, Yezierska "decided, as if planning to make peace with another warring power, to go to see her father" who was still living in the Lower East Side (she was living uptown in the Grovesnor hotel).[111] In fact, Yezierska was planning to reconcile herself with her father even before she wrote *Bread Givers* since she had begun to support him, "after *Salome* gave [her] an income".[112] However, the truce which occurs at the end of *Bread Givers* between Sara Smolinsky and her father was impossible in real life; after a disappointing meeting with her father, Yezierska fled back uptown, unable to achieve the reconciliation which she had worked out in her novel.[113] This meeting between Anzia and her father traumatized Yezierska since she didn't find the approval from him which she appears to have needed in order to continue writing successful novels. Her two final novels which were written after this visit indicate a loss of confidence in her writing, and they portray heroines who are uprooted and seeking for "comprehension" and acceptance by their fathers. For example, in *All I Could Never Be*, Fanya Ivanova seeks to "love all she had once hated", namely her father. She tells Hanneh Hayyeh that "the mere thought of her father is ground under [her] feet", and Hanneh replies,

> [n]ow that you have found yourself in your father you have found something real and abiding. Roots to hold you. Soil in which to grow.[114]

However, Yezierska's meeting with her father had such a profound emotional effect on her that it preoccupied her for the next twenty-five years. This is supported by the fact that although she tried to resolve it through fiction--first in *Bread Givers* and then in *All I Could Never Be* as quoted above--, it later emerged as a central, unresolved conflict in her autobiography, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, which I shall discuss in the next chapter.

In the very first page of Sara Smolinsky's first-person, autobiographical narrative, Sara presents herself in the role of

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[111] Ibid., p. 219.
[112] Ibid., p. 204.
[113] Henriksen, *Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life*, p. 220.
[114] Yezierska, *All I Could Never Be*, p. 195.

mother at the early age of ten in order to set the reader up for her rejection of motherhood and a life of domesticity.

> I was about ten years old then. But from always it was heavy on my heart the worries for the house as if I was mother.[115]

The opening scenes of ***Bread Givers*** are crucial since Yezierska wants to show that in order for Sara to become someone she must first free herself of this life of servitude and drudgery by rebelling against the repressive paternalistic conventions of Orthodox Judaism. Yezierska, who actually had three brothers and three sisters when she arrived in America with her family at the age of ten, emphasizes this paternalism by getting rid of her brothers in order to focus directly on the figure of Sara's father, Reb Smolinsky. However, although Sara rejects the traditional role for women in the ghetto in order for a vocation as a teacher, she becomes ironically both a substitute mother and a wife when she plans respectively to marry Hugo Seelig and to take her father into her home at the end of the novel. It is important to note that Sara accepts marriage and a truce with her father only on her own terms, and her return to the ghetto, plan to marry Hugo, and reconciliation with her father are all preceded by her achievement of an independent vocation: thus her realisation of equality of expression and responsibility are important prerequisites both for her marriage to Hugo Seelig and truce with her father.

Similar to Louisa May Alcott's autobiographical novel, ***Little Women***, ***Bread Givers*** is:

> a novel about suppression, as well as about self-expression, and, above all, about a possible union, both pragmatic and utopian, of the two.[116]

Sara's search for self-expression--similar to Sophie Sapinsky's in ***Hungry Hearts*** and Sonya Vrunsky's in ***Salome of the Tenements***--is portrayed in terms of her desire for an education and a vocation, which she achieves by liberating herself from her father's control and religious belief. Although Sara becomes a "*teacherin*" at the end of the novel, she is also the first-person narrator of her own

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[115] Yezierska, ***Bread Givers*** (London: The Women's Press, 1984), p. 1.
[116] Ann Douglas, "Introduction", in ***Little Women*** (New York: New American Library, 1983), p. xiii.

narrative which, similar to David Levinsky, makes her a kind of writer and artist. Hence Sara, like Yezierska, becomes not only a teacher but also a writer, and the former is merely the means of attaining self-expression through the latter.

It is not necessary to belabour the way Sara liberates herself from her father's restrictive and oppressive orthodox convictions; it should suffice to say that she sees in the marriages of her sisters, Fania, Bessie, and Mashah, that the traditional arranged marriage is a self-negating institution for Jewish women, a trap which stifles their ambitions and destroys their dreams. In order to illustrate the language of this negating patriarchal ethos, Sara presents the readers with a series of curses and abuses against which her plight to escape from her family (namely her father) appears not only justified but also necessary for her survival: her mother calls her a "Bandit" and "murderer" for wasting food;[117] she is described as "thin and small, like a dried-out herring";[118] her father calls her business initiative a "craziness" and labels her a "Crazy head";[119] later when she runs away from her father determined not to let him ruin her life as he had her sisters', he calls her a "Wild head", "blasphemer", "Denier of God", and "soul of stone";[120] in a confrontation with her father over her refusal to marry Max Goldstein, he curses her as a "lawless, consciousless thing", describes her as a "dried-up old maid", and tells her she's "worse than an animal";[121] Sara is referred to as a "Toad", "Wild Animal", and "Thing of evil";[122] according to Reb Smolinsky, she is "without character, without morals, without religion", and above all "selfish".[123] However, Sara strikes back at her father when she tells him that "[a]ll of my selfishness is from you", which is not only true but also the key to her personality, especially her determination.[124] Sara is selfish, but as these invectives show, she has to be in order to survive; and she learns to survive by transferring her father's obstinate faith in his religion, books, and prayers to her career, desire to teach, and search for self-

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[117] Yezierska, *Bread Givers*, p. 7.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid., p. 20.
[120] Ibid., p. 136, 138.
[121] Ibid., p. 204, 205, 206.
[122] Ibid., p. 207.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid.

expression. Thus she makes a religion of her vocation to become a teacher and uses her narrative to justify the substitution of her new religion for his old one.

Although Sara achieves her goal, returns to the ghetto, and manages to reconcile herself with her father, there is a blatant manipulation in the--once again--idealistic happy ending: Yezierska wants to demonstrate how Sara, like herself, was prepared to love and to accept her father in spite of his abuse and narrow-mindedness. Sara portrays herself as a heroic figure since she has the power to love her father despite his selfishness and violent language, as if turning her cheek to confront him with the limitations of his own religious ideology through her practice of a plainly Christian one. Thus Yezierska uses this first-person, autobiographical narrative not only to prepare herself for her return to the Lower East Side, but also as a kind of defense of her own search for a vocation--which becomes a major theme of her autobiography, ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse***. Sara's successful attainment of a teaching career is the most important event in her narrative, and it precedes her return to the ghetto, marriage, and reconciliation with her father. It is important to note that Sara's mother not only supports her daughter but also appears to become more critical of her husband and rebellious in the course of the novel. For example, when Mrs Smolinsky begins to doubt the wisdom of her husband's choice to marry Fania to Moe Mirsky rather than to Lipkin, the poet whom Fania loves, Sara's mother remarks, "[m]aybe if I had the sense of my daughters in America, I would have given you a good look over before the wedding".[125] Hence, Yezierska reverses the importance of her mother and father in ***Bread Givers*** by giving greater emphasis to the former and by showing a shift in gender roles by the end of the novel which presents Sara with a distinct advantage over her father: Reb Smolinsky, who becomes a chewing-gum peddler and suffers from the endless harangues of his second wife, is portrayed as a fallen Lear, defeated by his youngest daughter and old age. Thus Yezierska is able to unify Sara's past, represented by her father, and her present, represented by her affair with Hugo Seelig, by creating a new family structure with Sara and Hugo as equal partners, and her father as the emasculated

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[125] Ibid., p. 76. See pages 95, 126-7, and 128.

and shrunken "child". In addition, the prospective marriage of Hugo and Sara and incorporation of Reb Smolinsky all under one roof shows how Yezierska attempted to fuse the elements of expression--represented by Hugo and the New World--and repression--symbolized by Reb Smolinsky and the Old World--in a "pragmatic and utopian" union. The fact that Sara's career predominates over romance is clearly in line with Yezierska's earlier works, such as ***Hungry Hearts***, ***Salome of the Tenements***, and ***Children of Loneliness***. However, this theme is handled with less success and less confidence in her last two novels.

Arrogant Beggar and ***All I Could Never Be*** both reveal that Yezierska's powers were noticeably tapering off. Disconcerted, if not shocked by her confrontation with her father, Yezierska began to lose her confidence and creative power due to her failure to achieve the regenerative reconciliation which she had desired. The language of Adele Lindner in ***Arrogant Beggar*** is pervaded by descriptions of a lost woman seeking for some sort of revelation and atonement. Similar to Sonya in ***Salome of the Tenements***, Adele ultimately rejects the aristocratic romance with Arthur Hellman and returns to her people in a symbolic union with Jean Rachmansky--concluding once again with a platonic union of "comprehension" between Yezierska's heroine and a male artist. Adele's new lover, Rachmansky, inspires her with his "music of the Resurrection",[126] and thus Yezierska's heroines are still searching for a saviour in an artist-god figure.

> [Adele] How is it that I'm not frightened by your genius, Jean? [...]
> [Jean] My genius--whatever that is--is dead without you [...] You brought me back to life--our own people. There's an atmosphere here.[127]

However, now the happy union at the end of the novel, which is just as contrived as that of ***Bread Givers*** and ***Salome of the Tenements***, "makes [Adele] feel guilty", and here we seem to see Yezierska losing faith in the possibility of both an ideal relationship with a man and working situation.

All I Could Never Be, the next and last novel, ends in a similar kind of union between heroine and male artist but with a different result. Fanya Ivanova, who was a successful writer but admits that

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[126] Yezierska, ***Arrogant Beggar***, p. 260.
[127] Ibid., p. 261-262.

"something has stopped the writing in her", meets Vladimir Pavlowitch, an outcast painter who earned his living as a commercial artist.[128] For the first time, Yezierska's heroine has a successful relationship with a lover who isn't Jewish, and *All I Could Never Be* ends not in a platonic union but in a sexual consummation--one should note, however, how quick she is to describe this sexual union in terms of exile and revelation.

> Without looking at each other, they read each other's essences and flowed together in understanding. Into each face had come that look of release--exiles in strange lands, suddenly granted a vision of home.[129]

Although Dorothy Canfield Fisher helped Yezierska with the final draft of *All I Could Never Be*--making the "girl [Fanya] less self-righteous and the man riper, more clear-seeing when she condemns the town"--, Yezierska was unwilling to change the "final part [of the novel]--their being "physical lovers at sight" as Fisher had suggested.[130] In a letter to Fisher, Yezierska justified Fanya and Vladimir's sexual union with the remark:

> [t]hat is the kind of people they are. That is the whole tragedy of the book. The way they are at seven they are at seventy. People do not seem to grow very much--And yet in spite of the girl being the same sort she was at the beginning--she did change--she did grow--even though the changes were not visible. But a Russian Jewess could never achieve the heroic power of restraint of an Emily Dickinson.[131]

The last sentence above is ironic since Yezierska, who created a series of heroines more similar to Emily Dickinson in their sexual restraint, [132] finally accepts passion as a part of love. Although Fanya is no longer searching or lost at the end of the novel, Yezierska seems to use her to confess that she had come to a dead end in her career. At one point, Fanya remarks that she has:

> suffered a terrible disillusion--a loss of faith that left me in utter darkness. All I want now is a job to keep

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[128] Yezierska, *All I Could Never Be*, p. 131.
[129] Ibid., p. 253.
[130] Letter from Anzia Yezierska to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, *Dorothy Canfield Fisher Collection*, Bailey/Howe Memorial Library, University of Vermont.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Yezierska, *All I Could Never Be*, pp. 158-9.

> busy, to stop the agony of thoughts that can't come through.[133]

The fact that the heroine of Yezierska's last novel wants to work in a factory rather than to write illustrates how Yezierska had come full circle in her career: Shenah Pessah, Sara Reisel, and the narrator of "How I Found America" all wanted to work with their "heads" and not with their "hands" in *Hungry Hearts*. Now Fanya, similar to Yezierska, wants to return back to the poverty and struggle which characterized her early years as a writer and which also happened to be her most creative period. Perhaps Yezierska had predicted the end of her literary creativity at the very beginning of her career when Sophie Sapinsky remarks that the voices of Hanneh Breineh and Shmendrik "will not be stilled in [her], till all America stops to listen".[134] America had listened to Yezierska and her heroines for over a decade but now they had very little new to say. Although Fanya, like Yezierska, had become a writer and gone to Hollywood, she realises that "[f]ame is a more terrible trap than love"[135] and reflects that "her success was born of bitterest failure--the failure to hold a great friendship, a great love".[136] Yezierska's final novel, *All I Could Never Be*, shows her returning to rework the love-affair with John Dewey that was also the subject of "Wings", the first story of her first book. In her rejection of fame and success, she seems to be preparing herself for a final return to her old self through poverty, obscurity, and acceptance of her failure. In this respect, Yezierska had truly completed the "cycle of her experiences", which she had begun in search for the promise of America and ends by accepting failure and poverty as her only means of understanding.

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[133] Ibid., p. 131.
[134] Yezierska, *Hungry Hearts*, p. 249.
[135] Yezierska, *All I Could Never Be*, p. 133.
[136] Ibid., p. 113-14.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANZIA YEZIERSKA'S *RED RIBBON ON A WHITE HORSE. MY STORY*

INTRODUCTION

In the last chapter I showed how Anzia Yezierska's writing from *Hungry Hearts* (1920) to *All I Could Never Be* (1932) can be viewed as a "cycle" of fictionalized self-portraits since she always employs fiction to dramatize her own "experiences as an immigrant",[1] especially her desire for self-expression and search for a vocation in America. Yezierska's autobiography, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse. My Story* (1950),[2] is similar to her early fiction since she uses the autobiographical narrative to defend as well as to justify her decision to become a writer. However, although her autobiography and fiction both focus on her desire for self-expression, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* is more complex than her novels and short stories due to the fact that she adds a vital new theme to her writing, namely the reaffirmation of her identity as a Jew. In a moment of "clarity", self-discovery, and revelation at the end of her autobiography, Yezierska realises:

> that the battle I thought I was waging against the world had been against myself, against the Jew in me. [...] How often when I had sought work in Christian offices had I been tempted to hide my Jewishness--for a job! It was like cutting off part of myself. That was why there was no wholeness, no honesty, in anything I did. That was why I always felt so guilty and so unjustly condemned--an outsider wherever I went.[3]

Yezierska's autobiographical narrative is a means of regenerating the "wholeness" and "honesty" which she had in the Lower East Side ghetto before she became a famous writer. Her rediscovery and reacceptance of her "Jewishness" brings her back to her beginnings in a circular manner, thus initiating a series of returns: to her home in the ghetto--her literary milieu--which she leaves at the beginning of *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, to the past which she

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[1] William Lyon Phelps, *Autobiography With Letters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 907.
[2] From now on, I will refer to *Red Ribbon on a White Horse. My Story* as *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*.
[3] *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (London: Virago Press, 1987), p. 212.

tries to forget in Hollywood, and to former values which she had abandoned in her striving for success and fame. In short, ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse*** illustrates Yezierska's successful attempt to make a "new start" as a writer,[4] to create herself anew through her autobiographical narrative, a kind of rebirth or regeneration that restores her faith in her self, her work, and her identity as a Jew. Similar to Chapter Three on Cahan's ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben***, I shall attempt to show how Yezierska either consciously or unconsciously displays herself through her use of metaphor, symbols, and recurring motifs. However, before I begin with the formal analysis of ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse***, I will discuss her need to create some kind of continuity between her autobiographical and fictional work.

THE SEARCH FOR NARRATIVE CONTINUITY

Yezierska's narrative voice in ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse*** is a distinctly American voice which lacks the Yiddish inflection and sentence structure of her fictional heroines such as Shenah Pessah and Sara Reisel in ***Hungry Hearts*** and Sara Smolinsky in ***Bread Givers***. It is a more confident, reflective, and composed voice which matured immensely during the eighteen years of artistic silence between ***All I Could Never Be*** and ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse***. However, despite the different narrative tone of her fiction and autobiography, the final lines of ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse*** correspond directly to the title and theme of her last novel, ***All I Could Never Be***, as if she hadn't stopped writing since 1932.[5]

> I did not have to go to far places, sweat for glory, strain for the smile from important people. ***All that I could ever be***, the glimpses of truth I reached for everywhere, was in myself.[6]

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[4] Ibid., p. 199.

[5] Contrary to Henriksen, who remarks that Yezierska was writing consistently between 1932 and 1950 but was unable to "sell any of her stories" (***Red Ribbon on a White Horse***, intro., p. 17), Yezierska herself admits in ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse*** that she had "written [herself] out" by 1932, and adds, "I could drive myself [to write] no longer. Now I had to face the fact that the books published after ***Hungry Hearts***, instead of getting better, were becoming thinner and thinner" (p. 122).

[6] ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse***, p. 220, my emphasis.

With a simple semantic revision--changing the "never" in the title of *All I Could Never Be* to "ever"--Yezierska recreates the possibility for expression and, in doing so, overcomes the self-doubt and lack of confidence which silenced her in 1932. Hence, similar to Henry Roth (as I'll discuss in Chapter Seven), Yezierska needed to create an idea of narrative continuity between her fiction and autobiography by linking her autobiographical narrative both thematically and linguistically to her last novel; in other words, she had to go back to the period of blocking or truncation which occurred after the publication of *All I Could Never Be* in order to overcome her writing block and to continue as a writer.

THE MYTH OF THE SELF CONTINUED

As I mentioned in the last chapter, it is not a coincidence that *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* begins with a fictionalized version of her emergence as a writer since Yezierska, the ghetto author, was a self-creation. The fact that her fictional heroines and self-invented persona as a writer were interchangeable is illustrated by the highly fictionalized self-portrayal in *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, which is reminiscent of heroines such as Shenah Pessah, the Lower East Side orphan and laundress in "Wings". For example, Yezierska describes herself in "Hester Street" as an uneducated orphan from the ghetto who had left her now deceased parents' home in order to become a writer--"If only Father and Mother were alive now! How I longed to be at peace with them!"; however, it soon becomes clear to the reader that she was not an orphan since her father was still alive when *Hungry Hearts* was published.[7] In addition, she fails to mention that she had left the ghetto over twenty years prior to the beginning of her "life story", and claims that she was only twenty-three years old when she met John Morrow (alias John Dewey) in 1917, which would make her twenty-six at the time of her success in 1920.[8] However, according to Louise Levitas Henriksen, Yezierska was born in 1880 which means that she was forty years old--rather than twenty-six--in 1920 when *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* begins.[9]

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[7] Ibid., p. 28. The fact that her father was alive when *Hungry Hearts* was published becomes clear two paragraphs after the citation above.

[8] Ibid., p. 110.

[9] Louise Levitas Henriksen, *Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), p. 14.

Finally, although Yezierska tries to pass herself off as a young, uneducated and naive writer in "Hester Street", she is unable to disguise the fact that she was already a published writer with a literary agent. Thus, Yezierska's highly fictionalized self-portrayal in the first chapter of ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse*** illustrates not only how she tried to promote an image of herself as an uneducated ghetto primitive, but also the large extent to which Yezierska identified with her fictional heroines.

THE METAPHOR OF CIRCULARITY

Yezierska reworks her fictional "cycle" of "experiences as an immigrant" in ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse***, which concludes with a more positive and hopeful portrayal of her experiences as an immigrant writer than in ***All I Could Never Be***.[10] Although ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse*** is not arranged in a strictly chronological order, Yezierska provides a roughly chronological framework for her narrative in order to focus her story directly on her literary career: it begins with her emergence as a public figure and Hollywood success story in 1920, when she published ***Hungry Hearts*** and sold the film rights to Samuel Goldwyn, and ends roughly with her return from Fair Oaks, New Hampshire[11] to New York in 1932, the same year that her last novel, ***All I Could Never Be***, appeared. It is interesting to note that Yezierska's reaffirmation of her identity as a Jew and a writer (symbolized by her return to the New York at the end of the autobiography) is described almost exactly in Meyer Levin's autobiography, ***In Search***, which was also published in 1950. Levin prefaces his autobiography as an "investigation" and "evaluation" of his "inner problems", and remarks that:

> [i]t will soon appear [to the reader of his autobiography] that [his] development as a Jew is inextricably woven with [his] development as a writer, though there were periods when [he] tried to separate these two factors.[12]

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[10] See the section in the last chapter on the circular conclusion of Yezierska's fictional cycle of experiences.

[11] Yezierska disguises Arlington, Vermont, where she went at the beginning of the 30s, as Fair Oaks, New Hampshire in ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse***.

[12] Meyer Levin, ***In Search*** (New York: Horizon Press, 1950), p. 10.

Similar to Levin, who describes how he had "come full circle" in his writing career and adds that the "circle was not empty" of meaning,[13] Yezierska uses the metaphor of circularity in ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse*** to describe her rediscovery and reaffirmation of the vital connection between her writing and Jewish identity. In a section of her autobiography concerning her decision to return to New York from Hollywood, Yezierska comments that Boruch Shlomoi Mayer's pleading letter to her for money to return to Poland:

> pulled me back to the dim past, to all those I had abandoned to become a writer. Like a runner who runs a race in a curved track and must get back to his starting point, the distance I had covered running away to live my life with pencil and paper had brought me back to where I had started.[14]

Thus, Yezierska's career as a writer, which begins in ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse*** with her desire to escape from her Jewish identity and the poverty of the ghetto, ends with her return to both poverty and her identity as a Jew; and, similar to Levin, the "full circle" which Yezierska makes in her career as a writer was not "devoid of meaning".

EMIGRATION: DEATH OF THE IMMIGRANT AND BIRTH OF THE AMERICAN WRITER

Yezierska begins ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse*** with the arrival of the Western Union telegram which projects her to fame and fortune in Hollywood in order to portray the figurative death of the Jewish ghetto immigrant and birth of the American writer, whose departure to a new world--parallelling that of the American immigrant--requires a kind of "eviction", "death", or emigration.[15] This telegram enables Anzia, the young writer of "Hester Street", to leave the Old World (here the Lower East Side ghetto) behind by emigrating to the new promised land of Hollywood. Although there is an implication in this scene that full assimilation to America is not possible for the Jewish-American writer who remains in the ghetto, Yezierska ultimately rejects this idea at the end of the autobiography where her identity as Jew and American are shown to be not only complementary but also compatible. Her initial intention in ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse***

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[13] Ibid., p. 9, 11.
[14] Yezierska, ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse***, p. 93-4.
[15] Ibid., p. 25.

is to present the reader with an inverted success story, since her autobiography begins with her sudden and spectacular Hollywood success and appears to descend into abysmal failure.

> Even when I began this story, long before I went to Fair Oaks, I did not know how it would end--that is, the meaning of the end. I thought I was writing the downward career of a failure. [...] Today the knowledge of a thousand failures cannot keep me from this light born of my darkness, here, now.[16]

Similar to Howells's portrayal of Silas Lapham, Yezierska shows that her fall from the heights of success and riches back into poverty and obscurity results in a moral rise and return to her home which regenerates her. It is ironic that her symbolic birth from immigrant to public figure in "Hester Street", the first chapter of ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse***, is really a description of the shattering and loss of her identity; likewise, the story of "failure" which Yezierska thought she was writing turns unexpectedly into a discovery of the richness of her diverse experiences in New York and Hollywood, especially her Jewish background which she had denied in her yearning for success.

PAWNING THE PAST: THE SHAWL VERSUS THE TYPEWRITER

Yezierska's decision to pawn her mother's wedding shawl (rather than her typewriter) reveals her major conflict as a writer between her relationship to her literary source, the Jewish ghetto and its "culture of poverty" which the shawl represents, and to fame and success as a writer in Hollywood, symbolized by the typewriter. It is necessary to look closely at the meaning of the shawl since it is a rich and complex symbol that provides an important clue to Yezierska's intention as an autobiographer. The shawl and the narrative are both highly emotive objects which have "[p]eople's lives [...] woven into it";[17] and like the narrative, the shawl is a piece of art which generates memories of the Old World ghetto, especially her late mother--clearly making it a symbol of women's creativity.

> Nobody in our village in Poland had had a shawl like it. It had been Mother's wedding present from her rich uncle in Warsaw. It had been her Sabbath, her holiday.

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[16] Ibid., p. 218, 220.
[17] Ibid., p. 27.

> . . . When she put it on she outshone all the other women on the way to the synagogue.[18]

By pawning the shall to get the lucrative movie contract with Goldwyn, Yezierska uses her religious and aesthetic inheritance to move from one world to another: thus she trades her religious and cultural rituals or traditions such as the Sabbath and the possibility of marriage symbolized by the shawl for a vocation in America. It is ironic that Yezierska, who believes that "this might be the last time I'd have to pawn [the shawl]", is unable to redeem or repossess the shawl when she returns to the pawnshop with one hundred dollars since it had already been sold.[19] Therefore, the loss of her shawl, similar to her later loss of artistic inspiration in 1932, can not be reversed for any amount of money.

> The loss of that one beautiful thing which all my money could not reclaim shadowed my prospective trip to Hollywood.[20]

Yezierska is so obsessed with her past--especially since it provides her with so much literary material--that a conflict arises in the pawning (and later loss) of objects connected to the past. As she puts it after losing the shawl, "[t]he distrust of good fortune always in the marrow of my bones made me think of my father".[21] Hence, the loss of her religious "inheritance" triggers her feelings of guilt, placing her father's suspicion of fortune in direct conflict with her desire for success and fame. She attempts to convince the reader that she was skeptical of her success even before she signed her contract with Goldwyn. However, this skepticism could only have been voiced by a wiser, more mature Anzia Yezierska whose values concerning money and fame had been radically altered by her experiences in Hollywood, the stock market crash, the ensuing Depression, and her descent into obscurity and poverty. What Yezierska wants her readers to accept is her conception of the past, or in other words its present value to her as a writer, rather than objective historical facts about her past. The reader looking for facts would be considering the autobiography in purely materialistic

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[18] Ibid., p. 26.
[19] Ibid., p. 26-27.
[20] Ibid., p. 31.
[21] Ibid.

terms, which is the way Zaretsky, the pawn broker, regards the shawl in "Hester Street".

The same shawl that Zaretsky calls a worthless "moth-eaten rag full of holes" is transformed by Yezierska into an aesthetic creation which is "rarer than diamonds", gets "finer" with age, and is invested with the power to evoke the past.[22] Contrary to Zaretsky, who rejects the value of the past--"[f]or what is past nobody pays. Now it's junk--falling apart"--, and contrary to the Anzia of "Hester Street" who pawns her "inheritance" as a means to attain success and riches in the New World, Anzia Yezierska, the elderly autobiographer, repossesses her shawl by weaving together her memories into a kind of literary shawl.[23] Her narrative is simultaneously a substitute for the shawl and a means of retrieving the stories and relationships which were symbolically lost with it; and like the shawl, which becomes finer and more subtly coloured as it ages, the memories woven into Yezierska's narrative also become more subtle with time. Thus she attempts through her autobiographical narrative to redeem her present poverty and obscurity as a writer in 1950 in the same way the shawl had "redeemed the squalor [of the ghetto] in which [she] had to live" in 1920.[24]

Yezierska would rather pawn her mother's wedding shawl than her typewriter for practical as well as symbolic reasons: she cannot have a vocation without her typewriter, and her writing--as demonstrated by the potential sale of *Hungry Hearts* to Goldwyn--represents the possibility of fame and success in Hollywood. However, although Yezierska trades her Jewish past for an American future, her melancholic culture of poverty eventually comes into direct conflict with the Hollywood myth of success: the fact that the former culture of the ghetto has a stronger hold on her is evident when she ultimately rejects Hollywood in order to return to New York. In addition, the title of her autobiography comes from a ghetto proverb which her father used to repeat, which clearly indicates that this is a story about a Jewish woman from the ghetto rather than a Hollywood legend. Hollywood requires Yezierska to conform to and validate its myth of success, and in doing so to

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[22] Ibid., p. 27.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., p. 26.

sacrifice her control over her own self-image. In a section of *Timebends* concerning Hollywood, Arthur Miller remarked that his "success [there] was only legitimate if won without sacrificing independence", and he adds in a section comparable to Yezierska's reaction to Hollywood that:

> [t]he very idea of someone editing a play of mine or so much as changing a word was enough to make my skin crawl, and to actually submit pages to a producer who became the owner of what one wrote the moment one wrote it--this was unconscionable. Indeed, the very process itself of exchanging art for money was repulsive.[25]

Like Miller, Yezierska refuses to validate the Hollywood myth of success on its terms and thus her entire narrative can be seen as a heroic struggle to preserve her identity and artistic integrity, to have full control over her own "life story" regardless of its factual accuracy.

YEZIERSKA'S WORDS VERSUS HER FATHER'S

The prospect of success is always undercut by a tone of prophetic skepticism in *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, and Yezierska's skeptical voice concerning the loss of her shawl (cited above) is closely related to her father's skeptical voice throughout the narrative. When she visits her father directly after selling the movie rights to *Hungry Hearts* to Goldwyn, he is chanting from *Isaiah* which, combined with the "aging stoop of his shoulders", and "paler, thinner" "frail body", is interpreted by Yezierska as a condemnation of her quest for riches and fame. Although Yezierska appreciates the striking beauty of his voice, which transforms the squalor of his tenement home with a special aura, her confrontation with her father in "Hester Street" results in a turbulent and emotional scene that is later repeated at the end of the autobiography--where she revises the same event to show much greater understanding for her father. Nevertheless, in the earlier scene, Yezierska deliberately insults her father with her gift of a hundred dollars, which he sees as an act of apostasy and irresponsibility:

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[25] Arthur Miller, *Timebends* (London: Methuen, 1988), p. 230, 213.

> hastily, to halt his reproaches, I reached into my bag and dropped ten ten-dollar bills on the open page of his book. He pushed aside the bills as if they would contaminate the holiness of the script. [...]
> "Can your money make up for your duty as a daughter? In America, money takes the place of God."[26]

Yezierska's father rejects her money since he regards the production of fiction as blasphemous and contact with its financial reward as a spiritual pollution or "soiling" of sacred "script", which is the foundation of his religion. She uses money to symbolize the conflict between her belief in her saleable and lucrative writing, and her father's belief in the pricelessness of his holy text. Thus her writing and her father's sacred texts, her modern belief in the self and his ancient faith in God, clash in a way that was common at the beginning of immigration from the Russian Pale to America, a clash which Salman Rushdie describes as "the conflict between the sacred text and the profane text, between revealed literature and imagined".[27] Although Yezierska and her father's relationship to words differs, their faith in words is equally strong; she can defile the "holiness" of her father's words but she can not "soil" its innate beauty. Therefore, even though Yezierska and her father are in direct opposition due to their relationship to secular and religious literature, her devotion to words, love of linguistic beauty, and faith in that which the words express bind her (and her profane text) irrevocably to her father (and his sacred text).

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS ALTERNATIVE BOOK OF FAITH

Yezierska portrays her father as a prophetic figure either chanting from *Isaiah* or offering ghetto proverbs as a warning to his daughter against the temptation of money and fame in Hollywood, which he refers to as "mammon" and "Babylon". This association of her immigrant father with Isaiah, the prophet of exile known for his beautiful and exalted language, is crucial. Isaiah believed in a God whose control of history was absolute, and that his people's difficulties were due to their failure to put their faith in God. Like Isaiah, Yezierska's father regards greed and arrogance as the root

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[26] Ibid., p. 32-33.
[27] Salmon Rushdie, "Bonfire of the certainties" [A recorded interview], *The Guardian*, (February 15, 1989), p. 23.

causes of estrangement from God, illustrated by Yezierska's pursuit of money and fame in Hollywood, the Babylon of the New World. Her father calls her a "Daughter of Babylon" since he views her acceptance of fame and flight to Hollywood as a kind of exile from her people, which is supported by his warning that she will "wander in darkness" outside of the ghetto.[28] However, Yezierska's portrayal of her father reading from the book of *Isaiah* is vital due to the idea expressed by Isaiah that return and redemption are possible despite the Jews' sins and years of exile. Although Isaiah warns the Jews of Judah against their pride and arrogance due to their introduction of Assyrian temples and alien gods, he does promise the possibility of redemption: "Zion shall be redeemed by justice,/And those in her who repent, by righteousness".[29] Abraham Heschel remarks that there is no "redemption without affliction" but that:

> [s]uffering does not redeem; it only makes one worthy of redemption; for the purpose of redemption is to initiate an age in which "those who err in spirit will come to understanding, and those who murmur will accept instruction".[30]

Yezierska does eventually return to her Jewish heritage and is redeemed and regenerated, as foreseen by Isaiah, who gave his son the symbolic name of Shear-jashab in order to express "the conviction that the remnant [of Zion in exile] would turn to God and be saved".[31] In addition, she attempts to show in *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* that her return to New York and her Jewish roots is a form of revelation leading "to understanding", thus interpreting the father's prophecies from *Isaiah* according to her own needs.[32]

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[28] Yezierska, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, p. 33.
[29] Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962), p. 82. The authorized King James version of *Isaiah*, 1:27, has "Zion shall be redeemed with judgment, and her converts with righteousness". Another reference to return and redemption in *Isaiah* appears in 10:21-22.
[30] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 82-3.
[31] Ibid., p. 60.
[32] There is some evidence that Yezierska was interested in Christian Science and that she toyed with various mystical philosophies. Although the evidence is scarce, it does suggest that she strayed further from Judaism than is hinted in her autobiography or fiction. Although her return to New York at the end of the autobiography does not signify a complete return to the Orthodox Jewish belief, she does show in *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* that it represents her acceptance of her Jewishness, a symbolic form of atonement.

Throughout *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, Yezierska imitates the intricate, "mystical", and ingenious methods of her father's Talmudic inquiry and interpretation in order to create an alternative book of faith in which her own prayers, confessions, dialogues, and a maze of arguments are combined to form a resounding declaration of faith in her self.[33] For instance, she reflects on her failure in Hollywood as a fulfilment of her father's prophetic curse, "Daughter of Babylon! You've polluted your inheritance. ... You'll wander in darkness and none shall be there to save you".[34] However, she learns to convert her failure in Hollywood into a verbal triumph by manipulating, rearranging and elaborating her experiences in the narrative to form a personal victory even in defeat. No one is there--in Hollywood or New York--to save Yezierska except herself: "Today the knowledge of a thousand failures cannot keep me from this light born of my darkness, here, now".[35] "Here, now", in the narrative present, Yezierska transforms her father's metaphor of exile and "darkness" into a metaphor of self-discovery, inner peace, and self-revelation. She compares her literary monologue to his prayers to God, and infers that she gains a similar kind of spiritual sustenance from writing as he does from praying.

> Everything that happened to me was a challenge that drove me to write. I turned to my writing the first thing in the morning and the last thing at night--as Father had turned to his prayers.[36]

Thus writing enables Yezierska to face her insecurities, "the fear that I was nothing", which arose primarily due to her father's condemnation of her writing career as a "lawless, godless, selfish existence".[37] "Roused from [her] nightmare of waste and loss" thirty years later, Yezierska discovers and reveals in her autobiography that writing is a means of converting those years of silence into a text which emphasizes the fullness of her life rather than the waste.

> But I've had moments [writing] when I was so filled with the life I've lived I felt myself flow out into my

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[33] Murry Baumgarten, *City Scriptures* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 84.
[34] Yezierska, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, p. 33.
[35] Ibid., p. 220.
[36] Ibid., p. 77.
[37] Ibid., p. 31.

> words. These rare moments when I was my real self, I took back the fraud, the humbug, like God absolving the Prodigal.[38]

Yezierska associates the "rare moments [writing]" with a state of selflessness--"I felt myself flow out into my words"--rather than "selfishness", of which her father accused her.[39] On one hand, she writes ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse*** in order to exorcize her father's lingering spirit, the "the conscience that condemned me",[40] which possesses her like a dybbuk. On the other hand, writing has a religious significance to Yezierska which resembles her father's intense devotion to God. Her "rare moments" occur only while writing and they combine elements of inspiration and revelation, confession and catharsis--"like God absolving the Prodigal". Yezierska, the omnipotent, God-like autobiographer, not only recreates her own identity but also frees her guilt-ridden, Cain-like, prodigal "self" of the past. And as Spinoza remarks:

> it is clear from Gen. iv. 7 that a man can overcome the temptations of sin, and act righteously; for this doctrine is told to Cain, though, as we learn from Josephus and the Scriptures, he never did so overcome them. [...] the revelation to Cain only teaches us that God admonished him to lead the true life, for such alone is the object and substance of the revelation, not doctrines concerning free will and philosophy.[41]

Unlike Cain, Yezierska does "overcome the temptations of sin", represented by her rejection of Fox's offer of a $100,000, and turn back to New York to "lead the true life"--in her case as a writer from the ghetto. She is forced to "absolve" her own guilt through her autobiography since her father never did. In the end, she gives birth to herself through writing to counteract the fact that her father had pronounced her dead and banished her from his memory.

JOHN'S LETTERS: A NEW CULT OF LOVE

The love for the beauty of words connects Yezierska to her father in spirit, but her love is for words of romance and

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[38] Ibid., p. 61.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., p. 217.
[41] Benedict de Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise* (New York: Dover Publications, 1951), p. 40, 41.

opportunity. Yezierska "hoards" food, love letters, and memories in order to satisfy her creative and emotional hunger;[42] she creates a kind of cult around John Morrow's love letters, kept in a trunk (like the Torah) and under the old clothes belonging to a prior self--the religious immigrant from the Polish shtetl. The poetic beauty of John Morrow's love letters were, like the Talmud to her father, Yezierska's only comfort in the Lower East Side. However, John's words are not only her "music and poetry" but also an "opiate" which stimulates her dreams and physical sensations, suggesting a kind of hedonism and thus apostasy to Orthodox Judaism.[43] She sees John as a tangible and alien god of love which she substitutes in place of her father's intangible God: when she first meets John, she remarks that she "had not dreamed that God could become flesh", calls herself "God's stenographer" after agreeing to work for him as a secretary, and is thrilled when he addresses her in a letter as "Dear love of God".[44] Her cult of love, which hinges on John's support of her vocation and desire for self-expression, represents a faith in the self that is in direct opposition to her father's highly community-oriented religion. In the absence of faith in her father's God, Yezierska turns John's letters into a faith which becomes such a vital part of her that she cannot disavow her belief in their love: "I could no more tear up those letters than I could root out the memory of him!".[45]

> [John's] letters were my assurance that I was a woman who could love and be loved. Without them, I was again the oddity of Hester Street, an object of pity and laughter.[46]

John assures Yezierska that she isn't the "heartless", "barren" "devil", that her mother, father, and colleagues at work tell her she is. He is drawn to her creativity, "the *dybbuk* which drove other men away", the "book" in her heart which she tries with great pains to put into words.[47] Thus, he loves and accepts Yezierska for what she is, not simply as a Jewish woman viewed in terms of her marriageability but also as a writer "struggling for a voice".

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[42] Yezierska, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, p. 29.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid., p. 112.
[45] Ibid., p. 30.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

> He looked into my eyes, and his look burned through me. I was suspended in the concentration of his gaze. "You don't have to become. You suffer from striving. You try to be. But you are, you are already."[48]

In a pathetic way, John's letters reassure Yezierska that she is not only a woman capable of loving and of being loved, but also an artist, a doubt which plagues Yezierska throughout her life: she describes the sale of the movie rights of ***Hungry Hearts*** as mere luck--"like winning a ticket on a lottery", doubts that she deserves to be called a writer in Hollywood, declares in a moment of pathos that she is "[n]ot a woman--not a writer", and needs to quote Phelps's article about her titled, "The Heroine as a Woman of Letters", as objective proof of her talent.[49] Only when Yezierska later rereads John's letters, especially the line "[y]ou're an emotional, hysterical girl and have exaggerated my friendly interest",[50] is she able to apprehend the erroneous nature of their love. In tearing up the letters many years later, Yezierska finally disavows her cult of love and substitutes a new "gospel" of work in its place. More important than marrying John (which she claims to be "impossible with a married man") are the "dreams" and possibilities which John's words inspire.

> My love needed a sanctuary, a solitude of sky and stars. [...] I walked Brooklyn Bridge night after night, recreating my every experience with him: the way he looked at me, the words he said, trying to hold close the golden moments of being understood.[51]

As Tillie Olson illustrates in ***Silences***, few of the women who achieved literary success in England and the United States prior to the 1920s were married, and therefore it is not surprising that Yezierska chose her new faith in her vocation--a "solitude" and a "sanctuary"--over a possible marriage to the man of her dreams.[52] Her desire for independence and hunger to express herself through writing threatened the very foundation of the patriarchal ghetto community

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[48] Ibid., p. 109.
[49] Ibid., pp. 26, 74, 124.
[50] Ibid., p. 128.
[51] Ibid., p. 110-111.
[52] Tillie Olson, ***Silences*** (London: Virago Press, 1985), Chapter 1.

which branded her as a "devil", "meshugeneh", and "witch".[53] Thus, her need for a "sanctuary" and "solitude"--for respectively a room of her own and dismissal of marriage--was a realistic requirement for an aspiring Jewish woman writer at the time. John's supportive words kindle Yezierska's tremendous "hunger and longing for love" but once that love fails she diverts her ambition and desire for recognition through her literary work in America, where, in her words, "I saw a place for myself. I saw work. I, the unwanted one, was wanted. If I could not have love, I would have fame, success".[54] This shifting of failed love into hard work and a desire for recognition through writing is a common characteristic of Yezierska's fictional heroines, as I showed in the previous chapter. And although her new dedication to her new "gospel" of work does not suggest a complete return to Orthodox Judaism, she does need to return to her origins, past experiences, and home in New York in order to write again.

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE HOLLYWOOD MYTH OF SUCCESS AND THE MYTH OF THE SELF

Yezierska describes her sudden popularity and journey to Hollywood as a fairy-tale journey of discovery. She portrays herself as a "Sweatshop Cinderella" who is suddenly allowed to enter Hollywood, which she describes as a "fabulous", "unreal" world of her dreams.[55] Murray Baumgarten's comment on Sholom Aleichem's "On Account of a Hat" and Isaac Bashevis Singer's "The Little Shoemakers" applies aptly to Yezierska's narrative: "In both stories the moment of transition from the Jewish to the non-Jewish realm takes place in the circumstances of a dream".[56] Just before her entry into Hollywood, Yezierska awakens after a long sleep and sees "consciously" for the first time on her trip to California.

> I looked across the vast space and thought of the time when all this silent sand was a rolling ocean. What eons had to pass for the ocean to dry into this arid waste! In the immensity of the desert the whirl of trivialities which I had so magnified all fell away. I was suspended in timelessness--sand, sky, and space.

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[53] The concept of witches was created out of fear of culture contact, the very contact which Yezierska wanted to make with America through John Morrow.

[54] Yezierska, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, p. 119.

[55] Ibid., p. 33-34.

[56] Baumgarten, *City Scriptures*, p. 46.

> What a relief it was to let go--not to think--not to feel, but rest, silent--past, present and future stretching to infinity.[57]

This description of the "arid waste" of the desert not only foreshadows the feeling of alienation and solitude which she later experienced in Hollywood, but also it is an appropriate metaphor for her dried-up, wasted years as a writer just prior to the publication of her autobiography. Arthur Miller's remark that, "[t]he past [...] is a formality, merely a dimmer present, for everything we are is at every moment alive in us",[58] is extremely helpful in describing Yezierska's voyage to Hollywood and autobiography as a whole: although she tries to suppress her past and flee from the ghetto, she discovers that the past, whether it be her memories of her mother, father, or John, is an inexorable part of herself which can neither be discarded nor simply forgotten. For example, she tries to forget about "the black curse of poverty" in order to enjoy Hollywood, but is unable to since her memories of her life in the ghetto return to haunt her and spoil her enjoyment in Hollywood. Faced with Hollywood and it's myth of success, Yezierska "becomes alien to herself", the ghetto writer, just as Baumgarten points out:

> Once the Jew embarked on the heady voyage of self-discovery, [s]he had to confront the fact that [s]he was now alien to [her]self; in becoming "other" to [her]self, [s]he encountered [...] the conditions for choice.[59]

Hollywood gives Yezierska the opportunity to chose between success or poverty, fame or creativity, conformity or independence. In each case, she chooses the latter.

Yezierska's writing block in Hollywood sets in as soon as she begins to lose control over the projection of her own self-image, a moment which coincides with the frightening "shock" of a new culture for the young woman still wearing her "immigrant clothes":

> While I stood panic-stricken, tongue-tied, cameras clicked, flashlights exploded.
>
> And here I was--in the mecca of writers--struck dumb. Like King Midas, whose touch turned everything to gold, I was dying of starvation.[60]

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[57] Yezierska, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, p. 34-35.
[58] Miller, *Timebends*, p. 131.
[59] Baumgarten, *City Scriptures*, p. 22.
[60] Yezierska, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, p. 36, 79.

She starves in Hollywood--a metaphor for her inability to write--for several reasons. First, she is cut off from the cultural and physical points of reference of the ghetto which had inspired her literary creativity. In addition, she begins to discover that neither gold nor money are a panacea for her perpetual dissatisfaction and longing for love. The Hollywood reporters, who demand a "formula" for her success, and "the million dollar build-up for [her] book" provoke Yezierska to question the validity and meaning of "success".[61] She constantly seeks for "proof that I was a writer", but her half-hearted assertions that she had earned her fame and recognition are undermined by her chronic doubts, which were exacerbated by the press's distorted publicity in Hollywood. Thus, Yezierska's entire experience in Hollywood focuses on the question of artistic integrity, truth, and control over her fiction and story of her life. Her idea of truth, as one would expect from a skeptic, is solipsistic: truth could be found only in herself, her writing, and her voice, not in Hollywood's film or newspaper versions of her life. She discovers that both journalism and film distort the truth: the journalists who greet Yezierska upon her arrival in California want only the "formula" of her success and distort her life beyond recognition in their newspaper articles;[62] likewise, Yezierska's producer, Sam Goldwyn, not only requests Yezierska to sum up her next story in a "sentence",[63] but also takes a leading role in the manipulation of Yezierska's text, *Hungry Hearts*, which is given a happy ending and laughs in order to appeal to a larger audience for bigger profits. Hence, it is not surprising that the "Olympian Gods" of her dreams, the Hollywood actors, writers and producers, remind Yezierska of the "hucksters" selling their cheap wares like peddlers in the ghetto.[64] She describes the famous writers at a Hollywood party like the peddlers in the Hester Street fishmarket because of the way they refer to literary creativity in such debasing terms as the production of goods and profit; in addition, the Hollywood set for *Hungry Hearts* reminds her of Hester Street factory, churning out films like suits in a sweat-shop: "The clock ticked off the minutes, prodding: Produce! Produce! Produce another best seller or get the hell out

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[61] Ibid., p. 36.
[62] Ibid., p. 40.
[63] Ibid., p. 72.
[64] Ibid., p. 62.

of here".[65] This analogy is strengthened by the fact that nine of the ten major Hollywood film companies in the 20s were owned by Jews who had either been merchants or sweat-shop owners in the Lower East Side.[66] Yezierska despises Hollywood's trivialization of art into a mundane commodity, illustrated by Paul Bern's humorous version of ***Hungry Hearts***, which she describes as the ***Uncle Tom's Cabin*** of the immigrant; she considers his manipulation of her novel's ending an insult to her artistic integrity and distortion of her own life: "My book is my life", [she] cries. "I'll not let them murder it with slapstick".[67] To top it off, the privilege to review the first showing of ***Hungry Hearts***, accurately referred to as the "post-mortem" for her "murdered" text, is to be done by Montague Glass, a journalist known for turning "out caricatures of Jews like sausage meat for the popular weekly and monthly magazines".[68] His unpleasant stereotyping of Jews is the very antithesis of Yezierska's desire to render a realistic picture of the variety of Jews instead of a single Jewish type. Thus, she begins to see Hollywood as the antithesis of the Jewish ghetto where, in her father's words, "[p]overty becomes a wise man like a red ribbon on a white horse": the Hollywood myth of success and the Jewish "culture of poverty" clash, and the latter emerges as the dominant, more vital culture for Yezierska. Hence, the beauty and "honesty" of the ghetto and her past eventually pull Yezierska back from the "glossy", alienating land of Hollywood to her home in New York.

FALSE PROPHETS AND TRUE

Yezierska describes her experiences in Hollywood in her father's terms, namely as a religious conversion or apostasy. The "gods" of Hollywood--writers, directors, and actors--not only "tower over" her

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[65] Ibid., p. 87.

[66] Sam Goldwyn made gloves, William Fox started with a burlesque theatre chain, Harry Cohn of Columbia Pictures was a German cobbler's son, Jessy Lasky of Paramount was an immigrant shoe salesman, the Warner Brothers were cobblers and bicycle repair men, Marcus Lowe, the owner of a chain of theatres, Adolf Zukor started by selling furs, and Louis Mayer also owned a burlesque house. Carl Laemmle, whose father was a Talmudic scholar, was the one exception. These former businessmen became "noblemen" of sales by selling movies like the "hucksters" who traded clothing or groceries in the ghetto.

[67] Ibid., p. 82.

[68] Ibid., p. 81.

threateningly, but also tempt her to "convert to a new faith [of the rich]".[69] This new "faith" nearly seduces Yezierska into thinking that riches make people "kinder, nobler and more beautiful", an idea which strikes her as a repulsive "apostasy" and makes her think of her "father [turning] in his grave".[70] Although Yezierska fears that she had completely rejected her past or "repudiated all that I had been", she refuses to change her clothing in Hollywood which illustrates her on-going tie to the old world and unwillingness to give in to the new. However, when her contract with Goldwyn expires, Yezierska is "too confused, too unsure of myself, to know what to do next", until William Fox forces her to choose between success and a permanent residence in Hollywood, or rejection of money and return to New York. Like Goldwyn, Fox is a false prophet (as both producers' names imply) who practices a religion of exploitation and greed. But when Fox tries to tempt Yezierska away from Goldwyn with a $100,000 contract his faith in her makes her doubt her worth, "He was offering me a fortune. But was I really a writer?".[71] Yezierska rejects his money in a scene which is intended to remind the reader of her father's rejection of the hundred dollars which she had earned by selling the film rights of *Hungry Hearts* to Goldwyn in "Hester Street": her rejection of this new lure of more fame and fortune clearly signifies a return to the path of righteousness. Even Fox's office is described as a kind of "sanctuary" like her father's room, but his office, with its glass windows and theatrical atmosphere, represents a "sanctum" of false idolatry. Fox, whom she describes as a "priest at an altar", wrongly believes that Yezierska would convert to his worship of money, "his glance resting on me as if I were already one of his anointed".[72] In the tradition of male manipulation of female creative potential reminiscent of the Pygmalion myth, Fox wants total control over Yezierska's creativity and self-image in order to lift her to even greater stardom as he had done for Mary Carr.

> I dictated every pose, every move she made. I gave her every bit of her stage business. That woman never knew what she was acting. I didn't want her to know.

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[69] Ibid., p. 59.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid., p. 85.
[72] Ibid., p. 84.

> But I knew what I wanted--what I could make of her.
> And I know what I can make of you.[73]

However, Yezierska doesn't want to be changed or created by others; on the contrary, she wants to have full control over her own creations and self-image. Thus, Fox's offer of a fabulous three year contract with total control over her creativity represents a negation of self or self-murder to Yezierska, illustrated by her reference to Hamlet's soliloquy, "[t]o sign or not to sign. To sign and become rich; not to sign and plunge back into poverty".[74] By refusing to sign, Yezierska retains the creative authority over her fiction and self-image which she desires to possess more than money; signing her name symbolizes "self-murder" and religious conversion--"anointed"--simultaneously. Her refusal of Fox's money represents her ideological return to her roots and culture of poverty. Thus, poverty represents life and freedom, and riches represent death, alienation, and "loneliness".

In Hollywood, a letter from the Talmudic scholar Boruch Schlomoi Mayer punctures Yezierska's self-centeredness and prepares her for her return to New York. Boruch Mayer is, in Louise Levitas Henriksen's opinion, one of Yezierska's "inventions" or "fictional embellishments of the truth";[75] in my opinion, he represents Yezierska's literary maturity, an ability to distance herself from real figures, namely her father, in order to work out her unresolved conflict with him. That the character Boruch Mayer had its source in her father is supported by the fact that Yezierska's entire family changed their name to Mayer when they arrived in New York; in addition, her choice of Boruch, the name of an apocalyptic prophet, as a forename is a clear reference to her father's role as a prophetic figure in her autobiography. When she returns to New York to meet "Reb Mayer" to give him money, as she had done in "Hester Street" with her father, it is too late as he is already dead (similar to her father, who is dead when Yezierska writes ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse***). However, although Reb Mayer's letter reminds Yezierska of her father--it had "something familiar in the turn of the phrase. The Yiddish of it reminded me of my father"--it also expresses Yezierska's own personal condemnation of her desire to

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[73] Ibid., p. 86.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid., intro, pp. 13, 14.

become a parvenu.[76] Baruch Mayer's desire to go back to Poland, "[b]etter to die there than to live here, among the money-making fat-bellies--worshippers of the Golden Calf" parallels Yezierska's own desire to go back to New York; and his words, a "voice out of time, a voice out of eternity", remind her of the possibility of absolution through "prayer on the Day of Atonement".[77]

> The letter had come stamped and dated through the drab routine of the U.S. mail. But to me it was a voice out of time, a voice out of eternity, the blowing of the ram's horn calling Jews to prayer on the Day of Atonement. [...] [Reb Mayer's letter] called me back from years of forgetfulness, [...]. And I remembered the synagogue on the Day of Atonement. Jews in white shrouds, in the ancestral robes of death, facing their sins in an ecstasy of abasement before the throne of Jehovah, chanting the prayer that was birth, death, and resurrection.[78]

Yezierska's entire autobiography is a way of turning back to her home, to her past, and to her Jewish identity, an identity which, (arguing in a circular manner) she could never break away from since it was "in [her] blood and bones". Boruch Mayer, who wants to "go back to my little village in Poland where all know me for what I am--and will respect me, because I am what I am", and Yezierska's father, who "in a world where all was change [...] alone remained unchanged",[79] illustrate the kind of unwavering personal integrity and faith which Yezierska admires above all--especially since she had lost both briefly. Writing ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse*** brings Yezierska back to her origins, her beginnings, and historical roots. However, before she can write again, she must exorcise the ghost which silenced her--a silence which originated from her father's condemnation of her religious apostasy.

DEATH AND REBIRTH: JEREMIAH KINTZLER AND RICHARD WRIGHT

Yezierska patterns her return to writing with figures of birth, death, and resurrection. That is why the character Jeremiah Kintzler, whose death leads both to a vital revelation and symbolic rebirth for Yezierska, is so important. Kintzler's death makes her conscious of her own hypocrisy and wasted years as a writer, a

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[76] Ibid., p. 91.
[77] Ibid., p. 92.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid., p. 91-2.

discovery which enables her symbolically to bury the "ghost" of creative silence, or in other words to exorcize the dybbuk which possessed her.

Shortly after joining the WPA writers project, Yezierska meets Jeremiah Kintzler, who combines aspects of her father's prophetic skepticism and her own secular idealism: like her father, his speech is filled with warnings and prophecies: "*'Gevalt!'* he groaned in a whisper. 'The world is coming to an end!'".[80] Like Yezierska, Kintzler shows great intellectual promise and receives critical acclaim in his youth for his writing but suffers in old-age from a creative block which has prevented him from finishing his "masterpiece", a biography of Spinoza.[81] In addition to the similar course of Kintzler and Yezierska's literary careers, Kintzler defends his artistic integrity and years of silence in a voice that sounds uncannily like Yezierska's in Hollywood.

> Creative work cannot be judged until it is finished. [...] I cannot violate my integrity as an artist and show work before it is finished. [...] It takes an artist to respect the integrity of another artist.[82]

> The quickest way to destroy people is to destroy their faith in their work. [...] All I want is what every artist wants--to give the world only that which comes out of his own heart. [...] I'll show them yet--here's one man who'll not sell his soul for a mess of politics.[83]

When Yezierska joins the WPA she accepts the same "standard of production" and writing game in New York during the Depression

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[80] Ibid., p. 174.

[81] Isidore Epstein, *Judaism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960), p.65. In the chapter "The Bone in My Throat", which Yezierska cut from the final manuscript of *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, it becomes much clearer that Yezierska identified with Kintzler due to his attraction to Spinoza. She wrote:

> Spinoza endured the hardest trials of a Jew--the loss of faith in his father's God. He was ostracized by his own people. His writings were proscribed [sic], his life menaced. And all this he transmuted into a philosophy that sings through the ages like the clear song of a lark. This Jew has been my inspiration for years. Let me pass him on to you. (*The Anzia Yezierska Collection*, The Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University, Box 1)

[82] Ibid., p. 169.

[83] Ibid., p. 181.

which she was unwilling to play in Hollywood. However, poverty seems to be the important factor in her tacit acceptance of her job with the WPA, which Jeremiah describes as a sham and artistic blasphemy: "to look up trivia for a guide to Babel! It's a desecration of everything holy!".[84] Yezierska candidly admits that she "admired the vitality of [Kintzler's] rebellion, but, like the rest, I took the easiest way"; Kintzler, on the other hand, briefly accepts the "game" (like Yezierska in New York) for the sake of the money, but he eventually "strikes" (like Yezierska in Hollywood), refusing "to do any more faking" for the "required quota of words".[85] Thus, Jeremiah, the writer and secular prophet, seems to be Yezierska's indirect means of simultaneously commending herself for her rejection of Hollywood and criticizing herself for working on the WPA.

Like Jeremiah, the biblical prophet, who was never without hope in spite of the almost unrelieved tragedy of his life, Jeremiah Kintzler never loses faith in his writing. He is an unwavering idealist both sleeping and awake until his death: "No doubt he sleeps with his brief case [filled with his unfinished biography of Spinoza] for a pillow".[86] However, Jeremiah's idealism is taken to an extreme which borders on the ludicrous, for his gesticulations and warnings make him appear like "[a] clown who had exchanged a pushcart livelihood for a Mad Hatter's dream of authorship".[87] This is clearly a form of self-criticism by Yezierska since she too had failed to create after 1932.[88] When he dies, voicing his self-righteous indignation at the WPA, Yezierska grabs his suitcase not only to preserve his work but also to protect it from desecration and humiliation at the hands of the other WPA writers who wouldn't be able to understand Kintzler's years of creative frustration as well as she. However, when she opens Kintzler's briefcase she discovers that, like herself, he had not actually produced anything other than a few nonsensical scraps whose meanings were "unclear".

> Suddenly, roused from the nightmare of waste and loss, I picked up the brief case, carried it downstairs and emptied it into the ash-can.

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[84] Ibid., p. 176.
[85] Ibid., p. 189.
[86] Ibid., p. 171.
[87] Ibid., p. 193.
[88] See footnote 5.

> Like a sleep-walker, I returned to my room, gathered all my notes, my boxes of manuscripts, and carried them down to mingle my wasted years with Jeremiah's.[89]

The "revelation" that Kintzler's artistic passion and ambition had been wasted rouses Yezierska from her own "nightmare of waste and loss" which began when she went to Hollywood. Thus this sleep-walking scene is both a symbolic death and purgative act which gives her new life, a catharsis of her years of frustration and failure which prepares her for a new start as a writer. In order to exorcise Jeremiah's dybbuk she must, in Jeremiah's words, "[b]low up the sham [and] hypocrisy"[90] of the years in which she posed as a writer--symbolized by the burning of her manuscripts which she empties into an "ash can". The "ash-can" is part of an "ash" motif that runs throughout the narrative, and it clearly refers to the idea of atonement: by sacrificing her work, converting it into ashes, Yezierska negates herself in a moment of "selflessness" and atonement. Hence, the sleep-walking scene represents Yezierska's search for a ritualistic purification, for the "the prayer that was birth, death and resurrection" that she was searching for when she returned to the Lower East Side from Hollywood after reading Boruch Mayer's letter. The "ash" motif represents not only death but also birth and thus it is a perfect metaphor for her circular narrative. When the landlady's daughter, Minnie, has a birthday Anzia's desire to know when she was born leads her to ask her mother, who replies, "[f]or [Minnie], life is a feast. For you--a funeral. Bury yourself in ashes and weep because you were born in this world"; Yezierska does eventually bury herself in her ashes, and she is reborn in the process.[91] In addition, Yezierska is described in Hollywood as a "Sweatshop Cinderella", which is appropriate since she not only identified herself as a "household drudge" similar to Lulu in Zona Gale's ***Miss Lulu Bett***, but also revises the myth of "Cinderella"--or "Aschenputtel" in German--according to her own needs: her real escape from drudgery occurs by returning to her home and marrying herself to her work, "literature", rather than her prince, as in ***Cinderella***. This idea of a Phoenix-like regeneration through death is constantly repeated

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[89] Ibid., p. 197.
[90] Ibid., p. 189.
[91] Ibid., p. 38.

throughout surviving scraps of Yezierska's work in the Mugar Memorial Library's *Anzia Yezierska Collection*: in her late 80s, Yezierska wrote, "[y]esterday I was old, worn out, waiting for death. Now I've risen out of my ashes".[92] In addition, she claimed that the critics had "extinguished the fire that had enabled [her] to write", and the sleep-walking scene can be viewed as an attempt to reimmerse herself in the symbolic "fire" of creativity. She confirms this idea in a short confessional note which appears to have been written by her at the age of 84, in which she wrote:

> [a]ll of my life I've never taken the time to live. I burnt up my food, clothes, my love and leaped forward into the furnace.
>
> And I wrote. I wrote about whatever I knew, I wrote about hunger and poverty and loneliness. And I felt at one with those people in my stories--I knew them so well.
>
> It was a life and death struggle but I got into print. Novels, short stories, I killed myself to be a writer.[93]

Thus, Yezierska had to sacrifice part of her self in order to write, and she expressed this life/death paradox with the fire and furnace image. The idea of throwing her work and life into the furnace for a final rebirth can also be seen as a symbolic description of her desire to transform herself from a writer of fiction into an autobiographer. She does finally succeed making the transition from fiction to a new genre, namely autobiography, thus distancing herself from her previous work as she had desired in the Phelps letter of 1932 quoted in the last chapter. Nevertheless, writing, be it fiction or autobiography, is a form of death and loss, and thus her autobiography can be viewed, paradoxically, as a last attempt at preserving or recovering the past from total oblivion.

After Yezierska purges "Jeremiah's ghost", she escapes to Stewart's Cafeteria, where she meets Richard Wright. Wright's recent success in winning a prestigious literary prize reminds her of her own success when "The Fat of the Land" won the O'Brien prize in 1919 for the best short story of the year. Yezierska sees how Wright is able to turn "his trials into productivity", an idea which seems to be the key to Yezierska's regained creativity and

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[92] *The Anzia Yezierska Collection*, The Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University.

[93] *The Dorothy Canfield Fisher Collection*, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont.

confidence in her work: "Whatever hardship he had known he had transformed into his creative drive".[94] The fact that Wright represents a form of spiritual regeneration to Yezierska is supported by the fact that he sings "Rise and shine", a spiritual which buoyed the slaves in their time of troubles. Hence Kintzler's death and Wright's success symbolize respectively the death of her own idealism and hypocrisy and new beginning for an elderly woman for as she remarks, "[i]n one day I had seen the beginning of success and the end of failure".[95] Yezierska "[buries] the corpse" of her old manuscripts with Jeremiah's in her attempt to make a new, successful start similar to Richard Wright's. Thus her death/rebirth symbolism is worked out in the ash motif as well as in her depiction of Kintzler and Wright.

RETURN TO HER ROOTS: MRS THOMPSON AND MRS COBB

Yezierska's "new start" in life requires yet another death, namely Zalmon the fishpeddler's, since it is Zalmon's "death money" which gives her a final unexpected chance to write again. She uses Zalmon's inheritance to move to an artist colony in New Hampshire, where she goes looking for understanding. Although Yezierska appears to be wandering in the "wilderness" once again (the first time being in Hollywood), she meets two women in Fair Oaks, Mrs Thompson and Mrs Cobb, who have a vital influence on her eventual decision to return to New York. She envies Mrs Thompson's "tangible woes" and discovers that despite her hardships Mrs Thompson is still "anchored in the God of her fathers".[96] This leads to Yezierska's realization that she "had abandoned the God of [her] fathers and had not found [her] own".[97] Later, she meets Mrs Cobb, a faith-restoring, maternal figure and substitute for Yezierska's mother, who had died many years before. Mrs Cobb is an elderly country poetess who not only provides Yezierska with food to satisfy her hunger but also advice which helps Yezierska to overcome her lack of confidence and perpetual spiritual dissatisfaction. Although Yezierska claims to be aware of her "self-destructive" tendency which she calls her "murderous ego" before

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[94] Yezierska, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, p. 178.
[95] Yezierska, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, p. 196.
[96] Ibid., p. 206.
[97] Ibid., p. 206-7.

she meets Mrs Cobb, the placement of this meeting with Mrs Cobb at the end of her narrative signifies its supreme importance. Mrs Cobb not only understands Yezierska, but has also experienced the same desires, longings, and disappointments as a writer.

> You remind me of all that I once wanted and renounced. [...] It's taken me all these years to realize that the whole world for me is right here.[98]

The main difference between Yezierska and Mrs Cobb is that Yezierska is wandering in "exile" in the "wilderness" of New England, whereas Mrs Cobb is both at home in Fair Oaks and rooted in her past. Like Yezierska, Mrs Cobb had achieved some success and recognition as a poetess, but felt ill at ease in the city and therefore decided to return home, where she got married and settled down. Like John Morrow, who told Yezierska simply to be herself, and like Yezierska's mother, who expressed her pride in being a Jew in her song, "What we are that we are, but Jews, Jews we are",[99] Mrs Cobb assures Yezierska that being herself was good enough, that she didn't have to "battle against her Jewishness" or hide her identity: "[a]nd so she rekindled in me the vital sense of myself that I had lost when I fled Hester Street".[100] She not only feeds Yezierska (in fact her very name suggests food) but also accepts Yezierska "for what I was, not for anything I had ever done".[101] Food is a "reminder of the warmth and generosity of a prim New England farm woman, the poet of the town, whose greatest poem was herself".[102] Like Mrs Cobb, Yezierska's greatest story is her own. She finally learns once again to "transform" whatever "trials she had known" into "tranquillity" as Mrs Cobb, Richard Wright, and her "Hester Street" self had done. Writing again, Yezierska returns to her "real self" in a "moment of fullness" which she is able to experience only in that very process of literary creation. Writing brings her back to her old, creative, confident, successful self.

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98 Ibid., p. 209, 210.
99 Ibid., p. 50.
100 Ibid., p. 215.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.

CONCLUSION

It's sad, but not uncommon, that such a gifted woman writer as Anzia Yezierska should experience such a long period of unproductive silence. But *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* is Yezierska's greatest literary creation, and thus she ends her career with an emphatic success. Her main accomplishment was in breaking the years of artistic silence, and in doing so she proved that she was not only a writer but also a woman who had lived a rich and full life. The story of her experiences, and thus her life, is rich, especially if we consider wealth in terms of experience and emotional intensity. She finally turned her trials into a creative work which fused fact and fantasy, rich people and poor, famous characters and obscure, Hollywood and the Polish ghetto, New England and New York. Like Virginia Woolf in *Moments of Being* and Mary Antin in *The Promised Land*, Yezierska writes about her past in order to be rid of it, to end the years of silence, to achieve a wholeness by piecing together experiences or stories which appear as vignettes or self-enclosed chapters in *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*. Words are alive for Yezierska; they give shape to her memories, enable her to relive her experiences, and to weave her past and present into a single narrative identity. It is only through words that Yezierska discovers who she is: "I stared at her, trying to imagine what life would be like without wrestling with each living word";[103] and it is only by writing that Yezierska truly lives, "[w]ithout a country, without a people, I could live only in a world I had created out of my brain. I could not live unless I wrote".[104] Perhaps Yezierska's inner, emotional life never became a meaningful part of her exterior life; or, to put it another way, her interior world was for her the most real and meaningful; as she said, the reality of life "creates its own poetry".[105] Both Yezierska's autobiographical fiction and fictional autobiography show how she translated that "reality", with the help of a vivid imagination, into literature.

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[103] Ibid., p. 60.
[104] Ibid., p. 127.
[105] Ibid., p. 48.

PART III

Henry Roth

CHAPTER SIX

SHIFTING POLARITIES IN HENRY ROTH'S *CALL IT SLEEP*

INTRODUCTION

Henry Roth is the last of the three major first-generation Jewish-American writers of English fiction to be discussed in this dissertation. His on-going work in 1991, at the age of 85, shows how the literature of this first-generation Jewish immigrants after the pogroms of 1882--which led to the mass immigration of Polish, Russian, and Galician Jews to the United States--stretches over a whole century: Cahan wrote his first story, "Mottke Arbel and His Romance", in 1892 and it was due to his meeting with Howells in that same year that he decided to translate this Yiddish story into English--symbolizing his transformation from Yiddish to American writer. Like Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Roth's literary monument, *Call It Sleep*, is a highly autobiographical narrative about a boy named David, and the idea of duality (or polarity, as Roth calls it) is a common theme of both novels; and similar to Cahan and Yezierska, Roth regenerated himself as a writer after a long period of literary silence. In addition, the regeneration of the writer through autobiography and reacceptance of their Jewish identity occurs simultaneously for Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth, and it is a major theme of their later writing. In an interview with William Freedman conducted in Israel, Roth described this movement of return and reunification with Judaism when he commented that:

> [w]hat I take from [Israel] is contrapuntal, a counterpoint between the young man who comes to literary consciousness and who is continually moving away from Judaism and the old man who had to come back, not just to come back but to reunite with it in some way in order to redeem the literary abilities that went to sleep in the youth.[1]

In the next two chapters I shall attempt to show how Roth's artistic blocking--symbolized by the short-circuiting and paralysis of David at the end of *Call It Sleep*--is followed by an attempt to regenerate the writer (to find a "path back to himself", as Roth puts it) by

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[1] William Freedman, "Henry Roth in Jerusalem", *The Literary Review*, 23 (1979), p. 19.

going back to the period of paralysis or truncation in order to overcome his years of artistic silence. There is a considerable need for the close formal analysis of *Call It Sleep* which I have undertaken in this chapter not only since the novel has been consistently misinterpreted by almost all of its critics,[2] but also since the writing of the novel had such a great impact both on Roth and his later writing--as I shall attempt to show in Chapter Seven. Thus, my discussion in this chapter of the "shifting polarities" in *Call It Sleep* is important since the idea of polarity is a constant concern and theme in Roth's entire work.

Henry Roth commented in an interview that he "worked with polarities in expressing the subjective reality of the little boy" in *Call It Sleep*.[3] The central conflict of the novel illustrates the polarity of David's divided impulses, namely his alternating attraction and repulsion to the overwhelming sensuality of his mother and to the brute power and masculinity of his father. The leitmotifs of attraction and repulsion, unification and truncation are used to highlight the tense, divisive relationship of David's parents, between whom David--the highly sensitive and vulnerable observer--is situated as a buffer for his mother and scapegoat for his father. On one hand, the thrust of *Call It Sleep's* plot illustrates David's gradual coming to terms with his father, a kind of shrinking of his father's masculinity (and with it David's decreasing fear of and increasing pity for his father), and on the other hand, a painful separation from his mother, whom David idolizes and clings to in a kind of regressive symbiosis. Thus the reduction of David's hatred of his father and attraction to his mother is the ultimate resolution of the novel, but one which retains a sense of the precarious nature of this emotional levelling off.

THE CHOICE OF DAVID SCHEARL'S NAME

It should be stressed that division and polarity are illustrated even in Roth's choice (probably unconscious) of David Schearl's

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[2] Alfred Kazin's recent article on *Call It Sleep* (*New York Review of Books*, October 10, 1991)--which is to be used as the introduction to the new issue of *Call It Sleep* published by the Noonday Press--is full of minor textual errors as well as a major misinterpretation of the novel. See my letter to the editors of the *The New York Review of Books* concerning Kazin's review in Appendix II.

[3] David Bronsen, "A Conversation with Henry Roth", *Criticism Magazine*, 23, No. 2 (1981), p. 268.

name. The name Schearl sounds like the word shear, an act of cutting off or truncation that is inherent in emigration to the New World--severing David's connection to the Old World. Roth links this idea of truncation metaphorically to both time and water since the journey itself divides David from his home on the other side of the Atlantic. In the scene where David is left alone with Luter while his parents go to the theatre (separated for the first time from his mother), the omniscient narrator describes David's feelings of isolation and abandonment--"the mind, experience, shearing the flow of time as a rock shears water"[4]--as a kind of truncation that resembles his previous divisive voyage by boat from the Old World--which his mother represents. In addition the Yiddish word schere(n), which not only sounds like Schearl but also retains practically the same spelling from the Yiddish, means either scissors as a noun, or to clip, to shave (a beard) or to cut (hair) when used as a verb. The image of shearing is indirectly connected to Roth's description of David's state of mind when his parents attend the theatre above since in the previous scene Albert comments that his favourite play in the Old World was "The Revenge of Samson": "I can see him yet, blind, but shaggy again, waiting his time against the pagans. It moved me greatly".[5] Samson, like Albert when David later observes him shaving, is a figure of enormous physical strength whose single weakness is the cutting of his shaggy hair which renders him impotent.

> There hath not come a razor upon mine head; for I *have been* a Nazarite unto God from my mother's womb: if I be shaven, then my strength will go from me, and I shall become weak, and be like any *other* man.[6]

The story of Samson and Delila is used to emphasize Albert's emasculation and his blindness to Genya's past betrayal which nearly results in the complete collapse of the Schearl household at the end of *Call It Sleep*--connected symbolically to the biblical story by Roth's reference to the pillar.

> Only the sheltering valley between her breasts muffled his scream of fear to her heart. Convulsive, unerring

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[4] Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 34.
[5] Ibid., p. 33.
[6] *Judges* 16: 17, in *The Holy Bible* (Chicago: The Gideons International, 1959).

> hands flew up to her neck, sought and clasped the one upright pillar of this ruin.[7]

However, unlike the resolution of the Samson and Delila story where Samson takes revenge on his enemies by pulling down the pillars to which the Philistines bound him resulting in his and Delila's death, the house of David barely avoids this tragic downfall.

Another vital aspect of the name Schearl should be noted since it has to do with David's interpretation of *Isaiah* and the importance of prophecy in *Call It Sleep*. In an interview with Bonnie Lyons, Roth remarks that he chose the section of Chapter Six in *Isaiah* "by some kind of divine inspiration", which he describes as "amazing" and "almost unaccountable".[8] Although Roth left *cheder* when he was eight, he admits to having done some research at the "Hebrew Theological Institute" where he consulted a rabbi in order to locate the purification scene in *Isaiah*.[9] Therefore, David's name and any other possible references to it in *Isaiah* should not be ruled out. Coincidentally, in *Isaiah* 7.3, which directly follows the scene of Isaiah's purification by the angel that Roth uses in *Call It Sleep* (*Isaiah* 6), the name of Isaiah's eldest son, Shear-jashub, is first mentioned and it means "the remnant shall return". Although it is stretching the point, the connection between the name of Isaiah's son and Albert Schearl's son, the remnant who returns home at the end of the novel, underlines the crucial themes of "return" and redemption that are at the heart of both *Isaiah* and *Call It Sleep*.[10]

> For thus saith the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel; In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength.[11]

> And he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and the Adversary standing at his right hand to be his adversary. And

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[7] Roth, *Call It Sleep*, p. 384.
[8] Bonnie Lyons, *Henry Roth: The Man and His Work* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1976), p. 174.
[9] Ibid., p. 174.
[10] In an interview with Roth in September 1977, "Henry Roth in Jerusalem", William Freedman quotes a letter from Roth to Harold Ribalow in which Roth wrote (regarding the republication of *Call It Sleep* in 1960) that "I had one theme, redemption, but I haven't the fable". Roth asserted in his interview with Freedman that, "I think redemption still is my theme; and in this case perhaps not so much the redemption of the individual soul, but of the writer", p. 18.
[11] *Isaiah* 30: 15, in *The Holy Bible*.

> the Lord said unto Satan, The Lord rebuke thee, O Adversary; yea, the Lord that has chosen Jerusalem rebuke thee: is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?[12]

The brand plucked out of the fire refers to the remnant of Israel which will return to Zion in the messianic era, and this image is particularly interesting in light of the final electrification scene where David survives the shock of the third rail but is burnt and carried like a martyr back to his more united home.[13]

AT THE NEXUS OF TENSION

In the "Prologue", Roth places David at the nexus of tension between his two estranged parents in order to emphasize that David must come to terms with the previously divided worlds of the past and present, old and new, which his parents represent. The fact that the following scene takes place on the ferry between Ellis Island, where the Schearls arrive from the Old World, and Brownsville, where they settle in America, further illustrates the importance of David's position between the hazy, idyllic world of his infancy (symbolized by his mother) and violent new world of his early childhood (symbolized by his father).

> But these two stood silent, apart; the man staring with aloof, offended eyes grimly down at the water - or if he turned his face towards his wife at all, it was only to glare in harsh contempt at the blue straw hat worn by the child in her arms, and then his hostile eyes would sweep about the deck to see if anyone else were observing them. And his wife beside him regarding him uneasily, appealingly. And the child against her breast looking from one to the other with watchful, frightened eyes.[14]

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[12] *Zechariah* 3: 3, haftorah read on the Chanukah Sabbath.

[13] Similar to King David who descends into the region "of the deep of the great abyss" and land of the Philistines before returning home to Jerusalem. Robert Seltzer remarks in ***Jewish People, Jewish Thought*** that "the descent into the underworld to bring a god back to the realm of the living comes from the Canaanite epic of Baal, and compares the Messiah's descent into the kelipot as an "incidental aspect of his mission, as happened to King David [when he sojourned] with Achish King of Gath, but it soon came to be realized that such an extraordinary event must occupy the centre of any Messianic schema" (p. 109).

[14] Roth, *Call It Sleep*, p. 11.

Albert's eyes tell all. His paranoia, contempt, hostility, and violence are shifted away from the wife onto the child, whose role as scapegoat is highlighted by Albert's threatening visual--and then violent physical--contact with David's hat. The blue straw hat and David's "distinctly foreign costume" become the central symbolic elements of the "curious" reunion between husband and wife.[15] David's hat, which Albert refers to as "that crown",[16] suggests the motif of kings and usurpers that runs throughout the novel and is implied by David's forename. King David, David's biblical namesake, was in constant mortal danger from his predecessor, Saul, who resented and feared the popularity of the son of Jesse; similar to David and Albert, David and Saul's relationship ended with Saul's repentance and their reconciliation. In addition, David's role as the potential unifier of domestic division can be compared to King David's historical role of uniting Judea and Israel as well as the two institutions of kingship and the Temple by bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem where he established the first Jewish Temple (albeit a temporary tent shrine).[17] Thus, unlike Stephen Dedalus whose call is to be an independent artist exiled from Ireland, David is placed involuntarily in the precarious role of unifying his divided home in America.

DAVID AND GOLIATH: THE RAIL MOTIF

In Chapter Two of "The Cellar", David is wrenched away from his mother's protection to perform a task for his father. At the printer's office where David is taken to retrieve his father's pay and belongings he learns that his father's wrath is not only directed at himself but a reality that can be empirically affirmed both by an

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[15] Ibid., p. 10. David and his clothes are remnants of the Old World which unnerve "the stranger", Albert, since they remind him of the past he fled from and his abortive attempt to seek a brighter future in America. The strangeness of Albert and the connection of father and son to the New and Old World through their clothes is crucial, for it is the sudden entrance of the past in the form of David that triggers off Albert's violence. Albert's shaven face and American clothes are signs of his departure from Judaism. "And this is the Golden Land", Genya remarks ironically after recognizing her husband's haggard, undernourished face that betrays his failed assimilation, which, when compounded with the loss of identity (Genya fails to recognize him at first), adds up to his moral defeat.
[16] Ibid., p. 14.
[17] Robert Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 323.

external source and in a language other than Yiddish, namely English. It is fittingly at Mr *Lobe's* printing office that David first hears others confirm that his father's temper poses a real threat.

> "Your ol' man near brained me wid a hammer," said the man addressing David. "Don' know wot happened, nobody said nuttin." He grinned. "Never saw such a guy, Mr Lobe. Holy Jesus, he looked like he wuz boinin' up. Didja see de rail he twisted wid his hands?" [...]
> ..."Come here" [Mr Lobe] said to David. "What's your name?"
> "David."
> "David and Goliath," he smiled. [...] "The idea, sending a kid his age on an errand like this."[18]

The David and Goliath comparison underlines both an important story in the Old Testament and the "rail" motif. Throughout the novel, David searches for an equivalent light or superior power in order to overcome his father's "boinin" temper and brute ability to twist the rail. Albert's gentile name and threatening use of hammers and "rails" connects him to the Philistines, whose monopoly of iron manufacture gave them a temporary military advantage over other tribes in the area.[19] David's initial fear of his strange father, the man he meets for the first time in the New World, the Philistine who has shaven his beard and abandoned his Jewish faith, is transformed into a "terrifying" reality which must be overcome like Goliath was by the shepherd boy.

> So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone, and smote the Philistine, and slew him; but there was no sword in the hand of David.[20]

Triumph over Goliath is a achieved through David's faith in God and by his tactical knowledge rather than strength. And it is David Schearl's knowledge of his father's weakness that becomes the key to his final apprehensive triumph.

The David and Saul, David and Goliath, and Samson and Delila stories underline the historical and mythical motifs of cultural and generational conflict in *Call It Sleep*. On a psychological level, the Oedipus myth as interpreted by Freud applies directly to *Call It Sleep* and cannot be avoided in a discussion of the novel. Roth

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[18] Roth, *Call It Sleep*, pp. 25-26.
[19] Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought*, p. 324.
[20] *1 Samuel*, 17: 50.

admitted in interviews with Bonnie Lyons and William Freedman that he "knew about Freud", but adds that his knowledge wasn't very deep: "I knew only what almost everyone knew of Freud, and that wasn't a great deal".[21] This does not invalidate the Oedipal nature of the relationship in the novel which clearly surfaced unconsciously in the act of writing. The displacement of King Leïos by his son Oedipus differs somewhat from the Saul/David and Samson/Philistine conflicts but it does parallel David and Albert's conflict in an average (rather than noble) domestic situation. Like Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex*, Roth shows on an unconscious level through symbolic means how desires which develop naturally amongst children must be suppressed, thus becoming social taboos. As Freud puts it:

> [m]other-incest was one of the crimes of Oedipus, parricide was the other. It may be remarked in passing that they are also the two great crimes proscribed by totemism, the first socio-religious institution of mankind.[22]

Although David neither sleeps with his mother nor kills his father these desires are the basis of his emotional conflict which he is forced to suppress into dreams--rather than committing them unconsciously as Oedipus does. Roth responded to these taboos in a similar way the "auditor" of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* "reacts" in Freud's description. Freud underlined the importance of the unconscious revelation of the Oedipal theme when he commented that:

> [i]t is not to [the morality of the Oedipus story] that the auditor reacts but to the secret sense and content of the legend. He reacts as though by self-analysis he had recognized the Oedipus complex in himself and had unveiled the will of the gods and the oracle as exalted disguises of his own unconscious. It is as though he was obliged to remember the two wishes--to do away with his father and in place of him to take his mother to wife--and be horrified at them. And he understands the dramatist's voice as though it were saying to him: "You are struggling in vain against your responsibility and protesting in vain of what you have done in opposition to these criminal intentions. You are guilty, for you have not been able to destroy them; they still persist in you unconsciously."[23]

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[21] William Freedman, "A Conversation With Henry Roth", *The Literary Review*, 18 (1975), p. 155.
[22] Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), p. 335.
[23] Ibid., p. 331.

The cooling off of Genya and Albert's marriage, Genya's shifting of affection from husband to child, David's attachment to his mother's breast, the pervasiveness of guilt amongst the Schearls, David's competition for the attention of his mother as the first object of her affection (threatened by Albert and then Luter), David's evanescent blinding and the permanent wounding of his foot are all elements of this Oedipal myth. And Freud remarks that:

> Theodore Reik has [...] shown in a brilliant work [Reik, 1915-16] that the puberty rites of savages, which represent a rebirth, have the sense of releasing the boy from his incestuous bond and of reconciling him with his father.[24]

Thus Roth's intention or underlying goal is to reverse David's yearning for parricide and incest with his mother, a yearning which puberty rites or initiations (such as David's sexual and spiritual initiations in *Call It Sleep*) attempted to reverse. David's feeling of "triumph" mixed with a "vague, remote pity"[25] for his father at the end of the novel results from a successfully fused sexual-spiritual initiation that relieves him of his pent-up sexual desires and yearning for his father's death. This initial wish to slay his father is suggested at the very beginning of the novel when David dreams:

> of his father's footsteps booming on the stairs, of the glistening doorknob turning, and of himself clutching at knives he couldn't lift from the table.[26]

In addition, when Bertha suggests that Genya should poison Albert, David is inspired with "wonder at her rashness" and "guilty elation" since they were his own thoughts voiced objectively.[27]

DAVID AND ALBERT

The ideas of death, violence, and time are inextricably linked to David's perception of his father. The "stripped down", "exposed" alarm clock which ticks when Yussie prods it during their first discussion about fathers; David's calendar printed by his father which divides Albert's "red" days at home from "black" days when he's at work; the calendar leaves of black, fatherless days of the

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[24] Ibid., p. 335.
[25] Ibid., p. 439.
[26] Roth, *Call It Sleep*, p. 22.
[27] Ibid., p. 189.

past which David saves in his shoe-box; the "sudden sweep" of his father's arm which sends David's hat to the sea (and later David's food and the "two thieves" to the floor) all build up a sense of increasing strife and imminent or "fated" conflict between father and son: "Those hands of his will beat me yet! I know! My blood warns me of this son! [...] He'll shed human blood like water!"[28] Albert's arm, like the arm on Yussie's clock that ticks with the slightest prod, symbolizes the inevitability of his oppressive wrath.

> Never taking his blazing eyes from David, his father came down the parlous stairs. "What?" he ground [sic], towering above him. "Speak!" Slowly his arm swung towards the sobbing Yussie; it was like a dial measuring his gathering wrath. [...]
> Nothing existed any longer except his father's right hand--the hand that hung down into the electric circle of [David's] vision.[29]

Here David becomes aware of the need to defend himself from his father's violence which threatens metaphorically to stop time, or in other words to force David into the role of paralysed, sacrificial lamb suggested here by the reference to the story of Abraham and Isaac. Albert comes to symbolize time since as the father of David he helps to initiate David's birth (and possibly his death), but if David can somehow prove that Albert is not his father it can provide a kind of escape from Albert's tyranny (i.e. freedom); in other words if Albert is not his father, then David is someone else!

The idea of passing time comes to mean growing up, maturing, and especially death, all of which David has trouble accepting. Although the reality of death disturbs David in the carriage scene (as does his conversation with his mother about the finality of death), the possibility of his father's death seems to comfort him. After the frightening view of the coffin in the carriage scene, David attempts to overcome the ominous, deathlike darkness of the hallway by singing the last stanza of "My country 'tis of dee", which begins coincidentally with the words, "Land where our fodders died".[30] David's thoughts of the possible death of his father, his association of Albert with the darkness of the corridor, Albert's footsteps emanating from the direction of the hellish, rat-infested cellar, his

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[28] Ibid., p. 83.
[29] Ibid., p. 81, 82, "ground" is probably a misprint in the Penguin version. It should most likely read "groaned".
[30] Ibid., p. 61.

frequent references to time--"Now time will bring something--who knows"--, and his "demonic rage" during his milk rounds near the gas tanks where the two thieves are left for dead, all help to build up Albert's symbolic role as the harbinger of death: "But if [Bertha] thinks she can make light with me because she has a man with her, she'd better be careful. She's jesting with the angel of death!"[31]

DAVID AND GENYA

Contrary to Albert's "fell electric fury" which disrupts or fractures the "electric circle of David's vision", David's mother has the effect on David of "electrifying" everything into focus; where Albert terrorizes his child with violence, resulting in David's visual distortions and mental corruptions, Genya has the polar opposite effect. In addition, contrary to Albert's unsettling tyranny in the New World, Genya offers David the comforting security of the Old World; she secures David's sense of self since she represents the indisputable point of his origin. However, upon David and Genya's arrival in the United States (especially on their ferry voyage to Brownsville), the emblematic quality of mother as *virtuous* point of origin--i.e. vestal virgin or holy "vessel"--is slowly broken down by the narrator's foreshadowing of Genya's "sin" suggested in the image of the "charred" Miss Liberty.

> And before them, rising on her high pedestal from the scaling swarmy brilliance of sunlit water to the west, Liberty. The spinning disk of the late afternoon sun slanted behind her, and to those on board who gazed, her features were charred with shadow, her depths exhausted, her masses ironed to one single plane. Against the luminous sky the rays of her halo were spikes of darkness roweling the air; shadow flattened the torch she bore to a black cross against flawless light - the blackened hilt of a broken sword. Liberty. The child and his mother stared again at the massive figure in wonder.[32]

The unity of the mother and child at the end of this description by the omniscient narrator suddenly shifts after the "Prologue" to a subjective or critical analysis of Genya, posed statuesquely, elevated at the doorway, now viewed at a distance through David's own eyes.

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[31] Ibid., p. 187.
[32] Ibid., p. 14.

> Standing in the doorway on the top step (two steps led up into the front room) his mother smilingly surveyed him. She looked as tall as a tower. [...] A vague, fugitive darkness blurred the hollow above her cheekbone, giving to her face and to her large brown eyes, set in their white ovals, a reserved and almost mournful air.[33]

The effect of this juxtaposition of Miss Liberty and Genya (three pages later) brings the former, inert figure to life and places the latter figure under more critical scrutiny. David's mother, symbol of the Old World, like the symbol of the New World at the gate of entry, is elevated to emphasize how impressive, statuesque and iconic she is to the child who idolizes her. But ironically, Genya's plea to Albert to forget the past--"Well it's all behind us now isn't it?"--is immediately undermined by the appearance of the very image which faces them, a shadowy Miss Liberty. The Statue of Liberty "before them" is "charred" or soiled by the shadow, and this image is mirrored by the "fugitive darkness" of Genya standing in the doorway. That Genya's virtue is in question is emphasized not only by the description of her overpowering sensuality--her "old grey dress" rose "straight from strong bare ankle to waist", her bosom is "curved round" and "deep", her dress "set her full throat in a frame of frayed lace", her "smooth, sloping face" was flushed, and her lips are "mild" but "full"[34]--but also by her dubious claim to having lost David's birth certificate and the discrepancy between his age and size. Until this point, Miss Liberty--"ironed to a single plane"--and Genya--"framed" in the doorway--are still one-dimensional figures. David's growing consciousness of his mother's multi-dimensionality, the coming to life of her physical beauty and emotional buoyancy, creates an emotional conflict that divides mother and child--a conflict which David must come to terms with in order to mature.

The Madonna and child image in this first scene, a motif which runs throughout the novel, is highlighted by "the rays" of Liberty's "halo" which look like "spikes of darkness roweling the air" and by her torch "flattened" into a "black cross" against flawless light.[35] In addition to the Madonna and child motif, the imagery used to

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[33] Ibid., p. 17.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., p. 14.

describe Liberty and Genya introduces other themes such as the conflict between the Old and New Worlds, the departure from freedom into tyrannical slavery, the crossing from the luminous and edenic east into the darkness of the setting sun and "sunlit water of the west", i.e. from idyllic purity of the old, mainly Jewish world to the terrifying darkness and corruption of the new Christian world--symbolized by Liberty's paradoxical dark "halo" and "black sword". However, before David can come to terms with his mother's sexuality and substitute a new realistic image for his idealized image of her, he must become conscious of his own sexuality. In Book I, David experiences his first sexual initiation with Annie (while his mother is in the next room) and gradually his sexual awareness effects his identity and relationship with his mother, thus widening his perception through a number of traumatic shocks. Eventually, like Albert in Book III, David is forced to come to terms with Genya's sexuality and to accept her imperfections and darker past. "Love, marriage, whatever one calls it", Genya tells Albert, as David listens,

> does that to one, makes one uncertain, wary...One wants to appear better than one is.
> "It did that to you I suppose [Albert replies]."
> "Yes." She seemed hesitant. "Of course!"
> "Bah!"
> "Of course!" she reiterated, and then laughing. "You know how the old song goes: In this way and that, one beguiles the groom."[36]

Although this comment refers to Bertha's relationship with Sternowitz, it's clear to David (who at this point knows more than his father does about Genya's past) that it also applies to his mother. Thus Genya's past becomes not only the means of understanding the dynamics of his parents' relationship but also the key to his own development.

DUALITIES

Roth remarked to Bronsen that he created Bertha, Genya's sister, in order to display another side of David's mother's personality, creating a foil for Genya but at the same time illustrating the dual nature of his characters.[37] One manifestation of Roth's concern with polarity or duality is the way the narrative often shifts from

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[36] Ibid., p. 175.
[37] Bronsen, "A Conversation with Henry Roth", p. 268.

omniscient third person narration to David's first-person, internal monologue and vice versa; another element of this duality is David's frequent desire to be in two places at once, for instance when he sits at the window and tries to see the interior and exterior of the house simultaneously, or when he's brought to the police station and imagines himself at home with his mother while sitting in the station; a third aspect of duality is the way some characters--and objects such as the picture, banister, coal, zinc sword, whip(s), and horn(s)--link two ideas. Joe Luter is one of these characters.

The first thing one notices about Luter is his similarity to Albert: he comes from Albert's home town, they were good friends in the Old World, and they work in the same printing shop in the ghetto. However, like Bertha and Genya whom I'll discuss below, Luter and Albert can also be considered as polar opposites whose function is similar to that of the sisters in Roth's description.

> I worked with polarities in expressing the subjective reality of the little boy in the novel. I am referring to the personalities of the mother and father, as well as the characters of the mother and her sister. Actually, my own mother was the source of both of these contrasting female figures. I abstracted one side of my mother, rounded it out and created an aunt who in most respects is the antithesis of David Schearl's mother.[38]

Despite their common background, Luter can be seen as Albert's opposite; he is polite, cunning, unmarried, Albert's "foreman" or boss, able to pierce David's consciousness with his eyes and capable of stirring David's unconscious emotions as well. But Luter's role is not merely to "stir" David's thoughts about the differences between "the boarder" and "the father" but also to highlight Albert's sexual impotence and Genya's sexual unfulfilment.

> And urged on by only a sympathetic look from Luter, to hear [Albert] speak of his youth, he, who was so taciturn and thinlipped, whom David never could think of having a youth, speaking of his youth, of the black and white bulls he had tended for his father (and try to hide a frown at the word, father, he, who never hid displeasure), how they had fed them mash from his father's yeast mill, how he had won a prize with them from the hand of Franz Joseph, the King.[39]

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[38] Ibid.

[39] Roth, *Call It Sleep*, p. 31.

Luter manages to draw out Albert's memories of the past, which are much more sinister (implied by Albert's pauses and displeasure) than Luter's; indeed, Luter's memories are not only more blatantly sexual but also more like the sexually-charged Old World David remembers in the Walter Wildflower song in which a ring of blossoming girls (similar to Luter's "peasant wenches") sing metaphorically about their readiness for sex--"So we are all young ladies/An' we are ready to die".[40]

> "Yes," [Luter] chuckled, hurriedly. "I like especially the way [Albert] never speaks of Tysmenicz without leading in the cattle he once tended."
> "Well, there weren't many things he loved more in the old land."
> "But to love cattle so," Luter smiled. [...] "Each one remembers what appealed to him [Luter continued], and I remember the peasant wenches. Weren't they a striking lot, in their tight checked vests and their dozen petticoats? [...] And when they smiled with their white teeth and blue eyes, who could resist them? It was enough to set your blood on fire. [...]" "You know," [Luter's] voice was very earnest, "the only woman I know who reminds me of those girls, is you."[41]

Here David is used by both Genya and Luter since Genya places David between herself and Luter to deflect his advances; likewise, Luter uses David as a means to praise Genya's "same" white German skin and "same brown eyes".[42] This scene is similar to the "Prologue" where David finds himself between his mother and another man. However, this time the tension doesn't result from the man's repulsion by his mother but rather from Luter's attraction to Genya's hips.

> David, who was leaning from the side of his chair, could see Luter and his mother at the same time. Absorbed in watching his mother, he would have paid little attention to Luter, but the sudden oblique shifting of Luter's eyes towards himself drew his own gaze towards them. Luter, his eyes narrowed by a fixed yawn, was staring at his mother, at her hips. For the first time, David was aware of how her flesh, confined by the skirt, formed separate moulds against it. He felt suddenly bewildered, struggling with something in his mind that would not become a thought.[43]

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[40] Ibid., p. 23.
[41] Ibid., p. 42.
[42] Ibid., p. 40-1.
[43] Ibid., p. 39-40.

The "uneasy game" which David thinks of as a "secret tag" to beat Luter's gaze before it catches him in the earlier dinner scene, turns here into a dangerous, sexually "stirring" game of following Luter's gaze.[44] Contrary to Albert's "demonic" violence, Luter represents demonic sexuality; he is a fleshier man than Albert with a shifty, voyeuristic eye, a crude way of "twisting the ring around his finger", and a lust for peasant wenches like Genya that "stirs" David's awareness of both his sexual attraction to his mother and struggle to fend off this "other" more masculine boarder for his mother's affection. Another innocent game shifts into a dangerous sexual game directly after this scene when Mrs Schearl takes David upstairs to play with Yussie Mink. Yussie, who likes his father more than his mother, whose origins are securely defined by the two pairs of portraits on their "front room walls", whose father has a steady job at a "joolery shop", and who has an elder sister, is David's foil. In this scene, Yussie is sent on an errand (allowing David briefly to take over Yussie's role as younger brother) thus interrupting the innocent game of hide and go seek; when Annie takes David into the closet in her "mother's room"[45] the new game becomes a much more dangerous version of "hide and go seek", in fact a traumatic or terrifying sexual initiation.

> He was silent, terrified.
> "Yuh must ask me," she said. "G'wan ask me."
> "Wot?"
> "Yuh must say, Yuh wanna play bad? Say it!"
> He trembled. "Yuh wanna play bad?"
> "Now, *you* said it," she whispered, "Don' forget, you said it."
> By the emphasis of her words, David knew he had crossed some awful threshold.[46]

Bonnie Lyons emphasizes that David is introduced to the "knish" in this scene, or in other words to Annie's vagina which is connected metaphorically to the darkness of the basement, the rats that live there, the rat cage in the closet, and the braces on Annie's legs which surround her own metaphorical "cage" or "trap".[47] What David really experiences in this scene is the connection between

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[44] Ibid., p. 44.
[45] It is crucial to remember that in a railroad flat such as the Minks' and Schearls', Genya's bedroom closet is directly under Annie's mother's bedroom closet.
[46] Ibid., p. 52.
[47] Lyons, ***Henry Roth***, Part II, Chapter 1, pp. 39-54.

saying the words with his own lips, the lips that have kissed both Annie and his mother, and the meaning of the act itself. In other words, he learns "w'ea babies comm from".[48] Annie's grab for David's "petzel" sends him screaming out of the closet to his "Mama" in the other room. These two scenes with Luter and Annie (Albert and Genya substitutes) shatter David's world, estranging him even from his mother, who puts him to bed following this traumatic initiation.

> But she didn't know as he knew how the whole world could break into a thousand little pieces, all buzzing, all whining, and no one hearing them and no one seeing them except himself.[49]

David resorts to dreams in order to reduce the pain induced by this fracturing knowledge, or in other words to forget or escape from the trauma through sleep--a scene which is repeated at the very end of the novel.

A NOTICEABLE SHIFT

Book I concludes with a gradual shift in the relationship between Albert, Genya, and David. Following Genya's threat to leave Albert and David's terrified flight from the Brownsville ghetto, mother and son return home to a father whose power and size has noticeably shrunken and whose own despair becomes briefly visible to the son.

> His startled groan came from the bedroom. "You? Genya?" For once his voice was stripped of harshness, stripped of pride, power, was nothing but a cry such as David might have uttered, alone in the dark, despairing. "Genya!"[50]

Although this brief moment of Albert's vulnerability and David's identification with him is preceded by David's desire that his father were "miraculously, forever gone" and followed by Albert's "inflexible pride", father and son are brought somewhat closer to each other since their mutual need for Genya and her dominating role both become clearer. In addition to this startling revelation, Albert is further emasculated in David's eyes by the apparent affair between Genya and Luter (his "awareness" and his father's

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[48] Roth, *Call It Sleep*, p. 52.
[49] Ibid., p. 54.
[50] Ibid., p. 111.

"unawareness"), Luter's abandonment of the Schearl home, and Albert's accident at the printer's shop where his arm (which Albert used to punish David and threatened to punish Luter with) gets injured in a machine. This further emasculation of Albert is witnessed by David from the window of his home--literally in a position of superiority.

> An instant David stared, and suddenly in the space of one stride, it was neither stranger nor parcel he saw, but his own father, and the right hand against his coat was hanging from a sling and swathed in bandages. He screamed.
> "Papa! Papa!"[51]

This is the first time David says "Papa" in the novel and one of the few times he even addresses his father directly, both evidence of the gradual normalization of their relationship. Added to David's awareness of his father's pathetic helplessness--"Nothing fulfils itself with me! It's all doomed! But what made him give me this? And what made him change?"[52]--is David's observation of his mother's nervousness which he associates with her deceptiveness and suspected affair with Luter. Suddenly, David's consciousness shifts from anger at his father to anger at his mother.

> The strange start of dread he had felt when his father's eyes had rested on him still lingered with him. [...] It frightened him too much. Everything he knew frightened him. Why did he have to be here when his father came home? Why had his *mother* kept him? Why did he have to know? You had to know everything and suddenly what you knew became something else.[53]

David's hatred of his father turns into "something else" too; it begins to seem like it's his mother's use of him as a buffer, like Annie's use of him in the closet, that David resents. Although this thought is not clearly expressed by David, it is implied by his reconciliation with Yussie and realization that it is Annie, the older woman in the parent's bedroom closet, that he dislikes: "It suddenly occurred to him that it was not Yussie but his sister he disliked so much".[54] In the same scene, David's mother (like Albert before) suddenly diminishes in stature since she can't understand Yussie's

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[51] Ibid., p. 131.
[52] Ibid., p. 135.
[53] Ibid., p. 136, my emphasis.
[54] Ibid., p. 136.

English; in addition, when David sees his mother "outside her pale" at the police station her helplessness and inadequacies become "embarrassing" and transparent to David. Then after David's reconciliation with Yussie, he overcomes his fear of the "monstrous" cellar and dark hallway, and consequently his fear of the dark (connected to his fear of his father) shifts into anger.

> Descending, they neared the cellar door at which when he glanced, David felt a wave not so much of fear as of anger run through him - as though he defied it, as though he had slammed the door within him and locked it.[55]

Thus, the first major shift in the novel shows David overcoming his nightmarish fear of the "monstrous cellar", the revelation of his anger at Genya, and feelings of sympathy for Albert.

THE LOWER EAST SIDE: THE DUAL NATURE OF THINGS

The emotional shift at the end of "The Cellar" is followed by an important physical transition from Brownsville to the Lower East Side by the Schearls. Albert becomes a milkman, connecting him to his youth in Austria where he tended his father's cows and emphasizing his retreat into the past. Albert's new job means that David sees him less, which significantly reduces David's day-to-day anxiety. In addition, the house in the East Side is cellarless and the Schearls now live closer to the "cloudy yellow glow" and "soft grey haze" of the sky that not only diffuses the previous darkness of the hallway but also transforms the "tumult" of the noisier East Side into a "mild, relaxing hush", and "luminous silence, static and embalmed". However, it is the symbolic purity of the stairs and banisters leading up to the "mysterious vacancy and isolation" of the roof that dissuades David from exploring this new area.

> But these [stairs] that led up to the roof still had a pearliness mingled with their grey. Each slab was still square and clean. No palms of sliding hands had buffed the wrinkled paint from off their banisters. No palms had oiled them tusk-smooth and green as an axe-helve. They were inviolable those stairs, guarding the light and the silence.[56]

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[55] Ibid., p. 139.
[56] Ibid., p. 142.

The banister is an important symbol for David since above his house it is still infused with a pearly, unsoiled purity that he associates with the stairs' "inviolability". The banisters leading up to David's building, however, represent the opposite quality of corrosion or corruption that links the lower world of the ghetto to his home.

> And now on the top step of the stoop, he paused awhile and watched the Hungarian janitor polish one of the brass banisters in front of the house. It had a corrupt odour, brass, as of something rotting away, and yet where the sun struck the burnished metal, it splintered into brilliant yellow light. Decay. Radiance. Funny.[57]

This description occurs in Book III, which highlights David's increasing consciousness of the dual nature of things, i.e. the brass's corruption and potential purifying "radiance". In Book III, the dual nature of the new additions to their East Side home such as Bertha, the picture, and the horns, becomes much more defined than in Book I. Bertha's arrival in the Schearl's new East Side apartment decreases the competitive tension in the Brownsville household due to Luter's presence and allows us to focus more closely on the two types of women rather than men. David no longer has to compete with two men for the attention of his mother, and the fear of the cellar door is removed (as well as Albert, due to his new job) in the East Side.

Bertha's presence in the Schearl's house highlights, as Luter's had previously done, Albert's impotence and Genya's sexual unfulfillment. Bertha's arrival not only diverts the tension between David and his father over to Bertha, but it also forces Albert to focus on the lustier "female side" of Genya. The appearance of Bertha immediately provokes Albert's abusive and foul language, and David revels in her criticism of Albert's prudishness, like when she describes Albert as "squeamish as a newly-minted nun". The first major conflict between Albert and Bertha occurs when she displays a newly-purchased pair of underwear, the sight of which drives Albert into a "demonic rage".[58]

> "Do you remember the drawers we wore in Austria - into the stockings? Winter and Summer my legs looked like a gypsy's accordion."
>
> But David's father could restrain himself no longer.

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[57] Ibid., p. 239.
[58] Ibid., p. 155.

> "Put those things away!" he rapped out. [...] "Are you going to do what I say?"
>
> Aunt Bertha clapped one hand to her hip, "When I please! It's time you knew what women wore on their bottoms."
>
> "I'll ask you once more you vile slut," he shoved his chair back and rose in slow wrath.
>
> David began to cry.
>
> "Let me go!" Aunt Bertha pushed back her sister who had interposed herself. "Is he so pious, he can't bear to look at a pair of drawers? Does he piss water as mortals do, or only the purest of vegetable oil?"
>
> His father advanced on her. "I'm pleading with you as with Death!" He always said that at moments of intense anger. His voice had taken on that thin terrific hardness that meant he was about to strike. "Will you put them away?"
>
> "Make me!" she screamed and waved the drawers like a goad in his very eyes.
>
> Before she could recoil, his long arm had swept out, and with a bark of rage, he plucked the drawers from her. A moment later, he had ripped them in two. "Here, you slut!" he roared. "Here are your peaks!" And he flung them in her face.[59]

This scene is important since it portends the final confrontation between Albert and Genya at the end of the novel, and here the "shearing" which I discussed above occurs literally when Albert tears Bertha's "drawers" in two. Genya's intervention between Albert and Bertha, and Albert's sudden burst of violence both mirror the earlier dinner with Luter where David became the target of Albert's wrath. Albert, who lashed out violently at David during the first dinner with Luter, now sends Bertha reeling into the wall, foreshadowing the final climactic scene when Albert sends a pregnant Bertha crashing to the wall. In the latter scene, Bertha not only intervenes on David's behalf but also to cover up for Genya's affair with Ludwig in Austria. However, not only is Bertha hit in this climactic scene at the end of the novel, but also Genya, a punishment which David himself desires--illustrating his jealousy and suppressed anger at his mother due to her affection for other men.

Just as Luter brought back Albert's memories of the Old World, Bertha connects Genya to her hidden past, the very past she desired to leave behind in the "Prologue". Bertha's arrival makes Genya nostalgic, and her love-affair with the Russian, Sternowitz, inspires Genya to buy a picture for the occasion of Sternowitz's

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[59] Ibid., p. 154-5.

first dinner at the Schearls'. Bertha brings to America the traces of a "rumour of some sort" in Genya's past which she wants to clarify after the dinner.[60] Her conversation with Genya about the Old World attracts David's attention, turning him outward to look for a sign or way of understanding his parent's behaviour. Genya's animated state before dinner when she unveils the picture and Bertha's romance are connected by the picture which the whole family focuses on at the end of the dinner. In fact, just as Bertha lifts her eyes (like Luter's eyes in a previous dinner scene) and notices the picture, David's eyes meet it too in a moment of revelation.

> *That was it!* Now he remembered! The thing he was searching for! That he forgot down stairs! Funny - [...] He began to wonder vaguely why it had followed him all afternoon, why it had tugged at the mind from the ambush of the mind.[61]

Here the picture begins to provide a means of understanding Genya's past that is somehow connected to Bertha's present romance; thus it is both literally and figuratively a bridge between the present and past. Genya's animation when she unveiled the picture, her "happiness" that caught David's attention when she looked for a nail to hang it up, and later the mixture of "pain" and reverberation of Genya's voice when she slips off into Polish during the conversation with Bertha about her past all "stir" David profoundly.[62] Yet David's inability to pierce Genya and Bertha's dialogue, to decode their Polish conversation into Yiddish, paralyses and excites him simultaneously.

> Her voice took on a throbbing richness now that David had never heard in it before. The very sound seemed to reverberate in his flesh sending pulse after pulse of a nameless, tingling excitement through his body. [...]

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[60] David begins to see his mother more objectively, like when he spots her "accidentally" in the street: "It was as if the street's shifting intricacy had flowered into the simple steadiness of her presence". Despite "the simple steadiness" of Genya's presence, David gets angry at his mother since she forgets to get him his favourite Chinese nuts at the laundry. In addition, changes in Genya's behaviour such as her animation when she unveils the picture (170), when she calls David her "second man" (174), and especially during the sexually charged presence of his father in the house all make him resentful and jealous about her divided attention.
[61] Ibid., p. 185-6.
[62] Ibid., p. 190.

> With the same suddenness as before, meaning scaled the horizon to another idiom, leaving David stranded on a sounding but empty shore. Words here and there, phrases shimmering like distant sails tantalized him but never drew near.
>
> He writhed inwardly at his own impotence.
>
> It seemed to him, lying there almost paralysed with the strain, that his mind would fly apart if he brought no order into this confusion.[63]

As David retreats furtively into the front room, Genya and Bertha slip unconsciously back into Yiddish. Playing games seems to have taught David at least how to be deceptive. It is in this crucial scene that he peers voyeuristically into the window of Genya's past in order to gain the very knowledge which will help him to overcome his "impotence". Knowledge is a means of power, and later it is a means of evading the rabbi's wrath in the *cheder* and the aggressive anti-Semitism of the boys at the car tracks. Through the portrait, which attracts Bertha's attention and animates Genya, David discovers the existence of a much more important portrait, that of Genya's ex-lover, Ludwig, the Gentile "orgahneest" in Austria.

> Her sudden, involuntary gasp was like a steep, sheer drop in the level-flowing matrix of her speech. Her hand went to her lips. The horror that came into her face was such that it seemed to David not something thought or remembered, but something she beheld this moment, something present in this very room. A shudder ran through him, watching her. "The light before my eyes grew black! Dear God! There on the very top of the pile of coats lay the portrait. Gazing up at me, there on the top!"
>
> "They knew," Aunt Bertha exclaimed.
>
> "They knew," his mother repeated.[64]

David (like the reader) learns about Ludwig by almost reliving the discovery of Ludwig's portrait and Genya's conflict with her own tyrannical father. After the revelation of the love-affair, the naming of Ludwig, the reciting of her father's curses--"You call that suffering, he cried, Why? Because he held you under him like dung in the privy and drops you now?"[65]--, the abuse and casting out of Genya by father and lover, the reference to "the Benkart" (Yiddish for bastard) in her belly, and finally the revelation of Ludwig's decision not to marry Genya, all culminate in a description of Genya

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[63] Ibid., p. 194-5.
[64] Ibid., p. 195.
[65] Ibid., p. 198.

spying on Ludwig that is repeated exactly at this point in the narrative by David spying on Genya and Bertha.

> No, we didn't speak. He didn't see me. I was standing in the road one afternoon when I saw a yellow cart coming towards me. [...] And I knew even before I could see who was driving, that it was the brother of his betrothed. [...] I hid in the cornfield near by. It wasn't the brother-in-law this time, but Ludwig himself and the grand lady beside him. They passed. I felt empty as a bell till I looked at the blue cornflowers at my feet. They cheered me. [...]
> ...- Blue cornflowers? Likes them! Corn! That was - ! Inside on the wall! Gee! Look at it later! Listen! Listen now![66]

David seems to cheer Genya up in America like the blue cornflowers did during her emotional crisis in the Old World; the blue straw hat in the "Prologue" is the symbol that links David and the cornflowers--the present and the past. This information illuminates David with important knowledge, and although he resolves to look at the picture later what he sees at the end of the chapter is not the picture but a re-vision of what he knows, namely how Genya manages to retain her balance in her relationship with Albert. This buoyancy is symbolized by the doll David sees at that moment in the street.

> It was a headless, stove-in celluloid doll with an egg-shaped bottom, the kind that when they were pushed, bounced upright again. [...] One of them, apparently the owner, took something out of his pocket, struck it against the sidewalk - a match. Cupping it carefully, he touched it to a cracked edge of the doll - It flared up with a burst of yellow flame. [...] And then one pointed to the spot where the doll had been and where now nothing remained except the char against the curbstone. The other bent down and picked up something. It glittered like a bit of metal. Both stared at it - and David did too from his height.[67]

David views the reduction of the doll to "char" (a drastically shrunken, "charred" Miss Liberty) and sees the "glittering" magnet produced by the boys' "mejick" from the same window where he spotted his injured father. David seems able now to view his mother from a much more objective and critical point of view--no longer elevated, statuesque or iconic like Miss Liberty. This scene seems to

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[66] Ibid., p. 201.
[67] Ibid., p. 203.

reveal to him that although his father wielded the "iron hammer" as a means of dominance, his mother's "mejick interior" (magnetic and iron hard) represents a much more durable, hidden power.

> "He burned a doll and he made "mejick". And now he's got a piece of iron. You see it? In his hands? Look!" [...]
> "There's a little piece of iron," [David] explained. "In that kind of doll. That what makes it stand up when you push it over. And the doll burned. And only the iron is left."[68]

Although David uses the scene to deceive Bertha and Genya into thinking he wasn't listening to them, his game shows the reader that he has been able to unify some of the fractured meaning in his quest for knowledge and power. He seems to have found the key to his mother's buoyancy under the violent oppression of his father, the "mejick" in her belly, and possible illegitimate origin of his birth.

THE SEARCH FOR KNOWLEDGE AND POWER

In Book III, David searches for knowledge and power in order to divest himself of "that queer weight, that odd something lodged in his bosom that was so spiny, ramified", or in other words to rid himself for good of the oppressive weight of his two "foes"--his father and the dark. Ironically, although Albert recognizes David as his son in order to assure himself of his own immortality (by sending David to *cheder* to become a good Jew who will pray for him after his death), it is at the *cheder* that David begins to appropriate the knowledge of a superior power and means of overcoming his father, namely through God. The rabbi, like Albert, is violent to the extreme of sadism; but unlike David's father, the rabbi rewards his students for their good memories, performance and display of intelligence. David is prepared for a kind of revelation in the *cheder* way before he goes there by Sternowitz, whose story about a rabbi in Russia "stirs" David's religious consciousness like Luter "stirred" his sexual curiosity.[69] What seems to impress David about Reb Leibish in Sternowitz's story is neither his self-discipline nor his charity but the healing powers of God which the rabbi transmits.

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[68] Ibid., p. 204.
[69] Ibid., p. 181.

> The more "fency" [rabbis] become, the less of God's power do they have. [...] No. [Reb Leibish] had God by his side. He said to my father, Let her go! Take your hands away! And then he said, Come here, my daughter! And she said, Where? I can't see! And he cried out. Look at me! Open your eyes! The Almighty gives you light! And she opened her eyes and she saw! That's a rabbi!
> [...] Without knowing why [David] had been strangely stirred by Mr Sternowitz's short narrative.[70]

Although David doesn't understand the reason for being so "strangely stirred" by this story, it prepares him for the revelation he has of God's powerful and healing light in the book of *Isaiah*. Book III (especially when David is brought to the *cheder*) marks a much calmer period of his life in which David feels:

> as though he were waiting for some sign, some seal that would forever relieve him of watchfulness and forever insure his well-being. [...] Perhaps the sign would be revealed when he finally learned to translate Hebrew. At any rate, ever since he had begun attending cheder, life had levelled out miraculously, and this he attributed to his increasing nearness to God.[71]

This calm occurs just before Passover when David connects the ritual celebration of the Jews' deliverance from slavery in Egypt to his own slavery and yearning for freedom, which is symbolized by his quest for divine light: "One needed only a bright yard. At times David almost believed he had found that brightness".[72] The polarity between sin and purity, darkness and light, slavery and freedom, pain and ecstasy, which Roth has developed extensively up to this point in the novel, can be summarized here as the polarity between the "old horror" of sex and the new revelation of the holy words of God.[73]

THE CLOSETS: SEXUAL AND SPIRITUAL INITIATIONS

Roth fuses David's sexual and spiritual initiations symbolically through the image of the closet. David was initiated into the rites of sex by Annie in her mother's closet and it is in the *cheder* closet that the rabbi keeps his holy books, or specifically the haftorah section from *Isaiah*, the source of his first religious initiation. The

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[70] Ibid., p. 180-1.
[71] Ibid., p. 218.
[72] Ibid., p. 218.
[73] Ibid., p. 220.

rabbi's translation of *Isaiah* from Hebrew into Yiddish suddenly catches David's attention since it introduces the idea of a king's death inherent in the Saul/David, Laïos/Oedipus motifs.

> "In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw God. And God was sitting on his throne, high in heaven and in his temple - Understand?" He pointed upward.[74]

The very text that the rabbi choses for Mendel's haftorah to Jethro deals with David's own obsession with the decay or corruption of his house and the external world--his mother's sins and father's violence. Therefore, Isaiah's vision of God seems to provide some means of spiritual purification to David, the very sign he was looking for.

> "I, common man, have seen the Almighty, I, unclean one, have seen him! Behold, my lips are unclean and I live in a land unclean - for the Jews at that time were sinful -"
> - Clean? Light? Wonder if -? Wish I could ask him why the Jews were dirty.[75]

The symbolism of the unclean "lips" and purifying coal held with tongs is not completely clear to David at this point, but it reminds the reader of Genya's desire for his "cool" lips as well as David's own feeling of guilt due to his lust for his mother which he attempts to suppress.

> How I jumped when the rabbi pushed out with his fingers when he said coal. Nearly thought it was me. Wonder if Isaiah hollered when the coal touched him. Maybe angel-coal don't burn live people. Wonder -[76]

The paradoxical nature of the coal as a purifying medium perplexes David but the symbolic idea of redemption of sin by paradoxical means was not foreign to Jewish messianic sects such as the Shabbatian movement.[77] Following this haftorah the class reads the

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[74] Ibid., p. 223.
[75] Ibid., p. 224.
[76] Ibid., p. 227.
[77] See Scholem on "Redemption through Sin" in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism: And Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971). In my interview with Roth, he admits that he used elements of Jewish mysticism such as the Kabbalah as a structural device, or as he put it:

> [The Kabbalah] was something I needed for the novel itself. [...] I felt that at this point that's what I needed

"Haggadah" and its contents relate directly to the divine will in the historical liberation of the Jews. The "chad godyuh"[78] section of the "Haggadah" reveals to David that there is a greater power above that of the devil, or the angel death, a superior height which David reaches metaphorically by successfully reciting the "long ladder of guilt and requital".[79]

> Carefully, he climbed past the cow and the butcher and the angel of death. "And then the Almighty, blessed be He -" (*Gee! Last. Nobody after. Didn't know before. But sometime, mama, Gee!*) ... [80]

David's attempt to approach the rabbi to clarify his confusion is interrupted by lightning, both a sign of God and a good omen.

> "Lightning before the Passover! A warm summer! [the rabbi commented]" [...] "Before God," the rabbi interrupted, "none may stand upright".[81]

The contrast between Albert, described as the "dark levin" or the angel of death, and God's redeeming light surfaces here. This scene propels David into his search for God's light and investigation into the nature of blessing and sin--of the penny he earns for his reading of the "chad godyuh" since he is the one with the "blessed

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> just as a culture; I felt that it was a necessary part of the structure. Otherwise, it lacked certain elements (Appendix I).

In addition, in an interview with Lyons, he remarked that he may have heard somewhere about mysticism and adds that he had read Scholem Asch. Coincidentally, Asch's play, *Sabbatai Zevi* (1907), was first published in English in 1930, a year after Roth started writing *Call It Sleep*, and in it the ideas of redemption through sin--"[t]he nearer the hour of redemption approaches, the stronger does Satan become"--and of the unification/truncation motif are evident: "In me [Sarah] thou hast fall and repentance, rupture and reconciliation" (p. 86).

[78] *The Jewish Encyclopedia*'s spelling of the "chad godyuh" is "Had Gadya", or "Only Kid". It is "a popular Aramaic song chanted at the conclusion of the Passover seder". According to the editor of *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, "[t]he end of the song expresses the hope for messianic redemption: God destroys the foreign rulers of the Holy Land and vindicates Israel, "the only kid"". This is extremely interesting in light of Roth's later comments that Israel's victory in the 1967 war helped him to "[f]ind a path back to himself", initiating a kind of redemption or "regeneration", a word he now prefers to use to describe his re-emergence as a writer.

[79] Roth, *Call It Sleep*, p. 230.

[80] Ibid., p. 230.

[81] Ibid., p.231-32.

understanding that remembers yesterday", and the "sin penny"[82] he earns from the old woman for the sacrilege of lighting her candles on "Shabis".[83] The polarity of sin and blessedness is developed further when David returns home and becomes aware of the "double sin" of the boys tearing Jewish newspaper during "Shabis" in the hallway water closet, followed by his mother's confirmation of the "chad godyuh" revelation and David's entrance into "the delicious circle of her embrace".[84]

> She said that He was brighter than the day is brighter than the night. [...]
>
> Brighter than day. That seemed definite, seemed to conform with his own belief, that much he could grasp. It reminded him of the chad godyuh. "And He lives in the Sky?"[85]

One could easily say that for the remainder of *Call It Sleep* David's self-assigned task is to search for this light, since the "light is a kind of victory over the angel of death", over corruption, death, and the fear of darkness. It is interesting that the place where David finally experiences his "vision" is in the most corrupt wasteland of the junkyard, on the boarder between the Jewish ghetto, the East River, and urban New York.

Shortly after David reflects on the corrupt odour of the brass banister leading into his apartment and inquires into the nature of sin, he is sent into the streets to burn the scraps of leavened bread his father has collected and wrapped in a wooden spoon. The first image of the "chumitz" fire that the three boys guard is paradoxical since the boys light the purifying fire directly on "duh sewer" and attempt to turn the "chumitz" ritual into a money making enterprise;[86] not only is the pre-Passover ritual degraded in the ghetto but a fight between the three Jewish boys, the Jewish butcher, and the Italian streetsweeper occurs, forcing David to cross the ghetto's northern border of 10th street and Avenue D in order to perform the "chumitz" ritual.

> And there, just before the shore sank beneath the mossy piles of the dock (these driven through blackened rocks, past oil-barrels, stove-in, moss-green

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[82] Ibid., p. 235.
[83] Ibid., p. 235, 236.
[84] Ibid., p. 237.
[85] Ibid., p. 238.
[86] Ibid., p. 240.

> and rusty, past scummy wreckage) he squatted down beside a ledge of the open junk-heap, the salt-stink of ebbtide in his nostrils.[87]

David, the boy who "collected" junk in his shoe-box such as "perforated metal corks", "the stretched helix of a small window-shade spring", and other "striking odds and ends he found", seems to be in his own element in the junkyard.[88] Conscious of the fact that "sin is everywhere around him", David performs the ritual in the heart of the wasteland, at the very heart or source of corruption. "With his feet hanging over the water" from a dock jutting into the river, David seems to be re-enacting the very event which Passover celebrates;[89] similar to Moses at the edge of the Sea of Reeds, David has his first divine revelation while looking in the river, which is symbolized by the image of the voice and light on the water.

> Minutes passed while he stared. The brilliance was hypnotic. He could not take his eyes away. His spirit yielded, melted into light. In the molten sheen memories and objects overlapped. Smokestacks fused to palings flickering in silence by. [...] And he heard the rubbing on a wash-board and the splashing suds, smelled again the acrid soap and a voice speaking words that opened like the bands of a burnished silver accordion - Brighter than day ... Brighter ... Sin melted into light ...[90]

After this revelation David realizes that this light is the source of power that will enable him to overcome his fear of the darkness and his father, who is represented by the Charon-like figure standing on the "black tugboat" in "his undershirt" with "bare, outstretched arms gripping the doorpost on either side".[91] This "awakening" from inspired revelation to the concerned but amused voice of the man on the tugboat foreshadows David's final "awakening" or resurrection at the end of the novel. The scene that follows with the three antagonistic, gentile boys accentuates the corruption of the place--Dedey defecates, the boys urinate in the junkyard--and introduces a light even more electrifying in a source that emanates from outside of the Jewish ghetto. The boys descend upon David

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[87] Ibid., p. 242.
[88] Ibid., p. 35.
[89] Ibid., p. 243.
[90] Ibid., p. 244.
[91] Ibid., p. 245.

like hostile crusaders with "a sword made of a thin strip of metal that looked like sheet zinc", forcing him with their aggressive, anti-Semitic tactics to lie about his Jewishness in order to evade their violence.[92] The conflict highlights the interplay between David's internal illumination at the dock and the external "magic" which the boys force him to encounter: "They hemmed him in cutting off retreat".[93] The sunlight of April (the cruellest month in Eliot's *The Waste Land*) pervades this crucial scene, lighting the "filth and ruin", and a stench of mouldering flesh which "fouled the nostrils".[94] This description of the corrosion is followed by David's accidental "bending of the sword" to make it look now like the sword on the Mecca cigarette box in the advertisement that hovers over the junkyard (a symbol of conversion); David has no other option but to complete this alien ritual as they command him.

> Just drop it, they said, and they would let him go. Just drop it. He edged closer, stood tip-toe on the cobbles. The point of the sheet-zinc sword wavered before him, clicked on the stone as he fumbled, then finding the slot at last, rasped part way down the wide grinning lips like a tongue in an iron mouth. He stepped back. From open fingers, the blade plunged into darkness.
>
> Power!
>
> Like a paw ripping through all the stable fibres of the earth, power, gigantic, fetterless, thudded into day! And light, unleashed, terrific light bellowed out of iron lips. The street quaked and roared, and like a tortured thing, the sheet-zinc sword, leapt writhing, fell back, consumed with radiance. Blinded, stunned by the brunt of brilliance, David staggered back. A moment later, he was spurting madly towards Avenue D.[95]

Roth's blatant sexual imagery in this scene--especially the reference to the zinc sword "like a tongue in an iron mouth" which reminds one of David's sexual initiation (also forced) with Annie who was described as having an "awl-like tongue"--has been either surprisingly overlooked or misinterpreted by critics. This time David has the metal tongue, the bent "sword" that wavers phallically before him and which he plunges into the "grinning lips" to release its barbaric power. A "terrific" orgasmic shock sends David

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[92] Ibid., p. 246.
[93] Ibid., p. 247.
[94] Ibid., p. 248.
[95] Ibid., p. 249-50.

"spurting" madly home.[96] Like the sword which is "consumed with radiance", David seems to possess a new forbidden knowledge of a greater power connected to the divine light in the river.

> In the river, showed him, showed. In the dark, in the river was there. Came out if He wanted, was there. Stayed in if He wanted, was there.[97]

David uses the light, or rather the story of the light, to deflect the rabbi's wrath from himself when caught searching in ***Isaiah***, which David finds in the rabbi's *cheder* closet, in an attempt to interpret the light or clarify its meaning.

> The rabbi didn't know as he knew what the light was, what it meant, what it had done to him. But he would reveal no more. It was enough that the light had saved him from being whipped.[98]

David carries this illumination--"ichorous" eddies of transcendence which lift his "voice into a birdlike whistle"--and "internalized faith" into the serenely "lyric indolence" of the summer.[99] However, though he finally experiences this internalized faith and peace the reader has become over-accustomed to his hypersensitivity and paranoia for the first 257 pages of the novel. The golden "lolling" and "lyric indolence" seem peculiar and unnatural to the reader; thus Roth uses the calm to heighten the reader's apprehension of the "fated conflict" between father and son.

David's serenity is disrupted in the scene where Albert takes him on the milk rounds, way beyond the 10th street border of the ghetto to the "alien" and "malign" district of the gas tanks on 20th street, down into the "festering stench of the city's iron entrails" where (symbolic of hell) the "biggest fires, biggest foinisses in Noo Yawk" are.[100] It is an area of sterility, devoid of the fecundity of the Lower East Side ghetto which David knows so well; it is a hellish wasteland, an image that fuses both the sinister and sterile characteristics of his father. There, David experiences the horror which had haunted him all along. After the revengeful wrath of his father erupts to punish the thieves who stole his milk, Albert not

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[96] Ibid., p. 249, 250.
[97] Ibid., p. 251.
[98] Ibid., p. 254.
[99] Ibid., p. 257.
[100] Ibid., p. 274.

only blames the incident on David but also forces him to keep it a secret. Thus David is forced to bear both the guilt and burden of Albert's own crime, literally becoming the scapegoat.

Although the zinc sword and "rail" experience has a "galvanizing" effect on David, fusing his search for a sign with his knowledge of purifying coal and light in *Isaiah*, his trip with his father to the gas tanks fractures his world, once again "warping" and "contorting" it into "unreality".[101] David's return to his mother, however, focuses "sound and scent" for him temporarily; but despite the "[b]eatitude flawless" of his father's absence--the "empty bed" he sees when he arrives home--David is torn apart by the yearning for a "more durable purity" which sends him to the light source on the rooftop. He goes there, ironically, just after hearing from the boys sitting below that they had gone to the roof to catch a "kinerry" which had escaped and, in the process, they saw a naked woman and another kind of "kinerry".

> "But we seen annudder kinerry!" Schmeelkee boiled over.
> "Woddayuh mean?" [David asked. ...]
> "Big bush under duh belly!" The others jumbled voice with gestures. "Fat ass, we seen! Big - Wuh! Wadda kinerry! Wee! An' duh hull knish! All de hairs!"[102]

The story reveals David's sexual possessiveness of his mother--"Aaa! Mama! Mine it was! [...] Hate 'em. And she - [...] Mad at her"--which is mingled with his anger at her for showing herself to others: "Why did she let them look?".[103] The fact that the door of the house was locked confirms to David that his mother was indeed taking a bath, and later, when he creeps down from the roof he notices "the glow in her features", a moment of "profound and incomprehensible contentment", that he had seen when his mother thought about the picture and Ludwig.[104] The fact that Genya bathed David before his trip as "a milkman" to the gas tank area on 20th street and locked the door both suggest that Genya bathed herself for Albert to prepare for lovemaking. This time, unlike when David reached the locked door and house void of his father, the

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[101] Ibid., p. 280.
[102] Ibid., p. 290-91.
[103] Ibid., p. 292.
[104] Ibid., p. 170.

door is open and signs of lovemaking are all over the house: Albert is in bed, a new, white-handled whip is lying beside the tub, Genya greets David "without the usual [...] outstretched arms", her smile doesn't seem to be for him, and under the wrapping paper on the bathtub lie the horns which link Albert's past--his trade as a milk man and fear of being cuckolded--with his present threat to David of monstrous or bestial sexuality: thus even the symbol of the horns, now "lying on the washtub" (symbolic of his mother who has just bathed), shifts from one of impotence and cuckoldry to threatening bestial sexuality.

> Before him on a shield-shaped wooden plaque, two magnificent horns curved out and up, pale yellow to the ebony tips. [...] Though they lay there inertly, their bases solidly fastened to the dark wood, there pulsed from them still a suggestion of terrific power [...] Somehow he couldn't quite believe that it was for memory's sake only that his father had bought this trophy. Somehow looking at the horns, guessing the enormous strength of the beast who must have owned them, there seemed to be another reason. He couldn't quite fathom it though. But why was it that two things so remote from each other seemed to have become firmly coupled in his mind. It was as though the horns lying on the wash-tub had bridged them, as though one tip pierced one image and one tip the other - that man outstretched on the sidewalk, that mysterious look of repose in his mother's face when he had come in. Why? Why did he think of them at one and the same time. He couldn't tell. He sensed only that in the horns, in the poised power of them lay a threat, a challenge he must answer, he must meet. But he didn't know how.[105]

David connects his father's sexuality to his violence, the "monstrous walls of flesh and strength" of this "he-cow", which threatens the beatitude and intimacy of his own relationship with Genya even more imminently. The power to overcome his father, he believes, comes from the roof and sky above where he meets Leo Dugovka, the fatherless "goy". But David's friendship with Leo brings him, paradoxically, back down into the corruption of the cellar of Aunt Bertha's candy shop where he and Leo take David's cousins, Esther and Polly. David envies Leo's freedom (symbolized by the kite), "confidence", "carefree nature" and blessings, especially the power which the scapula on Leo's chest seems to give to him. He is awed by the fact that Leo is "not afraid" of anything due to the metal on

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[105] Ibid., p. 295-6.

his chest; he appears to David as part of "a rarer, bolder, carefree world", and David's contact with this new power and religion inspires him to inquire briefly into the world of Christianity. However, it should be stressed that Leo's promises to David, and David's desire for a "greater light" and "power to make himself almost godlike", are never fulfilled by Leo or his Christianity. Instead of getting the scapula (symbol of Madonna and child) for playing the role of pander, Leo gives David the rosary with a picture of Christ; that Christian light is "bigger than Jew light" doesn't seem to convince David, who is led tentatively back to the horror of the cellar and sexual games he fled from. There, in the cellar, David gets the rosary from Leo, which not only fails to save him but also almost betrays him to his father at the very end of the novel. The scene in the cellar disgusts David (as did the game of hide and go seek with Annie) and sends him running (as did his initiation with the third rail) once again to the *cheder*, back to the Jewish haven, in order to forget what has happened.

THE RUPTURING OF THE NARRATIVE

David's feelings of guilt for taking Leo to play "bad" with his own relatives propel him into a series of attempts to escape from his deed and from his own identity, a combination of his "hatred of the rabbi" and parents, and yearning for "giddy freedom".[106] It is at this point in the novel (p. 369), not the beginning of Chapter 21, as most critics claim, that the form of the narrative shifts or ruptures; David collapses in a fit of nervous tension or hysteria which sends him running "northward" screaming "I'm somebody else,-else-Else!" in an effort to escape from his guilt.[107] The narrative "envelope" or structure is broken at the same moment. The irony of David's confession or lie to the rabbi is that it not only contains fragments of the truth but that it also sets off a violent confrontation between Genya and Albert that results in two more confessions--Albert's about his father which Genya (but not the reader) already knows, and Genya's confession (which we *don't* hear) which helps to initiate the truce between Albert and Genya at the end of the novel. The secret of Albert's past is finally revealed at the end of the novel but David (like the reader) still remains in the dark about Genya's

[106] Ibid., p. 368.
[107] Ibid., p. 369.

sin--in other words who his father is! Thus the conclusion of the novel is left open, and neither David's conflict nor the vision he has is fully resolved. The two last scenes should be examined closely, since it's there that David's paradoxical failure and success, revelation and paralysis occur. What actually happens?

David's hysteria is described as "the horror of one tottering over an abyss" since in his effort to escape from home he realizes that the world of Leo's Christianity is not his solution. Not only does he recognize the useless nature of Leo's rosary--"Lousy son-of-a-! Back pocket [...] Them! It's them! No good shitten them! Kick! Throw away! Tear! Shitten, goybeads!"[108]--but also that he must inevitably return home despite its corruption: "Have to come back always". Trapped between hostile external and domestic worlds, David desires to "BeE nobody,..Always. Nobody'd see"; but fainting with "terror" he connects the corruption of the external world to that of his own internal, domestic world, an idea fused by the image of the electric power of the rail at the tracks, the tarnished rail at the entrance to his home, and the electric power of his father's temper which awaits him inside.

> In the trance that locked his mind only one sensation guttered with a bare significance. The chill of the tarnished railing under his palm, the chill and memory of its lustre and the flat taint of its corruption.[109]

Faced with an inevitable confrontation with his father, David seems to want his mother to suffer punishment for her sexual sins, which seem to be the source of the family tension.

> - Her fault! Hers. Ain't mine. No it ain't ...There! See! Chinky shows! Her fault. She said about him. Didn't she? She told it to Aunt Bertha. Her fault. If she liked a goy, so I liked. There! She made me. How did I know? It's all her fault and I'm going to tell too. Blame it on her. Yours Mama! Yours![110]

Although David throws himself directly into his mother's arms when he sees her, he has brought the house, Samson-like, into violent chaos, and the image of the house is linked to Samson's vengeance when he pulls apart the pillars of the house bringing it down on the

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108 Ibid., p. 376.
109 Ibid., p. 377.
110 Ibid., p. 382.

Philistines, Delila, and himself.[111] The confrontation between Albert and Genya confirms Albert's feelings of guilt concerning his father's death, but David's suggestion that his real father is a goy is never confirmed. The only thing that is revealed is Albert's own fear of impotency.

> Why I've sensed it for years I tell you! I've stubbed my feet against it at every turn and tread. [...] Then why do weeks and weeks go by and I'm no man at all? No man as other men are?[112]

Albert desires to be "rid of it", and the pronoun "it" refers here to David, or in other words the proof of Genya's "summer trysts" in the cornfields.[113] When David reaches into the "dark niche" where his father's broken whip was kept his father interprets it as a sign of "fate", like Isaac's near-slaying by Abraham: "It is your fate you're begging for?"[114] But David wants to reveal the one "sin" that hasn't come out, Albert's violence at the gas tanks which David was supposed to keep secret. At this moment, in one of the most misinterpreted and surprising scenes of the novel, Albert beats Genya *not* David for the "sin"!

> "I was tainted. I was bridled with another's sin. [...]"
> And before anyone could move, he had lunged forward at David's ***mother***.
> "Ow! Ow! Papa! Papa! Don't!"
> Those steel fingers closed like a crunching trap on David's shoulders - yanked him out of her hands. And the whip! The whip in the air! And -
> "Ow! Ow! Papa! Ow!"
> Bit like a brand across ***her*** back. Again! Again! and he fell howling to the floor.[115]

David screams out as he watches the whip hit his mother's back, an act he desires internally but verbally opposes. It is only ***after*** David crumples to the floor out of fright that the cross is revealed, and ***after*** Bertha says that Albert will slay him that Genya sends him "down" to safety where he imagines his father continuing to beat his mother: "Don't let him hit her".[116] It is at this point, after his mother's beating, that David resorts to the sacrifice that practically

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111 See footnote 7.
112 *Call It Sleep*, p. 390.
113 Ibid., p. 390.
114 Ibid., p. 396, 399.
115 Ibid., p. 399, my emphases.
116 Ibid., p. 400, 402.

kills him in search of a power greater than his father's: "In the crack light and he laughed. [...] Wait, Papa! Papa! Don't hit! Don't! Ow! Didn't want a big one, only twentier".[117] Thus the violent disruption of the narrative on page 369 leads up to David's descent into the symbolic world of corruption, past the two prostitutes standing in the "vitriolic glare".[118]

The stench of the milk in the street connects the corruption of the house to the world below; it is here that David finds the "spoon" or the milk ladle that fuses both his action in the past (the wooden Passover spoon) and the present, the milk "spoon" or ladle which he uses in a sexually symbolic ritual to purify the corruption of his house: "Even if it ain't a sword, could go in the crack".[119] "Convulsed" in another fit that turns into a new "strange feeling of craftiness", "hatred" and defiance" of the dark which emanates now from his parents' window, David grasps the "long, grey, milk dipper" and plunges himself into "deeper shadow".[120] It's important to note the conflicting emotions of fear and defiance which accompany this flight into the "old-wagon yard" that exhales "manure-damp rank" and beyond it the "strewn chaos of the dump heap".[121] Roth emphasizes not only David's alienation from his parents but also his isolation from all humanity in this "rusted" area on the edge of ghetto and city, where the shadowy dock meets the river.

> To the left, the chipped brick wall of the warehouse shut off the west and humanity, to the right and behind him, the ledge of the dump heap rose; before him land's end and the glitter on the rails.[122]

Here, at the heart of the corruption, David has his apocalyptic experience and unlike his father, who turns his violence outwards, David becomes the sacrificial victim of his own hatred.

The symbolic fracturing of the narrative in the electrification scene is fused at the end of the novel by the omniscient narrator who blends sections of David's internal monologue with the voices surrounding him in the junkyard (which David doesn't hear). A noticeable shift in the use of language occurs in this chapter; what

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[117] Ibid., p. 403.
[118] Ibid., p. 403-04.
[119] Ibid., p. 404.
[120] Ibid., p. 406.
[121] Ibid., p. 406.
[122] Ibid., p. 407.

critics who describe *Call It Sleep* as a "proletarian novel" never discuss is Roth's depiction of the "proletariat's" baseness and corruption. Aside from Bill Whitney, the watchman in the Royal Warehouse, practically all of the other characters echo David's obsession with the "crack", but only David desires to make the light emanate from the darkness, to transform sin into purity. O'Toole tells "us sompt'n about 'cunt'" and about his exploits with the whores in the back of the saloon; we hear about the "bull durham sack" on his "pecker"; reference to vaginas vary from "gash" to "free hole" and "a cut"; we read about "putz's" and "shafts", "dagos" and "wops";[123] the talk is of losing virginity, gambling, murder, and the apocalypse; against this background of sexual corruption and social decay, David himself seems to be undergoing a kind of symbolic sexual initiation and rebirth: "In the crack be born".[124] He is described as "blind as a sleep-walker" and "deaf" which makes him a kind of sacrificial "kid" as well--the "one kid" in the "chad godyuh" song. David's first attempt to touch the rail, "like a sword in a scabbard",[125] fails and it is followed by a symbolic description of his sexual impotence.

> *Like a dipped metal flag or a gro-*
> *tesque armoured head scrutinizing the*
> *cobbles, the dull-gleaming dipper's*
> *scoop stuck out from between the rail,*
> *leaning sideways.*
> *- Didn't. Didn't go in.*[126]

His first intentional try fails, but stepping into the dipper "as into a stirrup" he makes unintentional contact, which is directly preceded by a pun referring to the birth of Christ and the paradoxical act itself: "Dere's a star fer yeh! Watch it! T'ree Kings I god. Dey came on huzzbeck! [...] To a red cock crowin'. [...] Machine! Liberty! Revolt! Redeem!"[127] David becomes not only infused with barbaric power, but also he dies a kind of death and with it experiences a rebirth described as his "fatal glory". His brain "swells" then "recoils" leaving him--like the boy he pushed in the street and two thieves--on the ground and presumably dead.[128]

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[123] Ibid., p. 408, 409, 411, 410.
[124] Ibid., p. 409.
[125] Ibid., p. 411.
[126] Ibid., p. 412.
[127] Ibid., p. 417.
[128] Ibid., p. 417.

Like David, the writhing dipper (now symbolic of himself) is "almost consumed" and like a "leviathan leaped for the hook and fell back thrashing".[129] David's rising consciousness includes images from the entire gamut of his experience--fusing the "crosses" of the wires in Brownsville with the crucifixion of Christ, and Albert, with the Resurrection: "*his father soared with feathery ease*".[130] In this intermediary state between life and death, sleeping and dreaming, David realizes that he is still unclean, that even his father must die, and that he has become the sacrificial kid--"one kid, one kid only". Roth mixes Jewish and Christian symbolism here, but its important to recognize that David's rebirth is described in terms of the "coal" and "ember" image of *Isaiah*.

> *. . . But out of the darkness, one ember. [...]*
> *(Coal! And it was brighter than the*
> *path of lightning and milder than pearl,) . . .*[131]

David's consciousness upon awakening is like an awakening from "[a] nightmare".[132] His deliverance and cognisance of the reality of the experience is emphasized by the fact that he repeats the phrase "it wasn't a dream" three times.[133] David is only able to galvanize his past experiences in a state between life and death, sleep and consciousness, and it's there that he manages to find silence--to still the whirling hammer of time and fate--, or in other words to reverse the consequences of that fate.

Critics such as Bonnie Lyons who want to consider David's experience as a "unifying vision" or "triumph" should look closely at the results of the accident. David makes all of eight replies after the electrification in Chapter 22.

1. "N-nint' street," he quavered. "S-ebm fawdynine."
2. "T-top flaw."
3. "Over - over dere!" he quavered weakly.
4. "Y-yeh."
5. "N-no," he lied.

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[129] Ibid., p. 421.
[130] Ibid., p. 424.
[131] Ibid., p. 429.
[132] Ibid., p. 431.
[133] Ibid., p. 431.

> 6. "I don't - I don't know" he answered [to the question, "What made you do it?"].
>
> 7. "No mama."
>
> 8. "Yes, mama."[134]

What has been overlooked by critics is David's silence after the electrification and the internalization of his thoughts. David is now able to tell the crowd where he lives in English, but he still tells lies, is unable to explain his motives, never puts his vision into words, and can't say what it all means. Roth allows us to enter the mind of a child who is still confused and suffering intense pain. His thoughts and actions are permeated with physical and psychological anguish: he shuts his eyes trying to remember how to awaken; he is aware of the diffuse throbbing pain at his ankle described as an aching tide;[135] he wants the neighbours to go away. Even his feelings of "triumph" at the sight of his shrunken, defeated father are followed by David's own collapse, crumpling "inertly".[136] The meaning of the experience may be clear to him but it is never articulated and every passing moment makes it more difficult to describe. David knows his father is shaken and repentant and this enables him suppress his feelings of triumph over and hatred of his father into pity; this act of psychological suppression is analogous to David's attempt to subdue his physical pain by sticking his injured foot under the covers of the bed. His parents are finally united at the end but their unity is a tenuous one which required David's self-sacrifice. Now that this coming together has been initiated, one feels that David's childhood has been sacrificed in order to achieve it. We still don't know for sure that Albert is his father but we do feel that David's "acquiescence" at the conclusion signals the end of his own imaginative creativity which hinged on Albert's violence. As Roth himself remarked, "the form of the novel was broken" and with it the "creative psyche of the author".[137] In my interview with him, Roth added that:

> in retrospect, I marvelled at the fact how astonishingly [the end of the novel] forecast or adumbrated what actually was going to happen to the novelist himself. I

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134 Ibid., p. 431, 432, 433, 435, 435, 436, 438, 440.
135 Ibid., p. 431.
136 Ibid., p. 433.
137 Bronsen, "A Conversation with Henry Roth", p. 269-70.

> never dreamed [that ...] the symbol I used in *Call It Sleep* of the shock and the truncation of the writer should have proved to be true of me. In other words, it was I who was short-circuited or subjected myself to it anyway. But to that extent it's a kind of prophecy without in the least being conscious of it.[138]

David is ruptured and injured at the end of *Call It Sleep*, and his foot shows the visible sign of this scarring process. It is to sleep that David can forget about the nightmare of the past, and it is the past that Roth wants to forget. No wonder he later referred to the conclusion as a "foreshadowing of this to come". "This", like "it" in the title and last lines of the novel, is Roth's silence, the end of his productivity, the wall of the past, creative paralysis, things which are too painful to recount. No one should have to experience hell twice.

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[138] See Appendix I, p. 268. Abraham Heschel remarks that, "[p]rophecy always moves in a polarity, yet the tension of yes and no, of anger and love, of doom and redemption, is often dissolved in the certainty of God's eternal attachment [...]", *The Prophets*, p. 89.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A SHIFTING LANDSCAPE: THE SEARCH FOR CONTINUITY AND REGENERATION IN HENRY ROTH'S LATER WORK

INTRODUCTION

Henry Roth could not have expressed the idea of "lost identity" and "paralysis" more clearly than he did in *Call It Sleep*, which ends with the immense physical shock and wounding of the youth who, incapable of reaching maturity, withdraws from the world into the comfort of his bed, dreams, and silence. *Call It Sleep*'s conclusion displays an inability to go on--either to adolescence for David or creatively for Roth. If the resolution of the novel is viewed as a metaphor for Roth's own paralysis, short circuiting, and discontinuity, then the remainder of Roth's work since 1934 could be described as both a search for continuity and an explanation of his silence. No other writer, to my knowledge, has analyzed his inability to write so intensely and articulately as Henry Roth. Roth has equated David's failure to reach adolescence with his "own failure to mature", which implies (at least retrospectively) that David's silence and withdrawal from the world may have been a foreboding of Roth's own withdrawal and silence--as well as an alarming admission of the immaturity of the author of *Call It Sleep*. Although there is a sign of hope in David's revelation at the end of *Call It Sleep*, it is an elliptical revelation since it is never articulated, only felt, leaving the reader in a state of confusion and abeyance. *Call It Sleep*'s open-endedness, whether intentional or unintentional, elicits a feeling of instability that mirrors the external chaos and apocalyptic sentiment of the Depression as well as Roth's own internal confusion, collapse and shifting ideological position in 1933. However, the lack of coherence or unity at the end of the novel appears to have been intentional since it follows the model of *The Waste Land*, a point suggested by the thinly disguised autobiographical character "R" in "Itinerant Ithacan" (1977): "'I mean if [*The Waste Land*] was all coherent,' R fumbled, 'fused together into a whole, it almost would have been contradictory to what he was trying to say'".[1] The same

[1] Henry Roth, *Shifting Landscape*, ed. by Mario Materassi (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1987), p. 211.

applies to *Call It Sleep* which ends with a loss of identity, paralysis, and narrative "truncation" that can only be elucidated with the help of the author's retrospective self-analysis.[2] In fact, Roth candidly invites us to examine his past (or rather his interpretation of that past) in order to increase our understanding of *Call It Sleep:* in doing so Roth provides his own guide to *Call It Sleep*, his own Bloomsday Book for a man he described as "Jewlysses".

> The characters in the novel have a cohesion of their own, but to really understand them you have to go through the characters and back to the author to find out what was motivating him and disturbing him.[3]

In this chapter I will attempt to reveal some of the motivating factors in his life for the short circuiting at the end of *Call It Sleep* by going "back to the author" as Roth himself suggested, using his numerous interviews and later work as a means of locating these "disturbances". What one discovers in Roth's interviews and work collected in *Shifting Landscape* is a fascinating correspondence between the triangular or oedipal relationships in *Call It Sleep* and Roth's "ménage à trois" with Eda Lou Walton at the time. However, a perfect correspondence is impossible since we're dealing with fiction and the words of a "fictioneer".[4] The fact that Roth encourages us to look into his past suggests that he did exactly that himself; in other words, his proposal to find out "what motivated him" and "disturbed him" is a useful description of his own artistic process after 1933.[5] In *Shifting Landscape*, Roth can be seen continually returning to this period of blocking and creative "immobilization", reworking previous motifs from *Call It Sleep* in order to locate or create what he described as a "private continuum"[6]--which seems to mean a way of beginning to write again. However, "the private continuum" is an elliptical idea; on one hand, Roth stresses that the "private continuum" is a way of

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[2] Like Eliot, who elucidated the publication of *The Waste Land* with a lengthy commentary on obscure references, Roth has illuminated many aspects of his novel through his autobiographical commentary.
[3] David Bronsen, "A Conversation with Henry Roth", *Criticism Magazine*, 23, No. 2 (1981), p. 268.
[4] Ibid., p. 279.
[5] Roth's use of the third person pronoun ("him" as opposed to "me") to describe the author of *Call It Sleep* illustrates the way he fictionalizes and objectifies his self in order to facilitate analysis and discussion.
[6] Roth, *Shifting Landscape*, p. 107.

"going forward" artistically, but on the other hand, his creative development or progress appears to have been possible only by returning to the point in the past where identity, inspiration, meaning, and continuity were lost or destroyed. In 1934, Roth's shifting polarization--from sexual/spiritual in *Call It Sleep* to sexual/political in "If We Had Bacon"--may have paralysed him, destroying his creative drive. But it wasn't polarization in particular which prevented him from writing since polarity, the creative manifestation of polarization, is evident in the structure of *Call It Sleep* and in his later work. Thus polarization is both a motivating and destructive force for Roth. This contradiction is confusing but not inexplicable. Roth simply had to wait for a productive polarity, or in other words till his sexual/political polarization shifted, which it finally did (for various reasons) in the 60s when he found and developed a new polarity of the ghetto Jew and Zionist, the "dead author"[7] and the living one, and the past and present that pervades *Shifting Landscape*. It is only between these two poles that Roth has been able to write productively, and it is interesting that this need for polarity has led to a literary style that hovers between fiction and non-fiction.

THE BREAKING POINT AND DISCONTINUITY: A CASE AGAINST THE INTERPRETATION OF *CALL IT SLEEP*'S ENDING AS A "POSITIVE ACT" OR "UNIFICATION"

In order to understand Roth's work after *Call It Sleep* it is necessary to locate (as Roth does himself) the exact point of his artistic "disruption" and to examine the various reasons for the author's "immobilization". The initial point of paralysis can be located at the end of *Call It Sleep*, though Roth's complete "immobilization" didn't occur until after the publication of "Many Mansions" in 1940. All of the stories or excerpts which Roth managed to produce between 1934 and 1940--"If We Had Bacon" (1936), "Broker" (1939), "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple" (1940) and "Many Mansions" (1940)[8]--document a prolonged period of collapse and are pervaded with imagery of withdrawal and paralysis; they attempt with limited success to deal with the "terrible

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[7] Bronsen, "A Conversation with Henry Roth", p. 268.
[8] Roth also has a number of diaries from 1938-40 which still exist but are unpublished. However, they were used as a source and reference for his autobiographical novel, *Mercy of a Rude Stream*.

truncation", "loss of identity" or "trauma" which Roth experienced while writing *Call It Sleep*.

Roth's failure to bring David to adolescence is not simply a premonition of his own breakdown but its first symptom. His very inability to complete his Bildungsroman as intended suggests the disunity of the novel rather than unity, the fracturing of the author's point of view rather than a unifying and coherent perspective. In an interview with Roth, Bonnie Lyons attempts to present her case for an optimistic reading of *Call It Sleep*'s conclusion which she interprets as unified and coherent. However, Roth clearly rejects this idea, especially Lyons's "positive act" thesis. When Lyons presents her interpretation of David's electrification as a "positive act"--"doesn't David transform that destructive act into a positive act?"--Roth clearly renounces this simplification.

> He's applying it, but I don't know just in what sense he applies it. The first time he's a victim of a destructive force, then he uses it. [...] The meaning it has for the novelist is a short circuit.[9]

Lyons wants to suggest that the vision is a positive part of David's development. However, Roth contradicts Lyons's reading of *Call It Sleep* by asserting that the electrification scene signifies both the "short circuit" of the novelist and the destruction of the youth.

> At the time I thought this was a beautiful symbol of power destroying--what? The child was symbolically destroyed although he lived on. Something was destroyed in him, I don't know exactly what--perhaps his flights of fancy, the artist in him, perhaps it was childhood.[10]

Unlike Lyons, Roth is unable to reduce the "act" to a single meaning and suggests the likelihood of several possible interpretations of the novel's conclusion: the end of childhood, the death of the artist, and the destruction of the youth by the corrupt forces of the external environment. Thus Roth uses metaphors of paralysis or short circuiting in *Call It Sleep* (and *Shifting Landscape*) to symbolize a complex web of personal traumas or shocks. For

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[9] Bonnie Lyons, *Henry Roth: The Man and His Work* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1976), p. 170.
[10] Ibid., p. 170.

example, he associates David's literal shock with his own trauma of "alienation" at the age of 8, when his family moved to Harlem.

> I was alienated--to use that old hack of a word--and my novel became a picture in metaphors of what had happened to me.[11]

Hence Lyons's "positive act" interpretation disintegrates when Roth describes his "alienation" as the source of David's "loss of identity". Roth continued to examine this problem of "loss of identity" even in his most recent works such as "The Eternal Plebeian and Other Matters" (1977), a fact which illustrates that his "lost" or fractured identity was still in the process of being recovered or recreated years after the publication of *Call It Sleep*. In the following citation from an interview, Roth states much more forcefully what he said politely to Lyons:

> the writer does his best work when that work stems from a strong sense of identity. In order for that sense of identity to remain strong, the writer--or anybody--must feel he belongs: he belongs to a people, to a milieu, to a country. [...] When my family moved from that Jewish mini-state on the East Side to Harlem among the Irish and Italians, where I made many good friends, that point marked the beginning of the end of my sense of belonging, and with it my sense of identity. After that, except at home, all speaking, and of course all writing, was in English and it became almost inevitable that *Call It Sleep*, based on a lost identity, would be all the novel I could genuinely write--all the creating I could do from that sense of identity--because at the point where my novel ends, I no longer belonged. In fact, the apocalyptic end of the novel may very well depict what the author unconsciously felt: in the novel the child lives on, but his identity seems to have no future. The same thing it would also appear was true of the novelist: he lived on, but his identity disintegrated.[12]

In other words, a breakdown of identity resulted in the cessation of Roth's literary productivity, and the first manifestation of his loss of identity can be seen in the conclusion of *Call It Sleep*.

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[11] David Bronsen, "A Coversation with Henry Roth", p. 267.
[12] Roth, *Shifting Landscape*, p. 298-99.

Lyons raises the question of unification[13] in *Call It Sleep* when she presses Roth for a reading of David's "vision" as a positive, unifying act, to which Roth replies:

> It is not the way a true unification is attained. By a slow laborious development one gets there, but not all at once in mortal splendour.[14]

Roth's inability to complete his Bildungsroman by taking the hero past his eighth year "by a slow laborious development" to adolescence is directly linked to his own private shock, alienation, and failure to attain literary and personal maturity. Like David's evanescent "triumph" at the end of the novel which is followed by his withdrawal from the world, Roth's triumph of having been able to write at all is undermined by his ensuing paralysis.

> The sense of triumph he feels in the end was that he made the attempt, even thought it is a failure. Everybody goes back to his mundane and sordid and squalid life.[15]

This description applies to David as well as to Roth. One feels that neither David's quest for unification nor his desire for purification is completely successful; in other words the forces of corruption in the external world appear to be too great for both hero and writer. Roth's interest in this theme of the individual struggling against "the degenerative forces of society" is evident in his early work such as his essay on "Lynn Riggs and the Individual" (1930) and in later stories like "At Times in Flight", where the horse (symbolic of the writer) stumbles when the race "became real", breaks a leg, and is put down. Roth remarked that the story symbolizes the "death of the artist", or in other words the end of his flights of fancy. Thus, Roth may have found a new medium in the short story parable to describe the writer's "subjection" to the "corrupt forms of

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[13] The traditional reading of *Call It Sleep*'s ending as a kind of unification was probably initiated by Walter Allen's introduction to *Call It Sleep* in the 1963 edition, and it has significantly influenced the critical reception of the novel ever since. Allen wrote that, "[k]nocked out by the electric shock that results, as [David] comes round he has a vision that unifies his fragmented world and, in a sense, reconciles him to his experience of that world. In a mysterious way, the world becomes a whole". I disagree altogether with this reading, which separates my interpretation of *Call It Sleep* entirely from that of previous critics.

[14] Lyons, *Henry Roth: The Man and His Work*, p. 171.

[15] Ibid., p. 171.

existence",[16] but this theme which attracted him to Lynn Riggs's plays runs throughout his entire work.

LYNN RIGGS'S INFLUENCE ON ROTH

Lynn Riggs was Henry Roth's personal friend and literary mentor. It is neither surprising that Riggs's work had a major influence on Roth, nor a coincidence that Roth's only critical essay, "Lynn Riggs and the Individual" (1930), was written a year after he started writing *Call It Sleep*. Roth's essay on Riggs's plays highlights his own artistic concerns at the time and also clarifies the development of *Call It Sleep*'s conclusion. Strangely enough, no other critic has discussed the literary connection between Roth and Riggs, especially Riggs's influence on *Call It Sleep*.

The two plays by Riggs which Roth used as structural and stylistic models are *Big Lake* (1927) and *A Lantern to See By* (1928). Roth discovered a useful and highly symbolic dramatic structure in *Big Lake*, whose acts titled "The Woods", "The Cellar", and "The Lake" resemble *Call It Sleep*'s "The Cellar", "The Picture", "The Coal", and "The Rail". In addition to the symbolic structure, Roth was also drawn to the tragic theme of the play.

> The tragedy of *Big Lake* is simple and intensely moving. It lies in the destruction of the two children, who represent innocence and purity.[17]

The disrupted or truncated transition from adolescence to adulthood in *Big Lake* seems to have been an important thematic source for Roth's novel. Both Riggs's play and *Call It Sleep* deal with the powerful undercurrents of sexuality that threaten to corrupt the purity and innocence of their pre-pubescent or adolescent characters; in fact the scene in *Big Lake* where the teacher suspects Lloyd and Betty of sneaking off "like animals" to have illicit sex in the woods closely resembles David's sexual initiation by Annie in the closet.[18] This idea of the "corrupt forms of existence that destroy the life of the youth",[19] to use Roth's own words, links *Big Lake* to *A Lantern to See By*. In *Big Lake*, the children are the

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[16] Roth, *Shifting Landscape*, p. 13, also p. 284.
[17] Ibid., p 14.
[18] Notice the significance of Annie's last name, Mink, in *Call It Sleep*.
[19] Roth, *Shifting Landscape*, p. 14.

innocent victims of the teacher and police, but in *A Lantern to See By*, this resolution is reversed since the adult world, namely Jodie's father, is punished for his abuse of his son. In this blatantly oedipal play, Jodie despises his father, who, like Albert Schearl, complains about his son's silence and intimacy with his mother.

> An' here's Jodie. His Maw named him. He's quiet, he don't say much. He ain't got no tongue fer speaking. I wonder what goes on in his head sometimes.[20]

Like David, Jodie hates his father so much that he wants to kill him, and the idea of his mother's pregnancy makes him furious. Although David's mother does not get pregnant, Bertha, whom Roth described in his interview with Lyons as an abstracted side of his mother, is pregnant at the end of *Call It Sleep*. Thus, the final scene of the novel, where both Bertha and Genya are hit by Albert, can be interpreted as Roth's means of working out his resentment towards his mother due to the birth of his sister, Rose. The fact that Rose was born when Roth was two is interesting since David Schearl is approximately two when the first shock (of emigration) occurs in the novel. Roth admitted that he was extremely jealous of Rose,[21] and thus Bertha's pregnancy as well as Yussie and Annie's relationship, tinged with its latent antagonism, can be seen as a distanced portrayal of Roth's own feelings towards his sister.[22] However, unlike David in *Call It Sleep*, Jodie manages to transfer his affection to another woman, Annie (note the use of the name in *Call It Sleep*), and summons the courage to kill his father with a pinch bar, an act of liberation which Riggs describes with an image of light that is remarkably similar to David's description of the liberating potential of light.

> I'm glad I done it. It's better that a-way. My mind ud got dim. It didn't light my way so's I knowed whur I uz going. It's brighter now--a little brighter.[23]

David doesn't quite reach Jodie's level of violence (or maturity) which explains the reason for the feeling that *Call It Sleep* is an odd fusion of Riggs's two plays. Roth combines the sense of loss and

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[20] Lynn Riggs, *A Lantern to See By*, in *Sump'n Like Wings and A Lantern to See By* (New York: Samuel French, 1928), p. 134.
[21] Lyons, *Henry Roth: The Man and His Work*, p. 159.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Riggs, *A Lantern to See By*, p. 184-5.

corruption in *Big Lake*, symbolized by the death of the sexually innocent children on the lake, with the oedipal conflict of *A Lantern to See By*, namely Jodie's hatred of his father, attraction to his mother and jealousy of his potential sibling. The major interest in Riggs's plays for Roth was the tragic conflict between the innocent desires of youth and the external pressures which destroy or corrupt the young people, or as Roth puts it, "the meeting of youth with existence". He describes the solutions of the two plays as "counterparts", since *Big Lake* illustrates Willie's "retreat and acknowledgement of the inevitable incompleteness of such a retreat" and Jodie's assertion in *A Lantern to See By* represents the "destruction of the embodiment of the subjugating force, his father".[24] Thus Roth seems to have merged these two tragic threads from Riggs's plays, which resulted in the polarity of "triumph" and "acquiescence" at the end of *Call It Sleep*, a paradoxical or unresolved conclusion which Roth himself described as "triumph in failure".

So far I have argued that the conclusion of *Call It Sleep* illustrates David's loss of identity rather than a "positive act" or unifying tendency, and that this "breakdown in identity", shared by both hero and author, led to Roth's "breakdown in creative productivity".[25] In addition, I have suggested that the "truncation" and lack of cohesion at the end of the novel was respectively influenced by and modelled on T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, with evidence of additional structural, thematic and stylistic influences on Roth by Lynn Riggs's plays. At this stage, it is necessary to analyze the development of *Call It Sleep* on a more biographical basis, as Roth himself suggests, in order to understand what "disturbed" and "motivated" the author to write *Call It Sleep*.

ROTH'S PERSONAL SHOCK AND INABILITY TO MATURE

David's gradual shifting of resentment from Albert to Genya in *Call It Sleep* can be explained by a similar shifting of resentment on Roth's part towards his mother in 1914. It was due specifically to Mrs Roth that Henry was uprooted from the protective environment of the Lower East Side since she wanted to be closer to her relatives who had recently settled in Harlem.

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[24] Roth, *Shifting Landscape*, p.15.
[25] Ibid., p. 261.

> We lived in Ninth Street till I was eight years old, and then in the summer of 1914 we moved to Harlem. My mother's parents, along with several uncles and aunts, were brought over just before the outbreak of the First World War and settled...in Harlem. My mother wanted to be near her parents, which accounted for our moving there too. The move turned out to be crucial for me. [...]
> ...[Harlem] was a mixture of Irish, Italians and Jews, and a rough mixture. I was taken from a neighborhood that had been home for me and put in a highly hostile environment. That produced a shock from which I have perhaps never recovered.[26]

This "shock" resulted in Roth's "retreat into himself", "rejection of the Jewish faith and customs", and feeling of "alienation" in a violent Harlem which is expressed metaphorically by David's electrification and literally by Roth's inability to write about his adolescence in Harlem.[27] It is interesting that ***Mercy of a Rude Stream***, Roth's unpublished second novel, not only starts exactly where ***Call It Sleep*** left off, with the move to Harlem in 1914, but also deals with Roth's still unresolved resentment towards his mother for instigating this move.

> [***Mercy of a Rude Stream***] begins with removal from the East Side in 1914 to Harlem, where my folks moved. My mother in particular. There again there's kind of a difference of attitude toward her. We moved to Harlem because her kin had come over from the other side and settled in Harlem, and she wanted to be near them. So that's where the second...that's where the novel begins, 1914.[28]

Roth was eight when he was taken to Harlem and twenty-two when he finally left his parents' house in 1928. In that same year, Roth moved into the Greenwich Village apartment of Eda Lou Walton, an English lecturer at New York University twelve years his senior; he later described Walton's role in their relationship as "both a mistress and mother", which illustrates his divided needs at the time.[29] On one hand, this move freed Roth, enabling him to write objectively about the tense conditions in his parent's home, but on the other hand, it placed him in yet another triangular relationship--between Walton and Lester Winter. In the following year, 1929, Roth began to

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[26] Bronsen, "A Conversation with Henry Roth", p. 266.
[27] Ibid., p. 266.
[28] Steinberg, "An Interview with Henry Roth". See Appendix I.
[29] Roth, ***Shifting Landscape***, p. 295.

write *Call It Sleep*, and it could easily be suggested that his departure from the Lower East Side in 1914 and from his mother and Harlem in 1928 seem to be fused in the apocalyptic ending of the novel, thus hazily merging the fear of losing the communal security of the Lower East Side with the fear of his emotional break from his mother. Roth candidly admits that this need for a surrogate mother is proof of his immaturity at the time, and that this immaturity was a major reason for the "truncation" of his artistic career.

> In *Call It Sleep*, I stuck with the child, so I didn't have to mature. And I was being supported by Eda Lou, so I didn't have to mature. I think I just failed at maturity, at adulthood.[30]

Roth's "inability to do David's adolescence" in his second failed attempt at a novel after *Call It Sleep* is only one symptom of his creative and psychological paralysis. It wasn't until his separation from Eda Lou Walton in 1939, accompanied by his meeting of Muriel Parker and relationship with her, that Roth actually began to write again. Although his block may have had political and artistic causes, it was the rejection of "Walton's maternal solicitude" and Parker's "acceptance" of his "maturity" that enabled his further, albeit brief, artistic development from 1938-40.[31] However, the word "development" is perhaps too emphatic since Roth's work in this period merely confirms the final collapse of the artist which began in 1933.

TRIANGULAR RELATIONSHIPS IN *CALL IT SLEEP* AND ROTH'S MÉNAGE À TROIS WITH EDA LOU WALTON AND LESTER WINTER

When one examines the period of *Call It Sleep*'s completion (1932-33) in relation to Roth's relationship with Walton, a number of interesting parallels can be seen between his personal situation and David's at the end of *Call It Sleep*. The most interesting similarity between David and Roth is their attempt to come to terms with their mothers' overwhelming but unfulfilled sexuality and their fathers' violence and impotence, a conflict which concludes fictionally with David's "pity" for his father and conscious distancing from the suffocating and regressive attachment to his mother. The fact that Roth had not completely freed himself from this "maternal solicitude"

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[30] Lyons, *Henry Roth: The Man and His Work*, p. 162.
[31] Ibid.

is evident not only in David's eventual return home, where his mother soothes his physical pain and encourages him to suppress his pain into sleep--"And then you'll go to sleep and forget it all"--but also on a personal level by Roth's mere transference of this oedipal situation at home to a new "ménage à trois" with Eda Lou Walton and Lester Winter, his best friend at the time. This "ménage à trois", as Roth calls it, is portrayed most evidently in the scene at the end of the novel between David, Leo, and Esther in the cellar of Bertha's apartment: the letters "L" and "E" correspond perfectly to "Lester" and "Eda Lou", and the conflation of Leo and Esther is "Lest(h)er". Roth's later treatment of this "ménage à trois" in "Itinerant Ithacan" confirms his position as the voyeuristic third party like David in the scene above, as well as his interest at the time in the *The Waste Land*, whose influence is evident in Roth's description of the junkyard in Chapter 21 of *Call It Sleep*.

Leo Dugovka, David's Polish friend, is similar in several ways to Lester Winter, the person responsible for introducing Roth to Eda Lou Walton. Like David, who was impressed by Leo's freedom and independence, Roth was impressed by Lester's literary and creative maturity, and although Lester was not a gentile like Leo, Roth explains in "Itinerant Ithacan", how he thought Lester was a gentile when they first met. In "Itinerant Ithacan", Roth simultaneously discusses his "ménage à trois" with Lester and Eda Lou and documents his artistic development prior to *Call It Sleep*, which suggests the importance of this relationship and its influence on his novel. The incestuous aspects of stealing or winning one's best friend's older, maternal lover is worked out on several levels in *Call It Sleep*: a) in the closet scene with Yussie's sister, Annie, an older girl whose sexual game frightens David, who runs out of the closet screaming for his mother; b) in the relationship between Genya and Albert, which makes him jealous and angry; and c) in the relationship between Leo and David's cousin Esther which disgusts David and makes him feel guilty. Roth's usurpation of Lester's position as Eda Lou's lover strikes me as very similar to both David's usurpation of Yussie's place as Annie's substitute brother and playmate in the closet scene, and to David's displacement of his father at the beginning of the novel; in addition, this latter displacement is reversed not only in the novel when Albert retains his position as Genya's lover and "number one man", but also when

Roth's position as Eda Lou's lover is taken by David Mandel. Ironically, David Mandel was responsible for the publication of *Call It Sleep* and received the first instalment of Roth's money for the publication of "If We Had Bacon". Thus David Mandel's sudden arrival on the scene occurs at a crucial point both in Roth's creative and in his emotional life, and his intrusion played an underestimated role in the disruption of Roth's narrative and suspension of his literary career.

Roth learned about Eda Lou's affair with David Mandel in 1932 while writing the last third of *Call It Sleep*. Although Roth plays down the emotional effect of this news in his interview with Lyons, his displacement by another man and loss of Eda Lou not only inspired him to finish the novel but also served as the catalyst for *Call It Sleep*'s narrative disruption and Roth's "loss of identity".

> I remember that in 1932, when I was living in Maine and was almost 2/3 of the way through with *Call It Sleep*, Eda Lou wrote and said that she had met this interesting man in New York. I remember writing back that if she had finally found an adult who would take care of her, she ought to go ahead and marry him. I *thought* I was being very self-abnegating. But actually what I was doing was blindly trying to rescue myself. I was near to finishing the novel--it was the time to turn me loose, on my own, to experience the world around me. ...But...I didn't have the character to turn myself loose.[32]

Thus Roth's unsuccessful attempt to free himself from his mother in 1928 recurs once again in 1932 when he desires to "turn [himself] loose" from his dependence on the dominant and maternal Eda Lou Walton. However, in both cases he was only able to find a maternal substitute rather than a wife or lover: he later remarked that he felt like the "adopted son" of the woman who owned the farmhouse where he stayed and finished *Call It Sleep* in Maine, thus revealing a desire to return to a peaceful home and to his mother similar to David's return at the end of the novel.[33] It is clear that Roth was intensely divided between his love for his mother and Eda Lou in 1932, and the terrible trauma of the relationship corresponds to the

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[32] Ibid., p. 165-66.

[33] Roth also remarked that when he went to Maine "I was consciously trying to get away from a terrific failure, a terrific frustration", a phrase which is similar to the one used in *Call It Sleep* to describe David's electrification and withdrawal.

"terrible trauma" of writing *Call It Sleep*, especially the last scenes in which Roth's anger at Eda Lou--and his mother--is grafted onto the emotional landscape of the novel.

ROTH AND THE COMMUNIST PARTY

The year, 1932-33, marks a period of crisis and disruption in Roth's relationship with Walton and it is understandable that the narrative structure of *Call It Sleep* was fractured or lost its continuity when he heard about Eda Lou's relationship with David Mandel. However, Roth failed to extricate himself from this "ménage à trois" for quite some time since he lived with Eda Lou Walton for the next six years while she carried on her relationship with David Mandel. Roth's inability to finish "If We Had Bacon" and to write the sequel to *Call It Sleep* is evidence of the damaging effect of this relationship on his creativity. However, this was not the only manifestation of Roth's loss "of identity" and "point of view". This period which marks the completion and publication of *Call It Sleep* (1932-33) also marks the politicisation of the author in one of the worst years of the Depression. Roth's numerous "theories" or reflections on the creative affliction of writers in the Thirties provide an interesting historical analysis of his own personal dilemma.

> One author after another, whether he was Gentile or Jew, stopped writing, became repetitive, ran out of anything new to say or just plain died artistically. ...They became barren.[34]

Roth names Daniel Fuchs, James Farrell, Steinbeck, Dahlberg, Hart Crane, Léonie Adams, and Nathanael West as prominent writers who experienced success in the late 20s and significant or complete stagnation in the 30s. Anzia Yezierska could be added to the list of writers affected by this "blight".[35] Even Mike Gold, the ardent socialist and extremely productive journalist who published his successful autobiography *Jews Without Money* in 1930, was unable to complete a sequel to this autobiography or to finish other creative work until the end of the 30s. Nevertheless, despite Roth's "theories" about the external causes of his artistic demise, his own personal problems were the primary cause of the "breaking of the

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[34] Roth, *Shifting Landscape*, p. 76.
[35] Ibid., p. xiv.

creative psyche of the author" which he also referred to as the struggle with his "polarized self", i.e. when his "intellectual judgement and [his] sensuous orientation where at odds with each other".

> The very narrative he was engaged in writing, with wholesome stalwart proletarian as hero, became sicklied over with eroticism, veered toward pornography. Jesus. He had a vested interest in the sordid, the squalid, the depraved. He became immobilized.[36]

Thus Roth's attempt to write the proletarian novel, which resulted in the first hundred pages of "If We Had Bacon", was stifled by his personal confusion or divided impulses towards a "perverse" sexuality and this new adherence to Communist ideology--a dichotomy of purpose and character which led him to characterise himself as "[a] Party stalwart in letter, a satyr in proclivity".[37] Roth commented that "joining the Communist Party meant that I became a sort of inhibited or enforced Puritan you might say",[38] which suggests that the rigidity of the Party's prescribed literary form, the proletarian novel, imposed a kind of sexual censorship on Roth, cut off any outlet in that direction, and by doing so, created an internal conflict or "opposition" which stifled him. In addition, he became a member of the Communist Party as a way of escaping from his deteriorating relationship with Eda Lou, and a pattern of personal trauma followed by escape and shifting commitment or loyalty can be seen throughout Roth's life: a) in 1914, shocked and intimidated by his new Harlem environment, he abandons Judaism for atheism; b) in 1928, his escape from his home in Harlem results in the creative development of the artist; c) in 1932, he isolates himself from Eda Lou in order to finish *Call It Sleep*, but the experience is "traumatic" and abruptly disrupted by his knowledge of the affair between Walton and Mandel; d) in 1933, he becomes a Communist Party member in order to compensate for his guilty conscience--being supported by Walton during the Depression--and to replace the communal sense of the Lower East Side with a new

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[36] Ibid., p. 188. Roth uses the past tense here to refer to the "dead author" who wrote *Call It Sleep*.
[37] Ibid., p. 169.
[38] Steinberg, "An Interview with Henry Roth". See Appendix I.

political ideology.[39] Thus membership in the Communist Party was an unsuccessful attempt by Roth to "redeem" himself and to reintegrate himself into the world he had isolated himself from in order to write his novel. He was unable to make "the transition" from isolation to integration, from one world to another, until he found a way to identify with that world. This reintegration was only fully accomplished after the Arab-Israeli war in 1967, when he found a cause in Israel which united him politically and symbolically to the Jewish mini-state of his past, the Lower East Side; thus one might say that his decision to become a biology teacher, precision metal grinder, psychiatric assistant, and waterfowl farmer illustrates how he had actually become a proletarian after his creative demise in order to live out the life of the worker which he had tried unsuccessfully to write about in the 1930s.

Roth's early attempt to make the transition from Jewish to Communist author was a failure, but a close analysis of the surviving first chapter of "If We Had Bacon", shows that Roth was still writing indirectly about his personal experience and concerns which were rooted in his life in the Lower East Side. Roth commented that "If We Had Bacon" was a way of starting from scratch after the "terrible trauma" of writing *Call It Sleep*, but a close analysis of the chapter reveals a striking similarity between the main protagonist of *Call It Sleep* and author of "If We Had Bacon" since Roth, like the David who returns to the ghetto at the end of the novel, although newly politicized and reunited with a group could not make the transition to the American literary world.[40] In addition, "If We Had Bacon" may be a result of Roth's rejection of Judaism (although he rejected Judaism in 1914 and that didn't prevent him from finishing *Call It Sleep*), or of a Jewish theme, as he claims to Lyons. Even so, he failed to free himself of the motif of paralysis and shock that ties this excerpt thematically to *Call It Sleep*. The German milieu of the projected proletarian

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[39] Later, Roth isolated himself from his previous role as a writer by moving his family to Maine, and then after the 1967 war his ideology shifted from "assimilationist" to "pro-Israeli", and even considered moving to Israel.

[40] Roth also remarks in an interview with Lyons, that, "Had I gone on after *Call It Sleep* to write about the transition of the youth into the world of American literature, into the literary, intellectual world, I might have made the transition", *Henry Roth: The Man and His Work*, p. 162.

novel enabled Roth to use a Yiddish-English dialect reminiscent of that in *Call It Sleep*, and the relationship between Walter and Dan Loem is very similar to that between Albert and David Schearl. It seems that one of the main reasons for Roth's inability complete this novel, aside from the ideological conflict which occurred when he received his first large advance,[41] is that he could not rehash the Schearl story from a Marxist perspective. It is possible that "If We Had Bacon" could have been a successful sequel to *Call It Sleep* if Roth had chosen the title "If We Had Had Bacon" and placed it in the milieu of Harlem (rather than Cincinnati) which he knew so well. However, Roth's "premature politicisation" seems to have created a "dichotomy of purpose", or in other words confusion, which disrupted his creativity. It could also be claimed that Roth's premature success in 1934 was too problematic for the artistically and personally immature author, which suggests that his politicisation was a kind of escape from the life of the isolated, guilty, bourgeois, and sexually confused author who yearned for solidarity with a "folk" similar to the Lower East Side folk he had been taken from in 1914.

Roth's Communist Party membership was not only one of the major causes of his writing block but also proof of his polarization. As Roth says, he tried to write a proletarian novel of David's adolescence which was influenced by "the Party line", i.e. the second part of what the critics predicted as a "growing trilogy". Although Roth set out to write the story of Dan Loem, he was unable to get past the description of Walter Loem, whose sexual impotence remind one of Albert Schearl. Coincidentally, Roth also used the name of another Old Testament hero, this time Daniel, for his main protagonist. One way that Roth attempted to break away from the Lower East Side was through membership in the Communist Party (in which a high percentage of members were Jews from the Lower East Side), and the portrayal of Walter can be interpreted as a wish for a kinder father which is tied to his search for a new, redemptive political ideology. Unlike Albert, Walter loves children, but like David's father he is impotent and cuckolded by his wife, Juno. Although Roth never finished the novel, it is interesting that Bill

[41] Ironically, Roth himself didn't receive the money since David Mandel, his intermediary or agent (so to speak), kept the advance.

Clay, Daniel's model, suffered an injury to his right arm similar to Albert's and a "terrible shock" like David's.

> The man [Bill Clay] was a tough second-generation German American who had been raised on the streets of Cincinnati and relied on his fists and his physical stamina to cope with life. ...I was attracted to him because he always took pride in being able to defend himself, no matter what happened. ...Then suddenly this man who had fought and brawled his way through life lost his right hand in an industrial accident. With that came the terrible shock and realization that he was no longer able to fight the world alone. His personal tragedy and knowledge that he would have to turn to others for help were terrifying blows that hit him at the depth of the Depression and changed his whole outlook on life.[42]

This description of Bill Clay's "terrible shock" can be read almost word for word as an account of Roth's own emotional and artistic "shock" at the time. The fact that Roth never reached the actual point in the narrative where Dan has the accident is unimportant; that Roth chose a figure who becomes paralysed, shocked, and immobilized was significant enough for the author who must unconsciously have recognized the representation of his own dilemma in Bill Clay's life. Bill or Daniel's loss of his right hand, like Albert's injury to his right arm and the wounding and paralysis of David's leg, are metaphors for Roth's own fear of desuetude or creative paralysis. This assertion is supported by Roth's use of the same description of the paralysed arm to describe his inability to write after 1940.

> In 1940 I began suffering from a continuous pain in my elbow, so I gave up writing the journal that is now one of the few valuable possessions from the past.[43]

Either Roth's story was prophetic of his own paralysis five years later, or the continuous pain in his right elbow was the psychosomatic symptom of a writing block--the physical manifestation of Roth's own metaphor. Like Bill during the Depression, Roth himself became immobilized in the process of writing the novel in the mid-Thirties, and the fact that he got stuck when he went back to write the Prologue is very relevant to Roth's later work, especially "The Dun Dakotas".

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[42] Roth, *Shifting Landscape*, p. 22.
[43] Ibid., p. 92

"The Dun Dakotas" (1960) represents the "reawakening" of the writer as Mario Materassi remarks, but it also shows the need to go back to the point in the past where the writer became blocked in order to be able to proceed as an artist. Roth recognizes in this story that he is responsible for his own regeneration, or in other words for getting himself "unstuck". Coincidentally, Roth introduces the term "private continuum" for the first time, and the appearance of the term illustrates that the author at least has a critical theory or foundation for his regeneration. "The Dun Dakotas" can be read as a metaphor for this very process of restoring the "private continuum"; it starts in the first-person present, in the form of autobiography, and moves into a fictionalized story written in the past tense. Roth simultaneously introduces the personal conflicts of the author which influenced him to write the story, and then fictionalizes or allegorizes the conflict in order to resolve it. The title, "The Dun Dakotas", is in fact a pun on the unfinished prologue which was never "Done", since Roth, like the chief in the later story, got caught in a dream which carried on for over thirty years. The story, he said,

> as I originally intended it, was to be a realistic encounter between a band of Indians and surveyors for a railroad. ...But since it became a block, for me, in the course of time it moved out of the realistic realm and became a symbolic block that I had to go through, somehow or other--I had to get by, I had to get past. ...it became a symbol--and the symbol, these two characters facing each other, in which I suddenly became the petrified figure, the immobilized figure, waiting for an answer. And all I was trying to say was that I felt somehow or other, for a moment here, at least I passed *that* stage. I don't know what the hell the answer is. I mean, the chief at last lets me through--that's really what it amounts to. Now who this chief is, or what he represents, I really don't know. It's a subconscious barrier of some kind which has lasted all those years.[44]

Several interesting details in the intended prologue for the proletarian novel and in "The Dun Dakotas" suggest that both the Indian chief and the "immobilized" surveyor are symbolic of Roth: the chief represents Roth's older self, the reawakening writer who had been isolated in Maine for 24 years; the petrified figure or surveyor symbolizes the author of the novel whose gets shocked and

[44] Ibid., p. 111-12.

stunned like David at the railroad tracks. Roth's unfinished prologue about railway surveyors in the mid-west was an abortive effort to connect David's crisis at the railway tracks with Roth's own exploration of Communism and the life of Bill Clay in Cincinnati. The chief who had turned into stone or into legend, waiting for a man to decide what was history in "The Dun Dakotas", is analogous to Roth in 1960, who chooses to resurface artistically and to play the game which it involves (symbolized by the poker game). The reissuing of *Call It Sleep* in 1960 and the money Roth received for it was the result of pure chance; both Roth and the chief seem to have played their cards right. Roth was finally able to extricate himself from the wasteland and immobilization, which is achieved when the now "Great" chief (like the now famous author) allows the surveyors to continue on their way--to "Go on". It is an image of the author "sanctioning" his own rebirth and reinitiating his suspended literary exploration of a new landscape or literary form. However, the resurfacing of Roth's name in 1956, the reprinting of *Call It Sleep* in 1960, and his literary success in 1964 when the paperback issue of *Call It Sleep* became a best-seller must have played an equally important role in the regeneration of the artist. In this respect, the surveyors "commissioned to do a topographic study" in "The Dun Dakotas" (previously surveyors for the railroad in the prologue) can be interpreted as Roth's depiction of the critics who rediscovered the author and encouraged his renewed literary activity; they bring the chief and the writer the money which he wins by chance, but only the author can sanction or reject his renewed role as writer.

THE COLLAPSE OF THE ARTIST: METAPHORS OF CREATIVE BLOCK AND PARALYSIS

Before I look at the metaphors of paralysis and block, reawakening and regeneration, in Roth's later work (1956-present), a brief analysis of the stories he wrote between 1938-40 will reveal his acceptance or acknowledgement of breakdown and creative "desuetude". "Broker" (1939) is a story whose title itself implies going past the breaking point, and the story was written in the West Coast where Roth went "to break my tremendous dependence on Walton".[45] The black man in the story (most likely travelling from

[45] Ibid., p. 52.

Harlem) gets stuck at the top of a hill while driving south in Manhattan with his mason's and plasterer's equipment. This idea of getting stuck and breaking down is clearly analogous to Roth's near breakdown at the time, and it also suggests a realization of the author's inability to return to Eda Lou in Greenwich Village or to the Lower East Side. Like the protagonist of the story, Roth was doing street work for the WPA at the time.

> The following year [1939, Muriel Parker and I] were married, but the only livelihood we had came from the WPA and relief. They had me working with pick and shovel laying pipes as well as repairing and maintaining streets.[46]

Roth's near collapse coincides with his final separation from Eda Lou, and the imagery of the train tracks in the story links "Broker" to the electrification scene in *Call It Sleep*, which I have discussed as a metaphor for Roth's traumatic shock due primarily to David Mandel's affair with Eda Lou.

> What had happened was obvious at a glance. The truck had been going downtown and the driver, evidently unaware that the rising ground was bringing his rather lofty load closer and closer to the Elevated roadbed, had continued driving under the Elevated, until, here at the very crest of the hill, load and Elevated had met.[47]

The driver, like Roth, was unable to see the sign which would have helped him to avoid getting stuck and experiencing collapse, but the reason for the accident is clear to the narrator whose position in the story as a mere observer enables him to describe the scene objectively. Thus narrative distance or objectivity is achieved in this story by allegorizing the personal trauma, fictionalizing it, and analyzing it from the vantage point of the present.[48] The story symbolizes the collapse of Roth himself who could no longer control his own creative vehicle, a creative breakdown which began with his proletarian novel. The policeman who carried David home after his accident in *Call It Sleep* returns as a callous and dogmatic figure of authority, symbolic of the political censoring of the artist which Roth experienced when the Communist Party ironically banned *Call It*

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[46] Ibid., p. 62.
[47] Ibid., p. 53.
[48] This narrative technique is similar to that which Roth picks up and develops in the Sixties and Seventies.

Sleep before realizing that the author was a party member. The image of trauma at the railway tracks--evident in *Call It Sleep* and indirectly in the prologue of the proletarian novel--is repeated here as well as in "Petey and Yotsee and Mario", where the autobiographical figure almost drowns off of the 130th Street dock "a few blocks north of the New York Central and New Haven station; the trestle of the railroad crossed the river only a short distance from where we swam".[49]

Roth's next story, "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple" (1940), illustrates the author's frustration due to the loss of his creative or imaginative medium. The boy is moved from his home in the Lower East Side to Harlem, where he is unable to read the *Purple Fairy Book* that he discovered and read avidly in the ghetto. The hero, a projection of the author who couldn't mature, dislikes fiction because it deals with adults--Roth's novel stopped before David's adulthood--and doesn't like adventure stories since they all have to do "with dollars and cents"--the author of the unfinished proletarian novel is speaking here. Roth analyzes this story as the result of the loss of Judaism as the "framework" for his writing, but it would be more accurate to say that it represents the subjection of youth to the violent reality of a new world which is unable to provide him with protection or escape through fairy tales. This inspiring fairy tale element, which was a vital part of *Call It Sleep*, is now beyond the grasp or service of the writer. In addition, "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple" supports my argument concerning the fracturing of *Call It Sleep*, since both elements of the child's literary tastes are symptoms of the author's inability to mature and of his desire to escape from reality. Coincidentally, escape is the theme of Roth's next and last story for sixteen years, "Many Mansions" (1940).

"Many Mansions" supports the interpretation that the fantasy world is better than the real world, and that the potential exploration of the latter was too frightening for the author. The story tells about a child who memorizes the names and addresses of the rich inhabitants of Fifth Avenue but who rejects a senator's offer to let him see the interior of the house, an opportunity which the child has dreamed of often. The fairy tale element is evident again since the senator is said to resemble "a character in the

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[49] Ibid., p. 93.

Arabian Nights", his cane is reminiscent of a wand or sword, the wood in his house comes from Sherwood forest, and the decorations inside include statues of lions with rings in their noses. The narrator's explanation why the ten year old "collector of mansions" flees from the senator illustrates a conflict between the author's imagination which inspires creativity, and the real world (especially one involving success, fame, and money) which threatens to destroy it.

> The prospect of beholding in reality all that I had read in the newspapers and all that I had conjured up out of daydream and music seemed suddenly too much for me. ...The nearer I drew to magnificence, the dark bronze carriage gates, the heavily curtained windows, the massive masonry of the lower walls, the less I wanted to enter. I felt as if there was something I already possessed that I might lose if I entered.[50]

However, the boy's flight from the senator, which occurs when the old man turns to enter his home, also represents the author's fear of paralysis, since inside he might experience the "[s]hadowy, seemingly hushed, rigorous" atmosphere which he associated with "Grant's Tomb or the Egyptian room in the museum", where dead heroes or petrified mummies lay in tomblike silence.[51] The idea of immobilization is further expressed when the narrator remarks that,

> I felt as if, were I to go in, I might be decreed to stay just where I was too, and nowhere else, like one of those bronze pickaninnies with the beaded lamps.[52]

The boy's flight represents paralysis in another form, since although he attempts to escape from the senator the latter is suspended or immobilized in the narrator's memory: "The last thing I heard the senator say was: 'I haven't said that in seventy years'".[53] The narrator, now an older man, also wonders what he hasn't said in the intervening years of silence, and it this respect he is like the suspended senator when he remarks: "I have often wondered since what else the senator said that he might not have said in seventy years".[54] Although Roth discounted the story as "fluff", it does illustrate his paralysis and flight from literature at the time. It's

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[50] Ibid., p. 72.
[51] Ibid., p. 73.
[52] Ibid., p. 73.
[53] Ibid., p. 73.
[54] Ibid., p. 73.

interesting that this story is modelled on one of Roth's friend, Gus, who gave up his dream to become a mechanical engineer and took up dentistry since he could "set up his own conditions", or in other words work unhindered as a Jew; like Gus who "seemed stunned" that eight years of hard work had gone "down the drain",[55] Roth too had become stunned: and approximately eight years had passed since writing *Call It Sleep*. Here, as in "The Dun Dakotas", the older man and youth represent two irreconcilable sides of the author.

RESOLUTION OF ROTH'S CREATIVE PARALYSIS THROUGH AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION, 1956-1991

An interesting correspondence can be seen between the public resurfacing of *Call It Sleep* and Roth's regeneration as a writer. Although Roth's first fictional work since "Many Mansions", "Petey and Yotsee and Mario" (July 14, 1956), was written before Alfred Kazin and Leslie Fiedler helped to refocus the public's attention on *Call It Sleep* in the autumn of 1956,[56] it seems likely that Roth was aware of their efforts to revive his novel when he wrote this story in the Summer of 1956. Even if he wasn't, the article seems to have spurred Roth to write "At Times in Flight", which appeared in 1959. Subsequently, the reprinting of *Call It Sleep* in 1960 was answered by Roth's symbolic decision to "[g]o on" as a writer in "The Dun Dakotas", which was written and published in 1960. Thus the rebirth of the text helped to stimulate the full regeneration of the writer. Following the highly successful paperback edition of *Call It Sleep* in 1963, Roth's indirect desire to reinvestigate the life of the ghetto and Judaism is illustrated by his plan to write a play and a novel about Marranos which eventually resulted in the story "The Surveyor" (1966)--where Roth meets a Police inspector, Señor Ortega, the descendant of a Marrano family in Sevilla--preparing him indirectly for a reunification with Judaism. Roth's greatest stimulus to continue writing occurred in 1967 when the Israelis emerged as victors in the Arab-Israeli war, a result which transformed Roth from an "assimilationist" to "pro-Israeli" and influenced the author to reinvestigate his break with Judaism in 1914-15. From 1967 on, Roth's work could be described as the search for a literary

[55] Ibid., p. 74.
[56] Ibid., p. 97. The story wasn't published until 1986 in the Italian magazine *L'Ombra*. Fiedler and Kazin's article appeared in *The American Scholar*, Autumn 1956.

approach which would help him to come to terms with his two periods of literary productivity and the silent years between.

"Petey and Yotsee and Mario" illustrates the moment when Roth became "unstuck". It can be read as a parable of the author's surfacing or emergence from years of silence and depression, and as the final discarding or shifting of a victimized perspective. The story, written in the first person, relates a real incident in Roth's life, when he was saved by three boys from drowning off the 130th street dock. The three gentile boys, the description of the East River just north of the railroad station and junkyard, and the wave from the tugboat which almost drowns the narrator are all reminiscent of characters and motifs in *Call It Sleep*. But the difference is that here the boys are not anti-Semitic, and more importantly, the narrator doesn't feel victimized by them. Roth appears to have been resurfacing not only from a tremendous depression at the time, but also as a Jew who had submerged his Jewish identity many years before due to the anti-Semitism he experienced in Harlem. Despite the boy's fear that his mother's token of appreciation would not be accepted by the gentile boys since it was "Jewish cake", his mother implies that he (perhaps like the author of *Call It Sleep*) may have been an inadequate judge of their humanity: "What kind of people would they be if they didn't like Jewish cake? Would they have even saved you?"[57]

Roth's next story, "At Times in Flight", explores another aspect of "shock" and paralysis, somewhat different from the drowning episode above, and with a new narrative technique that mixes past and present more evenly. Though the story does symbolize the "death of the artist", it is a symbolic death in the past which Roth is able to observe from a distance, to analyze from a new perspective (from "an embankment" rather than as participant) in a scene that is reminiscent of David's electrification in *Call It Sleep*. The horse's leg is broken (David's is injured and scarred) and a crowd gathers around the horse just before it is put down--also similar to the electrification scene except that David survives. Roth writes about the race incident at Saratoga Springs in 1938 on two narrative levels: the past tense and parable form enable him to analyze his failure to mature as an artist; the present tense shows

[57] Ibid., p. 96.

a man who is choosing a new path in life, which is illustrated when he walks away from the track guided by Martha (alias Muriel Parker), a woman with "a better sense of direction" than the narrator (and whom Roth later marries). It seems that Roth's decision to leave Walton for Parker in 1938 was a sacrifice of his literary career for the sake of a family. Unlike the author of ***Call It Sleep*** in 1933, Roth is now willing and ready to accept marriage and the prospect of a family, to become a mature adult which was impossible in his relationship with Walton.

> Except that ["At Times in Flight"] also implies that in the death of the art there is the beginning of the acceptance of the necessity to live in a normal fashion, subject to all of the demands and all the exigencies and vicissitudes that life will bring.[58]

In other words, Roth had to mature before he could write again and that took a good sixteen years.

Roth's use of autobiographical details and first-person narrative resulted in a new structure in his work where present experiences and feelings explain or elucidate events in the past, or vice versa. For example, in "At Times in Flight" the loading of the horse's carcass on the truck reminds Roth of a "similar scene on the East Side of long ago--an image from long-vanished childhood of a cop shooting a horse fallen in the snow".[59] The figure of the police inspector appears not only in "At Times in Flight" but also at the end of ***Call It Sleep*** and in stories like "Broker", "The Surveyor", and "Weekends in New York". In the first three stories it is clear that the policeman is a gentile, but in the last two his religion is less defined, and his role is that of the "deus ex machina", the device which resolves the conflict between the drunk and the religious revivalists in "Weekends in New York". In "The Surveyor", Stigman's confrontation with the police inspector of Marrano descent can be interpreted as an encounter with his alter-ego. Stigman is a type of Marrano or crypto-Jew searching for a way of regaining his lost identity.

Although Roth wrote "The Surveyor" in his pre-Zionist phase, before his pro-Israeli pieces like "Final Dwarf" and "No Longer at Home", he seems to be in the process of preparing himself for this

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[58] Ibid., p. 105.
[59] Ibid., p. 103-4.

ideological transition: Roth considered writing a play and a novel about Marranos, and this story documents his reinvestigation of Judaism through the discussion of the crypto-Jew phenomenon. Roth's fascination with the crypto-Jew is not surprising since it symbolizes his own conflict between Marxism and Catholicism in 1933. "The notion of the crypto-Jew, caught, as it were, at the center of a struggle between zealous Catholicism and equally zealous Aztec paganism (read Marxism) fascinated me".[60] The main character's name, Stigman, reflects Roth's own stigma of being a Jew, a fact which bothered him intensely when his family moved to Harlem. A stigma is literally a scar left by a hot iron, and although this meaning is archaic it lies at the root of the present meaning, a mark of shame or discredit. The story, "The Surveyor", describes how Stigman and his wife travel to Sevilla and rent surveyor's equipment in order to locate the exact spot of the quemadero and to lay a wreath there for the victims of the Spanish Inquisition. The name, Stigman, combined with his search for the location of the quemadero seems to be a metaphor for the narrator's own search for his moment of paralysis, the moment described in *Call It Sleep* when David was scarred and burned by the iron rail which Roth explained as a metaphor of his reaction to the anti-Semitic environment of Harlem. Roth was Stigman all along, a man who felt the stigma of being a Jew, a stigma which he overcomes gradually in "Petey and Yotsee and Mario" and "The Surveyor". Although the story does show traces of Roth's attraction to Christianity (more fully worked out in "The Wrong Place"), it is only a fleeting attraction that ends in his attempt to find a way into Judaism.

Stigman locates the spot of the quemadero in a flower bed beneath the statue of El Cid, the 12th century Spanish knight who returns from exile to reconquer the Iberian peninsula after more than three centuries of Arab dominance; like El Cid, Stigman heroically searches for the symbolic reconquest of this land which had persecuted the Jews and was still ruled by a dictator. Ironically, when Stigman finds the spot he also encounters a policeman, and then a police inspector whose understanding and knowledge of Stigman's enterprise surprise the latter. Stigman learns that the police inspector was probably the descendant of a

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[60] Ibid., p. 172.

Marrano family. Thus Stigman encounters his alter ego in the inspector, a man living in his own country but with an assumed or disguised religion. The inspector then offers (like Virgil in Dante's *Inferno*) to lead Stigman and his wife through the "Barrio" of Santa Cruz, which is the old Jewish ghetto adjacent to the mosque: the mosque represents a period of greater toleration of Jews in the peninsula and the golden age of Sephardic literature, religion, and science. Although Stigman fails to replace the wreath on the spot of the quemadero, he is able to free himself from his own dilemma, to walk out of the "Barrio" or ghetto without the help of the Marrano inspector. The fact that he forgets the wreath in the police station suggests that Roth's artistic death and his self-pity have finally come to an end. Roth's comment on his desire to write a play about "four Spanish prisoners, one of them a Marrano, in a cage being fattened for sacrifice", which was eventually transformed into this story was:

> It is interesting enough that I have to recapitulate, and finally arrive at little more than adolescence, at the same time as I reach old age.[61]

Luckily, Roth did recapitulate and find his way "back to Judaism", which helped him to start anew, with the regained confidence to "concoct the story". Roth's renewed faith in his creative ability is symbolized at the end of "The Surveyor" by the weather-vane, "La Fe" or "Faith" which "stood on her high pinnacle above the Cathedral, pointing at every wind with her palm branch of triumph".[62] In 1966, Roth's faith in his artistic ability had fully returned.

It is interesting that Roth's first story after the Arab-Israeli war marks a shift in the name of his hero from Stigman in "The Surveyor" (1966) to Kestrel (a European hawk) in "Final Dwarf" (1969), which shows not only the physical shrinking of the father but also the growing conservatism of the son. Roth later admitted that the story depicted the "shrinking of the liberal", or of the stigmatized Jew who is transformed from Stigman, the liberal dove, to the pro-Israeli Kestrel.

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[61] Ibid., p. 151-2.
[62] Ibid., p. 151.

> I had the need for [Jews] to be warriors; I had the need for us to be peasants and farmers. ...
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> If there is anything dramatic about this, I suppose it can be explained as the way a fictioneer does things. Significant for me is that after his vast detour, the once-Orthodox Jewish boy has returned to his own Jewishness. I have reattached myself to part of what I had rejected in 1914. Even before the Israeli-Arab war I was beginning to feel that there might be some path that would lead me back to myself, although I realized there was no returning to the Jews of the East Side of more than a half century ago.[63]

Through the "mini-state" of Israel Roth rediscovers and (as only a "fictioneer" or god can do) revives the "dead author of the past" who lived in and described the "mini-state" of the Lower East Side. Roth links himself back to his original Jewish community since only the identification with a community could help him to rediscover his "lost identity".[64] Thus Roth's perspective shifts from the victimized "albatross of myself" to the ardent supporter of Israel in the figure of the hawk. In a way, "Final Dwarf" also illustrates Roth's end of exile in Maine, where the story takes place, since it was in this year that he gave up his waterfowl business and began to write seriously again, which entailed an examination of this period of exile in pieces such as "No Longer at Home" (1971), "Prolog im Himmel" (1973), "Squib" (1975), "Kaddish" (1977), "Itinerant Ithacan" (1977), "Vale Atque Ave" (1977), "Segments" (1979), and "The Wrong Place" (1978).

Roth's writing in the Seventies (1971-78) could be described as a search for continuity or, in his own words, for a "private continuum". In order to create this "private continuum" Roth needed to re-identify himself with a people and in doing so to resurrect a new, symbolic home. In "No Longer at Home", his "amorphous, ambiguous, at once mystical and soiled, at once unbridled, inquisitive, shrinking" self, the party stalwart and author of *Call It Sleep*, begins to create a new identity, to find a new polarity, and to erect a new home for the man and child who was "No Longer at Home".

> I'll tell you though, I have now adopted one, out of need, a symbolic home, one where symbols can lodge, whatever it is in actuality, whatever waverings and residual reservations I may have: *Israel*.[65]

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[63] Ibid., p. 175.
[64] Bronsen, "A Conversation with Henry Roth", p. 279.
[65] Roth, *Shifting Landscape*, p. 170.

Ironically, Roth's new political stance and activity stimulated him and gave him the continuity that was destroyed when he attempted to write the proletarian novel as a "detached" author in the Thirties. The 1967 war enabled Roth to experience a "new reunion with folk", the kind of unification that was impossible for him in 1933 since it is now "*his*" folk, and the emphasis must be on the word Jewish. Thus, similar to Yezierska, Roth makes a full return back to his milieu: the Jewish folk and their mini-state.

"Prolog im Himmel", a piece of writing "that defies definition", illustrates Roth's reworking of the proletarian novel's prologue (which was discussed in "The Dun Dakotas" and "The Surveyor") as well as his fervent search for a "continuum", or in other words a narrative approach. Unlike the narrators of his earlier stories written in the first-person, the narrator of "Prolog im Himmel" clearly distances himself from his subject at the beginning, and the hero is now neither Stigman nor Kestrel but simply "R". Roth calls this piece an "awareness" which was part of his "continuum journal" at the time: "These 'awarenesses' were reminiscences and observations about my surroundings".[66] It is interesting how Roth transforms his work from a journal or diary into a somewhat less autobiographical story, as if he were commenting on a commentary on himself.

> I had written a pile of them, notebooks about a foot high [until 1976]. Then about a year and a half ago, I began to write something that was a continuity, also in the past, and with this I became more and more curious.[67]

Roth is using the same disrupted narrative form and stream of consciousness style that he used at the end of *Call It Sleep*, but now he develops the technique, intermingling past and present, which helps to emphasize the autobiographical material's influence on the fictional result. It's a style he has referred to as a mixed bag and which seems to have suited him well since it helped him to produce the "endless" (over a thousand pages and still going) second autobiographical novel, *Mercy of a Rude Stream*. Roth's description of his literary form in this latter work easily applies to all of his work since the beginning of the Seventies.

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[66] Ibid., p. 182.
[67] Ibid., p. 182.

> Well, it's not quite autobiographical. I take all kinds of liberties with it, novelistically. I use it as a base. And I return to it from time to time as autobiography, but I leave it again. So it's a kind of mixed bag, if you wish.[68]

Roth's "Itinerant Ithacan" sustains the narrative tension of these two forms best since it develops the division between the author's past and present, polarizing the problem in order to resolve it and thus find a way forward--i.e. to continue writing. Roth's use of autobiographical material in "Itinerant Ithacan" as well as ***Mercy of a Rude Stream*** is what he calls "an attempt to recreate the actual course of the individual out of the ghetto and into the more real world in which he finds himself", but this requires going back to this point of departure in order to reassert his new stance by comparing it to the old.

> I've used autobiography...but the purpose of it is to make the spare stance from my ghetto attitude and my previous ghetto conditioning, to the cosmopolitan world that I entered but couldn't handle, to put it that way, in fiction. But I had to force myself to learn how.[69]

"Segments", "The Wrong Place", "Nature's First Green", and "The Prisoners" all show Roth going forward in fiction, writing about adult problems and showing his own tenacious attempt to come to terms with his past: his early adult relationships, his shifting ideology, success followed by obscurity, and his exile in Maine (illustrated in "The Prisoners") where he was waiting like a prisoner "for Harold Ribalow to come and dig him out".[70] Roth's breakthrough, aided by his shorter work, came with his extended autobiographical novel which starts at the Harlem adolescence of the youth in 1914 and should bring us to the reemergence or regeneration of Roth as a writer. That Roth used journals from 1938-40, the only work he saved from this period, to give some objectivity or authenticity to the work shows him returning to that traumatic period of truncation (when he gave up writing in 1940) in order to start writing again. Thus the autobiographical details and texts help Roth to establish the extremely important sense of

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[68] Steinberg, "An Interview with Henry Roth". See Appendix I.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Roth, ***Shifting Landscape***, p. 98. Ribalow went to Maine to tell Roth "that in a year or so the copyright [on ***Call It Sleep***] was going to expire".

continuity. In the process, he has managed to get very far indeed, to make the transition which he failed to make in the Thirties, "to bridge that particular gap", to find "his lost identity", and to recreate or regenerate his self through a productive ideology and narrative polarity. Once the "dam broke" in 1985, when Roth began ***Mercy of a Rude Stream***, everything that had been stored up for the past fifty odd years simply began "pouring over". Roth's final maturity can be seen as an "almost fierce negation of the individual who fathered ***Call It Sleep***", as a rejection of his detachment and autonomy in the Thirties, and as a creation of a coherent narrative structure that unites, compares and analyzes two eras, the period of shock and withdrawal and that of his artistic regeneration and retrospective development. Roth provides a wonderful description of this new narrative form, which he calls "suborning autobiography to my whim".[71]

CONCLUSION

Henry Roth did become a kind of "Jewlysses", a word he used jokingly to describe himself. The pun expresses the idea that Roth's odyssey, which began when his parents took him from the Lower East Side in 1914, eventually ends like Odysseus's with a return home after many detours. Roth's literary career made a circular route from successful novelist to proletarian author, literary obscurity in the woods of Maine, and back to productive author again. Although Roth may have been a victim of the "organized demands of society" like Riggs's characters, and may have suffered from his immaturity, ideological confusion or "dichotomy of purpose", he did manage to find a way of achieving "reunification on a new basis". Israel provided Roth with an example of a people reborn, "*his* people--regenerated by their own will".[72] Roth had been seeking regeneration since he had read ***Ash Wednesday***, and like the author of the poem Roth's ideological turn-around from "assimilationist" to "pro-Israel" was a way of saving coherence, of extricating himself from a kind of wasteland or creative blight. Renewal is at the heart of Roth's later writing, but in order to achieve this renewal the individual who had "lost identity, lost faith,

[71] Ibid., p. 182.
[72] Ibid., p. 189.

lost certainty, lost bearings" had to find his artistic confidence.[73] Through Israel, Roth discovered the confidence he had lost and managed to overcome this stigma or feeling of persecution which began when he moved to Harlem and which resulted in his Communist Party membership and exile in Maine. Roth remarked that "[t]he gestation period of an individual's rebirth is of indeterminate duration".[74] However, this rebirth cannot occur without faith in the possibility of regeneration, which Roth outlined in ***Call It Sleep*** when David regains consciousness after his electrification. Roth commented that Joyce never "awoke", never reconciled himself with his own history and excesses.[75] Roth, however, did awaken and is reconciling himself with his own excesses by fusing autobiography and fiction: the former provides a means for repudiating his self, and the latter a medium for doing so objectively and analytically. Roth managed to find his "private continuum" but in order to go forward, to write, to maintain continuity, he had to start where he had left off--namely at David's adolescence. In ***Shifting Landscape***, Roth quotes another crypto-Jew, Heine, from memory, "Ich hatte einst ein schönes Vaterland. Es war ein Traum".[76] In Roth's "Vaterland", the Lower East Side, the people spoke a dialect of Heine's "Muttersprache", and this community provided Roth with the rich "sources of [his] being" which reside in childhood memories. The paradox is that although these sources provide a means of identity they haunt the author whose "only peace" comes by "forgetting myself".[77] Roth may finally have forgotten himself in order to overcome his paralysis, "trauma", immobilization. or "writing block" but in order to forget himself he first had to remember. Roth, it seems, has been able to remember, to rework, and to write again. That too must seem like a dream.

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[73] Ibid., p. xiv.
[74] Ibid., p. 176.
[75] Ibid., p. 258.
[76] Ibid., p. 235.
[71] Ibid., p. 261.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have tried to show that Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, and Henry Roth's autobiographical narratives are both thematically and stylistically related to their earlier fictional work. Although all three writers experienced a breakdown in identity which led to a breakdown in creative productivity, they all managed to regenerate themselves as writers after a period of artistic silence or blocking. Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth all used highly fictionalized forms of autobiography to create their own personal literary continuums, or in other words to find a means of linking their present writing and experience coherently to that of their past. Cahan put an end to nine years of silence after the ***The Rise of David Levinsky*** with the publication in 1926 of the first three volumes of his autobiography, ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben***; Yezierska's "blocking" set in after the publication of ***All I Could Never Be*** in 1932, and lasted until 1950, when she published her autobiography, ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse***; and Roth managed to overcome almost thirty years of "creative desuetude" and "short circuiting" when the republication of ***Call It Sleep*** in the 60s gave him the necessary impetus to give up water-fowl farming in order to write seriously again.

What unites the writing experience of these three first-generation, Jewish-American writers is not only the fact that they managed to regenerate themselves as writers through highly fictionalized autobiographical narratives, but also that each writer's literary rebirth was accompanied by the desire for reconciliation--or "reunification" on a "new basis", as Roth puts it--with their Jewish identity. In the first two volumes of ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben***, Cahan attempts to recreate his childhood and youth in the Old World through his highly nostalgic and sentimental narrative, and he reverts to Yiddish, his mother tongue, as the means to narrate his life; Yezierska not only returned to the Lower East Side Jewish ghetto which she had left in order to become a writer, but also sought for a "reconciliation" with her "Jewishness", which she described as something she "had been tempted to hide" in her pursuit of fame and success; and Roth, managed to achieve a "reunification" with his Jewish past after the emergence of the state of Israel, which gave him the sense of "security" and "belonging"

that had been lost when his parents moved from the Lower East Side ghetto to Harlem in 1914.

What has become clear during the course of this study is that all of Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth's work--be it fiction or autobiography--has a very strong autobiographical foundation. The reason for the similar pattern in their writing can be explained, to a large extent, by their shared literary, cultural, and historical experience as first-generation Jewish-Americans who lived or grew up in New York's Lower East Side ghetto and wrote about their experiences as immigrants in English. Although the degree to which Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth fused autobiographical details and fiction in their novels and autobiographies varies according to the writer, their writing constantly alternated between two autobiographical genres.

The idea of the "personal" or "private continuum", which I have defined as the writer's attempt to create some continuity between his or her earlier fictional and later autobiographical work, is best illustrated by a comment by Roth. In an interview with Diane Levenberg in 1987, Roth describes the effect of the republication of ***Call It Sleep*** in 1960 on his identity as a writer, which provides a potent metaphor for the idea of the "private continuum". He remarked that:

> when my novel [***Call It Sleep***] re-appeared in hardcover in the early '60s, and I gave up the water-fowl business, I found no better place for storing my haphazard writings than in the numerous draws of the incubator (***where late the sweet birds sang***, says Shakespeare). All of which struck a fellow writer who happened to be visiting us as very funny. What a rare fancy that was, he exclaimed, to incubate one's ideas in a genuine incubator.[1]

Roth's "haphazard writings" included "notes of a journal kept during the period 1937-39", as well as "three journals of the late thirties" which he decided he "couldn't burn" since he "valued them too much". It is these journals which he used both as a starting point and literary basis for his second unpublished novel, ***Mercy of a Rude Stream***. Thus, the idea of keeping these journals in an incubator almost fifty years after he wrote them and then using them as a basis for his later work is a perfect example of the way a

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[1] Henry Roth, ***Shifting Landscape***, p. 84.

"private continuum" functions. Like Roth, Cahan and Yezierska also used their autobiographies (in Roth's case, his journals) to bridge the gap between his past and present identities as a writer. Similar to Roth, who described his second unpublished novel, ***Mercy of a Rude Stream***, as a novel inspired by his "desire [for] reconciliation with [his] self and with the necessity of change",[2] Cahan also attempted to achieve a reconciliation with his self as well as a narrative continuity with his past through autobiography. In fact, Cahan went literally back into the world of his past when he travelled to his home town in 1923, a trip which inspired him to write his nostalgic autobiography. Cahan's self-portrayal in ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben*** can be seen as continuous with the main protagonists of his novels since like Pavel and Parmet in ***The White Terror and the Red***, Cahan portrays himself as a Russian revolutionary, and like David's first-person autobiographical narrative in ***The Rise of David Levinsky***, Cahan's autobiography expresses his feelings of spiritual emptiness, personal failure, and marginality despite his fame and success. Thus the nostalgic and melancholic narrative tone of ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben*** links it directly to ***The Rise of David Levinsky***.

Like Cahan, Yezierska's autobiographical heroines and self-portrait in ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse*** overlap, as I have shown in Chapters Four and Five. The clearest image of Yezierska's "personal continuum" is the way she makes a direct reference to the title of her last novel, ***All I Could Never Be***, at the end of her autobiography, where she manipulates her final novel's skeptical title into an assertion of self-confidence and faith: "all I could ever be [...] was in myself". Thus like Cahan and Roth, Yezierska used autobiography to achieve a reconciliation with her former self. Roth commented that his language in ***Mercy of a Rude Stream*** is of a man, "trying desperately to see himself anew, to compare his present self with his past"; Yezierska and Cahan use autobiography to see themselves "anew", but to varying degrees of success. Yezierska's autobiography is her major achievement, but Cahan's is not as convincing as he would like it to be. Nevertheless, both ***Red Ribbon on a White Horse*** and ***Bleter Fun Mein Leben*** give us much greater insight into both Yezierska and Cahan's work and their personalities.

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[2] Ibid., p. 260.

In conclusion, Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth's dialectical self-analysis never ceased even though their writing had come to a premature standstill. When they finally began to write again, their "private continuums" became "personal continuums" since they were no longer completely private but instead available to the reading public.

There are many directions a further study of first-generation Jewish-American writers could go from here. But, first, it is important to point out that there is still a need for careful readings of important texts such as Roth's ***Call It Sleep*** or Cahan's ***The Rise of David Levinsky***. Only last month, in the October 10, 1991 edition of ***The New York Review of Books***, Alfred Kazin published an article on ***Call It Sleep*** which contains many minor textual errors as well as a major misinterpretation of the novel. Due to the fact that ***Call It Sleep*** has a history of misreading and misinterpretation by critics, I decided to write a letter to the editors of ***The New York Review of Books***, which I have included in Appendix II.

Unlike Cahan and Yezierska's work, my study of Roth's work can not be considered complete since his second novel, ***Mercy of a Rude Stream***, will be published after his death. It would be very interesting to study ***Mercy of a Rude Stream*** to see how it might support or contradict my arguments in this thesis. Another avenue which could be explored as a continuation of this dissertation, is a study of second- and third-generation, Jewish-American writers whose writing experience resembled Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth's. I am referring to writers such as Edward Dahlberg, Ben Hecht, Meyer Levin, Philip Roth, Arthur Miller, and Saul Bellow, who have written both fiction and autobiographies and whose writing may be better understood within the context of their Jewishness. In addition, a close analysis of the connection between their fiction and autobiographical narratives would--as it has for the texts studied in this dissertation--most likely lead to new readings of individual novels as well as a better understanding of each writer's work.

APPENDIX I

AN INTERVIEW WITH HENRY ROTH. NOVEMBER 25, 1989

Steinberg: Before I start asking you questions I would like to tell you how much I've enjoyed reading *Call It Sleep* and *Shifting Landscape*. *Call It Sleep* is one of the most moving and sincere novels I've ever read. Also, I'd like to thank you for taking this time to answer my questions.

To give you a brief outline of my questions, my main interest is in your thoughts about fiction and autobiography, and I would like to discuss with you the ideas of redemption, return and prophecy in relation to your fictional and non-fictional work.

So my first question is: Much, if not all of your work after 1934 is not only autobiographical but also attempts to clarify what happened to you during this period of crisis and silence. Would you say that you have found a way back to yourself through both your work after *Call It Sleep* and your autobiography?

Roth: Yeah, it took quite a long period as you know. Almost fifty years, I guess. It didn't seem as if I would ever make it. I think I was seventy-three years old, let's see, seventy-nine. And you've probably also read, William Targ, who was once chief editor at Putnam and husband of my agent, asked me to write a little sketch for him for a book he was publishing, and I did. Well to make a long story short, it began stirring things up. At that point I asked if I could send him things, and he agreed. And with that, all this pent-up expression finally found expression exactly. From there on I gained momentum, I suppose you'd call it. And I was able to go on, on my own. I've been going ever since, at tremendous lengths. In other words, the dam was down and everything was pouring over.

Steinberg: So your autobiography is quite long?

Roth: Oh, it's endless.

Steinberg: You have used terms such as "fracturing", "discontinuity", "repudiation of the self" and "loss of identity" to describe both the act of writing *Call It Sleep* and your inability to continue writing after *Call It Sleep*'s publication in 1934. Did you find that autobiography gave you the opportunity to reverse this process of fracturing or discontinuity, or in other words to help you find a kind of continuity with the past?

Roth: Yeah, that's a ... I felt all the time that nobody had done what was necessary to do; not that I thought I could do it, but it was something that I always wanted very much to do. And that is: build some kind of bridge between that sharp break of the thirties with a new outlook, a new attitude that arose after the war, after World War II. In other words, we seemed, at least to me--I was not so highly read and all that, I don't have time--that there was a sharp cut-off between the attitudes, the ethos, of one period and those that came into being at another. And nobody was able to bridge that particular gap. And that's why ... I mean, in a sense

that ... well, let me put it this way, nobody's bridged it. The one who went furthest in it was practically off his pulley as far as I'm concerned, and that was Joyce, who ended up in a blind alley there. The question of having to revaluate one's whole past, to revaluate one's whole attitude, it was necessary, in short, to try to use one's head; it was necessary to, you might say, create a ... well, an intellectuality (can't think of the word) of a number of concepts for oneself which we call an ideology. With that you create an ideology for oneself to which one adhered to. In other words, that seemed the next stage for anybody who wanted to go from the period of the Thirties to the period after World War II. You had to drop ... I had to drop what was essentially my impressionism and so forth in favour of achieving some kind of ideology. The ideology that I had was itself a very barren one and destructive as far as I can tell. And that is to say that Marxist, Communist, Stalinist, I had to find a different kind of an ideology. I didn't know I had to do all of this, you know, but apparently that's what took place.

Steinberg: I think you described this ideology once as a polarization, I believe, between Communism and sensuality. In your interview with Bronsen, you described the act of writing *Call It Sleep* as a struggle with your "polarized self" and referred to the ending of *Call It Sleep* as "the breaking of the creative psyche of the author". So how would you describe the process of writing your autobiography? What actually took place in reconstructing this ideology or finding a new one?

Roth: Yes, well what we're dealing with is something that in *Call It Sleep* was really destroyed. It was a question of trying to start almost from scratch. It's true that what I was saying about the sex and the writing and so forth were at odds with each other. Had I been able, I suppose, to proceed along those lines it might have been possible to keep on struggling between sex and writing. But I was not able to. In other words, joining the Communist party meant that I became a sort of inhibited or enforced Puritan, you might say. So there was no longer any outlet in that direction for me; as long as I adhered to Communist ideology--very good. So, in other words, what it seemed to be doing, was to ... I was opposing myself by my Communist-Marxist adherence. Well, it simply lead to something close to, I suppose, close to nervous breakdown, I don't know, I didn't go through one. But it certainly led to this early traumatic cessation of all writing. And then with the beginning, when I began again, it was after I had shed Marxist ideology in favour of a partisanship, you might say, with Israel. I couldn't develop much partisanship for the diaspora, my Jewish people, friends, since I had already repudiated it. But it did seem possible and was. It came very natural for me to make the next step and that was with Israel, uniting my concerns with Israel's concerns. That seemed to give me the necessary stand-point from which I could proceed.

Steinberg: So this brings in the idea of redemption. In *Call It Sleep*, redemption and return are suggested, in my opinion, by the potential unity of the Schearl family through repentance, forgiveness and David's return home at the end of the novel. Are the ideas of redemption and return major themes of your autobiography?

Roth: Well it isn't return, and it isn't redemption. These two things both take on kind of a religious overtone, don't they? They have a

religious resonance. Neither case though is applied. I couldn't return. But what it meant to me first of all, was that it was possible to go forward. In other words, that there was a future. But what stopped I think me and a whole lot of other guys was that we no longer had a sense of future because as far as our allegiances were ... our allegiances were with the Communists, that was a consolidation. It wasn't going ahead any further. It became fixed, monolithic, etc. That left us--guys like me--little room to go ahead.

There was one [question], too, about redemption. What comes nearer to a modern idea or kind of a concept--although I agree I've had it in the past, I may have had the idea of redemption--but what comes nearer is some kind of rehabilitation or regeneration, if you wish. I guess that still can stay outside of religious bounds to some extent. But that's what it amounted to for me. I had to ... I didn't feel I had to ... well, if you wish all right redeem, but it's a religious... I thought that if I was ever to make it, I had to regenerate, rehabilitate the individual, the man who did the writing. And that was no easy job. I guess that's where all the time went. And that took place primarily thanks to my wife, and thanks to trying to live, you might say in the novel kind of like other people live, and cease being the artist-writer.

Steinberg: How does the autobiography begin? Where have you decided to...

Roth: Well, it's not quite autobiography. I take all kinds of liberties with it, novelistically. I use it as a base. And I return to it from time to time as autobiography but I leave it again. So it's kind of a mixed-bag, if you wish. It begins with removal from the East Side in 1914 to Harlem, where my folks moved. My mother in particular. There again there's kind of a difference of attitude toward her. We moved to Harlem because her kin had come over from the other side and settled in Harlem, and she wanted to be near them. So that's where the second ... that's where the novel begins, 1914.

Steinberg: It's interesting that the Jewish ghetto is, in a sense, the starting point for the autobiographical work that you're telling me about. And it also plays a major role in the fiction and autobiographies of almost all of the writers who grew up in the Jewish ghettos of New York, Boston or Chicago--such as Mary Antin, Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, yourself and Daniel Fuchs to name a few. Why do you think this world of the ghetto has had such a major influence on both the fiction and autobiographies of these two generations of Jewish-American writers?

Roth: Well I imagine that'd be a matter of sources, don't you? That ghetto was a very rich, wide-ranging source, if not the only one of childhood and growing up. And a rich source of primary impressions, you might say. And so we had (to call?) to it.

Steinberg: I have several questions related to Anzia Yezierska which I'd like to ask you because my PhD [dissertation] is on your work as well as Abraham Cahan's and Anzia Yezierska's. First of all, did you know Anzia Yezierska personally?

Roth: No, but I think I got a letter from her. She didn't sign her name.

Steinberg: Are you familiar with her autobiography *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*?

Roth: No, I think the only book I read (you see I don't read an awful lot and I didn't know about her until late) was *To Make My Bread, Make My Bread*, I think. Is that the title?

Steinberg: *Bread Givers*?

Roth: Yeah, OK. That's it.

Steinberg: The reason I ask you is because in an interview conducted on your birthday in 1986 excerpted in *Shifting Landscape*, you mentioned Anzia Yezierska as "a writer, who like Faulkner, went back to her own people since the new cosmopolitan world could not feed them", in your own words. Do you feel that the experience of writing your autobiography was a means of returning to the East Side, a place which you referred to as containing the "very sources which gave rise ... to [your] writing"?

Roth: You mean now? My writing now. I don't go back to the East Side. That's all completely in the past.

Steinberg: I meant through your fiction.

Roth: No, I don't go back to it. My whole point of the thing was to be able to go forward in the same way as I had to as an individual. The thing that I couldn't do was in any way, in any appropriate and satisfying way, reflect or follow that course in fiction. What I actually went through in reality I seemed unable to, you might say, project the reality onto the printed page. In a sense, that I knew what I had gone through, and yet I seemed unable to recreate that fiction. And this is what I'm doing now. How well I'm doing it is not a question. But what I'm trying to do now, and what I suppose is waiting to be done, was to recreate the actual course of the individual out of the ghetto--that's all past now--and into the more real world in which he finds himself. And in which I found myself. And to make that transition: there's a tough job. To make that transition from the parochial ghetto which he knew so well to the cosmopolitan world which was all new to him.

Steinberg: You said that you needed to go forward.

Roth: Yeah that's right.

Steinberg: Did autobiography, or in fusing your work with more autobiographical detail, help you to go forward? What I'm trying to understand is the process of mixing autobiography with a choice of fiction ... or using autobiography to break with the past to find a way of going forward.

Roth: Well I do, yes. I've used the autobiography. What I'm trying to stress is that I've used the autobiographical material, but the purpose of using it is to make that spare stance from my previous ghetto attitude and my previous ghetto conditioning to the

cosmopolitan world that I entered but couldn't handle, to put it that way, in fiction. But I had to force myself to learn how. And it seemed as if learning how depended upon an examination of my own ideology, even those [things] that I wasn't conscious of. In other words, these had to become explicit, much more than they had before if I was to go forward in fiction, creatively, as I actually did in life.

Steinberg: I have just two more questions if that's all right?

Roth: Yeah.

Steinberg: The first one's about prophecy and the second one is about mysticism. Prophecy seems to be a major concern in *Call It Sleep*, especially the book of *Isaiah*. Would you say in retrospect that *Call It Sleep* was prophetic, on one hand, of your own creative silence symbolized by David's introspection and failure to reach adolescence at the end of the novel, and on the other hand, or your ultimate literary rebirth, represented by David's resurrection after his life-threatening electrification?

Roth: Well it would seem as if--many times I marvelled at the fact--that what I thought I was doing at the time, and was doing, was writing a novel which seemed to have a very exciting aspect, and one that helped me in the writing, in the doing as a piece of fiction. But as you suggest in retrospect, I marvelled at the fact how astonishingly it forecast or adumbrated what actually was going to happen to the novelist himself. I never dreamed--that figure of speech, that trope--the figure, the symbol I used in *Call It Sleep* of the shock and the truncation of the writer should have proved to be true of me. In other words, it was I who was short-circuited or subjected myself to it anyway. But to that extent it's a kind of prophecy, without in the least being conscious of it. It's a kind of prophecy made by someone who was not in the least being conscious of its application to his self. It's only made when you look back and say, how could he have found such a metaphor? That was the word I was looking for.

Steinberg: My last question is--and perhaps it needs a little introduction. You've mentioned that several books and poems influenced you very much before you wrote *Call It Sleep*, namely Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Frazer's *Golden Bough*; I was wondering if some sort of Jewish mysticism influenced you as well as these texts? In other words, did you have any knowledge before writing *Call It Sleep* of the *Kabbalah* or any other type of Jewish mysticism?

Roth: All or most of what you've mentioned, what you're saying, has come to me later in years. Because, well later on my wife an I both studied Hebrew. We were five years doing first year Hebrew. Well anyway, the point is, I'd like to return to it and answer your question, is that at a very early age, by the time I was bar mitzvahed, in other words, thirteen, by fourteen I declared myself an atheist. By thirteen I had already separated myself from Judaism in any of its forms you might almost say, mysticism or orthodoxy or any of it, I mean I scoffed at it. And I think that had to do with the fact that, perhaps it was some subconscious revenge against Judaism or my parents in having plucked me out of an environment which was very congenial and in which I seemed to be at home, into

another entirely different environment, a non-Jewish environment, where when we moved in the bulk of the street was Irish and a smaller scattering of Italians. Jews were a handful. We just moved in and my father was always looking to save a dime; I mean in his pathetic perennial childishness, he found a place on 119th street just east of Park Avenue at twelve dollars, I can still remember, twelve dollars a month, cold water flat. And it was such an entirely stark difference in environment and friends that I distanced myself as soon as I could from my past, from my Jewish past.

Steinberg: But prior to distancing yourself, had you had any contact with Jewish mysticism at the *cheder* or through preaching, folk tales or songs?

Roth: With the *Kabbalah*? No. It was something that I needed for the novel itself. So I ... because of that he knew what he wanted, he had to find it. I felt that at this point that's what I needed just as a culture; I felt that it was a necessary part of the structure. Otherwise, it lacked certain elements. So, as far as actual knowledge of mysticism and so forth, in my last year on the East Side when I was eight and a half, I was then supposed to go into beginning what was called chumish, which is to say to begin the actual translating. Up till that time the method of teaching was to learn the alphabet and learn how to read very glibly but without knowing what you read. Unless sometimes you sat next to a kid who already was translating, which is what chumish is. So you could pick up something. That was an old method of teaching. But whatever I picked up was just, by and large, the tiniest smattering. And as far as any depth was concerned into mysticism or *Kabbalah*, that was just completely beyond me. I hadn't approached it.

Steinberg: Once again I'd like to thank you very much for talking to me and I'd like to wish you and your family a happy holiday and a happy new year.

Roth: Thank you (laughs warmly). I hope you had your turkey dinner.

APPENDIX II

A LETTER TO THE EDITORS OF *THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS*

To The Editors:

The reissuing of Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* by the Noonday Press is certainly a welcome event. However, it calls for a long-overdue reexamination of the novel which, judging from Alfred Kazin's article in your last issue, will unfortunately not occur. With all due respect to Alfred Kazin, whose praise of *Call It Sleep* in *The American Scholar* in 1956 (Volume 25. Autumn, 1956, p. 486) was partly responsible for recovering the novel from obscurity, I was surprised to see that his review of *Call It Sleep* was not only inaccurate, but also failed to consider the novel in light of new material. I am referring to the numerous interviews with Roth by David Bronsen, Bonnie Lyons, and William Freedman, the collection of Roth's essays and short stories which appeared in *Shifting Landscape*, and critical works on Roth's fiction such as Bonnie Lyons's *Henry Roth: The Man and His Work*. The result of this failure is a number of minor inaccuracies, and a major misinterpretation.

Kazin calls the Schearl's first-storey tenement apartment in Brownsville "a cave" in which Albert "shut [David] up", an event which never occurs in the novel. He claims that David is "searching for experience beyond his immediate neighbourhood" in the scene where he gets "losted" and is taken to the police station. In fact, David is actually scared to death and running away from the violence and guilt connected to the previous scene where he pushed another boy to the ground.

Finally, Kazin claims that David is beaten up by Albert in a climactic scene at the end of the novel which leads up to David's electrification on the streetcar tracks. Kazin's description of the scene is as follows:

> There is a violent altercation with his father, who is all too willing to believe that David is someone else's son and beats him.

However, the text from the novel (which has been misread by almost all commentators) makes it very clear that Genya rather than David is beaten by Albert.

> And before anyone could move [Albert] had lunged forward at David's mother.
>
> "Ow! Ow! Papa! Don'!"
>
> Those steel fingers closed like a crunching trap on David's shoulders--yanked him out of her hands. And the whip! The whip in the air! And--
>
> "Ow! Ow! Papa! Ow!"
>
> Bit like a brand across her back. Again! Again! and he fell howling to the floor.

The misinterpretation of this scene by Kazin is crucial as it can distort one's reading of the novel, which is what has occurred in Kazin's case. Kazin believes that David "has some slight sense of triumph" at the end of the novel "for he is at last at peace with himself". He adds that "David has won his essential first victory. He is on his way to becoming the artist who will write this book". Does Kazin mean to imply that David has written *Call It Sleep*?

Roth has used terms such as "fracturing", "discontinuity", "repudiation of the self", and "loss of identity" to describe both the conclusion of *Call It Sleep* and his own inability to continue writing after the novel's publication in 1934. He could not have expressed the idea of "lost identity" and "paralysis" more clearly than he did in the novel, which ends with the immense physical shock and wounding of the youth, who, incapable of maturing, withdraws from the world into the comfort of his bed, his dreams, and silence. *Call It Sleep*'s conclusion displays an inability to go on either to adolescence, for David, or creatively, for Roth. Roth has equated David's failure to reach adolescence with his "own failure to mature", which implies (at least retrospectively) that David's withdrawal from the world and silence may have been a foreboding of Roth's own withdrawal and silence--as well as an alarming admission of the immaturity of the author of *Call It Sleep*.

Critics like Kazin who want to consider David's experience as hopeful, unifying or triumphant should look closely at the end of the novel and at the result of David's accident. What has been overlooked is David's silence after the electrification and the internalization of his thoughts. David is now able to tell the crowd at the tracks where he lives; but he still tells lies, is unable to explain his motives, never puts his vision into words, and can't say what it all means. His thoughts and actions are permeated with physical and psychological anguish: he shuts his eyes trying to remember how to awaken; he is aware of the diffuse throbbing pain at his ankle; he wants the neighbours to go away, etc. Even his feeling of "triumph" at the sight of his shrunken, defeated father is followed by his own collapse, crumpling "inertly". The meaning of the experience may be clear to him but it is never articulated and every passing moment makes it more difficult to describe. David knows his father is shaken and repentant and this enables him to suppress his feelings of triumph over and hatred of his father into pity; this act of psychological suppression is analogous to David's attempt to subdue his physical pain by sticking his injured foot under the covers of the bed. His parents are finally united at the end but their unity is a tenuous one which required David's self-sacrifice. Now that this coming together has been initiated, one feels that David's childhood has been sacrificed in order to achieve it. David's "acquiescence" at the conclusion signals the end of his own imaginative creativity which hinged on Albert's violence. As Roth himself remarked, "the form of the novel was broken" and with it "the creative psyche of the author". In an interview which I conducted with Roth in November, 1989, he added that:

> in retrospect, I marvelled at the fact how astonishingly [the end of the novel] forecast or adumbrated what actually was going to happen to the novelist himself. I never dreamed [that] the symbol I used in *Call It Sleep* of the shock and truncation of the writer should have

> proved to be true of me. In other words, it was I who was short-circuited or subjected myself to it anyway.

David is ruptured and injured at the end of *Call It Sleep*, and his foot shows the visible signs of this scarring process. It is in sleep that David can forget about the nightmare of the past, and it is the past that Roth wants to forget. No wonder he later referred to the conclusion as a "foreshadowing of this to come". "This", like "it" in the title and last lines of the novel, is Roth's silence, the end of his productivity, the wall of the past, creative paralysis, things which are too painful to name twice.

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