NOVEL AMBITIONS: FOUR EARLY JEWISH-AMERICAN WRITERS AND THEIR PROFESSIONAL FORMATION

by

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Abstract

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During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, many Jews emerged from the Lower East Side to stake a claim in the field of American letters as novelists, poets, and intellectuals. My dissertation examines the professional development of three of these individuals—Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, and Henry Roth—and asks a question largely overlooked in the field of Jewish-American studies: why would a poor, non-native-speaking immigrant pursue an economically risky career as a writer?

Adapting Pierre Bourdieu's cultural insights, I set aside the romantic paradigms of authorship and try to explore the professional origins of Jewish-American writing by situating it within a nexus of social and cultural relationships. I contend that Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth

were acutely aware of the economic pitfalls that came with being a writer but argue that for each author cultural advancement possessed a "redemptive" potential unavailable simply through economic achievement. Throughout this dissertation I explore the various ways these authors demonstrate their mastery of English in an attempt to distance themselves from the Yiddish-speaking masses and join an elite group of American writers.

I contrast the professional ambitions of these immigrant authors to those of the Anglo-American writer Henry Harland, who, during the 1880s, produced a series of "philo-semitic" novels under the pseudonym Sidney Luska. Not only did these novels claim to provide a window into the Jewish world, Harland selected the name Luska to convince readers that their author was himself a Jew. But, I argue, these books have little to do with Jews; rather, they are borne out of a set of aristocratic cultural and social values that denigrated realism's mimetic codes. The way Harland utilizes Jewish characters to articulate these values is central to my analysis of his literary development.

Ultimately, I contend, each author's career was shaped by social and cultural desires that were so pressing they inevitably made their way into his/her literary work. A

good deal of this dissertation, therefore, is devoted to demonstrating how these early Jewish-American narratives—in their various stylistic and formal manifestations—may be read as allegories that encode the deepest professional concerns of their authors.

Acknowledgments

As a rule, kids from my neighborhood in Brooklyn did not grow up to earn doctorates. But while my life in academia may represent a statistical anomaly, it is the life I have imagined for myself for as long as I have had professional desires. Defying demographic probabilities, however, isn't easy; while I acknowledge my own determination to find a home in the world of teaching and scholarship, my will would have meant nothing if it had not been sustained by the emotional, intellectual, and material support of dozens of individuals. Since this is likely to be the only moment in my career when I will be able to thank many of those who have contributed to my own formation, I take the liberty of doing so.

My parents, Menachem and Colette, deserve first credit. As working-class immigrants, they sacrificed a good deal of wealth, health, and happiness so that I might realize my intellectual and professional potential.

I found my earliest (and, arguably, most important) teachers at Brooklyn College. Professors Martin Elsky, Vera Jiji, Neal Schaeffer, and Joan Larkin all played a critical role in showing me how animate, potent, and enduring words and ideas can be. For their intelligence, patience, and kindness I owe them more than words can convey. I would also like to thank Sarah Church, Pieranna Pieroni, Bill Martin, Nancy Seidler, Marisa Giannini, and Jonathan Abraham—my good friends at Brooklyn College. It's through our debates, conversations, and arguments that I learned that we too had a stake in the life of the mind.

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Erin Henriksen, Greg Malar, Adria Braverman, Stephen Hogg, Don Rottenstreich, and Mitchell Rottenstreich: in his/her own way, each of these dear, dear people helped me stay the course. (I also feel obligated to thank my cat Zuzu whose feline presence had an uncanny way of calming me during the most trying moments in this journey).

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Introduction

It is well that the world only knows a fine piece of work and not also its origins, the conditions under which it came into being; for knowledge of the sources of an artist's inspiration would often confuse readers and shock them, and the excellence of the writing would be no avail.

Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*

It seems fair to speculate why a person living in a market economy would choose to become a writer. After all, the financial risks of the profession more often than not outweigh the rewards. The initial years of a writer's development are especially the most difficult as she competes with peers for the recognition of publishers, editors, critics, and readers. For authors who want to pursue "serious" literature the situation is even more precarious, since they must try to resist the lure of money and popular appeal—the impression that they are "selling out." For this reason, authors who are economic failures are often viewed as the embodiment of artistic integrity, while commercially successful writers are frequently regarded as artistic failures.[1]

[1] For example, the *Voice Literary Supplement* reported that "after more than two decades as the world's premier horror novelist,"

Consider how much more complicated the vocation of writing becomes when aspiring writers emerge from the poorer classes. What would compel them to pursue a profession that seems to defy the ambitions of virtually everyone else in their position: the pursuit of economic advancement and social mobility? The matter becomes considerably more complex when the aspiring writer is a poor immigrant who wants to define herself as an American (that is, Anglophonic) author.

Throughout the period of mass migration that began in the 1880s, however, Jews emerged from the Lower East Side to stake a claim in the field of American letters as novelists, poets, and intellectuals. This dissertation examines three of these writers: Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, and Henry Roth; it also examines the work of Henry Harland, who, writing under the pseudonym Sidney Luska, tried to promote himself as a Jewish writer during the 1880s. I don't pretend to offer an analysis of the more profound and metaphysical questions that seem to be an integral part of the literary vocation: for example, the sense of a "calling" that many writers refer to. Instead, I approach the development of a literary career as the

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Stephen King left his long time publisher, Viking, because it was reluctant to promote him as a serious author (Hand).

manifestation of both complex socio-cultural demands and profound psychological and ontological needs/desires.

There have been few explorations into the broader social and cultural forces that might have shaped the careers of writers like Harland, Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth. While important critics like Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, Ted Solataroff, and Leslie Fiedler have provided some of the strongest readings of Jewish-American writing, their concerns are largely thematic; informed by the hermeneutical outlook of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, these critics were primarily concerned with how Jewish-American writing meditated on issues of society, politics, history, and ethics. More importantly, their critical values and methods had a lasting influence on a subsequent generation of scholars and critics. As a result, Jewish-American studies are still primarily thematic in nature, generally uninterested in exploring the social foundations of the Jewish-American literary career itself.

In the last thirty years, however, a handful of critics, sociologists, and historians, such as Raymond Williams, Robert Darnton, and Roger Chartier, have worked to situate the vocation of writing within a broader social, historical, and economic nexus. No one has been more thorough in this pursuit than the French sociologist Pierre

Bourdieu, who tries to flesh out the unspoken relationship between social structures, the logic of capitalism, and aesthetic values.

In an essay originally published in 1983 titled, "The Field of Cultural Production, or The Economic World Reversed" (FOCP), Bourdieu provides a compelling description of the relationship between artistic and economic values. Bourdieu immediately articulates the problem he sees with traditional literary studies: "There are [...] very few other areas in which the glorification of 'great individuals,' unique creators irreducible to any condition or conditioning, is more common or uncontroversial [...]" (FOCP 30). Bourdieu wants to debunk the deeply entrenched romantic image of the artist as solitary genius; he does so by offering a complex socio-literary analysis of art and culture that situates a writer's development within broader social, political, and economic processes.

As the title of his essay suggests, Bourdieu reads the logic that defines the values of artistic production as an inversion of the logic that defines the values of market economics; in the world of cultural producers, the creation of art without regard for financial reward or popular recognition is the highest end. Bourdieu calls this the

"principle of autonomy"—a principle which "excludes the pursuit of profit and does not guarantee any sort of correspondence between investments and monetary gains [...]" and which "condemns honours and temporal greatness" (FOCP 39). It's the perpetuation of this principle of autonomy that has given rise to the myth of the transcendent solitary genius.

For Bourdieu, however, the principle of autonomy is a "collective bad faith" that willfully ignores the structuring principles that dominate all social organization (the field of power); for Bourdieu, this collective outlook "helps to support the efforts of individual bad faith which makes it possible to experience failure in this world as election hereafter [...]" (50). One of the most compelling features of Bourdieu's analysis is the way it demonstrates how the categories that define the field of literary production are predicated on the rules that organize the field of social and economic relations: in the field of literary production, an individual producer vies with other producers for domination of the literary market; his ambitions, values, and anxieties are motivated by notions such as risk, reward, and investment.

Bourdieu's most important articulation of the relationship between the socio-economic and the aesthetic is his discussion of the *habitus* and his persuasive demonstration of how social and class values ultimately instill the outlook that will define an author's literary disposition and the potential place he can occupy in the field of cultural production.[2] Thus,

> the propensity to move towards the economically most risky positions, and above all the capacity to persist in them (a condition for all avant-garde undertakings which precede the demands of the market), even when they secure no short-term economic profit, seem to depend to a large extent on possession of substantial economic and social capital.

In short, writers who emerge from the most advantaged social class are instilled with both the financial and temperamental security needed to sever art from commerce (FOCP 67-68). Conversely, writers from the poorest segment of society will often attempt to compensate for their economic disadvantage by trying to enter the most autonomous segment of the field of cultural production. However, they lack the confidence and security that comes

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[2] Bourdieu fully explores this phenomenon in his discussion of the "habitus" in both *The Logic of Practice* and *Outline of a*

with wealth and have a difficult time competing in this segment of the field.

There are two qualities that I have found most useful about Bourdieu's analysis: the first is his willingness to ground his theoretical position in the lives of the authors he discusses. In the essays that comprise *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu provides clear demonstrations of how his principles play out in the lives and careers of the authors and artists he examines. Consequently, he points the way to a new and compelling form of social and cultural biography—a direction that I follow with much interest. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, although he is a sociologist, Bourdieu pays close and particular attention to literary texts and in the process suggests how novels, stories, poems, and plays can be read as allegories that concretize an author's professional values, anxieties, aspirations, and prejudices. This mode of reading has proven invaluable to my analysis.

While Bourdieu's ideas have made important contributions to literary studies in general, their potential for redefining Jewish-American literary studies has not yet been realized. The possibilities, though, are exciting; Bourdieu forces the critic of early Jewish-

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Theory of Practice.

American literature to account for a complex socio-cultural phenomenon: the decision of poor, non-native-speaking immigrants to defy the conventional route of social mobility to pursue the economically risky profession of writing.

It's my contention that the authors I examine in this dissertation were acutely aware of the social, economic, and cultural complexities that came with their vocation. I have limited myself to their first works because it's here that their professional ambitions, anxieties, and desires are most pronounced. Three of these authors (Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth) were immigrants who had a first-hand experience of poverty and New York's Lower East Side. These writers were not in a position to reject financial rewards or participate in the bad faith that Bourdieu ascribes to those artists who adhere to the principle of autonomy. In fact, at various times in their careers, Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth voiced a desire to see their work generate money as well as prestige. Ultimately though, none of them gauged success in America primarily in economic terms; making money simply wasn't a profound enough barometer of social advancement. For each, success was to be measured by a standard of a *cultural* achievement that could mark their ascent from the Lower East Side and

signify their transformation from Yiddish-speaking immigrants to "real" Americans. As authors they could put into evidence their mastery of English, win the praise of American writers and readers, and ultimately be included among an elite group of American cultural producers.

Here again Bourdieu's analysis is helpful: while each author subordinates economic advancement to cultural achievement, it's clear that they all subscribe to one of capitalism's most defining convictions: markets recognize and reward individuals, not groups. Cahan, Yezierska, and Roth want to set themselves apart from the Yiddish-speaking world: they pursue distinction.[1] Consequently, while the Lower East Side is a recurring setting in virtually all of their works, it's a world that their protagonists constantly define themselves against. Far from serving as the voice for the communal concerns of immigrant Jews, then, these authors created fictions that dramatize and concretized the difference between themselves and the world from which they emerged.

Chapter One: Henry Harland

I begin my dissertation, however, with an analysis of

[1] The sociological implications of the term "distinction," have been thoroughly examined by Bourdieu in his most famous work of the same name.

non-Jewish author. Active a full decade before Abraham Cahan, Henry Harland is the earliest of the writers I examine. Born to a family that could trace its lineage to the founding of the American Republic, Harland, writing under the pseudonym Sidney Luska, initially wanted to be received as a Jewish author. Between 1885 and 1889 he published four novels that, at first blush, present a sympathetic portrait of Jews and Jewish life. His philo-semitic desires were initially rewarded as reviews and articles in both the Jewish and secular press identified him as a Jew.

But Harland's career was formed at the height of the debate between realism and romance; his own devwlopment within a socially and culturally elite class played a crucial role in defining his anti-realistaesthetic. Consequently, the philo-semitic quality of his Luska novels is open to interrogation. The Jews that emerge in these novels are not simply devoid of a social depth; they are denied an interior life. Rather than providing them with subjectivity or situating them within a broader social world, Harland makes his Jews the vessels for primal and supernatural forces. In this way, they serve as vehicles for his own aesthetic values; they have no autonomous identity.

With the rise of a rational-critical Jewish public during the late 1880s, however, Harland's romantic representational strategies came under attack. Jews now demanded a more accurate depiction of their lives. In 1889, amid the Jewish public's backlash, Harland moved to England. He continued to write romances, assumed a place in the art-for-art's sake movement, and began to espouse strongly anti-democratic sentiments; like many writers associated with aestheticism, he began to voice a belief that humanity was a vulgar lot incapable of appreciating beauty. In his stories and essays, Jews were singled out as money-obsessed parvenus corrupting European ideals. In the end, I argue that a socially and culturally complex world had begun to make its demands on Harland's aesthetics. But his disposition left him unamenable to these forces. Rather than adapting his artistic sensibilities, he sought refuge in an insular romantic vision of feudal Europe; it was a vision that allowed him to maintain his ideals and prejudices.

Chapter Two: Abraham Cahan

While Abraham Cahan is generally regarded as heralding the beginning of Jewish-American literature, he is now primarily known for his half-century tenure as the editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*. Cahan's most vocal advocates

argue that as editor of the world's largest Yiddish newspaper he was a tireless defender of Yiddish culture and Jewish life; they point to his role in advancing the careers of Isaac and Israel Singer, Scholem Asch, and other important Yiddish-language writers as proof of his benevolent relationship to the Yiddish speaking public. However, in recent years another school of thought has emerged arguing that far from advancing the language, Cahan viewed Yiddish primarily as a vehicle for the Americanization of the immigrant masses. Once this end was achieved, Cahan argued, there would no longer be a need for the language.

Finding enough evidence in his career to substantiate this latter view, I argue that Cahan's cynical appraisal of Yiddish can be traced back to a broader social and cultural phenomenon: the denigration of Yiddish by the nineteenth century Eastern European Jewish intelligentsia. As an emerging socialist intellectual in Vilna, Cahan adopted the prevailing view that Yiddish was an inadequate linguistic vehicle for "serious" philosophy and literature. As a politically ambitious immigrant on the Lower East Side, he eventually understood the role that Yiddish could play in transmitting ideology to the immigrant masses; however, he continued to hold it in low esteem. When his

contemporaries in the United States and Russia began exploring Yiddish's literary potential, Cahan started to stake out a career as an Anglophonic writer instead. Moreover, Cahan's literary ambitions drew him to the most controversial literary mode of the day—realism. By pursuing a career as a literary realist, I argue, Cahan hoped to enter an elite cultural circle and distance himself from the Yiddish speaking masses.

His first novel, *Yekl*, has been traditionally regarded as a work that condemns the unrestrained assimilationist tendencies of its protagonist. I argue, however, that Cahan's own social and cultural values come strikingly close to the views espoused by Jake, the novel's protagonist. Consequently, Jake cannot easily be dismissed as a mere "allrightnik." Instead, he is a figure who, in his effort to become a "real American," embodies many of Cahan's own authorial ambitions, values, and prejudices.

Chapter Three: Anzia Yezierska

Of the four careers I examine in my dissertation, Anzia Yezierska's presents the greatest challenge. To one extent or another, Cahan, Roth, and Harland identified with a literary school or movement; their authorial development can be located within established institutional discourses and practices. Yezierska's cannot. Yezierska's literary

values, style, and objectives speak directly to her status as a poor immigrant woman who could never participate in the formative debates and discussions that molded the careers and sensibilities of her male counterparts. These values are brought out strongly in her first collection of short stories, *Hungry Hearts*. While the stories that comprise this collection range from Yezierska's earliest efforts to those written on the cusp of wide public and critical attention, the aesthetic sensibility that defines all of them is highly idiosyncratic and serves as a barometer of Yezierska's consistent sense of herself as an outsider.

Lacking the formal structure associated with a literary movement or school, the stories that make up *Hungry Hearts* borrow heavily from much simpler literary genres, like the fairy tale, to organize and present a dramatization of Yezierska's own professional insecurities and fantasies. Consequently, one sees recurring *topoi* in many of Yezierska's narratives: a young, highly emotional Jewish girl whose deep intellectual and creative aspirations are blocked by the oppressive social and religious forces. While she is occasionally aided in her cultural ascent by a benevolent gentile, her progress

toward self-realization is always solitary and often frustrated.

Throughout this chapter I explore the compelling ways Yezierska plays with this basic formula in several of her stories. My aim is to demonstrate how, even in the wake of wide recognition, she conceives of herself as the eternal outsider struggling for recognition and achievement in the face of various religious, social, and cultural forces that work against her. The stories that comprise *Hungry Hearts* are attempts to "figure out" this sense of isolation and exclusion.

Chapter Four: Henry Roth

Over the last forty years, Henry Roth's reputation has grown exponentially. Rescued from obscurity by Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, Leslie Fiedler, it now appears that Roth's place in the American canon is firmly rooted. Like his contemporary, Ralph Ellison, Roth's place in the field of twentieth century American letters rests on a single novel, *Call It Sleep*. Published in 1934 to both critical and popular acclaim, *Call It Sleep* has the distinction of being hailed as an outstanding instance of proletarian literature, a watershed of American modernism, and an important precursor to the ethnic novel. The objective of this chapter is to offer a new reading of *Call It Sleep*—one

that demonstrates how the novel dramatizes Roth's professional ambitions and uncertainties.

Roth was not the only Jewish writer of the 1930s to emerge from the New York tenements to stake a claim in the field of American letters. However, in an act that seems to defy the economic exigencies of the decade, he was the only Jewish novelist to adopt modernism's highly experimental mode. Consequently, this chapter is largely concerned with the professional strategies implied in working within a modernist aesthetic.

Much of my discussion of *Call It Sleep* is predicated on an interrogation of the self-analysis Roth presents in his monumental autobiographical novel, *Mercy of a Rude Stream* (*Mercy*). Comprised of four volumes, *Mercy* represents Roth's end-of-life effort to make sense, both for himself and his readers, of his literary development and failure. But *Mercy* is much more than a memoir or autobiography; it is a complex work of social, psychological, cultural, and literary analysis. As such, it sheds much light on the professional trajectory that led to the composition of *Call It Sleep*.

Roth's decision to work within a modernist aesthetic is rooted in the profound sense of social and personal corruption that he associated with his Harlem existence.

His slow and complicated inculcation into the world of literary culture not only molded Roth's aesthetic values; it also presented him with what he believed would be a remedy to his sense of corruption. For Roth everything about modernism implied nobility and purity. He was especially drawn to the way authors like Joyce and Eliot could transform the decay and squalor of modern urban existence into high art. In modernism, then, Roth saw the potential for his own redemption and salvation; it was a talisman.

Call It Sleep, I argue, both dramatizes this pursuit of purity but also demonstrates how illusory this pursuit was. By reading the novel's protagonist, David Schearl, as Roth's surrogate I try to demonstrate Roth's deep ambivalence about the modernist aesthetic and its potential for ontological redemption. For while Roth creates a novel that adheres strictly to the tenets of modernism, the story he tells aligns the movement with a host of pathologies: sadism, masochism, violence.

Chapter One

Henry Harland/Sidney Luska: Jews Within Limits

Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, and Henry Roth are generally regarded as the progenitors of the Jewish-American literary tradition. As with all lineages, however, the one they inaugurate is founded as much on what it omits as on what it includes. In the decade before Cahan published *Yekl*, Henry Harland published a series of novels under the Jewish pseudonym Sidney Luska. *As It Was Written* (1885), *Mrs. Peixada* (1886), *The Yoke of the Thorah* [sic] (1887), and *Grandison Mather* (1889)—taken collectively these novels broke new ground in American literature by advancing a sympathetic picture of Jews and Jewish life. More incredibly, as the use of the Luska pseudonym suggests, Harland wanted to be received as a Jewish author even at a moment when no Jewish author had staked a claim in the field of American letters; and quite often, critics and scholars continued to attribute the novels to a Jewish writer long after Luska's true identity had been revealed.[1] Nor were the novels marginally received. *As It Was Written* alone sold more than 50,000

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[1] See Hamlin Garland's *Companions on the Trail* (1931), and Kermit Vanderbilt's *The Achievement of William Dean Howells* (1968), for example.

copies and was heavily reviewed both in the mainstream and the budding Jewish press.

But it's with good reason that Harland's name isn't included in a catalogue of early Jewish-American writers. Following his move to England in 1889, Harland renounced his Sidney Luska novels, espoused deeply anti-democratic views, and singled out Jews as a perniciously corrosive element in European culture. Moreover, in an effort to distance himself from his American past, Harland began to claim an aristocratic identity. He insisted, for example, that he was born in St. Petersburg rather than Brooklyn and that he was educated at the Sorbonne rather than the City College of New York; Harland even went so far as to try to lay claim to the title of baron.

While this chapter will touch on this peculiar literary transformation, its primary objective is to situate Harland's literary development within the social and aesthetic values of his class and the aesthetic discourse of the American 1880s. By doing this, I hope to describe how Harland's anti-semitism can be traced to the aesthetic and social values of his literary emergence. Consequently, I argue, even his purportedly philo-semitic novels treat Jews in a highly ambiguous/suspicious way. This chapter interrogates his first novel, *As It Was*

Written, to demonstrate how it utilizes Jews in a way that reveals Harland's literary and social values, prejudices, and anxieties. Ultimately, of course, I hope to touch upon the motivations behind Harland's decision to write under the pseudonym Sidney Luska.

Henry Harland was born to and raised within a family and class that shaped his literary outlook, values, and aspirations. Both his parents could trace their ancestry to the founding of the United States. In what seems to have been a rejection of this lineage, however, his father, Thomas Harland, cultivated the society of socially progressive writers and thinkers. The elder Harland had his own cultural and intellectual aspirations. To pursue these ambitions, he moved from Norwich, Connecticut to a Fourierist housing cooperative in New York City. Here he met his son's future godfather—the nineteenth-century romantic poet and critic E.C. Stedman (Harap 455). It's Stedman who was largely responsible for fostering Harland's creative aspirations and shaping his aesthetic sensibilities. But his influence stands as only one force in the formation of Harland's literary disposition. Harland grew up surrounded by his father's intellectual acquaintances, including Felix Adler, the founder of the Ethical Culture movement. When he was twenty-two, Harland

spent a year touring Europe, and his experiences on the continent further crystallized his aesthetic and social standards.

I mention this biographical information to situate Harland's literary sensibilities and his handling of Jewish themes and characters within the broader values of a particular class. Renouncing his aristocratic lineage, Thomas Harland pursued a life devoted to art and culture. But he brought to this pursuit the self-assurance of his class—a confidence largely founded on a long history of social privilege.[2] His son inherited this disposition. Harland's novels have no interest in economic exigencies, social organization, and material existence. While *As It Was Written* is primarily concerned with the artistic life and the artistic temperament, Harland's conception of art and artistic creation is deeply insular and narrowly defined, severed from larger social and institutional forces. In short, Harland's novels adhere to those tendencies that Richard Chase ascribes to anti-realistic romance (Chase 12-13). Harland's representational values demanded idealization. And this creed of artistic idealization had taken hold in both the American romance

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[2] For a theoretical discussion of this phenomenon, see Pierre Bourdieu's "The Field of Cultural Production," pp. 67-68.

novel and the European avant-garde. Writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* two years before the publication of *As It Was Written*, Charles Dudley Warner provided a succinct encapsulation of romance's aversion to realism:

> One of the worst characteristics of modern fiction is its so-called truth to nature. For fiction is an art, as painting is, as sculpture is, as acting is. A photograph of a natural object is not art; nor is the plaster cast of a man's face, nor is the bare setting on the stage of an actual occurrence. Art requires idealization (464).

Warner's disdain for realism and its photographic tendencies echoes the more extreme condemnation offered by Baudelaire twenty-five years earlier. Baudelaire viewed the "photographic industry [and realism in general] [as] the refuge of all failed painters with too little talent, or too lazy to complete their studies." For Baudelaire, photographic realism was an art form worthy of the masses ("The Salon of 1859" 296). Baudelaire's elitist sentiments underscore romance's implied social outlook and prejudices. Harland's attraction to romance is an extension of the

values of a class confident enough in its social standing to dismiss social exigencies and the material world.[3]

American realism's most vocal proponents (William Dean Howells, Samuel Clemens, Hamlin Garland, Bret Harte, Theodore Dreiser) were Midwesterners largely removed from the aesthetic and social values of an East-coast gentility; their literary sensibilities were deeply rooted in their experiences in non-literary vocations as varied as journalism, printing, mining, riverboat piloting, to their engagement with a socially and ethnically heterogeneous world, and a variety of social discourses. In defining himself as a writer of romances, Harland proclaimed his allegiance to an opposing set of literary and social values. *As It Was Written* speaks directly to this joint commitment. A critical figure in shaping these values was Edgar Allan Poe.

Harland's godfather, E.C. Stedman, was a committed champion of Poe's work at a time when most American critics were either hostile or oblivious of the author's achievement. Stedman published numerous articles on Poe's stories, poems, and essays, a Poe biography, and a ten-volume edition of Poe's collected writings. As the man

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[3] It isn't surprising to learn that the romance's origins are situated in the emergence of a European aristocracy. See Erich

largely responsible for Harland's literary education, Stedman undoubtedly disseminated much of Poe's sensibility to the young Harland. There have been no critical investigations into the relationship between the two writers; but an assessment of Poe's aesthetics and his reception can shed much light on *As It Was Written*'s representational devices, its treatment of Jews, and Harland's peculiar career.

Poe, of course, was himself an arch-romancer. His fictive worlds eschew the layered material and empirical reality associated with the realist novel for the sake of the atmospheric, the macabre, and the fantastic. His influence on Harland's first novel is pronounced. But it isn't simply the literary Poe that helped shape *As It Was Written*; the discrepancy between Poe's European canonization and his American neglect seems to have played an even more critical role in molding Harland's aesthetic choices.

For Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Verlaine, Poe was the progenitor of an aesthetics that didn't answer to economic, social, moral, or ideological imperatives: his was art for its own sake. For these men, Poe's work, life, and death were the realization of artistic nobility. The destitution

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Auerbach's *Mimesis* for a discussion of this phenomenon.

and neglect he suffered in his lifetime were merely the signs of his absolute devotion to this principle: a testament to his martyrdom for the cause.

The notion of nobility was critical to the way these men understood Poe's work and career. And the anti-democratic sensibility of the pure art movement is well documented. Poe, Baudelaire, Wilde, Mallarmé all espoused a theory of aesthetics based on a renunciation of realism and the exclusion of a socially engaged "people" from their artistic vision. Baudelaire is the most vocal proponent of this anti-democratic sentiment, insisting on the homologous relationship between pure art and an aristocratic temperament; this is why America will never produce great art. Echoing Poe's own assertion, Baudelaire asserts that in a nation without an aristocratic heritage, "the cult of beauty can only be corrupted, diminished, and die" ("Edgar Allan Poe, His Life and Works" 165-166). For Baudelaire, Poe's unhappy fate was the consequence of having been born in an overly moralistic country where aesthetic judgment is left to a "mob of buyers and sellers...a vast drinking saloon, thronged with consumers doing their business at dirty tables, against a background hubbub of coarse talk [...]" ("Further Notes on Edgar Allan Poe" 197).

Consider the dichotomy that Poe's life must have presented to Harland: on the one hand there's Europe, aristocracy, beauty; on the other, there's America, vulgarity, democracy. For an emerging author with Harland's ingrained class disposition, Poe's fate must have crystallized crucial professional decisions. *As It Was Written* attests to the course Harland saw for his own career. A summary of the novel will demonstrate Poe's literary influence, in particular, and the sensibilities of romance, in general, demonstrating the degree to which *As It Was Written* eschews the mimetic conventions of realism.

At the center of *As It Was Written* is Ernest Newman, a highly sensitive and talented Jewish violinist. As the novel begins, we learn that Ernest is constantly possessed by a sense of emptiness and isolation. He soon meets and falls in love with Veronika Pathzuol, another musically talented Jew. The two eventually marry and settle into a happy and fulfilled domestic life. But this joy is cut short when Ernest comes home one night to discover Veronika's murdered body. He is indicted and tried for his wife's death, but is ultimately acquitted. Because of the notoriety of the trial, however, he's unable to find work and spends his days wandering the streets of New York. Eventually though, he finds a job as a waiter. While on

duty one night, he befriends a young bohemian, Daniel Merivale. When Merivale learns that Ernest is both a Jew and a musician, he assumes the responsibility of liberating him from his life of drudgery. In Merivale's view, "Music is the art in which Jews excel" (113), and Ernest must be free to devote himself exclusively to his art. Merivale, who has "plenty of cash" (137), invites Ernst to move into his apartment. Surrounded by paintings, statues, books, and musical instruments, Ernest is initiated into a purely artistic existence.

Merivale confirms Ernest's new artistic identity by presenting him with a Stradivarius. The violin has a mesmerizing effect on Ernest. Whenever he plays it, he loses all sense of volition and is transported to the "pure realm of the spirit" (120). But no sooner does his life as an artist begin, than the novel takes its fatal turn. At a pawnshop one day, Ernest and Merivale purchase an antique jewelry box. Taking it home, they discover a secret compartment that contains a letter addressed to Ernest; it's from his long dead father. The letter, which had been written shortly after Ernest's birth and shortly before his father's death, details the consequences of a generations-old family curse. The curse warns the Newman males never to marry. Ignoring the curse, Ernest's father wed, but was

betrayed by his wife and his best friend. Trusting fate to ultimately place the letter in his son's hand, the elder Newman, admonishes Ernest to avenge the infidelity by murdering his mother's lover and all of his descendents. The letter concludes by disclosing the lover's name—Nicholas Pathzuol, Veronika's father. Ernest is initially unable to link his wife's death with the directives of the letter; and he continues to lead his artistic life until one day while playing his Stradivarius, he slips into his usual reverie. In his trance, however, he composes both a brilliant symphony and a letter confessing to Veronika's murder. Now faced with the realization that it was in fact he who killed Veronika, Ernest turns himself over to the police.

A brief listing of some of the novel's motifs and themes will demonstrate how much *As It Was Written* owes to Poe's poetics of the macabre: a familial curse that threatens to end a family's lineage; a protagonist endowed with supernatural musical abilities; a beautiful woman murdered by her lover.[4] In short, everything in the story operates at the level of the fantastic.

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[4] All of these motifs, in fact, can be found in a single Poe story, "The Fall of the House of Usher."

In Harland's literary world, then, Jews are amenable to the fantastic; in some way they advance his aesthetic vision. How, though? What follows is an attempt to make sense of Harland's strategies of novelization, to examine how he reorders the empirical world to suit his literary vision and professional desires, and to explore how Jews fit into this strategy of reordering.

By 1885, New York City had begun its monumental transformation into an industrial and commercial metropolis. The great wave of mass immigration that would continue into the second decade of the twentieth century had begun five years earlier. But the social and demographic complexity of urban life—energy, poverty, overcrowding, disease—that caught the attention of both social reformers and realists is wholly absent from *As It Was Written*. Geography, setting, locale is simply absent throughout the entire text; Harland rarely gives his readers spatial markers to help them situate the narrative. New York, a city of more than a million residents, is reduced to a handful of characters who travel within the protagonist's immediate orbit. It's not surprising that the spaces and settings that appear throughout the novel are interiors: intimate and contained. Consequently, New York feels more like a ghost town than the largest city in North America.

In one scene, for example, Ernest wanders the city's streets in search of a new job. But the streets are devoid of life: buildings, people, activity. Eventually, he comes to a wine shop, where

> I took a table near the stove and asked for a glass of wine. As my senses thawed, I became aware that a quarrel was going on in the room—angry voices penetrated my hearing.
>
> The proprietor, a fat man in shirt-sleeves, stood behind the bar. His face was very red. In his native tongue loudly and volubly he was berating one of his assistants--a waiter with a scared face (92).

Ernest observes the quarrel between employer and employee, but there's nothing peripheral to this observation. Where one would expect to find customers, conversation, and activity, there's no one else in the background. Props, lighting, sounds, miscellaneous characters—the general activity and objects that suggest scenic depth and atmosphere simply don't exist here or anywhere else in *As It Was Written*. The novel is thoroughly solipsistic. What matters is the world insofar as it affects Ernest.

To understand the objective in this suppression of the empirical world, compare the above passage with the opening of William Dean Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, also

published in 1885. The setting is Lapham's private office; Bartley Hubbard, a journalist, waits to interview the novel's protagonist. Before the interview begins however, Lapham attends to a letter he has been writing:

> "There!" Lapham pounded with his great hairy fist the on the envelope he had been addressing. "William!" he called out, and he handed the letter to a boy who came to get it. "I want that to go out right away..." (5).

At first it would seem that a private interview would be more conducive to a sense of solipsism and isolation than a wine shop. But even within this intimate setting, Howells' novel immediately suggests the presence of a wider world. Here, Lapham puts the finishing touches on a letter; but neither Hubbard nor the reader ever learns its content. On the surface, the letter seems to be something completely incidental—trivial. But in fact it's a very subtle device that underscores the realist aesthetic. Addressed to someone who is both outside the sphere of the interview and the sphere of novel itself, the letter points to a larger world than the one defined by Lapham's office and the novel's plot. Moreover, William, the office boy, is exactly the type of fleeting character who doesn't appear in *As It Was Written*. But his presence in Howells' novel is critical because it metonymously suggests the whole of

Lapham's corporate structure. In short, at every turn, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* presents the periphery, background, and social organization that is so conspicuously absent in Harland's work.

In *As It Was Written* such a letter would appear only if it had an immediate and apparent affect on Ernest's life. Rather than depicting an empirically concrete world, *As It Was Written* presents interiority: meditations, thoughts, feelings. It's a first person narrative; but Harland severs Newman's inner life from a broader world, from any reference to social structures and institutions. Consequently, Ernest's mind is constantly turning inward. But the content of his mind is largely empty.

The novel begins with a sustained phenomenological moment as Ernest attempts to present an inventory of his thoughts, emotions, and desires; but by his own admission his subjectivity is obscure, dim, and unanchored to anything concrete. He is restless "without knowing why" and hungry "without knowing for what." He is "dimly conscious" of "vague desires," but simply cannot fathom what the object of these desires might be: "They [have] no definite object." Consequently, his "thoughts [get] into the habit of wandering away" and "fly off to cloud-land." And while he admits to trying to discover the source of his

desires, he confesses that he is not "prone to self-analysis." Devoid of agency, he simply waits for the change that will "come over the tenor of [his] life" (1-2).

He is utterly empty—nothing inheres in him. Not only does Harland sever Ernest from an external world, he denies his protagonist a sense of will, personality, and psychology. Consequently, Ernest stands in direct opposition to the characters who people the novels of writers like Howells and Henry James; where the realists wanted to create a literary mode that would be capable of representing/constructing the complexity of inner life, Harland empties out inner life. Judged against a realistic sensibility, Ernest is a cipher—a contentless character. But given Harland's aesthetic predilections and values, this is a representational asset, not a flaw.

It's here that Newman's Jewish identity becomes critical. Because he is not concerned with situating his characters in a socially complex world, Harland creates a Jew severed from the historical and material realities of the period. Thus, despite the 20,000-person leap that took place in New York City's Jewish population between 1870 and 1880 (*World of Our Fathers* xix), the social, economic, and cultural presence of New York Jewish life never impinges on or contributes to Ernest's character. Not only is Ernest's

Judaism never socially situated, Ernest never takes part in ceremonies and rituals that would identify him as a Jew. What kind of Jew, then, has Harland created? How does he fill this emptiness?

On the one hand, Ernest has no anchoring in a broader, socially complex world: he is largely disconnected from economic, social, political institutions–the structuring forces of urban life–and religious practices. On the other, he's a member of a religion with profound innate passions–a people full of "fire" and "flavor" endowed with great artistic feeling, especially for music (105-106). Consequently, although he is rarely affected by the material exigencies of urban existence, Ernest's Judaism leaves him open to primal and supernatural forces. Time and again, his creativity is described as coming not from within himself but through some mystical possession, "Another spirit impels my arm, pouring itself out through the voice of my instrument [...]. While the music is going on my personality is annihilated. With the final note I seem to 'come to' as one does from a trance" (9). "Mental exhilaration gave way to bewilderment, as I saw that my hand was forging along faster than my thought could dictate, in apparent obedience to an independent will of its own [...]" (241). This absence of autonomy is further

underscored in descriptions of Ernest's emotional states. His love for Veronika, for instance, is so profound that his: "heart welled with tenderness for all living creatures—the overflow of the tenderness it had from her. All [his] senses, all [his] capacities for pain and pleasure, were more acute than before" (25).

Perhaps most importantly, Harland limits Ernest's agency by calling up the Old Testament *topos* of patralineal punishment—the notion that punishment against the father will be visited upon his sons and grandsons; in this way Harland provides a reference and a source for the familial curse that drives Ernest to kill Veronika: the imperatives of the ancient law are potent enough to trump the depth of his love for his wife. Moreover, in the letter that magically makes its way to him years after its composition, Newman's father emerges as an anachronistic Jewish figure. As the letter begins, he appears as the embodiment of gentle piety; but as the letter draws to an end and his insistence that Ernest carry out his murderous wishes becomes stronger, the father emerges as a the voice of primal blood vengeance: "Do not strike him down with one blow. Torture him to death. Pluck his flesh from his bones shred by shred. Prolong his agony to the utmost" (204). If Ernest waivers in fulfilling the decree, his father

assures him, "I shall be prepared. From my grave I shall watch over you. From my grave I shall guide you. From my grave I shall see to it that you do not neglect the duty of your life" (206).[5] And what's true of Ernest and his father is also true of Veronika, who is described as a Jew whose eyes contained "[a]ll the history of Israel" (12), and for whom "[a]ll the martyrdom of the scattered hosts, were hers by inheritance" (24).

Harland, then, presents a highly exoticized version of the Jew. His allegiance to aestheticism and to romance led him to create Jews who are thoroughly anachronistic–wedded to the faith's most primal and supernatural past. In this way, Ernest, his father, and Veronika are granted a special ontological status: they don't have to participate in the complex "in this world" engagements that provide "normal" individuals with a sense of volition, cognition, and identity; and this special status makes them attuned and susceptible to more profound, unseen, anti-rational, and supernatural forces: overwhelming feelings, musical inspiration, ancient curses. As such, they serve as Harland's romantic ideals, counters to what Malcolm Bradbury and David Cheshire characterize as realism's "flat

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[5] Certainly, parallels can also be made to *Hamlet*.

and masculine concern with the given world and with a determinist view of things [...]" (310).

As the novel's protagonist, it's Ernest who most fully dramatizes Harland's own aesthetic values and aspirations; much of *As It Was Written* is devoted to describing his artistic development within the discourse of pure aesthetics: time and again, Harland aligns Ernest with figures and types associated with the nineteenth century avant-garde and the sensibilities of art-for-art's sake. The symphony he spontaneously composes at the end of the novel is repeatedly compared to the works of Berlioz. It's Veronika's rendition of Gounod's *Ave Maria* that magically draws the couple together. In the wake of Veronika's murder, Ernest compares his depression to that of "an opium eater deprived of his daily portion" (108), a clear allusion to one of the stereotypes of nineteenth-century bohemian life.

As It Was Written, however, is the story of Ernest's artistic *development*. Like Henry Roth's *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, it is also a kunstlerroman; but where Roth takes his cue from realism and naturalism and situates his protagonist's artistic development within the complex network of social, cultural, and psychological realities of 1920s tenement life, Harland turns artistic development

into a process of arcane and magical initiation. Critical to this process is Ernest's mentor, Daniel Merivale.

Writing of Harland's love of Parisian life, Richard Le Gallienne observes:

> Harland was one of those Americans in love with Paris who seem more French than the French themselves, a slim, gesticulating, goateed, snub-nosed, lovable figure, smoking innumerable cigarettes as he galvanically pranced around the room, excitedly pronouncing the *dernier mot* on the build of the short story or the art of prose [...]. The most vivacious of talkers, "art" with him, as with his Parisian prototypes, was a life-and-death matter. Nothing else existed for him [...]. The polishing of his prose was for him his being's end and aim (quoted in Cheshire and Bradbury 303-304).

Harland molded himself to the model of the Latin-Quarter bohemian—a figure that receives substantial treatment in *As It Was Written* in the character of Daniel Merivale. And Le Gallienne's description of the artistically impassioned Harland is near replication of Harland's description of the artistically impassioned Merivale. Like Harland he is tempestuous, nervous, chain-smoking, aesthetically impassioned, and in love with things French (97-99).

Four years before his move to Europe and his own assumption of the bohemian identity, then, Harland imports the figure and makes him a central character in his novel. And if Albert Parry is accurate in claiming that *As It Was Written* is largely concerned with aesthetic discourse (3), then the spokesperson for Harland's aesthetic values is not the largely unaware and volitionless Ernest, but the cosmopolitan Merivale. As the exemplar of bohemian life, Merivale's role in the world of *As It Was Written* is crucial. Completely immersed in aesthetic experiences, he's the initiate who draws Ernest into the cult of pure art and in the process makes its values, habits, and codes intelligible to the reader. He makes no observations about politics, society, or economics; only the "pure" appreciation of art has value for him.

In one of the novel's few gestures at social observation, however, Merivale speaks of his desire to see Jews intermarry; but even this articulation has to be read against Merivale's/Harland's aesthetics. Merivale dreams of an America where Jews will

> leaven the whole lump—color the whole mixture. The English element alone is [...] pure water; the German element, one portion of *eau sucrée* [...] add the Jewish—it is a dose of rich strong wine. It will give fire and flavor to the decoction. The future Americans, thanks to the

> Jew in them, will have passions, enthusiasms. They will paint pictures, compose great music, write great poems, be capable of great heroism (105-106).

Here, America is not a complex social and cultural organization—but a collection of ethnic groups—each with its inherent traits and characteristics. The innate passion and artistic genius of Jews like Ernest will redeem the nation and contribute to a new sensibility by tempering the bland and austere northern European ethos with Semitic "fire," "color," and "flavor." It's a utopian vision, but one without a social, political, or economic content; only art matters. Consequently, Merivale's dream seems to stand as a direct response to Baudelaire's characterization of the United States as a place completely inhospitable to the cultivation of creative genius, where "[m]aterial activity [is] exaggerated to a kind of national mania" ("Edgar Allen Poe" 165).

But to realize this ideal, Ernest's latent talent must be disciplined. Merivale is the initiate responsible for directing the novice's raw talent and inducting him into the divine mysteries of artistic creation. The site for this initiation process is the domestic shrine of Merivale's studio—his temple to art:[5]

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[5] Romanticism posited a very personal and solitary notion of the production and consumption of art. Consequently, domestic spaces like the library, study, or studio assumed quasi-mystical

> It was chock full of odds and ends piled about in hopeless confusion. The walls were hung with a reddish paper, and freckled with framed and unframed pictures—etchings, engravings, water-colors, charcoals—some suspended correctly by wires from the cornice, others pinned up loosely by their corners. The ceiling was tinted to harmonize with the walls [...]. Bits of porcelain and metal ware, specimens of Italian carving. Chinese sculptures in ivory, rich tapestries, bronze and plaster reproductions of antique statuary, and books of all sizes and descriptions and in all stages of decay, were scattered hither and thither without a pretense to order (115-116).

Despite its disorder, Merivale's collection metonymously suggests the totality of the arts. It's an image that strongly invokes the utopian vision of nation engaged in an exhaustive artistic pursuit. Ernest's failure to recognize a structuring principle in the collection serves to underscore both his own artistic immaturity and Merivale's status as one for whom the "clutter" makes perfect sense. In fact, the collection is

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overtones in its literature. The works of Poe, for example, go to great lengths to create a supernatural aura around these private spaces, as in "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Raven."

enchanted as well as expansive. When Merivale's initial attempt to lure Ernest back to music is met with resistance, he magically produces the Stradivarius, hoping that instrument's mystique will tempt the musician.[7] The ploy works. Mesmerized by the instrument's physical beauty, Ernest plucks its chords and immediately recognizes its inherent magic; a draw of the bow, and Ernest is overwhelmed—transported. Throughout the novel, Harland presents Ernest's musical production as the result of ecstatic communion ("I touched the bow to the strings: the result was a voice from heaven [...]" (120), "[W]hile the music is going on, my personality is annihilated"(9)) But nowhere is the language more ecstatic than here.

> I don't remember what I played [...]. I only remember that for the first few minutes I suffered the tortures of the damned—an army of devils were tugging at my heart-strings—and withal I had no power to restrain the motion of my arm and lay the violin aside. Then, I remember, the pain gradually turned to pleasure, to an immense sense of relief, as if all the woe pent up in the recesses of my soul had found an outlet and was gushing forth in a tremendous flood of sound (120-121).

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[7] Merivale's collection is so cornucopian and magical that one suspects that *any* artistic object or artifact may be produced in an instant.

Ernest loses himself in the "pure realm of the spirit." As the vessel for a supernatural musical force, his own volition is obliterated; and Merivale, echoing Mallarmé, consistently reminds Ernest that this musical genius is a divine gift, an "aristocratic mystery," presented to an elected elite ("Art as Aristocratic Mystery" 206).

As I have tried to demonstrate throughout this chapter, a sense of aesthetic aristocracy emerges out of a sense of economic confidence. It's not surprising to learn that Merivale's absolute devotion to art and its mysteries is made possible by the backing of a seemingly endless reserve of capital. His ability to instantly both produce and assess the rarest of artifacts is a further sign of a sensibility that could have emerged only within an elite class–a fact that he readily and frequently admits.[1] Moreover, Merivale's aristocratic sensibilities view art and labor as thoroughly incompatible; work both represents a distraction from the pursuit of pure art and implies an association with the "people." In fact, the first thing Merivale does when he learns that Ernest is a musician is to liberate him from his job as a waiter. He does so by

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[1] Veblen's discussion of this phenomenon can be found in the "Conspicuous Leisure" and "Conspicuous Consumption" chapters of *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.

hiring Ernest as his personal secretary; but the position is purely nominal. Once hired, Ernest never engages in secretarial work. Instead, like Merivale himself, he devotes himself exclusively to an artistic existence.

Harland offers only a single glimpse into the psychology of labor and toil. It's the novel's most poignant moment and is spoken by the doomed Veronika as she describes her life before she met Ernest. (Because it's the novel's only sustained description this kind of subjectivity, I quote it in full):

> And then the mere physical fatigue—day after day, work, work, work, and never any respite. Of course everybody has to work, but almost everybody has a holiday now and then; and I never had a single day that I could call my own. In the winter it was hardest. No matter how tired I was, I had to be up and off giving lessons even if the snow was ankle deep. And the ice in the river made it such hard work getting to Hoboken, made the journey so very long. When I would come home all fagged out I had to clean the rooms and cook the dinner; though I am afraid that sometimes did not more than half do my duty. Sometimes I would let the dust lie for a week on

> the mantle-piece. And every day was just the same as the day that had gone before. It was like traveling in a circle. When I would go to bed at night my weariness would be all the harder because of the thought. "To-morrow will be just the same, the same round of lessons, the same dead fatigue, the same monotonous drudgery from beginning to end." And as I saw no promise of change, as I thought it would be the same all my life, I could not help ask what the use was of having been born (39-40).

The emotions conveyed in this monologue are full of a profound pathos—one that's wholly absent in *As It Was Written*. It is the novel's only moment of realism. The syntax is unadorned, direct, and concrete—strongly wedded to the representation of the drudgery and despair that came with poverty.[1] But like Veronika herself (and anything suggesting realism), this stylistic and representational sensibility loses its place early in the novel.

Undoubtedly it's because she is a woman that Veronika

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[1] It also indicates how difficult it must have been for even for the most avowed romantic to evade realism's emerging sensibilities.

embodies Harland's less-than-romantic mode of existence: after all she is someone for whom labor is not merely a necessity but a human "duty" as well.[10] Merivale's life (and later Ernest's), then, stands in diametric opposition to Veronika's. Veronika must toil; Merivale is free to devote himself exclusively to art and its mysteries. This contrast is most evident in the scene where Ernest is coaxed to perform on the Stradivarius that he's just received. Since it's late, the musician worries that he might wake the sleeping neighbors. But for Merivale, the imperatives of art outweigh the inconvenience it might present to others, "As for the other occupants I pay double rent on the condition that my quarters are to be my castle, and that I can create as much rumpus in them, day and night, as I desire" (117). Compared to the suffering and sacrifice that defines Veronika's existence, Merivale's life seems deeply irresponsible. But this is exactly the point; Merivale's aesthetics insist that his responsibility is to art and art alone.

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[10] This notion of life as an endless cycle of drudgery seems to have been commonplace in late-nineteenth-century literature. Carrie Meeber, in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, although financially better off than Veronika, is still compelled to wonder, "What was it [life]? A very dull round indeed. What did she have? Nothing but this narrow, little flat[...]. For what was she made, anyhow? More thought followed and then tears—tears seemed justified, and the only relief in the world" (307-308).

Ultimately, then, one has to wonder why Veronika is killed. After all, she too has strong musical talent. Why is she denied access to the transcendent musical force that constantly posses Ernest? Is it because her immersion in a life of toil and labor somehow taints her, bars her from participating in the realm of pure art? Or is she killed because, in the logic of the novel's aesthetic values, marriage is fatal to an artistic life—luring the artist away from his singular calling? It's true that in the end, Ernest surrenders to the police. But is this aesthetics capitulating to ethics? After all, by the time of his surrender, Ernest has already lived the life of artistic purity; he has composed his great symphony and communed with the "pure realm of the spirit."

The *New York Times*, influenced by realism's emerging sensibilities, said of Harland's second novel, *Mrs. Peixada* (1886): "The story of Jewish life in New York City, the true realistic one, has yet to be written" (quoted in Beckson 26). But Harland had no interest in the "true realistic story." Erich Auerbach's assessment of the Goncourt Brothers may be fitted to Harland's treatment of Jews in his Luska novels:

> They were collectors and depicters of sensory impressions, especially of sensory impressions

> valuable for their strangeness and novelty. They were professional discoverers or rediscoverers of aesthetic, and particularly or morbidly aesthetic, experiences suited to satisfy an exacting taste surfeited with the unusual (*Mimesis* 439).

And Edmond de Goncourt's self-assessment is easily applied to Merivale and Harland, "'I am a well-born man of letters, and [...] the people, the mob, if you will, has for me the attraction of unknown and undiscovered populations, something of the *exoticism* which travelers go to seek [...]'" (quoted from *Mimesis* 439). It would be impossible, however, to continue maintaining this exoticism in the United States.

The freedom from work and from social engagement that Harland imagines for his protagonists underscores the aesthetic and social ideals he valued for himself; but early in his career he realized that these values would be untenable in America. The pretensions he affected when he moved to London in 1889 (that he had been born in St. Petersburg, that he had been educated at the University of Paris, that he was the descendent to English nobles) were designed to give the impression that he had spent his life immersed in European aristocracy among a people who had a

natural aesthetic capacity. What necessitated the realization that such a career would be impossible in the United States? In large part it was the emergence of a socially cohesive and vocal Jewish-American public.

The Jews that Harland presents in his Luska novels were critical *devices* for disseminating his literary values and objectives. In *As It Was Written*, he eschews the realist's mimetic values and the construction of literary worlds predicated on the complex interaction between individuals and social structures. He does so in order to devote himself exclusively to the pursuit of some transcendent notion of art and artistic creation. This reluctance to represent a socially complex word is analogous to his unwillingness/refusal to view Jews as "in this world" entities.

In opting to make a Jew the protagonist of his novel Harland had considerable representational leeway. While their numbers were growing, Jews were not yet a visible or univocal group in American society. They did, however, carry a substantial and popular cache of romantic stereotypes that Harland exploits throughout *As It Was Written*: deep emotionalism, natural musical abilities, a propensity for superstition, all the qualities that make them ideal vehicles for his literary values. Moreover, he

could further condition the reception of his novels by publishing them under the Luska pseudonym—augmenting the sense of mystique and mystery by implying that the work is authentic.

It's not until the 1890s that Jews begin to develop into a critical-rational public capable of social and cultural debate; they simply were not in a position to affect representational strategies, habits, and values; nor had they cohered into a body capable of producing its own literature, its own efforts at self-representation.

By the time Harland moved to England in 1889, however, a cohesive, vocal, and self-confident Jewish public had begun to take shape in the United States; it was a public motivated by an increasing population, a growing newspaper industry, and an expanding coterie of critics, writers, and intellectuals. As early as 1887, this Jewish public opinion had risen up against Harland. In that year Harland published his third Luska novel, *The Yoke of the Thorah* [sic], which takes up the issue of intermarriage that was briefly introduced in *As It Was Written*.

In it, the protagonist, Elias Bacharach, dies of heartbreak when the imperatives of the Old Law (the Yoke of the Torah) forbid him to marry the Christian woman he loves. The novel concludes with a renunciation of the

"superstitious" and "monstrous lie" that stands in the way of happiness (quoted in Harap 464). The Jewish press blasted the novel. The *Jewish Exponent* condemned it as condescending and out of touch with the modern Jewish experience; it concluded that Harland "deludes himself by thinking he is not prejudiced against the Jews [...]" (Harap 465). *The Menorah* (not to be confused with *The Menorah Journal*) lashed out at the novel's implication that Jews "lacked refinement" and that if he is to be a "man" a Jew must not affiliate with Judaism (quoted in Harap 465). Harland's own frustration with this reception is evident in a letter he wrote to William Dean Howells: "Jews don't want to be written about; at least they don't want to be portrayed as they really are. Your picture must flatter them; otherwise they'll feel like crucifying you" (quoted in Beckson 33). Demanding to be taken seriously as social, cultural, and religious agents, the Jewish public begins to exhibit a critical faculty completely at odds with romantic/exotic conception of the Jew that Harland presents in *As It Was Written*. It's against this background of a Jewish backlash that Harland moved to Europe in 1889.[11]

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[11] It's unlikely that Harland's emigration to London offered him a sense of refuge from these forces. Between 1881 and 1905, exactly the years of Harland's European residency, London's own Jewish population leapt from 47,000 to 150,000.

Rather than compelling him to rethink his aesthetics the emerging voice of Jewish public opinion seems to have both strengthened Harland's devotion to aestheticism and calcified his latent anti-democratic sensibility. After arriving in London, Harland founded and co-edited the influential art-for-art's sake journal *The Yellow Book*.[12] The Luska novels had become a source of embarrassment; writing to the publisher T. Fisher Unwin, he confessed, "'as for the early novels attributed to me, I almost think they were written by another man. At any rate, they are very crude and immature performances; and nothing could induce me to consent to their re-appearance'" (quoted in Beckson 46-47).

For the rest of his brief life, Harland devoted himself to stories defined by a profound nostalgia for an aristocratic European pastoral, a fairy-tale world comprised of castles, estates, and fallen monarchs in which feudalistic ideals were held up against democratic sensibilities. In his short story "The Queen's Pleasure," for example, the heroine, an unpopular monarch, laments the consequences of "'universal suffrage" and the "folly of constitutional government" (70); she sneers at the opinions

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[12] Harland was responsible for the journal's literary contributions, Aubrey Beardsley for its art.

of the "riff-raff," the "vulgar rank and file" (47), and concludes that while a "'good despot is better than a mob, a bad despot is even better'" (70). This sensibility is considerably developed in an 1896 editorial titled "Dogs, Cats, Books, and the Average Reader," in which Harland indicts "The Average Man" as a lover of the obvious, as one whose attitude "towards the Subtle, the Elusive, when not an attitude of mere torpid indifference, is an attitude of positive distrust and dislike" ("Dogs, Cats, Books, and the Average Reader" 11).

One cannot help but hear in all of this Harland's condemnation of those Jews who dared to condemn his representational ideals and strategies. Not surprisingly then, Jews hold a special place in Harland's European romances: they are "aliens" and "dogs" whose opinions "don't count" ("The Queen's Pleasure" 46). In *The Cardinal's Snuff Box*, Harland's most popular novel, a Jew appears "dressed in gold chains and diamonds flashing from every corner of his person"; later a character recalls an estate which had fallen

> into the hands of the Jews, as everything more or less does sooner or later; and they [...] were going to turn the castle into a hotel, into one of those monstrous modern hotels, for other Jews to come to,

> when I happened to hear of it, and bought it. Fancy turning that splendid old castle into a Jew-infested hotel! (*Cardinal's Snuff Box*).

But Harland's invective against Jews only indicates how necessary they still were to his aesthetic vision–how much he needed them to signify his own artistic *and* social aristocracy. In Albert Parry's observation, Harland had come to absorb "bohemia's distrust of Jews, aligning them with the commercial Philistine world" (38).[11] Jews are still invoked as stereotypes; but now they adhere to the bohemian stereotype of crass, money-obsessed vulgarians; they are the foils that provide the aristocracy with its sense of cultural nobility.

By the late 1880's, the complex social and historic changes that began to take place within the New York Jewish community made the romantic representation of Jews as static, volitionless individuals, controlled by either archaic laws or supernatural forces, untenable. Harland had worked hard to keep society and history out of his novels, but social and historical forces ultimately made their claim on his career. The proliferation of vehicles of publicity (both in English and in Yiddish), the growing

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[11] Parry goes on to make the important observation that *both* Bohemia and Jews were "outcasts living in their self-enclosed worlds" (quoted in Beckson 38).

sense of group autonomy, of social and political engagement, all bolstered by a rapidly growing population, were an unignorable counter to Harland's representational ideals. A new public was emerging, one with its own set of economic concerns and ambitions, its own authors who had their own complex professional desires.

Chapter Two

Abraham Cahan: Rising Author, Static Masses

Champions of Abraham Cahan's career have tended to level the complexity of the author's literary and linguistic life into a harmonious "event." For them, "Cahan" is not a polysemous and contradictory sign, but an icon that embodies a variety of benevolent functions: champion of the poor, modernizer of Jewish tastes, father of Jewish-American literature. Jules Chametzky's observation that Cahan was a unique figure in American letters "mediating between various sensibilities, languages, cultures—Yiddish-Jewish, American-English, Russian" (vii) perfectly encapsulates this phenomenon. Rather than revealing how these cultural and linguistic "sensibilities" often competed with each other, or demonstrating how mediation may have been utilized for more coercive ends, Chametzky reads Cahan as a figure for the harmonization of disparate values, customs, and outlooks. It is an approach to Cahan like Chametzky's that has provoked Hannah Berliner Fischthal to argue that

> most English-writing critics tend to glorify the almost legendary Cahan, to praise his long-running

> editorship of the formerly largest foreign-language daily in the world, and to laud his own works written in English. This is a view, however, that is both sentimental and simplistic (1).

While Fischthal is correct to identify the hagiographic tendencies among many of Cahan critics, her condemnation of the author also shares their shortcoming. Like those who can only glorify Cahan, she too reads his career as a singular event and not as a manifestation of larger cultural and social phenomena.

The following analysis deviates from other investigations into Cahan's life and career in several crucial ways: it reads Cahan's professional ambitions as a negative response to an emerging Yiddish culture; it attempts to locate these ambitions within a matrix of well established literary and intellectual attitudes; and it attempts to demonstrate how this ambition grew out of a denigration of the Yiddish speaking masses and their culture. What I hope emerges from this examination is a more complex sense of how Cahan's literary ambition played itself out as it moved between two linguistic spheres and a

plurality of publics.

In *Literary Language and Its Publics in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, Erich Auerbach advances the compelling argument that the function and form of a language is always in flux–defined by pressures exerted upon it by surrounding historical developments. Adapting to new cultural encounters or catastrophic events, the language evolves and takes on a new identity; failing to adapt, it dies. While it is true that Yiddish had always demonstrated an uncanny ability to absorb even those cultures most hostile to it, by the late nineteenth century its function within the Eastern European Jewish milieu had been rigidly set. As the language of a relatively segregated and homogeneous population, Yiddish served the quotidian needs of an insular community: commerce, pedagogy, human relations. Its horizons were necessarily narrow; outside of an impressive body of folk literature, it had no codified literary tradition: no professional secular authors, no publishing houses, no audience. Moreover, Yiddish's intellectual scope was delimited by the aims of an entrenched Orthodoxy that employed the language primarily as a means of creating sermons, homilies, and tales to present

the Torah and the Talmud to an audience largely illiterate in Hebrew and Aramaic.

All this changed, however, during the mid-nineteenth century when Europe underwent a process of general liberalization and began lifting long-standing barriers to Jewish mobility. With the collapse of boundaries dividing the Yiddish-speaking world from dominant/dominating European cultures, many Jews began to redefine their identities according to new linguistic and intellectual opportunities. No longer bound to the provincial world of the ghetto or the *shtetl*, Jews sought out secular intellectual and literary vocations in the languages now available to them while simultaneously denouncing Yiddish as the crude language of an unenlightened peasantry. This process of "acculturation" was accelerated by institutional programs—primarily pedagogical—designed to mold Jews to a governmental standard of citizenry.

As a city within the realm Alexander II (Russia's most liberal Czar), Vilna, where Abraham Cahan was born, was an important site for this process of modernization. One may, in fact, read the trajectory of Cahan's early career as emblematic of the general de-Yiddishization tendencies that

had developed among many younger Jews during the 1870s. Although he had been born into a household with a strong rabbinical lineage, Cahan had developed an early attraction to the dominant intellectual mode of the day—political radicalism. Like other secular intellectual modes, politics had no Yiddish lexicon. Cahan, in fact, saw his intellectual formation as inseparable from the programs of Russification that defined the Jewish university curriculum of the period (Sanders 30), and shared the socialists' hostility "not merely to Yiddish as a language but to everything having to do with Jewish tradition" (*WOF* 17). For a new generation of Jews the provincial sphere of Yiddish and Judaism was to be displaced by the utopian ideal of universal brotherhood promised by socialism.

With the assassination Alexander II in 1881, however, Russian radicalism was driven underground and eventually out of the country. Forced into the same patterns of migration as Jews escaping religious persecution, and compelled to live under identical conditions, Cahan and other radicals continued to regard their refusal to adopt Yiddish as the hallmarks of intellectual and cultural status. This reluctance/refusal was institutionalized immediately upon

their arrival to America. While this coterie of intellectuals was highly fragmented—"a mixture of socialist, anarchist, positivist, village atheist [...]" (*WOF* 102)—it nonetheless possessed a critical and theoretical vocabulary capable of fostering some sense of cohesion and outlook. Having absorbed the practices of what Jurgen Habermas has called "rational-critical debate," radicals established a vibrant Russian intellectual culture on New York's Lower East Side. Coffee houses, restaurants, apartments, and lecture halls became sites in which the conditions of the new nation were actively debated by and for a public of *Russian-speaking* Jewish immigrants.

The Yiddish-speaking masses, however, who were denied linguistic access into the world of political ideas, debate, and action, could not develop a sense of social cohesion and the necessary critical apparatuses to be regarded as a true public. Recognizing the political potential of the ever-growing population of Lower East Side Jews and often sharing their predicament as exploited workers, intellectuals like Cahan stepped in to assume roles of leadership. In the process, however, they were compelled to adopt the language they had for so long rejected. While still denigrated by

the radicals, Yiddish now took on the role of imbuing the Jewish masses with a social and self-critical awareness. The malleability and elasticity of the language made it especially adaptable to new circumstances in the United States, and a new political mission. Soon, the critical-rational institutions that had initially developed in and around Russian were displaced by Yiddish organizations.

But this shift from an elite to a popular language was hardly democratic. The formation of the Yiddish radical press during the 1890s concretized the implicit hierarchy that was maintained within the Lower East Side Jewish community even after Yiddish had been adopted as its *lingua franca*. On the one hand there were a handful of intellectuals who now defined political policies and social prescriptions in articles and essays; on the other, there was an emerging public following the prescriptions the papers had laid out for it. Most critics have tended to view this relationship as positive, even necessary. Jules Chametzky's assertion that Cahan

> understood the limitations of the Jewish immigrant—indeed one of his self-proclaimed tasks for more than a dozen years had been to help bring

> a semi literate, largely uneducated and backward people [...] into the contemporary and enlightened world (54)

serves as the traditional justification for the relationship that Cahan and other intellectuals had adopted to the Yiddish-speaking masses. While it is true that early Yiddish newspapers like the *Arbeiter Zeitung* provided the masses with an invaluable vehicle for political legitimization, ontological reflection, and literary self-representation (especially in an emerging body of fiction and poetry), no critic has thought it worthwhile to investigate how the culture that developed around the Yiddish press more deeply inscribed the difference between an intellectual elite and the "chaotic" masses. Only in acknowledging this implicit hierarchy do we gain a clearer sense of Abraham Cahan's literary career.

Ronald Sanders' *The Downtown Jews* conveys the sense of power that the Yiddish press—its writers and editors—maintained over the Jewish immigrant workers. In addition to setting the tone and policies for labor activity, individuals like Cahan took a hands-on approach to directing

the action of the workers.[1] But Sanders also describes how a culture independent of the one developing on the streets had begun to take shape in the offices of these newspapers. Intellectuals who had once denigrated Yiddish, were now faced with the challenge of creating a professional identity within the language:

> The writer did not have to invest his integrity and temperament in a single item in each issue. Rather, in any given issue, he could be several things at once: poet [...] popular-science writer, socialist theoretician, storyteller, reporter and so on [...] (Sanders 108).

Undoubtedly much of the feeling of professional independence described here emerges as the consequence of this generation's first encounter with a free press; yet it is also the result of testing the limits of Yiddish itself: applying it to new uses and constantly moving on when one particular identity didn't fit. But such a sense of freedom,

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[1] Sanders description of the Cloak-maker's Union strike of May 1890 is an especially revealing of how Jewish laborers were the pawns in the debates between the anarchists and the socialists (115-120).

of testing identities, could only emerge in a world in which the exigencies of the working class were kept at bay. The Yiddish press professionalized intellectual labor and for the first time exempted the intellectuals from the very conditions they were analyzing in their writing.

Yet while many of the writers associated with the Yiddish press attempted to form an identity within the very language they often continued to denigrate as unsuited for "philosophical and political discussions" (Sanders 63), Cahan had been developing a lateral career as an English-language journalist ever since his arrival to the United States in 1882.[3] Cahan, who, like many of the

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[3] Biographical descriptions of Cahan's acquisition of English betray his proponents' most hagiographic tendencies. In terms which very closely echo the nationally ingrained myth of Abraham Lincoln's own education, Jules Chametzky and Ronald Sanders cast Cahan as an ideal instance of American self-reliance. By eliding the specific, material processes that are a necessary part of language acquisition (no matter how "miraculous"), Cahan's life is transformed into a Ragged Dick narrative, in which the hero--through his own incredible sense of will and effort--"masters" the language so thoroughly that he can begin publishing in English within six months of his arrival to the United States. A

intellectuals, "could never rid himself of [either] his innate prejudice against *zhargon* as a vehicle for serious writing" (Sanders 194), or his disdain for the parochial taste of the Yiddish-speaking public, would always maintain that a "serious" literary career was possible only in a "major" language. Thus, when he left the Yiddish press in 1897 to devote himself exclusively to a career as an English-language author and journalist, he did so not merely as an individual with his own sense of professional values, ambitions, and desires, but as the extreme manifestation of the ideas about literature, politics, and literary prestige that had always defined the modern Jewish intellectual's reaction to Yiddish.

Cahan's first crucial professional announcement as an English language author is his 1896 novel *Yekl*. The traditional summary of the novel is as follows: *Yekl* is the story of one recent immigrant's life on the Lower East Side. Its protagonist is Yekl, who, in his desire to be taken for a "real Yankee," has changed his name to Jake and constantly

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crucial reason for this critical short-coming, is a heavy and naïve use of Cahan's autobiography as the source biographical data.

employs his sketchy knowledge of American life, culture, and lingo to impress and dominate his co-immigrants.

Like many other immigrants of the period, Jake has had to leave behind a wife and child in Russia in order earn enough money to pay for their passage. In the months that follow his arrival to the United States, he expresses a genuine hope of bringing them over, but after three years he has adapted well to the life of a bachelor (he has kept his marriage a secret) and has put off his familial responsibilities for as long as possible. Ultimately, however, he receives word of his pious father's death and in a moment of guilt fulfills his promise to his wife and child.

Highly orthodox, and clinging to the mores of the old world, Gitl, his wife, comes to serve as source of never-ending embarrassment to the highly secularized Jake. From the moment of their reunion at Ellis Island, Jake views Gitl as an obstacle to the dreams he had envisioned for himself while living alone in the United States. Unable to escape the embarrassment of being shackled to a pious greenhorn like Gitl and in love with the equally pretentious Mamie, Jake eventually gets the divorce he has been hoping for.

But the novel's final chapter, "A Defeated Victor," seems to indicate that the idealized life he had envisioned for himself after his divorce will never materialize.

While this summary validates the interpretive inclinations of critics who read the novel as a critique of "Americanization" or the imperatives to assimilate, it fails to take into account how *Yekl* may also be read as a dramatization of Cahan's own professional ambitions. Rather than condemning "Americanization" as a process of cultural betrayal, the novel may be viewed as valorizing it as the necessary pre-condition for Cahan's hoped-for prestige in the world of American letters. In such a reading, Jake and Mamie emerge not as the novel's "villains," but as the embodiment of Cahan's own American ambitions: the characters who exhibit the strongest will to power in a world defined by Darwinian logic.

Before addressing the specific ways in which this logic manifests itself within the text and the way it comes to serve Cahan's notion of authorship and prestige, I would like to explore the conditions under which the novel emerged. Situating *Yekl* within the field of late nineteenth century American letters will illuminate Cahan's own

motivations for producing a novel that emphatically denies the Yiddish-speaking masses, both as characters and as real-world entities, the opportunities for cohering into a rational-critical public.

Yekl is a professional gamble—a work written in a recently acquired language that overtly aligns itself with late-nineteenth-century American literature's most controversial movement, "realism." Critical assessments of the nineteen- sixties and seventies almost always champion the novel, because their principles of hermeneutics subscribe to the belief that fiction can serve as a reliable mediator of reality. Critics like Sanders, Fine, and Chametzky, therefore, read Cahan's "gamble" as a *representational* risk—a break with the established aesthetics of romance. They value the novel because it tells the truth. I do not intend to re-articulate many of the criticisms of realism's representational claims. Although insightful and compelling, these arguments, developed largely over the last twenty years, do not address what is most crucial to my analysis of Cahan's career—realism as a *professional* strategy and prescription. What follows, then, is an attempt to describe how Cahan pursued a

specific literary formula to claim a place of prestige in what Pierre Bourdieu has termed "the field of cultural production."

Like all literary movements, realism was defined by a set of values and objectives that placed it in opposition to the aesthetics of other literary movements, most notably romance; in its struggle with romance, realism engaged in comprehensive promotional strategy to tout its socio-literary vision and thus establish its own cultural and artistic hegemony. Both H.H. Boyesen and William Dean Howells, for example, presented realism's mission as a liberation of the American reader and the American literary market from the hold of romance's immature and feminine artistic values.[3] They justify the movement's frank and unsentimental representation of sex, violence, and human corruption as necessary for the cultivation of a "mature"

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[3] Boyesen's characterization of the predicament of American letters warrants quotation:

> But there are other forces at work in our literature, which are more permanently injurious. Chief among these I hold to be the fact that the American Public, as far as the novelist is concerned, is the female half of it. The readers of novels are chiefly young girls, and a popular novel is a novel which pleases them. If an American author should attempt to write fiction for men, his books would share the fate of Rousseau's "Ode to Posterity," which never reached its address.

and "masculine" national literary identity.

While realism's tenets had been crystallized by the time Cahan wrote *Yekl* in 1895, its legitimacy as an aesthetic statement was still heavily argued in the most important literary journals of the decade. It continued to maintain its status as an *avant-garde* movement even while its constitutive elements had been largely standardized in novels, essays, and manifestos. The movement had taken on both a representational and a prescriptive force. By decoding and adapting realism's representational values, formulas, and devices, an emerging author proclaimed his allegiance to the movement's beliefs and objectives, demonstrated a kinship with its authors, and, in the process, announced his professional ambitions. *Yekl*, therefore, is not a novel that is invested simply in a truthful representation of the Jewish Lower East Side; it is an assertion of professional confidence and desire—a demand that its author be received as a "serious" literary figure aligned with a controversial literary movement.

The role of the tenement in Cahan's imagined process of literary ascent is crucial. Writing in 1895 about the sentimental trend in tenement fiction, William Howells

observed that "'middle class readers [had to] have toughness idealized, and they must have the slums cleaned up a little [...] if they are to have them in literature'" (quoted in Fine 99).[4] The assessment is not simply an encapsulation of everything that realism was allegedly combating–the immaturity of middle-class taste and its refusal to view life "as it is"–but one in a series of pronouncements that emerged throughout the decade attacking romance's representational limitations.[5] These pronouncements, which may be viewed as part of realism's general endorsement of a "local color" movement, were crucial in creating a space within the literary market for a new mode of ghetto representation. Thus David Fine observes that by the mid-nineties, "[t]he city's 'other half' had become [...] a product of proven marketability, one which the writer who wanted to demonstrate his contemporary social relevance could hardly resist" (96). It is exactly the objective of the remainder of this chapter to demonstrate how *Yekl* represented Cahan's self-conscious effort to prove his

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[4] See Sanford E. Marovitz's "Howells and the Ghetto: 'The Mystery of Misery,'" for a refutation of Howells' alleged social and political commitments.

[5] The most famous of these pronouncements came in the form of two

literary and professional relevance and how this pursuit was predicated on a denigration of the Yiddish-speaking masses.

Yekl's allegiance to realism is immediately apparent, evident in its complex orchestration of dialogue and narration. Cahan shrewdly weds each character's identity to the particular way he/she uses language—especially English. When characters attempt to speak it, their English is often incomprehensible, full of mispronunciations and heavy "accents." But above the cacophony of dialect is the detached and linguistically precise and confident voice of the omniscient narrator. To proponents of realism, this linguistic layering goes hand in hand with the movement's mimetic objectives. In Chametzky's assessment, it is precisely through its use of language that the narrative imbues life to its characters, drives home its crucial themes, and "lectures" to a general American readership in an effort to "dispel" their "implicit prejudice and ignorance" (63). But viewed from the point of view of professional ambition, this layering of language (heteroglossia) is one of the crucial devices Cahan employs to announce—to himself, to his audience—his mastery of the

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novellas by Stephen Crane: *Maggie: A Girl of the Street* (1893)

realist mode.

On a representational level, passages like the following may have provided Cahan's readership with a glimpse of Lower East Side Jewish life:

> Suffolk Street is in the very thick of the battle for breath. For it lies in the heart of that part of the East Side which has within the last two decades become the Ghetto of the American metropolis, and, indeed, the metropolis of the Ghettos of the world. It is one of the most densely populated spots on the earth—a seething human sea fed by streams, streamlets, and rills of immigration flowing from all the Yiddish-speaking centers of Europe. Hardly a block but shelters Jews from every nook and corner of Russia, Poland, Galicia, Hungary, Roumania; Lithuanian Jews, Volhynian Jews, south Russian Jews, Bessarabian Jews; Jews crowded out of the "pale of Jewish settlement; Russified Jews expelled from Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kieff, or Saratoff [...] (13-14).

But this passage is not simply heavily descriptive; it

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and *George's Mother* (1896).

verges on chaos.[6] Written in colons and semicolons rather than periods, the syntax is overwhelmed by the descriptive force. It's not simply that the passage tries to present an accurate image of Lower East Side life; it engages in rhetorical excess to announce its literary aims and allegiances.

Nowhere is Cahan's linguistic performance more in evidence, however, than in the way he allocates speech to his various characters. On the level of representation, this distribution of dialogue is certainly meant to support the narrator's characterization of the Lower East Side as "a human hodge podge with its component parts charged but not fused into one homogeneous whole" (14). Dalia Kandiyoti reads *Yekl*'s use of language as mimetic at heart—a work that demonstrates "that *the local itself* is heterogeneous and disequilibriated" (94). In her assessment, the novel's cacophonous amalgam of languages and dialects reveals the polyphony of Yiddish and the plurality of Lower East Side Judaism. The reader frequently encounters scenes in which linguistic differences create distances between the various

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[6] Dalia Kandiyoti has argued that *Yekl* shares with the local color narratives the tendency to report the sensual details of its area of concern (86).

characters that a shared religion cannot unite. One may, in fact, read the climatic divorce as the consequence of Jake's inability to tolerate Gitl's slow rate of language acquisition. Throughout the novel, Cahan utilizes the device of incorporating (mispronounced) English words into the "Yiddish speech" of his various characters.[1] Kandiyoti views this technique as underscoring a dialectical relationship between the two languages, "Yiddish syntax and intonation enter English just as English words incorporate themselves into Yiddish. In displacement, *both* languages acquire an elasticity attributed to Jewish languages [...]"(94). Her analysis suggests that there is something "natural" to Cahan's representational mode, since the novel mimetically "captures" a complex linguistic interaction. But while *Yekl* may be heteroglossic, it is also monolingual. What the novel achieves, it achieves exclusively in English. There is neither a pictographic nor a phonetic representation of Yiddish in the entire work. Although it might try to capture the language's nuances—its syntax, intonation, and diction—the novel can only do so through suggestion, deferral, and sleight of hand. Rather than

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[1] A technique that will be perfected by Henry Roth in *Call It*

reading this as a representational shortcoming, however, we may view it as another performance announcing Cahan's desire to be taken seriously as an American author. For *Yekl's* use of dialect, its attempt to create a unique Yiddish-inflected English, is yet another announcement of the novel's adherence to the literary codes established by realism in general and the local color movement in particular.

Read against Cahan's own aspirations to be taken seriously as an English language novelist, it becomes difficult to sustain an interpretation of *Yekl* that positions Jake as a "villain." As the only character in the novel unafraid to put his English on display, Jake shares many of the tendencies one finds in Cahan's own literary and linguistic values. But one need not resort to biographical analysis to illuminate the ways in which Jake comes to serve as Cahan's correlative; the novel itself valorizes the qualities of its eponymous hero that Cahan himself sought to cultivate.

The traditional interpretation of *Yekl* has been to read Jake as a man who constantly fails in his obligations to others. Instead of expressing a sense of responsibility to

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Sleep.

his past, or feelings of kinship to his fellow immigrants, Jake selfishly relishes his life as an American bachelor and ridicules everyone who cannot keep up with his standards of "assimilation." His pretensions are most viciously inflected upon his newly arrived wife, whom he often wishes gone or dead. But this is a narrow reading of a complex text, one that singles out a particular character for traits found in others throughout the novel.

One may be inclined to view the pious and learned Bernstein, who works with Jake in the cloak shop, as the embodiment of an ethical standard. But time and again, Cahan "marks" this character in the most dubious terms–even in what might be construed as the novel's only ethical outburst. After engaging in debate over the merits of American athletes, Bernstein rebukes Jake for not applying himself to a more productive course of self-improvement:

> "Look here, Jake, since fighters and baseball men are all educated, then why don't you try to become so? Instead of *spending* your money on fights, dancing, and things like that, would it not be better if you paid it to a teacher?"
>
> Jake flew into a fresh passion. "*Never min'*

> what I do with my money," he said. "I don't steal it from you, do I? Rejoice that you keep tormenting your books. Much does he know! Learning, learning, and learning, and still he can not speak English. I don't learn and yet I speak quicker than you!"
>
> A deep blush of wounded vanity mounted to Bernstein's sallow cheek. *"Ull right, ull right!"* he cut the conversation short, and took up the newspaper.

Easily cowed in the face of Jake's confidence and aggression, Bernstein retreats into the background where he remains for most of the novel. Moreover, the very terms that Cahan utilizes to characterize Bernstein, here and throughout the work, are almost always negative and unattractive: "vain," "sallow," "dyspeptic" (1), "lurid" (53).

Nor can this claim be made for Jake's wife, Gitl. Unable to make sense of her new world, terrified by her husband's transformation, and intimidated by Mamie, Gitl is the embodiment of victim-hood. Lacking even a suggestion of fortitude and resilience, her unvarying response to each

misfortune that befalls her is to weep, hide, or faint. At times the narrator seems to validate and legitimize Jake's sense of revulsion:

> Poor Gitl! She strained every effort to please him; she tried to charm him by all the simple-minded little coquetries she knew, by every art which her artless brain could invent; and only succeeded in making herself more offensive than ever (61).

In short, no character in *Yekl* offers a standard of ethics against which to condemn Jake's behavior. Most, in fact, are involved in the very process of assimilation for which readers have traditionally condemned him. This is most strikingly revealed in Gitl's own process of assimilation. Most readings of *Yekl* position Gitl as the character least willing or able to bend to the mores of the new world. While it's true that Gitl is revolted by all she sees when she first arrives to Ellis Island, the narrator makes it clear that her process of "ungreening" begins as soon as she sets foot on American soil. At first she is compelled to follow Jake's lead: to ride the tram on the Sabbath, to tolerate his new name for her, "Gertie"—"a word phonetically

akin to Yiddish for Gentile" (41). But although she is terrified of shedding her piety and the clothes that manifest it, we learn early that she possesses a secret desire to be more modern:

> All at once her face brightened up with temptation. She went to fasten the hallway door of the kitchen on its latch, and then regaining the bedroom shut herself in. After a lapse of some ten or fifteen minutes she re-emerged, attired in her brown holiday dress in which she had first confronted Jake on Ellis Island, and with the tall black straw hat on her head. Walking on tiptoe, as though about to commit a crime, she crossed over to the looking glass. Then she paused, her eyes on the door, to listen for possible footsteps. Hearing none, she faced the glass. "Quite a *panenke*! [young noblewoman]" she thought to herself, all aglow with excitement, a smile, at once shamefaced and beatific, melting her features(40).

And it isn't only Jake who cannot tolerate her inability to assimilate more quickly. As her only

companion, Mrs. Kavarsky constantly doles out (terrible) advice in the hope of saving Gitl's marriage. But rather than identifying Jake as the source of marital distress, Mrs. Kavarsky fixes the blame on Gitl for refusing to "modernize" her appearance. By the end of the novel, however, it is clear that Gitl has crossed a limit; even her engagement to the equally pious Bernstein will not bring her back to her original orthodoxy:

> The rustic "greenhornlike" expression was completely gone from her face and manner, and [...] there was noticeable about her a suggestion of that particular air of self-confidence with which a few months' life in America is sure to stamp on the looks and bearing of every immigrant (83).

This process of Americanization and assimilation is played out within a very specific milieu. For it is not simply that the world of *Yekl's* Lower East Side is, as Kandiyoti asserts, heterogeneous ("a model for the multifarious ethnic community"(90))—it is brutally competitive and devoid of a unifying ethos. Here, those institutions and beliefs traditionally responsible for

crystallizing a public spirit—religion, politics, family, friendship—are rendered impotent. In Mrs. Kavarsky's words, America is a place where a "father is no father—a wife, no wife"(57). While this notion is most obviously demonstrated in the disintegration of Jake and Gitl's marriage, it's present everywhere in the novel. What does it mean, after all, that the only sustained description of a religious ritual is of a divorce—one conducted by a rabbi who is reluctant to dissuade the couple from separating for fear of losing his fee (83)?

Nor does politics fill the void left by an absent religion. While the workers in the novel are exploited by a boss who takes malicious pleasure in their desperation (9), radicalism is rendered anonymous and relegated to the background. In the novel's opening catalogue of Lower East Side "types," we come across a "cadaverous young man" reading a socialist magazine in Yiddish. But this is all he does, or rather all he is; unnamed, he is never allowed to emerge as a voice for political action. The only instance of union activity is passed over in a single sentence: "On the Wednesday in question Jake and his shopmates had warded off a reduction of wages by threatening a strike, and were

accordingly in high feather" (45). The success of the political act has no value in itself; it simply establishes the upbeat domestic mood that follows.

It's not that *Yekl* merely denies its characters the institutional practices and beliefs necessary to cultivate solidarity. Characters who one would expect be united by religion, emotions, shared experiences, or social outlook mercilessly assail each other. One source for these disputes is economic; there isn't enough work to go around; and rather than uniting for equity, each worker sees himself in competition with the other for his very subsistence (8-9). The other source of tension is sexual competition. Virtually every woman in the novel vies for Jake's affection, and the cruelty they inflict upon each other in this pursuit is remarkable, as we see in the tensions between Mamie and Fanny (21-23), in Mamie's intimidation of Gitl (49-50), and in Fanny's attempt to exact revenge on Mamie through Gitl (61-64).

In fact, far from condemning Jake and Mamie, *Yekl*, in constructing an ethos predicated on brute competition, can be viewed as celebrating their dynamically aggressive tendencies. In a novel in which few characters are given

names and in which the community of Jewish immigrants is alternately referred to as "bedraggled half naked humanity," "an assemblage," "a swarm," "a seething human sea," "a multitude," Jake and Mamie are presented with clearly defined personalities and as characters capable of rising above the unformed and nameless mass that surrounds them. Jake especially is always at the center of attention, not simply because he is a braggart, but because when compared to the awkward and unattractive bodies of those who surround him, his powerful physique and seemingly limitless energy emerge as admirable traits.

Nowhere is this borne out more than in the scene that takes place in Joe's Dancing Academy, the place where immigrants who toil in the clothing industries by day labor at night to acquire a skill they regard as necessary for identifying themselves as "real" Americans. Inept, unable to display the grace one associates with dancing, these characters never rise above the status of mass; they are a "damp-haired, disheveled, reeking crowd—an uproarious human vortex, whirling to squeaky notes of a violin and the thumping of a piano" (15).

Contrast this image with the one presented of Jake—a

"strapping figure towering over the circling throng before him" (16). In a world of awkward bodies, Jake emerges as the epitome of elegance and ease, and the novel leaves little doubt as to why women desire him:

> Jake was bent on giving Mamie what he called a "sholid good time [...]." They spun along with all-forgetful gusto; every little while he lifted her on his powerful arms and gave her a "mill," he yelping and she squeaking for sheer ecstasy, as he did so [...](20).

But it isn't simply physicality that elevates Jake above the crowd. In a novel in which America is viewed as either an abomination or as merely an abode, Jake is the only character to give voice to its ideals, the only one who has tested the limits of its freedom. While most of the immigrants who surround him have never left the boundaries of the Lower East Side, Jake has lived in Boston and among non-Jews. His assertion that "[h]ere a Jew is as good as a Gentile" (5) is not empty boasting, but a statement predicated on his own experience. Thus, his prescription for assimilation may be viewed not so much as a rejection of one's past but an embrace of the potential of the new land—a

potential everyone else in the novel is either afraid or unwilling to experience.

It is true that the novel negates most of these qualities once Gitl arrives to America. Where he had once had an energetic and ambitious *joie de vivre*, Jake is now a cold-hearted hedonist cursing his wife for destroying the life of leisure he had created for himself. But no sooner does the novel deny Jake his sense of "primal" energy than it transfers them onto his future wife, Mamie. Strong, predatory, confident, Mamie is Gitl's antithesis. Unintimidated by the uncertainty of the future, it is she who orchestrates the terms of the divorce, reassures Jake of their future together, and produces the capital necessary for realizing their dream of opening their own business.

At the end of the novel, Cahan assigns each couple an entrepreneurial fantasy. Jake and Mamie hope to open a dancing school, Gitl and Bernstein a grocery store. These ventures are not neutral plot elements, but another device through which the text gets to assert the dominance of Jake and Gitl. Which couple, the narrative seems to ask, possesses the traits necessary for successfully competing in a capitalist culture, for realizing the archetypal American

dream of owning one's own business: the confident, energetic, and aggressive Jake/Mamie, or the timid and intimidated Gitl/Bernstein? The logic is clearly Darwinian: the aggressive and the confident belong together. And in finally pairing Jake with Mamie and Gitl with Bernstein the novel itself comes to condone the divorce that readers have traditionally blamed on Jake.

I have tried to show how a close reading of *Yekl* may be utilized to support a celebratory rather than condemnatory view of aggression and competition. I would now like to explore the ways in which Cahan frames the logic of competition as an attempt to "figure" his own professional ambitions. While the Jewish mass is everywhere present in *Yekl*, the novel delimits only a half-dozen characters, and while none of these emerges as a clear surrogate for Cahan, the novel's reluctance to fully condemn Jake is worth exploring in this light.

Always impatient with the Yiddish-speaking Jews' refusal or inability to adapt to the mores of the new world, Jake takes on the role of advocate, arguing the merits of shedding one's attachment to a linguistic and cultural past "'Once I live in America [...] I want to know that I live in

America. *Dot'sh a' kin' a man I am!* One must not be a *greenhorn*. Here a Jew is as good as a Gentile" (5). If *Yekl* may be read as Cahan's attempt to convey Lower East Side tenement life to a largely Gentile readership, he creates in Jake a character who performs the analogous function of describing Gentile America to a provincial and intimidated Jewish population.

In large part, Jake's proclamation–for which he always has an audience–that one must abandon Yiddish is analogous to the Jewish intellectuals' own reluctance to employ the language in their own cultural and political program. But Jake takes it further; like Cahan who had left the Yiddish press to pursue a career as an English language novelist, Jake's sense of prestige and ambition is intimately bound to his ability to perform in English, to the distance he can place between himself and the language of the *shtetl*. While he lacks the education that Bernstein possesses, Jake has a fluency (albeit imperfect) in English that he is never afraid to put on display. Bernstein may "learn, and learn, and learn," but Jake speaks.

United into a single character, the educated Bernstein and the ambitious Jake would certainly come to stand in for

Cahan in a more complete way. Why, then, the division? Why is the highly educated Bernstein completely overwhelmed by his efforts to learn English, and Jake's incredible sense of drive ultimately rendered impotent? The answer to these questions is bound to the notion that *Yekl* is a work created by Cahan to "figure" out his literary and cultural ambitions. For in writing *Yekl*, Cahan creates a world that can both account for and celebrate his own professional trajectory.

In the absence of a unifying ethos, normative religious codes, or institutional forces, *Yekl* presents a Lower East Side in which a plurality of national, professional, and linguistic identities can thrive. But Cahan's refusal to present Lower East Side ethnicity and culture as a monolithic block is not simply a commitment to realism's mimetic claims; it is also a strategy for validating his own difficult cultural choices. If any vocation and any identity may emerge from this world, why not "the Jewish intellectual who rejects Yiddish to pursue an English language literary career"?

As the "figure" that is granted the authority to "enter," describe, and comment upon all of the novel's

intimate and public spaces without participating in their happenings, only the narrator can be said to employ the linguistic mode that most fully puts Cahan's proficiency in English into evidence. No character in the novel even approaches the sophistication of the narrator's discourse. Chametzky sums up the phenomenon nicely:

> [T]he language of the narrator [...] completely envelops and is obviously superior in every respect to the crude, painfully rendered immigrant's English. The narrator is capable of frequent conceptual formulations "placing" the story in a wider historical context, unlike the immigrant's language that is sharply set apart from it (73).

But these linguistic discrepancies are not natural; they are *constructed*—and constructed in a very particular way. Cahan's notion of heteroglossia, while nuanced in its allocation of linguistic competence to the various characters, is ultimately binary. Between the erudite discourse of the narrator and the clumsy, imperfect speech of the characters stands a vast and unmediated gulf; and ultimately, it is Cahan who imposes and maintains this

linguistic distance. But to what end?

The Lower East Side depicted in *Yekl* is a milieu in which a variety of "types" are allowed to thrive, but Cahan "fixes" them in such a way that no character is permitted to encroach upon the hegemonic status of the narrator's authorial and authoritative voice. Thus, it is not simply that Bernstein "lacks" the drive or the skill necessary to put his education into action or that Jake "loses" his sense of ambition the moment Gitl arrives; it is that Cahan willfully denies them even a suggestion of those attributes necessary for the realization of full autonomy. Viewed in this light, Jake's illiteracy (he can neither read nor write Yiddish or English) is just one in a series of devices designed by Cahan to distance the narrator's voice from the world it describes.

However, it isn't only the individual characters who are denied this autonomy. As an undifferentiated mass, the community of Lower East Side Jews never amounts to anything more than "an assemblage," "a swarm," "a throng." In denying them a communal ethos and an ability to unite as a public capable of engaging in critical-rational debate, Cahan holds down the masses, and thus elevates his own

authorial position. *Yekl* never seeks to present tenement life as an experience *felt* by those who live within it. Instead, the narrator, like Jake at his height, manages to "pick and nudge his way through the dense swarms of bedraggled half-naked humanity" (14) and is always already above/beyond/outside the ghetto.

What ultimately ensures Cahan's sense of hegemony, however, is that *Yekl* is a work written in English. The tactics he deploys within the novel are also used against a "real" social entity—the Yiddish-speaking reader. Thus, Jake's illiteracy stands in for the predicament of the Lower East Side Jew in general; for just as Cahan denies Jake access to the world of letters within the novel, he denies the Yiddish-speaking public access to the world he has made of their lives. The overwhelming majority of immigrant Jews simply could not read the novel and so could neither debate nor challenge the way they had been depicted within it.

The Lower East Side intelligentsia had always viewed the formation of a Yiddish press as a compromise: a concession to the "inferior" language of the masses as way of putting political ideas and theory into action. Cahan's ideas about literary prestige, however, demonstrate an

unwillingness to take part in this compromise. In his particular pursuit of an English-language literary career, Cahan did not simply abandon the politics he once espoused, he rejected it. *Yekl* is a work that dramatizes Cahan's ambitions, but the way in which it does so is repressive, refusing the Yiddish-speaking mass (both as characters and as "real world" entities) any ability to realize or access autonomy and publicness.

Had Cahan achieved the success he had hoped for within the American literary milieu, his hegemonic social vision would, in all likelihood, have remained confined to novels and other literary outlets. But while *Yekl* was favorably and prominently reviewed by William Dean Howells, and Cahan singled out as an important member in the next wave of American realism, the novel was largely neglected by the reading public and rejected by critics guided by the tenets of romance.

The German-Jewish press was especially critical of the novel. This wealthier and more acculturated group of Jews saw in Cahan's fiction a potential threat to their established social status. For them, *Yekl*'s "dark sordid picture of Ghetto life" (*American Hebrew* 275) would only

fuel the anti-Semitism latent in many American readers (Harap 506-508).

In the end, Cahan's literary ambitions were always thwarted.[5] It is therefore as a failed English-language writer that he assumed full editorial control of the *Jewish Daily Forward* in 1903. Under his direction, the *Forward* would rise from the brink of economic collapse to become the largest foreign language newspaper in the United States, one with a daily circulation of 250,000 readers.

While it is true that the paper published the works of Sholem Asch, Lamed Shapiro, Israel and Isaac Singer and that it codified the Jewish immigrant masses into a politically influential public, only a few critics have thought it worthwhile to examine the more pernicious effects of Cahan's editorship—effects that prompted many who worked under Cahan to echo David Pinski's assertion that the *Forward* was the "'greatest misfortune to befall the Jewish people since the destruction of Jerusalem'" (quoted in Harap 490). With the *Forward*, the hegemonic order that Cahan had imagined and imposed upon the world of *Yekl* was released from the world

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[5] Cahan would publish only two other novels: the now nearly forgotten, *The White Terror and the Red* and his most famous work, *The Rise of David Levinsky*.

of "mere" fiction; it became the way in which Cahan viewed his readers and the justification for fifty years of his editorial practices and social prescriptions.

The relationship that Cahan would develop with the *Forward* and its readers was defined by his response to the question that had always vexed the Lower East Side intelligentsia: to what end could Yiddish be legitimately employed? His decision to rid the paper of the "unworkmanlike dilettantism" he associated with the entrenched interest in "pure" socialism that had come to define the Yiddish press during his absence (Sanders 267), was an early indication of where he would take the paper. In Cahan's journalistic vision, ideas were now to be presented pragmatically, anecdotally—free of theory. While the intelligentsia had struggled for more than a decade to mold the Yiddish press to their political and theoretical values, Cahan would cater to popular tastes. By employing the sensationalistic techniques that had come to define Hearstian and Pulitzerian journalism and displacing the overtly philosophical tenor of the *Forward* with *shund*—"a fusion of vulgarity, sentimentality, and banality in language and literature" (Harap 489)—Cahan hoped to

transform Yiddish into a vehicle for the embourgeoization of the masses.

It is not clear, however, what Cahan's ideals of "Americanization" entailed. To Ronald Sanders, the editor's prescriptions were part and parcel of his rejection of the intelligentsia's theoretical politics. Instead of promulgating the "pure" socialism of the earlier decade, the new *Forward* would be devoted to cultivating the manners and behavior of its readers. For Louis Harap the adoption of such a policy is merely another instance of Cahan's cynical relationship with his audience; rather than addressing social and ontological complexities, Cahan offers superficial remedies:

> [H]is concept lacked perspective and was limited to striving towards the prevailing code of manners and Anglo-Saxon mores—the use of a handkerchief instead of the sleeve, proper table etiquette—and minimizing external differences from the "Americans" [...](491).

For Jules Chametzky, however, Cahan's concern with manners was important—practical and easy to follow recommendations for becoming an American. I hope to demonstrate, however,

that Chametzky's position is historically untenable.

No feature of the *Forward* was more important in disseminating Cahan's prescriptions for Americanization than the letters to the editor, the *Bintel Brief*. The *Bintel Brief* was an ingenious invention; rather than addressing general issues to an anonymous readership, it spoke to the specific anxieties of particular individuals. Its popularity was immediate and long lasting–accounting for the paper's long success. Most critics have tended to regard the feature as a benign phenomenon–the "patient and omniscient father, wise in the ways of America, to whom one wrote seeking council" (Sanders 263). But the way this feature helped to foster Cahan's particular relationship with his readers warrants more critical attention than it has received.

Ostensibly established to mold immigrants into American citizens by encouraging them to abandon their rustic folkways (*Bintel Brief* 22), the *Bintel Brief* did far more than prescribe remedies for various crises; it inscribed a particular relationship between desperate readers who offered up the most intimate details of their lives in search of help and Cahan who replied to them. The tone of

the exchange is almost always the same: a desperate reader pleas with a "Dear," "Worthy," or "Esteemed" editor for advice on a grave matter. The letters, which almost always speak to an immediate and intimate crisis, are generally conveyed in several detailed paragraphs marked by heavy pathos: "I hope you will allow me to unburden my heart," "With tear-filled eyes I beg you," "I have a grievous wound in my heart." While there are occasional bursts of emotion on the part of the anonymous editor who responds to these letters, the advice he offers is usually brief, detached, and full of imperatives—completely at ease with his recommendations. The editor who responds is, in short, linguistically and existentially removed from the reader who asks for advice. On the surface, this is a truism. The discrepancy between one who asks for help and one who gives it is the defining characteristic of advice columns. Because they are exempt from witnessing the ways in which it unfolds as practice, however, advice columnists rarely have to live with the consequences of their advice. The tone they employ in doling out recommendations betrays how removed they are from the problems of their readers. But my argument is not about advice columns in general; it is about

the way in which their inherent hierarchy comes to serve as yet another device in Cahan's professional formation.

If, as Sanders suggests, the *Forward* had become the realist novel Cahan had always hoped he would write ("What book that he could write could ever be adequate to this flow of reality that now surged through his eyes and ears, his brain and his newspaper?" (268)), how are we to understand the dynamics of exchange between desperate reader and all-knowing advisor? Certainly, this isn't the dialogism one associates with the novel. If anything, the *Bintel Brief* not only reinforces the discrepancy between an ignorant and chaotic public and an all-knowing narrator/author that Cahan had constructed in the fictional world of *Yekl*, it concretizes this relationship into a social reality. With the force of an immensely popular newspaper behind him, Cahan "really" does emerge as an authority to whom the immigrant readership "really" yields.

As with *Yekl*, the Jewish immigrant public remains monolithically fixed in Cahan's imagination. As a crowd incapable of engaging in debate or absorbing complex political arguments and ideas, they justify the *Forward*'s editorial practices during Cahan's tenure. Cahan's

immediate rejection of the overtly theoretical politics of the socialists in favor of sensationalism and popular features betrays this pessimism. It is an extreme act, devoid of a sense of nuance, compromise, or mediation. Jules Chametzky's assessment that "Cahan had to condescend because it was the only technique that worked" (19) is less a defense than an easy generalization; like Cahan's own pessimistic attitude toward the *Forward*'s public, it elides all specificity about Lower East Side life at the turn of the century, and tells us little about the degrees of intellectual potential among a vast lay-readership.

In the absence of crucial socializing institutions, the *Forward* undoubtedly played an important role in providing its readers with a sense of political and cultural identity, especially in the first decades of the twentieth century, but only Howe, Harap, and Fischthal have thought it worthwhile to discuss the ways in which Cahan and the paper simultaneously advanced Jewish-Yiddish culture (*Yiddiskeit*) while undermining it.[9]

Cahan's belief that *Yiddishkeit* should eventually

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[9] In Howe's compellingly dialectical formation, Cahan helped to create Jewish culture while at the same time undermining it, "as if creation and disintegration were for him equally terms of

succumb to a process of Americanization occurs at the very moment when Yiddish begins to achieve literary recognition. By the 1920s, the Yiddish-speaking world had begun to produce its own professional authors, critics, and editors, its own publishing houses and literary periodicals, and its own literary public. The *Forward*'s role in this process of institutionalization cannot be overstated. For more then fifty years the paper employed and published a coterie of Yiddish writers who would ultimately provide the language the literary legitimacy that Cahan had once thought impossible. Yet their efforts to "fence off" Yiddish from "alien intrusion" and to establish the language as a permanent literary and cultural achievement came into conflict with Cahan's belief that Yiddish had value only to the extent that it could serve as a vehicle for Americanization (*WOF* 530-531). Like the efforts of the socialists before them, their pursuit of a Yiddish aesthetic would be thwarted. Given this cultural impasse, Lamed Shapiro's assertion that Cahan viewed the *Forward* as a "shop" in which literary authors were merely hands in the service of the editor's will (Harap 489-490) stands as one

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fate" (525).

of the Yiddishists' more benign denunciations of the editor. More extreme, and perhaps more representative, is Joseph Opatashu's accusation that Cahan "'spit'" on [the Yiddish] language'" (quoted in Harap 489).

Shortly after establishing his cloak-making enterprise, the eponymous "hero" of Cahan's most famous novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, falls under the influence of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer. Concluding that "a working-man, and everyone else who was poor was an object of contempt [...] —a misfit, a weakling, a failure, one of the muck" (283), Levinsky finds in Darwin and Spencer a justification for his career as an arch-capitalist and his exploitation of the workers beneath him. Throughout this chapter I have tried to demonstrate the ways in which a Darwinian sensibility governed Cahan's literary and editorial career decades before *David Levinsky* was published in 1917.[13] Cahan's ambition as an English-language author was predicated on creating a literary world in which the Yiddish-speaking masses could never cohere into a critical-rational public. His career as editor of the *Forward* was

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[13] In one of his earliest English-language pieces, "Realism" (1889), Cahan lauds Spencer for paving the way for a new literary sensibility.

marked by his refusal to compromise on crucial intellectual, linguistic, and literary issues. His insistence on the use of *shund* and sensationalism, even in the wake of emerging Yiddish literary professions and publics, testifies to a reluctance (or refusal) to view his readers and his writers as endowed with the literary and intellectual potential he himself had exhibited as a newly arrived immigrant.

Cahan's detractors and defenders all work from the presupposition that his career was somehow the expression of a unique personality. While such an assessment is certainly true within the development of Yiddish-American culture, a broader socio-historical perspective reveals the extent to which Cahan's vocational development played itself out along a highly inscribed professional axis. Morgan, Ford, Carnegie, Hearst, Pulitzer—the list of analogous corporate personalities is long and implicates all sectors of American business. With the birth of American corporations in the late nineteenth century, a site emerged in which a range of "individualisms" could be enacted. A new institutional type was born: the tycoon, the robber-baron, the captain of industry—a charismatic figure who exercised his status as individual by denying autonomy to those beneath him. As a

former reporter for both Hearst's and Pulitzer's papers, Cahan had come into contact with many of these individuals. His attitude to the Yiddish-speaking masses reveals how thoroughly he had absorbed their values.

Chapter Three

Anzia Yezierska: The Poetics of Reclusion

Abraham Cahan defined his professional identity by attaching himself to various political and cultural movements. His life's work is a reflection of the values and habits he had acquired as an active participant in socialism, realism, and Hearstian journalism. Moreover, his careers as political activist, author, and editor would not have been possible without the personal associations he formed with men such as Samuel Gompers, William Dean Howells, and Scholem Asch.

As an immigrant and a woman whose literary goals were formed in the early years of the twentieth century, Anzia Yezierska was largely denied access to the professional institutions and associations that made Cahan's career possible. As a result, much of her work seems to lack the sense of coherence and unity that comes with working from within a literary movement. Realism, melodrama, lyricism work together in her stories in ways that are often cacophonous, but always compelling. *Hungry Hearts*, Yezierska's first book, is highly indicative of this phenomenon. Composed of stories written between 1914 and 1919, the work reflects Yezierska's shifting authorial

desires and values as she made her way through the literary world. What follows, then, is an attempt to understand Anzia Yezierska's efforts to define and make sense of her own literary identity through her fiction. By exploring the various figures, motifs, and styles she employed in *Hungry Hearts*, I hope to demonstrate how institutional exclusion and its consequences compelled Yezierska to develop her own complex and highly unique authorial sensibilities.

Anzia Yezierska was born in Plotsk in the Russian Pale sometime around 1881.[1] After her family had settled on the Lower East Side in the early 1890s, she, her brothers, sisters, and mother assumed the economic burden of the household. As a religious scholar, her father was exempted from these economic responsibilities and was afforded the leisure to pursue his religious studies.

Yezierska's dismal predicament was typical of the experiences of most immigrant children of the period. But while the poverty of the Lower East Side placed a tremendous burden on children, it also created the conditions through which girls could begin to claim their independence, since participation in the economic sphere

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[1] Both the year of her birth and the year of her arrival to the United States remain unknown.

began to imply a sense of financial and social autonomy (Ewen 106-107). This sense of independence was bolstered by the growth of a modern urban culture. "If the older generation had difficulties accepting new ways," Elizabeth Ewen has observed, "for their daughters contact with American culture at work, at school, or in the street created new definitions of femininity that led to a rejection of the constriction of family bonds" (Ewen 208). The tenement was not exempted from the influence of this new discourse.

Yezierska would always "resent [...] her status as an immigrant, as someone separate from the 'real America' of the native born" (Schoen 6), and like many immigrants eager to enter American culture, she believed that education was the crucial first step in realizing her social and intellectual ambitions. She had defied her father by attending night school in preparation for college, had reserved a part of her wages to pay for her education, and, in an act of incredible rebellion, left her parents' house as an adolescent to act on her newly acquired sense of autonomy and ambition (Henriksen 17).

One may be tempted to view her eventual admission into Columbia Teachers College as the pay-off for an early life of hard work and determination. But this simply

wasn't the case. It's true that as a resident at the Clara de Hirsch Home for Working Girls, Yezierska had come to the attention of wealthy German-Jewish philanthropists who offered to fund her schooling, but this act of "generosity" came with the stipulation that she forego an academic curriculum and pursue a degree in domestic science instead. As an immigrant from one of the most rural regions of Eastern Europe, as a women who had had her cultural sensibilities shaped by a highly patriarchal Judaism, Yezierska had grown up in a world defined by extremely narrow horizons and possibilities. Admission into Teachers College should have remedied this predicament, but to large extent it merely re-inscribed the narrowly defined world she had fled. It's with good reason, then, that exclusion from cultural and intellectual life would become a crucial topos in Yezierska's work.

By the time she had entered Teachers College, Yezierska had already developed a sense of creative ambition and hoped that collegiate life would play an important role in her literary development (Henriksen 17). A list of the few academic courses she was able to audit—Shakespeare, Development of Medieval and Modern Civilization, Political and Social Ethics—indicates the degree to which she saw immersion in a Western intellectual

and cultural history as part of her own intellectual formation. Like the generation of Jewish immigrant males who would attend City College a generation later, Yezierska believed that immersion in politics, aesthetics, and history were necessary for shaping her literary identity.

But a writer's sense of herself isn't merely or primarily formed in the classroom; it is shaped by the network of informal relationships that develop with peers, teachers, and other young, ambitious cultural producers. Unable to participate in the conversations, debates and lectures that define an active collegiate life, Yezierska was denied access to a crucial step in the process of her intellectual and authorial development. As her daughter and biographer, Louise Levitas Henriksen has observed, "To be so close to poetry and philosophy, yet excluded from it, filled her college years with frustration. On the campus she had frequent reminders she was out of place" (18).

Without access to a literary education (history, poetics, composition), Yezierska once again found herself in a world defined by narrow horizons. While always filled with a deep sense of ambition, her writing would always reflect this exclusion from academic culture. She would develop a set of values that would stand in diametric opposition to the values of the academy: emotionalism

rather than abstraction, looseness rather than form, expression rather than analysis, inspiration rather than knowledge—these would become the hallmarks of her writing.

Without the contacts that might have developed had she been a part of academic, intellectual, or literary culture, Yezierska had to adopt her own strategies for publicity and self-promotion. Believing that her inability to negotiate the hierarchical structure of the publishing world presented the greatest obstacle to her career, Yezierska transformed impersonal institutional relationships into highly intimate ones. For years, adherence to professional decorum had done nothing to advance her career, and she began to circumvent institutional bureaucracies by compelling cultural figures to deal with her personally. In highly intimate letters and surprise office visits Yezierska would, in her phrase, "pour out her heart" to editors, writers, and publishers. By relating the difficulties of being a marginalized immigrant author, she hoped to generate enough sympathy to forge a crucial cultural alliance.

For example, in September 1916, Yezierska wrote to her childhood friend, Rose Pastor Stokes, begging to help her publish her first story, "A Free Vacation House," which she had been circulating for years:

> Your encouraging words about the stories I sent you make me work harder than ever. My one release, my one prayer is my writing. If it is possible for you to get Everybody's or the Metropol interested in publishing some of the stories I sent you, you would save me from the "Charities" (quoted in Henriksen 71).

Like Yezierska, Stokes had grown up a poor immigrant on the Lower East Side, but managed to achieve some recognition as a journalist and playwright. As the letter suggests, Stokes was well connected in the publishing world. There is no record of how Yezierska's friend reacted to the letter, but shared background and common cultural aspirations must have made her receptive to Yezierska's plea. In any event, "A Free Vacation House" was soon published in *Forum*.

No figure was more crucial to the development of Yezierska's intellectual, artistic, and professional sensibilities, however, than John Dewey. In 1917 Yezierska walked into Dewey's office at Columbia. She had not come to seek his help with the publication of a story, but to voice her grievance with the New York public school system which had rejected her application to resume her position as a cooking teacher. Yezierska, recently divorced and financially overburdened, contended that she had been

denied the job because she did not comply to Anglo-Saxon standards of appearance and grooming.[3] She knew that Dewey had been a champion of progressive struggles and hoped that he would take up her cause.

He did more. To prove her intellectual worth, Yezierska had brought "A Free Vacation House" (in published form) to the meeting. Because he felt the story gave voice to "lived" experience and rejected the sterile conventions and repressive traditions of Anglo America, Dewey found Yezierska's affective and form-less writing admirable. He advised Yezierska to give up teaching and devote herself exclusively to writing. He then invited her to enroll in his seminar on social and political philosophy. Later, it was Dewey who would publish her third story, "Soap and Water and the Immigrant" in the *New Republic*.

Until her meeting with Dewey, exclusion from intellectual and cultural life had been *the* defining influence on Yezierska's professional sensibilities. Without the support of institutions, teachers, or peers, without membership in a group or organization, Yezierska could only grope through a literary career. Because she had never taken part in the conversations that contribute

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[3] Louise Levitas Henriksen raises the possibility that it was her mother's irresponsible performance as a teacher years earlier

to the formation of an author's sense of identity and confidence, her objectives, values, and beliefs remained largely unformed. As one of the nation's leading thinkers, Dewey changed all this: he encouraged her to make her own life and emotions the subject of her art; he validated her intellectual abilities by urging her to participate in intellectual culture; he championed her own status as an American.

There is ample evidence to suggest that romantic (though unconsummated) feelings developed between Dewey and Yezierska. For Yezierska, who had always identified educational institutions with exclusion, this improbable relationship represented everything she had been seeking—the intersection of the intellectual, the professional, and the intimate.

I mention this biographical information because for Yezierska the personal and the literary were always inseparable. Her complex relationships with the Lower East Side, her immigrant past, academia, and John Dewey inform her writing on the most *intrinsic* level, providing her stories with their defining stock of motifs, figures, and themes. But in *Hungry Hearts* these motifs, figures, and themes are never static. Their significance and meaning

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that led to the rejection of her application (82)

shift from narrative to narrative, serving as indicators of the profound changes in Yezierska's early professional development.

The stories that comprise *Hungry Hearts* were written over a half decade of change; they reflect Yezierska's *shifting* and often contradictory attitudes toward her art and her vocation. They include her earliest literary efforts, written without institutional support or guidance; they include those stories written under the personal and intellectual influence of John Dewey; and, finally, they include stories written in the wake of commercial and critical recognition.

In short, *Hungry Hearts* is a highly self-reflexive work. It utilizes a host of rhetorical devices to construct a variety of allegories about Yezierska's search for a place in the world of American letters. By exploring how Yezierska manipulates these literary elements from narrative to narrative, one gains a clearer sense of the changes in her mission, aspirations, values, and habits.

In one group of stories ("Hunger," "Wings," "The Miracle," "How I Found America," "Soap and Water," "The Lost 'Beautifulness") Yezierska presents a highly emotional and idealistic protagonist engaged in an intense struggle to escape the Lower East Side. The obstacles she

encounters in the pursuit of her dreams are clearly lifted from Yezierska's own life. In "Wings," the traditions of patriarchal Judaism doom the intellectually ambitious but unmarried protagonist, Shenah Pessah, to a life of "pity and ridicule" (4). In "Soap and Water" the unnamed narrator is terrified that she will be denied a teaching diploma because she doesn't adhere to the standards of grooming and fashion established by her college. In "The Lost 'Beautifulness" a mother's simple artistic pleasure comes to an end when she is evicted by her greedy, Jewish landlord: landlord, school, patriarchal Judaism—each functions as obstacle to the protagonist's desire for self-actualization.

As a rule, Yezierska does not allow her heroine to succumb to the repressive forces of religion, capitalism, or institutionalized education. While the strength of her emotions isolates the protagonist from the community, it also compels her to try to define her own place in the world. These feelings remain pent-up, chaotic, unchanneled, however, until she encounters someone capable of giving them a focus and a direction.

As Yezierska's ideal Americans, Anglo-Saxons serve as the embodiment of culture, intellect, aristocracy, and charity. It is *they* who emerge in these stories as the

teachers, scholars, and writers who fuel and direct the protagonists' own intellectual and social potential—recognizing the promise that patriarchal Judaism and institutionalized education do not. Moreover, they foster and cultivate this potential through friendship and romance. As the embodiment of culture, love, *and* salvation, Anglos take on a nearly-divine presence in these stories, even when, like John Dewey himself, they ultimately fail to deliver on the promise of love.

In "Wings," the sociologist John Barnes comes to the Lower East Side to study "The Educational Problems of the Russian Jews." As a good Deweyian, he rejects the conventions of academic isolation and moves in with the immigrants themselves "in order to get into closer touch with his subject" (5). While looking for an apartment, he meets Shenah Pessah, a young woman with great intellectual drive, but forced to toil for her uncle in the tenement he owns. Deeply affected by her story of unrealized hopes and desires, Barnes sheds his scholarly mien and begins to take a personal interest in Shenah's development, promising to help her learn English by introducing her to the public library. It's here that the religious overtones begin to emerge:

> Shenah Pessah drank in his words with a joy that struck back lest this man—the visible sign of her answered prayer—would any moment be snatched up and disappear in the heavens where he belonged (6-7).

These religious feelings continue when Barnes brings her to the library. Shenah is overwhelmed by a sense of religious "awe." ("What a stillness full from thinking! So beautiful it comes on me like music!" (13)). Like a mendicant, she believes herself too coarse to occupy the hallowed space. But the emotions are not simply one-sided. Barnes matches Shenah's sense of awe, insecurity, and loneliness with his own feelings of charity and benevolence. The night at the library ends with an embrace. This moment of intimacy is cast in highly mystical terms, as Shenah "[feels] her soul swoon in ecstasy as he [draws] her toward him" (14).

The next day, Shenah is alone and free to contemplate what she believes is her imminent salvation through John. Barnes, however, cannot deliver on the love he seemed to promise. In the end, he too is alienated by Shenah's overwhelming emotions, and coolly backs out of her life. While she may curse her loss and another rejection, Shenah has come to internalize Barnes as a metaphysical ideal—a standard by which she will come to measure her own life.

"After all," she tells herself, "he done more for you than you could do for him. You owe it to him the deepest, the highest he waked up in you. He opened the wings of your soul" (16). In the story's sequel, "Hunger," this process of idolization/idealization is taken even further as Shenah rejects the advances of Sam Arkin.

More concerned with economic achievement than with the "higher" realm, Sam falls far short of the standards that Shenah has established for herself under Barnes' influence. "He ain't just a man," she tells Arkin of Barnes. "He is all that I want to be and am not yet. He is the hunger of me for the life that ain't just eating and sleeping and slaving for bread" (28).

What model of authorship, then, do stories like "Wings" and "Hunger" dramatize? To begin, they pit a highly individuated heroine against the immigrant community. This antagonism between the individual and community is, of course, orchestrated by Yezierska herself, who has no real interest in exploring the mores, values, and desires of the people who share the Lower East Side with the protagonist. Here, it's only the heroine's plight that matters. Consequently, the representatives of community, religion, society emerge as de-personalized

characters to whom Yezierska assigns the single function of impeding the protagonist's development.

If viewed from the conventions of realism these narratives seem faulty and limited—a deeply skewed representation of a highly complex world. But Yezierska had no interest in writing a realistic account of Lower East Side life. Realism posited a complex relationship between the word and the world. It made exhaustive claims for its abilities to depict all of human experience: emotional states, cognitive procedures, social relations, personal relationships. An author with realist aspirations had to *learn* how to both orchestrate experiential data and mediate it through a literary language. Abraham Cahan's relationship to the realist ethos, for example, was formed by and within institutions. *His* sense of how the literary and the social should intersect was a result of conversations, debates, and practices developed among other cultural producers. Because she was systematically rejected by such a world, Yezierska had no access to realism's values, habits, objectives, and strategies. *Her* sense of authorial identity was founded on a profound sense of isolation and rejection, and most of her protagonists in *Hungry Hearts* give voice to this predicament.

Rather than bemoaning this isolation, however, Yezierska transforms it into the necessary precondition for self-realization and self-fulfillment. In her narratives, personhood is never an *a priori* ontological status, but an ideal attained through the endurance of solitude and suffering. It is an internal drive—metaphorically characterized by Yezierska as "hunger," "thirst," "burning"—that makes this endurance possible. In one way or another, all her protagonists articulate Shenah Pessah's belief that one has to "work [oneself] up to a person" ("Hunger" 27). Through this figuration, Yezierska of course comes to valorize her own will, her own ability to endure, to overcome isolation, rejection, and exclusion.

The incompatibility of Yezierska's aesthetic and the realist aesthetic is nowhere more apparent than here. Realism situates its characters squarely within the nexus of social relations. In the realist narrative, the individual is largely bound to and defined by the political, economic, and religious institutions that surround her. Yezierska has none of this. In her stories, the individual is supplanted by a heroine who, like her, can summon up a will capable of transcending the institutions that oppress her. "A fire blazed in me to rise over the world because I was downed by the world,"

Hanneh Hayyeh tells herself in "The Miracle" (57). It's the imperative that drives all of Yezierska's strongest characters.

If Yezierska doesn't write realist stories, what then does she write? What are the literary forms and modes that give her work their unmistakable sense of coherence and structure? Consider the skeletal narrative that underlies so many of the stories in *Hungry Hearts*. A young woman is oppressed by those closest to her. In an effort to create a new life for herself she runs away. Forced to fend for herself, she endures a long period of toil and loneliness. One day, quite miraculously, a stranger enters her life and befriends her. This stranger is unlike anyone she has ever met before. He (or, quite often, she) possesses extraordinary physical and spiritual qualities. Through his love, the young woman feels herself saved—redeemed.

Yezierska writes fairy tales; and she does so with good reason. While realism demands that its practitioners be steeped in a sophisticated mimetic code, the conventions of the fairy tale could easily be absorbed and adapted by a writer with no literary training. But it's how the fairy tale mode comes to speak to/for Yezierska's professional desires and frustrations that I find most compelling.

Yezierska's heroines are storytellers. Like her, they are always eager to present their life story to a sympathetic listener—an audience willing to overlook their surface flaws (crystallized by Yezierska through tropes of fashion, décor, and grooming) to get at the "essential" being. This is one important reason why the Jewish community and the representatives of institutionalized education are almost always cast as villains. They constantly thwart the protagonist's innate desire for self-expression: Jews, because their patriarchal order condemns her to a life of drudgery and domestic imprisonment[1]; institutionalized education, because its pedagogical practices can only offer her vocational training or immersion in "dead" knowledge.[2] Yezierska's idealized gentiles stand in diametric opposition to these repressive forces. They are, at least for a while, the model audience. Not only do they listen and encourage the

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[1] In "Wings" Shenah Pessah tells John Barnes that she can't pursue her desire to study because her uncle "got already used to leave the whole house on me" (5).

[2] In "How I Found America," the protagonist leaves her Russian home with an idealized vision of American education, "I saw before me free schools, free colleges, free libraries, where I could learn, and learn, and keep on learning" (113). But the reality is of course quite different. Here she does battle with an educational system that trains them either to work with their hands and bodies (121) or condemns them to "[t]he manners and customs of the eighteenth century, of people two hundred years dead" (124).

telling of the life-tale, they are affected by it—moved to action. And for Yezierska, winning the listener's sympathy constitutes the first step in the protagonist's social and cultural mobility.

This of course *is* fantasy. Like all fairy tales, these narratives express the hopes of the marginalized and the desperate. For years she had been denied access to the world of cultural debate and conversation, and her own desire for self-expression was constantly thwarted by the institutions that surrounded her. Her literary remedy—born out of her initial relationship with John Dewey—was to create a messianic figure who offered the promise of salvation. Where the world had only presented her with rejection, exclusion, and isolation, he would provide solace, validation, and love.

These stories speak deeply to the frustrations of an emerging marginalized author; but they do so in a way that could easily be construed as naïve, immature. The refusal to examine social processes, the reluctance to cast the protagonist's plight as an extension of the predicament faced by female immigrants in general, the fetishization of gentiles, the heavy use of affect and emotionalism—all of these point to an imagination unwilling or unable to view the world as a complex phenomenon.

I have tried to show how Yezierska's professional and personal circumstances limited her access to more complex modes of representation—and how this limitation manifested itself in one set of stories. But *Hungry Hearts* attests to Yezierska's literary *development*. The stories that comprise the collection reflect shifting attitudes toward craft, audience, and identity. Thus, where stories like "Wings," "Hunger," and "How I Found America" present a fantastic and "naïve" dramatization of an emerging author's desires and frustrations, "My Own People" and "'The Fat of the Land," written in the wake of growing popular and critical recognition, reveal a more nuanced sense of professional motivations, aspirations, and responsibilities. Both stories include characters who are writers. In the former, Yezierska demonstrates a strong desire to bridge the chasm that divides herself from the Lower East Side community. In the latter, this division becomes so vast and complex that no reconciliation is possible.

"My Own People" breaks with the literary values, conventions, and objectives of the Yezierskian fairy tale in obvious and crucial ways. Consider the story's opening paragraph:

> With the suitcase containing all her worldly possessions under her arm, Sophie Sapinsky elbowed her way through the noisy ghetto crowds. Pushcart peddlers and pullers-in shouted and gesticulated. Women with market-baskets pushed and shoved one another, eyes straining with the one thought—how to get the food for a penny cheaper. With the same strained intentness, Sophie scanned each tenement, searching for a room cheap enough for her dwindling means (97).

The narrator Yezierska utilizes here bears little resemblance to the one she utilizes in her fairy tales. In the latter, it's the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist—her reaction to the world around her—that matter most. "My Own People," however, immediately signals a willingness to engage with the *external* world. Within this opening paragraph Yezierska reveals an ability to structure and organize even the most chaotic world. Pushcart peddlers, pullers-in, women with market-baskets, and the protagonist herself—each group is clearly defined, individuated by its unique activity. The tendency seen in the fairy tales to cast the entire Lower East Side community as monolithically oppressive force working against the protagonist is simply not present here.

Instead, throughout the story Yezierska utilizes the techniques of realism in an effort to depict this world objectively. And in this landscape, Sophie Sapinsky is subject to, not exempted from, the cares and concerns that plague the other residents of the Lower East Side.

Like Yezierska, Sophie undergoes a crucial transformation as she learns to wed the Lower East Side Jewish community to her own literary aims and ambitions. An aspiring author, Sophie comes to the tenements in search of an affordable room of her own. She hopes that the solitude of a private space will allow her to work through her persistent problems with writer's block. The titles of aborted projects—"Believe in Yourself" and "The Quest for the Ideal"—speak directly to her initial sense of writing as a socially detached practice, and in some way allude to Yezierska's own sense of isolation and the aesthetic values that emerged from her solitude. All of Sophie's attempts to turn inward, however, are constantly thwarted by the activity and anxieties of her neighbors. At first, Sophie tries desperately to shut this world out, but as the story progresses and the catastrophes that befall her neighbors intensify, Sophie begins to realize that in their reaction and resilience, these Lower East Side Jews posses exactly the vitality that her own writing lacks. By the end of the

narrative, her writer's block is resolved as she abandons her self-centered aesthetic for one that allows the poor and the oppressed–her own people–to speak through her.

"My Own People" reveals a greater command of literary style and form. Although Yezierska continues to invest her characters with a great deal of introspection and affect, her utilization of a third person narrator is much more fully realized. Her psychological observations, sequencing of action, and orchestration of setting reveal an attention to detail that is simply absent in stories like "Wings" and "Hunger." By the time she wrote "My Own People," Yezierska had already developed a critical and popular following: Houghton Mifflin had agreed to publish *Hungry Hearts*; Yezierska herself was the subject of newspaper articles and magazine interviews; Samuel Goldwyn would soon begin negotiating for the film rights to the collection. Not surprisingly then, "My Own People" presents a new Yezierskian heroine, one endowed with a strong sense of personal and professional worth. Undoubtedly, it is this new sense of ascent, acceptance, and confidence that allows Yezierska (and Sophie) to treat the Lower East Side Jewish community with a new sense of representational parity.

However, while "My Own People" resolves many of the literary shortcomings evident in the fairy tales, it

presents its own set of problems, particularly in the concluding image of the author as a quasi-mystic. Overwhelmed by the plight of her impoverished fellow Jews, Sophie, in an ecstatic moment, is abruptly overwhelmed by their collective voice. Surrendering herself to its power she is finally able to put words to paper, and concludes, "Ach! At last it writes itself in me!" the story concludes. "It's not me—it's their cries—my own people—crying in me!"(107).

While much of "My Own People" speaks to Yezierska's literary maturation, the image of the author that she presents at the end of the story betrays a residual naivete. Rather than utilizing her creative powers to transform the community's mores, values, suffering, and anxieties in her own fiction, Sophie surrenders her literary autonomy and imagination all together. Her assertion that "It's not me—it's their cries [...] crying in me" turns Sophie into a mere transcriber rather than an artist. What's truly remarkable about this authorial transformation, however, is that it takes place in a single day—the result of an epiphany rather than a sustained engagement with the people of Lower East Side. The differences in language, education, and class that had so sharply divided Sophie from this community throughout the

story are, in a moment, simply erased. Instantly transformed from an alien to an insider, Sophie's ability to give voice to the masses is never made ambiguous or problematic.

Furthermore, while the idealized figure of the selfless author may have had a place in the Yezierskian fairy tale; it is out place in the realistic sphere of "My Own People." Here, the characters *are* socio-economic beings; they measure their lives by the their financial anxieties and aspirations—by their ability to buy, sell, trade, haggle, and engage with the institutions that surround them. For much of the story, Sophie herself must participate in these economic concerns. Having given up the security of a steady job to pursue her literary ambitions, she must ask herself "for what?" (99). Her arrival on the Lower East Side is not, after all, motivated by an altruistic concern for its residents, but by economic necessity. In short, her quasi-mystical experience at the end of the narrative is inconsistent with the rest of the story's strong realistic values.

Yezierska had left the Lower East Side long before she wrote "My Own People." Her departure from her parents' house as an adolescent, her Teachers' College education, her two middle-class marriages, her strong literary and

cultural ambitions, her relationship with John Dewey—all of these attest to the cultural and economic distance that separated Yezierska from her originary community. Because the stories that comprise *Hungry Hearts* were written over several developmentally critical years, however, the way in which Yezierska reflected on this distance was never stable. Her fairy tales speak to her strong desire to forge an identity outside the Jewish ghetto community; they are born out of a resentment of communities and institutions that presented the strongest obstacles to the realization of ambitions. "My Own People," however, is written at a moment when many of these obstacles had been overcome. And in the wake of her first success, Yezierska could now lament her distance from the Jewish community and attempt to bridge it through her fiction. But Yezierska never provides concrete and material ways to mitigate social, economic, and cultural differences. In the end, Sophie, in an ecstatic fit, retreats to her room, while Lower East Side life continues outside her door. The sense of union she experiences is predicated not on "in this world" interaction, but an "out of this world" mystical possession.

Years later, at the height of her popular and critical success, Yezierska would openly acknowledge the

impossibility of bridging this gap, but the fantastic ending of "My Own People" acknowledges this awareness much earlier in her career. It is *Hungry Heart*'s most accomplished story, "'The Fat of the Land," however, that most fully and painfully speaks to the chasm between new world cultural producer and her old world past.

Written in 1918, "'Fat of the Land" was immediately recognized as literary *tour-de-force*. In 1919, it was selected as the best short story of the year by the American critic Edward O'Brien. Although written before "My Own People," "'Fat of the Land" serves as its loose sequel. Rather than focusing on Sophie Sapinsky and her development as an American author, however, the story follows the life of Sophie's landlady and neighbor, Hanneh Breineh.

Weighed down by the responsibilities of trying to keep her family alive, Hanneh emerges not as a domestic saint, but as an exhausted and desperate woman. Hanneh's six malnourished, dirty, and rambunctious children constantly provoke her anger. Early in the narrative, for example, Hanneh confides to a friend her wish that her youngest child were dead, because he hampers her ability to earn more money, "Some mothers got luck. A child gets run over by a car, some fall from the window, some burn themselves

up with a match, some get choked with diphtheria; but no death takes mine away" (81). Yezierska is still fond of affect, but the emotions expressed here are far darker than anything that appears in her other stories.

After presenting the reader with such a dire picture, the narrative leaps ahead twenty years to Hanneh's new life on Eighty Fourth Street where she lives with her unmarried daughter. Each of her children stands as an emblem of American success; all have attained a high degree of culture and affluence, succinctly conveyed through highly grammatical and formal speech. Hanneh, however, cannot adjust to her new life or the new rules of etiquette it entails. Her speech is still heavily inflected with ghetto English. Alone and out of place, she confides to a friend from her past:

"They want to make me over for an American lady, and I'm different [...]. When I was poor I was free, and could holler and do what I like in my own house. Here I got to lie still like a mouse under a broom. Between living up to my Fifth-Avenue daughter and keeping up with the servants, I am like sinner in the next world that is thrown from one hell to another" (88).

The life of wealth is impossible to bear for Hanneh, because she can't adjust to the new social standards that

it entails. Thus even her children's success proves a source of consternation since it only serves to "widen the gulf" between them and her (89).

But where the conventional Yezierska story is concerned with the point of view of a single character, "'Fat of the Land" gives voice to the concerns, frustrations, and desires of Hanneh's children as well. While she resents their success, and their American manners, they resent her reluctance to try to adapt to her new life. This tension is especially strong in the relationship between Hanneh and the daughter with whom she lives, Fanny.

After being criticized by her brothers for not being kinder to their mother, Fanny lashes out:

> "I've tried harder than all of you to do my duty. I've *lived* with her [...]. I've borne the shame of mother while you bought her off with a present and a treat here and there. God knows how hard I tried to civilize her so as not to have to blush with shame when I take her anywhere. I dressed her in the most generous Paris models, but Delancey Street sticks out from every inch of her. Whenever she opens her mouth, I'm done for. You fellows had your chance to rise in the world because a man is free to go as high as he

> can reach up to; but I, with all my style and pep, can't get a man my equal because a girl is always judged by her mother" (90).

As a seemingly ungrateful and superficial daughter, it would be easy to align Fanny with the Yezierskan fairy tale villains. But this is not the case. First, Yezierska goes to great lengths to grant Fanny's complaints a large degree of legitimacy. She *is* the one responsible for taking care of her mother. As a woman, her possibilities for finding a good match *are* hampered by this responsibility. And while we may condemn her desires as elitist and superficial, they *are* part and parcel of her social ascent, and are closely related to Yezierska's own bourgeois ambitions. In short, her outburst is anchored in real feelings of frustration and desperation. This is given a considerable amount of weight later in the text when tensions between mother and daughter come to a climax. To Hanneh's accusation that her daughter does not love her, Fanny responds: "You want me to love you yet? [...]. You knocked every bit of love out of me when I was yet a kid. All the memories of childhood I have is your everlasting cursing and yelling that we were gluttons" (93). Fanny's memory is of course corroborated by the representation of Hanneh earlier in the story.

What is remarkable about "'The Fat of the Land" is that it resists the simple oppositions into which all the other stories of the collection ultimately lapse. Here, Yezierska's career is embodied by *both* the mother who feels out of place and excluded by mores and habits of American culture, and the daughter desperate to distance herself from the past, and seeking the acceptance of an American elite. One may be tempted to locate Yezierska's surrogate exclusively in Benny, Hanneh's playwright son. But here too the correlative is frustrated. We meet Benny as one of his plays is about to open in Broadway. We are told that the play deals explicitly with issues of "race hatred" and xenophobia (88). Although it is neither named nor described, the work would in all likelihood draw heavily upon the experiences of Lower East Side Jews, and Benny's own experiences with poverty and destitution. Benny's public, however, is comprised of benevolent, wealthy American gentiles (88).[5] His literary and critical sensibilities reveal how far Benny has moved from the world he now depicts in his plays. So while Hanneh is proud of her son, she can never understand the art he has made of their Lower East Side life, and ultimately resents her

[5] Yezierska crystallizes Benny's success by placing the President in the audience.

inability to participate in his success (89). The differences in class, language, and, economics that "My Own People" so easily erases, are insurmountable here. The tenement-born author cannot magically or materially bridge the gulf that divides him/her from the world of his/her past.

In 1923, Yezierska published her second collection of short stories, *Children of Loneliness*. The collection included the self-reflexive study, "Mostly about Myself." Written at a moment when Yezierska was enjoying immense critical and popular success, the essay represents her first attempt to explain her unorthodox literary sensibilities to a growing public.

Yezierska begins her essay by situating herself in the lowest tier of the literary hierarchy. She sees the literary accomplishments of other authors and admits to her own feelings of inadequacy, limitation, and jealousy:

> I envy the writers who can sit down at their desks in the clear calm security of their vision and begin their story at the beginning and work it up logically, step by step, until they get to the end. With me, the end and the middle and the beginning of my story whirl before me in a mad blur (132).

The opposition that will permeate the entire essay is established here. On the one hand there are those writers who have "mastered" form, authors whose stories develop logically, "step by step." On the other, there is Yezierska, whose ideas and words resist all her attempts at organization.

But no sooner does she concede her limitations than she begins to accept them—in much the same way that "a man must learn to accept the hump on his back" (133). Rhetorically, this simile helps Yezierska to begin to distance herself from the writers she had initially "envied." The hunchback must make peace with his hump, and she must make peace with her stylistic limitations. Ultimately, however, this acceptance of de-formation is more than embraced; it is transformed into a mode of defiance. Against the formally accomplished and "soft-spined" (143) writers who pursue mere literature, Yezierska positions herself and her "dirt and blood" aesthetic (139-140).

Her mode of authorship has ethical as well as literary implications. But she brings the ethical to bear on her writing in a peculiar way. As the title of the essay itself suggests, Yezierska's writing is thoroughly first person, deeply *self*-centered. She herself concedes this:

> 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 so much [...]. So my thoughts, instead of going out naturally to the world around me, were turned in upon myself (133).

Yet it is exactly a connection with the world around her that provides Yezierska with the ultimate justification for her *self*-centered writing. In the essay's most compelling rhetorical turn, Yezierska universalizes her own experiences of hardship and destitution in two crucial ways. First, she sees in her own history of struggle the conditions that make her the ideal *spokesperson* for the lives of the poor. She has a "knowledge of [their lives] that no well-born writer could possibly have" (139). More remarkably, she eventually transforms spokesmanship into mystical embodiment. No longer external to her experiences, the poor come to reside *within* Yezierska. She gives them a voice, but the voice she gives them is already their own: "All the starved, unlived years [of her ancestors] crowd into my throat and choke me" (131). The perception of *self*-centeredness on the part of critics is thus a misperception. *Her* rage, *her* hunger, *her* loneliness are in fact a collective rage, hunger, and loneliness. In

the implied competing literary traditions that run throughout the essay, Yezierska locates herself outside the stylized world of European writers like George Sand and George Eliot(133) and firmly within the deeply American sensibilities of Walt Whitman–a singer of self and of selves. Because America itself is turbulent and volatile, America has rewarded her aesthetics of honest self-expression.

I have taken the time to explore the rhetorical strategies of "Mostly About Myself" for two reasons: first, to demonstrate how the essay is itself a highly organized, and cogently argued work of writing. As such, it relies on conventions of logic, analysis, and structure that it implicitly condemns in formal writing. This is only natural. With "Mostly about Myself," Yezierska begins to engage with a critical, rather than imaginative, mode of writing; the extent to which she can successfully convey to her readers the legitimacy of her unorthodox literary practices largely depends on how she develops and presents her arguments. Next, I wanted to interrogate the claims that the essay makes for Yezierska's fiction. While she may insist that her narratives are chaotic and confusing (134), "Mostly about Myself" largely undermines this assertion. The essay locates within the stories a sense of

organization and purpose held together by both an aesthetic and ethical force.

Unfortunately, none of the claims Yezierska makes in "Mostly about Myself" are borne out by the stories themselves. Defying the most improbable odds, Yezierska became a successful American author. Her protagonists give voice to *her* dreams and anxieties. As would-be artists, teachers, intellectuals, and writers, these women defy the conventions of their class, religion, and milieu. The individual *and* society—it's the disjunctive relationship between community and self that defines and structures all of Yezierska's fiction. Her protagonists emerge not as representatives of the Lower East Side, but as figures who exist outside the community's values, goals, and outlook.

Consider again "My Own People"—the story that seems to adhere most closely to the authorial sensibilities espoused in "Mostly about Myself." Sophie Sapinsky comes to the Lower East Side in search of a room of her own. She hopes that through solitude, she will be able to overcome the writer's block that has long plagued her. While she is initially beset and annoyed by the people that surround her, she is, ultimately, overwhelmed by their spirit and their voice. The story concludes as *their* words flow unbidden from *her* pen. In her ecstatic state, Sophie vows

that the voice of her own people will not be silenced until "all America stops to listen" (107). In "My Own People" a material, professional problem (writer's block) is given a fantastic solution (mystical possession); but this "solution" will only augment Sophie's identity as a professional and increase the distance between her and the community she purports to represent. Here's why.

If all America is to hear this voice, Sophie's writing cannot be contained in her room or circulated exclusively on the Lower East Side. She must transform the voice of the oppressed into a circulable object—a book. But the transformation of voice to text is not simply a matter of offering the American public a transcription. It means forefronting linguistic differences that would make the story's mystical climax impossible to sustain.

"My Own People" is written in slightly dialogued English—only hinting at the linguistic differences that, in the New York of the early twentieth century, would have marked Sophie's relationship with the Lower East Side community. There is no definitive explanation for why Yezierska leaves this difference unexplored. However, if the reader overlays the story with his/her own set of historically and textually informed assumptions, it becomes clear that forefronting these linguistic difference

undermines the story's fantastic conclusion. Here are the crucial linguistic omissions that I think need to be inserted into "My Own People." (1) Lower East Side Jews were Yiddish speakers. (2) Sophie has American literary aspirations. (3) In all probability, Sophie would have to interact with her Lower East Side neighbors in Yiddish. (4) The voice that overwhelms her must be, if it belongs to the community, a Yiddish voice. (5) Finally, if America is to "hear" it, this voice must be translated into an English text.

The oppositions are clear: Yiddish/English, voice/text, Lower East Side Jews/American public. It would be convenient to situate Sophie as an intermediary between these two worlds, but the narrative itself disallows such a move. Here again is Sophie's closing exclamation: "*It's not me—it's their cries* [...] crying in me! [...]. *[T]hey will not be stilled in me*, till all America stops to *listen* [emphasis added]" (107). This voice demands to be heard *in itself*. It negates Sophie's authorial abilities. To write, to translate, to mediate is thus to present something other than the voice itself.

But Sophie does write, "on and on all through the night" (107). What does she write, however? What does the voice say through her? Yezierska never tells us. It is a

voice devoid of content. In the end, "My Own People" solves Sophie's professional predicament, but leaves the experiences of the Lower East Side Jews unrevealed through her writing.

America too will never know what the Yiddish voice says. It will only have Sophie's translation, *her* words. And when it does express an interest in "listening," the American public will do so through a market that rewards individuals not communities. So while their economic suffering may give birth to Sophie's career, the Lower East Side will enjoy none of the economic or symbolic benefits of her success. More importantly, they will be denied access to the world she has made of their lives.

With my reading of "My Own People," I have tried to make explicit what I think is a hallmark of all Yezierska's stories—the protagonist's autonomous relationship to the Jewish community. Yezierska's "heroines" are communal exceptions, not communal representatives. But it's more than this. Not only are these women detached from their originary community, their efforts to forge a sense of belonging within other social forms and institutions are constantly met with rejection, frustration, unhappiness. Politics, education, romance, marriage, motherhood, career—none fulfills the protagonists' deep desire for acceptance.

Ultimately, of course, these women speak to and for Yezierska's own existential predicament—the sense of exclusion she would feel even after she had attained critical and commercial success.

Why, then, would Yezierska make such communal claims in "Mostly about Myself"? To begin, by the time she had written "Mostly about Myself," Yezierska had met with incredible popular and critical recognition. She was the subject of numerous newspaper and magazine articles; she was constantly solicited for interviews; and, most importantly, she had been paid ten thousand dollars by Samuel Goldwyn to pen the screen version of *Hungry Hearts*; in large part, it is the 1922 film adaptation of her collection that inaugurated Yezierska's career.

Yezierska arrived in Hollywood at a moment when the movie-going public had begun demanding representations of the foreign and exotic. To capitalize on this desire, Goldwyn set his studio's public-relations machine in motion, casting Yezierska as "the sweatshop Cinderella." Industry publications immediately began to disseminate the story of the author who had "leapt from Hester Street sewing machine to Hollywood riches" (Henriksen 1). For years the press would perpetuate this Yezierska myth through articles titled: "A Scrub-Woman Who Became a Great

Novelist," "A Girl Who Came Up From Despair," and "Fighting up from the Ghetto." Yezierska herself would contribute to this image. To cultivate the impression that her relationship to the Lower East Side was direct and organic, she would never mention her college education, her years as a teacher, her two middle-class marriages, her relationship with John Dewey—her twenty year dissociation from the Jewish community.

"Mostly about Myself" is written in the wake of Goldwyn's publicity efforts—efforts that brought Yezierska immense critical and economic rewards. It is itself part of that effort. It provides her audience with the image of an author whose rebellious aesthetic is rooted in the immediate experiences of poverty. Unless she was seduced by the myth she had perpetuated, Yezierska probably had some sense that her stories undermined her claims to an organic relationship with the Lower East Side. But to discount or discontinue this myth would have alienated her growing audience, would have truncated her career, would have undermined the success and recognition she had virtually willed into being.

I would like to close with this illustrative moment from Yezierska's life. By 1923, Yezierska had earned enough money from the sales of *Hungry Hearts* to sail to

England. There she came into contact with John Galsworthy, Joseph Conrad, George Bernard Shaw, Israel Zangwill, and H.G. Wells. In the wake of World War One, these authors were engaged in important discussions about the responsibilities of the author to his/her world. The result of these conversations would be the formation of Poets Essayists and Novelists (P.E.N.)–an association of writers devoted to social and political progress. Invited to participate in these debates and this movement, Yezierska declined; she felt alienated from the cause and the writers who were organizing it. "They were real people who belonged together in their world," she would write, "so sure of themselves that they could think of others" (quoted in Henriksen 195).

By her own admission, Yezierska could not think of others; the social and political responsibilities of authorship did not speak to her. Her writing had always made this clear. The world, she felt, had always rejected her, and in her writing she could reject the world. Faith, family, friends, lovers, teachers, peers, fame, fortune–while they may provide short-lived happiness, are not sources of consolation, affection, and support but of betrayal and pain. It's not surprising, then, that retreat and escape are two central tropes in Yezierska's writing,

that her characters are always seeking the refuge of their own rooms. An embrace of solitude and isolation, an obsession with inwardness—these are the defenses against a world that is perceived to reject, exclude, refuse.

Chapter Four

Henry Roth: Incest, Modernism, Redemption, Sleep

Abraham Cahan and Anzia Yezierska wanted to be acknowledged as American authors. Cahan, however, arrived to the United States when he was twenty-two. The values, aspirations, and prejudices he would come to espouse as an American author and editor were largely formed in *the milieu* of an elite Eastern European intellectual culture. Anzia Yezierska arrived to the United States as an adolescent; her literary values, habits, themes, and subjects, speak directly to her sense of exclusion from American intellectual and literary life. Henry Roth was also an immigrant; he too lived on the Lower East Side; his monumental novel, *Call It Sleep*, also stems from the experiences of New York ghetto life; like Cahan and Yezierska, Roth also creates a protagonist who embodies his own social and artistic values, anxieties, and experiences. But unlike his predecessors, Roth arrived to the United States as a child; his sense of personal and literary identity stemmed from his immersion within a variety of American locales and institutions. His experiences within the tenement, the public school, the *cheder*, City College,

the Greenwich Village literary salon and bohemian culture would play a crucial role in his authorial development.

Even if it were not a first novel, *Call It Sleep* would still be an audacious literary pronouncement. Published during the worst year of the Great Depression (Kazin ix), *Call It Sleep* deviates strongly from the representational commonplaces of the Lower East Side novel; it is unlike anything produced by Roth's literary predecessors (Abraham Cahan and Anzia Yezierska), or his contemporaries (Mike Gold and Daniel Fuchs). It eschews the imperatives of tenement realism, and looks to the conventions and techniques of the literary avant-garde instead. Naturalism, symbolism, anthropology, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, mysticism—each can lay a claim to the novel's complex constitution. *Call It Sleep*, then, is highly polysemous—resistant to conventional modes of interpretation. "Every model that may be perceived as constituting the structural foundation of the novel," Mario Materassi has observed, "reveals itself, in time, to be only partially responsible for the organization of textual reality" (49). Bearing *Call It Sleep*'s complex structure in mind, it seems legitimate to ask why, at the height of the Depression, Roth would have chosen to write such a highly figured and aestheticized novel. The following

chapter will explore the social, cultural, and biographical motivations behind the development of Roth's unique career. Moreover it will read *Call It Sleep* itself as an allegory that dramatizes Roth's literary values, anxieties, aspirations.

Henry Roth was born in Galicia, the easternmost province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in 1906. When he was two, he and his family migrated to the United States and eventually settled on the Lower East Side. The Roths lived in this largely self-contained and homogeneous world until 1914 when they moved to Harlem, then a predominantly Irish neighborhood. After graduating from DeWitt Clinton High School in 1924, Roth entered City College. It was while he was a college freshman that he was introduced to the New York University professor Eda Lou Walton. Walton, who had received a dual degree in anthropology and English from Berkeley, was twelve years older than Roth. The two soon became lovers, and Roth left his parents' Harlem apartment to take up residence with Walton in Greenwich Village. Their tempestuous relationship lasted for ten years. During this time, Walton served as Roth's advisor, critic, editor, and patron. It was she who introduced him to the world of avant-garde letters, and to the two writers who would shape his literary sensibilities: James Joyce and

T.S. Eliot. It is she who ultimately found the novel a publisher. Not surprisingly, it is to her that the novel is dedicated.

Call It Sleep was well received by a number of important literary journals and critics, and sold 6,000 copies–a substantial number in light of the profound economic crisis of the day. And Roth's efforts to translate his first novel into the foundation of a career were also successful. He had written the first chapter of a second novel, had signed a contract with Scribner, and had received much encouragement from the publishing house's most influential editor, Maxwell Perkins. But Roth could never proceed beyond this first chapter and eventually came to a literary impasse that would last for nearly sixty years. During this period, he renounced writing altogether. He and his wife, the composer Muriel Parker, resettled in Maine where Roth moved from one non-literary job to another: water-fowl farmer, machinist, psychiatric ward attendant, math and Latin tutor. Then, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Alfred Kazin, Leslie Fiedler, and Irving Howe began to call attention to Roth's novel. With Howe's front-page review of the reissued paperback edition of *Call It* Sleep in the *New York Times Book Review*, Roth was lifted out of obscurity. The book eventually sold

1,000,000 copies. But while he was now able to make small inroads into his writing, it would be another thirty years before Roth would publish another novel. The four-volume *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, which Roth had begun in the 1970s, was published in installments during the mid-1990s. Henry Roth died in 1995 at the age of 89—a year after the first volume of *Mercy of a Rude Stream* was released.

Even this cursory biographical summary points to some complex and compelling questions about Roth's authorial training, emergence, decline, and revival. After all, how is it that an author from the most impecunious class developed the disposition and the tactics to enter the most elite segment of the field of cultural production? In interviews, essays, and narratives published late in his life, Roth admitted to having constantly worried about the difference between his two identities: Lower East Side youth and avant-garde author. It seems inevitable, then, that *Call It Sleep*—written at a moment when Roth was feeling the pull of both worlds most strongly—should somehow speak to this predicament. Surprisingly, however, critics have generally never thought to read *Call It Sleep* as a work that dramatizes Roth's complex process of authorial emergence. Instead, the trend in Roth studies has been to analyze *Call It Sleep*'s intrinsic techniques

and devices: its utilization of stream of consciousness, its manipulation of languages and dialects, its employment of archetypes and symbols, its orchestration of visual and aural patterns. It's my contention, however, that these modernist devices have a crucial extrinsic value and professional function as well; they announce Roth's ambitious professional aspirations and help him work out his own complex set of literary and social values and expectations.

Werner Sollors' 1996 essay "'A World Somewhere, Somewhere Else.' Language, Nostalgic Mournfulness, and Urban Immigrant Family Romance in *Call It Sleep*," takes an important step in demonstrating just how *Call It Sleep* may be viewed as a dramatization of Roth's professional formation. Sollors reads the novel's protagonist, David Schearl, as embodying the crises faced by many second-generation immigrants like Roth. In Sollors' analysis, David must learn to move away from his fascination with the largely unremembered experiences of the old world (the world of his parents) and embrace his own experiences of the modern metropolis. This move does not entail a surrendering of the past for the sake of the present. Rather, the second-generation immigrant must learn to shuttle between the two experiences. For Sollors, David's

process of awakening to his own new world identity serves as a correlative for Roth's own development as a modernist writer. In the literary world of Greenwich Village, Sollors argues, Roth learns how to claim an identity as both East Side Jewish immigrant *and* bohemian author. But while Sollors offers a provocative reading of how the *Call It Sleep*'s *bildung* structure dramatizes Roth's own professional development, his essay ultimately invokes the romantic hermeneutics that have defined Roth studies to the present. From this perspective, the novel is seen as a dramatization of the triumphant emergence of the young author—a celebration of both David's, the novel's protagonist, and Roth's powers of imagination.

With the publication of his monumental autobiographical novel *Mercy of a Rude Stream* [*Mercy*], however, Roth radically changed the terms of reception for *Call It Sleep*. The work, released in four volumes between 1994 and 1997, orders and fleshes out the stories Roth had been telling about himself in interviews, sketches and other self-reflexive pieces since the 1960s. It is my contention that *Mercy* negates any triumphal reading of *Call It Sleep*; rather than portraying the young protagonist's passage into aesthetic awareness, *Call It Sleep*, read through *Mercy*, presents a dramatization of the failure of

the aesthetic life. Moreover, a reading of Roth's memoir seems to suggest that the literary crisis that would define his life and career for more than half a century was already embedded in his first novel.

Mercy of a Rude Stream is an end-of-life narrative; in it, Ira Stigman, the novel's protagonist/narrator/author and Roth's surrogate, looks back on a life defined by an inability to follow up on the promise of a brilliant first novel. Stigman writes the story of his own *bildung* in an effort to understand why he was drawn to a literary career, how he became a modernist, and why he could never move beyond his first novel. The story he tells is hardly romantic. It is, instead, severely self-critical and self-damning. To solve the riddle of his existence, Stigman meditates on episodes of molestation, incest, theft, and betrayal.

It's true that *Mercy* is a life-story told many decades after the fact. The old/narrating Stigman is keenly aware of this, often reprimanding himself for "injecting his present bias, his revisions and reservations" into his younger self (*From Bondage* 73). Consequently, it is fair to wonder how the work can and should be utilized to make sense of *Call It Sleep*, a novel written more than half a

century earlier.[1] But *Mercy* is not a traditional memoir or autobiography. First, and most strikingly, Roth disclaims any relationship between his own life and the events that take place in the "novel"[2]—this, even though the very phrases, tropes, motifs that Stigman uses in his life narrative are drawn verbatim from those Roth had used in interviews and other autobiographical writings. Next, *Mercy* is an involuted narrative; the act of writing the memoir becomes an integral part of the memoir itself. The older/narrating Stigman underscores this involution by constantly interrupting his story to inject commentary, observation, and analysis. Finally, the entire work is told almost exclusively from the third-person; even when the older Stigman turns away from his youth to talk about his contemporary life, he does so through the mediation of a "he."

In his disavowal that *Mercy* is autobiographical, Roth distances himself from his surrogate, Ira Stigman; in his use of involution, the older Stigman distances himself from

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[1] This question is, of course, one of the many leveled at biographical criticism in general.

[2] The disclaimer appears on the copyright page of each volume in the novel: "This work is fiction. Although some characters were inspired by people whom the author knew, the narrative is not intended in any way to be a depiction of any real events. This novel is certainly not an autobiography nor should it be taken as such."

the younger Stigman; in his use of a third person narrator, the older Stigman distances himself from both his young self *and* his present self; finally, in some way, all these devices distance the reader from both Roth and Stigman.[3] Why, then, would Roth insist that *Mercy* is fictional when it is so patently his life story that he is telling? Why would Stigman create an autobiographical narrative in which his older, narrating self is severed from his younger self? The answer is complex.

While it does not altogether dismiss it, *Mercy* is suspicious of a primal self, of autonomous or *a priori* subjectivity. Instead, the novel's use of literary and rhetorical devices suggests that Roth/Stigman comes to understand his existence only by maintaining a critical distance from his younger self. Through disavowal, involution, and third-person narration Stigman/Roth opens up a space that allows him to approach his identity *critically*. It's not surprising, then, that the memoir constantly presents Stigman's development not simply as an expression of some inborn drive, but as a response to the economic, cultural, and educational institutions that surround him. The older/narrating Stigman underscores this

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[3] After all, the "novel" would feel more intimate to the reader if it were told in the first person and eschewed the rhetorical

relationship between self and society by repeatedly stepping out of his role as narrator to comment upon and interrogate the way these institutions contributed to the formation of his younger self. In short, *Mercy of a Rude Stream* is deeply invested in a hermeneutic process. It casts a wide net in search of the terms that will help its author make sense of his life.

I mention these peculiarities of *Mercy's* autobiographical mode in order to demonstrate how it too may be read as a work of literary and cultural criticism. The psychological, anthropological, and sociological insights it offers speak to a mind that understands the complex relationship that exists between self, society, and aesthetics. Ultimately, what Stigman/Roth has to say about his own professional formation contributes to a new understanding of *Call It Sleep*.

In a 1969 conversation with David Bronsen for *Partisan Review*, Roth observed that growing up on the Lower East Side

> represented a very secure enclave. Everyone in our building was Jewish, as were the neighbors to either the side of us and the people across the street. Had I thought of it in those terms back them [sic], I

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devices of involution and disavowal.

> would have said that I was surrounded by a homogeneous environment and that I completely identified with it [...]. The East Side was helpful, communicative and highly interrelated—in short a community. It was a place with the promise of opportunities and new horizons, where one could make a new start in life. And the Jew was optimistic and dynamic, full of the feeling that nothing was holding him back (265-266).

Roth speculates that if his family had remained downtown, he would have written "some honest portrayals of Jewish life on the East Side" (269). In short, he would have become a realist. For Roth, then, realism is the mode suited to homogeneity, community, and stable identity—everything *Call It Sleep* is not.

The image that Roth conveys of his childhood in this conversation with Bronsen is highly nostalgic, a bracketed moment of repose in a life that would be characterized by discord and fragmentation. For Roth, the moment that signaled the end of this Edenic existence was his family's move to Harlem in 1914, when he was eight. 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 never recovered" (266). With this

move to a hostile and gentile Harlem, Roth becomes depressed and indrawn—physically obese and academically uninterested. The multiethnic world around him threatens, and he retreats. In the end, without the stability of a cohesive Jewish community Roth abandons the Judaism he once loved.[4]

This is the *formula* that Roth provided in 1969. The story he tells in *Mercy of a Rude Stream* has none of it. *Mercy* eschews the nostalgically halcyon world of Lower East Side infancy and instead takes as its starting point the Stigmans' arrival to Harlem. The older/narrating Stigman devotes more than a thousand pages to showing how deeply immersed his adolescent self was in the world that Roth had decried two and a half decades earlier; the schools, streets, jobs, and games of the gentiles are *his* schools, *his* streets, *his* jobs, *his* games. But there is much more here than shared public space. The boy who develops in this memoir is not a romantic innocent oppressed by a hostile world. Instead, Ira Stigman's progression from childhood to adolescence to manhood seems molded to the topoi of nineteenth century naturalism; Ira steals, cheats, manipulates, betrays. In the novel's greatest revelation,

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[4] Time and again, Roth would claim that this loss of community was the source of his ultimate failure as a writer.

the older Stigman abruptly breaks his narrative (*Diving Rock* 142) to confess what he had long omitted from his memoir but now feels compelled to include—his years-long incestuous relationship with his sister, Minnie; moreover, this confession opens the door to another admission of incest—this time with his younger cousin, Stella.

Incest becomes the figure that the older Stigman continually invokes to crystallize—both for himself and for the reader—his younger self's sense of irredeemable corruption. In fact, modernism's classic tropes of decline, decay, and chaos appear throughout *Mercy* in various forms: poverty, vulgarity, crime, domestic abuse, sexual molestation. The corruption that the narrating Stigman locates within his younger self echoes the corruption that surrounds him in Harlem. The attempt to break free of this corruption is the defining act of the entire memoir.

For both Roth and Stigman "liberation" will come in the form of aesthetics. Virtually all critics identify Roth's relationship with Eda Lou Walton (Edith Welles in *Mercy*) as the catalytic force behind his transformation from street kid to bohemian writer. Because it describes and critiques the incremental steps that led Stigman out of

Harlem and to Welles, *Mercy* presents a much more complex story of Roth's/Stigman's artistic development.

Even before meeting Welles, Ira is drawn to artistic experiences: the music of Wagner (!), paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The older Stigman is hard pressed to identify the origins of this predilection and can only attribute it to something ineffable. It isn't the metaphysical source of this artistic inclination that interests the narrator, however; it's the way this inclination develops against the younger Stigman's Harlem existence. Crucial to this process of development is his high school friend Larry Gordon.[5] It's Larry who first helps Ira crystallize an aesthetic disposition by introducing him to a range of cultural experiences—"ballet, the stage, modern sculpture, opera, architecture, orchestral music" (*Diving Rock* 227), to the possibility of a literary profession, and, ultimately, to Welles herself.

While the Stigmans continue to embody the mores of an Eastern European provincialism and insularity, Larry's family is a direct heir to a Western European liberal tradition. In point of economics, the Gordons are thoroughly middle-class, owners of a prosperous dry-goods

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[5] In 1977, Gordon appeared in Roth's autobiographical essay "Itinerant Ithican" as Lester Winter.

business. In point of acculturation, they are thoroughly assimilated; Larry's great-grandparents, also successful merchants, settled in New Haven after arriving to the United States from Hungary.[6] In point of religion, the Gordons are firmly rooted within German Reform Judaism. In point of familial structure, the Gordons adhere to the bourgeois ideal of *Gemutlichkeit*—warmth and intimacy. Larry is so removed from his own experiences, that Ira initially takes him for a gentile:

> Yes, there he was, still, Larry, regular Arrow collar countenance, in fine navy blue wool topcoat over matching tweed jacket, and wearing a blue knit tie. In good taste everything, you just felt it, even if you didn't know what good taste was, refinement, oh, what the hell, had to be gentile, with that kind of luster [...] (*Diving Rock* 190)

As the youngest son born to the Gordons, Larry has been provided with all the material and cultural advantages of his class, including the liberty and leisure to pursue his own intellectual and creative interests. Ira, who sees himself stunted by the economic, social, and educational limitations of his class, neighborhood, and family,

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[6] While it is never explicitly mentioned, chronology seems to point to Hungary's failed liberal revolution of 1848 as a

recognizes the gulf that separates him from his new friend; in his formulation, he "[humps] his own sister" while Larry writes poems (*Diving Rock* 201-202). But something in Ira's disposition leaves him open to a *modern* aesthetic experience. And this is exactly what Larry eventually offers him. Early in their relationship, Larry lends Ira a copy of Louis Untermeyer's anthology of modern American poetry. Juxtaposed to the "dead" poems and poets that Ira is forced to read in high school, the poems in the Untermeyer feel urgent, immediate (*Diving Rock* 199); they represent "a new kind of meaning, of being, of feeling, almost like coming out of a labyrinthian basement into daylight" (*Diving Rock* 201).

It will be years before Ira develops the critical aptitude to make sense of this modern aesthetic experience; but from the beginning he identifies it as a mode of revelation available to an elite. Ira longs to join the ranks of this elite, but knows that he lacks the psychological temperament and the social standing to make any headway in the pursuit of this ideal; he needs Larry—the embodiment of everything this world represents. Their friendship, then, is complex, founded not simply (or primarily) on feelings of mutual benevolence or warmth, but

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motivation for their emigration.

on Ira's developing ambitions. It's Larry who will help him out of the vulgarity of his Harlem life and into a nobler existence (*Diving Rock* 209).

The first critical step in Ira's *bildung*, then, becomes his intense study of Larry's aesthetic and cultural preferences and habits. But this pursuit changes radically when the two of them enter college. Ira, who still has a nebulous sense of a professional future, enters City College to study biology. Larry enrolls in New York University's Greenwich Village campus to study English and dentistry (more on this later). While Ira struggles unenthusiastically through his curriculum, Larry becomes an active participant in a world of young cultural producers; *his* literary aspirations take shape through conversations and debates that occur in classrooms, clubs, salons, and coffee houses. And there's more; behind his budding sense of a literary identity stands Edith Welles-his teacher and lover.

Welles stands at the center of a vibrant Greenwich Village intellectual life. At twenty-seven, she is the youngest member of NYU's English Department; and her anthropological and literary training at Berkeley places

her squarely within the emerging modernist sensibility.[7] Time and again, *Mercy* crystallizes Welles' aesthetic and intellectual predilections by drawing the reader's attention to her library which contains work by: T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Robinson Jeffers, Edna Vincent Millay, William Carlos Williams, William Butler Yeats. Moreover, Welles is the organizing force behind a salon culture that includes important young moderns like Margaret Mead (Marcia Meede, in the novel) Hart Crane, Kenneth Burke, and Louise Bogan.

Through his friendship with Larry, Ira slowly enters this world of artistic debate and production. Standing on the margins, he absorbs its outlook, habits, prejudices, modes of consumption. Ira, of course, constantly senses his own limitations:

> He knew that he shouldn't be here, didn't belong here. They just seemed to drive him down with their, their manners, education, yeah drive him down to street level, to the hoi polloi, to what he was. What the hell. Home was a slum, a bleary tenement, a railroad flat a flight up, with mom and pop in it, sometimes leaning out in balmy weather, as he did too watching

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Eda Lou Walton was the first person to receive a dual doctorate from the University of California.

> the Pullman trains go by in summer. (*Diving Rock* 339).

But Edith Welles encourages his intuitive response to art and literature, and invites him to take a more active role in cultural life. Anglo, intellectual, modern, generous—to an exponentially greater degree than Larry, Welles embodies Ira's ideal of cultural nobility. It is because of *her* encouragement that he begins to sense his own aesthetic and intellectual potential, "You had to change," he demands of himself, "[Y]ou had to change and try to come close to her—her values: to learn to recognize artistry cultivated in the most unlikely places [...]" (*Diving Rock* 365). Immersion in the world of the avant-garde also brings into relief something he had suspected for sometime, Larry's artistic and intellectual limitations.

Almost immediately, these limitations begin to manifest themselves in the world of cultural producers. Although he rails against the bourgeoisie and its cultural values (*Diving Rock* 219),[3] the stories he writes are largely defined by the economic, historic, moral imperatives of his class. Where his peers demand a literature that is experimental and reflects the "depletion of meaning and the

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[3] His friendship with Ira is one of the ways he attempts to renounce the standards of his class.

erosion of consensus" (*Diving Rock* 289), Larry can only offer "well rounded," "conventional," and "family-type" fiction (*Diving Rock* 292). Despite his interest in *modern* poetry, his tolerance for and understanding of modernist aesthetics has a limit.[9] Time and again he rejects Welles' encouragement to read and learn from avant-garde writers. He resents Eliot for undermining romantic lyricism, and for making sordidness an aesthetic value (*From Bondage* 161). And when Welles presents him with a copy of *Ulysses* hoping that "the daring literary innovations might provide impetus to his own writing, might steer his imagination into uncharted regions" he returns it largely unread because he finds it boring (*From Bondage* (61-64).

But what Larry rejects, Ira embraces. For Larry modernism represents the erosion of his own aesthetic ideals: beauty and lyricism. But this is exactly what the young Stigman finds most alluring about the movement. Ira sees in Joyce and Eliot's fascination with decay, corruption, and squalor a correlative for his own existence; theirs is a literary mode perfectly suited to *his* experiences. And their revolutionary aesthetics make

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[9] Consider the range of poets gathered under the rubric "modern" in Untermeyer's two major anthologies: Stephen Vincent Benét, Emily Dickinson, Robert Graves, Thomas Hardy, Amy Lowell, Ezra Pound, William Butler Yeats. Surprisingly, while he includes the

his own literary aspirations tenable. With Welles' encouragement, Ira begins to extract from Eliot and Joyce a critical lexicon—one that allows him to begin to articulate his own literary ideals and values (*From Bondage* 161-163).

But Ira isn't simply drawn to apocalyptic philosophy. He is drawn to the innovative techniques and devices that these men utilize to give body to their ideas. Modernist message and modernist form: each holds a critical value for Ira.

As he struggles to make sense of "Prufrock," and *The Waste Land*, Ira encounters for the first time a literature steeped in "alienation," "fatuity," "anomie," "despair" (*From Bondage* 138). In Eliot, the classic *topoi* of heroism and nobility succumb to the sordidness of the "ugly present" (*From Bondage* 163). As Welles points out to Ira, Eliot's poetry is a lament for the loss of chivalric values (*From Bondage* 160). Ira understands this. But, in a demonstration of his newly acquired critical confidence, he also recognizes that Eliot's idealized past has nothing to do with his own experiences, with the experiences of his class; it is not his tradition. He therefore reads out this nostalgia until what remains of Eliot's aesthetic is

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poems of James Joyce, Untermeyer omitted T.S. Eliot from both his anthology of American and British verse.

pure cynicism. It is *this* aesthetic that validates Ira's own suppositions, prejudices, and shortcomings, showing him that these qualities can be made into a powerful art (*From Bondage* 145).

But it's Joyce who instructs him on *how* to transform shortcomings into literature. Immediately after Larry rejects *Ulysses*, Ira sets to reading it. The experience is a revelation:

> *Ulysses* demonstrated to him not only that it was possible to continue to commute the dross and the mundane and the sordid into literary treasure, but how it was done. It showed him how to address whole slag heaps of squalor and make them available for exploitation in art. Equally important was Joyce's tutelage in the sorcery of language, how it could be made to fluoresce to electrify the mood and rarify the printed word. No more master of every phase of syntax, no more authoritative mentor [...] of subtlest effects, subtlest distinctions in word or phrase, had Ira in his desultory way ever encountered than Joyce. Joyce elucidated the ways to use even the squeal: lingo as well as language, the double entendre, the pun, the homely squib, the spoonerism, the palindrome, pig Latin and pig Sanskrit (*From Bondage* 73).

With *Ulysses* Ira sees that poverty, violence, vulgarity, sex—the very experiences that he thought discounted him from the artistic life—could now serve as literary material. It's true; nineteenth-century realism and naturalism had already made these phenomena literary commonplaces. But where naturalists and realists maintained that art had a mimetic obligation to life, Joyce insisted on the supremacy and autonomy of artifice. Joyce's "pure" literary language elevates the base, the low, the mean into something noble (*From Bondage* 77). For Ira this has incredible allure. First, he believes that the doctrine of literary purity can transform the internal and external corruption he associates with Harlem into literature. More importantly, though, he thinks that engagement with a rarified aesthetic is itself ennobling, capable of redeeming him from his own sordid existence (*From Bondage* 75). The duration of the novel crystallizes Ira's modernist awakening by presenting it against Larry's own creative decline; and it does quite complexly.

While Ira understands the importance of the emerging aesthetic, Larry remains devoted to a waning system of literary and artistic values. One of *Mercy*'s most compelling characteristics is that it attempts to provide a socio-familial account for this divergence in fortunes.

Larry attends NYU to study literature *and* dentistry; this is his bind. His family encourages cultural and aesthetic engagement; but it is also a family that has a highly defined sense of social decorum and economic propriety.[13] Larry believes he can balance his artistic ambitions with his deep sense of familial responsibility; the unfolding of his artistic life, however, belies this confidence.

It's clear very early that Larry will never be free of bourgeois economic imperatives or cultural values. At the beginning of their friendship, Ira confesses to Larry his intention to teach high school biology. Rather than encouraging the pursuit, Larry points out that "'Schoolteachers don't earn much money.'" Larry, we learn, will supplement his life as a writer by becoming a dentist. For Ira this is a jolt—a realization his friend has limitations. "What about those poems Larry wrote," Ira wonders, and what of

> the modern poems that he had recited, poems that liberated one from stale perspectives, made free and vibrant the grimy streets and filled them with promise. Money? Earning? All that freedom was suddenly hedged, that shimmering romantic freedom

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[13] The Gordons embody all the contradictory tendencies of the classic bourgeois family: they advance the ideal of personal

> Larry seemed to possess a minute ago constrained (*Diving Rock* 214).

Ira identifies Larry's love of and devotion to family as the stunting force in his friend's creative development. Larry is continually presented with crises that pit his artistic desires against the demands of his family and class. And time and again, he fails to make the decisions that prove his commitment to a literary calling. As Ira's sense of artistic ambition and mission grows so does his conviction that Larry has been spoiled by a life of ease. To Ira, Larry's inability to break free of bourgeois mores underscores a creative and temperamental weakness: he lacks the strength to make the difficult decisions, to deal with the complexities of modern life, to undertake the challenge of complicated texts and radical ideas: "Instead of tackling the arduous, the demanding, and patiently, quietly, requiring all that he could of himself," Larry opts for the easy (*From Bondage* 146). Eventually, Welles herself comes to voice this belief: "Larry is a dilettante," who lacks the strength defy his parents she confides to Ira; in time, she concludes, he too will become as conventional as they (*Diving Rock* 178, 146).

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cultivation while insisting on a high degree of social conformity (Habermas 47-48).

It's Larry's relationship with Welles that most fully crystallizes his predicament. The Gordons are convinced that the relationship can only result in their son's economic and social ruin:

> He could have had young heiresses at his beck and call, a worldly, polished youth like Larry, exceedingly handsome, and with a bit of English accent to enhance his charm [...] young heiresses, daughters of elite German Jewish families, millionaires, leading merchants and financiers (*Diving Rock* 367).

In an effort to prove his resolve, his devotion to Welles, and to his writing, Larry transfers from NYU to CCNY, abandons his dental career, and moves into his own apartment. While he is initially confident that he has made the critical break with his family and can now advance his career, his father's fatal heart attack proves otherwise. Overwhelmed by guilt, Larry returns to his family—never to leave its hold.

On the other hand, Ira believes that *his* social and familial circumstances predispose him to the literary career that Larry will never enjoy. First, he believes that his experiences of destitution and corruption place him squarely within a high modernist sensibility. Moreover, the brutality of his domestic life frees him from

the sense of familial duty and obligation that hampers Larry's career. "[There was] nothing to reckon with, nothing to hold him back, family, warmth, what did he [Larry] call it? *Gemutlichkeit*" (*Diving Rock* 217). Finally, unlike Larry, Ira's economic predicament demands that he cultivate a strong work ethic. The jobs he holds throughout high school and college are almost always physically grueling and irksome; but they instill in him a sense of resolution and fortitude that he (and Welles) believes is crucial for training as both modern reader and modern writer. Unlike Larry, then, Ira doesn't give up when faced with a complex text. Consider the description of his initial response to "Prufrock":

> How utterly ungraspable. It was like learning to swim; nothing to hold on to, no firm medium to depend on. What the hell was the man talking about? It was not each separate part that baffled Ira. It was all of it. It was the meaning of the whole that tantalized, that he couldn't comprehend. He felt as if he would have to memorize it, commit it to his mind, or his mind to it, have it with him at all times, without need of the book, contemplate the meaning of the poem until the meaning became part of

him, and then he could understand it—the way he understood himself (*From Bondage* 144).

Ultimately, Ira comes to the realization that Larry has exhausted his usefulness as a friend; he will need someone else to lead him through the complexity of the new modernist aesthetic and offer him the salvation of avant-garde culture. That person, of course, is Welles. Almost immediately after sensing Larry's limitations, Ira begins looking for a way to displace his friend in Welles' life. "If Larry couldn't or wouldn't subject himself to the shibboleth of modern novels," Ira thinks, "he had to accept the consequences of his refusal" (*From Bondage* 65-66).

Not only does Ira believe that Larry has lost his value, he is convinced that Larry is unworthy of Welles' mentorship and affection. Thus when Larry's father dies, it is Ira who suggests that he return to his family and take care of his mother. As Ira anticipates, the return seals Larry's fate. Since much of his time and energy is devoted to familial responsibilities, his creative abilities ebb and finally disappear. Ira's awaited-for space opens up as both he *and* Welles' decide that Larry has no future in the world of cultural production.

Ira again appeals to class as the justification for his betrayal: in the pursuit of a literary career, poverty

validates all tactics. Familial and fraternal loyalties are obstacles to the realization of ambition. And Ira's sense of loyalty is trumped by his sense of necessity: "He couldn't help it: he needed to enter any gateway of esteem far more than Larry did, any gateway of esteem, of prestige" (*From Bondage* 65).

In the end, however, like Larry, Ira's creative energy will wane. Time and again, the older, narrating Stigman alludes to his one novel and the "extraordinary hiatus of production" that would follow it and define his career (*Diving Rock* 37). *Mercy* is Stigman's monumental effort to work through his half-century block and in the process provide a candid assessment of his literary development and its decline. The story of the birth of Stigman's literary identity is only part of the memoir's function, however; on a more fundamental level, the work is a renunciation of the assumptions, values, modes, and objectives that went into the formation of his modernist self.

It's the Joycean doctrine of aesthetic purity that is most strongly repudiated. In the memoir's most sustained meditations on aesthetics, the older, narrating Stigman offers a scathing indictment of Joyce for failing in his social responsibilities as a writer by escaping history through elaborate artifice. According to Stigman, in the

pursuit of art-for-art's sake, Joyce truncated his career by severing himself from the dynamic flow of human life. It's because he chose to follow this aesthetic that Stigman's own career was aborted[11] (*Diving* Rock 114-119, 149; *Diving Rock* 69-71).

It isn't my intention to offer an analysis of Roth's ultimate rejection of Joyce and modernism. Needless to say, this critique falls squarely within a view that insists on a fluid interaction between the novel and the world. What I do think fascinating is that Roth reveals a highly ambiguous relationship to the doctrine of aesthetic purity in *Call It Sleep* itself. This should come as no surprise.

Ulysses is a monumental attempt to exhaust the phonetic, symbolic, descriptive, and philosophical potential of the English language; it appropriates, invents, and parodies dozens of literary modes, devices, and techniques; it tries to bring into play the totality of Western epistemology, metaphysics, and aesthetics–all in the service of a story about a single day in the life of

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[11] In one of *Mercy's* most compelling moments, the older Stigman (echoing Roth's position) attributes Israel's victory in the Six Day War as the event that breaks the Joycean hold. In the nation's improbable victory, Stigman/Roth sees a correlative for his own potential resurrection, a rebirth predicated on a sense of connection to, not autonomy from, a people.

two ordinary Dubliners. It is arguably the twentieth century's most realized expression of a self-sustaining literary artifact—a work that demands years of devotion to parse its linguistic complexity.

But *Ulysses* stands towards the end of Joyce's career; it is his penultimate declaration of devotion to an aesthetic ideal.[12] Roth is drawn to this ideal as an adolescent; he appropriates it at the beginning of his career, at a moment when he is barely out of Harlem. What *Mercy* makes clear, however, is that Stigman's (Roth's) attraction to aesthetic purity wasn't simply (or primarily) aesthetic. Certainly, modernism's implied aesthetic potential to transform the base into the noble held great allure for Roth; but as presented in *Mercy*, the trope of transformation held a profound social, ontological, and professional promise as well.

First, and foremost, Roth/Stigman makes aesthetic purification synonymous with *self*-purification; by writing an aesthetically "pure" work, Roth hoped to redeem the familial, social, and psychological "corruption" of his tenement existence; intimately connected to this hope is

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[12] Of course his ultimate declaration of literary autonomy, *Finnegans Wake*, is so autonomous that it has alienated all but the most devout Joyceans.

the notion that participation in high modernist discourse is the hallmark of a cultural and intellectual nobility (this, of course, is embodied in the person of Walton/Welles); next, modernism's complexity affords the author the ability to give voice to and structure his "base" experiences while simultaneously concealing those experiences through elaborate literary devices; finally, modernism's avant-garde status offered an emerging author like Roth the greatest potential for establishing a reputation within a world of elite cultural producers. Put bluntly, *Call It Sleep* makes itself inaccessible to the world out of which Roth himself had emerged. The image of Roth that Leonard Michaels offers in the introduction to *Shifting Landscape* crystallizes all of this. "While many waited in bread lines," Michaels observes:

> Roth, wearing fine English tweeds, purchased for him by Walton, sat in her Village apartment reading T.S. Eliot and learning how to write a novel. He also "inflicted upon" himself [...] the discipline of learning Greek, Latin, German and Italian, and he could eventually read Homer and Dante (xxii).

For Roth, then, the modernist doctrine of purity was much more than an aesthetic imperative; it held a nearly messianic promise of redeeming every category of his

existence. One needed only the discipline to transform oneself into modernist writer. But can any aesthetic mode offer the kind of redemption and purification Roth/Stigman seeks in *Mercy*? *Call It Sleep* indicates that Roth was always quite ambivalent about the potential of aesthetic purity—about purity itself.

Not surprisingly, the tension between the pure and the impure is *Call It Sleep*'s crucial structuring topos. The novel crystallizes this tension through dozens of binaries: kosher/treife, chaste/sullied, Jew/gentile, sanitation/filth, legitimate birth/illegitimate birth, Yiddish/English. Standing at the center of these oppositions is the novel's child protagonist, David Schearl. At one level, in fact, the novel may be described as a dramatization of David's highly complex process of reading corruption into and out of world defined by brutality and bedlam.

Cogs, coal, castors, coins, clocks, cages, corn, cookies, calendars, candy, hats, horns, springs, paintings, whips—David's mind continuously sifts through the array of clutter that surrounds him hoping to discover among it the one object that can stand as a symbol of purification, redemption, and protection—a talisman. It's this pursuit

that gives *Call It Sleep* its defining structure and momentum.

From the very moment that Roth introduces the reader to David and his family, however, it becomes clear that purity and redemption will be drawn into a complex semiotics of violence and sadism. The scene takes place late on a Friday afternoon on the steamship *Peter Stuyvesant*–a ferry that transports new immigrants from Ellis Island and Manhattan. The only passengers aboard this excursion, however, are the recently-reunited Schearls: David; his mother, Genya; and his father, Albert. Genya and David are newly arrived; but Albert has been living in the United States for two years, earning enough money for his wife and son's passage. In contrast to the jubilant immigrants who ecstatically celebrate their arrival to America, however, the Schearls are somber–devoid of joy and, seemingly, of familial love and warmth (5-6).

The mood is largely attributable to Albert–the novel's embodiment of austerity and paranoia. A series of events immediately bring these traits to the fore. First, Genya had failed to recognize him when he had come to meet her at Ellis Island. On the ferry ride to Manhattan, she tries to account for her failure by pointing out how much Albert has changed since she had last seen him (6), but Albert's

response is tellingly unsympathetic: "It's no excuse for you not to recognize me. Who else would call for you? Do you know anyone else in this land?" "I came [...]. And what did you do? You refused to recognize me. You don't know me [...]. That's the greeting I get." (7). On top of this, Genya has been unable to stick to Albert's instructions. Hoping to save half a fare, Albert had written his wife to tell the immigration officials that David was seventeen months, not two years old. But David's size makes it impossible to maintain the lie. And Albert accuses Genya of having made a "laughing stock" of him by giving the "brat's true age" (7-8).

But it's David who most provokes these feelings in Albert. Where other immigrants carry "sheets tied up in huge bundles," "bulky wicker baskets," "prized feather beds," "boxes of delicacies" like "sausage, virgin-olive oils, rare cheeses," the Schearls carry only a large black satchel (10). Albert has made certain that his wife and son cannot be singled out as foreign by sending ahead simple American clothing; but it's his mode of dress that catches the reader's attention, because of its profound suggestion of restraint and austerity:

> His clothes were the ordinary clothes the ordinary New Yorker wore in that period—sober and dull. A black

> derby accentuated the sharpness and sedentary pallor of his face: a jacket, loose on his tall spare frame, buttoned up in a V close to the throat; and above the V a knotted black tie was mounted in the groove of a high starched collar (10).

David, however, continues to wear a hat from the old country. Albert demands that Genya remove it. When his wife pleas that the hat was a gift from her friend, he hurls it into the ocean. "Can't you see those idiots lying back there are watching us!" he snaps at his wife. "What will the others do on the train? He looks like a clown in it." It's Albert's summation of the situation that sets the tone for the entire novel, "He's the cause of all this trouble anyway!" (11).

In the seven years that follow, Albert has little to do with David.[11] But he does set a standard of behavior and comportment that he reinforces with brutality. David will constantly fail to live up to his father's extreme standards. Each infraction grows in weight, culminating in the novel's catastrophic climax. While it is true that Albert is the novel's most realized embodiment of severity and violence, it also true that David himself plays a

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[11] It's telling that in the entire novel Albert never addresses David by name.

significant role in contributing to his predicament. Albert's austerity has a profound influence on David's sense of himself and his perception of the world. David continually finds himself in an epistemological and existential crisis: fretting over whether he has "played bad," "acted bad," "thought bad." But David's volatile imagination does more than internalize Albert's predilections; it augments them.

When Albert is fired from his job at a printing press, he sends his five-year-old son to retrieve his uniform and uncollected wages. It's here that David first learns of his father's potential for great violence (and the reason for his dismissal): "Your ol' man nearly brained me with a hammer," Albert's former co-worker tells David. For David the figure of the hammer-wielding father is profound; his imagination dwells on the image until Albert emerges as a specter of divine retribution—a force waiting to release its fury on the world (28).

The image is given some focus later when Albert nearly kills two vagrants for stealing milk from his delivery cart. Even before his father lays a hand on them, David concludes, "they [are] doomed." When the beating does take place, David processes it against the earlier vision of the hammer-wielding father: Albert's fist becomes "a sledge"

that slams against the neck of the culprit. In the end, the event only confirms David's vision of his father as a metaphysical figure of retribution (280-282).

David's great fear, of course, is that this force of retribution will ultimately turn against him; and it does throughout the novel. The first instance of this takes place early on. David kicks a friend in the nose. Albert, who walks in on the scene and sees the blood, picks up a coat hanger and approaches David: "Speak," his father demands, "Tell me did you do this?" "Answer me!" But David cannot answer; he is awed into silence as the hanger is transformed into the mythical hammer, his father into the figure of vengeance: "Who could answer his father?" David wonders in the instant before Albert begins to beat him. "In that dread summons the judgment was already sealed."

For David, then, Albert is the Oedipal father waiting to execute judgment against a corrupt and treacherous world—a world that includes David himself. This sentiment is reinforced by David's sadistic Hebrew school (*cheder*) teacher, Yidel Pankower. Like Albert, Pankower directs his rage against a world he views as sinful and false. Pankower sees himself as the faithful defender of Jewish purity, guarding it against the eroding influence of American culture. Wherever he looks, he sees a "sidewalk-

and-gutter generation" that knows nothing about "piety and observance" (374). Pankower's response to this lack of deference is verbal and physical violence. And it's his students who bear the brunt of this rage, "Even a goy knows more about his filth than you know about holiness" (233) he yells at them in a typically graphic imprecation. But where the other kids regard Hebrew school as a burden and a bore, and Pankower a laughingstock, David takes the lessons seriously; he does so initially to avoid the wrath of his teacher; but ultimately, he comes to believe that Hebrew itself may be a talisman capable of protecting him from his father and from the incursion of the world's corruption. "Ever since he had begun attending cheder," we are told, "life had leveled out miraculously, and this he attributed to his increasing nearness to God" (221).

This aversion to the world is further reinforced by his parents' isolationism. Like Albert's austerity, this familial trait too is immediately established in the novel's prologue. The narrator brings the Schearl's solitude into relief by contrasting it to the usual scenes of reunion that take place on a ferry that shuttles between Ellis Island and Manhattan:

> All that day, as on all the days since spring began, her decks had been thronged by hundreds upon hundreds

> of foreigners, natives from almost every land in the world, the joweled close-cropped Teuton, the full-bearded Russian, the scraggly-whiskered Jew, and among the Slovack peasants, the docile faces, smooth-cheeked and swarthy Armenians, pimply Greeks, Danes with wrinkled eyelids (9-10).[14]

For different reasons, Albert and Genya both lead lives of insularity and seclusion. Albert's paranoia makes it impossible for him to cultivate relationships with other people. As he himself concedes "I have no fortune with men" (137). With Genya the matter is more complex. For while she is loving, warm, and intimate with David—the Freudian mother to Albert's Freudian father—she's reserved and stoical in her relationship to the rest of the world.

While there is no explicit motivation given for Genya's reticence, the novel does offer some hints. One of the characteristics that critics have always singled out about Genya is the nobility of her bearing. And one of the most compelling ways the novel puts this nobility into evidence is through the profound and eloquently told autobiographical stories that Genya tells David about her

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[14] Roth brilliantly establishes the Schearls' isolation throughout the novel through the orchestration of intimate space. Most of the action that takes place in the Schearls' apartment take place in the kitchen, which consistently described as sparsely, white,

youth. The young woman who emerges in these tales is highly cultured and affluent—someone thoroughly immersed in the mores of the bourgeoisie.[15] But it's exactly this nobility that also defines her sense of superiority. Compared to the provincial and naïve peasants of her village, Genya is well-read and sophisticated. But her sense of class is not limited to the past; it defines her reaction to the people who surround her now in America. Her intelligence, speech, comportment are the signs of her superiority to her tenement neighbors. Thus, her only visit to a neighbor's apartment yields this telling response: "If I had known she talked so much, drays could not have dragged me up there [...]. Her tongue spun like a bobbin on sewing machine—and she sewed nothing. It's unbelievable! I began to see motes before my eyes!" (55).

Father, mother, and teacher each imparts to David a sense that the world is base, false, corrupt, treacherous. In fact, it's Albert's radical cynicism that David comes to absorb most fully, "I don't want anybody. I—I have no fortune with men" (137), Albert concedes early in the novel. David makes this his own outlook: "Trust nothing.

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immaculate—almost sterile. Consequently, there is nothing to detract from the drama that unfolds around the family.

[15] Roth has said that Genya is largely an amalgam of his own mother and Eda Lou Walton.

Trust nothing. Trust nothing. Wherever you look, never believe" (102).

But for Albert the world's treachery and corruption come to be embodied by David himself. Throughout the novel, he accuses David of being lame, a false son, filth, a sin. But rather than rebelling against this view of himself, David internalizes it. He believes in his own corruption and constantly fears his father's retributive wrath. His one attempt at a defense is to seek out among the debris of the Lower East Side a talisman powerful enough to redeem his corruption and thus protect him from imminent destruction. This hope is actualized by David's mind—an imagination that extends into the world of clutter and tries to wrest from it a redemptive symbol.

Because it forefronts the complex maneuvers of David's imagination and symbol-making, symbol-seeking process, most critics have read *Call It Sleep* as a kunstlerroman—the story of David's artistic emergence. This romantic reading of *Call It Sleep*, however, fails to recognize that David's romantic pursuit is motivated not by a fleeing from but by an internalization of a world view associated throughout the novel with sadistic brutality. His quest, in short, is self-destructive. It's here that Roth most strongly betrays his own ambivalence about the modernist aesthetics

he had adopted. If *Call It Sleep* is a bildungsroman, the story it tells of David's development may be read ironically.

Albert and Pankower espouse a cynical mistrust not simply of the world, but of the modern world: Albert longs for the days of his rural youth in Galicia (31-32). For Pankower America is a "sidewalk-and-gutter" nation where Jews reject or have forgotten the sanctity of their tradition (374). Yet isn't this exactly the outlook that draws Ira to T.S. Eliot in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*? "Prufrock" and *The Waste Land* demonstrate to Ira that his sordid world can be made into art, and that, in turn, this art can liberate him from a base existence. Eliot, then, haunts the pages of *Call It Sleep*, but not as a figure of mentorship and instruction offering the possibility of salvation. As an animating force behind Albert and Pankower's outlook, Eliot becomes a merciless father waiting to turn his rage on Roth's/Ira's surrogate—David. Moreover, David's quest for purity, which Ira so strongly associates with Joyce, becomes, in the world of *Call It Sleep*, a masochistic pursuit—the monomaniacal obsession of pitiless men. Yet David makes these destructive and self-destructive tendencies his own; and the consequences of this internalization are dire. Time after time, David's

mind settles on an object or into a space believing it will offer him the protection and redemption he seeks; but in the end this object or terrain either augments the very crisis he's been trying to resolve or puts his very life in jeopardy. It is, in short, a futile pursuit. A few examples will support this reading.

Early in the novel David flees his father's abuse and the taunting of the neighborhood kids and wanders beyond the familiar boundaries of his block. The further he goes the more rural and open the landscape becomes. At first, David is buoyed by the new sense of space and freedom. Each telephone pole he passes leads him further away from the cares of his neighborhood and his home:

> Seven.... Eight.... Nine.... Ten.... He stopped counting them. And with them, dwindling in the past, all he feared, all he fled from: Luter, Annie, the cellar, the boy on the ground. He remembered them still, yes, but they were tiny now, little pictures in his head that no longer writhed into his thoughts and stung him, but stood remote and harmless—something heard about someone else (93-94).

But euphoria soon gives way to panic. David becomes so enrapt in counting the poles, in marking the distance that he's come, that he is soon lost. The terrain sheds it's

initial promise of deliverance and becomes the setting for yet another crisis. The crisis is only amplified by the series of strangers who try to help David find his way home. Unable to make sense of his speech, however, they lead him to the local police precinct. "They would keep him there," he thinks at the station. "Keep him there always! They would never call his mother! And now that he knew, it was too late. He had learned never to trust too late" (104).

A similar episode takes place later in the novel—this time along the East River. David has come here because it's the only place he can find to perform the ritual of burning the unleavened bread—the ceremony that ushers in Passover. As soon as he completes the rite, however, he notices the effect of the sunlight hitting the river. The brilliance is overpowering—mesmerizing. David is transfixed. Staring at the reflected radiance, he has a vision of the world dissolving, "Sin [melting] into light." He's lured forward towards the river. The sound a passing tugboat's whistle jolts him out of his reverie and saves him from drowning (247-248).

But it's the chain of events that lead to the novel's conclusion that underscores the self-destructive/suicidal quality of David's pursuit. One day he overhears Reb

Pankower translating the opening verses of the book of Isaiah for another student. In it, the prophet approaches God but realizes that he is too unclean to behold him. The angels press a piece coal to the prophet's lips thus purifying him and allowing him to approach. By now David is so thoroughly convinced of his own impurity that he becomes obsessed with this image of purification, and sets out to find the angel's coal for himself.

Consequently, when some gentile kids trick him into placing a metal rod between the trolley tracks, David interprets his subsequent shock as evidence of his having touched divine light. The minor electrocution he suffers here is amplified at the end of the novel in a near fatal experience with the rail. It will be David's most catastrophic moment. But it's only the culmination of several crucial events that underscore the futility and folly of David's pursuit.

The catalyst for the novel's climax takes place early in the final book, "The Rail." Seeking refuge from the street, David makes his way to his apartment's rooftop. Because of its suggestion of height and expansive space, the roof has profound metaphysical significance for David—a place of overpowering purity, "too pure," in fact, "for the flawed and flinching eye [...] " (296). It's here that he

meets Leo Dugovka, a twelve-year-old Polish-American. To David, the largely self-sufficient Leo is the embodiment of nobility, independence, strength (305), and he is soon desperate to win the gentile's friendship. Eventually, he is invited to Leo's apartment; it's here that he comes into contact with yet another representation of divine light—a painting of Jesus and the Sacred Heart; and once again, he is transfixed by the image. When David draws a correlation with the story of Isaiah, Leo insists that "Christchin light [is] way bigger [...] than Jew light" (322). Since "Jew light" has proven ineffective in protecting him against his father's rage and the sordidness of the street, David is convinced of Leo's assertion. By now, however, it's clear to the reader that Leo is as much a part of the street as the kids whom David despises. David, however, doesn't see this: so while his fascination with Christian light intensifies, so does Leo's interest in hearing more about David's prepubescent cousin, Esther. In the end, the two boys strike a deal, in exchange for a broken rosary, David will help Leo "play bad" with his cousin.

The results of the agreement are catastrophic. After he helps Leo have his way with Esther, David returns home to find Albert accusing Genya of cuckoldry and denying all paternal responsibility for the boy; meanwhile, Esther's

father, Nathan, who's found out about Leo, has come to denounce David for his role in "corrupting" his daughter. But before Nathan can utter a word, David himself retrieves his father's whip, confesses his "sin," and accepts his brutal beating as providentially ordained. During the beating, the rosary falls out of David's pocket and further fuels Albert's rage and his belief that David is a "sin" that must be obliterated (402). The angel's coal, the rooftop, the rosary, Leo—each locale, object, and person that David had infused with redemptive power has contributed to this moment.

With the help of his mother, uncle, and aunt David manages to escape. Running into the street, he grabs his father's milk ladle. And for the first time, resolves to give vent to his rage, to stand in defiance. "Yuh dared me...Yuh double-dared me...Now I gotta," he reiterates to himself. But he's not alone; around him there is the world he'd once renounced, now his refuge. "Humanity. On feet, on crutches, in carts, and cars. The ice-vendor. The waffle-wagon. Human voices, motion, seething, throbbing, bawling, honking horns, and whistling" (407). Making his way to the trolley yard, David thrusts the ladle into the tracks. The shock knocks him unconscious. It's here that the novel becomes most experimental, interweaving David's

subjective experience of electrocution with the surrounding voices and conversations of the street.

This is the novel's most cryptic moment, yet critics have traditionally read it as David's initiation into artistic consciousness. Alfred Kazin argues that in this scene, "David has won the essential first victory. He is on his way to becoming the artist who will write this book" (xx). For Naomi Diamant, the moment represents the maturation of David's creative temperament because in it, David's consciousness surrenders its solipsistic pursuit and becomes fused with the language and culture of the street (355). For Werner Sollors the novel's conclusion reconciles both David's and Roth's various ethnic and the aesthetic identities (164).

But such claims are unsound and troubling. First, initiations traditionally signal a passage from adolescence into adulthood. David is nine years old. What kind of duration can this initiatory experience possibly have? Next, such an interpretation makes the electrocution a successful instance of David's pursuit. In this view, David's obsession with purity is ultimately correct and justified. The redemption and purification that had eluded him throughout the novel are finally his. The pernicious and self-destructive consequences of his pursuit are

nullified, because each failure has contributed to this triumphant moment. More insidiously, such a reading ultimately validates Albert and Pankower's sadistic and monomaniacal obsession with purity. After all, it's they who create the conditions and terms that lead David into this pursuit; it's their pessimism and paranoia that come to shape his own mode of perception, and fuel his own quest for purity.

But it's the image of the "victorious" David that ultimately belies this romantic interpretation. While it's true that Albert is momentarily compelled to concede to the investigating policeman that the unconscious boy is his son, this seems to be a paltry victory; David is limp in the policeman's arms; the novel concludes with his sleep, not with his waking. Who's to say what the morning will bring? Will his "triumph" last? Has Albert admitted fatherhood out of sincerity and concern or out fear of the law? Will he be humbled by David's near fatal experience? Or will his abuse resume the next morning, the following week, or month? Will David's creative temperament be allowed to grow and mature? While the text provides no answers, critics try to circumvent its silence by reading the novel's narrator as David's fully realized mature self. But the tone of the novel is thoroughly third-person.

Nowhere does the narrator even suggest a link between himself and his protagonist.

In the end, it would be Roth's last literary act to frustrate any idealized or romantic reading of *Call It Sleep*. *Mercy of a Rude Stream* provides a justification for Roth's attraction to the doctrine of purity, while simultaneously underscoring the futility of this pursuit. The youth who stands immediately behind Roth's authorial emergence was not the innocent and tormented David, but the pathological and tormented Ira. Poverty, incest, betrayal, the tenement, menial labor, the Depression—*these* were the experiences that propelled Roth's literary emergence. Roth had hoped that engagement with a pure aesthetic would redeem his low origins. But how could art expunge the affects of this background? It couldn't. The author of *Mercy* makes this clear. But so did the author of *Call It Sleep*. With *Call It Sleep*, Roth may have written the "the most Joycean of any novel written by an American" (quoted in McHale 75), but Roth constantly underscores his ambivalence about the hope he had invested in the Joycean aesthetic.

But *Call It Sleep* doesn't merely cast suspicion on the obsession with purity; it may also championing the very things that the agents of purity (and Roth himself) revile

and repress—the street, its culture, and language. No character more fully embodies the spirit of heroic crudity than David's aunt, Bertha. Bertha is the novel's most Rabelaisian force. Coarse, bawdy, irreverent, but also warm and protective, she refuses to be impressed or swayed by culture, decorum, taste, and purity. When Nathan, her husband, complains to her that David has aided in the corruption of his daughter, she responds with typically plain-spoken common sense, "Oh what a fool you are—choking over it! As if it's never happened before that two brats should be playing like animals. Is she maimed! Has he snatched from her—the prize? Won't it heal before she's married?" (381-382). Her reaction to a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which to her is an inescapable labyrinth, is also typically irreverent—"If I ever walk up these stairs again, I hope I give birth to a pair of pewter twins" (150).

But it's her relationship to Albert that makes Bertha one of the novel's most engaging characters. Unintimidated by her Albert's brutality and austerity, she is the only one who dares to call him a madman. Time and again, she provokes her brother-in-law's rage by relating sexually charged stories, puns, and jokes. She even dares to display a newly bought pair of underwear in at the dinner

table. But even when Albert strikes her for being a "slut," she remains proudly defiant and unafraid.

But just as Roth can't commit himself fully to the doctrine of purity, neither can he allow this Rabelaisian spirit to flourish. Bertha is the only character in the novel strong enough to reorient David's relationship to the world, the only one capable of making him see the folly of his obsession with the pure. But as soon as Roth introduces her, he marries her off and largely removes her from the novel and David's life.

This then is Roth's bind and a possible source for his long literary silence. Roth writes a monumental Joycean novel; but throughout it he betrays his ambivalence about the Joycean project. At the same time, he makes the language, culture, and attitude of the street vibrant and dynamic, but truncates them before they can influence David and the shape of the novel itself. The street and the tenement were the worlds Roth knew best; and they are present everywhere in the novel; but it's obvious that he could not shed the personal, social, and cultural prejudices that he held towards them to allow them to flourish and gain footing in the world of *Call It Sleep*. Roth's authorial identity is thus divided. He was never able to synthesize the modernist aesthetic ideal with his

own lived experiences. Only after he rejects Joyce, half a century later, is he able to resume not so much his career, as the mere act of writing.

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