A CRAVING FOR HISTORY: IMMIGRANT THEMES IN JEWISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE

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University of New Hampshire

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A CRAVING FOR HISTORY: IMMIGRANT THEMES IN JEWISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

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B.A., State University of New York at Albany, 1972
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DISSERTATION

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the Requirements for the Degree of

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in
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September, 1984
This dissertation has been examined and approved.

Dissertation director, Gary Lindberg
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Michael DePorte, Professor of English

Philip Nicoloff, Professor of English

Harvard Sitkoff, Professor of History

Bud Khleif, Professor of Sociology

July 17, 1984
Date
to Pop—my own Galitzianer (now can I buy you that cup of coffee?)
to the memory of Gary Rabinoff—teacher, friend, soulmate
and to Lisa, whose magical powers delivered me from fear
(tú eres muy simpática)
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</th>
<th>v</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. &quot;SOME VAST SALLOW AQUARIUM&quot;: THE FIRST VOICES OF JEWISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. MAKING IT--OR, THE GOSPEL OF SUCCESS</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. THE SPELL OF THE PAST: ABRAMAH CAHAN’S THE RISE OF DAVID LEVINSKY</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. GIVING FREEDOM A CHANCE</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. THE PURSUIT OF ECSTASY: ISAAC ROSENFELD’S PASSAGE FROM HOME</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. AFTER PORTNOY: TOWARDS A DEVOTIONAL LITERATURE</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. O MY AMERICA!: THE IMMIGRANT STORY AS CLASSIC AMERICAN NOVEL</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

A CRAVING FOR HISTORY: IMMIGRANT THEMES IN JEWISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

JEFFREY SAPERSTEIN

University of New Hampshire, September 1984

This dissertation is a cross-generational study of three immigrant themes in Jewish-American literature: transformation, freedom, and connection. It covers a number of twentieth century writers whose central concerns revolve around issues of assimilation. Chapter I gives a brief overview of the topic.

Chapter II examines the various means by which the immigrant sought to achieve American status. Writers discussed include Mary Antin, Anzia Yezierska, Elias Tobenkin, Michael Gold, Norman Podhoretz, and Saul Bellow. Chapter III is an in-depth study of Abraham Cahan's The Rise of David Levinsky (1917), a rags-to-riches story of a poor immigrant's rise up the ladder of success in the garment industry. The chapter emphasizes the psychological strains of transformation.

Chapter IV deals with the second generation's flight from immigrant neighborhoods into the larger American sphere, and the necessity to give shape to this new freedom. The writers discussed are
Anzia Yezierska, Henry Roth, Daniel Fuchs, and Alfred Kazin. Chapter V is a close reading of Isaac Rosenfeld's *Passage from Home* (1946), a study of an adolescent's attraction to an aunt who leads a bohemian life far removed from the boy's familiar middle class world. This chapter examines the nature of the boy's alienation.

Chapter VI concerns the attempt by modern Jews to recover aspects of their tradition. It looks at a number of non-fiction memoirs as well as fictional works by Mark Helprin, Cynthia Ozick, and Hugh Nissenson, works in which both memory and imagination are enlisted in an attempt to recover "the useful past." Chapter VII is a close reading of Johanna Kaplan's *O My America!* (1980). This novel focuses on an immigrant son who has escaped his past by creatively fashioning his alienation into an intellectual style. The chapter looks at how his escape is countered by his daughter's attempt to understand the cost of such transformation. A brief conclusion speculates on other uses of my analysis.
"SOME VAST SALLOW AQUARIUM": THE FIRST VOICES OF JEWISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE

What meaning . . . can continue to attach to such a term as the 'American' character?—what type, as the result of such a prodigious amalgam, such a hotch-potch of racial ingredients, is to be conceived as shaping itself?

Henry James, The American Scene

I am a Russian revolutionist and a freethinker. Here in America I became acquainted with a girl who is also a freethinker. We decided to marry, but the problem is that she has Orthodox parents, and if we refuse a religious ceremony we will be cut off from them forever. I don't know what to do. Therefore, I ask you to advise me how to act.

letter to the editor of The Forward

After spending twenty years in Europe, Henry James, the last great voice of America's Protestant literary tradition, returned home in 1904. This period was one of the most accelerated transitions in American history. James left New York in the 1880's when one could still speak literally of Greenwich Village, and just as the first wave of the so-called "New Immigrants" from southern and eastern Europe had reached our shore. When he returned, a shirtwaist factory had replaced his former home at Washington Square, and millions of Slavs, Italians, and Russian Jews had, in James' eyes, taken possession.

James recorded his impressions of this metamorphosis in The American Scene, perhaps the first book to ponder America's "ethnic question" in a wholly personal, non-scientific fashion. Using the same intricate, highly reflective style that characterizes his fiction masterpieces of this period, James tries to gauge his relation to his
native city in the light of its ethnic composition. Detecting a "chill" in this urban hodge-podge, he is forced to conclude: "... there is no claim to brotherhood with aliens in the first grossness of their alienism."^1 James was no ordinary racist and for him to perceive his distance from working class Italians and Jews was hardly unfair. However, conceding James his self-effacing irony, there is still an unmistakable tinge of proto-racism in his inability to distinguish individuals from the foreign crowd. The "masses" and "swarms" he repeatedly refers to seem to be turning the once familiar scene into a "phantasmagoria."

When he visits a Yiddish café on the lower East Side, James observes what he calls "the Hebrew conquest of New York." Here James' genuine admiration for the vitality of Jewish life is undercut by his patronizing language: "There is no swarming like that of Israel when once Israel has got a start, and the scene here bristled, at every step, with the signs and sounds, immitigable, of a Jewry that had burst all bounds." Some of James' comments suggest the fastidious author's physical unease among the immigrant population: "Multiplication was the dominant note . . . overflow is the main fact of life." James' overall impression of Yiddish New York is condensed in this clearly racist analogy: "It was as if we had been thus . . . at the bottom of some vast sallow aquarium in which innumerable fish, of over-developed proboscis, were to lump together, for ever, amid heaped spoils of the sea."

What was life like inside this aquarium? Given this underwater perspective, what were the immigrants' own impressions of the American scene? Were these strange creatures in fact destined to "lump together,
for ever" in this urban fishbowl? These are the underlying questions of "A Craving For History," a discussion of the imaginative literature written by Jewish immigrants and their descendants as they tried to find, and still seek their place in America.

Finding a place is no cliché. There is a curious failure of comprehension in James' assumption that America's newcomers, in their swarming multiplicity, were "at home." Perhaps because James felt himself dispossessed, he attributed a sense of possession to the new immigrants, but nothing could be further from the truth. History records the profoundly disorienting effect of the industrial metropolis upon a generally rural, tradition-centered people: the immigrants themselves spoke of being thrust into an alien world which they variously personified as a thief, a whore, or a slaughterhouse. In fact, "alienation" would become the classic literary theme of the Jewish immigrant culture. Sitting among them and hearing their guttural Yiddish, James would not guess that a distinctive literary voice could emerge from these masses. He could only register his fear of linguistic pollution. The East Side cafés, he felt, were "torture-rooms of the living idiom."

To James' ears, the babble of the East Side sounded like a profanation of his "consecrated English tradition." To more discerning ears, it could make for a bittersweet music. Many of these voices were first heard in their individuality in the "Bintel Brief" (Bundle of Letters), an advice column begun in 1906 by Abraham Cahan, the editor of the Yiddish daily The Forward. In the pages of The Forward, the immigrant could pour out his deepest emotions.

The letters ranged among numerous topics: marital difficulties, career choices, nuances of behavior, relations with Gentiles. No
American commonplace—from ice cream to romantic love—was taken for granted, since every stranger was an innocent. Sometimes the letters revealed the shtetl superstitions many newcomers brought with them:

I am a young man of twenty-five, and I recently met a fine girl. She has a flaw, however—a dimple in her chin. It is said that people who have this lose their first husband or wife. I love her very much. But I'm afraid to marry her lest I die because of the dimple.2

Cahan could dismiss this ignorance with curt irony: "The tragedy is not that the girl has a dimple in her chin but that some people have a screw loose in their heads."

At other times, the tragedy was too real for an easy joke:

I was born in a small town in Russia, and until I was sixteen I studied in Talmud Torahs and yeshivas, but when I came to America I developed spiritually and became a freethinker. Yet every year when the time of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur approaches, I become very gloomy; my depression is so great that I cannot endure it. When I go past a synagogue during these days, my memory goes back to my childhood friends and my sweet childlike faith. So strong are my feelings that I enter the synagogue, not in order to pray to God but to heal and refresh my aching soul by sitting among landsleit and listening to the cantor's sweet melodies. The members of my Progressive Society don't understand. They say I am a hypocrite since I am known there as an outspoken freethinker. What is your opinion of this? Answer: No one can tell another what to do with himself on Yom Kippur.

Sometimes the writer's simplicity of expression coupled with an intensity of emotion could make for a raw poetry:

I am a girl sixteen years old. I live together with my parents and two older sisters. Last year I met a young man. We love one another. He is a very respectable man, and makes a fine living. My sisters have no fiancés. I know that should I marry they will never talk to me. My parents are also strongly against it since I am the youngest child. I do not want to lose my parents' love, and neither do I want to lose my lover because this would break my heart. Give

* A glossary of Yiddish words and expressions is located in the appendix. The first use of these terms is underlined; thereafter they appear without underlining or quotation marks.
me some advice, dear Editor! What shall I do? Shall I leave my parents and lose the happiness of my life! Give me some advice, dear Editor!

The untutored letters printed in the "Bintel Brief" were written in Yiddish for a Yiddish-speaking readership. But in giving voice to their fears and hopes, these ordinary people were testing the waters of their new freedom. After all, writing a letter to an esteemed editor like Cahan was not the same as speaking one's mind in the noisy home or on the crowded streetcorner. It implied a conversation with a larger world, a gesture towards America. From such a gesture, a rich literary style and tradition would develop, one that would sound the same note of anxiety that is evident in these unsophisticated letters. One can almost hear, for example, one of Philip Roth's fictional fathers in the letter which ponders the forbidden world of baseball. The young girl's heartfelt conflict between romantic love and family duty will become the actual substance of many of Anzia Yezerska's stories, and Cahan himself, in The Rise of David Levinsky, might well have been the gloomy freethinker who still entered synagogues, not to pray, but to re-inhabit the past.

Throughout this study, I use the phrase "Jewish-American literature" rather than "American Jewish literature" favored by many scholars. The distinction suggests my emphasis, which is on the fictional treatment of assimilation themes. I am interested in the content of Jewishness within the context of American life. The relation of American Jewish writing to the Yiddish literary tradition of eastern Europe is an important related topic and one I touch on in my second chapter. But "A Craving For History" is intended primarily to trace the Jewish response to America.
This response has by no means been a uniform one. Jewish-American literature continues to be of interest because of its shifting ironies, often revealing a highly contradictory combination of attitudes. One pole of this ambivalence results from the psychological tendency of the outsider to conform to a supposed norm. One of the most salient features of Jewish-American literature is its assumption of a tangible America, "out there" and just beyond one's grasp. The phrases "real Yankee" and "real American" are invoked repeatedly in the literature of the first two generations. Even in recent Jewish fiction, sophisticated and apparently assimilated characters evince a belief in authentic American character traits, and measure their own strangeness against this "normalcy." No matter that this standard remains elusive or is variously embodied in the person of an aristocratic New Englander or a down-to-earth Midwesterner, or even that "real Americans" themselves are seen striving to emulate the same idealized models. The fundamental fact is that, in their literature at least, Jews are still seeking America.*

The corollary of this tenacious belief in an elusive but still sought after America is the continuing fact of ethnic identification. As Glazer and Moynihan reported in their 1964 study Beyond the Melting Pot, even forty years after the period of mass immigration ended, strong

*Apparently America is still seeking its Jews. In Woody Allen's film Annie Hall, the affair between Midwestern shiksa and New York Jew is based on a mutual fascination with the lover's exotic otherness, though Alvy and Annie seem very alike in their habits and interests. To Alvy, she is the quintessence of Americanness because she says, "oh gee" and calls her grandmother "grammy." To Annie, he is a "real Jew" by virtue of his insecurities and obsessions, though it would be easy to argue that any practicing Jew could be considered more "real" than Alvy.
ethnic patterns still prevailed among New York City's five major minorities: "The point about the melting-pot . . . is that it did not happen . . . The American ethos is nowhere better perceived than in the disinclination of the third and fourth generation of newcomers to blend into a standard uniform national type." 4

Among immigrant groups, Jews have always had a heightened awareness of their own separateness. Partly self-cultivated and partly forced upon them, this alienation had developed along side of a compensating resiliency, a flexibility which has worked to their advantage in the New World, with its relative absence of anti-semitism. The Jewish ambivalence towards America corresponds to America's ambivalence towards its Jews. The immigrant Jew is usually cited as the classic example of successful Americanization, even while being chided for stubbornly persisting in his separateness. The immigrant themes discussed here are built on such dualities. In their broader outlines, these themes—attitudes toward success, generational conflict, and reconciliation with the past—can be considered generic immigrant concerns. But the combination of heightened ethnic awareness with facile adaptability is a distinctly Jewish phenomenon.

My use of "immigrant themes" does not apply exclusively to the literature written by immigrants themselves. While most of the works covered in chapters II and III were written by first generation immigrants, the literature under discussion in chapters IV through VII represents a later development of assimilation themes. These works, written by the children and grandchildren of immigrants, contain an overt or implicit recognition of the role of the immigrant past. This past refers to the period of migration (1880-1910) of eastern
European Jews, especially from Russia and Poland, from whom the vast majority of today's American Jews are descended. Assimilation was a keener issue for this group than for the group of German, Spanish, and Portuguese Jews who migrated to this country in the mid-nineteenth century and who experienced a smoother transition because of their greater westernization.

The works I discuss should also be distinguished from another body of immigrant literature: the literature written by or about those European Jews displaced to America at the aftermath of the Holocaust. The Holocaust survivor is a different class of immigrant than the Russian Jew who migrated at the turn of the century, and Holocaust literature—a phenomenon in itself—introduces issues that are outside the scope of my study.\(^5\)

In keeping with my emphasis on assimilation, I confine myself to Jewish literature written in English. Many immigrants, of course, were content to remain within the East Side and to communicate exclusively with the Yiddish-speaking world in America and Europe. A surprising amount of quite good poetry and fiction was written in Yiddish through the 60's and published in The Forward.\(^6\) But the literary language of most American Jews is English and the writers I discuss have already taken this preliminary step towards America.

Jewish-American literature is so diverse a body of writing that it yields few all-encompassing generalizations. But in confining my focus to issues of assimilation, I discerned a pattern of development in the literature which was loosely chronological. It made sense that the concerns of a first generation immigrant would differ from those of later generations and I used this putative evolution as my organizing principle.
The immigrant generation itself was faced with the most fundamental of assimilation questions: could they maintain traditional Jewish identities in their secular New World environment? America opened up a sense of possibility that the shtetl Jews had never known. The "promised land" came to possess an almost magical hold in the immigrant psyche. Despite the undeniable evidence of failure and poverty all over the East Side, the first generation circulated a gospel of success, which told of marvelous transformations in the land whose streets were "paved with gold." Driven by the need to prove their value in the eyes of their host culture and given opportunities not previously allowed them, immigrant Jews were bent on "making it" in America.

Chapter II traces the success theme in a series of first generation works which focus on the transformation of a lone individual, as he seeks an American identity. In this chapter, I also include works by such post-immigrant writers as Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Norman Podhoretz because, although written later in the century, they take up the same issue of the young man unmoored from his past and coping with a perilous kind of success.

This survey chapter is followed by chapter III, "The Spell of the Past," a close reading of Abraham Cahan's novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), perhaps the most incisive fictional embodiment of immigrant transformation. There is a documentary breadth to Cahan's novel as it chronicles the protagonist's journey to the top of the garment industry. But Levinsky's "rise" is a very qualified one. With almost clinical precision, Cahan dissects the cost of such success. *The Rise of David Levinsky* is an archetypal immigrant work. Because so many of its motifs permeate assimilation literature, I return to it repeatedly in my later chapters.
While the immigrant himself had to cope with the pressures of assimilation in an overt way, the children of immigrants, American by birth, were faced with a more problematic, because more internal, relation to the past. In many second generation works, the immigrant past disappears altogether or remains a vague part of the backdrop. My second immigrant theme thus focuses on home life, the family, and the neighborhood—the psychological boundaries of the middle generation. In works by Anzia Yezierska, Henry Roth, Daniel Fuchs, and Alfred Kazin, I found a generation of dreamers, longing to escape their New World ghettos in order to enjoy America's freedom. But escape for its own sake could make for an empty victory. "Giving Freedom a Shape" (chapter IV) became this generation's main task.

This chapter is followed up by a discussion of Isaac Rosenfeld's out of print _Passage From Home_ (1946). On the surface, this slim novel tells a simple story of a teenage boy's flight from home and his eventual return. But on a deeper level, it is a study of a second generation son "in pursuit of ecstasy," (chapter V) yearning for some holiness amid the mundane facts of a drab middle class existence. If it lacks the rich texture of a major novel, the diminishing itself is crucial—_Passage From Home_ is a study of a religious Jew without his religion. It includes passages of great sensitivity and beauty: it deserves to be back in print.

With assimilation assured, many recent Jewish-American works are seeking to re-establish a connection between the experience of the immigrant Jews and the lives of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren today. The works of the immigrant revival are often nostalgic. Their action takes place in the lower East Side and
Brooklyn of many years ago, but they share a common impulse towards a connectedness that is the third significant immigrant theme of this study. Reconciliation with one's ancestral past is a common enough phenomenon, but the narrative techniques by which these works seek to establish the connection seemed to me of particular interest. In chapter VI, "Towards A Devotional Literature," I examine a number of non-fictional memoirs as well as fictional works by Cynthia Ozick, Mark Helprin, and Hugh Nissenson, in which storytelling itself, as an act of memory and imagination, becomes the way to recover a rich cultural past. For Jews, this recovery has become an almost sacred duty and many writers themselves speak of the "devotional" quality of their work, a quality that transcends mere nostalgia.

Because of the importance of storytelling, many of the protagonists of these recent works are writers engaged in the very process of constructing a text. This is true of Johanna Kaplan's O My America! (1980), the focus of my final chapter, "The Immigrant Story as Classic American Novel." O My America! tells two stories simultaneously: there is the public celebration of the Jewish intellectual who has left his immigrant past behind, and the private re-construction, by the reflective daughter, of the scattered fragments left in the wake of her father's quest for America. What Kaplan calls "the first generation disease" of denying the past is thus countered by the narrative assertion of a continuity between the past and the present. O My America! is a truly important novel. In it Kaplan successfully merges the classic immigrant motif of transformation and the classic American myth of promise. While The Rise of David Levinsky looks forward to many developments covered in the later chapters, O My America!, with
its large scope and sympathy, encompasses many of the ideas discussed in the early sections.

In singling out these three themes for analysis—transformation, freedom, and connection—I make no claim for comprehensiveness. No doubt other assimilation themes can be discovered in Jewish-American literature. The emphasis I give to themes of success, family relations, and the recovery of the past seemed to me the most useful way to draw connections between the immigrant and post-immigrant generations.

As for my selection of works, for the most part I avoid fuller discussions of Bellow, Malamud, and Roth, the big three of Jewish-American literature, and concentrate instead on such figures as Abraham Cahan, Daniel Fuchs, Anzia Yezierska, Henry Roth, Isaac Rosenfeld, Hugh Nissenson, and Johanna Kaplan, names much less familiar to readers of American fiction. Part of my aim in "A Craving For History" is to bring to light lesser known authors whose works I feel deserve greater attention. It was an exciting bit of literary archaeology to unearth such small gems as Bread Givers, Homage to Blenholt, and Passage From Home. There was also an element of challenge in beginning the critical evaluation of such contemporary novels as Ellis Island, My Own Ground, and O My America! I hope this sense of discovery and challenge comes across in the following pages.

I've titled my study "A Craving For History," a phrase from Herbert Gold's novel/memoir Fathers. I chose this phrase because for many of us living in an almost ahistorical world of future shock, it is immensely satisfying to discover one's own relation to the ancestral past. The works under discussion deserve our attention precisely because they force us to consider the ways the past and present are in-
timately connected. My own turning towards immigrant fiction has not been an arbitrary academic selection, but an act of curiosity and self-discovery.

Does the immigrant past still have a vitality today? Obviously I think it does. The very fact that so much contemporary Jewish-American literature is going back to the lower East Side for its setting as well as its inspiration is a telling phenomenon. Even today, the immigrant experience is acknowledged as the central fact of twentieth century Jewish-American life. Assimilated Jews, many of them non-observant in a religious sense, still struggle with some of the same issues that the unassimilated immigrant generation had to face on a day-to-day basis: What aspects of the tradition are worth preserving in my own life? How can I reconcile religious practice with secular freedom? What aspects of the past shall I pass on to my children? The question down the generations is essentially un-changed: how to be a Jew in America?
CHAPTER NOTES


3 Among other works which examine this connection see Ruth Wisse, The Schlemiel as Modern Hero (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971).


5 For a fine study of this "post-Holocaust consciousness" see Dorothy Seidman Bilik, Immigrant-Survivors (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1981).

6 A prominent school of proletarian writing resulted from the Jewish influx into the garment industry. For a discussion and sampling of "sweatshop poetry" and other East Side literature see How We Lived, pp. 293-316.
CHAPTER II

MAKING IT—OR, THE GOSPEL OF SUCCESS

But if God was enough for men like my father, their sons, in time, changed the tokens of value. God became success.

Harry Roskolenko, "America, The Thief"

The trouble with people like us who start so fast is that we soon have no place to go.

Joseph Heller, Good as Gold

In a wonderful little story called "On Account of a Hat," the Yiddish writer Sholom Aleichem deftly evokes the absurdity of shtetl life in its interaction with the Gentile world. The "hero" of this tale is a certain Sholem Shachnah, known throughout his little town as Sholem Shachnah Rattlebrain. Shachnah, a real estate broker ("at least he hangs around the landowners"), is rushing home for Passover from a transaction far from his village. While waiting for the train, the overworked salesman falls asleep and dreams that a wagon he has hired to take him home goes out of control, causing him to miss the first night of the important holiday. But Shachnah awakens from this nightmare to find that his train is in fact just pulling into the station. He picks up his carpetbag and his hat and rushes off to the train. In his hurry, he takes the hat of the man sitting next to him, a Russian General. Suddenly and mysteriously (since Shachnah is unaware that he has donned the wrong hat), everyone is bowing and scraping before the little Jew. "This way, Your Excellency," the
porter tells him and tries to transport him to a first-class compart-
ment. But Shachnah resist—these Gentiles must be making fun of him.
When the preferential treatment continues, Shachnah, no fool he, thinks
he has the answer: this can't really be happeining, he must be part of
the dream that his real, corporeal self is still dreaming back on the
bench in the station!

Thus the greatest good luck is perceived by the hapless Jew as a
piece of utter misfortune. Naturally, the excess thinking has cost him.
Shachnah returns to his "self" on the bench, misses the train and thus
the start of the holiday, and earns himself the reputation as the town
fool.¹

Ostensibly a story of a Jew who has outsmarted himself, "On Ac-
count of a Hat" can also be read as a parable of alienation. Sholom
Aleichem was right to zero in on the simple outward appearance of a hat,
for the question of a Jew's identity often rests on such apparently tri-
vial items as clothing and manners.* This story was written in Yiddish
and set in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century, but Shachnah's
unintended "passing" anticipates a fundamental immigrant dilemma.

With characteristic brevity, Sholom Aleichem penetrated to the
heart of the shtetl world view, which assumed a static social order in
relation to society at large. Not permitted to own land or to enter
the professions, Jews fulfilled a middle man function, living and
working on the fringes of the Gentile world. This social reality
worked with the religious tradition of holy study and self-restraint
to foster the Jews' sense of passive acceptance. Thus the very thought
of worldly success was a ludicrous joke.

¹For religious Jews, wearing a hat is a required custom on all holidays.
By the later part of the nineteenth century, this state of hopeless resignation was becoming intolerable. Many of the more enlightened felt that the countless number of ingrained customs and habits were keeping the Jews in a superstitious medieval world, completely out of touch with the flow of history. Ideas of secularism, science, and politics from western Europe were reaching the shtetl world in waves, causing a gradual erosion of the orthodoxy. In the early 1880's, a series of vicious pogroms forced increasing numbers of Jews to consider the idea of flight.  

It was at about this time that the first word of "America" reached the shtetl. The earliest group of pioneer immigrants wrote to the old home, luring their compatriots with tales of di goldeneh medina (the golden land), where no czar would grab Jewish boys for army service, where education was free and a Jew could make his fortune. America was not idealized beyond belief. There was advance word of the dangers the Jews would face in a godless country, as in this letter:

You are heading for a corrupt and sinful land where the Sabbath is no Sabbath and the holiday no holiday. Even on the Yom Kippur they do not fast. And for what purpose are you going there? So you can eat meat every day—they say that in America people can eat meat every day. But their meat is trayf. No good Jew would touch such meat. I would loathe even to look at it. I would disgorge it if I accidentally ate it. Feh! Utterly disgusting.

But for every letter of warning, there were two which spoke of unimaginined possibilities, and which inspired visions of miraculous transformations:

But suddenly America had flashed upon our consciousness and fanned our dormant souls to flames of consuming ambition. All my relatives and all our neighbors—in fact, everybody who was anybody—had either gone or was going to New York. Everybody who went there became a millionaire overnight, and
a doctor or a teacher into the bargain ... There, in America, was my future, as well as my family's.³

More than anything else, America represented the future. For shtetl Jews, inured to their exile, the future had always been an ahistorical concept, signifying the ideal time of the coming of the Messiah. The first stirrings of Zionism secularized this ideal but attracted only a handful of shtetl Jews. Many more centered their hopes for redemption around the idea of America. When the first wave of immigrants started arriving, then, it was no wonder that they invested the Americanization process with a quasi-religious significance. The future was about to be realized. Such a jump into history called for a physical and spiritual readiness—in Mary Antin's phrase, a willingness "to be made over."

Not all immigrants of course were willing to be transformed. Some, especially the elderly, rejected America outright. Emigrating to escape increasingly severe pogroms, these exiles lived and died in the lower East Side of New York, speaking little English and creating a little shtetl or "Jewtown" in America. Jacob Riis and, with considerably more sympathy, Hutchins Hapgood described these Old World types in two early books of investigative reporting, How The Other Half Lives (1890) and The Spirit of the Ghetto (1902).⁴ These were immigrants in body only, their mind and spirit remaining in the old country.

But most Jews came not only to get away from czarist terror, but also to make the most of American opportunity. For this majority, to cease being a greenhorn became a necessary prelude to success. But at what point did one cease being a "greenie" and become a "real
American"? Though the transformation process had nearly mystical import, the formation of an American identity had to be validated in tangible, concrete terms.

In the literature of immigrant transformation, three factors serve as the criteria of success: learning, money, and style. "Style" incorporated possessions, manners, values and attitudes, especially attitudes towards success itself. There is something of a natural progression to this sequence. A secular education offered the immigrant mastery of a new language and citizenship, initial proof of transformation. Earning a living was also of immediate concern, but most first generation Jews viewed money as a guaranty on the future. It meant being able to secure "a better life" for one's children. The refinement of manners and cultivation of style occurred when the second generation began to move out of the East Side into middle class and suburban neighborhoods, which necessarily followed from the acquisition of learning and wealth.

Before the immigrant could pursue success, however, two barriers to transformation had to be hurdled. One came from without, in the form of American nativism and elitism—the various guises of social anti-semitism. The other came from within the immigrant himself—the fear of conversion. Transformation, after all, could mean apostasy. As Sholom Aleichem knew, "on account of a hat" a Jew could lose his very soul.

In part, American nativism was fueled by the belief in the apparently unmeltable qualities of the immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, in comparison with the smooth acculturation of the
"Old Immigrants" of English, German, and Scandinavian descent. According to one advocate of restricted immigration, the "New Immigrants" were "beaten men from beaten races," whose "mere habits of life are of the most revolting kind." Even the earlier population of German Jews, a more assimilable, less visible group than the later Ashkenazim (the Jews of central and eastern Europe), found their entry into American life hampered by these elitist notions.

While some native Americans applauded the German Jews' commercial aptitude and their rapid Americanization, others associated their upward mobility with all the pretensions and vulgarity of that period in American social life known as "the Gilded Age." A good example of this contradictory attitude can be seen in Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth* (1905), where Simon Rosedale, a German Jew, is allowed to travel within the circle of the old New York society because of his wealth, but is shunned on any but the most superficial personal level.

Even a more sympathetic onlooker, like the novelist Henry Harland, was guilty of elitism, though it manifested itself in a circuitous fashion. Harland, who wrote under the Jewish sounding pen name of Sidney Luska, was one of the first popular novelists to focus on the new figure of the American Jew. In *The Yoke of the Thorah* (1887), no doubt with all good intentions, he set out to examine the problem of intermarriage, but the book reveals a not so latent suspicion of the Jew's inner nature.

The novel traces the agonizing conflict of Elias Bacharach, a wealthy young painter, over whether to marry Christine Redwood. Elias is deeply in love with Christine, but he is Jewish and she is Protestant. When his uncle, a rabbi, warns him that intermarriage is the
worst sin a Jew can commit, Elias decides to end the relationship. The Harland/Luska narrator comments, "The Jew had got the better of the Man." But a few days after this apparent victory, Elias' "better nature" reasserts itself and he decides to marry Christine after all. Now the narrator tells us, "The Man had got the better of the Jew." At the wedding ceremony, just about to take his vow, Elias is seized with a fit and falls to the ground unconscious. At this point, Harland conveniently tells us that only the rabbi knows that Elias is prone to epilepsy. Elias is taken away. Upon recovering, he is convinced that God's hand has intervened, and completely breaks with Christine. The remainder of this lurid novel demonstrates the tragic consequences of the "yoke of the Thorah" as Elias' feelings for Christine are once again revived.

The Yoke of the Thorah is a curiously duplicitous book. Presented as a sensitive problem novel in which Harland tries to demythify the Jew and make him familiar to American readers, it actually reinforces the exotic strangeness of the Semite.* Outwardly Elias is a thoroughly assimilated cosmopolitan, but Harland treats his Jewishness as an ineradicable condition, a burden or "yoke," incapable of modification. Although Harland focuses on the German-Jewish community of New York, many of the same fears of Jewish otherness would be carried over to the even stranger Russian Jews.

It is not surprising, then, that in an atmosphere of suspicion, much first generation literature written by eastern European Jews

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*Overt anti-semitism only surfaces once in the novel. After Elias breaks off his engagement with Christine, her father, until then an apparently unprejudiced Universalist, calls Elias "a damn, miserable white-livered Jew."
attempted to placate native American fears. Even Abraham Cahan, the
immigrants' most respected spokesman, was put on the defensive.

Trying to demonstrate the malleability of the Russian Jew in the
prestigious journal Atlantic Monthly, Cahan wrote in 1898: "The
Yiddish periodicals are so many preparatory schools from which the
reader is sooner or later promoted to the English newspaper, just as
the several Jewish theatres prepare his way to the Broadway play­
house . . . ."\textsuperscript{10} Cahan was a genuine believer in bi-culturalism,
but his use of "promoted" and "prepare the way" suggests that many
immigrants believed the key to success was what the sociologist
Milton Gordon has called Anglo-conformity.

Many of the earliest works of immigrant transformation read today
like simplistic apologies for the Melting Pot. To differing degrees,
the assimilation process was seen as a movement towards Christianity.\textsuperscript{11} In Elias Tobenkin’s novel Witte Arrives (1916), for example, immigrant
success or "arrival" is measured by the protagonist’s ability to hide
all traces of his past and to pass as a native-born American, at least
in his professional life. The novel tells the story of Emil Witte
(nee Witkowski), who emerges from immigrant anonymity in a small
Midwestern town to become a successful feature writer and novelist in
the East. Emil never rejects his Judaism. He converses in Yiddish
with his father and discusses Marx, the immigrant’s worldly Messiah,
with his socialist uncle. But his success, after a long struggle as
a fledgling newspaper writer, is dependent on his discovery of a
refined, "real American" writing voice:

The cultural background of Witte's writing was that of New
England. Not one in a thousand readers of these unsigned
editorials on American life and problems and ideals would have suspected that they were written by any one not of American birth. Many, indeed, would have placed the writer of such articles as none other than a scion of one of the oldest American families.12

Capping off this success, the novel concludes with Emil's intended marriage to Barbara Graves, a Gentile woman from one of the "old families." This marriage with a patrician Gentile is thus the reward for Emil's impersonation, and the outward badge of his arrival into America.

While Witte Arrives stops short of actual conversion, the novel's conclusion is a sort of symbolic change of faith. In some cases, though, symbolic transformation became literal conversion. In Against the Current (1910), Edward Steiner's autobiography which begins "I am a loyal American," the Hungarian-born Jew embraces a brotherhood-of-man ideal literally, by converting to Christianity. Throughout the book, Steiner paints himself as the true cosmopolitan, the ideal melting pot hero. Though he retains his sympathy for Jews, his conversion is a total renunciation of his Jewish past: "Christianity is to me the real internationalism in which all the races and nations are one or are growing into oneness. In it the individual casts off that which is specific to his race, he becomes one with all men, and therefore one with the divine in them."13 For Steiner, assimilation is completely antithetical to ethnic specificity.

Steiner apparently had no problem changing his faith, but for most immigrants, even those who had lost much of their piety, conversion was still a great sin. For these, success in America could never involve an absolute break with the past. Though shtetl life had been emptied of much of its religious doctrine before the period
of mass migration, shtetl values were part of every immigrant's baggage. If these values could be adapted to suit American conditions, then success might be achieved without paying the high price of apostasy.

Sacred study was the primary value of Jewish life, as well as the chief determinant of social status within the shtetl. A poverty-stricken man of learning occupied a higher rank on the social scale than a wealthy but unlearned man. When immigrants arrived in America, they directed their thirst for knowledge to the secular subjects of the New World. Although the holy texts were no longer the objects of study, immigrants pursued their American education with what amounted to a holy zeal. Stories of first generation immigrants clamoring to learn English in night school are by now commonplace. Education was pursued for its own sake, as part of the Jewish tradition of study, as well as for more pragmatic reasons: if they could speak English, immigrants could get better jobs, make more money, and shed their greenhorn status. Learning thus proved to be the bridge between the Old World and the New: it carried over the Jewish tradition of thought, and it also proclaimed the immigrant a new man, a man socially reborn.

Mary Antin's The Promised Land (1912) established the hunger for education as the collective ideal of the first generation. Antin wrote this autobiography before she was thirty years old because, as she tells us in a quite remarkable opening paragraph, she has undergone something akin to reincarnation:
I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over. Is it not time to write my life's story? I am just as much out of the way as if I were dead for I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell. Physical continuity with my earlier self is no disadvantage. I could speak in the third person and not feel that I was masquerading. I can analyze my subject, I can reveal everything; for she, and not I, is my real heroine. My life I have still to live; her life ended when mine began.  

Antin's claim for "absolute otherness" is qualified to some degree by the rest of her story, which pictures Americanization as a gradual expansion of boundaries and consciousness rather than a sharp break with the past. If the young Russian girl from Polotzk emerges at the end as a college educated American author, the transformation is like a molting process, and the shedding of "foreign idiosyncracies" a painful but necessary stage in growth. 

Much of The Promised Land is set within the Pale of Settlement in Polotzk, Antin's native town. In these early chapters, Antin describes herself as an inquisitive child, curious about life beyond the pale. Her curiosity is reinforced when her father, having been exposed to modern ideas in his travels outside the small town, decides to give Maryashe and her older sister, as well as his son, a liberal education, both in Hebrew and secular subjects. Maryashe is an apt student, but having eaten from "the tree of knowledge" (Antin's phrase), she loses her innocent faith in Jewish tradition. One Sabbath, in defiance of the proscription against carrying anything beyond the limits of the home, Antin takes a handkerchief with her into the street and waits for God to strike. However, no punishment is visited upon her. From this experiment in sin, Antin dates the beginning of a new consciousness. 

*The Pale of Settlement comprised that area of czarist Russia in which the Jews were legally authorized to settle. About 95 percent of the total Jewish population of Russia lived within the Pale in the 1890's.
At this time, a series of financial misfortunes sends her father to Boston. Despite the fact that he is barely able to make a living, for three years he sends letters to the old country praising American freedom and democracy. Eventually he saves enough for his family's passage and Antin makes the exodus across the Atlantic.

Americanization begins the moment Antin, as a ten year old, sets foot on American soil, exchanging her "hateful homemade European costumes . . . for real American machine-made garments" and then shedding her Hebrew name for the real American "Mary." This transformation is described as a natural extension of her innate curiosity and her need for broader horizons: "I had come to America to see a new world . . . ." The apex of her achievement occurs two months after her arrival, on a September morning, when her father escorts her and her sister and brother to a Chelsea public school, "as if it were an act of consecration." Handing over the children's entry certificates to their teacher, Antin's father "took possession of America." The remainder of The Promised Land takes us through Mary's educational career and covers her facility with English, her rudimentary poetry writing, her growing interest in the natural sciences, and finally her entry into Barnard College.

Antin intended her autobiography to be representative. In telling her personal story, she hoped to make vivid the unlimited potential of the numerous untold immigrant lives. Directed explicitly at American readers, The Promised Land is both a patriotic hymn to American institutions, especially the system of free public education, and a demonstration of the Russian Jews' high ideals, eagerness to learn, and most of all adaptability.
If Antin saw herself primarily as an interpreter of the immigrant experience, Anzia Yezierska thought of herself first as a writer. She was intent not so much on convincing America of the worth of the immigrant—she took that for granted—as on revealing the inner world of her characters.

Yezierska's fiction of the 20's and 30's gives voice to the awakened hunger for self-expression the first generation felt after leaving the oppressive air of czarist Russia and Poland. She too pays homage to the promise of America. What distinguishes her work from that of other first generation writers is that instead of platitudes, Yezierska writes with an almost primitive rawness of emotion. Almost primitive, because Yezierska was a well educated woman who chose an untutored idiom that would evoke the immigrant's wide-eyed freshness of spirit: "Like all people who have nothing, I lived on dreams. With nothing but my longing for love, I burned my way through stone walls till I got to America." For Yezierska, America is the land of imagination, a place where dreaming is not just an idle activity but a way to make the self. In a story called "The Miracle," her young heroine calls America "a lover's land" and at the end of the tale, the miracle is accomplished: her night school teacher, the very essence of Protestant restraint, declares his love for his emotional student.

In Yezierska's fiction America is a lover's land because there one has the chance to fully express all one's longings and desires, to be a creator and giver, or to "make herself for a person," as one of her unsophisticated characters puts it. Yezierska's people possess the energy of children, as they soak up American culture: "I was so
grateful to mingle with the American people, to hear the music of the American language, that I never knew tiredness."  

But Yezierska realized that freshness of spirit alone could not sustain her characters. They must eat and pay the rent. Many of her tales condemn the harshness of tenement life. Though her work reveals an abiding faith in the land of possibility, she also writes convincingly of the social realities that betray one's dreams. In a moving little tale called "The Lost 'Beautifulness,'" both sides of her nature—dreamer and realist—are brought together. Hannah Hayyeh, a laundress, lives in an East Side tenement; ever since she worked for the genteel Mrs. Preston in Stuyvesant Square, she has dreamed of having a white painted kitchen exactly like Mrs. Preston's. Because her son Aby is due to return from army duty overseas, Hannah saves her pennies and with her own hands paints her tenement kitchen a sparkling white. Proud of her masterpiece, she invites neighbors to have a look, and their exclamations affirm her achievement: "Gold is shining from every corner . . . You don't need to light up the gas, so it shines! . . . What a whiteness! And what a cleanliness! It tears out the eyes from your head!"  

But her greedy landlord decides to raise the rent, for now that the kitchen is so glorious, the apartment has appreciated in value. When Hannah's son returns, he finds a heap of household belongings and his mother, huddled in the rain, evicted from her own "beautifulness."

Yezierska's work is being re-discovered today by feminists and rightly so, but it should be of interest to a wider audience.*

*Yezierska's Bread Givers will be discussed in detail in chapter IV, especially in terms of the conflict between tradition and aspiration.
Yezierska would be the last of the first generation writers of any significance to write persuasively about unambivalent attainment. In "America and I," her heroine slaves away in a private home and is later exploited in a sweatshop, but she manages to keep intact her hope "to do something with my head, my feelings . . . ."²² For Yezierska, it was still possible to view success purely in terms of self-awareness. Writing itself was the capstone of her achievement, the bridge between two worlds. As Yezierska said, "In only writing about the Ghetto I found America."²³ Her fiction sums up an entire generation's faith in America as a process of becoming.

There was a quality of innocence to the earliest literature of transformation in which anything "real American" seemed worthy of emulation. For Antin and Yezierska, curiosity alone could open up a world of possibility. These first stories of rebirth were love poems which envisioned a merger of spirit between Old World and New.

Actual social practice did not lag far behind this imagined union, for there was a surprising degree of congruence between Jewish ideals and traditional American virtues. The orthodox emphasis on denial and self-restraint jelled smoothly with a fundamental American Puritan ethic which preached frugality and abstinence.* As one historian notes, acculturation was often quicker for first generation Jews than other immigrant groups because Jews arrived with middle class values already internalized.²⁴ Contrary to the view of tradi-

*The original Puritan settlers saw themselves as a "chosen people" and used Old Testament language and imagery to describe their American experiment.
tional Jewish life as centered exclusively on holy study, the shtetl world was keenly aware of family background, social position, and wealth.

Money was never completely disdained, even by the truly pious. As Elizabeth Herzog and Mark Zborowski point out in their affectionate re-creation of shtetl culture *Life Is with People*, there was no shtetl equivalent for "filthy lucre" because money was never equated with dirt. If learning was regarded as the first criterion of status, wealth was a complementary value. A popular shtetl saying was "no bread, then no Torah." Wealth connoted the means to support a family, dispense charity, and contribute to the maintenance of the community. Conversely, poverty meant being a drain on generally limited community resources. When word came of American opportunity, the great mass of Jews who decided to embark were the deprived. For these hopeful poor in search of their economic future, money became a second measure of success.

Money continued to possess a hold upon the immigrant imagination even when American conditions failed to live up to expectations. The most cogent illustration of the way a money mania could take hold is Michael Gold's *Jews without Money* (1930). The title alone is striking. If nothing else, Gold's autobiographical novel dispels the myth that every Jewish immigrant went on to become affluent. *Jews without Money* stands as one of the few fictional treatments of a Jewish proletariat.* Peddlers, house painters, tailors, whores—Gold's world is populated by a host of immigrant workers, caught up in the drudgery of making a living.

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*Hugh Nissenson's *My Own Ground* (1976) can be considered a modern example (see chapter VI).*
The novel was written in 1930 but set before World War One. Gold looks back at his own boyhood with a bittersweet nostalgia: "I can never forget the East Side street where I lived as a boy . . . People pushed and wrangled in the street. There were armies of howling push-cart peddlers. Women screamed, dogs barked and copulated. Babies cried . . . It was an immense excitement. It never slept." While Gold embraces the vibrant Yiddish culture of his childhood ghetto, the novel's cumulative effect is anything but quaint. By playing the immigrants' hopes off against harsh reality, Gold achieves a blunt irony: "The Jews had fled from the European pogroms; with prayer, thanksgiving and solemn faith from a new Egypt into a New Promised Land . . . They found awaiting them the sweatshops, the bawdy houses and Tammany Hall."27

Jews without Money is set during a somewhat later stage of immigrant arrival than the work of Antin and Yezierska. The bloom is still upon the cheeks of Yezierska's characters, most of them young women. But though Gold's book is a memory of childhood, his was a youth prematurely cognizant of life's misery, and the adult characters also seem old before their time. The few who succeed therefore stand high above the masses. Gold recalls that on his block the "pattern of American success" was none other than Harry the Pimp. Never seducing any of his twenty girls, Harry views himself as a philanthropic businessman and a respectable family man, proud of his achievement. With genuine benevolence, Harry dispenses the wisdom of his experience:

America is a wonderful country . . . One can make much money here, but first one must learn to speak English. That is what I am always preaching to our Jews; learn English; become an American. Is it any wonder you must go on slaving in the sweatshops? Look at me; if I hadn't learned English I myself would still be buried in a shop. But I struggled--I fought--I learned English.28
Harry may be smugly innocent in his faith in this creed, but most of the other characters in *Jews without Money* have become fevered by their need for cash. Gold takes pains to distinguish this appetite from simple greed. For example, there is Zunzer the landlord, a mean-spirited miser. When Zunzer first came to America, he starved himself so that he could save enough money to bring his family over. After three years of careful penny pinching, he was robbed of his savings. He almost went insane, but eventually he began saving again. In two years, he was able to send for his family. But by that time, hoarding had become a way of life for him, and when his family arrived, he grudged them food and health care. When his wife died, he even haggled with the undertaker over the burial price!

Zunzer is the most extreme example of the fever pitch the money hunger could reach, especially among the book's male characters. If Gold's episodic narrative can be said to have a main character, it is Mikey's father, Herman Gold, a romantic dreamer whose moods swing violently between hope and despair. His career is an inversion of the typical tale of immigrant progress. Starting as a part owner in a suspender shop, Herman Gold works his way down the ladder of success until, ten years after his arrival in America, he is reduced to peddling bananas. His misfortunes only intensify his needs. Near the end of the novel, he tells his son:

> It's better to be dead in this country than not to have money. Promise me you'll be rich when you grow up, Mikey! . . . this is my one hope now! This is all that makes me happy! I am a greenhorn, but you are an American! You will have it easier than I; you will have luck in America!^{29}

In shtetl life, luck—that is, a little bit of God's favor—could be invoked with a certain playful irony, but Herman Gold's plea here
elevates the concept of mazel to an obsessive principle. Michael Gold's protest is as much directed against the immigrant's belief in this gospel as it is against the gospel itself.

Gold himself went on to become one of the leading Communist literary spokesmen of the 20's and 30's. This is prefigured in the novel's final scene in which the twelve year old Mikey, weary from weeks of unsuccessful job hunting, listens to an East Side socialist proclaiming an end to poverty. The novel concludes with a Utopian fanfare: "0 workers' Revolution, you brought hope to me, a lonely suicidal boy. You are the true Messiah. You will destroy the East Side when you come, and build there a garden for the human spirit." If, as Michael Harrington says, Jews without Money demonstrates the "hopeful poverty" of the immigrant generation, that hope seems to be an extension of a deep despair.

Another work which looks back at the earlier period is Albert Halper's Sons of the Fathers (1940). Though its voice of protest is more muted than Gold's, it also serves as an example of a new skepticism towards the success impulse which begins seeping into second generation literature.

Sons of the Fathers is set in 1915 Chicago and centers on an immigrant grocer and his pursuit of success. The novel begins optimistically, with the infant Milton taking his first few steps on his own, while the proud father, Saul Bergman, beams: "We've started our family in the sunshine of a new world, in a land of plenty and peace! No, you shouldn't worry about Milton, he's going to be somebody, I can see it already on his face!" Saul is a common, even a coarse man at the beginning of the novel, slaving after petty profits and hoping to be "well-to-do." But unlike
Herman Gold, Saul never cherishes grandiose notions of sudden wealth. As the novel proceeds, he becomes more refined by recognizing his own limitations. He soon resigns himself to his lot as a lower middle class storekeeper and pins his hopes for American success on his two oldest sons, Milt and Ben. For them, and his other children, he feels there will be a "better life." And indeed things look promising when Milt works his way up as a traveling salesman and Ben follows suit. But the promise turns sour when war fever sweeps the nation.

A somewhat didactic novel, Sons of the Fathers celebrates the simple middle class virtues of providing for one's family and saving for the future. This portrait of a working class grocer has affinities with Bernard Malamud's The Assistant (1957). Both show us ordinary little Jews, only minimally religious, who have settled for doing a decent business in the wish for a "better life" for their children.

Like Malamud's Morris Bober, Saul Bergman gains a certain dignity because of his wise resignation, but Sons of the Fathers is also a story of diminished expectations and disillusionment. When the war hits, the novel takes a decidedly bitter turn. Saul, who embraced the simple commercial virtues of good service and a fair price, is forced into a recognition of profiteering, the manipulation of market prices, and the evils of mass capitalism. And the light in this darkness—his hope for the next generation—is cut off by Milt's death in battle, just a few days before the armistice.

Both Jews without Money and Sons of the Fathers anticipate the disenchantment with the success drive which will become the explicit subject of much third generation Jewish-American literature. Certainly there were reasons for disillusionment. For one, the bloom of
innocence was beginning to fade. The second generation emerged with a measure of detachment towards American life not possible to their parents, caught up as they were in the fundamental problems of adjustment. In the early 20's the first nationality quota systems had put a check on unrestricted immigration, and a decade later the Depression had soured many immigrants' dreams. John Higham says that in the 30's, "The old belief in America as a promised land for all who yearn for freedom had lost its operative significance." 33

If the dream had lost some of its luster, the quest for transformation still had plenty of momentum, enough so that most second generation Jews succeeded in leaving behind their immigrant ghettos for middle class urban neighborhoods. The more fortunate were able to purchase homes in exclusive suburbs, gaining access to formerly restricted country clubs and schools, and leading lives virtually indistinguishable from their Gentile neighbors. No longer bound by the ghetto psychology of appeasement, the post-World War Two generation entered mainstream American culture with a sense of confident well-being. The greenhorn days were now far behind.

The sociologist Marshall Sklare suggests that in the first half of the century the desire of Jews to assimilate can be taken for granted, whereas in the second half, with most obstacles to acculturation down, Jews could choose the degree of assimilation they wished to achieve. 34 This wider set of choices led to the introduction of a third term, style, by which the newer generation could measure how far they had come in the transformation process. This yardstick presumes the acquisition of education and wealth, and can be defined in terms of
manners, possessions, and status—a literal life style. But style also implies a capacity for forming values and judgments, a sensibility. The very fashion in which one responded to one's own success was a measure of success itself and became a salient characteristic of post-50's Jewish-American literature (my use of "style" here, with an emphasis on its socio-cultural connotations, should be distinguished from the literary use of the word).

This literature did not always react to the Jews' emergence into the mainstream with whole-hearted acceptance. In fact, much third generation satire was built on a disdain for the success drive. This unreceptive style is best exemplified in much of the writing of Philip Roth, especially *Goodbye, Columbus* and Joseph Heller's *Good as Gold*. An alternative style, basically receptive, was more attuned to the power dimension of success. It attempted to acknowledge ambition as a legitimate response to American affluence. This receptivity was first sneakily introduced in Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* and received its most direct expression in Norman Podhoretz' *Making It*.

Although Philip Roth is the reigning comic satirist of the post-World War Two generation of Jewish writers, he is also one of the most earnest. There is a certain self-defeating quality to his work, as if he were not able to fully enjoy his own humor. This may be because throughout his career Roth has been drawn to the subject of immigrant success, yet morally repelled by its consequences.

Roth's early fiction hovers around the world of wealthy, suburban Jews who have, in Irving Howe's felicitous phrase, "assimilated like crazy." Roth catches their habits, customs, and social relations with
dead-eye accuracy. Because of his attention to the social nuances of everyday life and his tendency to exaggerate these sorts of details, Roth's strong suit has always been the comedy of manners. The narrative interest or theme of Roth's fiction generally lies in the intersection of various styles of Jewishness, each with its own class and family background, manners, and values. *Goodbye, Columbus* (1957), Roth's first important work, renders this intersection through a love story between rich girl Brenda Patimkin and poor boy Neal Klugman.

Neal, the story's narrator, is a librarian who lives with his working class aunt and uncle in Newark. In the opening paragraph, Neal, as if he were a servant, holds Brenda's glasses as she dives into a swimming pool. Brenda's wealth is instantly manifest in her physical grace and teasing complacency. With wonderful economy, Roth establishes Neal's attraction as a compound of envy and contempt. In *Goodbye, Columbus* desire itself seems dictated by style. Soon Neal is calling Brenda for a date and literally ascending the suburban hills to claim this golden girl.

From the very beginning, Roth sets this story of summer romance in the larger context of immigrant transformation. The novella has three distinct settings, each of which represents a different stage of this process. The nouveau riche world of the Patimkins, Short Hills, is built on acquisition and materialism. This is a realm of "gathering in"—the Patimkins are even ferocious eaters. According to the relativistic scheme of the story, the Patimkins occupy the New World. In order to win Brenda, Neal must accept the values of this world and make himself over in the form of a Patimkin (there is even a vague consonance between Patimkin and American). Though Neal
is dazzled by the Patimkin's air-conditioned luxury and their vigor, he is also immediately aware of the hollowness of this realm. Their Jersey suburb may be a kind of New World, but Neal perceives it as an unnatural place, with trees that drop sporting goods and a basement frigidaire overflowing with fruit. Ultimately Neal will not be made into a Patimkin. In these terms, *Goodbye, Columbus* is about a failure of assimilation.

Relative to Short Hills, Newark is the Old World, the world of the working class urban Jews. Roth evokes this world with a humorous nostalgia. For Aunt Gladys, with her concern for avoiding waste, life is a "throwing off." When the leg of an old dresser falls off, it is replaced by the suburban phone book (Aunt Gladys rarely uses it and it's thin enough— in 1957— to serve as a substitute leg). Despite his affectionate attachment to Newark, Neal is no longer at home there. A college educated man of sensibility, he cannot return to his provincial roots and he remains only a temporary guest at his aunt's.

Neal is thus doubly alienated. Rejecting the success drive of the New World Patimkins and detached from the quaint Old World customs of his parents' generation, Neal remains in a spiritual limbo at the end. On the Jewish New Year, having ties to neither world, he sets out for work. The library, the novel's third major setting, offers no retreat. Ideally a realm of mind and spirit, the Newark branch is actually a deadening place, inhabited by lifeless bureaucrats. In the end, Neal returns mechanically to this realm of numbness.

James Tuttleton has remarked that the novel of manners generally embodies the conservative social vision. As practiced by Cooper, James, and Wharton, it is written from the vantage point of long-
established and clear cut social values and norms. But Goodbye, Columbus suggests the difficulty of clear cut judgments for a culture in the process of being transformed. Roth questions the value of a success that is measured solely in terms of wealth and possessions, but offers no alternative value. Style here, then, is merely Neal's witty way of expressing his contempt. "Klugman," incidentally, is an incisive take off on the Yiddish expression a kug zu Columbus (a curse on Columbus)—the embittered chant of many disappointed immigrants. The title of Roth's story obviously also makes the point.

A number of critics, perhaps discomfited by Roth's uncompromising satire, have taken him to task for what they perceive as his Jewish self-hatred. It is indeed uncomfortable to read Roth, once the laughter has stopped. If he seems unable to find sustaining values in the assimilation experience, his fiction explores the seams in the process with honest bewilderment.

Roth's recent novel Zuckerman Unbound (1980) continues the guilt-ridden critique of success first formulated in Goodbye, Columbus. In the later work, Roth's hero is already a successful novelist, but his sudden fame and fortune upon publication of a controversial novel only alienate him further from his family and make him prone to paranoid revenge fantasies. Zuckerman's good fortune is really no different than a calamity: "All this, this luck--what did it mean? Coming so suddenly, and on such a scale, it was as baffling as a misfortune." In this comic nightmare, very close to Sholom Aleichem in spirit, success carries with it a strong counter-charge of guilt.

Joseph Heller takes this fear-of/desire-for success theme to its absurd limit in Good as Gold (1976). Alternating between the two
milieus of Jewish Coney Island and WASPy Washington, D.C., *Good as Gold* is really about the immigrant/outlier's fascination with and alienation from the strange workings of the American political establishment. Heller's "catch" this time is that his protagonist, Bruce Gold, is not aware of himself as a Jew when he is among Jews in New York City. In Washington, however, he is self-consciously Jewish. But since, according to Gold, Jews don't achieve high political office—Henry Kissenger being an anomalous exception—a Jew who does can't really be Jewish! Heller laughs off the idea of a Jewish cabinet member, but *Good as Gold* reveals an underlying unease about Jews in their relation to power.  

For Roth and Heller, disdain for success is not very far from a disbelief in its reality. This unreceptive style focuses on the discontinuities of the transformation process, emphasizing Jewish guilt, the absurd, and gaps in identity. The receptive style, on the other hand, gives more emphasis to the continuities of transformation, suggesting that an immigrant psychology can be guiltlessly reconciled with the desire for affluence, fame, and status.  

Perhaps the most striking example of this receptivity in Jewish-American literature is Norman Podhoretz' autobiography *Making It* (1967), which examines the conditions attached to upward mobility in a frank and unashamed manner. But Podhoretz' way had been prepared for him earlier in the century by what is arguably the most seminal work in the literature of transformation, Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953).  

As Leslie Fiedler says, Bellow emerges when Jews for the first time move into the center of American culture.  

The first sentence of *Augie March* boldly announces this assimilation theme in accents
that recall the classic American tradition of Whitman, Thoreau, and Melville: "I am an American, Chicago-born--Chicago, that somber city--and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way . . . ." \(^{40}\)

*Augie March* is the great melting pot novel of the mid-century, a panoramic survey of a pluralistic urban world, populated by a cross-section of ethnic types situated between low-lifes and intellectual dandies. It is also a Jewish-American novel, with the accent on the hyphen, because it fuses the leisurely style of the American rural picaresque tradition (*Huckleberry Finn*) with a new hurried urban chatter. Augie is a new kind of American character and Bellow needs a free-wheeling garrulousness to bring him to life. The exuberance of the novel alone is perhaps indication enough of Augie's readiness to seize upon an open field of possibilities.

In a negative sense, Bellow's aim in *Augie March* can be understood as a rejection of two popular Jewish stereotypes. First, he steers clear of the shlemiel/victim image which casts the Jew as either comical ne'er-do-well or passive slave to his own fears (Bellow's previous novel *The Victim* is a concentrated look at these fears). No unworldly simpleton, Augie travels through the novel with a healthy amount of ego. But lest Augie seem like a pushy Jew, Bellow also avoids a second stereotype. Augie is no overachieving Sammy Glick. Bellow reserves the role of the go-getter for Augie's older brother Simon. For Augie, however, there is self-acceptance: "I never tried to exceed my constitution." \(^{41}\) Though counseled by a number of putative fathers and mothers on how to seize opportunity and make his fortune, Augie's "spirit of opposition" keeps him his own, simple self. If he
remains a character on the fringe of both middle class respectability and the world of easy money represented by the post-war black market, Bellow insists that we see this as a conscious choice.

At the end of the novel, Bellow rewards his free-floating hero with a rural triumph, casting him in a pastoral mold: "I aim to get myself a piece of property and settle down on it . . . I'm not thinking about becoming a farmer, though I might do a little farming, but what I'd like most is to get married and set up a kind of home and teach school." Augie as a scholarly Gary Cooper is a little hard to imagine. Perhaps Bellow could allow himself this vision because he was writing from the vantage point of the mid-twentieth century, aware that Augie would move out of the Depression era into an age of affluence. In large part, Augie's success is a matter of Bellow's seizing on that sense of possibility and creating a voice and rhetoric to suggest the freedom. In this sense, Augie is a completely literary creation, representing the path of least resistance: he succeeds without completely rejecting materialism and without capitulating to the powers that be. Augie is Bellow's vision of the melting pot hero. He makes it, and on his own terms.

Where Bellow indirectly comments on the Jews' success drive through Augie's quest for simplicity, Podhoretz in Making It confronts this impulse, what he calls "the dirty little secret," head on. Podhoretz, the editor of Commentary magazine for the last 25 years, traces his rise from humble immigrant origins to the top of the intellectual world. He opens his preface with an overstatement that is only slightly ironic: "I am a man who at the precocious age of thirty-five experienced an astonishing revelation: it is better to be a
success than a failure.\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Making It} goes on to examine how Podhoretz came around, finally, to accept his own ambition as a legitimate response to the world of possibilities.

Podhoretz' journey to the top takes him from Brooklyn to Manhattan. Only a subway ride away in geography, Manhattan is a great distance psychologically. It represents affluence, fame, and assimilation. Podhoretz' childhood in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, however, was shaped by the idea of limited possibilities. Ironically, it was this immigrant milieu which taught him the gospel of success. Success was the possession of goods which had value in the eyes of others (i.e. Gentiles). Self-esteem was a secondary consideration. Meanwhile, Podhoretz' early experiences at Columbia and Cambridge convince him that success is measured by another yardstick: class— not only in the economic sense but also in the sense of an elitist style. This "facsimile WASP" style calls for a posture of detachment towards worldly success. For a while, Podhoretz resists giving in to the new code and deliberately wears unpressed clothes and keeps company with the "aggressive" Jews who are entering Columbia in greater numbers. But on his return trips to Brooklyn, his artistic sensibility is offended by the lower class manners of Brownsville. Almost unconsciously, he loses his Brooklyn nasal twang and his speech habits shift to a neutral American voice.

Podhoretz confesses that he was under the illusion that entering the world of spirit and mind and art entailed no shift in class status. He says he learned from Robert Warshow at \textit{Commentary} "that it was possible to achieve cultivation without losing touch with oneself, without doing violence to one's true feeling, without becoming pompous,
pretentious, affected, or false to the realities of one's own experience . . . "44 But he also intuitively understands that he is gradually becoming a facsimile WASP and that this style "represents an almost total break with the familiar."45

Podhoretz' conversion to WASPdom is miraculously aborted in the 60's by a stunning phenomenon: the newly chic status of Jewishness. Not only is Jewish-American literature becoming the leading school of fiction, but New York Jewish intellectuals are now appearing as writers and editors of such leading magazines as Partisan Review, Dissent, and Commentary. This section of Making It on the background and growth of the new Jewish establishment is a fascinating account of America's shift towards ethnicity, and reinforces what Glazer and Moynihan conclude in Beyond the Melting Pot: "But as the [ethnic] groups were transformed by influences in American society, stripped of their original attributes, they were recreated as something new, but still as identifiable groups."46 Podhoretz himself refers to this new Jewish community as "the family," shrewdly aware that it represents a more advanced development of his immigrant past.

Now Jewishness can be more openly acknowledged as in keeping with the best of Western culture, and Podhoretz uses a striking metaphor to convey this transition: he is like a Marrano* who has converted back to the open practice of Judaism "after having practiced it only in the secrecy of his cellar and in the deeper secrecy of his own mind."47

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* Marrano was the contemptuous term used by Spanish Catholics 500 years ago for those Jews forced to convert to Catholicism but who remained "secret Jews."
In the end, it appears that Podhoretz has "made it" to the top (Manhattan) without a loss of his immigrant identity (Brooklyn). The intellectual world Podhoretz joins is a good example of Milton Gordon's theory that the marginal man can find a home in gradually forming sub-groups composed of other marginal men. But if the Family has cushioned his ride to the world of affluence, Podhoretz' success is shadowed by two realizations. One is brought home to him after a visit to a high ranking member of the Kennedy administration. In relation to the power structure outside the Family, that is American society at large, Podhoretz realizes that the orbit of the New York intellectual is a very small one:

... this was not my country; I was not really a part of it; I was a citizen, and a highly interested one, of a small community in New York which lived by its own laws and had as little commerce as it could manage with a hostile surrounding environment. As an intellectual I was as ghettoized as my ancestors in Eastern Europe had been as Jews... I had never, in other words, felt anything but completely powerless in relation to what might or might not go on "out there."

Secondly, and more personally, there is Podhoretz' underlying perception that even his rise to the top of this relatively powerless world is based on a lucky bit of timing—the fortuitous ascension of urban ethnics. Like Augie, Podhoretz transcends his ghetto mentality and "makes it," but his success story is riddled with persistent questions of self-worth.

Success has become a dark theme in Jewish-American literature, but it was not always this way. For first generation immigrants, success meant, simply enough, becoming an American, a process of transformation that represented a threat to traditional values, but
which also signified personal and economic freedom, a sense of possibility. Ironically, just as Jews began moving into the American mainstream in mid-century, the cost of transformation came under scrutiny in the most important post-war literature.

Like some ancient taboo, success can be the object of a tantalized fascination as well as the source of a primitive fear. In Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* and Joseph Heller's *Good as Gold* the only way in which success can be approached is through an involuted kind of satire. Even for those, like Bellow and Podhoretz, who approach it more forthrightly, success holds its perils. Intent on demonstrating how he moved towards legitimizing his own ambition, Podhoretz in *Making It* reluctantly acknowledges the "conversions" and "depressive letdowns" which became chronic symptoms of his success. For all Bellow's affirmation, his pastoral conclusion to *Augie March* seems worked up. Like some first generation writers, Bellow goes overboard in justifying Augie's "American" qualities.

The later generation's discomfort is hardly surprising since it is based, in large part, on a detachment towards the values of their parents. The money gospel which pervaded the East Side induced the flight to the suburbs, but it also afforded the later generations the luxury of judgment. As early as 1930, Michael Gold had suggested, in *Jews without Money*, that money, formerly a means to an end, could become an end in itself. In *Sons of the Fathers*, Halper presents the simple virtue of frugality—the means to insure "the better life"—alongside of a prognosis of economic corruption, the golden land tarnished.

Dreams, aspirations, education. First generation literature suggests that knowledge itself is part and parcel of the American
promise. Becoming an American means expanding one's horizons, materially and spiritually. But even Yezierska, the poet of this passion, uses intermarriage—that is, approval by the Gentile world—as the test for her heroine's "becoming." And Mary Antin, who goes as far as one can in creating the exemplary immigrant—adaptable but with integrity—whispers of "fraud." The Promised Land, that model of immigrant success, hints that transformation implies not only a loss of innocence, but a loss of one's true self as well.

The very need for external validation suggests, ipso facto, the weakening of internal guidelines. Furthermore, the outward signs themselves have shifted through the century and have not always been reliable markers. Sociological mobility implies the potential for a psychological dislocation. While all the outer facts speak of overwhelming success—Jews have indeed become Americans—the literature of immigrant transformation continually asserts the riddle of inner identity.
CHAPTER NOTES


3 These letters quoted in Irving Howe and Kenneth Libo, How We Lived, pp. 18-19.


8 Luska, p. 83.

9 Luska, p. 177.


15 Antin, p. 187.

16 Antin, p. 197.

17 Antin, p. 205.

18 Antin, p. 205.


20 Yezierska, "America and I," p. 22.


22 Yezierska, "America and I," p. 27.


27 Gold, p. 6.

28 Gold, p. 17.

29 Gold, pp. 218-19.

30 Gold, p. 224.


33 Higham, p. 330.


41 Bellow, p. 204.

42 Bellow, p. 456.


44 Podhoretz, p. 149.

45 Podhoretz, p. 32.


47 Podhoretz, p. 136.


Men may change their clothes, their politics, their wives, their religions, their philosophies, to a greater or lesser extent; they cannot change their grandfathers.

Horace Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the U.S.*

Were the Jews Germans? Are they Americans? Are the Germans in the United States Americans? And the Swedes? And the Poles? I am not talking about citizenship or passports or external loyalties. What are the inner facts?

Ludwig Lewinsohn, *The Island Within*

The Jews' success drive would never have achieved its nearly folkloric aura had it not received considerable reinforcement from values endemic to American life. The vision of transformation has been such a prominent feature of Jewish immigrant culture because it meshes with a quintessential American idea—the idea of making a self. The spiritual dimension of this endeavor is implicit. Success may have its material manifestations, but the deep romantic current in American culture has always valued process over product, the energy that goes into attaining over the mere fact of attainment. If the self-made man is the American culture hero, the road he has traveled rather than his view from the top is the stuff of legend. As Bellow's non-denomina-
tional American character Henderson says, when he sets out to discover his better self, "I am a becomer, not a be-er."
Augie March would no doubt concur. The sense of promise and possibility also resonates for Bellow's immigrant ancestors. Immigrant transformation is a looking forward, it posits new life. The sense of futurity is echoed by the journey motif, the passage from one world to the next.

In this evolution, the past plays a crucial role, for success is invariably measured against one's former condition. One was once an ignorant greenie, now one is an American businessman, perhaps one's children will be doctors, lawyers, or teachers. The literature of transformation evokes the past nostalgically, as a piece of personal or racial history sweet to contemplate but left far behind in one's journey towards rebirth. In The Promised Land, Antin describes her Russian youth with affection, but it is already so distant as to seem like another self entirely. Augie pays tribute to the potato love\(^*\) of his tribe, but seems to spring new-made from his immigrant background. Podhoretz has kind words to say about Brooklyn, but ultimately asserts Manhattan as his rightful place. Although Neal Klugman's secular future is a dismal and comfortless one, it is, in some measure, a psychic victory over Newark and the old, ghetto self. In transformation literature, the past is not repressed, it is transcended.

For first generation immigrants, transcendence took a great deal of courage, for the passage to America was an enormous leap into the unfamiliar. Eastern European Jews were triply uprooted: physically—from small town life in the Old World shtetl to the sprawling American

\(^*\)The phrase Bellow uses in Herzog to describe the earthy family warmth of feeling among Jews.
city; economically—from a pre-industrial tradesman class to enforced proletarianization; and morally—from the cultural values of the closed Jewish tradition to the freedom and dangers of an open democracy. The willingness to be made over thus required outward changes in name and dress, as well as more profound adjustments in the realm of values and perceptions. Transformation also required a certain amount of willful ignorance. In fact, one did not spring new-made into America, one is never self-created. The myth of the self-made man was a fiction, useful to a people wrenched from a familiar world into the unknown.

Among first generation writers, it would be Abraham Cahan who, in *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), exposed the fiction. This uncompro­mising novel placed the theme of the past at the very center of the forward-driving success chronicle. Not merely the object of a bitter­sweet nostalgia, Levinsky's past both conditions and qualifies his American success. In this penetrating analysis of the overachieving personality, Cahan brings both strands of immigrant success psycho­logy—the self-promotion and the self doubt—into direct contact, demonstrating how they twist together in a complicated knot. Levinsky is a character given to glib rationalizations and to stubborn honesty. A man moving into the future with eyes open to every chance at mas­tering the material world, Levinsky is also prone to periods of introspection, in which he tries to retrieve images from a humilia­ting yet spiritual past.

It is ironic that it should be Abraham Cahan who created this most past-oriented of success novels. As editor of the prominent Yiddish daily, *The Forward*, for forty years—even the name of the paper sug-
gests the future orientation of the immigrant community—Cahan was regarded by the East Side populace as a Moses, leading his people into the New Canaan. In the pages of *The Forward*, Cahan addressed his immigrant readers in Yiddish, gently urging them towards an acceptance of American life. Simultaneously, he was writing articles in English which appeared in *The Atlantic* and *The Nation*, assuring Anglo-Americans that the Russian Jews, even while maintaining their traditional values, could become model citizens. But if Cahan's public role as a journalist was as spokesman for the future, his fiction expressed his private doubts. Judging from *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Cahan may have been like Moses in another way: pointing the way forward, he never completely entered the Promised Land himself.

Cahan's ambivalence is in his novel; it *is* the novel itself. Levinsky's "rise" is also a "fall"; his success is spiritual failure. *The Rise of David Levinsky* is, on the one hand, a piece of social history, a detailed documentation of the emergence of the Russian Jew into American life. On the other hand, it is an inward, psychological novel, an act of self-scrutiny so severe that it never advances, emotionally, beyond the single realization stated at the very beginning.

Isaac Rosenfeld says that, in the Talmudic tradition, *The Rise of David Levinsky* is an extended commentary on a single text, that text given in the opening paragraph:

> Sometimes, when I think of my past in a superficial, casual way, the metamorphosis I have gone through strikes me as nothing short of a miracle. I was born and reared in the lowest depths of

*It can be said that in its beginnings, *The Forward* was a socialist organ and the name connoted a progressive future; that is, good for the future of labor.*
poverty and I arrived in America—in 1885—with four cents in my pocket. I am now worth more than two million dollars and recognized as one of the two or three leading men in the cloak-and-suit trade in the United States. And yet when I take a look at my inner identity it impresses me as being precisely the same as it was thirty or forty years ago. My present station, power, the amount of worldly happiness at my command, and the rest of it, seem to be devoid of significance.

This paragraph establishes the theme of the novel, but it also sets up the novel's tonal shifts and odd juxtapositions. One can't help but hear the glorification of the self-made man as Levinsky states the facts of his "miraculous metamorphosis" in the baldest way—I arrived with four cents and am now worth millions. Even in 1917, this was close to cliché, and Groucho parodied such immigrant chutzpah in one of the early Marx Brothers films: "When I came to Florida I didn't have a nickel in my pocket . . . now, I've got a nickel in my pocket."

However, the bravado of the opening is undercut in the second half of the paragraph. In a much sadder, confessional voice, Levinsky examines his "inner identity," a part of him left behind "thirty or forty years ago," yet never transcended or incorporated into his present life. There is a gap, then, between Levinsky's two selves. His public and private worlds don't mesh. The casual phrase "and the rest of it" tells us much about Levinsky's psychic distance from his success.

As The Rise of David Levinsky opens up, the forward line or plot will correspond to the first motif, and will chronicle Levinsky's rise and transformation. But Levinsky's character, his sense of inner identity, remains static, fixed somewhere in the past. His transformation is thus purely external. In these terms, he is a character at odds with his own plot. Or as Levinsky himself puts it, "My past and my present do not comport well" (530).
Not the least of Cahan's achievements in *The Rise of David Levinsky* in the unobtrusive manner in which he grafts all the historical particulars of the Jewish immigration story onto the classic American rags-to-riches fable. Like the young man from the provinces who sets out for the big city to seek his fortune, Levinsky is unloosed from family ties in his small home town and makes his way into the great world beyond his origins. Like the American archetype, *The Rise of David Levinsky* is a parable of self-sufficiency rewarded.

Levinsky is a poor, orphaned Yeshiva boy in Antomir, Russia. He is a brilliant Talmud student, but after his mother's death he begins to feel that his restless spirit can no longer be contained at home. With poverty as a spur, he embarks on a voyage to America, the land "of fantastic experiences, of marvelous transformations" (61). On the passage over, determined to maintain his piety, he prays fervently three times a day.

After several weeks in steerage, David arrives at Castle Garden.* He passes through the official inspection and finds himself at Battery Park, completely alone, with four cents in his pocket. Directed by a formidable policeman to the Jewish East Side, David becomes the target of some gentle banter from his more experienced landsleit. The first English word in his vocabulary is "greenhorn." Praying at a small synagogue, he is befriended by a Mr. Even, a wealthy and sympathetic benefactor who becomes his first patron. Even buys Levinsky a new set of clothes and takes him for a hair-cut, which includes a shaving of

*Ellis Island became the federal immigration center in 1892; before then, inspection and admission of aliens was a state matter. Levinsky arrives in 1885. In New York, immigrants were received at Castle Garden, a small island close to the west side of the Battery.
his sidelocks. Almost instantly, Levinsky perceives the transformation process at work: "It was as though the hair-cut and the American clothes had changed my identity" (101). A few days later, he shaves his beard.

Slowly gaining more self-confidence, David begins to shed his greenness. He becomes a peddler and soon after a sewing machine operator in a big cloak-making firm owned by the Manheimer Brothers, two German Jews. Contact with American life has a twofold effect on him: it continues to wear away his piety and it stimulates his desire to master his new environment. What he doesn't absorb from daily life around him, he acquires by attending night school. David is a fast learner, and after his first few classes he dreams of entering City College. In the 1880's and 90's, the "Semitic atmosphere" of City College proved to be very congenial to many immigrants. Cahan shows how this "temple" secularized the immigrant's religious fervor and represented a passage to the higher life. Standing before the single college building on Lexington Avenue, Levinsky says,

*It was a symbol of spiritual promotion . . . University-bred people were the real nobility of the world. A college diploma was a certificate of moral as well as intellectual aristocracy. My old religion had gradually fallen to pieces, and if its place was taken by something else, if there was something that appealed to the better man in me, to what was purest in my thoughts and most sacred in my emotions, that something was the red, church-like structure on the southeast corner of Lexington Avenue and Twenty-third Street.* (169)

David's dream, however, is never realized. Working sixteen hours a day for the Manheimers, he is forced to suspend his studies. Meanwhile, his savings begin to take on a greater import of their own. The thirty-two dollars a week he is making is a staggering amount for a boy who once lived on community charity. As his bank account grows, Levinsky feels a new sense of power, and his money belt, which he carries
with him at all times, "loomed as a badge of omnipotence" (174-75). Wealth gradually displaces learning as the key to Levinsky's transformation.

Levinsky now begins his career as a small independent manufacturer. Breaking with the Manheimers, he rents a cheap loft on Division Street and convinces an expert tailor, Chaikin, to work as his designer. As his own salesman, Levinsky begins drumming up business in places as far away as Cincinnati and St. Louis. The middle section of the novel is filled with shop talk, as Levinsky and his fellow salesmen compare notes on credit, piecework, and all the tricks of the trade then common, which include paying non-union wages and stealing patterns from competitors. Cahan also uses Levinsky's perserverence as a demonstration of how the Russian Jews began to wrest control of the garment industry from the hands of the German Jews. On this level, The Rise of David Levinsky must be considered one of the major novels of business in American literature.

As Levinsky becomes wealthier, he becomes more refined, more American in his tastes and manners. Carrying around a sort of self-help diary with him wherever he goes, he notes the name of dishes from the better restaurants with his own explanations, and jots down the latest American slang expressions and business jargon. His sales technique improves. He stops gesticulating when bargaining—a mannerism carried over from his days of Talmudic argument. His business success places him in the company of well-dressed American Gentiles and he eventually feels at home in their presence, "a nobleman among noblemen" (329). He moves his growing manufacturing concern from the Jewish East Side, first to Broadway, and ultimately to that
most cosmopolitan of New York thoroughfares—Fifth Avenue. At the end a millionaire twice over, Levinsky owns a summer home, lives in a high class hotel, and has a chauffeur and valet. His transformation is complete. By all outward appearances, he is "real American."

Viewed in what Levinsky calls the "superficial, casual way," his transformation is indeed marvellous, modeled to some extent on the success literature that began developing in the mid-nineteenth century. Most notable of these was the series of books by Horatio Alger, which replaced the old western hero with a hero in touch with the new industrial order. In The Dream of Success, Kenneth Lynn summarizes the basic Horatio Alger plot: "... alone, unaided, the ragged boy is plunged into the maelstrom of city life, but by his own pluck and luck he capitalizes on one of the myriad opportunities available to him and rises to the top of the economic heap." Levinsky's rise clearly fits this pattern.

But the Alger myth was a highly moralistic fable in which the hero's economic fortune was bestowed as a reward for his inner worth. In Cahan's world, however, no such happy correspondence operates. Following in the naturalistic tradition of such American writers as Crane, Dreiser, Sinclair, and Norris, Cahan portrays the city as an amoral jungle where personal conscience, when not irrelevant, was a hindrance to the all-consuming desire to get ahead. Now Levinsky is not without sympathy for those fellow immigrants lost in the urban wastes. He slows his chronicle down to give us poignant snapshots of underpaid sweatshop workers, and formerly pious scholars forced into petty business dealings. Here Cahan the crusading journalist and
Levinsky the sentimentalist are perhaps closest. But as a New Yorker, Cahan also knew that the anonymous metropolis could shut people off from one another and from their own emotional wellsprings. He shows us how Levinsky becomes increasingly callous in his business and personal relations, with survival of the fittest as his guiding principle. Indeed, Levinsky's rise to the top is more dependent on his canny and cynical insights into this urban jungle than on his innate virtue.

John Cawelti, in an illuminating account of various components of America's success gospel, says that the pre-industrial Puritan ethic, which values piety and frugality, was replaced at the end of the nineteenth century by a more economically-oriented ideal. Because in the new order there was a less direct relationship between individual effort and the resultant product, personal forcefulness rather than simple industriousness was required in order to stand out from the crowd and get ahead. The new success virtues were initiative and aggressiveness, originality and boldness.

Taken on one level, The Rise of David Levinsky can be read as a celebration of these virtues. Levinsky himself encourages this interpretation, wherever possible playing up his charm and personal magnetism. At times, Levinsky narrates in the manner of the autobiographer who overstates the significance of random events and thereby heightens the dramatic role played by destiny. For example, Levinsky attributes his decision to become an independent manufacturer to a bottle of milk he spilled while in the employ of the Manheimers. As a suitable prologue to this mighty episode, Levinsky says, "An unimportant accident, a mere trifle, suddenly gave a new turn to the trend of events changing the character of my whole life" (187). It is as if fate itself were participating in the great man's venture.
In other places, Levinsky's insight and adaptability are vaunted. Levinsky seems to be an early disciple of the "how to win friends and influence people" school of thought. Without guile, he confides to the reader how he won Chaikin over to his business scheme by pretending to take an interest in the tailor's children, or how he worked on increasing his vocabulary so as to make a better impression on the more genteel storekeepers. In the business world appearances are everything, and Levinsky works assiduously at keeping them up. He's astute enough to realize that appearances don't necessarily belie one's true feelings. When he first arrives in America, he uses the story of his mother's death, an occasion of real grief for him, to obtain philanthropic support from a sympathetic onlooker. And once his business plans begin to take shape, Levinsky makes a moderate amount of psychology go a long way. Seated at his first fancy restaurant with an established American buyer, Levinsky makes a joke out of his ignorance of American table manners and thereby closes a deal. In other words, Levinsky even turns honesty into a self-serving craft.

This kind of situational facility is not necessarily detestable. In fact, it is part of the American tradition of clear-sighted pragmatism, exemplified by such sympathetic culture heroes as Huck Finn, Chaplin's Tramp, and other outsiders forced by circumstance to use their wiles to survive. But in The Rise of David Levinsky, the survival strategies practiced by the poor immigrant greenhorn give way to an almost compulsive pattern of manipulation. As Levinsky's schemes succeed, he becomes harder and more utilitarian in his professional behavior. And when his pragmatism borders on the unethical, as for instance when he steals designs from a competitor or has a brief affair
with a friend's wife, he seizes on the quasi-scientific social Darwinism then in vogue to justify his behavior.

Levinsky's coarsening is almost imperceptible; the reader's identification with the character also undergoes a subtle change. Levinsky seems more sympathetic in the first half when he is struggling, than in the second half when his rise is all but certain. Cahan's honesty here is evident. Aware of the first generation tendency to present palatable versions of the ideal immigrant, Cahan gives his character a darker side by suggesting that former standards of conduct were often abandoned in the secular environment of the New World. Levinsky makes use of his new freedom and the materials at his disposal to seize opportunity by the throat. And his shrewdness was not exceptional. As Howe notes, "By 1900 Jewish dominance of the garment industry was all but complete; over 90% of it was in Jewish hands." The process of transformation whereby formerly pious Russian Jews became leading manufacturers is a saga of great energy and adaptability, but viewed up close it did not always make for a pretty picture.

Despite Cahan's irony, early reviewers of The Rise of David Levinsky were unable to separate author from character, responding as if Cahan were in fact presenting Levinsky's story without judgment: "Mr. Cahan's naturalism is appallingly spontaneous and sincere." Another reviewer spoke of "the spiritual obscenity" of the protagonist, fearing that Cahan's portrayal would stir up anti-semitism. Perhaps the most wrong-headed but telling criticism of the novel was that Levinsky's rise "was based upon ruthless lying and trickery and treachery and theft . . . and he tells the story of it without a qualm . . . ." (my emphasis)
Perhaps because of the emotionally charged racial issues involved, these first reviews reveal a certain tendency to mis-read Cahan's intentions. Because Levinsky presents his rise to the top without apology, some readers (even today) are shocked by Cahan's apparent promoting of the image of the pushy Jew. Yet throughout the novel, Cahan is intent on demonstrating two often contradictory aspects of the success drive: the cultural and psychic inducements which reinforce Levinsky's climb, and his growing dissatisfaction following each new accomplishment. Nothing could be further from the experience of the novel than the notion that Levinsky tells his own story complacently.

At times, Levinsky renders his self-serving rationalizations so blatantly that he seems to invite criticism. He parades his amorality both as self-promotion and self-punishment: "I had no creed. I knew of no ideals. The only thing I believed in was the cold, drab theory of the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest" (380). In context, this statement is double-edged: Levinsky is trying to present himself as one of the Fittest because he is free from the hypocrisy of false ideals. But his unsentimental honesty is also intended to reveal the barrenness of his life. In psychological terms, Levinsky is a highly overdetermined character. He is forever aware of his own mixed motives and the reader is always aware of Levinsky's self-awareness. His presentation is complicated by the fact that he sees through his own self-promotion.

Levinsky's contradictory behavior, as well as the insisted-upon honesty of his story-telling manner, suggest that his conscience plagues him. Although he underpays his employees and works them illegal hours, he attempts to make amends by establishing an Antomir compensation
fund and permitting his pious tailors to take the Sabbath off. These acts of penance, however, never convince him that his character is fundamentally improved by his acquisition of wealth.

If Levinsky is aware of his own hypocrisy, he is also vigilant in his scrutiny of others. Perceiving the discrepancy between ideals and actual practice, he generalizes that all of civilization is honey-combed with "sham ecstasy, sham sympathy, sham smiles, sham laughter" (380). When a period of prosperity results in the new fashion of women wearing make-up, Levinsky overblows the implication:

... so I pictured civilization as a harlot with cheeks, lips, and eyelashes of artificial beauty. I imagined mountains of powder and paint, a deafening chorus of affected laughter, a huge heart, as large as a city, full of falsehood and mischief. (380)

Is this Levinsky the ruthless capitalist or Levinsky the chastening Old Testament prophet?

In the section of the novel set in the Catskills, Levinsky is utterly scornful of the parvenu Jews who have begun decamping there for their vacations and week-ends. Here Levinsky's earlier assertion that had circumstances been otherwise, he might just as easily have become a socialist as a capitalist is most relevant. For someone like Levinsky, the Catskills would seem to be the ultimate realization of the Promised Land, a perfect setting to display the rewards of transformation, with former greenhorns dressed in the latest fashion, dancing the newest American steps, and liberated from all vestiges of Old World self-restraint. Levinsky's scorn for this Vanity Fair is the most obvious example of his moral detachment from the outward symbols of success.

If other characters (and readers) perceive Levinsky as a ruthless capitalist, he hardly perceives himself this way. He comes across as
a cynical, boastful manipulator primarily because his quest for transformation is played out in the public world of symbols and gestures, where a dynamic appearance seems most likely to assure success. Gary Lindberg's study of the con artist suggests that self-promotion and persuasion are central components of American social life: "Instead of relying on family background, class habits, inherited manners, many Americans have had to confront each other as mere claimants, who can at best try to persuade each other who they in fact are." This analysis has special application to first generation immigrants whose claim to a secure identity is made even more tenuous by their very foreignness. Levinsky's public image should be understood, then, as an attempt to create a persona, to convince himself and others that he is "real American." His overstated narrative is Cahan's ironic way of suggesting that the immigrant's quest to create a public self, using the external symbols offered by American life, is doomed to result in psychological strain.

As always, Levinsky himself is aware of the role-playing dimension of his transformation: "We are all actors, more or less. The question is only what our aim is, and whether we are capable of a 'convincing personation'" (194). Levinsky's problem is not an inability to define his goal. He repeatedly says that he wants to be "real American." While he succeeds in the outward sense—he is granted recognition by other (non-Jewish) American businessmen—he never "lives the part" inwardly, as successful actors do. Levinsky is never able to convince himself that he is real.

On its deepest level, The Rise of David Levinsky explores the gap between public and private reality, between social persona and self-
definition. The discrepancy is so radical in Levinsky's case that, in
despite of the intimacy of the first person method, some readers find it
difficult to locate the main character. As one reader puts it, "The
Rise of David Levinsky is a novel about the absence of character."11
Cahan has certainly given us an elusive, multi-dimensioned protagonist,
but in some fundamental way this character remains unknowable. This
may be because Levinsky, for all his honesty, hardly knows himself.
It is to Cahan's credit that he has taken this most outward of genres--
the success chronicle--and turned it into a meditation on the mystery
of identity.

One cannot get very far in discussing this novel without taking
note of the narrator's detachment, the sense that he is not fully
there. Even when describing the heady exhilaration of his climb to
the top, Levinsky seems to be talking about someone else. This double
perspective--the older, more reflective narrator describing his younger,
active self--is perhaps implicit in the memoir form, but Cahan gives
it thematic and psychological significance. Despite its documentary­
like realism, the book seems haunted by a ghost. Even as the novel
rushes forward, taking its rhythm from the "hurry-up" of the bustling
metropolis and the speed of Levinsky's ascent, it goes back into the
past searching for some buried self, the key to Levinsky's inner iden­
tity.

It cannot be said that Levinsky escapes into the past. His
business success is too dependent on his steady attention to what is
before him. But when he measures his success against his former
misery, his success is judged hollow. This is a radical departure
from the forward-looking norm of first generation immigrant literature.
Ironically, it is Levinsky's Russian past, hardly a pleasant one, which becomes identified with his better self. The past, or more accurately Levinsky's sense of the past, is suffused with poetry; it is a realm immune to selfish manipulation and cold pragmatism.

That a lonely old man should be prone to nostalgia is not surprising. "Rosebud" is, after all, one of the most famous laments of the self-made millionaire. But nostalgia pervades the entire fabric of *The Rise of David Levinsky*. From the beginning, the novel is marked by a sense of loss. Levinsky's longing is quite understandable when he first arrives in America, absolutely alone. But even through his prosperous years, he will unaccountably experience homesickness for the Old World shtetl he was desperate to leave decades ago:

I seemed to remember things of my boyhood more vividly than I did things that had happened only a year before. . . . I was homesick for Antomir again. . . . To revisit Abner's Court or the Preacher's Synagogue, to speak to Reb Sender, or to the bewhiskered old soldier, the sheepskin tailor, if they were still living, was one of my day-dreams. (377)

At the very end, when Levinsky's transformation seems complete, he sounds this plaintive note again: "I can never forget the days of my misery. I cannot escape from my old self" (530). Levinsky's nostalgia is no simple response to a lonely life. It's a chronic psychological condition and distinguishes *The Rise of David Levinsky* from the standard immigrant fiction of rebirth. Levinsky can't be easily made over into the image of an American precisely because of his fascination with the past.

Less than one fifth of the novel takes place in Russia, but these events are crucial for an understanding of Levinsky's character. Born in 1865 in Antomir, David grows up with an acute feeling of deprivation and isolation. Because his father died when David was three years old,
he feels excluded from normal life. He and his mother live in a basement apartment with several other poor families. David's mother is illiterate but strong-willed and emotional, and David remembers their strong attachment. She makes sure that he attends cheder, although there is a constant struggle to pay the teachers. When he is thirteen, David enters the yeshiva. He is a star pupil, capable of fervent piety as well as intellectual mastery of Talmudic argument, but he is also prone to periods of doubt, especially when sexual feelings begin to assert themselves. Shortly after entering the yeshiva, David's mother is killed by a gang of anti-semites when she goes out to admonish them for attacking her son. David is heartbroken and determines, for his mother's sake, to be more pious than ever. His orphanhood makes his sense of exclusion more acute but it also frees him from his childhood dependency. Now he comes under the influence of a progressive Russian girl, Matilda, with whom he falls in love. She counsels him to learn Russian and enter the modern world. It is the early 1880's and word of a series of pogroms has spread to Antomir, as does news of America. David determines to leave and with a loan from Matilda, he manages to come up with the money. America will complete the process of bringing him suddenly into the modern world, of divesting him of his piety, and transforming him into a new man. But his inner identity has already been formed and, although it will become more and more distant as his Americanization continues, it will not be lost altogether.

All we need to know of Levinsky's character is established at the outset. His loneliness and deprivation, his insatiable hunger, and his great energy remain psychological constants, and Cahan, with much
insight, shows how these traits are intricately bound up with one another. In the Antomir segment, we see how David's poverty results in his debasement and his feeling of moral superiority. He makes a virtue of his martyrdom by developing an ability to withstand pain, and becomes an object of admiration for the other yeshiva boys. David's envy for those students who are better off makes him feel his suffering more keenly but also compels him to surpass those boys in his studies. Suffering in fact becomes an inseparable component of David's need to succeed. Rosenfeld says that this "core of permanent dissatisfaction" is at the root of Levinsky's American success, driving him on but also removing any but the most superficial pleasure he may obtain from his achievement.\(^\text{12}\)

David's humble origins thus serve to heighten his sense of longing. Levinsky himself sees this "streak of sadness" as racial, and Rosenfeld agrees that such a melancholy romanticism marks *The Rise of David Levinsky* as a profoundly Jewish story.\(^\text{13}\) Cahan's achievement here is to make this perhaps tribal sense of brooding historically resonant and psychologically crucial.

Levinsky is of that transitional generation which absorbed one value system in its youth while maturing under a very different one. As several critics have noted, the seed of Levinsky's discontent is planted long before he comes to America.\(^\text{14}\) By the 1870's, the rigorous orthodoxy of the medieval shtetl had already been encroached upon by the Haskala, the movement towards intellectual emancipation and modernization that spread from western Europe. The teaching of the Fathers—the Talmud tradition of scholarship and prayer—became a passing memory for many east European Jews. Cahan gives us a fictional correlative to
this piece of intellectual history in the person of the fatherless son:
"All I remember of my father is his tawny beard, a huge yellow apple he
time gave me at the gate of an orchard where he was employed as watch­
man, and the candle which burned at his head as his body lay under a
white shroud on the floor" (4). The fragmented details associated with
the lost father suggest the tradition in decay. If Levinsky is out­
wardly a benefactor of the new secularization, inwardly he is still
very much a part of the closed world of the ghetto. A decade of strict
religious training confirms him in his other-worldliness. Cahan catches
the Jewish spirit precisely at that moment when the secular world floods
in, captivating the senses without touching the soul.

The death of David's father has its parallel in historical fact,
the world of orthodox Judaism in the process of decay. But the loss
of his mother affects David more profoundly and continues to have re­
percussions throughout the novel. Psychologically, David's frenzied
business activity in America can be regarded as a displacement of his
religious zeal. But his emotional life is an utter failure, charac­
terized by a frustrated search for a maternal source of solace and
love. It may be a little clumsy on Cahan's part, but it is surely
more than coincidence that one of the first objects of David's lust
in America is his landlady, an older woman named Mrs. Levinsky (no rela­
ton of his).

The loss of both the Tradition, as represented by the Father, and
emotional succor, as represented by the Mother, leaves a void in
Levinsky's life that he desperately seeks to fill. Though he is never
able to define this need, he experiences it in contrast to his prosaic
American success. The poetic, spiritual aspect of life is associated
in his mind with his former self, especially his tendency to become immersed in the contemplation of purity and beauty.

Throughout the novel, and especially in the early section, Levin-sky refers to being spellbound or under a spell. When he watches a traditional Jewish wedding in his courtyard, for example, he says, "I was in a trance. The ceremony was a poem to me, something inexpressibly beautiful and sacred" (14). The plaintive tunes his mother sings "haunt me like ghosts" (5). The martial music which accompanied the soldiers' maneuvers in Antomir "would literally hold me spellbound" (11). Mesmerized by these images of sacred and secular love-liness, Levinsky is inevitably wrenched out of his trance by some mundane detail. At the wedding ceremony, for instance, an older boy disrupts David's spell by making a lewd joke about the bride and groom. Levinsky feels both enlightened and cheated by this fact of life: "I relished the discovery and I relished the deviltry of it. But the poem vanished. The beauty of the wedding I had just witnessed, and of weddings in general, seemed to be irretrievably desecrated" (14).

This will become the pattern of Levinsky's life. Moments of intense fervor and beauty and pathos will be replaced by revelations of an earthly nature. Baser motives will replace finer instincts. His life will swing between the sacred and the mundane, the romantic and the practical. Levinsky succeeds in the business sphere because it is the one area of his life in which the mysterious has no part. But his emotional life, his inner identity, is susceptible to the impractical and intangible. The past casts a spell that Levinsky never escapes.

David's poetic soul is most fully revealed in his relationships with women. He is one of those men who loves being in love. He
thrives on the tension of arousal, and there is an element of the illicit or forbidden in each of his affairs. Two of his major love relationships (with Matilda and Anna) are never consummated, while he and Dora have only a brief affair before she forces him out of her home. Just as Gatsby's love is "impersonal" in the sense that Daisy is the physical embodiment of his abstract dream of success, regardless of her personal failings, Levinsky's attraction to the three women has a symbolic quality, apart from their physical appeal. As Leslie Fiedler points out, the Jewish hero's love life is often presented as a symbolic courtship of America. The Rise of David Levinsky is a persuasive example of this pattern, for David's pursuit of women is closely bound up with his transformation impulse. His very failure with women suggests his unconscious ambivalence towards Americanization.

The heroine of David's first romance is Matilda, the young divorced Jewess in Antomir who lives "like a Gentile." She fascinates the young yeshiva boy precisely because of her modern ways. Matilda comes from the new middle class of Russian Jews who have been emancipated by their wealth and secular learning. She herself is a striking example of transformation. It is Matilda who encourages David to go to America and who raises the money for his voyage. When they meet 23 years later, Matilda has become a prominent socialist. Ironically, the woman who inspired David's first vision of transformation regards the full-fledged modern man, now a thriving capitalist in a showy mink coat, with hostility.

David's feelings for Dora are more complicated, and Cahan devotes an entire section of his novel, the longest, to David's relationship with her. Cahan here is working with material he was familiar with as editor of "The Bintel Brief," a kind of Yiddish advice-to-the-lovelorn
Love triangles involving husband, wife, and boarder were becoming almost clichéd in the lower East Side at the time. In the close-knit quarters of the ghetto, and under the confusing conditions of American life, marital stability was often difficult to maintain.

Dora is unhappily married to Levinsky's good-natured but unrefined friend, Max Margolis. Her one source of joy is her daughter Lucy, whom she dotes on. Levinsky falls in love with Dora partially because of the pathos of her situation. He is sincerely touched by the picture of the European-born immigrant competing against her own American-born daughter in a spelling contest. Another part of her appeal has to do with David's sense of domestic deprivation and his feelings for his lost mother. The Margolises become a substitute family for the lonely bachelor. Although Max jokingly calls Levinsky his "boarding son-in-law," there is a grain of truth to the epithet, since there is an oedipal component to David's feelings for Dora:

My lonely soul had a sense of home and domestic comfort that all but overpowered me. The sight of the new quilt and of the fresh white pillow, coupled with the knowledge that it was Dora whose fingers had prepared it all for me, sent a glow of delight through my heart. (251)

Dora shares with Levinsky his sacred worship of whatever is "real American." But though she yearns for romance and a way out of her unhappy marriage, Dora is too traditional to abandon her husband for her boarder. Thus Dora embodies Levinsky's own incomplete state of Americanization.

The most urgent of David's entanglements is with Anna Tevkin. Levinsky first meets this completely up-to-date American Jewess at a hotel in the Catskills. Anna is attractive and articulate, plays tennis gracefully, and champions Ibsen and the Moderns. The same
sort of superficial air of refinement will inspire Neal Klugman to pursue Brenda Patimkin in Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus*.

Although the Tevkin segment is near the end of the novel, Abraham Tevkin, Anna's father, figures in the story as early as David's school days in Antomir. At yeshiva, one of his friends tells David the story of a great beauty, the daughter of a famous Hebrew writer, who married a poet named Abraham Tevkin. What impresses David most about this romantic story is that the poet courted the beautiful woman through a series of passionate letters addressed not to the woman but to her father. Now, some quarter century later, Levinsky himself is destined to re-enact Tevkin's own behavior. For after being rejected by Anna in the Catskills, Levinsky continues his courtship in New York City by developing a strong attachment to Anna's father.

Abraham Tevkin, the once famous Hebrew poet, has been forced by American circumstances into becoming a small time real estate investor, a job he loathes. A free thinker who yearns for the spiritual, an American businessman whose soul is still in Russia, Tevkin is Levinsky's secret sharer. Tevkin's alienation, expressed in his brooding prose poems, speaks directly to Levinsky's inner identity. Through the Tevkin family, Cahan represents the range and contrariness of Jewish life in America. The Tevkin children are variously socialists, Zionists, free thinkers, and bohemians. They have no trouble reconciling their American selves with their Jewish selves, but their father is baffled by the wild transformations which the immigrant experience has wrought. Like Levinsky, Tevkin identifies the purity of his better self with the past: "Russia is a better country than America, anyhow, even if she is oppressed by a czar. It's a freer country, too—for the spirit, at
least. There is more poetry there, more music, more feeling, even if our people do suffer appalling persecution" (459). When Levinsky tries to assure Tevkin that it is possible to reconcile business and poetry, America and Russia, he may well be speaking to his own irreconcilable doubleness. Thus Levinsky's pursuit of Tevkin's daughter, which appears to be a quest for the future, is subliminally a longing for the spirituality of the past.

It is in his love life, then, that the poetic Levinsky surfaces. He continues to pursue women who in some sense represent America, yet his tendency to spiritualize them keeps them distant and unattainable. Thus he re-creates the condition of trance-like longing which is the legacy of his past. At the very end, Levinsky is courting that classic love object of Jewish-American literature, "a Gentile woman of high character," despite the unspoken understanding that neither of them will convert. Here, Levinsky's courtship has become purely symbolic. His quest for America continues even as he knows it is beyond attaining.

Spiritually detached from his American success, Levinsky is also unable to establish a vital connection with his past. In the last third of the novel, characters from the past reappear in a series of unusual coincidences. Matilda, Shmerl the Pincher (one of Levinsky's former Hebrew teachers), and Gitelson (his frightened shipmate) all wind up on the streets of New York and cross paths with Levinsky. With each, Levinsky attempts a happy reunion, but ironically because of his towering success, Levinsky is unable to re-connect with these Old World characters. As David Fine says, "Fleeing from the past while simultaneously yearning for it is the hopeless condition of all Cahan's heroes. They can neither escape nor relive what has gone before."
Shortly after his American metamorphosis has begun, Levinsky says, "A whole book could be written on the influence of a starched collar and a necktie on a man who was brought up as I was" (110). Cahan has his little joke here for he was in the process of writing that very book. In the manner of the naturalists, Cahan performs a kind of behavioral experiment in The Rise of David Levinsky. He takes a character whose innermost nature has been formed under one value system and places him in an environment in which those values are largely irrelevant. Then he has us watch to see what effect the external rewards system of the new environment will have on this creature's choices, habits, and way of life. Cahan was not afraid to face up to the implications of this American experiment. Levinsky loses his piety and becomes a new man. The romance of the past is rejected. Levinsky can't go home again.

Of course, Cahan was never really this clinical. He was a staunch advocate of bi-culturalism, deeply involved in the immigrants' struggle to maintain traditional values in the chaos of the New World. If religious practice is conditioned out of Levinsky, the religious impulse remains. The rewards of the secular metropolis never offer satisfying emotional sustenance for the spiritual hunger of the yeshiva boy. The distinction of Cahan's novel is how the spell of the past insinuates itself in what is superficially a typical story of immigrant achievement.

Cahan was drawing out the underlying romanticism of a generation that was almost instantly caught up in the drive to succeed. Levinsky's inner identity remains buried precisely because the action of the novel involves him in the public realm of business, appearances, and external transformation. But his suppressed longing for the poetry of life will
speak directly to the next generation. The American-born children of immigrants, already "at home" in the New World, will feel the need to fill a spiritual void perhaps more profoundly than their parents, and the undertone of melancholy in Cahan's novel will be the key note of their literature.
CHAPTER NOTES


12. Rosenfeld, p. 276.

13. Rosenfeld, p. 278.


CHAPTER IV

GIVING FREEDOM A SHAPE

All children go mad in America, and lose their respect. A dollar in their hands makes them kings, who rule their parents. It is a lunatic country. May it burn up.

Isodore Schneider, From the Kingdom of Necessity

... I am still the kid running away. I am within the structure of my Judaic upbringing. I am dreaming of sexual adventures. I am, endlessly, the sentimental boy and man ... .

Harry Roskolenko, "America, the Thief"

In The Rise of David Levinsky, Abraham Cahan had initiated the peculiar double rhythm of Jewish-American literature: forward towards transformation and backward towards recovery of the past. But this rhythm would necessarily be pitched at a different key for later, more assimilated writers. The transformation motif, though it continued to characterize post-immigrant literature, couldn't have the same mythic appeal for later generations it did for immigrants themselves. American by birth, the children of immigrants invested less in the creation of a self. Nor would the romance of the past possess the same kind of haunting allure for them as for Levinsky. The central premise of second generation literature is that the past, in the form of orthodox parents and New World ghettos, represented confinement; home was a place to be left behind. This process was viewed as a natural one. Indeed, immigrant parents often encouraged their children to depart.
After all, America was their birthright. As immigrant children began taking their new American identity for granted, the assimilation process was largely demystified.

The secularization of Jewish-American life was perhaps inevitable, but it gave rise to an unfortunate simplification. In contrast to the first generation's image as spirited pioneers, the second generation experience is generally recalled as vulgar and complacent. As Theodore Solataroff describes it, the popular image of the second generation American Jew is not pretty: "... the compleat bourgeois businessman, still a little anxious, perhaps, but basically at ease in the suburbs."¹

In general outline, this image possesses a measure of accuracy. It was, after all, the American-born children of immigrants who grew up through the Jazz Age, who made the move out of closed Jewish communities, and the all but ultimate break with whatever vestiges of orthodoxy remained. But the transition to comfortable American status was not as smooth as the stereotype would have it. This chapter is intended to dispel the misconception. If the secular Judaism of the middle generation seems dull by comparison, it posed its own special difficulties in adjustment. In many ways, the task of the second generation was more problematic than that of their parents because it was more internal.

In an interesting statistical study made in 1924, J.V. DePorte found that the mortality rates in New York State of the "mixed" population (American-born with at least one foreign parent) of adult males, from the ages of 20 through 58, were significantly higher than the corresponding rates in both the native group (native-born of native parentage) and the foreign-born group, in each year of the 38 year
period. In other words, the children of immigrants had a lower life expectancy than immigrants themselves through the major years of mature adulthood. DePorte speculated that the main reason for the difference was that, in contrast to the cultural and psychological influences of Old World traditions that had strengthened the immigrant generation, immigrant children were pressured towards a superficial Americanization:

The pressure of social environment has often made it advantageous for the native-born to separate himself, as quickly and decisively as possible, from his foreign-born parents. As a consequence, many of these native-born deny themselves, in the most pliant period of life, the comforts, physical and spiritual, of home life.2

Deborah Dash Moore has provided a simple yet telling definition of the second generation: "The second generation shares in common the experience of growing up American in Jewish immigrant homes."3 This definition also gives the central problem of this transitional group. Their home life ruled by orthodox values at odds with the influences of American mass culture that pervaded their social life, these secular Jews received a bewildering mix of cross signals. Parents could be heard to say, "go and succeed, America is yours," but also "don't go too far, don't forget you're a Jew." On the one hand, there were the movies, college, the world; on the other, the family, the synagogue, the community. Irving Howe says that the attempt to resolve the contradictions opened into "a chaos of improvisation."4

Both the freedom and the anxiety of this improvised age are everywhere apparent in the works under discussion in this chapter: Anzia Yezierska's Bread Givers, Henry Roth's Call it Sleep, Daniel Fuchs' Williamsburg Trilogy, and Alfred Kazin's A Walker in the City. The literature of these immigrant offspring is marked by a heightened awareness of the intensity of family life, a constant looking back
over one's shoulder to catch a parental response. Much of it is populated by romantic adolescents or hyper-sensitive children, longing to escape the narrow confines of the ghetto in which many of them had to share beds with siblings or parents, but fearful of where the open road will take them. This is a literature of boundaries and transgressions.

In an essay called "America, the Thief," a kind of archetypal summary of the second generation experience is given by Harry Roskolenko who grew up on Cherry Street in the lower East Side. Although the piece is a sentimental evocation of his East Side childhood, it takes its direction from the young boy's flight from home. Escape is the central motif of second generation literature.

What does Roskolenko escape from? For one, the sheer claustrophobia of the dense Yiddish ghetto. In Roskolenko's building, four families use one toilet. Accidents are commonplace in this crowded-together world of concrete. Roskolenko's older sister Esther is killed by a truck on her way home from work and his mother loses an arm after being run over by an ice truck. There is also the confinement of poverty. Roskolenko's father, who had run a mill in the Ukraine before emigrating, ekes out a living in New York's sweatshops. The ethnocentrism of the closed Jewish world is also to be escaped. As a young egalitarian, Roskolenko doesn't tolerate the us/them thinking common on the East Side, or the "chosen people" designation. But his parents try to keep him firmly within the Jewish orbit: "As children we were American-grained from the start. But to our parents we were always Jews, never Americans, though we lived within a perplexing set of physical and spiritual nuances."^5

As a way out of this confusion, Roskolenko's imagination seize
on places that are "open to the world," like the fire escape and any small patch of nature he can find in the urban landscape, places which by extension lead out of the ghetto to the larger world. The East River, just three blocks from home, becomes the great symbol of escape. Roskolenko transforms the scummy river into an idyllic Mississippi: "The river was my refuge when I needed to escape from fatherly rebukes, minor beatings, garbaged streets, dead horses, shrill laments—and the rabbi."6

Roskolenko's actual escape would be propelled by the Educational Alliance, an institution established by wealthy German Jews to help Americanize the Russian greenhorns. It is here that Roskolenko begins writing poetry, and is exposed to boxing, socialism, and art. Soon he is arguing with his father for the sheer love of intellectual play and admonished by the orthodox man for his wild ideas. His bar mitzvah, a concession to his family, marks his official break with formal Judaism: "The synagogue meant nothing to me after thirteen, though Judaism is still my private world."7 At thirteen, Roskolenko follows the dream of his youth and runs away to sea.

For the second generation, escape would be an accomplished fact, but Roskolenko's essay does not end simply with his departure from the East Side. The remainder of "America, the Thief" is concerned with the positive meaning of Roskolenko's escape. Unlike his two older brothers who became wealthy restauranteurs, Roskolenko rejects materialistic America. He becomes a Marxist, a seafarer, and a poet. Like a modern-day Ishmael, Roskolenko give up the concrete world:

My resignation included many things that are materialistic but few things of the spirit. It included organized Judaism. I am not organized for anything now. Poverty will always be here—and I have accepted it for myself. My few ambitions
mostly deal with writing, with going to desolate places, with waters—alone. God is there for me. I do not need choruses on the Sabbath; nor ḥisker (prayer for the dead), to lament for my parents; nor Yom Kippur to lament for what we were and what we have become. I lament alone.8

Roskolenko thus makes a separate peace with his past. As he confesses, escape for its own sake did not suffice. "America, the Thief" is a return to the past, an attempt to recover values from this lost world which can sustain him in the present. Writing itself serves the purpose of recovery, the East Side becoming the source and subject matter of his poetry. Away from home, Roskolenko comes to an appreciation of this world he could not feel when he was there. In his re-creation of the past, Roskolenko defamiliarizes it, sees it anew. To the adult Roskolenko, the East Side appears "myth-laden," graced by rituals and a sense of community that are no longer a part of the twentieth century.

Roskolenko doesn't retreat into the past. He willfully escaped the East Side and he realizes he can never go back. He grudgingly accepts the secular world, but seeks to find what has been lost. "America, the Thief," with its quiet tone of revery, represents a scaling down in intensity from The Rise of David Levinsky, and suggests a narrower, more domestic focus for the literature of the middle generation. If the task of the first generation was how to reconcile Russia and America—the past and the future—the task of the second generation will be how to give the escape from home a positive content—how to give shape to freedom.

The pattern of escape and return is central to the fiction of Anzia Yezierska who, like Roskolenko, turned to writing as both a way
out and a way back into her immigrant past. The very language she chose, a kind of immigrant vernacular, suggests her debt to the past. Yezierska's work provides one of the earliest examples of the Yiddish-English writing voice. Unlike Cahan's flatly correct literary style, Yezierska's prose is highly inflected and idiomatic. Hers is a spoken language, unmistakably the compassion-laden voice of a Jewish woman: "But from always it was heavy on my heart the worries for the house as if I was mother." In this sentence from Bread Givers (1925), it is as if words were too precious to be wasted by the poverty-striken narrator, who at one point is scolded by her mother for over-peeling a potato. Although this novel is her fullest exploration of the dimensions of American freedom, Yezierska's language is a constant reminder of her roots in the deprivation of the immigrant ghetto.

At first glance, Bread Givers may strike some readers as a straightforward, even simplistic account of a young woman's Americanization. The novel's heroine, Sara Smolinsky, undergoes much the same kind of metamorphosis as did Mary Antin. Sara leaves her East Side tenement and goes on to become a college-trained teacher, of refined manners and tastes, and with a genteel American-born (Jewish) lover. The novel is neatly divided into three sections--"Hester Street," "Between Two Worlds," "The New World"--to reinforce the transformation motif. But on a deeper thematic level, it may be more accurate to think of the novel's structure as binary: the first half charts Sara's hatred of the physical and psychological constraints of the ghetto and her banishment from her father's home; the second half brings Sara around to a pained acknowledgment of the unbroken relationship she has with her father and all that he represents. Bread Givers examines
the subservient role of women in a traditional patriarchal culture from the woman's point of view. It is thereby a dramatic example of the conflict between home life and social aspiration which is inherent in much second generation literature.

The first section of *Bread Givers* paints an unsentimental picture of domestic relations on the East Side. Many immigrant writers, intent on pursuing the sociology of Americanization, take us into the sweatshops, the marketplace, and the night schools, but few take us into the heart of home life the way Yezierska does. She gives one of the definitive portraits of Old World parents made into near caricatures by New World experience. Reb Smolinsky is a classic *luftmensh* (man of the spirit). In his room crammed full of holy books, he is in his glory, indifferent to such mundane matters as rent and food. Yezierska suggests that had he remained in Russia, Smolinsky might have been a truly venerable patriarch; in America, however, without the communal honor and support accorded a scholar, he has become a narrow-minded hypocrite, venting his bitterness on his wife and four daughters: "Woe to a man who has females for his offspring." Mrs. Smolinsky, on the other hand, is a near perfect example of the suffering Jewish mama. Bearing almost all of the weight of family responsibilities on her shoulders, she is both the clear-eyed pragmatist and the lamenting martyr. Was there ever a Jewish novel with more "oy vehs"? *Bread Givers* is surely no satire, but it does reveal the distortions of immigrant family life under the twin pressures of secularization and poverty.

Burdened by their household of unmarried females, the parents quickly arrange matches for the three oldest daughters. Reb Smolinsky's
talent for matchmaking, however, is not equal to his knowledge of Talmud. The three daughters are paired for life with men they do not love. Only the youngest daughter, Sara, is able to defy the father's demands and to break the cycle of domestic unhappiness.

In the beginning of Bread Givers, Sara is a sensitive witness to her sisters' hopeless struggle against their father's tyranny, but by the end of section one, she herself becomes the focus of the novel. Though she is the youngest and physically the frailest, she is a girl of deep feeling, a "bread giver" in her maternal instinct to provide and nurture. But she also possesses an iron will and fierce determination. As a peddler of fish, she has the strongest lungs on Hester Street. Her parents dub her "blood-and-iron" for this combination of qualities, and in large measure her conflict with her parents is really an internal struggle between different sides of her own nature. At the end of section one, Sara admits to a hatred of her father and, to his face, declares her freedom from the confinement of family life:

Wild with all that was choked in me since I was born, my eyes burned into my father's eyes. "My will is as strong as yours. I'm going to live my own life. Nobody can stop me. I'm not from the old country. I'm American!"
"You blasphemer!" His hand flung out and struck my cheek. "Denier of God! I'll teach you respect for the law!"
I leaped back and dashed for the door. The Old World had struck its last on me.11

Sara must now cope with loneliness, the price she pays for her independence. In the middle section, "Between Two Worlds," Yezierska shows how privacy, a clean window, and a white tablecloth can become minor revelations to the ghetto-dweller. After finding a room of her own, Sara gets a job as an ironer at a laundry and begins night school. Now that she is out from under the rule of her father, "her fierce
desire for life” asserts itself. She takes a suitor, Max Goldstein, a man of charm and polish but whose only real interest is making money. Max proposes and Sara, despite her physical attraction, refuses. Soon after, Sara has an unaccountable longing to see her father, whose preachings come back to her with new meaning. She senses that her rejection of Max is in some way connected to the values her father instilled. Only now that she is away from home does she begin to understand her link with the past:

For the whole day after, I thought of Father. If only I could talk myself out to him. Now, I could love and understand him from afar as I had once hated him and could not bear him when near. I had broken away from him as a child only to be drawn to him now, in my great spiritual need, as a person is drawn to a person.13

After saving enough money, Sara leaves for a small rural college, a radical step for a Jewish girl: “I felt like the pilgrim fathers who had left their homeland and all their kin behind them and trailed out in search of the New World.”14 But though she is leaving her past further behind in the physical sense, she is beginning to rediscover its spiritual worth. In a psychology class at school, she gains a new perspective on the East Side, seeing it as a treasure-chest of experience and meaning, a realm of suffering and grace.

Sara's college experience is a melting pot triumph. Mingling with "real Americans," she absorbs a style of unostentatious simplicity and tempers her intense emotionalism with American refinement. She wins a thousand dollar prize for best college essay and graduates from school with a teaching degree. Although the last part of the novel is titled "New World," it is set back on the East Side, where Sara returns as a teacher, working in the very same ghetto from which she had emerged.
After her mother dies, Sara returns to Hester Street to seek a reconciliation with her father. In his infirmity, he has re-married a shrewish younger woman. Seeing him now in his pathetic old age, Sara finally gives up her hatred of the Old World tyrant and recognizes that her quest for self-fulfillment, though it necessitated a rejection of family, was a legacy from her father. In his "innocent craziness," he was Sara's unacknowledged model of determination and moral passion. Taking a leave of absence, Sara decides to tend to the old man in her own home. Although Yezierska rewards her heroine with a lover, Hugo Seelig, the enlightened, American-born principal of her school, she assumes her old role as burden-bearer in the end. The novel concludes with Sara's resigned acceptance of her burden: "It wasn't just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me."^15

Like Levinsky, Sara can't escape the weight of the past. But unlike Levinsky, who is incapacitated by his "in-betweenness," Sara is enriched by an understanding of the historical context of her struggle. Her escape from the ghetto—her "fierce desire for life"—required an emotional hardening which is tempered at the end by her decision to nurse her ailing father. Though fully Americanized, Sara is still the bread giver—dutiful and maternal, a good Jewish girl after all. Alice Kessler Harris says that Yezierska and her heroine are "emotionally interchangeable" and that in writing Bread Givers Yezierska was purging her own guilt for having left home at seventeen. If this is so, the autobiographical underpinnings never make the novel overly-private. Bread Givers suggests that the secular
freedom of the second generation does not come cheap, indeed that a recognition of the moral obligations of tradition is part and parcel of that very freedom.

In *Bread Givers*, the oppressive world of the immigrant ghetto is re-invested with dignity and value. That is the meaning of Sara's return at the end. But in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934), the lower East Side is rendered as a sprawling chaos of experience. Far from confining the young protagonist, the cityscape is a terrifying, alien place. Almost nothing here is familiar or safe. Where Harry Roskolenko and Sara Smolinsky must defamiliarize the commonplace, David Schearl must learn to domesticate the strange.

This is a task that every child must perform and *Call It Sleep* is certainly one of the major literary works about childhood. Walter Allen says that Roth captures the child's magical thinking, his "instantaneous apprehension of the world." Call It Sleep doesn't have the same sociological intention as *Bread Givers* or the other works discussed here. Roth was more interested in evoking a child's coming-into-consciousness, through the use of certain experimental techniques that were part of the modernist movement in literature. Nonetheless, David's haunted sense of reality serves as a powerful metaphor of immigrant disorientation before the chaos of American freedom. The novel begins in May of 1907, the year which brought the greatest number of immigrants to America. Roth never lets us forget that David is the child of foreigners, who themselves never shake off their sense of estrangement.
The novel's prologue presents a vivid tableau of disorientation. With the late afternoon sun shadowing the Statue of Liberty, the Americanized father comes to Ellis Island to greet the wife and son he left in the Old World, but the European wife does not recognize him without his beard. The young son, seeing only a scowling stranger, presses closer to his mother. Failure of recognition is a major theme in the novel, especially the inability to identify places, the streets in one's own neighborhood. David repeatedly loses his way in the monotonous maze of New York's geometry. The "getting lost" motif in *Call It Sleep* is the unconscious equivalent of the running away theme in "America, the Thief" and *Bread Givers*, whose characters willfully assert their independence by leaving home. But the much younger David is a hyper-sensitive and fearful child. When he ventures beyond the security of his mother, he is almost completely helpless. One of the suggested meanings of the enigmatic title is that this period of David's life is ruled by unconscious forces, as if he were asleep (the three years covered by the novel correspond to the developmental period known as latency).

The sensitive boy himself is the novel's center of consciousness. To capture David's passivity, Roth makes use of an associational method whereby images and sensations seem to pour in upon the boy pell-mell. This is not to say that David is entirely passive, his mind a blank slate. Over the course of the novel, Roth very carefully demonstrates how the boy begins to organize the random sensations of his world into patterns of meaning and sense. As David reluctantly outgrows his dependence on his mother, he begins to develop a sense of self and to master his environment. At the same time, his actions
become more controlled and less compulsive. As the child gains greater mastery, he also gains courage, testing the limits of his self-sufficiency. Such risk-taking, though it courts danger, leads to insight. Call It Sleep is a record of the gradual and perilous movement towards knowledge. The progression is signified by the sequence of key images of the four section titles, and by the intensification of events at the end, climaxing with a literal burst of illumination.

Book One, "The Cellar," is dominated by the sense of a dark, unlit world of mystery and terror. All objects, including the cellar door, an alarm clock, even one's father, seem to hold an unknown content. David's need to penetrate this mystery and its strangeness are conveyed in the opening passage:

Standing before the kitchen sink and regarding the bright brass faucets that gleamed so far away, each with a bead of water at its nose, slowly swelling, falling, David again became aware that this world had been created without thought of him. He was thirsty, but the iron hip of the sink rested on legs tall almost as his own body, and by no stretch of arm, no leap, could he ever reach the distant tap. Where did the water come from that lurked so secretly in the curve of the brass? Where did it go, gurgling in the drain? What a strange world must be hidden behind the walls of a house! But he was thirsty.¹⁸

"The Cellar" portrays David completely at the mercy of this mystery. Because things are hidden to him, they are capable of betrayal. David cannot trust surface appearances. His neighbor Annie says she wants to play a game, but instead she traps him in a closet and kisses him. Whenever his father's friend Joe Luter visits his mother, David notices that his mother appears distracted, preoccupied with some adult matter that takes no account of him. The entire mood of fear and betrayal culminates in the episode when David loses his way and winds up in a police station. Waiting for his mother, David loses all faith in the visible world:
Trust nothing. Trust nothing. Trust nothing. Wherever you look, never believe. Whatever anything was or did or said, it pretended. Never believe. If you played hide'n'-go-seek, it was something else, something sinister. If you played follow the leader, the world turned upside down and an evil face passed through it. Don't play; never believe.19

In section Two, "The Picture," David's family moves from Brooklyn to the lower East Side of Manhattan. His father, formerly a printer constantly losing his job because of his temper, now becomes a milkman, and things stabilize a bit. David's volatile aunt Bertha enters the scene and the novel includes some comical episodes with Bertha and David examining mummies at the Metropolitan Museum. The central image of this section is the landscape his mother hangs on the wall one day, which nostalgically reminds her of the open fields of her native Austria. The picture also brings back an affair with a Christian man, but David can barely comprehend the story since his mother and aunt whisper it in Polish. In this section, then, David's curiosity about his parents begins to develop. At first they are absolute and diametrically opposed figures of light and dark: his mother—all compassion and security; his father—harsh, unbending, judgmental. But now, with a sense of their past, David perceives his parents in a more fully dimensioned way. Also in this section of the novel, David grows more at ease with his environment, no longer baffled by the confusing repetition of telegraph poles: "He walked slowly, idly, aware but no longer overcome or even troubled by the movement of vehicles and people. He knew his world now."20

In section Three, "The Coal," David begins cheder. Reb Yidel Pankower is an unkempt, knuckle-rapping teacher, but it is he who introduces David to Hebrew, God's tongue—"If you knew it, then you could talk to God."21 This section concerns the larger world of the
supernatural. One day in cheder, David hears the rabbi tell the story of how an angel of God cleansed Isaiah by placing a coal on his tongue. David is fascinated by this tale of God's omniscience and the anomaly of a cleansing coal (as opposed to the dirty cellar coal). The second half of this chapter includes a series of episodes involving transcendent brightness and fire. In one scene, at an East River pier, David watches the sunlight burn the water. Hypnotized by the image, David apprehends God's presence on the river. In another episode, three Gentile boys force David to drop a metal sword onto the electrified rail of the nearby tracks, causing a brilliant display of light and power. David is frightened but exhilarated by this vision. He runs back to the cheder where he locates the text on Isaiah in the holy book and reads the magical Hebrew at a hysterical clip. The Passover holiday commences and for the first time in the novel, David is delivered from fear: "For him the mere passing of time was a joy. The body was aware of a lyric indolence, a golden lolling within itself. He felt secure at home and in the street . . . ." 22

Roth could have ended Call It Sleep after Book Three, with David finally secure and unafraid, inspired by Isaiah with a vision of supernatural light. But Book Four, "The Rail," brings all the symbols and images of the novel together and intensifies them.

It would be difficult to summarize briefly all of the action Roth packs into the short span of time covered by these last 200 pages, but it is unified around the idea of a testing of boundaries. Fleeing his home after a violent family quarrel, David loses his way again. The whole world seems to flood in upon David now, and it appears as if his old fears have returned. His very identity seems uncertain now for
his father suspects that David might not be his own son. But his uncertainty, the sense that he is "somebody else," gives David a "giddy freedom." Although his actions here seem compulsive, David has instinctively set out for the railroad yard. The whole pressure of the novel is leading to this climax in which David will create his own illumination, not simply read about it in Isaiah or envision it in the sun's light on the river or under the guidance of the three Irish boys. David's action here represents a willed testing of freedom.

The penultimate chapter of *Call It Sleep* is a cinematic tour-de-force. As David prepares to lower a milk stick he picked up along the way onto the electric rail, Roth slows down and breaks up the action into fragments, and cuts to simultaneous events nearby: a warehouse watchman at work, an Irishman telling of his sexual exploits at a bar, a British sailor longing for a plate of fish 'n chips, etc. For the first time, Roth shifts the point of view away from David, implying a shrinking of the child's narcissistic view of the world: no longer the all-encompassing consciousness of the novel, David is now part of a wider world. His sense that he "ain't nobody" is literalized in the climactic action of the section. His contact with the electric rail concentrates his world into one image of blazing light. The shock causes him to lose consciousness altogether.

But this loss of self is temporary. After the near fatal electrocution, David is returned home. His father, who had previously denied him, now acknowledges his paternity, and goes to get the healing salve. With his mother nearby, David goes to sleep. Though David returns to the condition of sleep and the protection of his mother at the end, this is not suggested as an escape back into the
unconscious. One senses that David will continue to experience fear, but that now his fear has become a manageable component of his freedom. Having risked knowledge, David deserves his rest.

David's passage from home is a passage towards his own imagination and a grudging acceptance of the scenes and images his imagination has made of the world. This is the meaning of the novel's finale which contains the only explicit reference to the title:

He might as well call it sleep. It was only toward sleep that every wink of the eyelids could strike a spark into the cloudy tinder of the dark, kindle out of shadowy corners of the bedroom such myriad and such vivid jets of images—of the glint on tilted beards, of the uneven shine on roller skates, of the dry light on grey stone stoops, of the tapering glitter of rails, of the oily sheen on the night-smooth rivers, of the glow on thin blond hair, red faces, of the glow on the outstretched, open palms of legions upon legions of hands hurtling toward him. He might as well call it sleep. It was only toward sleep that ears had power to cull again and reassemble the shrill cry, the hoarse voice, the scream of fear, the bells, the thick-breathing, the roar of crowds and all sounds that lay fermenting in the vats of silence and the past. It was only toward sleep one knew himself still lying on the cobbles, felt the cobbles under him, and over him and scudding ever toward him like a black foam, the perpetual blur of shod and running feet, the broken shoes, new shoes, stubby, pointed, caked, polished, buniony, pavement-beveled, lumpish, under skirts, under trousers, shoes, over one and through one, and feel them all and feel, not pain, not terror, but strangest triumph, strangest acquiescence. One might as well call it sleep. He shut his eyes.25

This Joycean stream-of-consciousness moves from visual to aural to tactual images—a progression towards a greater immediacy of contact with the world. David's senses are not merely registering sensations; they are creatively involved in giving form to his random experience: the eyes strike a spark, his ears cull and reassemble, and the feeling of the pavement makes him self-aware and aware of others. The "it" of this passage is a new synthesizing power, akin to Coleridge's organic imagination, and not the escapist imagination of the once fearful child.
Although *Call It Sleep* has acquired a certain cult following since 1956, when it was named a "neglected masterpiece" by both Alfred Kazin and Leslie Fiedler, it still remains a largely ignored work. Though his scope is focused exclusively on David's perceptions, Roth creates a fully realized world. It is a tribute to his uncanny penetration of a child's reality that, although three years go by, David's inner world seems to exist outside of time. The ceaseless flux of experience is not broken up into conventional adult divisions of the workday clock and calendar, but instead by discrete moments of intense vision. *Call It Sleep* is an episodic novel in the best sense. Roth places his young hero amid the confusing welter of the secular world, without tradition or a fixed role to guide him. Instead David feels his way into the world through immediacy of contact: "Terrific clarity was given him. Terrific leisure . . . Terrific absorption." Roth suggests that this poetic absorption ultimately creates order and knowledge.

Roskolenko and Yezierska enrich the secular present by rediscovering the spiritual poetry of the past. In *Call It Sleep*, the commonplace rails of a stockyard yield up a transcendent light, and illumination liberates David from terror. For the characters of Daniel Fuchs, however, there is no going back to the East Side for poetry; and knowledge, the very worldly kind, only brings disenchantment. His characters possess no special powers of insight nor are they graced with the kind of poetic absorption of Roth's child/hero. If they have been liberated from the East Side, their new freedom is illusory. Fuchs' overriding theme is that secularization represents as much a trap as the rigorous confinement of tradition.
Fuchs spent much of his adult life in Hollywood, as a screenwriter of several commercially successful films. But his best work is generally considered to be the three novels that comprise his Williamsburg Trilogy, stories about second generation Jews who have left the East Side for the "neighborhoods" of Williamsburg, Flatbush, and Coney Island. The geographical expansion would seem to imply a measure of economic freedom. However, Fuchs' characters have gained little in their move to Brooklyn but greater expectations and consequently greater disillusionment. Their dreams have been shaped by the ersatz-romantic influence of American mass culture: movies, popular songs, and the optimistic aphorisms of the day. It is inevitable that their very un-romantic lives be spent in a fruitless longing for what they can't have.

The three novels—Summer in Williamsburg (1934), Homage to Blenholt (1936), Low Company (1937)—were not intended as a trilogy. They are separate narratives but they are bound by a common setting: Brooklyn in the 1920's and 30's. Sense of place is an overwhelming factor in Fuchs' work. Brooklyn serves as a kind of halfway stop between the Yiddish East Side and the open world, and Fuchs' characters share in this in-between quality. His tough guys still speak a stilted English like the polite Jewish boys they once were; while naive adolescents, eager for manhood, use the movie slang of their gangster heroes. Fuchs' Brooklyn is heartbreaking. This is as true an evocation of its ethnic earthiness and cultural inferiority as can be found. Irving Howe is right to say that Fuchs was not a naturalist by disposition, for he brings a sympathy to these low lifes that never approaches true naturalistic detachment. He succeeds in making
his characters likable, intelligent (if not educated) and humorous, but he also exposes their preoccupations as narrow and empty. Money-making has become the be-all and end-all of their lives. The few truly ethical characters seem like relics, while the young idealists are hopelessly out of place, yet with nowhere to go.

In a preface to the trilogy, Fuchs says that his memory impelled him to write about the long walks he took as an adolescent, and *Summer in Williamsburg*, his first novel, is steeped in a kind of dreamy melancholy. Though it follows the lives of several characters, it focuses primarily on the perceptions of Cohen and Philip Hayman, both twenty years old and "eager for experience," yet each in his own way alienated from experience as it is lived in Williamsburg. Cohen is a wonderful creation: a naive shlemiel who affects a world weary cynicism. Despite his pimples and ineptitude, he is a posturing romantic who wants life to resemble a Dostoyevsky novel. This means various attempts at suicide, Marxism, and love. Only suicide is successful, though in not nearly as dignified a manner as he would have liked. Cohen's idealism is a lively source of amusement for Philip Hayman, but though he fancies himself a realist, Philip is also disenchanted with the meaningless round of activity in Williamsburg, and is closer in spirit to Cohen than he thinks.

The novel begins with the suicide of Meyer Sussmann, the butcher, a gentle and decent man. Philip takes the suicide to heart and asks his old friend Miller, the miser, to explain why Sussmann might have taken his own life. Miller responds more deeply than Philip expects:

To find out, you must make a laboratory out of Williamsburg to learn what touches people here, why these details affect, and in what manner. A tremendous task. If you would really dis-
cover the reason for people's actions you must pick Williamsburg to pieces until you have them all spread out before you on your table, a dictionary of Williamsburg. Then select. Pick and discard. Collect and analyze.31

That Sussmann's death is directly connected to Williamsburg suggests the important role of environment in Fuchs' universe. The suicide thus becomes the pretext for a series of episodes and observations of life in Williamsburg.

Underlying Philip's sense of Williamsburg, and giving a dark coloration to much of the trilogy, is an acute class-consciousness, and with it a feeling of economic entrapment. The tailors and manual laborers of the first generation have now become retail merchants and small shopkeepers, but there is little hope for any further mobility. Like Shubunka in Low Company, most of Fuchs' characters "recognized the basic truth of making a living—you couldn't win fortunes working with your hands. You had to sell something . . . ."32 Fuchs anticipates Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman in his portrait of a commercial society, losing a sense of purpose in its compulsion to offer anything that will sell. Even the college educated sons, who desire something more than to go into business, see no way out of their eventual surrender to the money imperative. Schooling here hardly performs the same liberating function it does in Yezierska's world. We learn only in a brief aside that Philip is in college; it is as if it were irrelevant. If anything, education has given Philip what his brother Harry calls "this ethical baloney,"33 ideals that will be of little use in the real world. Philip's awareness of his working class roots derails his relationship with Ruth Kelman, whose parents have higher aspirations for her than a boy from Williamsburg. This class separation also prevents the growth of Philip's friendship with Charlie
Nagleman, a nouveau riche Jew living off of Central Park. Charlie's world is made up of a handsome home and summers in Maine, but Philip's world means the ash-cans and garbage on Ripple Street. As he tells Charlie in a letter, "I cannot seem to escape my destiny."34

If the future seems hopeless, what of the uses of the past? Fuchs' world is Jewish to the core, but only marginally religious. In *Summer in Williamsburg*, he includes one brief scene of a group of pious men at prayer, but he renders the scene as absurd and obsolete. While the sound of a toilet flushing can be heard, a dozen old men in a makeshift synagogue engage in a discussion of some of the finer points of a Talmudic text. Their leader, the miserly old Miller, sums up the argument: "Hichle, Pichle, Schmichle . . . Let us go again to the Talmud, the Good Book. It says, 'Va-cha-choo-loo, va-cha-choo-loo.' And this means, when the wind will blow, the cradle will rock."35 That the greedy miser has become "the ultimate sage" in this mock-heroic version of holy prayer indicates Fuchs' unwillingness to romanticize the past. In Fuchs' Williamsburg, the religious tradition as a source of spiritual meaning has been lost.

However, Fuchs does have a warm feeling for Yiddish immigrant culture, with its home-cooked spicy meals and the quiet benediction of mothers lighting Sabbath candles. Philip's father, though not religious, embodies the traditional ethical virtues, and he is presented in an unambivalently positive way. A man of integrity, Mr. Hayman refuses to sell his concession stand for 5000 dollars because he doesn't think it's worth that much. Despite Philip's obvious feeling for the old-fashioned immigrant customs and values, he realizes it is a world on its way out. It seems to him that his father's good-
ness exists in a kind of vacuum. Philip suspects that his father is a shlemiel, a loser, and wonders whether his fate will be the same: "He was heading in his father's direction, honest, good, and kind, but poor, and money meant so much. Look at him, Philip said, he's old, he's so skinny, and all he has after all the years is a cigarette and a window." Implicated in the very world whose values he detests, Philip comes to see his father's goodness as "too inactive." On the other hand, his uncle Papravel is presented as vital and active, in tune with America's get-rich-quick possibilities. The fact that he is a racketeer doesn't prevent Papravel from seeing himself as a legitimate businessman who is simply taking advantage of the opportunities of American capitalism. Increasingly, Philip sees his choice as one between Papravel's dishonest wealth and his father's noble poverty: "Was there no way out between the dirty preoccupations of fast money and the deadness of his father's example?" The fact that he perceives his options in this either/or way clinches his feeling of imprisonment.

By the end, Philip has followed old Miller's directions: he has made a laboratory out of Williamsburg and has collected and analyzed the specimens. But he never achieves the clinical detachment which might give him a measure of freedom for he is still a part of this world; nor does he come up with anything like a comforting scientific conclusion. At the end, Fuchs disavows any thematic distillation of the lives he has examined: "People in tenements lived in a circle without significance, one day the duplicate of the next until the end, which occurred without meaning but accidentally, cutting the procession short as pointlessly as Cohen's life had been cut."
In his preface, Fuchs says that in this his first novel, he was grappling with form and was attempting to discover a grand design to the life he had witnessed in Williamsburg, "with nothing left to vagary." This quest for all-encompassing artistic closure corresponds to Philip's attempt to find an explanatory motive for Sussmann's suicide. Philip's failure is Fuchs' success, for Summer in Williamsburg suggests that there is no key to unlock the mystery. If the novel lacks formal resolution, it remains true to Philip's alienation from, yet intimate absorption in, life in Williamsburg. At the end, Philip still remains a cynical dreamer, neither boy nor man, a perpetual adolescent. As Howe says, "There can hardly have been another American writer . . . whose image of life has been so tightly bound by his adolescent years . . . ."

What it means to "grow" into manhood becomes the explicit theme of the second of the Williamsburg novels, Homage to Blenholt. In this novel, Fuchs' tone becomes more wildly comical and there is plenty of slapstick. But he continues to explore the same subject of the previous work—young men dreaming of ways out of the closed-in lives around them. The story here revolves around Max Balkan's attempts to get his friends to attend the funeral of one Blenholt, New York City's Commissioner of Sewers. Max elevates Blenholt, who was actually a bureaucrat on the take, to the status of a titan, a modern day Tamburlaine. Like Cohen and Philip from the previous novel, Max wants to discover the beauty and heroism in life. His intentions are fine, but in the case of Blenholt his aim is way off. The funeral, which Max attends with his unwilling girlfriend Ruth, is a pompous, cliché-ridden affair. Fuchs punctures Max's bubble by interrupting all the
fake formality with some Keystone Cops slapstick in which Max is
roughed up by Blenholt's henchmen and his glasses crunched.

Unlike Philip Hayman, Max is obsessed with dreams of money. He
has devoted hours to such get-rich-quick schemes as a telephone movie
service, a nationwide chain of hot chicken soup stands, and a self-
sustaining parachute for people to stay up in the air as long as they
like. Like Tamburlaine, Max wants money and power only as a means to
a noble end. His practical girlfriend Ruth merely wants him to settle
down and get a job. But in Fuchs' world, the goals of both idealists
and realists are shaped by images from American pop culture and their
various means of escape are equated. For Max, it is bottled onion
juice; Ruth's dream is showing at the Miramar in the form of a Joan
Crawford movie.

In the end, Max discovers that his greatest idea—bottled onion
juice—is already in use. Deflated again, he determines to enter the
practical world by buying into a small local deli. While Ruth sees
this as a great triumph of manhood, Fuchs very clearly views it as a
capitulation and a spiritual death: "There was nothing for him to do
but to surrender, to go to work, to pay his debt to his father, to
Ruth, to the world . . . He felt cold now, with no trace of tears for
himself. That was all over. Balkan felt himself a man."42

The sequence of Fuchs' three novels reveals a progression of
sorts, though it may more properly be considered a descent. Summer in
Williamsburg remains just on the verge of taking its dreaming adoles-
cents into the adult world. At the end of Homage to Blenholt a
qualified manhood is achieved. In the final novel Low Company, it is
as if the young men from the previous novels have settled into a pre-
mature old age, worn down and obsessed by making a living. All their youthful dreams have run into the dull refrain: business is business.

Much of the action of the novel is set at Ann's, an ice-cream parlor and luncheonette in Neptune Beach. Neptune Beach is the kind of place that Fuchs' Williamsburg characters would want to escape to—a little beach resort in Brooklyn. Ironically, Fuchs portrays it as a world in decay, in which "nothing was solid." Its dominant image is the mob of bathers desperately rushing by subway to the shore, while the local storeowners exhort them to buy.

Fuchs' epigraph to this novel is taken from a Yom Kippur prayer, a catalogue of sins accumulated over the year, which concludes: "O, Lord our God, forgive us for the sin we have committed in hardening of the heart."

These characters have indeed become hardened, made grotesque in their obsession with money, sex, and good times. The list of characters, a collection of lost souls, includes Moe Karty, a compulsive horse player; Spitzbergen, the miserly owner of the ice-cream parlor; Shorty, the soda jerk with an inflated vision of his own skills as a womanizer; and Shubunka, a fat, greasy booker for several whorehouses. Gabriel Miller observes that there is no state of innocence in Fuchs' world. Escape from experience is impossible. Even the naive dish-washer Arthur, who only wants to be a man, participates in petty theft and is a witness to murder. Herbert Lurie, the one character with compassion and insight, wants to escape the "lowness of life" at Neptune Beach, and moves to the rural peace of Flatbush. But at the end, Fuchs implies that geographical movement is meaningless. Lurie's recognition of and compassion for the in-escapable meanness of life is the closest thing to redemption that
Fuchs allows in the trilogy:

Lurie knew now that it had been insensible and inhuman for him, too, simply to hate Neptune and seek escape from it. This also was hard and ignorant, lacking human compassion. He had known the people at Ann's in their lowness and had been repelled by them, but now it seemed to him that he understood how their evil appeared in their impoverished dingy lives and, further how miserable their own evil rendered them. It was not enough to call them low and pass on.  

Though Fuchs is a gifted mimic, with a feeling for the absurd comedy of immigrant life, his works have much to say about the spiritual malaise of the middle generation. It would be wrong to think, however, that this makes him a stern and earnest moralist. He doesn't dispense self-righteous judgments from some remote authorial height. He never attempts to transcend his subject matter or to romanticize it. His characters find themselves, like Philip Hayman, "with a hole and nothing to put into it." Fuchs faces this empty freedom with sorrow and tender acceptance.

The reminiscences of Alfred Kazin, published in 1951 in book form as A Walker in the City, form a lyrical coda to the second generation's ambiguous rite of passage. A Walker in the City can be read as a counter piece to Podhoretz' Making It. Where Podhoretz takes his subway ride from Brooklyn to Manhattan and clinically assesses the cost and pay-off of this journey, Kazin returns to Brooklyn from "the city," indulging the dreamy adolescent in him to recover the images of his childhood in Brownsville. This recovery requires a leap of imagination, since it is ten years since Kazin first left and Brownsville is hardly the same place. Kazin dutifully notes the changes that have occurred—the rash of used furniture stores replacing drug stores and movie theatres, blacks replacing Jews. But the mica on
the pavement and the street names are still familiar to him and his memory is quickened by the sight of orthodox women in their shapeless dresses and ritual wigs: "They give Brownsville back to me." Kazin's use of this Proustian motif suggests that his visit back home is a kind of ritual, serving a deeper purpose than that of quaint nostalgia. In fact, as the opening sentence informs us, Kazin has been returning periodically: "Every time I go back to Brownsville it is as if I had never been away." Although we know, even before beginning the book, that Kazin has left his provincial roots to become a famous literary critic and teacher, Brownsville still holds some strange appeal for him. His capacity to recover not only the general experience of his childhood there, but its exact sensations is uncanny. It is as if the smells, sounds, and textures of Brownsville have never left him. Rarely has the second generation's sense of place been so powerfully evoked.

Above all, A Walker in the City is a book of places, of clearly delineated areas of experience. Each subway stop between Manhattan and Brownsville carries its own associations. "Grand Army Plaza" means the Brooklyn Museum and Kazin's discovery of Albert Pinkham Ryder's paintings: "Sutter" means Lincoln Terrace Park and the experienced girls who passed by on summer evenings. Kazin's ethnic and class awareness is also marked off geographically: Manhattan is the land of the Gentiles; tree-lined Eastern Parkway, middle class alrightnik Jews; Livonia Avenue, the Negro district; two blocks over from his home yet still foreign territory, the place where the "Italianers" live. This is the urban jungle, where it is crucial to know your turf.
Then there are Kazin's private places which hold a more personal significance. Chester Street (Kazin's own block), the school auditorium and courtyard, the synagogue—these are places which oppress; the adults room in the library, the Brooklyn Bridge, and a vague "beyond" ("anything away from the block was good")--places which liberate the imagination. A Walker in the City couches the theme of escape and return as a dialectic of places which entrap and places which enlarge.

Like Fuchs' Williamsburg, Kazin's Brownsville is achingly working class and some of the same despair hangs over the place. The first sensation Kazin experiences upon returning is of an almost palpable hopelessness. The people now, as they did then, seem like caged animals, and his initial reaction to this oppressiveness is one of rage "mixed with dread and some unexpected tenderness . . . ." Almost at the very end of the long subway run from Manhattan, Brownsville seemed like the end of the world to the young Alfred. Bordering on the huge Canarsie refuse dump and surrounded by marshland and monument works, Brownsville is conjured up as a wasteland, clearly a place to be left behind. Sara Smolinsky must defy her father in order to leave the East Side, but Alfred, the beneficiary of the Jewish double standard, has no such conflict. His parents expect him to leave Brownsville and the working class behind. Their first American son, Alfred "was to be the monument of their liberation from the shame of being--what they were."

But if it is tacitly understood that Alfred, as an American, must be propelled out of Brownsville, it is also assumed that, as a Jew, he will remain within the Jewish community. His parents cannot foresee,
however, that liberation from the working class inevitably means entry into a non-sectarian, open world. In the book's second section, "The Kitchen," Kazin focuses on what might be called the domestic values of Judaism, values which are in direct opposition to the parents' economic ambitions for their son. Here, on a Friday evening in the quiet of the Sabbath, Alfred bathes in "the ancient still center" of Jewish culture. In the kitchen, and by extension within the Jewish community, there is peace and security. The most terrible word in his mother's Yiddish vocabulary is "aleyn"—alone. Although Alfred responds warmly to the Sabbath ritual, he is troubled by the matter-of-factness of his Jewish identity. Because it is given to him unconditionally, it represents a threat to his freedom. The recipient of these curiously mixed messages, Alfred reacts to his own background, not surprisingly, with deep ambivalence. The resolution of this ambivalence occurs in another significant place in Kazin's personal geography—the synagogue.

Like many American-born children of immigrants who themselves adapted their religion to meet the secular conditions of the New World, Kazin inherits a watered down version of orthodox Judaism. Expecting illumination and insight from the holy texts, Alfred is disappointed by the emphasis on the meaningless outer forms of religious custom. His bar mitzvah preparation is administered by a dried-up old teacher who doesn't even bother explaining the passage which Alfred must read. From the community standpoint, it is enough that Alfred go through the service. The synagogue itself fails to stir the boy's imagination. It is just an old house with the permanent smells of the rebbetzin's cooking in one's nostrils. In contrast to the movie theatre next door, the synagogue is a place "without any illusion or
Alfred belongs to this synagogue because he lives a block away. He has no choice in the matter and feels "a love‐less intimacy" with it. The synagogue at first promotes his feeling of enforced community, of an unthinking Jewishness.

Only after he is dutifully confirmed does Alfred, of his own free will, explore the meaning of the Hebrew texts. Mechanically chanting the Sabbath blessings one Saturday, he looks at the English translation for the first time. "In an agony of surprise," the English somehow gives him a sense of the "deepness" of his religious tradition that the Hebrew never does. In an experience similar to David Schearl's when he begins to assimilate the story of Isaiah into his personal life, Alfred finds "a kind of purifying ecstasy" in a Yom Kippur prayer:

The voice that spoke in that prayer book seemed to come out of my very bowels. There was something grand and austere in it that confirmed everything I had felt in my bones about being a Jew: the fierce awareness of life to the depths, every day and in every hour: the commitment: the hunger.

But the "ecstasy" which Alfred finds in the prayer book is not visible in the daily life of Brownsville, nor in the formal religion of the synagogue: "there was no gladness in it." With this understanding, Alfred begins his true liberation from Brownsville. Complementing his own private orthodoxy with a new sensual pleasure in the richness of existence, he begins to shed his fear of the world. Like David Schearl, Kazin gains mastery and self‐assurance. The last chapter shows him, at sixteen, coming into himself, writing poetry and discovering his ruling passions—Blake and Whitman, T.S. Eliot, the Old Testament as literature.
In structure a story of separation, moving from the colorless "block" to Highland Park and "beyond," A Walker in the City is perhaps more significantly a return passage home. Like many a Jew "who went to sea," Kazin returns periodically to give himself back to the world of his fathers. It is this world which gave him his first intimation of life's depth and sacredness, and thus gives meaning to the secular freedom he now enjoys. In that sense, he has never left.

Kazin's debt to Brownsville can also be glimpsed in his intellectual career as a thinker and scholar, for traces of the inner dialectic of his childhood appear in his adult writing. In what many consider his major contribution as a literary critic, On Native Grounds, Kazin posited an interpretation that is illuminating for what it tells us about both American literature and about Kazin himself: "... the greatest single fact about our modern American writing [is] our writers' absorption in every last detail of their American world together with their deep and subtle alienation from it." The creative uses of alienation might well be thought of as Kazin's hidden theme in A Walker in the City, as well as the condition to which much second generation literature aspires.

For the writers discussed in this chapter, the passage from home proved to be the salient experience of their lives and the source of their creative vision. Their common history as children of immigrants living in a secular age became sharply focused, in their writing, on the image of adolescents who dream of escape. As their characters discover, however, escape for its own sake is not enough and so they return, perhaps years later, to make their peace with the world which
both confined and nurtured them. This small handful of works cannot be said to provide the complete picture of what life was like for the middle generation, but collectively they offer striking evidence of the contradictions that were a part of what Kazin calls this experimental age.

Of course, the separation from family and home, and the attempt to come to terms with one's background are struggles which do not exclusively pertain to the children of immigrants. This may be the major burden of young adulthood everywhere, and the works discussed here are first of all stories of growing up. Specifically religious themes have given way to more universal issues such as knowledge, freedom, and self-sufficiency. As Theodore Gross puts it, "The most striking feature of literature by Jews between the two world wars is the absence of its Jewishness." The secularization of the second generation, while it represents freedom, thus also signifies loss, a felt absence.

It is not surprising, then, to find second generation characters who are only marginally Jewish seeking to fill the gap. Even escape from Jewish tradition and family takes on a Jewish coloring here. For Roskolenko and Yezierska, there is the grudging recognition of spiritual debt to the dying East Side culture; for Roth, a sudden burst of illumination to redeem the chaos of freedom; for Fuchs, a prayer of compassion and forgiveness. These writers have a feeling for life's burden, mystery, and depth, and try to carry their apprehension over to the mundane, everyday world. Kazin's "purifying ecstasy" suggests that secularization cannot undo the spiritual dimension of life.
"Ecstasy," in fact, is the operative word for another poet of alienation, Isaac Rosenfeld, who was as truly religious as a free-thinker can possibly be. At the heart of his unsung novel Passage From Home is a search for purity and an aching sense of its absence, themes which come increasingly to characterize Jewish-American literature at mid-century.
CHAPTER NOTES


4. Irving Howe, World of our Fathers, p. 166.


10. Yezierska, p. 95.


16. Alice Kessler Harris, "Introduction" to Bread Givers, p. xvii.


21. Roth, p. 213.

22. Roth, p. 262.


25. Roth, p. 441.


27. Roth discusses the influence of Joyce on his work in an interview with Bonnie Lyons in *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 5:1 (spring 1979), pp. 50-62.

28. Roth, p. 83.

29. These include *The Big Shot*, *The Hard Way*, *Criss Cross*, and *Interlude*. Fuchs won an Academy Award in 1955 for his script of *Love Me or Leave Me*.


34. Fuchs, p. 117.

35. Fuchs, pp. 50-51.

37 Fuchs, p. 117.

38 Fuchs, p. 377.

39 Fuchs, p. 377.

40 Fuchs, "Preface" to The Williamsburg Trilogy, p. vi.

41 Howe, World of our Fathers, pp. 583-84.


43 Fuchs, "Low Company," p. 28.

44 Fuchs, p. 2.


46 Fuchs, "Low Company," p. 311.


49 Kazin, p. 5.

50 Kazin, p. 83.

51 Kazin, p. 5.

52 Kazin, p. 22.

53 Kazin, p. 52

54 Kazin, pp. 41-42.

55 Kazin, p. 44.

56 Kazin, pp. 100-03.

57 Kazin, p. 103.

CHAPTER V

THE PURSUIT OF ECSTASY:
ISAAC ROSENFELD'S PASSAGE FROM HOME

A man came to Rabbi Levi Yitzhak and complained: "Rabbi, what shall I do with the lie that keeps sneaking into my heart?" He stopped and then cried aloud: "Oh, and even what I just said was not said truthfully! I shall never find truth!" In despair he threw himself on the ground.

"How fervently this man seeks the truth!" said the rabbi. With a gentle hand he raised him from the ground and said: "It is written: 'The truth will grow out of the ground.'"

from Tales of the Hasidim

In 1944, Isaac Rosenfeld's friend Saul Bellow had written his first novel, Dangling Man. It is the story of a man simply named Joseph who, "alone ten hours a day in a single room," waits to be called to military service. Dangling Man established Bellow as a writer of major importance and also seemed to capture, in its starkness, the existential preoccupations of the decade. The sociological novels of the 30's, with their look at bread lines, wobblies, and migrant farmers, were giving way, in the 40's, to studies of individual malaise, of people cut off from one another and from a meaningful connection to their society. "Alienation" was becoming the catchword of the day. The 40's also felt the influence of such literary existentialists as Kafka, Dostoyevsky, Sartre, and Camus. These European writers, working under vastly different circumstances, had somehow given America an image of itself in the figure of the anti-hero or underground man, pared down to a few basic attributes, and...
seeking to find some small pocket of meaning in a chaotic, godless universe.

It is no wonder, then, that at this moment, the Jewish-American novel, with its emphasis on homelessness and the emptiness of freedom, began to be considered representative. Jewish alienation of the 40's was very different from that of the immigrant generation. Then, Jews were in the historically familiar position of being outsiders on the fringes of a potentially hostile host culture, but now Jews were in danger of being swallowed up by a mass society, of losing their personal and racial identity altogether. In large part, this feeling of loss had come out of the second generation experience of moving steadily from a world rooted in tradition to a secular, materialistic, and spiritually empty realm. With Americanization fully achieved, middle class Jewish life could no longer be clearly distinguished from middle class American life. Second generation Jews, assimilated and yet still within memory of the tradition, felt the emptiness of mass society perhaps more keenly than others. Jewish writers began to investigate the limbo of middle class life with an intensity that made them spokesmen for their age.

Isaac Rosenfeld was one of these keen observers. Perhaps to us today he is not one of the most familiar. He died of a heart attack in 1956 at the age of 38 and his output was small: a book of verse, a number of critical essays, a dozen or so pieces of short fiction, and one completed novel, Passage from Home (1946). But to those who knew him personally, and within the literary circles of New York and Chicago, he left an indelible impression. Theodore Solataroff remembers him as a charismatic teacher of philosophy at the University
of Minnesota, with a trail of students following him around campus. Rosenfeld and Bellow were referred to as the Chicago Dostoyevskians, for the somber "Russian" mood of their writing. This was no literary affectation on Rosenfeld's part. He lived his angst. Bellow's loving recollection in *Partisan Review* shortly after Rosenfeld's death gives us a brief glimpse of a man full of "strange beliefs" and close to madness most of his life. His was the near-madness of the intellectual who yearned for simplicity of contact and emotional honesty: "The victories he wanted were those of the heart." Near the end of his life, Rosenfeld was drawn to Wilhelm Reich's theory of the sexual basis of life processes. Bellow says, "Ecstasy was what he pursued, and he paid the cost in suffering . . . ."3

Suffering and ecstasy are the twin poles of Rosenfeld's life and work. His short fiction almost always puts the two in sharply focused juxtaposition. In the story "My Landlady," for example, the young narrator, Joe Feigenbaum, a hospital orderly, relates a story about a woman who has her purse stolen while visiting her sick daughter. Joe escorts the woman home, paying her busfare. Then, after the woman's husband learns that the hospital bill cannot be paid, Joe witnesses a violent domestic argument. He returns to his apartment, disheartened by the suffering and helplessness of the couple. But the sinuous melody of a Russian folk song coming from his landlady's room revives him. Drawn to the music, Joe enters his landlady's room to find her nodding her head to the record. Joe asks her to play the song again. With an "ecstasy rising within [him]," he starts snapping his fingers to the music while the landlady begins to dance:

Delicately kicking to either side with her stocking feet, she went into the dance. She spun around the room, waving her
hands at her wrist, her feet making a soft thud on the rug. "Oh you are good!" I cried out and I could see in this stocky middle-aged woman the soul of the dancers on the plain. Her body whirled around, heavy, unused to the dance, but for me it had grace; her large, round bosom was thrust forward, but in it I could see the heart twinkling; her arms were moving through the air but I could see in them that same embracing softness, and they were acting out the human goodness of the dancers of the plain. 4

The woman's husband returns, the song ends, life goes on its mundane course. But Joe has been sustained by the momentary human grace.

The capacity to experience our natural life to the full, as embodied by the middle-aged landlady's youthful dance, had an almost religious significance for Rosenfeld. He addressed the religious question directly in an essay written in 1950, "Religion and Naturalism." In this personal statement, Rosenfeld asserted that all human values derive from the secular realm, and that any religious view which presumed the insignificance of the natural world was untenable. Although Rosenfeld aligned himself with naturalism, he could not rest content with the arid philosophical forms it often took. Rosenfeld felt the need to vitalize naturalism, supplementing the secular point of view with "a feeling for religion" (as distinct from religious belief). His ideal was one of natural fulfillment, "of the self-regulative ordering of values (in societies as well as individuals) where values offer themselves of their own accord in the experience of life, without residuum in some other world." 5 In places, Rosenfeld calls this ideal "joy"; in other places, "ecstasy."

Passage from Home, Rosenfeld's one completed novel, represents a working out of this problem in values, this search for ecstasy, within the context of second generation Jewish-American life. It is a peculiarly inward story, with so little attention to outward action that it has struck some readers as slim and unfinished. 6 Perhaps due to
the influence of Rosenfeld's hero Dostoyevsky, long sections of it read like Notes from Underground—more essay than fiction. But the very absence of social texture is a noteworthy omission; the loss of cultural and religious moorings contributes to the book's bareness. The young narrator's attempt to invest his colorless, middle class world with "a feeling for religion" places him in the company of other second generation dreamers like Harry Roskolenko, David Schearl, and Alfred Kazin. As with the stories of these secular Jews, Passage from Home follows the familiar pattern of escape and return.

At the same time, Passage from Home is a later stage second generation novel and pictures secularization with an even sharper ambivalence than many earlier works. It is 1946: the immigrant past as a source of spiritual sustenance is becoming further removed, and the urge for connection more desperate. Passage from Home is a vivid example of Jewish-American literature at mid-cycle, when the desire for independence from the Jewish home is matched by an equally compelling need to recover one's family history.

On the simplest level, Passage from Home is actually a single major episode about a boy who runs away from home. To elaborate: a young teenage boy named Bernard Miller who is unhappy with his self-enclosed, middle class family, is drawn to his aunt Minna, his dead mother's younger sister, a woman who is regarded by the rest of the family as shameful for leading a flagrantly non-Jewish life. Minna and Bernard's father appear to have had some obscurely illicit relationship at the time of Bernard's mother's death, and Minna was henceforth banished from the Miller household. Against his father's
wishes, Bernard visits Minna, eventually introducing her to a good natured Gentile man, Willy Harpsmith, a cousin by marriage. On the occasion of his father's 40th birthday party, open hostilities erupt between Bernard's father and Minna. Bernard leaves the party with his aunt. He spends several weeks at Minna's, sleeping on a cot in her dirty kitchen, and observing her intimate yet strained relations with Willy and a clownish, vulgar man named Mason who it turns out is really her husband. Disgusted by the sordidness of this triangle and feeling himself an intruder, Bernard returns home. The novel ends on a deliberately anti-climactic note: Bernard achieves only a partial reconciliation with his father, and fails to gain any final insight into the story of Minna's banishment.

Giving a bare bones synopsis of a work like *Passage from Home*, one is especially liable to incur "the heresy of the paraphrase." It is not that the book is plotless—the above sketch is accurate as far as it goes. But *Passage from Home* is an almost completely internal story. The mind of the narrator is Rosenfeld's true subject matter and he reveals that mind by a thorough-going emphasis on motivation. Where I wrote, in the plot summary, "Bernard leaves the party with his aunt," it would have been possible to say: Despite Minna's express desire to hear nothing about the Miller family, Bernard casually informs her of his father's upcoming birthday party, knowing his aunt's desire for revenge. Both his unacknowledged desire to leave home and his unconscious wish to 'know' his aunt thereby get fulfilled when Minna arrives unexpectedly (unexpectedly to Bernard's parents). Bernard 'impulsively' leaves with his aunt when not-so-unexpected hostilities erupt." This kind of cumbersome breakdown
of events approximates, in shorthand and without Rosenfeld's grace, the book's psychological approach.

Mark Sheckner says that Rosenfeld was plagued by "analysitis," and Rosenfeld himself, in an essay written in 1944 on the situation of the Jewish writer, said, "A conscious member of such a group is necessarily over-conscious . . . The very simple state of being a Jew—and it should occupy no more of a man's attention than any ordinary fact of his history—has created traumas, fears of violence, defenses against aggression." Instead of being hampered by this defensive over-awareness, Rosenfeld uses it as his very focus in Passage from Home, evoking Bernard's acute self-consciousness to examine the psychology of alienation. To Bernard, "more eager for insight than experience," the everyday world seems remote and unreal, and his detachment does have a Jewish component. The way Bernard combs the events of the text, giving each action a number of variant readings, might be considered as following in the Talmudic tradition of exegesis. But in the secular context of Passage from Home, it has degenerated into a kind of pilpul (debate)—that is, an endlessly hair-splitting search for the one true reading. The floating quality of alienation that hangs over the novel derives in part from the disparity between action and thought: between experience as it is lived, without clarity of purpose, and the tremendous weight of meaning which Bernard is determined to hunt out.

The Jewish quality of Bernard's alienation is explicitly referred to in one memorable passage. One day, hoping for some clue to his aunt's inner identity, Bernard plays detective, keeping watch over Minna's office building from across the street. As Bernard observes
the busy thoroughfare, his attention is diverted to the multitude of passersby, and his frustration over his aunt's seeming impenetrability becomes generalized to a sense of the gulf between all people:

I had never been without the realization that an empty space, which one might never hope to fill, stretched between person and person, between ignorance and knowledge, between one hand and the other, condemning all to loneliness. And, without ever having been able clearly to estimate it, feeling the weight of it and haunted by its presence, I had always carried it with me as a token, both secret and obvious, of my own existence. For as a Jew, I was acquainted, as perhaps a Negro might be, with the alien and divided aspect of life that passed from sight at the open approach, but lingered, available to thought, ready to reveal itself to anyone who would inquire softly.

It is interesting to note the softening in tone of the entire sequence, which began earlier in a mood of childish complaint and ends, in this passage, with Bernard embracing his alienation, as it were—accepting it as a vital condition of his existence.

The almost tender resignation to the essential loneliness of life is the kind of non-sectarian Jewishness that prompted Malamud's famous pronouncement, "all men are Jews." But if Bernard comes to accept alienation as a Jewish habit of mind, he is far from comfortable with the actual Jewish facts of his life. This discomfort constitutes a second source of alienation. Bernard is in the position of other second generation secular Jews: longing for a source of religious inspiration yet repelled by the concrete forms American Judaism has taken. Bernard has been dutifully bar mitzvahed, but the synagogue is no longer a meaningful center of religious life for him. His parents keep a kosher home and observe the Sabbath and the major holidays, but don't speak Yiddish. They are rather distant and encourage him to go out with girls and have friends—perfectly American advice. Occasionally they exhort him to take an interest in Jewish
life or read Jewish books, but they themselves hardly seem interested in Jewish culture. In striking contrast to Alfred Kazin's Brownsville, Rosenfeld's middle class Chicago offers neither socialism nor Zionism as secular substitutes for religious passion. Because Bernard's parents live in a primarily Gentile neighborhood, there is little sense of a Jewish community, not even the simple ethnic details of Jewish food, talk, and dress which Fuchs provides in *The Williamsburg Trilogy*. *Passage from Home* points to the thinning out of the Jewish tradition which is one of the major themes of the post-immigrant generations.

Bernard finds no spiritual nourishment in his immediate surroundings, but Rosenfeld does provide a fragmentary glimpse of the cultural heritage through the figure of the zayde, a minor but still essential character in the novel. Bernard's grandfather is a richly comical creation, a testament to Rosenfeld's severely un-romantic depiction of Jewish life. The old man is a degenerated patriarch who expects, unconditionally, the tribute of his family in the form of gifts of all kinds. His overstuffed house, with its inconsistency of furnishings, testifies to his undiscriminating avarice. This vain old man, with tea-stained beard, loose teeth, and tobacco smell, is hardly a figure of spiritual dignity. Oddly enough, it is through this seedy embodiment of tradition that Bernard is permitted one of his rare moments of unclouded comprehension.

Bernard's grandfather lives in the heart of the immigrant district of Chicago and one day when Bernard is visiting, the old man takes him to the home of a melamed (wise man), Reb Feldman. Gathered around their spiritual leader is an assortment of coarse looking old Jews
who wear earlocks. These men are Hasidim, members of a sect of Judaism known for its extraordinary piety and enthusiasm. Bernard waits for some indication of their holiness, but at first the Talmudic discussion the men are engaged in seems uninspiring, even casual, with two of Feldman's disciples off in a corner playing chess. Bernard and his grandfather are about to leave when Reb Feldman begins to speak. Now a concentrated intensity can be felt as the rebbe, "giving them his wisdom and his truth," (93) concludes the discussion in an emphatic yet beatific tone. All of the auditors nod intently; even Bernard's grandfather mutters under his breath, "True, how true, amen!" (93-94). Suddenly the old men begin to dance, holding their arms above their heads, while a wordless melody sweeps across the room.

This scene is a close parallel to the dancing scene in "My Landlady." Like the commonplace old woman, Bernard's grandfather is transfigured, and Bernard, like Joe an active witness to the ritual, shares in its meaning: "... I could see that my grandfather was transformed into a new person. A look of completeness lay on his face, an expression of gratitude as if for the ecstatic understanding to which Feldman had led him. Though unable to understand, I had shared the experience of that ecstasy, and I, too, felt grateful for it" (94).

With this scene in mind, Dorothy Bilik says, in her study of second and third generation Jewish-American writers, "Passage from Home represents a transitional stage in the immigrant novel for while the center of consciousness is not himself an immigrant, he is able to draw upon that heritage."10 This is somewhat questionable, since this picture of spiritual passion is never repeated again in the novel.
The scene of Hasidic fervor interrupts Bernard's regular life; it appears as a secret, private practice while Bernard's outward life remains completely American and secular. In no way does Rosenfeld suggest that Bernard's interest in Jewish life has been reawakened. Furthermore, knowing what we do of Rosenfeld's ideas on religion, it is unlikely that he would approve of this sect that had become, by the second half of the nineteenth century, opposed to all secularizing trends in Jewish life. Their view, that the only true existence is in God, goes against Rosenfeld's belief in fulfillment in the natural world. Nevertheless, despite the intellectual antipathy, one can see the strong emotional appeal Hasidism would have for Rosenfeld's overly-analytic young hero, who wants nothing so much as the joy of a simple contact with "truth."

According to Martin Buber, "The core of hasidic teachings is the concept of a life of fervor, of exalted joy." For the Hasidim, as in the scene from Passage from Home, prayer is ecstatic and loud, involving song, body movements, shaking, and clapping. Hasidic song is often textless; the melody is more important than the lyrics. The whole direction of Hasidic prayer gives emphasis to emotion over intellect, and it is the emotional spontaneity of the Hasidim that Bernard responds to. Because Bernard cannot understand the Hebrew, his attention is directed to Feldman's gestures, and the feeling of the melody and dance—in other words, the non-verbal means by which the master and his disciples are aroused to ecstasy, or "quickened" in Buber's phrase.

Though the scene is incidental to the ongoing plot development, several aspects of Hasidism, in secular disguise, work to give Passage
from Home its quasi-religious nature. First is the notion that a deep
joy, such as Reb Feldman imparts to his followers, is the prime factor
in Jewish life. For the Hasid, the joy in the world as it is makes
manifest the reflection of the divine. For Bernard, joy is signified,
not by divine manifestation, but by a sensual but not licentious free-
dom of mind and spirit—a secular ecstasy. Although the context in
this scene is clearly religious, Rosenfeld's use of the word "ecstasy"
avoids the mystical connotations. Bernard never desires "to be beside
himself," numb in his sensations so that his soul can be free of his
body. Here, as elsewhere in the novel, "ecstasy" refers to a know-
ledge that permeates one's being and grants a harmony with others and
within the self. It is primarily an exalted state of feeling where,
for the moment, mind does not separate one from reality.

A second aspect of Hasidism that plays a role in the novel is the
concern for the ethical dimension of everyday life. Nothing charac-
terizes Passage from Home more than the series of moral questions
which run throughout the novel: how can one express love for another
without cheapening the emotion?; how can one maintain simplicity of
contact through "the peril of intimacy"? (280); how can people trans-
form selfish impulses into noble ones, and thereby remain "fixed to
the best moments of their lives?" (97). Because these are difficult
goals to achieve, a helper is often necessary. The Hasidic concept
of discipleship and a Tzaddik or spiritual guide are also important
in the novel. In his passage from home, Bernard searches for figures
of experience and wisdom who can show him the way to the fully realized
life. Though Bernard accepts homelessness and loneliness as basic
conditions of existence, he does not rule out the possibility of mo-
ments of insight "when this minor world was more than universe enough" (118). His pursuit of the ecstasy of comprehension is all the more remarkable for his admission of the opaqueness of the secular world.

One of the most striking aspects of Passage from Home is that the kind of penetrating knowledge which Bernard seeks is out of all proportion to his very limited experience. The little bit of humor in this hyper-serious novel derives from the discrepancy between Bernard's sophisticated insights and his often callow social behavior. Intellectually precocious, Bernard is painfully aware of his lack of experience. With excruciating honesty, Passage from Home captures that period of early adolescence when one has, in Bernard's own words, "lost a gift and not yet learned an art" (38). To acquire the art of adult ease and confidence means first of all to move beyond one's family. The novel's opening description of a Sunday family gathering conveys Bernard's intellectual yearning to escape, even as it evokes his emotional identification with family life. As a description of the unspoken security guaranteed by the extended family, this passage ranks, along with a similar passage from James Baldwin's story "Sonny's Blues," as one of the loveliest in modern American fiction. I quote it at length because of its beauty and because it conveys a sense of belonging that Bernard will never feel again in the novel:

We had a large family. Marriage and death have since reduced it, but in those days we were all together, as closely knit as one of my grandmother's flowered scarfs. Most of us lived in Chicago. It is hard to give the exact number of our tribe, which trailed off at the edges where the blood ran thin into distant cousins and nominal relationships, but there were always a good two dozen who would gather, of a Sunday, at my father's house or at the home of my grandparents. We would sit around the table drinking tea and eating honeycakes and all of us
would be talking at once. The children would run up and down the house, disregarding the cries, "Stop that now, people live downstairs!" A baby or two might be squalling; or suppose some youngster would trip over the carpet and come up screaming, with a lump the size of an egg on his forehead—then there was always a commotion and a chorus of sighs, the women clucking in sympathy and the men snorting their admonitions, while someone would press the blade of a table knife against the young one's bruise to bring down the swelling. We loved noise, loved the banging of doors, the sound of dishes in the kitchen, the swirling of water in the bathroom. But we also had a capacity for silence, a quiet feeling and respect for the family's presence which would show itself, some time after supper, during one of the last rounds of tea, when everyone would be sitting heavy, drowsy and contented around the big table in the dining room, with the lights lowered, and a few might be singing softly, the rest humming—and then not even the babies would cry.

The men, especially, had a great love for these silent, meditative hours in which, they felt, the whole heart of the family lay. Once, during such a session, my grandfather, who was sitting next to me, embraced me, drew me from my chair and tried to sit me on his knee. I fought him off, pushed away from his prickling, tea-stained beard. I felt I was almost committing a sin by doing so—but goodness, I was too old for that! (3-4)

Daniel Bell has commented on "... the concreteness of family love as the binding element in Jewish life," and it is evident here. First one notes the simplicity of the passage, the homely metaphor (grandmother's scarfs) and the generalized references to "the children" and "a baby" (as well as references to marriage and death)—as if Rosenfeld were describing an almost timeless Sunday, capturing some elemental rhythm of life. Related to this is the tribal feeling conveyed by the evocation of the simple honeycake meal and the domestic sounds of a full household. In feeling and tone, the picture matches the hushed, tender quality of an Old World Sabbath as Zborowski and Herzog describe it in *Life Is with People*, except of course this is Sunday, the American day of rest, not the Jewish Sabbath. Bernard speaks in the first person plural; despite his sense of separation, his memory is unambivalently positive. At the end, we see the 14 year old fighting off the embrace of his grandfather and it is as if
Bernard had indeed committed a fatal sin and Eden were lost forever.

Bernard's separation from the family fold is an act of intellectual defiance. His deliberate if somewhat reluctant venture beyond home draws him towards a realm of experience similar to Kazin's "beyond"—that is, towards everything that is not familiar (i.e. family). If his family seems to him to be smothering, earnestly middle class, and Jewish in a joyless kind of way, then experience must mean a life of freedom, sensual awareness, and ecstasy. Early in the novel, at a Seder, Bernard has a vision of this good life, after five cups of Passover wine:

And suddenly I saw myself walking on a broad field, not unlike the lawn in the park. Overhead there were the new stars, absent all winter; underfoot was the grass, renewing itself. At a distance, in a lighted area around a table, men were chanting a traditional song about a goat, yellow chicken soup was flowing, children were scampering about . . . But I walked on in the night, and at my side was a young girl who shared the world with me, whose eyes danced and winked, under whose feet, too, the grass was renewing itself. She smiled when I spoke to her, the tip of her tongue ran over her teeth and lips. She was my aunt Minna, and yet not she. She was all girls in one, all mysteries and delightful things understood and possessed, and mine, all mine . . . . (16-17)

Here Rosenfeld gives us a sense of the potential fullness that the natural world can offer. All the religious significance of the Passover holiday has been stripped away, though the daydream does incorporate a few details from the celebration. Instead, Rosenfeld paints a Chagall-like picture of harmony between man and nature, sensual abundance, and a playful, polymorphous sexuality. This vision also points in the direction Bernard's search for ecstasy will take. As the novel proceeds, the wished-for harmony becomes focused primarily on the love relationship—the ultimate connection between people.
Both Bernard's desire for escape and his pursuit of natural fulfillment center around the figure of his aunt Minna. Her very distance from the heart of family life causes Bernard to perceive her as a secret sharer, in complete spiritual accord with him. Another reason for his fascination with Minna is that Bernard has few memories of his mother, and Minna, his maternal aunt, is a more appealing replacement than his stepmother who is all bosom and soap powder (at least part of Bernard's attraction to Minna is her non-Jewish thinness). But it's not only in the contrast with the familiar that Minna appeals. Her lifestyle makes Bernard believe in the spiritual connection between them. The abstract paintings on her wall, the dust-covered books, the jazz albums scattered about—all this testifies to the liberalness of spirit and the intellectual freedom that Bernard values. Minna's home is a veritable temple of culture and spirit. Bernard quickly develops a partly sexual, partly platonic love for his aunt.

But when Bernard visits Minna, shortly after his Passover daydream and spontaneously kisses her on the cheek, she slaps him. Responding only to the sexual motive for Bernard's visit, Minna is blind to the spiritual companionship the young boy is seeking. This is the first indication of her unfitness as a role model. Bernard, however, cannot discern her failure. Instead, he is now even more keenly aware of his own shortcomings. Thus it occurs to him that his best chance at knowing his aunt is through the use of a kind of adult substitute. At this point, the novel details Bernard's surreptitious and finally successful attempt to match Minna and his widowered cousin Willy.
Willy Harpsmith, of whom Bernard says, "I really do not know what he was doing among us" (6), seems to offer Bernard everything his father can't: an exuberance of spirit, an exotic (non-Jewish) background, an example of virility and masculine charm. Willy's appeal also has to do with his easy-going humor, which contrasts so strikingly with Bernard's family's moral earnestness. In short, Willy is a Gentile father replacement. Bernard's father perceives the unspoken rivalry and his own inferiority, and is barely able to conceal his envy.

Thus, Bernard's escape from home takes the form of re-creating a new family for himself in the persons of Willy and Minna, a seemingly more humane and vital set of parents than his own. Bernard hopes that these model figures can provide a picture of joyful harmony and can impart, like Reb Feldman, the ecstasy of their comprehension:

I lived in a world in which, it seemed to me, people understood one another perfectly. Men spoke with complete assurance of women, and women of men. Their sex was divided and shared, subsumed under and related to their entire lives. I felt awe in this; and I was drawn in awe to Willy and Minna, exemplars, connected beings. (59)

For over half its length, Passage from Home sets up an air of great expectancy, suggesting that ecstasy is within reach. In the final third, however, when Bernard actually moves in with Minna and Willy and observes their relationship up close, he is appalled to find that their life of harmony is actually one of petty bickering, psychological manipulation, and coarse physical contact. The messiness of the relationship is reflected in the dirtiness of Minna's house. Once perceived by Bernard as a cell of freedom, it now becomes a filthy, cockroach-infested den of disorder. Treated like an intruder, Bernard sleeps on a cot in the kitchen, within hearing of the
love-making from the bedroom. The physical relations of Minna and Willy also seem to Bernard to be empty of grace and feeling. As he overhears the sounds from the next room, the image of love takes on a primal-scene horror, "... as if their act had become, not one of love, but of devastation, something brutal, intent, among the sighs that I heard, upon pain, pain only, the ultimate, devouring satisfaction" (183). When Mason enters the scene, an ugly triangle is played out before Bernard's eyes. At first Minna sets the two suitors off against each other, intensifying their petty jealousy. Then when she grows tired of the game, Minna throws a pajama party at which she casually announces that she and Mason have been married for six years. Minna's freedom, far from being life-enhancing, is actually a cold indifference to the feelings of others, and the love connection between her and Willy is a sham. Bernard concludes his stay with them in utter disillusionment: "It seemed to me that men and women were made to hate each other" (245).

Failure of love is one of the painful lessons of Passage from Home, but deeper than this failure, and perhaps responsible for it, is a more problematic issue. This might be called the problem of memory. Early in the novel, Bernard speculates on the relation of memory to knowledge, and by extension, its relation to love:

Memory resembled the old photographs lying about the house, pasted in albums, buried in drawers, pictures which begged to be believed, showing my father as a young man, my mother as a girl, myself as a baby. These images were too oblique a version of the familiar, too greatly altered, completely negated in life. I would sometimes stare at the snapshot of my father, my eyes fixed to the softer and younger face, each line and hair of it, hoping I might thereby gain some understanding, a clue, perhaps still available in the past, to undo that in the present which was entirely a secret. But even the younger face denied me; I would stare until my eyes teared over and the image began to dissolve. So with my own snapshot, a baby, ball in hand,
Bernard's urgent need to make contact with these old photos suggests the crucial role the past plays in Passage from Home. The ability to "own" a past—to claim a connection with an earlier self—is an important part of Bernard's vision of the fulfilled life. Without this continuity, there is no self-knowledge, and without that, there is no knowledge of others.

The absence of the cultural past, except in the form of a handful of fragments, has already been discussed. There is also a curious gap in Bernard's personal past. One of the central enigmas of the novel—the relationship between Bernard's father and Minna—revolves around actions from the past which are just beyond Bernard's memory. This is a pervasive problem in the novel. Not only is Bernard disconnected from any meaningful relationship with his heritage, but individual characters too hardly seem related to their own pasts. Minna is the most obvious example of this discontinuity. There are vague allusions to a childhood in Russia and sinister references to her behavior at the time of Bernard's mother's death, but they don't appear to hook up with the present Minna to form a coherent picture. Other characters remain similarly fragmented. Bernard's search for the harmonious, natural life is severely hampered by this quality of incompleteness. In setting Willy and Minna up as exemplars, Bernard is certain that each possesses a wholeness of being that will guarantee their successful union. When the relationship starts breaking down, Bernard comes to question each one's integrity. He becomes especially attentive to the way they attempt to relate their past with their present, looking
for the coherent pattern which gives each of them self-connectedness. The stories that Minna and Willy tell about their own lives provide important clues for Bernard, as he begins to judge their worthiness with more acumen.

Willy's "story"—the tales he tells of his past and the overall image he presents to Bernard—is relatively simple. He paints a picture of his boyhood that is Paul Bunyanesque. Out in the fields all day, at 16 six feet tall and still growing, running after girls—however much of this is true, and Bernard's ironic narration suggests that he suspects Willy of exaggeration—it is still a coherent self-image and one that Willy actually tries to keep consistent with his present actions. These tales, and Willy's expert manner of telling them, take such firm hold on Bernard that, he tells us, "they replaced my own daydreams" (33).

A good natured loafer, Willy gains a certain dignity because he realizes his influence over Bernard and presents a self-image that has salience for the boy. One of Willy's longer tales, about his running away from home at the age of 14, gives a picture of filial disobedience that he knows will echo Bernard's own feeling. Willy fashions it as a Huck Finn-like rite of passage. After telling Bernard how he left home, Willy tells a fabulous story of being out in the woods, frightened but also in touch for the first time with the rhythm of the natural world. His aimless drifting on a small stream and his comment "Man, was I lonely!" are reminiscent of Huck's idyll and his fears. The tale ends with Willy's return home one year later:

The old man looked him over, saw he had grown and was satisfied; saw also that he was cold and threw some wood on the fire. Their meeting after nearly a year told Willy that from then on his father would respect him and regard him as a man... It sur-
prised him to find, after a year's absence, that he should return not with his mother, not his brothers or his sisters, but with his father stamped in his heart and driven into his soul, to resemble above all else the man he had fled. (190-91)

Corny as this story is, it reassures Bernard that reconciliation with his own father is possible. It also gives Willy an inner harmony that Bernard finds exemplary:

So he had lived and was now living; a life which was either idleness or adventure, impossible to distinguish the two. Such was his experience, and whether he sought it out or found it only in retrospect after its anxiety had passed, it was the whole meaning of his existence—necessary or accidental, colorful or dull, a natural thing in which there was always evidence of grace. (191)

Despite Willy's later humiliation at the hands of Minna and Mason, he remains a positive figure throughout the novel. Presenting a continuous sketch of his past linked to his present, Willy opens himself to a simple, immediate contact with Bernard. His major failing is his lack of purpose, but he remains at least a partial exemplar of the life of freedom. Minna, however, has no guiding tale or set of stories, and it is this really, more than her messy home or her harsh self-centeredness, which is her ultimate failure. She cannot recognize her past as having a significant relation to her present.

Once Bernard enters Minna's home on a regular basis, he is determined to draw her into the human orbit, to find the guiding theme of her life and to discover the meaning of her freedom. Knowledge of his aunt becomes tied in with the larger issue of the human condition: Can one person ever get to know another fully? What is the cause of the gulf between people? If everyone has their own separate inner reality, then what is truly real? Because of her self-containment, Minna is an especially good embodiment of these questions, as
Bernard realizes:

... nor could I even draw the general assurance that the woman now before me, no matter what I might think of her, was in any way related to the one existing in my imagination. She was forever herself, self-contained, engulfed in a privacy which I had only to stand before her to perceive. Neither I, nor Willy, nor any stranger would ever know her or leave so much as a mark upon her. (120-21)

Despite her privacy, Bernard tries to piece various versions of Minna together. According to Minna, at the time of her sister's death she was to have taken Bernard's mother's place, but was chased away, even assaulted by his father. According to Bernard's stepmother, it was Minna who was the aggressor, propositioning his father and kidnapping Bernard for more than a week. This is the very vision of evil—Minna as a petty, vile, and shameless woman, and Bernard is reluctant to accept it: "The very best that I could do for Minna would be to regard these suspicions as elements in an unfolding and still inconclusive account" (111).

For Willy, Minna is a relatively simple object: a woman in need of taming. A more complex view is provided by Mason who remembers her as an old-fashioned foreigner, an innocent greenhorn: "She was a good, sweet, unspoiled girl, a hard-working dressmaker, religious as the holy devil, prayed all day long and wouldn't even do so much as carry a handkerchief on Saturday or answer the telephone" (129-30). Then Mason mysteriously alludes to Minna's startling change after her sister's death, when she became an ultramodern American woman. He explains her sudden independence as a defensive front. Mason's version, then, is of an almost schizophrenic Minna—a sweet, religious immigrant girl and a cold, manipulative bohemian—whose two selves divided at the time of her sister's death. Thus Bernard's hope for a full
picture rests with his aunt. If anyone could connect these two halves, it should be Minna herself.

As the novel proceeds, Bernard becomes increasingly suspicious of Minna's freedom; it seems to exist in a void, its significance based more on a negation of her past than on any positive belief in freedom of spirit.

Minna tells Bernard only one story about her distant past, and it is a curious one. Minna, who is a dressmaker, tells Bernard the story of the clothes dummy which sits in her room and which frightened Bernard when he was younger. Minna calls the dummy Sonia and tells the young Bernard a tale that could have been invented by the Brothers Grimm. When she was a little girl in Russia, Minna relates, she was very lonely because she had no sisters (Bernard tells us that he didn't notice at the time the discrepancy here with the fact that Minna was his mother's younger sister). So she went to a wise old woman and told of her sorrow. The old woman gave her a big box and told her to use the material from the box to make a little girl. Minna called this girl Sonia and kept the doll a secret from her parents and brothers. One day the old woman told Minna that she could make her a real sister, but to do so she would need Sonia's head. Reluctantly the girl gave the doll's head to the woman. In later days, the woman needed the arms, legs, and trunk and gave Minna wire to replace the doll's appendages. Minna concludes her tale: "And when my little sister was born she had Sonia's head and face and arms and legs. And that is why Sonia has no head, no arms and no legs. But we have remained very good friends" (40).
This is perhaps the closest Minna comes to revealing anything of her far off past to her sister's son. It is so indirect a reflection of her inner life that one can hardly suppose the young boy would be able to make sense of it. But it is the older Bernard who repeats this story now as he confronts his aunt at 14, and the story surely has more meaning. It suggests some maternal instinct that has since been thwarted—it is as if Minna, with the help of the old woman, conceived the younger sister—and it evokes the image of a needy and lonely girl already apart from her family in a private world of her own making (Minna did, after all, have a real sister). And the final image of the headless, armless, and legless clothes dummy as friend, rather than the real sister, may be Minna's way of representing her own lifeless lack of connection with others. Minna hardly seems aware, however, of these implications, and she is not about to change her life. Bernard sees her failure as a problem with her memory:

It seemed to me that she would never be able to explain herself, never consciously understand or unconsciously reveal the single pattern or emotion or experience that had once entered and marked her life, determining its essence for all time. With her, the superseding moment canceled its predecessor, depriving her of that increment of mind with which one grows at last into a knowledge of himself. Minna, I felt certain, had no memory—each fresh experience destroyed her anew... Her life, which had always been a mystery to me, seemed even more a mystery to herself. (191-92)

Paradoxically, though no one can gain control over her because of her elusive independence, she has no control over her own fate because of her lack of self insight.

Bernard's search for some ecstatic understanding of life must be regarded as a failure. His passage from home is a bitter disappointment. In a travesty of love and harmony, his "ideal" family splits
apart. After several weeks' absence, he returns home where he achieves only a partial reconciliation with his father. The mystery of Minna's role in his family's past remains clouded.

Yet his return home does not represent a total defeat. While in exile, he has developed a greater empathy for his father that is bound to make their relationship at least more cordial. He also recognizes that his attempt to assert his own independence led him to overvalue his aunt's supposed freedom. Now he is able to discern the emptiness of her self-centered independence, a freedom which is merely a retreat from human involvement. Returning home, Bernard realizes he is not bound by the example of his father's conventional bourgeois life or the alternative example of Minna's amoral bohemianism:
"... my actual longing looked neither here nor there, neither to home nor exile, but to a life foreign to both in which some beauty and freedom prevailed" (240).

In the penultimate scene in the novel, significantly set in a city park between Minna's apartment and his father's home, Bernard determines to continue his pursuit of ecstasy. Sitting in a portion of a greenhouse where the tropical plants are kept, he senses that the hold on life which the plants have is tenacious but unconscious, and that human life, without ecstasy, is also subject to the same cycle of growth and decay, "without true existence" (262). In the book's most passionate statement of belief, Bernard confirms the value of his search: "I told myself I would go out, I would inquire, I would learn, I would see where I had been wrong, I would cease being afraid. I would emerge from the jungle in which my life had been spent, choked and over-run with wild growth. . ." (263).
Passage from Home renders the secular freedom of the second generation as a seductive bohemianism, capable of engulfing the young hero in the chaos of the undirected life. Bernard, however, chooses to shape freedom by pursuing a life of natural fulfillment. His glimpse of Hasidic passion, in which at least a momentary ecstasy was available, has given him a clue for his pursuit. Although he fully accepts the secular realm as the basis for human values, he has fastened on a fragment from the spiritual past as an inspiration for the future.
CHAPTER NOTES


2 Rosenfeld was also the literary editor of *New Leader* and on the staff of *New Republic*. His most important criticism has been collected in the now out-of-print *An Age of Enormity: Life and Writing in the Forties and Fifties*, ed. Theodore Solataroff (New York: World Publishing Company, 1962). Rosenfeld's dozen or so pieces of short fiction can be found together in *Alpha and Omega* (New York: Viking Press, 1966).


4 Isaac Rosenfeld, "My Landlady," in *Alpha and Omega*, p. 25.


7 Sheckner, p. 9.


9 Isaac Rosenfeld, *Passage from Home* (New York: the Dial Press, 1946), p. 59. All further page references to the novel are contained in parentheses in the text. *Passage from Home* is currently out-of-print.


13 For the religious and secular meanings of the word, see "Ecstasy," The Oxford English Dictionary, 1969.


15 Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, Life is with People, pp. 37-61.
CHAPTER VI

AFTER PORTNOY: TOWARDS A DEVOTIONAL LITERATURE

Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you.

Deuteronomy 32:7

In 1946, Jewish-American life seemed sufficiently detached from its Old World traditions so that Rosenfeld could picture Hasidism as something intriguingly foreign. But its exotic strangeness also suggests a problem. Hasidism is a realm of Judaism only marginally connected to the young protagonist through the shabby figure of the grandfather. Rosenfeld takes pains to show that Bernard's is no sentimental attachment to the world of his grandfather, who himself seems far removed from the piety of the Old World sect. Hasidic Jewry is not transmitted here from grandfather to father to son; rather it is glimpsed as a momentary fragment from a lost tradition. If Bernard draws upon it as an image of the fulfilled life, he does so from a distance, for it is not a part of his very being, not an organic part of a living past.

The discontinuity of past and present is the historic meaning of Passage from Home. On the novel's private, domestic level, this theme emerged as a gap in memory, to the extent that one's own relatives appeared somehow foreign and unknowable, their past a mystery to others and to themselves. Bernard's pursuit of ecstasy was an attempt
to penetrate the secret meaning of this obscurity.

In an even more conspicuous way, the literature of the third and fourth generations can be understood as an attempt to place itself in relation to the past. Since Rosenfeld's time, that past has become increasingly elusive. With half of European Jewry destroyed in the Holocaust, history itself seems to be conspiring to keep today's Jews at a remove from their ancestry. Assimilation too has exacted its price. The speed with which many immigrants shed their Old World names and identities in their quest to become American has contributed to the sense of a vanishing past. Memory, always an ethical imperative for a people having to preserve its culture in Diaspora, takes on even greater urgency under the conditions of a diminishing Jewry.

It is not surprising, then, that the literature of the 50's and 60's became more self-consciously Jewish than that of the previous generation. The ethnic identification of the modern, assimilated Jew is a remarkable phenomenon, but understandable in light of post-Holocaust concerns over the survival of Jewish identity. Just when Jewish writers began entering the mainstream of American literature, their writing stubbornly recalled their immigrant backgrounds. At mid-century, Bellow and Malamud were the pioneers of the cultural resurrection, their work marked by its sentimental, ethnic flavor, their language mixing polished academic conceits with earthy Yiddishisms.

By the mid-60's a phase of reaction to such sentimental ethnicity had set in. In the work of such writers as Philip Roth, Bruce Jay Friedman, Stanley Elkin, Joseph Heller, Lois Gould, and Erica Jong, a bloated consciousness of the immigrant tradition and a comically doomed attempt to escape this heritage issued in a long line of Jewish
neurotics, characters racked by guilt, anxiety, and self-disgust. The most notorious example of this third generation sub-genre was Portnoy's Complaint (1969). There was no such thing as a neutral response to Philip Roth's confessional novel, which was received by some readers as a liberating catharsis and by others as a shameful piece of Jewish anti-semitism. Roth's caricature of family life in Portnoy's Complaint wasn't intended to mock the immigrant tradition itself, but its worn-out literary expression: the much vaunted concept of Jewish suffering becomes reduced to the figure of the eternally constipated father; the proverbial warmth and understanding of the Jewish mother is rendered as a smothering omniscience; and the dreamy, intellectual son is now repressed and horny. Not surprisingly many critics, especially Jewish critics, saw such humor as a degeneration and felt that Portnoy's Complaint had emptied the immigrant experience of positive content. Theodore Gross, using Portnoy's Complaint as a warning sign, made this prophecy in 1974: "With this novel, the circle of creativity that one might designate as Jewish-American has been fully drawn—the rest, one suspects, will be repetitious, an afterthought." As subsequent Jewish writing proves, Gross' judgment was hasty.

To dismiss Portnoy's Complaint for its mockery of the Jewish tradition is to fail to see its place in assimilation literature which, since The Rise of David Levinsky, has always been fighting off the hold of the past while simultaneously falling under its spell. What was Portnoy's guilt if not an expression, albeit a circuitous one, of his debt to the tradition of scholarship, self-restraint, and high ethical standards? For Roth, even debunking the past seemed to be a
way of claiming it. Portnoy, no doubt, relished the jibes he took at
his family and his "wonderful Jewish heritage," but Roth quite pur-
posefully framed this attack around a therapy session. Portnoy's
confession had the effect of getting something nasty out of one's
system. Roth's punchline, his Dr. Spielvogel's one line of dialogue
in the novel—"now vee may perhaps to begin"²—suggests Roth's own
realization that Jewish-American writing needed a new direction.

Judging from the most recent literature, Portnoy's Complaint
served its purpose. The "kvetching" of Roth and the clan of satirists
seems to have cleared the air of much third generation ambivalence,
allowing newer writers to assess their relation to the past with less
rancor and more humility. Contemporary Jewish-American writers are
engaged in what seems to be a collective act of recovery, or of re­
discovery, of their link with the past. Nostalgia, a psychological
undercurrent in The Rise of David Levinsky and the target of Roth's
satire in Portnoy's Complaint, has now become a motivating factor in
the very creation of a literature. On an almost weekly basis, one
comes across non-fiction memoirs or journals in which wealthy, ultra-
assimilated Jews register their need to belong to the tribe and their
sense of regret at having left. A kind of "Roots" phenomenon has
taken hold: contemporary Jews are tracing their geneology, or learning
a Hebrew or Yiddish they never knew as the children of transformation­
obessed parents, or reintroducing into their homes the Passover seder
and the Sabbath rituals, with some adaptation to fit their own se­
cular circumstances. In the non-fiction works under discussion in
this chapter, it is not uncommon to find the writer recalling some
buried childhood memories, or re-telling family stories once heard
from an elderly relation, as a way to gain an empathy with one's distant ancestors and a greater understanding of one's own place in the family history. Memory itself becomes a form of identification here. To remember the past is to witness it, and to honor it.

Contemporary Jewish-American fiction reflects this quite deliberate urge for connection, what Anne Roiphe calls "a wholeness hunger." Indeed a strong religious consciousness manifests itself in the work of such writers as Mark Helprin, Cynthia Ozick, and Hugh Nissenson. Scenes which appeared in Rosenfeld as brief epiphanies off the main stage of American middle class life (such as the Hasidic gathering and the landlady's dance) now occupy more of the foreground. In fits and starts, Jewish-American writing since Portnoy's Complaint has moved beyond the comedy of self-contempt towards a devotional literature, a literature which pays homage to a time when everyday life was pervaded by holiness, ritual, and purpose. From today's perspective, the immigrant era seems to embody these values, and the immigrant himself appears as a symbolic link to the history and tradition of a living Judaism.

Perhaps there is a danger here of a false nostalgia, a historical fuzziness. The immigrant era was, after all, also a period of confusion, impiety, and rampant materialism, as Cahan demonstrated. But we take from the past what we need most in the present. While many of the writers discussed here acknowledge the less-than-noble aspects of the assimilation drive, they seek to recover, for a profane, secular age, what can be termed the useful past—a time when the moral dimension of life operated, when action had ethical consequences, and when Jews, whatever the compromises they might have made, still had
some immediate relation to a living tradition. In remembering, re-
creating, and even inventing images from this past, contemporary
Jewish-American writers validate their own place in the tradition.

Recent years have seen the development of an interesting pheno-
menon in non-fiction: a series of memoirs or personal essays in
which upper middle class Jewish liberals, whose years of maturation
took in the period of student protest, "alternative lifestyles," and
the rejection of their own bourgeois background, record their dis-
covery of the renewed importance of family ties and racial origins.
Coming out of the ethnic closet, these liberal universalists are
suddenly declaring their need for a firmer Jewish identity.

One of the more absorbing examples of this trend is Anne Roiphe's
*Generation Without Memory: A Jewish Journey in Christian America*
(1981). The title itself is telling. In an almost literal sense,
Roiphe is without racial memory. She grew up in a wealthy, ultra-
assimilated home in which Christmas, not Chanukah, was celebrated.
Roiphe's father, in his drive for American status, had completely
denied his past. Claiming that he could no longer understand the
Yiddish of his proletarian childhood, the wealthy lawyer never dis-
cussed his immigrant background with his children. In fact, he is
still so shut off from his past that he has become an almost patho-
logically private person, not only unable to share memories but in-
capable of communicating any part of his inner life. Roiphe's mother
also contributed to her daughter's amnesia. Even on her deathbed, she
refused to divulge the Polish family name which had never been spoken
since an Ellis Island immigration officer changed it to "Phillips."
Her parents alone were not responsible for Roiphe's detachment from Judaism. Her own impulse towards "universalism" had convinced her that she had escaped the connection to a private racial history in a non-sectarian embrace of Western humanism. This record of her family's absorption into mainstream American life forms the background for the book's more immediate concerns.

Despite her racial amnesia, Roiphe continued to identify herself as a Jew through the period of her youth and young womanhood. But now, in the book's present tense, Roiphe finds herself trying to explain to her youngest daughter just what it means to be a "Jewish humanist." Her answer, even to her own ears, sounds artificial and unconvincing. This episode early on establishes the inquiring nature of the book and points in the direction Roiphe's journey will take.

The remainder of Generation Without Memory can be understood as Roiphe's attempt to provide a better answer to her daughter, to work out a definition of her own Jewishness.

Roiphe uses a collage-like method to come at this definition. The book consists of brief reflections, observations, and anecdotes, usually no longer than two or three pages each, covering a wide range of subjects: her parents' early lives, Jewish misogyny, her daughter's obsession with the Holocaust, psychoanalysis (her husband is an analyst), her feelings about Israel. Roiphe glosses her personal observations with ideas she has culled from doing a considerable amount of research on Jewish history and theology, a body of knowledge she was unfamiliar with as the child of assimilating parents. The book's episodic format and its quick shifts from the personal to the impersonal suggest a piecing together of unlike parts, fragments that
may or may not fit very neatly. Roiphe sees this attempted synthesis as the burden of the contemporary, cultural Jew.

Working her way through the fragments of a modern Jewish-American life, Roiphe evaluates the Jewish tradition for what it can offer her daughter's generation. Without qualms, Roiphe rejects altogether the misogynistic strain of Jewish patriarchy. With some small measure of guilt and nostalgia, she also feels unable to bring traditional prayer and ritual into her home; as a secular intellectual, Roiphe cannot become a religious Jew. But if she will not make use of the theological dimension of Judaism in her daily life, she embraces a second aspect of the tradition—the revival of Jewish history through the telling and re-telling of stories: "This witnessing of the past constitutes the bonds of the tribe." Roiphe determines to learn more and more about Jewish history and legend, and she successfully transmits the "remembering part" of her tradition to her oldest daughter, who becomes absorbed by the world of European Jewry. Roiphe's own method, a gathering of personal and tribal associations, affirms her commitment as a witness.

*Generation Without Memory*, then, does achieve a certain coherence, despite its apparently random organization. Supplementing her faulty memory with both an acquired knowledge of Jewish life and a practical concern for the survival of Judaism in America, Roiphe weaves the fragments of her personal and collective past into a kind of fabric for future generations of cultural Jews.

*Generation Without Memory* is an intensely personal meditation on what it means to be a mother. But in wondering what things of lasting value she can offer her children, Roiphe necessarily comes out of
herself and seeks the advice of various helper figures. The book is filled with rabbis, teachers, and psychoanalysts, people who have either maintained a continuity with Jewish tradition or have already gone through a similar experience of severance and reconnection. The reliance on these teachers has become increasingly common among contemporary Jews who formerly abandoned Jewish values and practices, and now seek to regain their faith. Much of the literature of recovery is taking the form of an inner journey or quest, in which an honored spiritual guide lights the seeker's path with some ancient wisdom. Such is the case with two recent memoirs, Paul Cowan's *An Orphan in History* (1982) and Dorothea Straus' *Under the Canopy* (1982), in which two secular agnostics are "converted" to a Judaism they never really knew, through the help of elderly orthodox Jews.

Like Roiphe, Cowan was raised by parents who had abandoned all signs of religious observance in their upward social mobility. He too was unaware of his Old World family name. His father, the one-time president of CBS, had severed relations with his own father and had changed the family name to "Cowan" in 1931. But at his father's funeral, Paul discovers from a cousin that the original name was "Cohen," the designation for the descendants of the Jewish priestly caste, and further that his great-great-grandfather, Rabbi Jacob Cohen, was a famous Maggid (a wandering teacher-preacher) in Lithuania. Curious about his rabbinical background, Cowan reconstructs the Cohen family genealogy, discovering a history of father-son conflict whereby one ancestor remained faithful to Jewish traditions, while his son would turn away from the faith, followed in the next generation by a return to piety. Cowan's own return seems to be foreshadowed by this
pendulum-like pattern.

In Part Two of *An Orphan in History*, Cowan actively seeks to incorporate the traditional Jewish side of his past—the Cohen part—into his modern, secular life as a Cowan. He journeys to Israel, living on a kibbutz where he takes the name "Saul Cohen." Then, back in America and writing for *The Village Voice*, he begins researching an article about life on the lower East Side. He meets Rabbi Joseph Singer, a tenth generation descendant of the Baal Shem Tov (the founder of the Hasidic movement). Rabbi Singer introduces Cowan to the orthodox sofers (scribes) and shochets (ritual butchers) who still practice their traditional crafts in modern America. Through Singer, a whole realm of the living past is opened up for Cowan. Singer advises Cowan to wear a yarmulke when he interviews these orthodox Jews, and soon the wearing of the skullcap becomes more than an interviewer's convenience: "It was a physical link to Rabbi Singer's faith, to my own history."^5 Cowan even begins attending orthodox services on the lower East Side, only removing the skullcap when he gets off the subway at his home on the upper West Side. For David Levinsky, such a doubleness made for an impossible balancing act, but Cowan says, "I liked the dual identity."^6

Slowly, "one mitzvah at a time,"^7 Cowan transforms himself into an observant Jew. At first, he turns down all Saturday assignments and lights the Sabbath candles with his family. Later his Protestant wife converts to Judaism. Through a cousin in Chicago, he retrieves his grandfather's tefillin (ritual object placed on the arms and forehead during prayer). At first he keeps the tefillin at the bottom of a suitcase, but soon Cowan calls Rabbi Singer for a lesson in how to
use the strange object. After some practice, Cowan begins to wear the tefillin regularly. In the elaborate looping of the strands of the phylacteries tightly around the fingers, arms, and head, Cowan experiences the sensation of being physically bound to his ancestral history. The image of the contemporary Jew wearing the ritual object passed on from an orthodox grandfather he never knew is the symbolic capstone of Cowan's journey.

Philip Roth had forecast something very similar in his 1959 story, "Eli, the Fanatic," in which Eli Peck, suburban lawyer, dresses in the clothes of a Hasid, an enigmatic figure who emerges from the well-groomed Westchester woods to point an accusing finger at the ultra-assimilated Jew. But in the late 50's suburban setting of Roth's story, exchanging a nifty Brook Brothers suit for the long black coat of a displaced Hasid strikes Eli's neighbors as the height of bad taste; in the end, Eli is carted off to an asylum. Some twenty years later, however, in an age more receptive to such spiritual longing, Cowan's actions possess a greater validity. By today's standards, he is no fanatic.

Of course, Cowan never renounces his worldly self or gives up his modern clothes. Like Roiphe's, his journey is an attempt at synthesis, at incorporating the past into the present. At the beginning, Cowan announces that he is both Paul Cowan and Saul Cohen; by the end, he seems able to live with the duality.

Cowan's urge for connection takes the form of action: he lives on a kibbutz, he and his wife help establish a Jewish community center, he writes articles about the lower East Side. Dorothea Straus' "conversion" in Under the Canopy remains largely on the level of con-
sciousness and fantasy. Like Cowan's, Straus' path is guided by an Old World Spiritual teacher, in this case the Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer. Straus and Singer are an unlikely pair. As Straus says, Singer's fiction as well as his very person "proclaimed that Jewish culture had not perished from the earth." Straus herself, however, comes from another world of Jews whose tacit mandate has been, "Let us outlive the Jewish past; let us forget."⁸

Straus, the wife of Singer's American publisher, tells how, without any overt reforming intention on Singer's part, she begins to feel a latent Jewishness rise within her. Listening to Singer recite one of his stories in her apartment, Straus is prompted to make an exploratory visit to a Hasidic synagogue on Third Avenue. Trying to feel some kinship with the ultra-pious sect of Jews, Straus is frustrated by her ignorance of the Hebrew text they are reciting. Out in the street, Straus realizes that she was trying to force a connection: "There was nothing for me there ... The temple had been like a dream in which one finds oneself in a place that should be familiar, but it is strange and dark, and one searches in vain for some object without knowing what it is."⁹

Just as Straus' disappointment sets in, though, a memory of her wedding day is rekindled. She recalls the summer of 1938 and the reformed rabbi who presided at the wedding (a concession to her fiancee's still observant father). Because of the rain, the rabbi wore his hat causing guests to think it was to be an orthodox wedding. Straus remembers being embarrassed to be thought of as orthodox. But when the first faint rumors of Hitler's "solution" reach her ears at about this time, Straus is shocked into an acceptance of her Jewish identity.
A more convincing example of the search for connection, perhaps because it occurred almost by chance, is The Journeys of David Toback (1981), the Yiddish memoirs of an East Side kosher butcher. In a remarkable act of collaboration across the decades, Toback's granddaughter Carole Malkin, who never knew him, discovers the memoirs, has them translated into English, and "retells" them in 1981. Spanning a full century, this joint effort encompasses five generations of Tobacks and, by implication, the whole epoch of Jewish exile, culminating in the immigrant adventure and its legacy in America.

It's difficult to say precisely what the granddaughter contributed to her grandfather's story. In an afterword, Malkin says she used a certain amount of poetic license, selecting, expanding, and leaving out original material, as well as using her imagination to reconstruct David's inner thoughts and feelings. Her intention seems to have been to highlight her grandfather's highly receptive intelligence rather than his skills as a writer. It is as if Malkin has taken us in hand to the lower East Side in 1933 (the year Toback retired and began his memoirs), pointed out this old bearded Jew with his wife and daughters, an ordinary butcher, and said, "this man has led a remarkable life."

David's journeys in the Russia of the 1880's and 90's are indeed remarkable, the stuff of a darkly picaresque novella. As a history lesson, his tale gives us a view of peasant society marked by extremes of superstition and violence. David's very survival largely depends upon his relations with the Russian goyim he comes in contact with on his travels. He casts a sharp eye on all variety of interaction between Jew and Russian. There is the story of the Russian
general whose last request is that his funeral procession be led by a Jewish cantor and choir. Even an anti-semite can recognize the plaintiveness of their singing. Like anyone at the mercy of arbitrary power, David also records the absurd comedy of powerlessness. At the draft board, disgusted by the undignified antics of his fellow Jews trying to avoid conscription by all manner of excuses, David boldly announces that he is healthy and eager to loyally serve the czar. He is promptly dismissed by the astonished committee who believe he surely has brain fever!

Toback's memoirs read like a "how-to-succeed" guidebook for the disenfranchised. In this, it is not unlike The Rise of David Levinsky. Both Davids start out as pious Talmud prodigies whose developing ambitions lead them further away from the sheltered world of the shtetl. Toback is somewhat more successful than Levinsky at reconciling his secular occupations with his pious background, though he too experiences a measure of guilt. For both, the idea of America, before they actually leave Russia, is commensurate with the scope of their dreams and ambitions.

Although Toback's memoirs end when he first arrives in 1898, "America" is a much used word throughout his journeys. He is advised to run away to America as early as his bar mitzvah year. At about the same time, he is promised to Perl, the daughter of the town's shochet, according to the traditional practice of arranged marriages. Thus when he comes of age, David will be faced with the unpleasant prospect of an ugly wife and an unwelcome job. This conflict--between the idea of a new life and the responsibilities incumbent upon a Jewish son--becomes the thematic core of Toback's memoirs.
Toback never does marry Perl. He disobeys his parents and takes up his life among relatives in other towns in Russia, learning how to keep the books at a rich plantation, how to drink like a Russian workman, and how to ride (he is nicknamed "the Cossack" because of his skill as a horseman). Ultimately he does marry a pious Jewish girl, and takes over her family's small trade. Despite his love for Chaya, Toback continues to experience a keen sense of lost opportunity, a feeling partly resolved by reliving his adventures years later in his diary.

Had Toback remained in Russia, it is unlikely he would have survived the wave of severe pogroms of the 90's or later the Nazi occupation, yet the migration to America has exacted a price. That cost is embodied in the figure of Tzerl, David's oldest daughter, who killed herself by jumping off a building in New York. Tzerl was the child David fathered in Russia, but never saw until he brought his wife over to America, more than two years after he himself arrived. The girl absorbed all the melancholy of her temporarily abandoned mother and was never close to her father. Her suicide looms as an unexplained mystery at the head of Toback's story and an emblem of the traumatic wrenching of lives associated with immigration. There is a direct correlation between Toback's grief and guilt over his daughter's death and his decision to record his memories, for he begins writing on the anniversary of Tzerl's death after a long period of writer's block. As he says at the start, "Now I will try to drive away the bad thoughts by remembering everything I can about my youth in Russia."\textsuperscript{13} By taking up his pen and recording the world he left behind, Toback is atoning for his necessary flight to freedom.
David's act of remembrance is echoed by Carole Malkin's. The assimilated contemporary American Jew never knew her grandfather, but through translation, research, imagination, and perhaps racial obligation, she resurrects the world of her ancestors. As Ted Solotaroff says:

In saving David Toback's tales and memories from oblivion, and in developing her own mode of remembrance, Carole Malkin has maintained the continuity of Jewish consciousness, a continuity that lies deeper than indigenous cultural influences, awaiting the touch of learning and imagination and spirit that retrieves and renews it.14

As he is about to put his five notebooks in the closet, David Toback wonders, "for whom have I written all this?" His final thought is that perhaps his brand new grandson will someday come upon them. Toback would not live to discover that, 50 years later, it is a secular Jewish daughter who will turn out to be his translator and publisher. Thus Toback's legacy--"a great treasure of authentic tales"--outwits his own expectations and is revived by a female descendant. While Toback achieves an unexpected atonement with the daughter he never knew, Carole Malkin makes the unlikely but necessary connection to her ancestral past.

Carole Malkin's discovery of David Toback's journal was a piece of good fortune, giving her direct access to a distant ancestor's experiences and thoughts. Although she added her own vital contribution, Malkin's task was essentially one of restoration. She found the dusty journal, put a frame around it, and asked us to pay attention. The Journeys of David Toback can be considered a work of found art.
Not all contemporary Jews, longing for contact with the distant past, have been fortunate enough to make such a find. Today's Jewish-American writers of fiction are forced both by historical circumstances and their own inner necessity to invent images from the past that will be of use in the present and future. Even within the works just discussed, we find memory stretching itself, reaching beyond the non-fiction format, and calling upon fantasy, conjecture, and imagination. Because her father tells her nothing of his own past, Roiphe admits that she has been forced to embroider certain aspects of her family history. Cowan's search for roots is originally impelled by his need to establish contact with a grandfather he never met. When he puts on this invisible ancestor's tefillin, Cowan's connection to the past is, if not imaginary, then quasi-mystical. And Straus' book ends in sheer fantasy, a merging of figures from her personal past with Old World characters from the work of I.B. Singer, figures who themselves have been imagined.

As early as 1962, Herbert Gold had attempted to blur the distinction between fact and fiction (or memory and imagination) in Fathers, significantly subtitled "A Novel in the Form of a Memoir." In this sentimental account of his father, Gold invents dialogue and scenes in order to "tempt out" an emotional truth that the facts alone will not yield. Indeed, the non-fictional and fictional aspects of Fathers work at dual purposes. While the non-fictional aspect emphasizes Gold's conflict with his father, the fictional emphasis is on "a rage for connection." Because Sam Gold never looks back on his past, in fact never speaks his father's name, his son Herbert must make use of
family rumor and conjecture in order to construct his father's childhood and young manhood.

Gold's subject was the standard middle generation theme of the conflict between generations, but his method involved an imaginative penetration of dim historical facts, a technique that has become increasingly useful in the literature of the late 70's and 80's. In *Ellis Island* (1981), for example, Mark Helprin does not attempt to compel the reader's belief in the reality of his world. He uses the well-documented details of the immigrant period as a given, and playfully invents his own version of the past. In this exuberant novella pitched somewhere between parody and rhapsody, Helprin re-creates the greenhorn's first few months in the New World as a larger-than-life dream. From the first appearance of Ellis Island looming out of a shroud of mist, fog, and snow to the final section in which thousands of dancing Hasidim usher the hero into the lower East Side, the whole surface texture of the story is surreal. One reviewer, in a cogent phrase, calls *Ellis Island* "fantasticated history." Although the plot traces the outline of the familiar immigrant pattern—the perilous Atlantic crossing, the wait on Ellis Island, the education of a greenhorn, and his accommodation to the New World—Helprin's fanciful rendition resembles the topsy-turvy creations of Lewis Carroll, Kafka, and the Marx Brothers (one scene is a direct imitation of the famous mirror sequence from *Duck Soup*). If Helprin plays fast and loose with historical fact, it is because his very method is an echo of and a homage to the folkloric tradition of Jewish culture, in which tales from the real past were adapted and embroidered to provide fables to live by in the present.
source of legend, exemplum, and humor is Helprin's own gesture of devotion.

The story begins in January when the narrator arrives on Ellis Island, which appears as a floating land of castles and towers. For two weeks, he undergoes a series of arbitrary examinations by gigantic American immigration officials. Labeled an Italian anarchist by the officials, the narrator, who has a remarkable talent for bending with circumstances, accepts the designation and is sent to the Italian waiting quarter. Later he passes through a pantry into the Jewish dorm, where he is reunited with his countrymen. He eventually meets a red haired Danish woman, Elise, an abandoned wife, whom he instantly falls in love with. She becomes his inspiration, his "pillar of fire."* In order to leave the fog-bound way station, Elise must prove that she will not be a burden to her new country. The narrator volunteers to become her guarantor. Although he is a writer, he must find verifiable work in order to obtain the certificate of employment that will free Elise from the island. The story thus establishes early on a conflict between the writer's interior realm of imagination and the world out there, between dream and reality. Being able to distinguish between the two becomes a fundamental task of the greenhorn's education.

The episodic narrative then follows the protagonist as he tries to survive and find work in New York. After being duped by a clever con man, the narrator wanders through the cold Manhattan streets in

*The Pillar of Fire is mentioned in Exodus (13: 21-22). The Pillar meets Israel at the edge of the wilderness and continues thereafter with Israel in the desert. A symbol of the divine presence in the Jews' exile, the pillar is an image of guidance and protection.
his shirtsleeves until he comes to a building which houses music and art students. On the top floor he enters an art class where 40 young men are sketching a beautiful nude model. The inebriated narrator, who has never drawn before, attempts a sketch. The result is hardly a masterpiece: "It looked like an angry dragonfly with huge breasts. Representations of stars, moons, comets, and great moments of history littered the background. For some reason, the dragonfly was fitted out with aviator goggles and a broadsword."19

A failure as an artist, the narrator then tries his hand at manual labor. He gets a job with a construction crew in Brooklyn as a fire tender on a machine meant to melt the frozen ground. The fire engine is like something out of Jules Verne and when the narrator gives it full throttle, it takes off over houses and lakes, finally crashing in a garden. Rescued by a group of Hasidic Jews, the narrator is brought to their palace where he listens to a number of fabulous tales by their Tzaddik, Rabbi Figaro. Finally he witnesses a gigantic milk white room where the Hasidim, dancing under a high dome of light, create a surging, golden energy. Entranced by this realm of light, the narrator is also aware that he has yet to fulfill his promise to Elise. Reluctantly, he leaves the Hasidic palace.

In the final section, the narrator enters the lower East Side, where he is taken for a tailor. Desperately needing a job, he plays along but once in the shop he is completely at a loss. A beautiful seamstress, Hava, teaches him how to stitch. Later, she offers him her apartment. The narrator falls deeply in love with Hava, whose selflessness inspires in him the respect and love he had formerly given only to his rabbinical teachers. The narrator begins writing
for *The Forward* and by the end of February he marries Hava. In March, he remembers his promise to Elise and returns to Ellis Island. There he learns that Elise died in an attempt to bring surviving victims of typhoid fever from an incoming ship onto the island. Guilty for his long delay in returning, the narrator is further humbled by the pure selflessness of Elise's heroic actions. The narrator is now finally awake to "the binding principle of the world"—to give to another without reward. The dream-like nature of his adventure subsides in favor of the reality of moral obligation. He leaves Ellis Island behind him for Hava, no longer a greenhorn.

A clue to what Helprin has intended in this deceptively serious work can be found in a recent symposium in which several younger writers were asked to discuss their major influences. Helprin cited Dante's *Divine Comedy*, explaining his love for this work:

> With all the pressures of his age impinging upon him, for the sake of his chivalrous and selfless love of Beatrice, his love of God, his stubborn, cruel and nasty obsession with justice and his touching and idealized devotion to a past that was golden mainly because he had made it up, Dante fought his way—in language that was explosive, hypnotic, technicolored and astounding—through the greatest, deepest, most moving and most beautiful work of literature that anyone has ever written.21

These Dantesque elements are also evident in *Ellis Island*: the platonic love of a guiding Beatrice figure—Elise, the narrator's "pillar of fire"; a love of God as evinced by the enthusiastic and eccentric Hasidic community; Helprin's own tendency to hyperbolic, "technicolored" language; and above all, an idealized devotion to the past which is viewed as a golden, if slightly wacky, age mainly because Helprin invents it. The shaping role of imagination is at the heart of *Ellis Island*. 
Imagination is what the narrator has in abundance. It is not for nothing that he is a writer and storyteller. As Helprin sees it, the immigrant period was an age well-versed in folklore and legend. The narrator himself has an apparently endless fund of Old World fables at his disposal, alluded to in the refrain "but that is a different story" which becomes a sort of running gag in Ellis Island. More than mere diversions, these tales help sustain the hero in perilous circumstances. For example, when the narrator is thrown out into the cold New York streets, he warms himself by recalling the tale of Rabbi Legatine who survived a blizzard with only a fur hat, a roasted chicken, and his book of prayer. Not only here, but throughout Ellis Island, imagination serves as a necessary survival tool, equal to the challenges of the disordered world of America. More than once, the narrator's on-the-spot inventiveness helps him cope with bewildering circumstances. Something of a shape-shifter, the nameless hero fabricates four different identities for himself in the course of the novella. As a writer, his very vocation calls for him to invent characters, and he himself takes on the coloration of his creations. Helprin here has fun with the immigrant's chameleon-like impulse to adapt to his environment, as Woody Allen did in Zelig. In Zelig, however, the character's rapid changes were beyond his control, while in Ellis Island the narrator is deliberately role-playing, literally the author of his various selves.

Even the hero's background seems to be an invention. He says he is an orphan from the Baltic shtetl of Plotsidika-Chotchki (which translates roughly and nonsensically as busted-beauty). Like the mythical village of Chelm, it is a town of fools. But the narrator
also appears to be a rabbi of sorts. On the passage over, his shipmates ask him to lead a prayer during a storm. Then again, the narrator mentions having broken with his rabbinical past. Hardly the typical shtetl Jew, he speaks five languages and refers to his classical learning. He is certainly no model of the conventional Jewish scholar, for he is quite adept at bending Jewish law to fit his needs (imagine a David Levinsky without any qualms over his flexibility). When he is accused by the other immigrants on Ellis Island of eating non-kosher food, he concocts an elaborate story about a dispensation from the Samonsker Rabbi—a pure fiction—which allows him to ignore the dietary code as long as he remains completely celibate for two years! The narrator's crazy patchwork of a background suggests the Jews' checkered history in exile and also evokes a kind of composite immigrant personality—part fool, part wise man, with tendencies to both the strictly traditional and the universally non-sectarian.

But it is not only in its nimble response to a history of transience that the imagination is called into play. Apart from its worldly uses, imagination has an almost sacred life of its own for Helprin. This is especially evident in the section of Ellis Island set among the Hasidim. In Helprin's vision, they are a sect of inspired and holy madmen, occupying a world of dazzling whiteness. Their palace, modeled after the grand synagogues of Asia, is rendered as a veritable temple of the imagination. Here, Helprin playfully invents some of his own fanciful Hasidic tales and puts them in the mouth of his Rabbi Figaro. There is, for example, the story of Rabbi Texeira the beekeeper, whose 500,000 bees one miraculous day rose in a yellow and black cloud to defend the Russian Jews from a violent
Cossack attack. The Hasidic oral tradition, which relies on fabulations of this sort, is congruent with Helprin's (and the narrator's) own extensive use of fantasy and tall-tales. The purity of the Hasidic realm as a place apart from the mundane is underscored by the fact that the unlikely Rabbi Figaro is himself one of the narrator's own creations. Earlier in the story, he had invented and quoted Figaro to help him win a philosophical argument. So when the narrator finds himself face to face with Figaro, it is as if he were in a universe of his own imagining. Just as the Hasidic Jews have managed to create their own spiritual realm in the midst of the secular city, so the narrator has, for the moment at least, freed himself from all worldly cares. Of course, he must leave this holy retreat in order to fulfill his obligation to Elise. But the richness of the Hasidic tradition will sustain him in the outside world: "I could not stay there, for I had things to do and a promise to keep. However, when I left I carried the memory of that place as if it were a diamond in my pocket." 

If the imagination has a near-sacred life of its own, a secondary theme in *Ellis Island* is the danger of a runaway fantasy life, divorced from ethical considerations. While the narrator's fabrications help him adapt to his strange situation in the New World, they also divert him from his moral obligation to Elise. At the night school, for example, he is chided by the art teacher for indulging his fantasies and not paying enough attention to the model's anatomy, "the real beauty of things." Imagination, which can reach beyond mundane reality and offer the dreamer a protective shell, must also include an awareness of the here and now. In the end, the shape-shifting...
trickster becomes a devoted husband, his exuberant imagination now focused by the holiness which is everyday.

**Ellis Island** is an interesting example of a contemporary writer trying to preserve the charm of the past (charm in the magical sense too). Perhaps it is inevitable that Helprin's technicolored recreation of the immigrant period strains the reader's belief a bit. The narrator's moral education is less convincing than the sheer pleasure he takes in spinning tales and improvising his various selves. Helprin's moral and his method are somewhat at odds: the overt lesson of **Ellis Island** advises a taming of imagination but the real message suggests that invention itself is cause for celebration.

What is a less than persuasive theme in Helprin is the driving force behind much of Cynthia Ozick's writing. In her stories and essays, Ozick cautions against the excesses of the imagination, especially as it comes into contact with Jewish history and life. Helprin's elevation of invention and fabrication to nearly sacred status might well strike Ozick as idolatrous, since she feels that storytelling is a kind of pagan magic and that imagination itself offends the second commandment (no graven images). Of course, Ozick is well aware of the dangers she herself runs, as a storyteller, in calling on her imagination. Her work, much of which is drawn to the supernatural, implicates her in her own charge of literary paganism. Ozick recognizes the contradiction: "Why do I, who dread the cannibal touch of story-making, lust after stories more and more and more?"  

Ozick's fiction is focused primarily on contemporary Jews who feel the need for a connection to their ancestral tradition. Although
the theme of the past plays an important role in her work, it is the Jew's religious consciousness rather than his/her ethnic identity as a hyphenated American, that interests Ozick. Consequently Ozick doesn't re-create Jewish history in any fanciful way. She wants to recover, not the immigrant past, but a part of Jewish tradition "more deeply ancient." Ozick's fiction is an attempt to bring this ancient religious wisdom back into contemporary, secular literature. According to Ozick, the "centrally Jewish Idea," originating before the Diaspora, is characterized by anti-idolatry and a concern with conduct and the consequences of conduct. Ozick's belief in the moral seriousness of fiction echoes the traditional Jewish view of literature as told or written in order to teach. As Ozick says, "Fiction will not be interesting or lasting unless it is again conceived in the art of the didactic."  

Ozick's program for a recovery of the Jewish Idea can be understood as a reaction to the earlier Jewish-American literature of alienation. Ozick accepts the marginality of the Diaspora Jew as historical fact; however, she rejects the whole concept of marginality as giving the Jewish writer his universal appeal. In fact, Ozick rejects the notion of universality altogether, viewing it as a trap in which Jewish writers lose all sense of authenticity. Ozick's own fiction, which at times resembles a Talmudic commentary or a series of ethical teachings, is far removed from the literary school of stand-up comedy so prevalent in the 60's and 70's. Generally speaking, reading Ozick demands a more specific knowledge of Jewish thought than is required for Malamud and Roth. Ozick's fiction rarely relies on those American/Yiddish expressions--shlemiel, meshugenah--that have
become almost token signs of Jewish-American fiction, and which are now understood by most non-Jewish readers. It is not that Ozick wants to speak only to Jewish audiences; rather she objects to Jewish-American ethnic writing, which she feels is intended, perhaps unconsciously, to appease Gentile readers. About her own writing, Ozick says she strives to speak always in the same voice, to be one thing all the time. She suggests that post-immigrant Jewish fiction ought to escape the "descent into ethnicity" and all the familiar sociology which that implies.  

Ozick's most direct frontal assault on that sociology is an offbeat satire called "Virility." The story is set in the not-too-distant future and told by a 106 year old narrator who recalls the rise and demise of an immigrant poet Edmund Gate (formerly Elia Gatoff). From this ultra-contemporary perspective, an age when people are at the mercy of their machines, the classic immigrant rags-to-riches fable represents a lost potential for self-creation. Ozick's premise would seem to be a set-up for a nostalgic tale, lamenting the passing of a simpler, more human age. But she uses her dystopia in an unexpected way. "Virility" is actually an allegory on the short-lived prominence of ethnic literature. Gates' premature death becomes a metaphor of literary exhaustion—Ozick's prediction for a literature that is nourished solely on the experience of Jews as pariahs, detached from both their host culture and the ancient Jewish Idea.  

The story begins as the narrator recalls his first view of the young Gatoff in knickers, fresh off the boat from Liverpool (he emigrated there first from Russia, staying with a spinster aunt, Rivka). Gatoff begins his career in America as a clerk in the narrator's
newspaper office. Even in the most mundane of tasks, he demonstrates unflinching energy. The narrator has a sort of humorous tolerance for Gatoff's wish to be a famous poet. Working his way up to police reporter, Gatoff—now Gate (a name suitable for his new language of English)—diligently and abundantly churns out poems whenever he has free time. Written in the margins of the dictionary he always carries with him and pilfering whatever odd English words happen to be on that particular page, the poems are hackneyed and ludicrous. The Protestant narrator now feels utter contempt for this immigrant upstart who is possessed of incredible chutzpah: "His investment in self-belief was absolute in its ambition . . . ."}\(^{29}\)

Almost imperceptibly, Gate begins to involve himself more and more in the narrator's affairs, going so far as to appropriate his first name "Edmund" as well as the top floor of the narrator's home. When the narrator returns from a long assignment overseas, Gate has completely taken over the home and is now, incredibly, a famous poet. The narrator is even more astonished when he reads some of Gate's recent poems: the formerly naive hack who wrote in pure cliché has talent after all. Ozick has real fun here describing Gate's discovery by the world and his zany transformation into honored poet. Though we never hear a single one, the poems are said to be hard and masculine—"virile" (the story also has a feminist level of meaning, with Ozick satirizing the sexism common in much critical jargon).

In allegorical terms, the growth of Gate is the ascendency of the ethnics in American letters. Using sheer naïveté and bravado, Gate usurps the very domain of the WASP editor. As Gate grows in manhood, the narrator declines. Gate's mature style injects a new
and healthful tone into the language. But just as sudden as his star rose, Gate is in decline. It is discovered that he has all along been a pretender, a literary charlatan. The source of his work has been his aunt Rivka, the relation he left in England. Gate's success has been based on a massive plagiarism. The "virile" poetry is the work of an old spinster Jewess (the new poems are now described as "trivial" and "slight"). Aunt Rivka herself is something of a charlatan. A Russian Jew who emigrated to Liverpool, Rivka never came to America because "she had fixed on English as the best tongue for a foreigner to adopt, and she was suspicious of the kind of English Americans imagined they spoke." Through both Gate and Rivka, Ozick is commenting on the duplicity of the immigrant writer who usurps a new identity and a new language.

"Virility" can also be taken as an indirect commentary on Helprin's shape-shifting immigrant/writer. Where Helprin celebrates his hero's chameleon-like knack for taking on various identities, Ozick sees such camouflaging as fraudulent. Helprin's wandering Jew has a comical-mythical past rich in its accumulation of various cultures; for Ozick, Gate's background as an exile, with "a regular salad of an accent," is no cause for laughter, but is a sad fact of history. In Ozick's view, the Diaspora, of which the immigrant experience is the most recent phase, contains all the worst aspects of assimilation.

Ozick never directly addresses the issue of artistic creation or value. The question of why Aunt Rivka's poems are so meritorious remains unanswered. Instead Ozick is concerned with the public reception and perception of Gate the writer, whose personality becomes a source of fascination to the Gentile world. Whatever the quality of
Gate/Rivka's writing, Ozick predicts that a literature which is written by Jews who pretend to be Gentiles will ultimately fail to please both Gentile and Jewish readers. Gate's writing is doomed to obsolescence.

In its look at the Jews' journey in Diaspora, which includes their stays in Russia, western Europe, and America, "Virility" conveys a sense of Jewish identity in a continuous process of attrition. In Ozick's futuristic setting, the dilution has reached the point where the literature that comes out of the assimilation drive is literally detached from the writer's own experience and the writer himself is a pseudo-person. Or as Ozick puts it elsewhere, in her characteristically bald way, "The secular Jew is a figment; when a Jew becomes a secular person he is no longer a Jew."

Ozick isn't interested in the immigrant period in any sentimental sense. When she does write more reverently about it, she sees its value not in the immigrant's drive towards assimilation, but in the era's proximity, both historically and spiritually, to ancient Jewish wisdom. Her story "Puttermesser: Her Work History, Her Ancestry, Her Afterlife" starts out as a Malamud-like attempt to find some Old World symbol of spirit within the contemporary, secular New World. Yet the story's outcome insists on the peril of sentimentalizing a connection with the realm of spirit, as noble an aspiration as it is.

Ozick's protagonist here, Ruth Puttermesser, is an over-achieving lawyer who is stuck in a drab municipal building with the meaningless title of "Assistant Corporation Counsel." Puttermesser is "every bit as American" as her assimilated parents in Miami or her grandfather who peddled hats in New England. Still, she is dissatisfied with the profane and anonymous life of New York: "She demands connection--
surely a Jew must own a past." 33 She begins to take Hebrew lessons from a great-uncle Zindel, a forebear who somehow managed to remain a pious Jew in America and who still knows the holy letters (Yiddish, the language of Diaspora, necessarily takes second place for Ozick to Hebrew, the sacred tongue). Zindel is surely a creation out of Malamud: an anachronism, this shabby orthodox Jew who lives among blacks is the repositor of deep Jewish wisdom.

Just as Ozick begins to create a sentimental image of the modern intellectual Jewess and the Old World teacher bent over their Hebrew books, the narrator interrupts the scene to inform us that Zindel is actually dead and buried in Staten Island and that Puttermesser has never really had a conversation with him: "He is all legend . . . ." 34 This then is a scene conjured from Puttermesser's need to claim an ancestor. Puttermesser's mind, straining beyond and before her immediate assimilated family, has animated a ghost! "Puttermesser" comes from a collection of stories Ozick pointedly sub-titles "five fictions," and the story's conclusion insists that the meeting between Puttermesser and her honorable ancestor is a fiction. Although Ozick is not unsympathetic to the urge for spiritual connection, she feels that a writer should not rely on a deus ex machina, such as Zindel, to relieve characters of responsibility for their own lives.

Like much of Ozick's fiction, "Puttermesser" works by negation; it cautions against that which it calls forth. Contradictions of this kind allow Ozick to work on several levels of meaning at once, to create a dense, ambiguous, and morally urgent fictional universe. For Ozick, a literature "beaten out for the sake of humanity, must
wrestle with its own body, with its own flesh and blood, with its own life."35

All of Ozick's best stories derive from a profound self-struggle, but none more so than "The Pagan Rabbi." It is difficult to do justice to this demanding and multi-dimensioned story, probably Ozick's greatest individual work. In my brief discussion, I want to suggest that Ozick is working through some of the contradictions she sees as comprising the terms of conflict for the post-immigrant Jewish writer. For Ozick, "Jewish writer" is an inherently paradoxical condition, like "pagan rabbi."

"The Pagan Rabbi" is the most compelling statement of Ozick's own need for and aversion to the magic of the image. She opens the story with this precept from The Ethics of The Fathers:

Rabbi Jacob said: "He who is walking along and studying, and then breaks off to remark, 'How lovely is that tree!' or 'How beautiful is that fallow field!'—Scripture regards such a one as having hurt his own being."

What follows seems to uphold the traditional wisdom: a Hebrew scholar, more than distracted by the loveliness of a tree, does indeed hurt his own being. But an exact reading of his actions remains open to interpretation. Although it has a contemporary, naturalistic setting, "The Pagan Rabbi" is written in a rabbinic mode of discourse: it provides a written text in the form of diary entries and a letter, framed by the argument of two learned Jews, and further framed by the reader's own interpretation of these interpretations. An almost endless dialogue is thus established, not merely for the sake of argument itself, but because a one-dimensional reading of the central action will not suffice. In the rabbinic tradition, every individual piece of conduct matters so intensely that nothing is
beyond argument. Without being didactic in the narrow, dogmatic sense, "The Pagan Rabbi" is a perfect instance of a literature "conceived in the art of the didactic."

"The Pagan Rabbi" begins with the news of Isaac Kornfeld's suicide. Kornfeld, a wise and respected rabbi of wide learning, has hung himself by his prayer shawl on a tree in the public park. The narrator, a former classmate of Kornfeld's at the rabbinical seminary and now a non-believer, journeys out to see the tree, and then visits Kornfeld's widow Sheindel in an attempt to understand his friend's motives. The widow shocks the narrator by calling her husband a pagan: "I think he was never a Jew."

She then invites the narrator to read her husband's profuse notebooks to find a clue to his death.

The notebook reveals that Kornfeld, the brilliant Talmud jurist and scholar, had scaled the Fence of the Law and had become a lover of nature and a pantheist. The notebook's last entry reads, "Great Pan lives." The next day, the narrator reads Kornfeld's love letter addressed to "loveliness" which continues the strange story of the holy man's conversion to animism. The letter reads in part:

There is nothing that is Dead. There is no non-life. Holy life subsists even in the stone, even in the bones of dead dogs and dead men. Hence in God's fecundating Creation there is no possibility of Idolatry, and therefore no possibility of committing this so-called abomination.

Kornfeld's story concludes with his conjuring of a flower-like wood nymph—a marvelous creation on Ozick's part—and their anomalous coupling. This "affair" lasts two months when, in a sudden reversal, the dryad accuses Kornfeld of greed, telling him that his soul is still that of a dried up old scholar who denies the nature gods.
Psychologically torn into two selves by this accusation, Kornfeld hangs himself.

In "The Pagan Rabbi," Ozick confronts two warring impulses in Jewish thought: the impulse towards a polytheistic, natural religion—where Judaism and Christianity meet in their more primitive aspects—and the centrally Jewish tendency towards a strict monotheism, fenced in by the world of Talmud and holy study. Within the story proper, the opening lines from The Ethics are upheld: Kornfeld has been distracted from his books by the loveliness of nature. He has chosen the wrong holiness and his reason has become unbalanced. The fact that the narrator reads his friend's story in the notebook and letter seems to reinforce the traditional primacy of the Word over the world, the text over the image.

However, it is important to remember that Kornfeld's paganism, as recorded in his writing, is framed by an outer story. In that story, the narrator visits the widow as part of a subtle courtship game. The narrator admits that he has been in love with Sheindel since he first met her. She is a woman of unusual background and abilities. Born in a concentration camp, this survivor is a woman of wide learning, unusual for an orthodox wife. The narrator's reading of Kornfeld's text is part of a test Sheindel is covertly offering him. Also something of a pagan rabbi, the narrator has already renounced his belief and has further committed the sin of marrying a Gentile (he is now divorced). A proper interpretation of Kornfeld's "paganism" may restore him to his faith and win for him the hand of the widow. However, he is unable to see Kornfeld's nature worship and subsequent suicide as the abomination it is,
according to orthodox teachings; he is half sympathetic to his friend's romantic imaginings and is not without pity for Kornfeld's search for holiness. Sheindel, however, has utter contempt for her husband's flights of fancy. The narrator cannot share this contempt and in the end he abandons his unspoken courtship of the unpitying widow.

In "The Pagan Rabbi," Ozick has set herself a difficult task. In telling Kornfeld's story, she is forced, by the very nature of the writer's art, to imagine Kornfeld's illicit imaginings. If the story overtly upholds Jewish law, covertly it pays homage to the image-making faculty. It is said of Rabbi Kornfeld "that his imagination was so remarkable he could concoct holiness out of the fine line of a serif."\(^{38}\) In shedding tears over Kornfeld's wanderings into forbidden territory, Ozick may be lamenting her own literary paganism. In another context, Ozick speaks of Freud and wonders, "Is the scientist who is attracted to the irrational himself a rational being?"\(^{39}\) The same may be asked of the Jewish writer drawn to the non-sectarian world of imagination.

Ozick takes the post-immigrant Jewish experience to an edge overlooking annihilation. She questions whether Jewish-American writing can survive its ethnic/assimilation phase. Her own fiction scrupulously avoids all ethnic clichés. At the same time, she refuses to permit a facile romanticizing of the Hebraic past. Ozick's work, with its contemporary, secular setting and its rabbinic method, constitutes a "new culture-making," a rethinking of the Jewish writer's role. In a hypothetical essay called "Toward a New Yiddish," Ozick even postulates a new language for Jewish literature in America. Just as medieval European Jews created a Jewish language, (old)
Yiddish, by pouring a Jewish sensibility and vision into the language of the dominant host culture (German), so contemporary American Jews can create a New Yiddish by infusing the language of their host culture, English, with the centrally Jewish Idea. Ozick calls the literature which will be written in this new language "liturgical."

This is a literature which possesses a religious consciousness (without necessarily being explicitly religious); in addition liturgical literature will "passionately wallow in the human reality," be Aggadic (Aggadah comprises the storytelling, non-legalistic elements in Talmud), and speak in a choral, communal voice.

Ozick herself says that there are already traces of a Jewish liturgical literature written in English and cites Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) as an example. A more recent novel that may well fit Ozick's program, and one that uses an immigrant setting as its focus, is Hugh Nissenson's *My Own Ground* (1976). Although it rejects the notion of a divine order, it is informed throughout by a sense of the mystery and holiness of ordinary life. Although its characters speak the street-wise slang of their time, the story's overall effect is of a Biblical parable. For a slim, first person novel, its historic scope is broad, its single voice reverberating with other voices (Nissenson himself uses a metaphor similar to "choral" to describe his method). Above all, *My Own Ground* "passionately wallows in human reality." The many naturalistic details—the wisps of straw in a horse's manure, the pus-filled eyes of an over-worked sweatshop laborer, the attention to all kinds of smells—stand out with a clarity that goes beyond objective reporting. Nissenson's vision is inclusive, his sympathy abundant. I know of no other recent
work which so justifies Irving Howe's depiction, in *World of Our Fathers*, of the high moral pitch, intensity, and inter-connectedness of life on the lower East Side.

At the same time, *My Own Ground* is far from a sentimental portrait of that world. While *Ellis Island* portrays the immigrant experience as a dream-like lark, *My Own Ground* renders it as a perilous descent into the underworld. Indeed much of the action of the novel takes place under the East Side El, a literal world of shadows. Nissenson uses this underground setting as a moral testing ground for his young narrator Jake, who emerges from this world only after witnessing and being implicated in a series of brutal experiences.

The novel, a complete flashback, is told by the 68 year old Jacob Brody who recalls the summer of 1912, when he was fifteen years old. An orphan working as a clothes presser, the young Jake is offered ten dollars to tell Schlifka the pimp the whereabouts of Hannelah Isaacs, a young woman who lives with her ultra-pious father in the same building as Jake. Hannah was one of Schlifka's whores, but she has run away and Schlifka is after her. Eventually Hannah returns to the apartment with a young man in spats who wears a pince-nez. This is Roman Osipovich Kagen, a Marxist revolutionary. True to the bargain, Jake tells Schlifka where the two are living, but then decides to warn Hannah and Roman that the pimp is out for them. Aware of the risk he runs for double-crossing Schlifka, Jake quits his job and moves in with the Marxist and Hannah. There he soaks up some of Osipovich's dialectical materialism and hears Hannah tell about her strange relationship with her father, who never touched her because of her irregular periods, and with Schlifka, who brutalized her but,
perversely, also awakened her sexuality. One day, Jake and Osipovich return to find the apartment empty. A neighbor tells them that Hannah left with Schlifka on her own free will. They decide to try to free Hannah, but in a confrontation at the whorehouse, Hannah lewdly declares that she prefers Schlifka's brutal love to Osipovich's sexless idealism. The two men fight. Osipovich kicks Schlifka in the ear, Jake's knee is badly cut, and Hannah runs out. Soon after, it is discovered that Hannah has killed herself. Her pious father, breaking the law which disallows ritual cleansing of a suicide, performs the ceremony himself, touching his daughter for the first time since she was a teen-ager. Jake leaves New York City and finds work in Elmira with a Jewish coal merchant. As we discover in the book's final line, he has remained there ever since.

*My Own Ground* incorporates many earlier immigrant themes. Set among immigrant low-life and working class, the novel is very much in the proletarian tradition of Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money*. Other elements comprise familiar immigrant literary territory: Jake's crafty survival tactics, the conflict between Old World father and New World daughter, the psychological strain of the densely populated East Side ghetto. Yet there is something new here as well. Nissen- son uses the storytelling technique itself as a way to memorialize an entire century of Jewish experience. The novel's inscription, from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, celebrates the poet-hero's journey through experience and his imaginative re-creation of that experience: "He was wise, he saw mysteries and knew secret things, he brought us
a tale of the days before the flood. He went on a long journey, was weary, worn out with labor, and returning, engraved the whole story on a stone."  

A much harder-edged work than *Ellis Island*, *My Own Ground* views the writer's task in an altogether different way. Helprin gives emphasis to the notion of the writer as divinely (or madly) inspired, spontaneous invention helping him bounce off of experience. The use of the ongoing present tense in *Ellis Island* reinforces the feeling of authorial improvisation. Nissenson, however, emphasizes the writer's slow and painful synthesis of events in which he himself is entangled. The use of the memoir format in *My Own Ground* implies that experience must be lived through, assimilated, and then recorded years later in tranquillity.

Though Jake records the dramatic events of the novel without judgment or much emotion, *My Own Ground* is centrally concerned with his registering of the forces which surround him. He functions as both witness and participant. Though the fifteen year old Jake is unreflective and affects a worldly cynicism, he is instantly implicated in the moral consequences of these events the moment he accepts Schlifka's ten dollars. His involvement is also made plain because characters pour out their lives to him. He is a confidant. Nissenson says that one of the technical devices he used are "arias" which the major characters deliver about life.  

Jake's role, then, is that of the active witness: he listens to, remembers, records, and artfully arranges these arias into the form of this memoir, his opus.
My Own Ground is a novel of recollection, indeed multiple recollections. The frame of the novel is contemporary. Jake is recording his memories in 1965 from Elmira. The novel proper—the story of the contest for Hannah's body and soul—takes place in 1912. And within this frame, Nissenson's immigrants have memories of their youth in Russia. In fact, there is almost as much space given to the characters' reminiscences as there is to the ongoing narrative. These memories are remarkably similar. All characters in the novel seem to share a common past, marked by fervent belief, brutal experiences of anti-semitism, and bloodshed. Nissenson has said that he is obsessed by myth; his overlapping of memories in characters as different as Schlifka and Osipovich gives an almost legendary resonance to the historical past.

Another effect of the memories within memories technique is to make us aware that such diverse characters could have emerged from this common Russian past. The reader thus participates in the linking between past and present which is the implicit aim of Jake's recollection. For example, we are forced to square the image of Schlifka as a studious Hebrew student with that of Schlifka the corrupt pimp; the image of Osipovich as wealthy landowner's son and as Marxist revolutionary; the image of the revered Reb Isaacs with that of the demented Jew we see in New York. And Jake too has three selves. There is the child Yakov in Umersk, a firm believer in God. Then there is the fifteen year old wise guy Jake, the cynic and atheist. And finally there is the 68 year old Jacob, the storyteller. The novel asks us to synthesize these selves, to see the connection between past and present.
In My Own Ground, characters embody a variety of passionate immigrant beliefs. The other-worldly Messianic and the secular Marxist aspects of Judaism are represented by Reb Isaacs and Roman Osipovich, respectively. These two traditions are linked through their shared belief in a future Utopia which can be hastened by breaking the Holy Laws in one case, and by the worker's Revolution in the other. Nissenson makes both of these visions come vitally alive in the novel, but ultimately Jake rejects such beatific promises. The book's central enigma—Hannah's debasing attachment to the man who has brutalized her—attunes Jake to the unpredictibility of human nature and the motivating role played by the emotions. Jake accepts the painful reality of the here and now rather than the logic of the classless society or the End of Days: "No future will redeem us; not with the human heart."43

Nissenson has been singled out by Robert Alter as the only genuinely religious writer among the new group of Jewish-American writers.44 My Own Ground certainly makes vivid the tenacity and intensity of religious belief. But in a final bizarre dream—in which Jake sees his landlady Mrs. Tauber deliver her own child, suckle it, and then bite off its fingers and swallow them—the novel asserts the primacy of the secular, naturalistic world with all its potential for evil and for holiness. In the dream, Jake "watches everything" and acknowledges himself as the father of the child. Shedding his first tears, he wakes up into the adult world of passion and compassion. No longer an orphan in the sense that he has symbolically claimed his own fatherhood, Jake has found "his own ground."
Like Helprin and Ozick, Nissenson is not primarily interested in the Jews' relation to Gentile America. Instead, his novel of recollection threads the various strands of Jewish memory into a kind of mosaic of twentieth century immigrant experience. As Ruth Wisse says, "The book suggests the collective unconscious of American Jewry, the repressed trauma of its passage from the old world to the new." With its recollection within recollection device, *My Own Ground* spans almost a century: it looks backwards to the haunted past of Russian pogroms, and forwards to the discovery of one's place within the immigrant tradition. This is accomplished through the synthesizing powers of the imagination. The reader, like the storyteller, must perform the linking of past and present lives which is Nissenson's aim. The theme of transformation, the classic first generation myth of rebirth, is given a new twist. Instead of the discontinuous selves of David Levinsky, Nissenson has integrated the various strands of immigrant memory into a coherent pattern of wholeness. In this way, Jacob Brody creates his own self.

There is no escaping the conclusion that Jewish-American writing of the 70's and 80's is turning away from earlier modes of alienation towards a devotional re-connection to the past. Another way of viewing it is that where middle generation writers relied on a method of dissection, the newer mode is one of synthesis.

In order to give shape to a potentially chaotic freedom, the typical second generation protagonist needed an analytic understanding of his environment, home life, and choices as an American child of immigrant parents. Fuchs' young intellectuals are admonished to pick
Williamsburg to pieces; Sara Smolinsky is unable to make peace with her past until she can abstract general lessons from her own particular experience, using the theoretical foundations learned in a college psychology course; in Passage from Home, Bernard Miller probes the mystery of family relations like a domestic detective. Rosenfeld's highly analytic approach carried over to the works of the 50's and 60's, where the detachment from Jewish values seemed severe enough to prompt warnings of a thinning-out of the immigrant tradition.

Some time after Portnoy's Complaint, however, there were signs that instead of a dilution, Jewish-American literature was moving towards a new emphasis on the richness of the past. Writers from the 50's and 60's perceived Jewish-American life as a confusing welter of fragments, and reduced the tradition to sardonic jokes on Jewish eating habits and vacation spots—"a bagels-and-lox Judaism"; today's writers, starting with fragmentation as their premise, are attempting to assemble and stitch together the disparate pieces of their backgrounds to enrich a contemporary age empty of tradition, ritual, and ceremony. Many ultra-aasimilated Jews have been impelled, in a number of non-fiction memoirs, to get back in touch with tribal associations that were all-but-suppressed in their family's rapid drive towards Americanization. Where memory itself is limited, these writers make use of fantasy and conjecture to incorporate past, present, and future. The writers of fiction examined here focus on those aspects of the past most salient to them: Mark Helprin, in Ellis Island, calling upon the folkloric tradition, which involves the tall-tale, the parable, and the great reserve of Jewish humor; Ozick searching, more urgently, for the pre-Diaspora Jewish Idea;
and Nissenson viewing the immigrant era, in *My Own Ground*, as charged with an intensely moral atmosphere. Both Helprin and Nissenson use storytelling itself as a means of threading Old World experiences, the period of immigrant adjustment, and contemporary life into a whole epoch of Jewish evolution. Even Ozick's more cerebral method, which suggests a dialectic of faith and doubt, is an attempt at renewal, at new culture-making.

These various attempts at synthesis evoke a religious dimension of life that seemed altogether absent in the earlier literature. There is perhaps something inevitably mystical about the search for connection across such a wide range of space and time, with contemporary secular Jews seeking an identification with Old World rabbis or pious ancestors. The "conversions" of ultra-assimilated Jews like Paul Cowan and Dorothea Straus read like mystical journeys, with shaman-like helper figures bringing the seeker back in touch with his/her inner, spiritual self. In his enthusiastic fabrications, Helprin himself sounds like a slightly crazed Hasidic master; Ozick, in her struggle to incorporate the ethos of the Jewish Idea into the make-believe world of fiction, is something of a pagan rabbi. The polarities that are inherent in this quest for connection—belief and skepticism, the spiritual and the secular, the traditional and the modern—don't necessarily cancel each other out. They are the kind of contradictions in which both terms in opposition can be simultaneously entertained in a life-enhancing struggle to bring the useful past into the perilous future.
CHAPTER NOTES


34 Ozick, "Puttermesser," p. 36.


43 Nissenson, My Own Ground, p. 170.


CHAPTER VII

O MY AMERICA!: THE IMMIGRANT STORY AS CLASSIC AMERICAN NOVEL

It is strange to see with what feverish ardor the Americans pursue their own welfare; and to watch the vague dread that constantly torments them, lest they should not have chosen the shortest path which may lead to it.

Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America

It is not so much that the Jew has caught up with America. America has at long last caught up with the Jew. His search for identity is its search. Its quest for spiritual meaning is his quest.

Irving Malin and Irwin Stark, Breakthrough

The assumption which underlies the literature of connection—namely, that the past informs the present, the present contains the past—must seem curiously old-fashioned by today's literary tastes. We are told that post-modern fiction is characterized by its lack of signification, by the upsetting of the reader's expectations, and by frequent narrative synapses. The "new novel," according to its theorists, is to be self-referential, enclosed; "it is not to allow anything to happen or become." If it is about anything, it is about itself.1 As far as character goes, William Gass, one of the new novel's leading practitioners, says, "[fiction] is where characters, unlike ourselves, freed from existence, can shine like essence, and purely Be."2 These concepts imply a view of the world: narrative discontinuity (absence of plot) suggests a belief in historic dis-
continuity; character removed from existence (absence of relationship) is built on a psychology of solipsism—private constructions of reality have become all-encompassing.

Such a world view could not be more unlike that of the large body of contemporary Jewish-American writing, of which the works discussed in the previous chapter comprise a representative selection. To assume that the actions of a distant ancestor may have some bearing on one's own choices today is to pre-suppose a causal chain of historic circumstances which goes against the whole grain of current literary trends. And the healing function performed by the literature of connection—the synthesis of the traditional and the modern—implies a sense of moral responsibility towards the past that has been all but abandoned by today's experimental fiction. It is precisely an awareness of the limitations of a private reality and a commitment to a struggle against historic discontinuity that have motivated a number of contemporary Jewish-American writers. Irving Malin and Irwin Stark comment that Jews as a people have always been aware of "historic depth." Indeed, works like The Journeys of David Toback and Under the Canopy, with their cross-generational and cross-cultural collaborations, are intended as celebrations of "historic depth."

But, to borrow from Henry James, being a modern American Jew is a complex fate. For many contemporary Jews, the awareness of the relation between the past and the present is not always untroubled and celebratory. The immigrants' assimilation drive has assured today's Jews material comfort and a secure place in American society, but has also left a legacy of family conflict, guilt, and tribal abandonment. A certain underlying self-hatred seemed so bound up with the immi-
grant's rush towards Americanization that it has taken at least two
full generations for Jewish-American writers to overcome their deep-
seated ambivalence towards the past. Judging from Ozick and Nissenson,
modern Jews continue to struggle for a critical understanding of their
immigrant heritage.

The sense that there are issues still to be resolved, genera-
tional relationships still to be understood, gives the latest crop of
Jewish-American writing a good deal of its excitement. Only recently
has the already assimilated generation been capable of attempting a
full-scale assessment of the costs of transformation. In the previous
chapter we saw every aspect of life come under intense scrutiny, con-
temporary writers discovering that the seemingly unconditioned was
determined, in some fundamental way, by a great-grandparent's decision
to change the family name or modify his dress. This kind of thorough-
going attention to manners, morals, and consciousness, and their
societal/historical determinants, makes possible a revival of fic-
tional forms thought to be "exhausted." It is the very struggle with
the past which is giving the Jewish-American novel the fullness of
vision and capacity for understanding and judgment which were once
thought of as the highest aims of the novel genre.

What the contemporary Jewish-American novel can best offer, when
it is free from the cheap sentimentality and false nostalgia that
Ozick and Alter cautioned against, is exemplified in the work I choose
to end with. No recent novel demonstrates the complexity of modern
Jewish life more compellingly than Johanna Kaplan's *0 My America!*
(1980). Even at this late date, it manages to make palpable the
immigrant's Utopian faith in America as a land of promise. This
belief is rendered as a calculated gamble, and Kaplan demonstrates both the heroics and the cost of such a gamble. Though relatively brief, it is a novel of great sweep, resonating with a mythic sense of the American past even as it conveys, with comic fidelity, contemporary manners. Kaplan penetrates to the loneliness and desperation which Tocqueville perceived as fundamental psychic conditions of a democratic society. At the same time, she suggests that though modern life may be fragmented, the urge for generational connection is crucial. *My America!* is an important new novel. In it, the immigrant vision of transformation merges with the native myth of a promised land.

*My America!* begins with the death of a father. Ezra Slavin, social critic and counterculture hero, dies of a heart attack at an anti-war rally in New York in 1972. Sexually active into his old age, Ez leaves behind a disparate clan of wives and children, legitimate and otherwise. Though the news of his death begins the novel, Ez's powerful personality dominates *My America!*

Without ever making him seem less than fully human, Kaplan uses Ez as a model of the American Jewish intellectual. Like other rebellious children of his generation, Ez was the Jew who ran away. One of four sons of Russian immigrant parents, Ez repeatedly attempted to leave his East Side home. Ultimately he succeeded, breaking from his working class background and becoming a free-lancing academic maverick, Jewish mostly in a certain intellectual style with a tendency towards disputation. In the 60's, Ez's displeasure with power structures of all kinds found a receptive audience in the new generation of student
protesters, and quite inadvertently he burst into national prominence. If *O My America!* had exclusively focused on Ez' experience, it would have been similar in spirit to a number of other works already examined, such as *Making It*, *America, The Thief,* and *A Walker in The City,* works which celebrate the virtues of marginality. But Ez' heroic transformation is considerably qualified in the novel. Kaplan gives a greater amplitude to this familiar story by examining the public celebrity of the Jewish intellectual within the context of private family relationships. On this level, what seemed to be "creative" alienation now appears in its potentially destructive light.

Eschewing such concepts as *The Family* as hopelessly bourgeois, Ez has abandoned wives and children in his pursuit of America, his "phantom lover." Ez' repudiation of his domestic role has freed him to develop a public persona as confrontational iconoclast, but it has resulted in a psychological stunting of his children who, except for one empty-headed flower child, are self described as "uptight," never completely getting over the internecine hostilities caused by Ez' infidelities. This is also a picture of a generation of what one theologian calls "atomic" individuals, isolated people without a clear or sustaining sense of family connection. In fact, the Slavin clan is such a baffling maze of near and half relations that in the very first chapter there is a confusion over who, as next-of-kin, should take charge of the burial arrangements.

Kaplan provides a family tree, so that the reader can keep straight the diverse set of characters who are marginally related. Ez' pursuit of America, like that of other outsiders, is manifested
199

in his attachments to women of strikingly different backgrounds. Ez' first wife, Pearl Milgram, was a Russian Jewish immigrant who died of a heart ailment shortly after giving birth to a daughter, Merry. After Pearl's death, the older son Jonathan is given to Pearl's sister while Merry lives with Ez and his new wife, Isobel Rees, a Midwesterner who has come East. With Isobel, Ez fathers a son Nicholas whom he barely acknowledges. Before divorcing Isobel, Ez has an affair with a self-indulgent married woman Paula Meisel, fathering two daughters—Francesca or Ffrenchy, a classic 60's hippie, and Susanna. Finally Ez marries poverty-stricken Georgeanne Blaikie from Appalachia, and lives with her in a rundown farmhouse in New England where, at the age of 62, he fathers his last child, son Samson (named after Ez' father Shimon).

There is a curious symmetry to Ez' romantic attachments. His fascination for "authentic pockets" of American life has led him to his two Gentile wives, Isobel, the WASPy intellectual from the Midwest and later to Georgeanne, a poor white from the rural South. In like fashion, he is romantically linked with two Jewesses—one the immigrant greenhorn Pearl with a social conscience, the other a bourgeois alrightnik, Paula.

Ez' furious pursuit of America is echoed by his children's various attempts to make peace with their elusive father. Jonathan and Nicholas have given up altogether. But Merry, Ez' one legitimate daughter, never abandons her quest to understand the Slavin legacy. The "real" action of O My America! is internal, taking place in Merry's consciousness (though told in the third person, O My America! utilizes Merry as point-of-view character most of the way). It is
Merry, a free-lance writer, who assesses the achievement and the price of her father's "gamble." In contrast to the public adoration of the intellectual hero, Merry's memories and reflections give us a darker version of the man's personal failings. It is not spite but self-knowledge which is the governing impulse behind Merry's reflections. If Ez' death gives her a certain critical detachment from his overwhelming personality, it also forces an awareness of her unmistakable connection. Kaplan says that the book started out as a critique of Ez, but by the end she grew to like him more. Kaplan's change of heart parallels Merry's more forgiving attitude as the novel proceeds.

The novel gains its strength and some of its elusiveness from a formal and thematic doubleness. *O My America!* is a structure of opposites, held in delicate balance. It juxtaposes the motif of orphanhood with the motif of connectedness; the theme of self-generation is set against the theme of continuity ("the betrayal of the genes"); the denial of the past is opposed by the role of memory and the passion for the past. The novel begins with Ez' obituary and ends with his memorial service. The public rhetoric which frames the novel contrasts with the private version which Merry constructs from recollections and episodes from her past. The novel seems to have a backward movement—it consists almost exclusively of flashbacks—but there is a subtle and constant forward motion. While the plot line advances from the time of Ez' death to his memorial service a short time later, Merry's memories reach as far back as her mother's girlhood in Russia, and range among various episodes from the period of immigration, the Depression, the Holocaust, and the peace rallies.
of the 60's. The novel's twofold time outline thus asserts a historic and generational continuity that Ez himself denies.

_O My America!_ is also a double voiced novel. Ez' pronouncements on American culture make the novel part essay. But Merry modulates her father's thunder with her private meditation. _Like The Great Gatsby_, with its use of the half-sympathetic Nick both to evoke and to condemn Gatsby's romantic vision, _O My America!_ seeks to modify Ez' outraged Utopianism with the more balanced view of a mediating figure. That this mediator is the daughter of the great personality gives the novel a psychological dimension. _O My America!_ is thus an implicit criticism or, more accurately, a re-interpretation of the immigrant strategy of rebirth. It sums up many of the themes of this study—the sense of America as Promised Land, the immigrant's courtship of America, the "gamble" of transformation, and the role of memory and imagination in recovering the past. The method in which the novel is pieced together, in non-linear fashion, is a distinctly contemporary strategy for reconstructing a self from the cultural fragments of Jewish-American life.

Ez Slavin's vision of America so dominates the novel that before we can discuss Merry's inward journey we need to know just what it is that Ez believes in. This is a tricky matter because one of Ez' guiding principles is Emerson's "a foolish consistency is the hob­-goblin of little minds." His inconsistency is not due to intellectual laziness. If at one moment he can defend the excitement and rich diversity of urban life, and at the next moment condemn the city for its coldness and anonymity, it is because his mind constantly
seizes on opposites. His sudden shiftings of opinion are part of his intellectual stance. He is a provocateur who thrives on argument. More than simply a personality tic, his outspokenness is at the heart of his style. Hardly an innocent remark can go by without Ez demonstrating its political bias or its shallow sentimentality. When Ez is on stage, as he is through most of the novel, there is sure to be a dogmatic pronouncement on anything from Jefferson's intentions in "The Declaration of Independence" to the sociological implications of canned herring.

Most of Ez' opinions about American life are scornful. The obituaries call him an iconoclastic social critic and later he is eulogized as "our unflagging conscience." At the same time, this naysayer has had a "lifelong love affair with the idea of America." He can be considered a skeptical Utopian. Slavin's pointed style, his provocative opinions, his outspokenness are all part of a concocted public persona, intended as a celebration of the idea of America as a land of growth, change, and possibility. He has written a number of studies of American culture, such as Outlaws and Citizens and Stranger in the Land, which reflect his romantic identification with the American impulse of lawlessness. By contrast, Europe represents a world of slavish traditionalism and decay. Not surprisingly, his challenge to authority has given him an affinity with youth, despite his discomfort around some of his adoring students. He has little sympathy for their adopting a black hip jargon and dislikes their simplistic distortions of his ideas. Worst of all, he abhors their comfortable bourgeois backgrounds. Despite these differences, Ez, in keeping with an almost programmatic need to identify with the
abstract idea of youth, maintains the illusion of comradeship. It's part of his persona as the intellectual maverick.

Though Ez plays his public role to the hilt, his vision of America derives from a wholly personal experience as the child of immigrants, outside the mainstream of American life. Merry's recollections serve as a continual reminder of this personal dimension of Ez's public self. Although Merry lived for a time with Ez's Yiddish-speaking mother on the lower East Side, the realization of her father's immigrant background still surprises her as an adult, so thoroughly did Ez transform himself. The novel's final scene gives Merry this shock of recognition in the person of Ira, Ez's nephew, a relation she had never met. Ira is a completely different animal from the Slavin clan of neurotic intellectuals. He is a coarse security officer who wears a gaudy gold *chai* around his neck. Yet this working class cousin has the same Dumbo ears as her father and the physical resemblance makes her aware of the world her father carefully sidestepped.

In passing, Ira asks Merry if her father gambled and Merry's immediate answer is no (gambling, apparently, was a trait common to Ez's three brothers). But almost instantly a deeper truth makes itself apparent to her. In a way, her father was a gambler: "No rakish hat had ever really sat on his head nor loser's racing sheet stuck out of his pocket, but forever defying the fragility of illusion, Ez, with that first-generation disease, had believed himself to be self-generated" (286).*

*It should be noted that Kaplan's use of "first-generation" here corresponds to what I would call a second generation Jew (an American-born child of immigrants). Ez's quest for rebirth and his "creative alienation" suggest an overlapping of immigrant themes that defies strict chronological separation.
This first generation disease manifests itself in a number of ways, most obviously in Ez' flight from domestic responsibility. His disavowal of his paternal role is tantamount to a denial of generations, of history. Ez chides his younger admirers for their ignorance of the past, yet he himself barely refers to his parents or his immigrant background, though he does make furtive trips to the East Side. Kaplan has said that Ez' denial of the past is "one of the mistakes of assimilation."7

If Ez embodies the immigrant belief in self-generation, it is a very calculated incarnation. An intellectual, his belief in rebirth is very different in nature than the innocent response of someone like Mary Antin, who believed with a naive literalness in the power to make oneself over. Ez is more in love with the abstract ideal of promise than the actual experience of American life. His behavior is much more similar to that of David Levinsky, another sufferer of this immigrant pathology. Like Levinsky's, Ez' gesture of belief is carefully worked up, based partly on self-promotion and partly on self-denial. To be made over, after all, means to lose as well as to gain a self.

Like Levinsky, Ez creates a public self for display purposes. While Levinsky is a self-made millionaire and Ez is a self-generated intellectual, they both share that immigrant quality of self-congratulation, as if to demonstrate that they truly belong. In The Rise of David Levinsky, it is Levinsky himself, with his confessional self-scrutiny, who exposes the doubts and insecurities underneath the pose of the aggressive businessman. Levinsky's two selves are dramatically at odds with each other. In O My America!, however, Ez has
more completely granted his public self a validity of being. Levin-
sky subscribes to a Dale Carnegie philosophy and puts on a smile.
Ironically this public/social self is gross and unsympathetic, whereas
his troubled inner life makes him a more appealing character. Ez, on
the other hand, is a counterculture hero, noble as a public figure,
but with no moments of candid self-acknowledgment or regrets over his
casual indifference as a parent and a husband. This makes him quite
unlikable as a character. One of Merry's functions in the novel is
to take up the private scrutiny which Ez has buried.

Despite Ez's apparent self-validation, one senses his persistent
feeling of alienation. His boyhood was one of poverty and deprivation
and it has left its mark. He tried repeatedly to run away from home,
yet his eventual escape into a literary and academic career, like
that of Harry Roskolenko, another East Side dreamer, is also a furtive
return. What is all his writing about but the theme of the outsider
in pursuit of a sense of place? Even when writing about the back­
woods people of Appalachia, people totally remote from his own ex­
perience as an urban intellectual, Ez projects a highly personal em­
pathy for the disenfranchised:

In this harsh, sad, alien land what could I be but a stranger?
And the people whose gaunt bodies and denying faces so troubled
me--in a nation of complacent plenty, an entire mighty continent
of shopping-mall superhighways, they were surely strangers
too. (180)

Ez has taken his private alienation and made it a principle of action,
a banner of belief. If I am alienated, his career seems to say, I
will make alienation the essential American response. Though in­
tended as a denial of his past, this strategy of using his private
pain to goad himself towards achievement in the public realm is a
striking betrayal of his immigrant genes (it is also very similar to Levinsky's "core of permanent dissatisfaction" but without Levinsky's complicated self-awareness).

Ez's entire career is built on this passionate ambivalence towards his past. One infers that his marriages to Isobel and Georgeanne—his incursions into what he thinks is the heart of Gentile America—are egged on by his feeling of alienation. Once he attains these "real Americans," like Levinsky and Portnoy he seems unwilling or unable to possess them. When he first meets the young Isobel at a pretentious intellectual gathering in New York, he is drawn to her Midwestern simplicity and clarity. But by the end of their marriage, she has become for him a Protestant "ice princess," devoid of Jewish warmth. Ironically, it is just this warmth that Ez had previously chided in his first wife Pearl as smothering and false.

His ambivalence is most clearly revealed in an episode when he travels with Merry to the lower East Side in quest of tomato herring, a food of his childhood. The experience is anything but nostalgic. At the busy appetizer store, he is forced to take a number and is finally given a can which is marked "sardines." When the counter-man tells him that tomato herring is really sardines packed in tomato sauce, Ez lashes out at the man with almost anti-semitic fury, accusing him of lying and cheating. Shortly after this scene, Ez meets a very elitist colleague who reveals a subtly patronizing anti-semitism. Ez knocks the fellow down. These two scenes, Ez's only moments of undeliberated emotion, reveal that he has never successfully resolved his own ambivalence towards the past.
More characteristic than this anger is Ez' penchant for coming upon the commonplace with wide-eyed wonder. This is what Merry calls his Rip Van Winkle syndrome: "What he valued above all was the sense of seeing something as you had never seen it before: through child's eyes, a discovery" (3). This sense of discovery is not only a child's special grace. It is also a recapturing of the sense of strangeness an immigrant might feel, but without the anxiety. It is, as Merry says, "an ingenuous fascination." In this way, Ez is able to keep alive the concept of American freshness and his own capacity for wonder. Rip is the man out of time. In order for Ez to embrace American culture, he must stand apart from it. His persona proclaims that critical detachment is the essential American posture. In this way, the outsider/insider split is healed and marginality itself becomes a virtue.

This strategy attempts to bridge the duality of self that is the burden of the immigrant Jew. David Levinsky's dual allegiances are irreconciliable. The closer he moves towards Americanization—that is Success—the further removed he becomes from his Jewish self. Levinsky's situation may be taken as the paradigm for Americanization as a one-way street. Ez Slavin, however, has left his options open. Skeptic and dreamer, anarchist and pacifist, outsider and insider, he avoids easy classification. Out of this very elusiveness he creates an American self. It is really a heroic task. The belief in self-generation takes incredible chutzpah and incredible control. It is, as Merry realizes, a risky gamble. It is Merry's story in O My America! that reveals the legacy of such calculated risk-taking. Through Merry, the immigrant vision of self-creation is placed in the larger
context of psychohistory, of causal relationships down the generations. As Pearl Bell says, "... what makes up the burden of this novel is the human wreckage left behind by the great man in the pursuit of his phantom lover, America."^8

It is one of the striking ironies of the novel—and one that says much about Ez' ambivalence—that this skeptic who rails against the smug American pursuit of happiness—should give his one legitimate daughter the utterly inapt name of Merry (the name "Merry" may also be an abbreviated version of Ez' beloved "America"). Merry is anything but a cheerful American type. She is an austere young woman of 26, living alone in what was once her father's "crash pad." As the novel begins, one senses that Merry has never completely freed herself from her father's influence, nor fully understood her connection to him. Ez' Thoreau-like disdain for material possessions has left Merry still somewhat envious of her well-fed relations on the West Side. Kaplan here utilizes the familiar immigrant opposition of uptown parvenu with downtown greenhorn to evoke Merry's neediness. Just a few years before his death, Merry tells her father, not without bitterness, "You brought me up to worship failure" (212). Ez' anti-success campaign, however, has also instilled in his daughter a sympathy for those on the fringes of society: Merry has a part-time job in a poverty program and has written articles on the plight of illegal immigrants. As Merry discovers, Ez' legacy is keenly double-edged.

Ez' inability or unwillingness to play the role of typical provider points to a more emotionally charged issue in Merry's life: her sense of abandonment after her mother's death. While Ez rationalizes
his limitations as a father by publicly condemning the corrosive effects of the nuclear family, Merry is bequeathed a profound sense of disconnection from fundamental relationships. Her sense of disconnection has burdened her from the very beginning.

When her mother died, her older brother Jonathan was taken away by an aunt and Merry was raised by her grandmother. Because of hostility over Ez' extra-marital affair with Isobel, Merry became, according to her grandmother's teary letter in "The Bintel Brief," "the baby nobody wanted to touch" (38). After her grandmother died, Merry was shunted back and forth among numerous friends and relations. With Ez' death, Merry is truly orphaned—without a father and mother, and still alienated from her brother and other half siblings. Her inner feeling of abandonment is only slightly overstated by her family friends' (the Roizmans) maid who, at a West Side party, suddenly remembers her as "that skinny little thing with all them dead, divorced mothers" (148).

Merry's orphanhood is the significant starting point of the novel. As Isobel says, in an echo of Ez' belief, "every American generation orphans itself" (57). The repetition suggests that the condition of orphanhood is part of a recurring cycle. The motif of orphanhood in the novel mediates between two thematic opposites: self-generation and organic connection. It is Merry's anomalous condition as a parent-less child which provides the emotional urgency to her quest for connection. It also gives her a certain intellectual freedom. Raised in the East Side ghetto by an Old World grandmother, and taught to "worship failure" by her anti-bourgeois father, Merry is hardly the classic Jewish princess. No doting father in-
dulged her every whim; she never possessed the abundance of material goods which could make a cocoon of her existence. Merry's insight and humanity as well as her anger and envy, spring from her orphanhood. Out of this heightened sense of isolation, she sets out to discover a self.

_O My America!_ is hardly a feminist novel in the conventional sense. For one thing, a case can be made that its main character is Ez, the intellectual gambler who in traditional male style forges an identity by aggressive risk-taking. Ez's life is a public life and his story is expressed in outward action. He is a character on the go. He even possesses a quick and energetic stride which Merry recalls she was barely able to keep up with as a child. By comparison, Merry is a wisp of a character, not only slight in physique but also, beginning with her confusion about the funeral arrangements, hardly an active part of the outward events. While Ez, the Roizmans, Ffrenchy, Charlotte, and Isobel are the dominant voices of the novel, Merry's role in most conversation is that of the auditor. She even refuses to speak at her father's memorial service. Judging from the outward events of the novel, one could conclude that Merry is merely a passive witness.

But, as I have already indicated, Merry's inner world becomes the center of interest as the novel proceeds, and the outward events have a secondary importance. Among contemporary Jewish women authors, this shift of emphasis is best exemplified by Tillie Olsen who, in the stories from _Tell Me a Riddle_, creates a haunting inner voice, what seems like the very language of the soul. Though Kaplan's novel never calls for the same haunting intensity, _O My America!_
follows in the Virginia Woolf tradition of the "plotless" story, in which consciousness itself has an equal if not greater value than action.

Although the novel begins and ends with the public adoration of Ez, the intellectual hero in pursuit of America, much of the middle section shifts attention to Merry's need to sort out her many complex feelings toward her family and her past. Estelle Jelinek says that in contrast to the male mode of self-presentation which projects the image of a confident public figure, female life stories reveal "a need to sift through their lives for explanation and understanding."9 Because this inner journey tends to be less single-minded and more amorphous than the characteristic male quest, female storytellers often rely on a non-linear organizing structure. As Jelinek says, "The narratives of their lives are often not chronological and progressive but disconnected, fragmentary, or organized into self-sustaining units rather than connecting chapters."10 O My America! is perhaps most feminine, if not feminist, in its creation of a narrative structure which allows a free play of memories and reflections within the conventional novelistic format. There is a psychological or emotional logic here: this highly associational novel gains its unity from parallels in mood and connections that may be more apparent on a second reading.

Though it is hardly insisted on, Kaplan makes us aware that the novel is being pieced together, drafted from the fragments of Merry's memories and the speculations which follow from these flashbacks. Like Carole Malkin, Merry functions as creative editor of her family history. As Murray Baumgarten says, "... Merry constructs the text
of her father's life—or rather she invents and discovers the meanings of her father's life by assembling the narrative of her own prehistory." I would suggest that Merry's narrative is an attempt not only to understand the meaning of her father's life but to understand a whole complex of family entanglements. The middle section of *My America!* is especially concerned with Merry's discovery of the meaning of her mother's life. The sense of the absent mother plays just as crucial a role in Merry's inner journey as the image of the publicly celebrated yet privately elusive father.

Merry's mother Pearl died shortly after giving birth to her daughter, so Merry's sense of her is necessarily limited. But although Pearl is, in this regard, a less visible character than Ez, Merry's need to resolve her relationship with her mother is just as urgent as her need to comprehend her father. Merry's recovery of the image of her mother also points to a feminist layer of meaning in *My America!* According to Ez, Pearl's desire to have more children and to maintain a Jewish home, as well as her Zionism, make her into a caricature of the overbearing Jewish Mother. For Ez, who has denied his own background and has directed his energies to the public realm of "big" social issues, Pearl's "parochial" concerns with home life and Israel are judged invalid. But in Merry's reconstruction, Pearl's experience as a Jew fleeing Hitler's Europe, as a farm worker in Palestine, and as a greenhorn trying to find work in the New Land, is granted a validity equal to that of Ez' heroic courtship of America. As Merry comes to discover, her mother's life was heroic in quieter, more ordinary ways.
Growing up practically an orphan, Merry had a number of mother surrogates. She spent her earliest years with Ez' Yiddish-speaking mother in a small East Side apartment. Though this grandmother was a warm Yiddish bubbeh, most of Merry's memories of this period are negative, bound up with her sense of immigrant poverty and failure. Her grandmother made skirts and dresses from remnants, and twenty years later "the strange acrid smell of fabric sizing" (28) still makes Merry gag.

After her grandmother's death, Merry spent her Sundays with Pearl's relations, the Senders. One of her most vivid memories concerns the Sender's tenant Gitta, a Holocaust survivor who lost her daughter in the camps. Merry recalls the sickening sweet taste of Kool-Aid which Gitta used to serve her warm, and remembers that "the blue number on her arm stood out like ugly jewelry" (47). Gitta liked to read fairy-tales to Merry and one that still haunts her is Rapunzel. The story of a mother's obsessive hunger for the vegetable rampion and the exchange of her daughter with a witch has a strong psychic charge for the mother-less child. As Merry records her childhood impressions of these visits, the tale of Rapunzel gets mixed in with the sickening taste of the Kool-Aid, and the childless Holocaust survivor gets confused with the Old World witch. Thus the Grimms' fable evokes for Merry the image of a smothering crone, a grotesquely distorted maternal figure.

When Ez marries Isobel Rees, Merry acquires another mother. Isobel's Midwestern rural background seems to promise the kind of wholesome domestic life that Merry needs, but Isobel never quite fits the sunny image of motherhood (here too Ez is partly responsible for
the domestic failure, as he begins his affair with Paula Meisel). Isobel's icy manner and the fact that as a novelist, she spent much of her time writing suggest an additional explanation for Merry's unhappiness as a child. The novel's various mother surrogates—bubbeh, Gitta, Isobel—do not provide Merry with a sufficient nurturing.

Merry's search for a sustaining mother image culminates in chapters six and seven. It is Merry's 27th birthday and she is having dinner with her father. Merry naturally associates her birthday with the anniversary of her mother's death. Over dinner, Merry spends the evening with Ez discussing the mother she never knew. Ez provides a slightly condescending, very matter-of-fact summary of her mother's life in Europe and her early greenhorn years. He describes a smug and sanctimonious woman who tried to turn herself into a Jewish Madonna. This doesn't satisfy Merry who tries to construct a happier version, modifying Ez' judgment with her larger sympathies. For example, when Merry hears how Pearl, on her way to Hamburg, jumped from a moving train because her papers weren't in order, she begins to construct a fable of danger and fortitude. She checks herself, however, realizing "the romanticized confusion in her own mind" (94). Still, the facts are eloquent enough—they induce an imaginative empathy for her mother's experience that Ez' judgment had formerly denied.

One of Kaplan's premises here is that the "truth" of any given life consists of a series of partial, subjective constructions. The dialogue between Ez and Merry gives two versions of Pearl, but the chapter concludes with a third version—Pearl's own self-presentation.
At this point, Kaplan inserts the article which Pearl wrote about her experience as an interpreter for the New York State Court of Appeals. The article, "100 Centre St.," begins, "In America, all girls become typewriterkeh's," and traces her education at a Warsaw gymnasium and her vocational options when she arrived in America. Pearl's accent prevented her from becoming a schoolteacher, so she majored in foreign languages at Hunter College and became a court interpreter. This history of Pearl's "vocational rambles" is followed by her account of actual cases she overheard, cases which demonstrate the psychological toll of unemployment.

Pearl's struggle to find her own vocation, against her father's wishes, provides a model for Merry's struggle to define a self. Pearl's sympathy for the "left out" is also part of Merry's inheritance, for she too writes articles about people who have "fallen out of the grace of ordinary life" (104). More significantly, Kaplan's placement of this article at the end of the dialogue between Merry and Ez gives us Pearl speaking in her own voice. Through the article, the unknown mother speaks directly to her daughter.

The article also prepares us for the sudden appearance, in the next chapter, of Halina Zylberschlag, one of her mother's childhood friends. In this section, Merry's knowledge of her mother is substantially bolstered and she comes as close as she will to recovering her mother's image.

One night, shortly after her birthday dinner, Merry receives a phone call from a heavily accented woman who says she knew her mother "Perla" in Warsaw and Palestine. This is Halina Zylberschlag, formerly Halina Dubrowska, the daughter of the D. family mentioned in one
of Pearl's articles. It was the D. family, a wealthy and cultivated Jewish family in Warsaw, who provided Pearl with housing and support while she received her Warsaw education. Halina and Pearl were the only two classmates at the gymnasium who survived the Holocaust, Pearl joining a pioneering group in Palestine, and Halina saved from destruction by her German lover.

When Merry meets Halina, she meets an animated middle-aged woman who speaks an excited combination of English, Spanish, German, and French. Halina has a veritable passion for the past. In a quest of historical preservation, she has traveled with her journalist husband all over the world, compelled to contact the children of her Warsaw classmates. This is not simply nostalgia. Halina is concerned with preserving the world of east European Jewry by contacting the succeeding generation and reminding them of their connection to this lost world. As she tells Merry, in her emphatic way: "But you are here! You! Don't you understand? Because of this, she was not--cut off! Because of this!" (123). At this point, Halina shows Merry a photograph of Pearl and her Warsaw classmates and Merry is shocked by her resemblance to the young, foreign-looking girl.

Coming in the exact middle of O My America!, this section represents a climax of sorts. Merry feels a sense of maternal connection which she hasn't been able to achieve previously. Halina's version of a warm, idealistic pioneer contrasts with Ez' portrait of the obsessed Jewish Mother. Furthermore, Halina's very person brings back the world her mother inhabited. Even the way Halina peels an apple, European style, makes Merry aware that this must have been the way her mother ate an apple. The chapter concludes with Halina's gift to
Merry of a flowered pin she has made. It is modeled on the flower her German lover used to bring her and, as Halina remarks on her way out, "... if I would have a daughter, I would give it to her" (129). Merry has symbolically regained her lost mother.

It is ironic that Merry's quest for family connection is most successfully achieved through the one member of the family she never knew. But there is still the more immediate problem of making contact with living relations. Even after Merry comes to terms with her mother's absence, _O My America!_ continues to explore the "human wreckage" of the Slavin family, especially in the context of American life in the 60's.

Much of the second half of the novel is given over to Merry's step-sister, Francesca Meisel or Ffrenchy, Ez' illegitimate daughter by Paula Meisel. A caricature of the 60's flower child, Ffrenchy is intended as a foil character to Merry. With her overstuffed bourgeois background and her obtuse narcissism, she is the complete opposite of the austere Merry. If Ffrenchy's overt sexuality shows off Merry's uptight Puritanism, Merry's integrity of character reveals Ffrenchy's moral and intellectual emptiness. In her desperate need to belong, this illegitimate daughter claims a greater sense of kinship to Ez than Merry in her more deeply felt ambivalence towards her father.

A character with less self-insight or fewer critical faculties is hard to imagine, and Kaplan captures this type of 60's bourgeois hippie perfectly. Ffrenchy, who faddishly condemns middle class values, stands as a perfect embodiment of those values. As Kaplan renders her, Ffrenchy is practically non-verbal. Her language is
almost exclusively composed of the clichés and jargon of her era.

Here she explains to Merry the aims of the mystical religious group she has joined:

What we do, like what we're really into, is getting together all the really highest, purest stuff from all the most truly enlightened beings. And like it doesn't matter where their external bodies were! I mean, they could have been anyplace! . . . did you know that most people--most people--not only are they asleep, which is like bad enough! But they're in prison! And they like don't even know it! Because, see, reality is a prison! Truly! It's this total jail! (194-95)

Kaplan is not kind to the 60's. Much of the second half of the novel is given over to inane monologues of this kind. If Ez suffers from first generation disease--the need to cut oneself off from tradition and the family--then Ffrenchy suffers from a certain kind of third generation disease--the obsessive need to belong, to submerge one's identity in another's or in a larger group. So it is with Ffrenchy's numerous sexual escapades, each of which she perceives as an ultimate love relationship, and her blind adherence to the latest trends. This cult mentality is an extension of what David Riesman has termed the "other-directed type," the kind of person who defines himself strictly in relation to others. Ffrenchy's "other-direction" is an overstated version of Merry's more genuine need to establish connection.

Ffrenchy is simply the most obvious example of other-direction; the novel is filled with other examples. Despite "the spirit of comedy" one reviewer thought "pervades the book," My America! is a very dark novel, its disturbing satire targeted at the need for comforting systems of thought. This can be seen in Ffrenchy's fadishness, the Spivaks' psychoanalytic babble, and the Roizmans' comfortable liberalism. Kaplan has created a society of lost souls,
shielded from the awareness of their own desperation by material wealth. Though Kaplan's focus is on a particular stratum of urban society—Jewish, middle class, liberal and psychoanalytically oriented—she is describing a general American condition, as her title suggests.

For those characters with any awareness, Ez' warnings about alienation prove to be prophetic. This includes the "authentic American" characters as well. In the sections devoted to Isobel, for example, we learn of her disaffection with her provincial Midwestern home. Like many intellectuals from the provinces, she yearns for that cosmopolitan realm of kindred souls, Greenwich Village. Yet when she arrives in her Utopia, she is confronted by the dark reality of urban life:

... the real life of the city seemed entirely closed to her, she was locked out. ... Buying a peach at an outdoor fruit stand in the high heat of lunchtime or slowly circling around the graceful stone and city greenness of Gramercy Park in the changing light of late afternoon, Isobel was overwhelmed by loneliness and it shocked her. What had her loneliness been about all her life if not that she belonged elsewhere? And here she was—in the very particular elsewhere she had always had in mind—and again, again she did not belong? (63)

Later, like a character out of James, Isobel leaves for Europe, still unsure of her sense of place.

Homelessness is a pervasive theme in the novel. In another episode, Ez and Isobel visit Eleanor Boland Hughes, the quintessential WASP. Eleanor has been acquitted of the murder of her husband, a Harvard divinity student who had taken to beating her in fits of moodiness and violence. Even the respectable New England tradition has left a haunted legacy of insanity and despair. In O My America!
everyone is, in some sense, a stranger in the land. Ez' immigrant
disease has become an American epidemic.

Alienation, loneliness, abandonment—these are the conditions of
modern American life as Kaplan presents it in O My America! If this
is a comedy of manners, it is a very dark one. At the same time, as
a study of the first generation belief in transformation and possi-
bility, it is a basic immigrant text. Only a Jewish author, a des-
cendant of immigrants, could have captured the twin emotions of hope
and despair in such ironically juxtaposed manner. Yet such an am-
bivalence has been the characteristic perspective of the classic
American novel. The writers of these texts, though Anglo-Americans,
have always felt themselves removed from the rush of American mass
culture. In its use of certain Jewish urban types, immigrant des-
cendants, to comment on life in contemporary America, O My America!
merges the immigrant saga with themes from the classic American novel.

In his seminal work The American Novel and Its Tradition, Richard
Chase explains that the American novel has always reflected America's
historical and cultural anomalies. The dual allegiances of the ori-
ginal Puritan culture—to a well-lit workaday world of pragmatic
money-making and to an otherworldly realm which mysteriously hid
salvation or damnation—established an almost Manichean dichotomy of
light and dark in the American psyche which early writers like Haw-
thorne and Melville were quick to seize on. Historically, the break
from Europe and the promise of a new continent gave rise to a Utopian
myth, the "City on a Hill," which was poetically bolstered by Old
Testament notions of "the promised land" and "the chosen people." The
theme of the New Man, the American Adam, coming upon a glorious crea-
tion and naming things as he saw them, served as a guiding spirit as well as a rationale for the break with the mother culture.

This American myth corresponds structurally with the immigrant theme of transformation, or making oneself over. The American experiment was of course an enterprise of immigrants to begin with, and the newer immigration of the early twentieth century has echoed the old pattern in important ways, especially the psychological severance with European culture and the public avowal of such American ideals as change, possibility, and the new. Thus such tensions as between tradition and progress, the past and the future, are deeply ingrained American dualities, as well as fundamental immigrant conflicts.

Of course, the dream of creating oneself anew is just that, for we are not in fact self-generated. We owe a debt, however tangled it may be, to the past, and there is no escaping the fact. Thus, in the American novel the effort to retain a pristine purity of self is inevitably shadowed by the guilt of making such a history-denying gesture. As Leslie Fiedler shows, we typically find American innocents in some homoerotic relationship with a dark double, usually with a Red Man or Black, America's exploited races. Something in the manner of Freud's "return of the repressed" also occurs in the Jewish-American novel. In the immigrant literature of the first generation, the Old World past is not exactly repressed but transcended. Still, in a work like The Rise of David Levinsky, the past comes back to cast a haunting shadow on Levinsky's "success." Greater attempts at denial occur in the middle generation, and so when the past returns it does so with more disturbing force. In Passage from Home, the past appears as a sudden revelation of a sect of religious enthusiasts. Ten years
later, the black-coated orthodox Jews who wander through Philip Roth's assimilated suburbs serve as uncomfortable reminders of the Old World. By the time of _O My America!,_ the break with the past had taken its psychic toll and it must be deliberately recovered. Using memories, associations, and fantasies in an attempt to reconstruct prehistory, Jewish-American writing of the 70's and 80's seems to be following the psychoanalytic aim of bringing the unconscious or forgotten back into living consciousness. In _O My America!,_ what Ez denies and therefore invalidates, Merry rediscovers and thereby confirms.

The American experiment and Jewish immigrant experience also share a similar contradiction between thought and experience, or transcendent ideal and historical reality. In America, the egalitarian idealism of the founding fathers was countered by the inequities of the capitalistic structure and the exploitation of the land and slave labor. America has had the dual traditions of jingoism and skepticism, of confident boosterism and nay-saying pessimism. In his quicksilver shifts from youthful confidence to embittered censure, Ez is like a composite of the American character. He even seems to Merry to change physical appearance, at times fresh and youthful, at times excessively wearied. Like Gatsby, Ez never loses his capacity for wonder, but like his Old Testament namesake, he is a prophet who rails against moral laxity. His skeptical romanticism also derives from his Jewish inheritance. The Jewish experience contains both the reality of centuries of persecution, and the Messianic belief in a future heaven on earth. Shaping his alienation so that he never loses sight of his "phantom lover" America, Ez embraces a Utopian vision of a better world, a new life. In its belief, however skeptical, in an
abstract ideal of promise, *O My America!* is a further development of the immigrant novel.
CHAPTER NOTES


5 Personal interview with Johanna Kaplan, 29 Dec. 1983.

6 Johanna Kaplan, O My America! (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 11. All further page references to the novel are contained in parentheses in the text.

7 From our interview, see note 5 above.


10 Jelinek, p. 17.


CONCLUSION

The subtitle of my study, "Immigrant Themes in Jewish-American Literature," strikes me now as far richer in implication than when I began this project. Then, "immigrant themes" seemed like a convenient and properly academic-sounding term to describe the writing by and about immigrants, and the literature which reflected the immigrant legacy. Now, the phrase has a significance beyond my original expectations. In a sense, the whole body of Jewish-American writing can be said to be an immigrant literature; in one way or another, virtually all of it may be seen as a record of the experiences of a group of outsiders for whom the idea of America has always been charged with both wonder and fear. The longing for the Promised Land was the first and perhaps overriding response to the New World; consequently, I have assumed the centrality of the assimilation impulse in Jewish-American literature, an impulse which crosses the generations and characterizes not only the fiction and autobiography written by immigrants, but much of the literature produced by their descendants today. I have called this movement towards America the theme of transformation: it implies Americanization, upward mobility, and, in its most extreme form, apostasy—the loss of Jewish identity. Along with the movement forwards, I posited a compensating movement back towards the past, an urge for connection that becomes more pronounced as that past seems about to be lost altogether. Connection
implies a certain retreat from American mainstream life, a nostalgia for the distant past, and, at its most extreme, the re-conversion to some form of traditional Judaism. My method was thus built on a duality which I perceived as comprising the very contrariness, and the liveliness, of Jewish-American literature.

Because the Jewish response to America has undergone frequent revision, I suggested an evolution of immigrant themes. The transformation theme seemed most relevant to first generation literature. I tried to demonstrate, however, that "the spell of the past" played a subtle, poetic role in The Rise of David Levinsky, qualifying and complicating the prosaic rendition of a young man's rise up the ladder of success. For the second generation theme of freedom, my emphasis was on the flight from Old World parents, though here too, as in Passage from Home, writers like Rosenfeld revealed an understanding of the need to acknowledge the influence of home life before entering the larger social realm. Finally, my third theme, connection, gave emphasis to the return-to-the-fold which characterizes so much contemporary writing. This emphasis, however, does not rule out the still important role played by the motif of the quest-for-America. A good part of Johanna Kaplan's O My America! is an examination of the courtship pattern which symbolizes the Jews' pursuit of the New World.

Of course, "transformation," "freedom," and "connection" are not distinct entities, but are useful metaphors whose terms are closely bound up with one another. The thematic grouping of works was thus a matter of my following cues from the works themselves. It seemed more fruitful to discuss a work like Bread Givers as an example of the freedom theme than the transformation theme, although the pro-
tagonist's liberation from the East Side, via a college education, made her "real American." Yezierska's own emphasis seemed to me to be on the burden of freedom, rather than on the celebration of American status.

My analysis also provides a framework for a discussion of the problems adhering to the literary expression of assimilation. Despite the achievement of Cahan, Yezierska, Henry Roth, Fuchs, and Gold, the earliest Jewish-American writing, when not completely ignored, was largely regarded by the literary establishment as an instance of local color. In many cases, the disregard was deserved. The transformation impulse revealed itself in a number of immigrant autobiographies which were intended primarily to placate native American readers. The tendency to appease is indeed one of the dangers of a minority literature; it gives much early Jewish writing only limited literary value.

It was not until the late 40's that Jewish-American writing began to enter the literary canon. The literature of the second generation, which charted the dimensions of American freedom, prepared the way for the proliferation of major Jewish-American works which burst upon the scene after World War II. In Passage from Home, Isaac Rosenfeld's placement of Jewish family life within the larger context of modern urban existence was an early example of the new universality Jewish writing could achieve. Now Jewish characters like Bernard Miller, Willy Loman, and Augie March were perceived not as exotics, but as representative figures. Most notably in the work of Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud, Jewish-American literature began an exploration of humanistic values that could no longer be strictly called "Jewish."
In Chapter II, I discussed Augie March in terms of transformation, but Bellow's work spills over with thematic riches. Bellow resists easy classification, shifting ground from novel to novel, and speaking in a completely different voice in each new work. In Augie March (1953) and Henderson the Rain King (1959), the American quest to define the self against an exotic natural backdrop is so strongly developed that Bellow seems to follow in the native tradition of Melville, Whitman, and Hemingway. Yet there is always an edge of irony in Bellow which suggests the outsider's point of view. In a recent story, "Him With His Foot in His Mouth," the protagonist Shawmut suffers from an unfortunate compulsion to make socially inappropriate remarks, which one character interprets as the outsider's verbal defense against powerlessness.

The outsider/insider, Jew/American split never quite applies to Bellow, who has a habit of turning most clichés on their head. In Herzog (1964), the protagonist is intended as a representative man, facing the existential dilemma of being free in a mass society which renders that freedom meaningless. Yet just as surely as this is the universal human condition, Herzog's attempt to fill this empty freedom with a positive content comes out of his experience as the child of immigrants. Bellow gives his character the kind of family background most second generation Jews were trying to escape: his father was the ineffectual provider, a failure even as a junk dealer; his mother was the sacrificing, pampering mama. Yet the potato love from his immigrant background is the source of Herzog's unlikely resiliency and his sense of self-worth. He may be a clumsy Herzog, but he is also a marvelous Herzog. The values from his past function as a
counterweight against the strong current of fashionable selfishness embodied by the foil characters. Bellow's work represents the richest literary expression resulting from the second generation movement into the American mainstream; simultaneously, Bellow brings to bear the perceptions only possible to someone whose cultural roots lie elsewhere.

Bernard Malamud's work also affirms an ethos that is Jewish in origin but which translates smoothly into the universal language of humanism. In his first novel The Natural (1952), Malamud used the idyllic American context of baseball as the arena in which to measure his protagonist's heroism. In The Natural, Roy Hobbs was a purely American character (the only good thing about the film version was the casting-to-type of Robert Redford in the lead role). In his greatest novel, The Assistant (1957), Malamud's Morris Bober comes out of the Yiddish tradition of die kleine mensh (the little man, the ordinary Jew), but here too Malamud was working out a definition of heroism which is Judeo-Christian in nature. Frank Alpine's circumcision at the end of the novel represents a new twist to the transformation saga: the little Jew is so exemplary that now a non-Jew (though still a member of an ethnic minority) converts to Judaism. But because Malamud more self-consciously invokes the Yiddish tradition than Bellow, I tend to place most of his work under the theme of connection. Malamud is perhaps the most important literary influence on the newer generation of writers like Ozick and Helprin, because of his recourse to fantasy and romance. Though set in the
naturalistic urban jungle, his stylized short fiction, especially The Magic Barrel (1958), recalls the Yiddish folk-tale, and thus the Old World past.

My triple-themed approach is in no way intended as an exhaustive analysis of all Jewish-American writing that exists or that is to come. The evolution of Jewish-American literature continues, and so new terms and metaphors must evolve to keep up descriptive pace. Even now, with Cynthia Ozick calling for a new literary language for Jewish writing, we may be close to the point when "connection" no longer suffices as a useful thematic description. As long as Jewish-American writers continue to use their Jewishness as a significant aspect of their work, then their literature will record the lively and ongoing encounter between America and the self. In this encounter, the immigrant journey still serves as a prototypical experience, one which modern Jews seem reluctant to abandon.
APPENDIX

Glossary*

Aggadah: the storytelling, non-legal component of Talmud

a klug zu Columbus: a curse on Columbus

alrightnik: nouveau riche

Ashkenazim: the name applied, since the sixteenth century, to the Jews of central and eastern Europe (western European Jews are known as Sephardim)

bar mitzvah: a confirmation ceremony for a thirteen year old boy

bubbeh: grandmother

chai: the eighth letter of the Hebrew alphabet; one half of the Hebrew word for life (chaim)

cheder: an elementary Hebrew school, usually occupying a single room

Diaspora: exile; the dispersion of the Jews among the nations outside of the Holy Land

di goldeneh medina: the golden land

goy: a Gentile

Hasidim: members of an orthodox religious sect known for its piety and enthusiasm

Haskala: movement for Jewish westernization which arose in Germany and eastern Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

landsman (pl. landsleit): one who comes from the same town in the old country

luftmensh: literally, man of the air: he who lives without visible means of support

maggid: a teacher-preacher, usually itinerant
mazel: luck; good luck
melamed: teacher in a Hebrew school
mensh: man; used as a term of approbation for someone possessing qualities of humaneness and responsibility
meshugenah: a crazy person
mitzvah: good deed; divine commandment
pilpul: an inflated form of analysis and debate used in Talmudic study; unproductive hair-splitting
reb/rebbe: teacher, rabbi, learned man
rebbetzin: wife of a rabbi
Rosh Hashanah: Jewish New Year beginning ten days of penitence
seder: Passover evening meal at which the Jewish liberation from Egyptian bondage is celebrated
shiksa: a non-Jewish woman, especially a young one
shlemiel: an innocent bumbler; a consistently unlucky or unfortunate person
shochet: ritual slaughterer
shtetl: a small town or village in eastern Europe inhabited principally by Jews
sofer: a scribe; a Torah scholar and copyist
Talmud: a massive compendium of commentaries and debates on the Torah
Talmud Torah: traditional Hebrew school
tefillin: phylacteries; ritual object placed on arm and forehead at prescribed times
trayf: ritually unfit, unclean, defiled
tzaddik: a most righteous man; especially among the Hasidim, a spiritual guide
yarmulkah: skullcap
yeshiva: school for Talmud study; a rabbinical college or seminary
Yisker: prayer for the dead

Yom Kippur: The Day of Atonement, the last of the ten days of penitence

zayde: grandfather
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