HENRY ROTH'S USE OF TORAH AND HAFTORAH IN "CALL IT SLEEP"

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Source: *Studies in American Jewish Literature (1975-1979)*, SPRING 1979, Vol. 5, No. 1, HENRY ROTH'S "CALL IT SLEEP": 1934-1979 (SPRING 1979), pp. 22-27

Published by: Penn State University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/41205508

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Whether by chance or design Henry Roth's Call It Sleep is a symbolic, schematized novel. Although many have probed the four-part structure--The Cellar, The Picture, The Coal, The Rail--Bonnie Lyons has given us the most incisive examination in her "Call It Sleep: A Close Reading."[1] Lyons and others have shown that each symbol is powerful in its own right and yet relates organically to the others. All four form a pattern leading to a thematic resolution in the novel.

Most agree that for David Schearl, the young protagonist, the cellar connotes darkness, fear, terror, isolation, death; even guilt and disgusting sexuality. Book II, "The Picture," evocatively contrasts with Book I, "The Cellar." "The Picture" is a scene of nature, nostalgia, warmth, pastel brightness. Although it is complicated by discordant father Albert's obsession with bulls and horns, and vulgar Aunt Bertha's appearance, "The Picture" focuses primarily on Genya's idyllic but complex girlhood in Europe. It recalls principally the period in the old country before she married Albert, when she was in love with a young gentile boy.

As Lyons points out, "The Cellar" has mostly negative connotations for David; and "The Picture" presents him with ambiguous signals. But the third section, "The Coal," gives him a contradictory message. On the one hand, David is told by his rabbi of God's use of coal to purify Isaiah. Finally, we have the symbol of "The Rail." Although the final episode involving the rail cannot be divorced from an intricate set of emotional, psychological, and actual events, in its most skeletal form it involves David Schearl's search for "God's coal," and his own mystical purification. He plunges a metal milk ladle into a streetcar track slot, is shocked into semi-consciousness and then unconsciousness, and is eventually revived at home among his family. By the time one reaches the last lines of the novel, Roth tells us, "One might as well call it sleep. He [David] shut his eyes."[2] So we have come through episodes of cellar, picture, coal, rail. What has happened to David in the process? Reconciliation? Acceptance? Learning? Calmness? Perhaps all of these things.

Bonnie Lyons concludes that "three analogues of redemption--sexual, political, and Christian--support and universalize David's personal mystical redemption in Chapter XXI."[3] There is evidence for this conclusion; but one can also explore other elements of a Jewish-Christian motif.

Upon examination of the novel one can see a significant Jewish religious motif which fits into the main symbolic and thematic patterns of the story. First, one should go back to "The Coal" and the rabbi's lesson to David about God's purification of Isaiah.

In the opening section of "The Coal," Albert worries about his dangerous job. If he dies will he have a traditional Jewish son to say prayers for him, a Kaddish? "I mean I'm little enough a Jew myself. But I want to make sure he'll become at least something of a Jew also" (210). So the scene is set for young David, not yet eight, to go to cheder in order to study

under Reb Yidel Pankower. The rabbi was an ugly, tough, even cruel teacher. But he liked David and it wasn't long before David at least respected and responded to the rabbi's teachings.

Time passes and David learns. "He often went to the synagogue on Saturdays"(221). One day the rabbi is preparing Mendel, a young student, for his Bar Mitzvah. The Torah portion is Jethro, or Yithro, from the book of Exodus; the Haftorah is Isaiah from books VI, VII, and IX.

"Now," said the rabbi stroking his beard, "this is the 'Haftorah' to Jethro--something you will read at your bar mitzvah, if you live that long" (225). What follows is about a dozen pages in which Mendel drones on in Hebrew, the rabbi translates and interprets in Yiddish (rendered in English in the novel), David wonders about many parts of the passage ("--And why did the angel do it? Why did he want to burn Isaiah's mouth with coal?"), the other cheder students continue their vulgarities in gutter-English, and an electric storm rages outside. "Twice through the yard, as though a lantern had been swung back and forth above the roof-tops, violet light rocked a moment and a clap of thunder and a rumbling like a barrel rolling down cellar stairs"(234). A most dramatic rendering of the Jethro/Isaiah, Torah/Haftorah portions in Reb Pankower's cheder.

Much has been made of the Haftorah portion used in Call It Sleep: that is, the specific part of the Haftorah given over to God's use of coal to purify Isaiah's lips. But both Torah and Haftorah are significant in other ways too. First, one must realize that the Torah selection, coming as it does from one of the five books of Moses, always takes precedence over the Haftorah, which acts as a comparative and prophetic commentary on the Torah portion.

The Jethro chapter of Exodus which Roth has chosen as central to "The Coal" part of Call It Sleep may be the most important section of all five books of Moses as we go from Genesis to Deuteronomy. In the Jethro passage of Exodus we get the tone of the patriarchal passages of Genesis. Jethro, priest of Midian, at this time a non-Jew, and the father-in-law of Moses, brings his daughter, Zipporah, and grandchildren to visit Moses in the wilderness. Jethro finds a son-in-law who has his hands full trying to administer to his unruly flock of Jews.

Every day, it seems, Moses judges and administers to his people from morning till night. Jethro soon alters all of this by decentralizing authority and by delegating duties. Soon Jethro's administrative genius is used by Moses to the fullest extent: "So Moses hearkened to the voice of his father-in-law, and did all that he said."[4] Shortly thereafter we have the revelation at Sinai. Israel is turned into a holy nation when Moses receives the covenant, the commandments--and then shares them with his people.

As for the Haftorah, it records a revelation that came to Isaiah in his early manhood. Isaiah has a vision of the Lord. Isaiah sees himself as "a man of unclean lips," unqualified to represent the Lord to the people, as a much earlier Moses felt that he could not be a go-between either. But an angel takes a glowing coal from the holy altar and touches the mouth of the prophet with it, thus purifying Isaiah. Much of the Haftorah portion is rendered piecemeal in Call It Sleep. But there is more. The Isaiah passages acting as the Haftorah for the

Jethro section of Exodus consist of chapter VI and the opening lines of chapter VII; then there is a break before the Isaiah passage continues with chapter IX, line 5:

> For a child is born unto us,
> A son is given unto us;
> And the government is upon his
> shoulder;
> And his name is called
> Pele-joez-el-gibbor-
> Abi-ad-sar-shalom;[5]

An editorial commentary for the passage is as follows: "a child. The verse has been given a Christological interpretation by the Church, but modern non-Jewish exegetes agree that a contemporary person is intended. The Talmud and later Jewish commentators understood the allusion to be the son of Ahaz, viz. Hezekiah." The commentator continues his explication of the passage, line by line, in each instance refuting Christian interpretations of this passage from Isaiah. The last words of the passage, the name, is translated from the Hebrew as "Wonderful in counsel is God the Mighty, the Everlasting Father, the Ruler of Peace."[6]

What we have here, of course, is part of the ongoing controversy or tension between Christianity and Judaism as to what in fact many parts of Isaiah prophesize. Here, for example, Christians have seen the prophecy of the coming of the messiah, Jesus, "the Prince of Peace," who would found and then lead the Christian Church. Of course, rabbinical interpretation rejects this view.

So what we have in Call It Sleep, partly by chance, partly by design, is an intricate set of symbols drawing upon what may well be the holiest books of the Bible where the Jews receive revelation from God, where the Jews in effect receive the commandments through Moses and thus become a Jewish people. At the same time we have the non-Jew, the father-in-law of Moses, Jethro, who brings his wisdom and judicial expertise to Moses and the people of Israel. (Rabbinical tradition tells us that shortly after this Jethro converted to Judaism.) The Moses story is linked with the Haftorah involving Isaiah, considered by many one of the most significant of Jewish prophets. In this Haftorah portion not only does one get the motif involving the purification with holy coal, but the Judaic-Christian tension concerning the messiah--"The Prince of Peace." There are echoes here, of course, of the Jew/non-Jew situation involved in the Jethro-Moses Torah portion.[7]

Gentile-Jewish tension seems to be a strong motif in Call It Sleep. To be sure, in "The Coal" section Roth relies much more heavily on biblical passages than he does elsewhere in his book. As Roth moves along to the denouement of the story--"The Rail"—most critics agree that enigmatically we are shown that young David Schearl achieves his own mystical vision in which he reconciles himself to life with his father, mother, and the turbulence that has hitherto rocked his life.

The more secular aspects of the Jewish/non-Jewish or "double" theme which appear in Call It Sleep seem to be on a different

order than the Torah/Haftorah use mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, they do enforce the Jethro-Isaiah portion. Much has been made of the section involving "The Picture," which focuses on Genya and her gentile lover in Austria. It would serve little purpose to explore this once again, but one should note that it does anticipate the Jethro-Isaiah section. Then we have the Leo-David episode in "The Rail." While not given as much attention as Genya and her gentile lover, it has received some critical examination. Suffice it to say that we have in the Leo-David episode, Leo, the Polish goy, who has the busted rosary that David lusts after, So David takes his age-old antagonist to another cellar where Leo can violate David's cousin, Esther—in exchange for the rosary. Polish Leo is a meaningful stereotype in Jewish history.

I'm not sure what to make of the Jewish/non-Jewish themes in Call It Sleep. One is on safer ground with Bernard Malamud, who says "all men are Jews." The Jethro-Isaiah portions certainly seem to reveal a strong Jewish thrust in the novel, almost an opting for the essence of Judaism. But this interpretation may be undercut, depending on how one evaluates non-Jewish Jethro and/or passages in Isaiah which may be taken to anticipate the coming of Christ. As for Genya and her lover, there is certainly more warmth, light, beauty in the recollection of her love affair and her "picture" than there is in her harsh life with Albert. So what is one to make of this? Leo, the Polish goy, is a creep. But then the Jewish cousin, Esther, isn't much better. More important, however, are David Schearl's perceptions. For example, the broken rosary itself is beautiful in his eyes. His mother's "picture," too, connotes beauty. Of course, what he senses of Isaiah as he hears him interpreted by the rabbi is mystery and power. Maybe some beauty also.

In a recent interview Henry Roth talked of his Jewishness: The interviewer said: "We have skipped over the whole subject of being Jewish, of Jewish books, of Jewish education." And Roth answered:

> It stopped when we left the East Side. Up until then, my Jewish education was similar to the Jewish education of all the other Jewish kids on the East Side. I couldn't conceive of myself as being anything but Jewish. Everyone went to cheder; you couldn't imagine not observing the Sabbath. God was in the universe and watching over us. . . .
>
> You really can see Call It Sleep that way. . . . I took a hostile environment and superimposed it on what was really a very protective and homogeneous environment, which is the East Side. Anybody who knew it would know that.

Roth's last comment in this section of the interview is that "I can't account for my doing what I did, or why the book became some kind of Jewish immigrant classic."[8]

An earlier interview, in 1972, possibly sheds some light on what has been said above:

> Interviewer: Do you consider Call It Sleep a Jewish novel?

Roth: No, because I just used whatever background or material was available to me, and this was it. I did not use a Jewish background to illustrate Jewish life per se. I used it to fulfill certain of my own compulsions.

. . . . . .

Interviewer: Did you read the Bible after you became an atheist at fourteen?

Roth: Yes, I read it in college--I enjoyed it tremendously as a piece of literature.

Interviewer: How did you choose the story about Isaiah's purification with God's coal that is so central to Call It Sleep?

Roth: Well, that's a very peculiar thing--it's almost unaccountable. I left cheder at eight and I wasn't yet translating--so I didn't know what portions were read when. But like Picasso--I knew what I needed. I wanted this purification, it was a necessary symbol--so I put it in. Then having done so, I went to the Hebrew Theological Institute and asked the rabbi when they would read this. Well, he told me that this would be the selection for the week--isn't that amazing? For that very week, that's what they would be reading. So by some kind of divine inspiration I chose exactly the right thing, the right passage [Italics mine].

NOTES

[1]Bonnie Lyons. Henry Roth: The Man and His Work. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1976, pp. 39-55.

[2]Henry Roth. Call It Sleep. New York: Avon Books, 1971, p. 441. (All subsequent page references will be given parenthetically in the text.)

[3]Lyons, p. 53.

[4]The Soncino Edition of the Pentateuch and Haftorahs. Dr. J. H. Hertz, ed. 2nd Edition. London: Soncino Press, 1967, p. 290. For complete Torah and Haftorah portions see pp. 288-305.

[5]The Soncino Books of the Bible: Isaiah. Dr. I. W. Slotki, ed. (London, Jerusalem, New York: The Soncino Press, 1949), p. 44.

[6]Slotki, p. 44.

[7]For comprehensive Jewish and Christian interpretations of Isaiah see Encyclopaedia Judaica. (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971), Vol. 9, pp. 43-71. See also Salo Wittmayer Baron, A Social and Religious History of the Jews (Columbia University Press and the Jewish Publication Society of America, 1952). Vol. 1, pp. 99, 339-340. For comprehensive discussions of Jethro see Encyclopaedia Judaica, 10, pp. 18-19, and Baron,V, p. 129.

[8]Henry Roth, "On Being Blocked and Other Literary Matters: An Interview." Commentary 64, (August 1977), p. 32.

[9]Lyons, p. 174.

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MYSTICAL INITIATION AND EXPERIENCE IN *CALL IT SLEEP*

"There is one theme I like above all others," Roth told Harold Ribalow in 1960, "and that is redemption, but I haven't the fable." He didn't then and has not found it since, though he has not, even at seventy, abandoned the search; but he had if for a few years in the early '30s when he wrote his only novel. Call It Sleep is a domestic, immigrant, Jewish, psychological and symbolic novel, but more specifically and more basically it is the story of the private and family life of an immigrant Jewish boy who, impelled by a threatening environment and a threatened psychic life and guided by a symbolic vision that is at once mythic and personal, embarks on a quest for redemption, salvation, and the blazing light of God.

Driven by fear of an alien world, huge and other, of a violent and rejecting father who doubts his legitimacy, of premature and vulgar sex, of the dark, particularly the engulfing, ego-obliterating dark of his home's grim cellar, and by an unshakable sense of his own sinfulness, David Schearl pursues the burning light of God to liberate and cleanse him. The novel graphs like an oscilloscope with peaks of transcendent vision and wider troughs of search-inducing terror and despair. The governing symbolic pattern is of light and dark, the fear of dark generating a compulsive fascination with light and God, with God because He is identified with light: the purifying flame, the liberating spark, the calming radiance. Three of the book's four section titles point clearly to this religious structure and this pattern. "The Cellar" introduces David's dark and hazardous world, its darkness rising up from his cellar to the shut closet where he "plays bad" with the crippled girl upstairs, and spreading like a stain to the black pupils, hair and printer's inked hands of his looming half-mad father. Light, sought antithesis and antidote, takes God's shape in his mother's story of two peasants who saw, in a forest near the Polish town she came from, "a light among the trees--yet nothing burning." As a result, "the goyim built an altar" there and declared it holy ground. "Because why?" asks David. "They saw a light and--and nothing burned? So that was holy?" "Yes," his mother answers. "So it pleased them to say. I suppose that was because Moses too saw a tree on fire that didn't burn. And there the ground was also holy."[1]

David's and the book's direction are set from that moment, defined more narrowly and sharply in the third section, "The Coal," where he reads, in cheder, the story of Isaiah's vision of "the Almighty in his majesty and his terrible light," and of the fiery coal with which an angel touched Isaiah's lips and cleansed him. Like Isaiah, David feels himself a sinner, the dirt in

"The Noisiest Novel Ever Written": The Soundscape of Henry Roth's Call It Sleep

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Source: *Twentieth Century Literature*, Spring, 1989, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Spring, 1989), pp. 43-64

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/441774

"The Noisiest Novel Ever Written": The Soundscape of Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*

Stephen J. Adams

"The squalor and filth, the hopelessness and helplessness of slum life are remorselessly presented and the cacophony never ceases—this must be the *noisiest* novel ever written."[1] Walter Allen's remark identifies one of the most striking and unusual features of Henry Roth's novel: this text opens up a world of sound as few others seem to do. Although most fictional imagery is, like our language itself, overwhelmingly visual, *Call It Sleep* offers many lessons in the verbal evocation of "soundscape"—a term coined by the composer R. Murray Schafer in his highly original study of the sonic environment *The Tuning of the World*. Schafer advances many new terms and concepts which, by overturning the visual bias of our language and culture, create a vocabulary that helps to explain the operations of sound in the world of young David Schearl, Roth's central character. Roth's uncanny evocation of David's sonic environment does much to account for the emotional intensity felt by most of the novel's readers.

Call It Sleep is, I am convinced, still undervalued. Though the peculiarities of the novel's publication history—its virtual disappearance in the Thirties, its acclaim after the paperback edition of 1964—are well known to Roth's readers, the book since then seems to have become pigeonholed as a "Jewish novel," rather than the essential American novel that I think it is. There may well be, as Leslie Fiedler has said, "no more Jewish book among American novels,"[2] but the impact and significance of this book extend far beyond its Jewish interest, profound as that may be. No other American novel dramatizes so powerfully the

trauma of the newly arrived immigrant. It is the classic portrayal, writes Richard J. Fein, "of the Americanized son who pits himself against the unyielding immigrant father."[3] In David's psychological adventure, we experience from the inside a paradigmatic rejection of Old World values and a tentative reaching toward the new. And the novel treats this distinctively American theme with unparalleled richness of implication and technical mastery. Far from being a novel of a particular ethnic group, *Call It Sleep* claims a central place in the canon of American fiction.

Critics of *Call It Sleep* have tended to focus on David's psychology—his oedipal attachment to his mother, Genya, and his fear of his father, Albert. Or they have focused on the novel's spiritual implications, treating it, like Fiedler, as "astonishingly a religious book."[4] On the other hand—still perhaps influenced by the Thirties' controversy in the Marxist *New Masses* over its supposed failure as "proletarian fiction"—they have downplayed the novel's broader social significance. Yet from the immigrant-crowded steamer Peter Stuyvesant sailing past the Statue of Liberty in the prologue, to David's climactic acts of betrayal and atonement, Roth's novel lives through the painful processes of separation and assimilation. Psychologically, David must separate himself from his father's rejection and his mother's emotional hold. Spiritually, he attempts to reach beyond a confining and yet somewhat destabilized Judaism, moving from an Old Testament culture into one defined and controlled by the New.[5] The gradual orientation of a fearful child, and his painful discovery of power, of relative maturity, of freedom from fear—of all the freedoms held out by America—form the core of the novel's experience.

The intensity of this experience derives from Roth's creation of the young boy's point of view, which critics have universally praised. More specifically, it derives, I believe, from Roth's ability to create the sensory world of the child, particularly the sense of sound. Though the text has not entirely traded eyes for ears, it has at least altered the usual ratio. The world of sound, as Schafer insists (taking his cue from Marshall McLuhan), is "loaded with direct personal significance for the hearer."[6] While sight defines objects as separate and distanced from the perceiver, sound seems to enter inside the body. Vision separates objects as distinct things, but the heard object is often unseen and unidentified. For this reason, sound is naturally linked to the disembodied or the supernatural; as Schafer puts it, "God originally came to man through the ear, not the eye."[7] Don Ihde, in *Listening and Voice*, agrees:

> It is the *invisible* which poses a series of almost unsurmountable problems for much contemporary philosophy. "Other minds" or persons who fail to disclose themselves in their "inner" invisibility; the "Gods" who remain hidden; my own "self" which constantly eludes a simple visual appearance; the whole realm of spoken and heard language must remain unsolvable so long as our seeing is not also a listening. *It is to the invisible that listening may attend.* . . . The primary presence of the God of the West has been the God of Word, YHWH.[8]

But if sound can acquire a numinous cast, it is also inseparable from the instincts of alarm. As Schafer observes:

> The sense of hearing cannot be closed off at will. There are no earlids. When we go to sleep, our perception of sound is the last door to close and it is also the first to open when we awaken. These facts have prompted McLuhan to write: "Terror is the normal state of any oral society for in it everything affects everything all the time."[9]

If *Call It Sleep* is, as Walter Allen declares, "the most powerful evocation of the terrors of childhood ever written,"[10] the reason may be David's heightened sensitivity to sound. And after David's final vision in which his unconscious mind constructs a "self" which survives his father's wrath, deliverance from terror of the loud world forms part of the meaning of the ambivalent sleep at the end of the novel.

Roth's text evokes David's soundscape on three levels of awareness. Often it records sound simply as part of the child's general perception. On a second level, David not only registers sounds but reacts to them—often with alarm, but with a range of other emotions as well. On a third level, however, he not only hears and reacts but he interprets as well. David is not the simple passive character that some critics, and even Roth himself, seem to think.[11] As Naomi Diamant has shown, in some of the best criticism written about the novel, *Call It Sleep* is "a semiotic *Bildungsroman*" in which David learns not only to *de*code but to *en*code his environment.[12] (Diamant wisely qualifies this phrase, since the novel covers only three years of David's life and is not technically a *Bildungsroman*, but it raises many issues common to the genre.) I would add furthermore that this process, which Roth quite consciously modeled on Joyce,[13] occurs simultaneously in the character and in the reader; as motifs accumulate, we together with David gradually invest them with symbolic and emotional attributes. The reader's experience fuses with that of the young boy, as he learns not simply to react to his New World but to interpret it and live in it.

On the level of simple perception, David is a remarkably sensitive

register of his sonic environment, or to use Schafer's word, he is a reliable "earwitness." After the dry, objective narration of the Prologue, which tonally as well as semantically establishes the family's sense of emotional exile as they enter New York harbor in 1907, the text plunges into David's phenomenal world, creating auditory as well as visual perspective:

> 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. "Mama!" he called, his voice rising above the hiss of sweeping in the frontroom. "Mama, I want a drink." The unseen broom stopped to listen. "I'll be there in a moment," his mother answered. A chair squealed on its castors; a window chuckled down; his mother's approaching tread. (p. 17)

Roth often makes us hear by finding the unexpected phrase: the "slight, spattering sound from the end of her lip," as Genya drinks tea (p. 121); a "hiss of shoes" on stone outside the door (p. 355); a door "tittering to and fro in the wind" (p. 418).

And of course, as Bonnie Lyons and others have noted, the text makes us aware of the sounds of languages—Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, and all the broken English dialects of the street. Roth expertly distinguishes, for example, the Irish brogue of the policemen from the speech of an Italian peanut vendor (p. 148), and with virtuoso flair even endows one of his speakers with both dialect and an almost impenetrable lisp: "Cauthye I wanthyloo, dayuth w'y'" (p. 360). Roth ensures that his text must be read with ears as well as eyes. Such passages may be said to dramatize David's awareness of the difficulty of extracting meaning from an alien language. As Raymond Chapman has noted,

> the primacy of speech over writing can be asserted even through the written text, with humor or with some social purpose. Indeed, the writer may actually draw attention to the difficulty and artificiality of what he is doing. He may emphasize the fact that the nature of language in its two realizations gives him an impossible task.[14]

In "The Cellar," David registers primarily the domestic environment of the apartment in Brownsville: As his mother touches the lock on the door, "the hidden tongue sprang in the groove" (p. 46); she sets the table, "knives ringing faintly, forks, spoons, side by side" (p. 69); she talks to her husband, "noisily setting the dishes down in the sink" (p. 77). David at this point is indoors mostly, and on his major venture outdoors, following the telegraph poles, he gets lost. His sleep is

disturbed one time by "the frosty ring of a shovel scraping the stony sidewalk" (p. 56); but his awareness of the outdoor soundscape in this setting is dominated by children's play: "So get back in de line. Foller de leader. Boom! Boom! Boom!" (p. 87).

In "The Picture," however, when the Schearls move to the lower East Side, the outdoor soundscape is more insistent:

> Here in 9th Street it wasn't the sun that swamped one as one left the doorway, it was sound—an avalanche of sound. There were countless children, there were countless baby carriages, there were countless mothers. And to the screams, rebukes, and bickerings of these, a seemingly endless file of hucksters joined their bawling cries. On Avenue D horse-cars clattered and banged. Avenue D was thronged with beer wagons, garbage carts, and coal trucks. There were many automobiles, some blunt and rangey, some with high straw poops, honking. Beyond Avenue D, at the end of a stunted, ruined block that began with shacks and smithies and seltzer bottling works and ended in a junk heap, was the East River on which many boat horns sounded. On 10th Street, the 8th Street Crosstown car ground its way toward the switch. (p. 143)

The noises of general humanity invade the indoors as well: "The stairs were of stone and one could hear himself climb. The toilets were in the hall. Sometimes the people in them rattled newspapers, sometimes they hummed, sometimes they groaned. That was cheering" (pp. 143–44). In one scene after another, David's ears register the sound of human crowds:

> Curtains overhead paddled out of open windows. The air had shivered into a thousand shrill, splintered cries, wedged here and there by the sudden whoop of a boy or the impatient squawk of a mother. . . . In the shelter of a doorway, across the gutter, a cluster of children shouted in monotone up at the sky:
>
> "Rain, rain, go away, come again some oddeh day. Rain, rain. . . ."
>
> The yard was gloomy. Wash-poles creaked and swayed, pulleys jangled. In a window overhead, a bulky, bare-armed woman shrilled curses at someone behind her and hastily hauled in the bedding that straddled the sills like bulging sacks.
>
> "And your guts be plucked!" her words rang out over the yard. "Couldn't you tell me it was raining?" (pp. 223–24)

Even when David, near the beginning of "The Rail," retreats to the freedom of the rooftop—"that silent balcony on the pinnacle of turmoil"—he remains eerily aware of the humanity below: "What sounds

from the street, what voices drifted up the air-shafts, only made his solitude more real" (p. 299). Human crowds provide what Schafer calls the "keynote" sound of the novel, the sound that acts as a constant point of reference like tonality in a piece of music; or to borrow Schafer's figure-ground analogy from visual perception, they provide the ground against which more meaning-laden figures are heard. This crescendo of voices accompanies David through the latter half of the novel to his climactic action at the trolley rail. It amply prepares for the daring divided narration of Chapter 21, in which David's self-enclosed consciousness is surrounded by this keynote chorus of human voices, even though he no longer hears them.[15]

Reading *Call It Sleep* with Schafer's account of past and present soundscapes in mind, one is struck by the predominance of human over mechanical sounds in Roth's city. If this is in fact the noisiest novel ever written, the reason is the narrating character's sensitivity and the author's vivid aural memory; for the soundscape in the New York of 1907 was hardly as noisy as the modern city's, where the keynote, as Schafer observes, is that of the internal-combustion engine.[16] Despite Roth's occasional mention of automobiles, they play little role in the novel; and despite his references to horse-cars, smithies, boat horns, and trolleys—all of which assume important symbolic functions—the human presence dominates; there is a feeling of perspective, of sounds near and far, which is largely obliterated in today's city. Absent from this intensely urban novel too are most natural sounds, apart from the domesticated horses, chickens, parrots, and canaries. And absent, of course, from Roth's indoor settings are modern intrusions like telephone or radio—or any electronic or amplified sound (though curiously enough, Roth's text registers the whine of power lines [p. 425], the so-called "corona noise" that power companies have just recently begun to study).

In fact, for such a noisy book, there is notably little music of any kind. The music is not set apart as an aesthetic object, but is integrated into the lives of the characters, like the children's game song that arouses David's dim memories of Europe (p. 23), or the work song that Genya absently sings as she washes windows (p. 329). Mention is made of a gramophone (Genya had heard one in Europe): "I never heard anything labor so or squawk," she says. "But the peasants were awed. They swore there was devil in the box" (p. 33). The Schearls possess one, but it remains an empty possession, "mute and motionless as the day before creation" (p. 156), as Aunt Bertha chides—though she desires to possess one herself (p. 185).

But Roth does not treat sonic imagery simply as part of the neutral background of the novelistic world. One cannot consider sound in *Call It Sleep* without quickly becoming entangled in David's emotional responses to it; nor can one consider sound apart from silence. David reacts to both sound and silence at first mainly with aversion, with fear. But gradually in the course of the novel he learns to overcome his fears, to find his place in the apparently hostile environment of the New World. Ultimately, he challenges the noise of power, and he acquiesces in the silence of sleep.

In the important passage near the beginning that establishes David's fear of sudden extinction, symbolized by the dark cellar, critics have noticed Roth's use of darkness and light, but they have failed to comment on his use of sound and silence:

> David never found himself alone on these stairs, but he wished there were not carpet covering them. How could you hear the sound of your own feet in the dark if a carpet muffled every step you took? And if you couldn't hear the sound of your own feet and couldn't see anything either, how could you be sure you were actually there and not dreaming? A few steps from the bottom landing, he paused and stared rigidly at the cellar door. It bulged with darkness. Would it hold? . . . It held! He jumped from the last steps and raced through the narrow hallway to the light of the street. (p. 20)

The incident vividly dramatizes what R. D. Laing would call David's ontological insecurity—his failure to feel secure of his own presence in the world as a real, whole, and continuous person. Thus a few pages later, when David again ventures the same route, he begs his mother, "Mama, will you leave the door open till—till I'm gone—till you hear me downstairs?" (p. 58).

Being heard is assurance of being. As Schafer remarks, silence, in the Western world at least, has mainly negative connotations: "Man likes to make sounds to remind himself that he is not alone. From this point of view total silence is the negation of human personality. Man fears the absence of sound as he fears the absence of life."[17] This fear is observable in other characters as well. Bill Whitney, the watchman who appears briefly in Chapter 21 of "The Rail," mutters to himself—"and this he did not so much to populate the silence with ephemeral, figment selves, but to follow the links of his own, slow thinking, which when he failed to hear, he lost" (p. 410). And the irrepressible Aunt Bertha, perhaps the only character besides David who fully senses the soundscape around her, embraces the turmoil—"I hate quiet and I hate

death" (p. 168)—as roundly as she rejects the Old World she has left behind: "But there's life here, isn't there? There's a stir always. Listen! The street! The cars! High laughter! Ha, good! Veljish was still as a fart in company. Who could endure it?" (p. 153).

Many scenes dramatize David's equation of silence with death and sound with life. When he witnesses a passing funeral, he tells himself, frantically:

> Make a noise. Noise. . . . He advanced. What? Noise. Any. "Aaaaah! Ooooh!" he quavered. "My country 'tis of dee!" He began running. The cellar door. Louder. "Sweet land of liberty," he shrilled, and whirled toward the stairs. . . . "Land where our fodders died!" The landing; he dove for the door, flinging himself upon it. . . . (p. 62)

The land where David's forefathers actually died, of course, is not America but the Old World, though his choice of lyrics ironically underlines an oedipal wish for his father's death here. A much later scene again equates silence with nonexistence. David drops a rosary gotten from his Catholic friend Leo on the floor of a different cellar: "At the floor of a vast pit of silence glimmered the rough light, pulsed and glimmered like a coin." He gropes for it: " 'I'm gonna get it,' almost audibly. '*I am*!' His teeth gritted, head quivering in such desperate rage, the blood whirred in his ears. . . '*I am*' " (p. 354). But with the whir of his own life processes in his ears, David's desperation is interrupted by the precocious sexual experimentation of Leo and cousin Polly—sounds that signify not the extinction but the creation of life. At yet another point in the book, David thinks of himself in his mother's womb, a memory, possibly even a prenatal memory, triggered when he overhears the mysterious word "Benkart," Polish for *bastard*: "—Benkart! (Beside the doorway David fastened on the word) What? Know it. No, don't. Heard it. In her belly. Listen!" (p. 202).

David learns early that where there is life there is sound: pure silence is unattainable. Hiding himself in the cellar darkness after a fight with playmates, he discovers

> there was no silence here, but if he dared to listen, he could hear tappings and creakings, patterings and whisperings, all furtive, all malign. It was horrible, the dark. The rats lived there, the hordes of nightmare, the wobbly faces, the crawling and misshapen things. (p. 92)

The composer John Cage similarly learned that there is no such thing as pure silence: when he entered an anechoic chamber and reported two sounds, one high and one low, he was told that one was his nervous

system in operation, the other his blood circulating.[18] David likewise experiences sound as part of his most intimate bodily rhythms; his system vibrates with the world around him. Helping with his father's milk deliveries, he is physically oppressed by the jangling bottles: "Louder, louder, nearer, they seemed to clank in David's heart as well. With every step his father took, the breath in his own body became more labored, more suffocating" (p. 279). Sonic metaphors enter Roth's language: "His blood, which a moment before had been chiming in bright abandon, deepened its stress, weighted its rhythm to an ominous tolling" (p. 339). As David flees the violent family confrontation in "The Rail," "every racked fibre in his body screamed out in exhaustion. Each time his foot fell was like a plunger through his skull" (p. 404).

Call It Sleep depicts many scenes in which David detects others by sound, or lurks out of sight eavesdropping on an adult world otherwise closed to him: "He crept to his doorway, stiff ankle-joints cracking like gun-shots. A blur of voices behind the door. . . . Hope clutched at it" (p. 386). David's instinctive recoil from Luter includes a disjunction of sight from sound: "But chiefly he found himself resenting Mr. Luter's eyes. They seemed to be independent of his speech, far outstripping it in fact; for instead of glancing at one, they fixed one and then held on until the voice caught up" (pp. 30–31). Elsewhere, David notes "a short chuckle that pecked like a tiny hammer" (p. 37), or a frown and "a faint smacking sound from the side of his mouth" (p. 45). Indeed throughout the novel, Roth's dialogue is loaded with stage directions in what may seem an excessive way. Within the space of a page we read: "said Luter sympathetically . . . said Luter meditatively . . . she laughed, straightening up . . . said Luter with a sigh . . . she agreed . . . he said warmly . . . said Luter with conviction . . . his mother laughed condoningly . . . he assured her . . . said Luter with the hesitance of careful appraisal" (pp. 40–41). This is a mannerism to be sure, but it is consistent with David's sensitivities. As he constitutes his world through listening, he is alert not just to what is said, but even more to the intonations and intentions behind what is said.

Roth seems unusually aware of the relationship between sound as phenomenon and sound as sign. This is clear in his treatment of languages—such as the Hebrew instilled phonetically before it is joined to "chumish," or translation. And when Genya and Aunt Bertha converse in Polish to close David out of the conversation, he strains to follow: "But though he pried here, there, everywhere among the gutturals and surds striving with all his power so split the stubborn scales of speech, he could not" (pp. 195–96). But nonverbal signals, too,

clutter David's world—from the "familiar tinny jangle" of a shopkeeper's bell (p. 78), to the factory whistles (p. 22) and school bells (p. 59) by which he keeps time.

The factory whistle, however, serves not only as a timekeeper but, to borrow another of Schafer's coinages, a "soundmark" as well. Schafer defines a soundmark as "a community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community."[19] In other words, the sound is not merely registered but invested with particular meaning or feeling. During the episode in which David, lost, is taken in by sympathetic policemen, Roth makes it plain that he has learned to orient himself, to interpret his environment, not through his eyes but through his ears. When he loses his way, he first tries to find himself visually: "Though he conned every house on either side of the crossing, no single landmark stirred his memory. They were all alike—wooden houses and narrow sidewalks to his right and left" (p. 96). But when at the police station he hears the familiar whistle, he immediately comprehends the distance he has traveled and panics at the thought of his mother: "Whistles? He raised his head. Factory whistles! The others? None! Too far! So far she was. So far away!—But she heard them—she heard the other whistles that he couldn't hear" (p. 104). The policemen notice, but Genya soon arrives and, as the two walk home, the process of sensory orientation is repeated. David is again deceived by his eyes:

> "That way, Mama?" He stared incredulously. "This way!" He pointed to the right. "This way is my school."
>
> "That's why you were lost! It's the other way." (p. 109)

But he knows he has arrived in the right place through the aural and tactile sensations of the wind: "They neared the open lot. He knew where he was now, certain of every step. There was a wind that prowled over that area of rock and dead grass, that would spring up at them when they passed it. And the wind did" (pp. 109–110).

This sonic orientation is repeated in "The Picture," where David again secures his place in the new East Side neighborhood largely through sound:

> He knew his world now. With a kind of meditative assurance, he singled out the elements of the ever-present din—the far voices, the near, the bells of a junk wagon, the sing-song cry of the I-Cash-clothes-man, waving his truncheon-newspaper, the sloshing jangle of the keys on the huge ring on the back of the tinker. (pp. 173–74)

Indeed throughout the novel, from the bellow of the steamer on the

first page to the climactic moment when David regains consciousness at the end, whistles and boat horns—which "set up strange reverberations in the heart" (p. 63)—gather symbolic associations having to do with orientation in time and place.

In *Call It Sleep*, one can observe this process by which a sound signal becomes a sound symbol, or to repeat Naomi Diamant's terms, by which David learns not only to decode but to encode his environment. As Schafer puts it, "a sound event is symbolic when it stirs in us emotions or thoughts beyond its mechanical sensations or signalling function, when it has a numinosity or reverberation that rings through the deeper recesses of the psyche."[20] Whistles and boat horns are the most obvious examples in the novel, but many other sonic motifs are developed and interrelated in complex ways. Furthermore, although the factory whistles suggest David's increasing security in his surroundings, other symbols take on more mysterious overtones. As Walter Allen remarks, Roth's novel captures "better than it has ever been done in English before what might be called a child's magical thinking, which is clearly allied to the thinking of the poet." [21] Like his literary precursor Huck Finn, who hears "an owl, away off, who-whooing about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody who was going to die" (Chapter 1), David Schearl hears certain sounds, like the Hebrew words of Isaiah, that trigger feelings of the supernatural.[22]

> All his senses dissolved into the sound. The lines, unknown, dimly surmised, thundered in his heart with limitless meaning, rolled out and flooded the last shores of his being. Unmoored in space, he saw one walking on impalpable pavements that rose with the rising trees. Or were they trees or telegraph-poles, each crossed and leafy, none could say, but forms stood there with footholds in unmitigated light. (pp. 255–56)

Here Isaiah's coal, which purifies his unclean lips and makes him a prophet of God, is associated not only with telegraph poles (and thus with David's earlier venture into the unknown), but also with the cross of the Christian Messiah, the thunder of Yahweh (see below), and the blinding light of unlimited power. It is associations like these, formed in David's mind, that drive him to the apparently irrational but quite explicable act of the penultimate chapter.

Because David, a young boy in a new world, must invent his own symbols, Reb Yiddel Pankower asks himself a key question: "What was going to become of these Yiddish youth? What would become of this new breed? These Americans?" (p. 374). This process of becoming is what *Call It Sleep* reveals. There may be, as Meyer Levin suggests, "no

more perceptive work in any literature dealing with a child's conditioning."[23] But just as the melodramatic convergences of "The Rail" reveal this positive process of conditioning, of encoding and creating new meanings, so do they join them to a mounting series of betrayals—betrayals of his mother's sexual secret and his father's presumed disgrace, of his sympathetic aunt and her stepdaughter's honor, of his religion and his rabbi. The betrayals are psychological, moral, cultural, and religious.

David's climactic act then, is simultaneously an effort to atone for them and an effort to seize power—literally the electric power of the trolley rail, but symbolically the sexual power of his father and the religious power of his private messianic vision. The scene is a confluence of interrelated symbols in which the psychological battle between father and son stands for conflicts on several other levels: it suggests a battle between Old and New Worlds, between Old and New Testaments, between captivity and freedom. As Roth's punning reference to Ahura Mazda suggests ("Vus dere a hura mezda, Morr's?" [p. 414]), it is a Manichaean battle between symbols of light and darkness.[24] To these conflicts, which a number of Roth's critics have explored, I would add that it is a battle between sound and silence.

As Schafer says, "Noise equals Power."[25] The loudest noises in the soundscape are created by those who hold greatest power over it. Thus the factory whistles, boat horns, and trolley noises dominate a society controlled by industry and commerce. It is a society David wishes to enter. This equation of loudness with power is understood instinctively by David's peers:

> "Yuh don' make enough noise, dat's why. Yuh oughta ha' Wildy."
>
> "Who don' make enough noise? I hollered loud like anyt'ing. Who beats?" (p. 219)

At various points, David's Brownsville playmate Yussie imitates the noise of a gun: "Bing! I'm an Innian" (p. 81); a firecracker that exploded prematurely in a man's hand: "Kling! Kling! Kling! Jos' like dat! Kling! Kling! Kling! Cauze de fiyuh crecker wen' bang by his ears!" (p. 139); and the printing press that injures Albert's thumb: "Id don' go boof?" (p. 141). David, whose sensibilities are clearly more delicate, at first recoils from such noisemaking; but when he discovers a source of mystical power between the trolley rails, he experiences it as an overwhelming fusion of light and sound, as Roth's language resorts to the figure of synesthesia:

> From open fingers, the blade plunged into darkness.

> Power!
>
> Like a paw ripping through all the stable fibres of the earth, power, gigantic, fetterless, thudded into day! And light, unleashed, terrific light bellowed out of iron lips. The street quaked and roared, and like a tortured thing, the sheet zinc sword, leapt writhing, fell back, consumed with radiance. (p. 253)

This first electric shock has resulted from anti-Semitic hounding by a group of street bullies; that is, it is tied to David's difficulties in making a place for himself in the Gentile-dominated world that he struggles to understand. But after the event, he discovers that his fear of the darkness has been lifted: "Gee. Used to be darker. . . . Ain't really there. Inside my head. Better inside. Can carry it" (p. 261). And soon after, he discovers the relative freedom of the rooftop, where the sunlight again is felt in terms of synesthesia—"a trumpet, triple-trumpet bearing light" (p. 296)—and where he can actually strike up a friendship, though an unequal one, with a kite-flying Christian. (Leo's kite, of course, recalls that prototypical American Ben Franklin, who tapped the sources of electric power directly from the sky.)

The second and climactic electric shock again reaches for the language of synesthesia, but it takes on more intricate symbolic associations, including a fusion of the sexual and the religious. As if to underscore the religious dimension of Roth's sound symbolism, Schafer advances a concept that he calls "sacred noise." "Wherever Noise has been granted immunity from human intervention," he writes, "there will be found a seat of power":

> The association of Noise and power has never really been broken in the human imagination. It descends from God, to the priest, to the industrialist, and more recently to the broadcaster and the aviator. The important thing to realize is this: to have the Sacred Noise is not merely to make the biggest noise; rather it is a matter of having authority to make it without censure.[26]

When David shoves the metal milk dipper—a symbol associated with both his father's penis and his mother's breast—into the trolley track, his quasi-sexual act ("in the crack be born") seems to him "as though he had struck the enormous bell of the very heart of silence" (p. 411).[27] When the circuit is completed, amid allusions to the virgin birth of Jesus and Peter's betrayal, David experiences the shock as "a blast, a siren of light within him . . . braying his body with pinions of intolerable light," while onlookers witness "a single cymbal-clash of light" and the milk dipper "consumed in roaring incandescence" (p. 419). Significantly, David

seeks this sacred noise not in the cheder but in the power circuit of the commercial world. His privately coded symbolic act brings him into contact, literally, with the true sources of social power.

Roth's cumulative technique builds complex symbolic chains: David's final self-immolation is anticipated in the doll-burning scene of "The Picture" (p. 207), and the incandescent milk dipper by the ritually burned Passover spoon of "The Coal" (p. 244). Likewise, the whistle that brings David back to consciousness (p. 431) is invested with symbolic and magical properties from many earlier scenes; most prominent is the hallucinatory waterfront scene in which David, transfixed by "fire on the water," is saved from falling by the blast of a tugboat:

> Minutes passed while he stared. The brilliance was hypnotic. He could not take his eyes away. . . . And he heard the rubbing on a wash-board and the splashing suds, smelled again the acrid soap and a voice speaking words that opened like the bands of a burnished silver accordion—Brighter than day. . . . Brighter. . . . Sin melted into light. . . .
>
> Uh chug chug, ug chug!
>
> —Cucka cucka. . . . Is a chicken
>
> Ug chug, ug chug, ug—TEW WEET!
>
> What! He started as if out of a dream. A tremor shook him from head to foot so violently that his ears whirred and rang. His eyes bulged, staring. (pp. 247–48)

David then sees the man on the tugboat who has saved him, "a man in his undershirt, bare, outstretched arms gripping the doorpost on either side. He whistled again, shrill from mobile lips, grinned, spat, and 'Wake up, Kid!' his sudden amused hail rolled over the water, 'fore you throw a belly-w'opper!'" (p. 248).

This complex scene is mentioned by most of Roth's commentators, but again the auditory imagery has been largely ignored. As Lyons observes, the man's "Wake up, Kid!" links David to the sacrificial kid of the Chadgodya, and the man's pose with outstretched arms suggests the Crucifixion (p. 61). But this pose also links him to David's father emerging from his bedroom in the previous chapter: "His stretching arms pressed against both sides of the door-frame till it creaked. 'We need some light'" (p. 242). And the sound of the washboard and splashing suds recalls his mother in the same scene, pronouncing the mystical words "Brighter than day" as she sits in the dark, washing curtains for Passover—surreptitiously breaking the Sabbath after sundown on Friday. The image is thus colored by both oedipal and religious guilt. Furthermore, the "cucka cucka"—a sonic rendition of

the chugging tugboat—recalls through a sonic pun an earlier visit with Genya to a chicken market:

> It's a sin. . . . So God told him eat in your own markets. . . . That time with mama in the chicken market when we went. Where all the chickens ran around—cuckacucka—when did I say? Cucka. Gee! Funny. Some place I said. And then the man with a knife went zing! Gee! Blood and wings. And threw him down. Even kosher meat when you see, you don't want to eat— (p. 226)

Although the market was kosher, as David recalls while seated in the cheder, Genya's laxity is disturbing: "Mama don't care except when Bertha was looking" (p. 226). The chicken reference furthermore looks forward to the icon David notices in Leo's apartment, Jesus of the Sacred Heart holding his breast open and pointing to his inner organs: "Guts like a chicken, open. And he's holding them" (p. 321). This scene, in which Leo lectures David on the restrictiveness of the Jewish diet and the superiority of "Christchin light"—"Bigger den Jew light" (p. 322)—is the same in which David also gathers information about the mysterious occupation of Genya's Gentile lover, a church organist. Leo describes a church organ: "Dey looks like pianers, on'y dey w'istles" (p. 321).[28] Chickens, organs, whistles, breaking the Mosaic law, taking a Gentile lover, and the superior power of Christian light—all conspire in the subterranean linkages of Roth's text and David's mind (and the reader's) to drive him to question his own origins and to emulate the freedom of the Christian boy whom he first saw flying a kite and "whistling up at the sky" (p. 301): "*Not afraid! Leo wasn't afraid!*" (p. 305).

Furthermore, in David's hallucinating mind at the waterfront, the tugboat whistle and the whistling man aboard her together fuse with a different bird sound:

> E-e-e. Twee-twee-twee. Tweet! Tweet! Cheep! Eet! R-rawk Gee! Whistle. Thought it was that man. In the tugboat. In the shirt. Whistling. Only birds. Canary. That lady's. Polly too—Polly want a cracker—is out already. On the fire-escape. Whistle. (p. 260)

Behind this stands an episode in which David has heard two caged birds in his East Side neighborhood:

> A parrot and a canary. Awk! Awk! the first cried. Eee-tee-tee—tweet! the other. A smooth and a rusty pulley. He wondered if they understood each other. Maybe it was like Yiddish and English, or Yiddish and Polish, the way his mother and aunt sometimes spoke. Secrets. What? (p. 174)

David clearly associates the bird sounds with the Polish-encoded secrets of his mother, and thus with his own possibly illegitimate origins. The canary, furthermore, looks forward to the escaped canary the boys pursue in Chapter 4 of "The Rail," and thence to the "yellow birds" that symbolize freedom throughout the climactic scene. Though the boys fail to catch the canary in the chapter, they do catch sight of Genya, naked, bathing in the washtub, much to David's anguish. In addition, the parrot bears the name of David's cousin Polly, whom he betrays to Leo's sexual predation in the candy-store cellar, thus repeating the forbidden liaison of Jew and Gentile begun by his mother. Leo, in fact, being Polish, acts as a double for David, suggesting to the reader and perhaps to his own subconscious the boy he might have been if he were truly the son of Genya's lover. Thus the birds and their sounds are circuitously related to David's awareness of his mother's sexuality and his own, to their mutual need for atonement and purification, and at the same time—even at the cost of betraying his Jewishness—to the desirability of the freedoms allowed to Gentiles.

One other significant though less intricate sound symbol reinforces the association of Leo with freedom of mobility and freedom from fear. Again an early memory is involved. In "The Cellar," David, returning home through the snow with a newspaper for his father, began to run: "He had only taken a few strides forward when his foot suddenly landed on something that was not pavement. The sound of hollow iron warned him too late—A coal-chute cover. He slipped" (pp. 78–79). The ruined paper rouses his father's anger, leading soon after to the brutal beating with a coat hanger. The hollow iron sound of the coal-chute ties together his fear of the cellar with his fear of his father, and relates as well to his desire for Isaiah's purifying coal. Near the end of the novel, the same sound alerts David to Leo's approach behind him—on the coveted roller skates: "The sudden whirr of wheels behind him—now louder on the sidewalk now roaring momentarily over the hollow buckle of a coal-chute—" (p. 337). Leo, the liberated and potent Gentile, flies over coal-chutes as he flies over rooftops. This sound is closely allied to the hollow metallic sound of the phallic milk dipper as David pries it loose: "It bulged, sounded hollow. Again he braced himself, thrust—Clank!" (pp. 407–08). And again when he strikes it against the trolley rail: "Only in his ears, the hollow click of iron lingered. Hollow, vain" (p. 414).

Roth weaves together these sound symbols with many other motifs in the climactic scene to suggest David's reaching out for purification and freedom; but he introduces a number of others, as well, linked with

the negative psychological forces embodied in David's father. Bonnie Lyons traces one of these, the *Zwank* motif, and though she concentrates on its semantic meaning—the Yiddish word for tongs, connecting his mother's sugar tongs with those of Isaiah's angel—she recognizes that when the word first appears in the scene at the rail, "the sound itself seems most important"; the word "assumes its semantic and imagistic significance" only gradually, as David's mind recollects.[29] She does not explain, however, why the word appears not with the angelic tongs but together with David's terrifying vision of his father leaping godlike over the rooftops and swinging his hammer. This recollection goes back to a glimpse inside a blacksmith's shop, just before David burns his Passover spoon and becomes hypnotized by the "fire on the water," where tongs and hammer are combined:

> Acrid odor of seared hooves lingered about the place. Now a horse-shoe glowed under the hammer—ong-jonga-ong-jong-jong-jong—ringing on the anvil as the pincers turned it.
>
> —Zwank. Zwank. In a cellar is—
>
> He passed the seltzer bottlery—the rattle and gurgle—passed the stable. (p. 245)

Thus, like the milk dipper, the tongs are associated not only with the mother and her sugar tongs, but also with the father and his hammer, and also therefore with the fear and guilt that both parents arouse. But this passage also links the hammer and tongs to horses and jangling bottles—sounds later invested with terrifying associations in the milk-delivery episode. These sounds at first seem relatively neutral, even positive, since the event promises an adventure into the outer world as his father's helper; but disaster strikes when David first disobeys instructions to wait with the wagon, and then watches helplessly as two bullies steal milk. His father's rage is soon inscribed into the sounds of the wagon, the bottles, the horses—and above all the whip, with which Albert almost beats to death one of the offenders:

> The crunch of heels on the gravel. Terror! His eyes snapped open.
>
> Dwarfed between the huge gas tanks, his father rounded the path. Eyes downcast as always he hurried, jangling the empty grey bottles in their trays. . . .
>
> "Paid yourself again!" he snarled. "Giddap! Giddap, Billy!" He snatched the whip out of the socket, lashed the horse. Stung, the beast plunged forward. The wheels ground against the curb. "Giddap!" Again the whip. Hooves rang out in a pounding, powerful gallop. The wagon lurched, careened around the

> corner on creaking axle, empty bottles banging in their boxes. . . . (pp. 279–80)

These sounds, incidentally, are among those identified by Schafer as the most aversive in the pre-automotive urban soundscape[30]; but David's response to the cracking whip needs little explication when he presents it to his father for punishment at the end of the violent quarrel in Chapter 19 of "The Rail." For although David is not physically whipped for the stolen milk, he is verbally disavowed by his raging father—"False son! You, the cause!"—and he is psychologically pressed into silence and nonexistence—"Say anything to your mother . . . and I'll beat you to death! Hear me?" (p. 282). Little wonder, then, that in David's vision the father appears accompanied by jangling milk bottles, a hammer that "snapped like a whip," and the reiterated *Zwank!* as he orders his son to "Go down" (p. 426).

One other archetypal sound attaches to Albert Schearl in this terrible vision: twice we read that his voice "thundered" (pp. 427–28). Lyons quite plausibly identifies this thunder motif with the Germanic hammer-wielding god of wrath, Thor[31]; but oddly enough, she omits reference to the one scene in the novel in which we actually hear "a clap of thunder and a rumbling like a barrel rolling down cellar stairs" (p. 234). It occurs when David, in the cheder, has just successfully recited the Chadgodya. The thunder excites the other children: "Bang! Bang what a bust it gave! I tol' yuh I see a blitz before!" (p. 234). The only characters frightened by the din are David himself and Reb Yiddel Pankower, who ducks his head and exclaims "Shma yisroel. . . . Woe is me!" Both regain composure:

> "Before God," the rabbi interrupted, "none may stand upright."
> —Before God
> "But what did you think?"
> "I thought it was a bed before. Upstairs. But it wasn't." (p. 235)

There is ample precedent in scripture for the rabbi's association of thunder with the wrath of Yahweh. But David's unexpected linking of thunder to the sound of a bed upstairs relates both thunderclap and God's wrath with his oedipal antagonism to his father. The rabbi underlines this association unknowingly, when he derides David's visionary account of Isaiah's coal in the trolley rail: "Oy! Chah! Chah! Chah! I'll split like a herring! Yesterday he heard a bed in the thunder! Today he sees a vision in the crack!" (p. 257). Failing to grasp David's mystical and quasi-sexual symbolic language, the rabbi disqualifies

himself in David's mind as an authority: "The rabbi didn't know as he knew what the light was." Thus when the milk dipper makes contact with the rail, it appears (amid cries of "Jesus!," "Schloimee, a blitz like—," and "Holy Mother o' God") as a burst of flame that "growled as if the veil of earth were splitting" (p. 420), and the Old Testament thunder is exchanged for that which rends the veil of the temple at Christ's Crucifixion in the Gospel of Matthew.

The father's appearance in David's vision enacts the psychological conflicts that the boy is struggling to resolve, a life-and-death struggle partly figured in symbolic language of sound and silence. Before such a God, none may stand upright—and as the visionary father orders David to "Go down," his consciousness approaches "nothingness," "oblivion," and "silence" (p. 430). But the sounds of life prevail. We hear the "Kh-r-r-r-r-f! S-s-s-s" of David's breath, supplied by artificial respiration, but also, certainly, by his will to survive. And we hear the wires that "whined on their crosses" (p. 425) and the groans of the "man in the wires" whose "purple chicken-guts slipped through his fingers" (p. 426), as David's imagination fuses the two episodes in which he is saved by a whistle into a single image of a messianic Savior.

Although the critics are divided, and Roth himself seems uncertain whether the ending of his novel is positive or negative, my own view is close to those of Naomi Diamant, Maxwell Geismar (in his introduction to the Cooper Square edition of the novel), or William Freedman, who writes:

> The myths of redemption and rebirth are implicit in the story of David Schearl, and both are rendered largely by means of symbolic image pattern that is part of David's own conscious awareness and that is viewed symbolically by his own fertile imagination as well as by the reader.[32]

David, whose name allies him to the messianic family of scriptural tradition, clearly emerges from his ordeal as victor, having undergone an almost literal death and rebirth. Though Leslie Fiedler contends that David's "intended sacrifice redeems no one,"[33] it does, I think, redeem himself, and by extension the population that he stands for—that of the newly assimilated immigrant. The novel portrays in the intensity of David's vision not a passive sensibility but an emerging poetic imagination capable of shaping an imperfect world to its own uses.

As readers of this climactic scene, we witness David's unconscious mind constitute a "self" in terms of a symbolic narrative woven out of its own experience. This narrative functions, in a paradigmatic Freudian

way, to exorcise the parental demons and reassert the unconscious self on new ground; for as Paul Jay has noted, the whole idea of Freudian analysis "depends on the subject's ability to fashion a narrative, a discursive formulation of the meaning of past events identified in the process of analysis as significant."[34] The outcome of this narrative is, to be sure, provisional, for it almost ends in David's death. But his recovery signifies, in psychological terms, a readiness to assert his independent being in the face of his father's rejection, and in social terms, his ability to assume a place in the loud world. At the novel's end, David Schearl is a successful adult and assimilated American *in posse*. Thus he can finally accept the natural rhythm and natural silence of sleep without fear:

> It was only toward sleep that his 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 the sounds that lay fermenting in the vats of silence and the past . . . 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. (p. 441)

[1] Walter Allen, "Afterword" to Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (New York: Avon, 1964), p. 445. Subsequent references to *Call It Sleep* are cited parenthetically in the text.

[2] Leslie Fiedler, "Henry Roth's Neglected Masterpiece," in *Unfinished Business* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), p. 82. I am also indebted to Naomi Diamant, "Linguistic Universes in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*," *Contemporary Literature*, 27 (1986), 336–55; James Ferguson, "Symbolic Patterns in *Call It Sleep*," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 14 (1969), 211–20; Ita Scheres, "Exile and Redemption in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*," *Markham Review*, 6 (1977), 72–77; and Bonnie Lyons, *Henry Roth: The Man and His Work* (New York: Cooper Square, 1976). I must also mention essays by two students, Brian Greenspan and Karim Mamdami.

[3] Richard J. Fein, "Fear, Fatherhood and Desire in *Call It Sleep*," *Yiddish*, 5 (1984), 49.

[4] Fiedler, "Henry Roth's Neglected Masterpiece," p. 85.

[5] Compare Roth's autobiographical reminiscence: "I wanted to adapt to this gentile Irish neighborhood in the shortest time possible; and one of the conditions for adapting was to get away from Judaism" (Lyons, *Henry Roth*, p. 172). Lyons' chapter "*Call It Sleep* as a Jewish Novel" (pp. 125–34) places this issue in context.

[6] R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), p. 11.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 51.

[8] Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 14–15.

[9] Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*, p. 11.

[10] Allen, "Afterword," p. 444.

[11] Roth tells Lyons (*Henry Roth*, p. 160), that David's character is "much too innocent, almost completely victimized, passive." Compare Helge Norman Nilsen, "The Role of the Protagonist in *Call It Sleep*," *Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters*, 13 (1983), 28–41.

[12] Diamant, "Linguistic Universes," pp. 337 and 346. For a semiotic reading that judges David's efforts a failure, see Wayne Lesser, "A Narrative's Revolutionary Edge: The Example of Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*," *Criticism*, 23 (1981), 155–76.

[13] Lyons, *Henry Roth*, pp. 169 and 117–23.

[14] Raymond Chapman, *The Treatment of Sounds in Language and Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p. 195.

[15] Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*, pp. 9–10. Roth (Lyons, *Henry Roth*, p. 170) fears that while to that point he had written "a fairly cohesive, formally recognizable novel," in this chapter he "ruptures the whole envelope." Richard J. Fein, too, thinks that this scene is "the least convincing part" ("Fear, Fatherhood and Desire in *Call It Sleep*," p. 53).

[16] Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*, p. 82.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 256.

[18] John Cage, *Silence* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1966), p. 13.

[19] Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*, p. 274.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 169.

[21] Allen, "Afterword," p. 446.

[22] Roth identifies *Huckleberry Finn* as "one of my great transitions" (Lyons, *Henry Roth*, p. 168). Don Ihde likewise emphasizes the relationship between religion and sound (*Listening and Voice*, p. 177):

> The very experience of God in the biblical traditions is . . . such that the person of God is "like" an intense auditory experience. . . . In the classical religious experience of Isaiah in the Temple, vision is obscured as the Temple is filled with the smoke of the offering, but the voice of God presents itself in the very midst of the visual obscurity. The God of voice surrounds, penetrates, and fills the worshipper.

[23] Meyer Levin, "A Personal Appreciation," in Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (New York: Cooper Square, 1965), p. xlvii.

[24] "Was there a whore master, Morris?" Roth points out the pun to Lyons (*Henry Roth*, p. 171).

[25] Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*, p. 74.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 76.

[27] Both Schafer (*ibid.*, p. 176) and Chapman (*The Treatment of Sounds*, p. 158) discuss the numinous quality of the bell symbol. On the plausibility of David's near-electrocution, see Henry Roth, *Shifting Landscape* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), p. 10.

[28] Schafer (*The Tuning of the World*, p. 55) identifies the cathedral organ, the loudest machine produced until that time, as the "sacred noise" of the medieval European.

[29] Lyons, *Henry Roth*, p. 63.

[30] Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*, p. 62.

[31] Lyons, *Henry Roth*, pp. 56–59.

[32] William Freedman, "Henry Roth and the Redemptive Imagination," in Warren French, ed., *The Thirties* (Deland, Fla.: Everett/Edwards, 1967), p. 114. For Roth's comments on the ending, see Lyons, *Henry Roth*, pp. 170–71.

[33] Fiedler, "Henry Roth's Neglected Manuscript," p. 87.

[34] Paul Jay, *Being in the Text: Self-Representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 24–25.

AN AMERICAN MESSIAH: MYTH IN HENRY ROTH'S "CALL IT SLEEP"

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Source: *Modern Fiction Studies*, Winter 1989, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Winter 1989), pp. 673-687

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/26283368

AN AMERICAN MESSIAH: MYTH IN HENRY ROTH'S *CALL IT SLEEP*

Lynn Altenbernd

HENRY ROTH'S *CALL IT SLEEP* HAS MOVED AND DELIGHTED—and puzzled—two generations of readers. Sometimes regarded as the best of American proletarian novels or as the best novel growing out of the Great Depression, it is in fact neither proletarian in any strict sense nor directly concerned with the economic depression of the 1930s. Since its publication in 1934 and particularly since its reissue in 1960, a succession of commentators have produced something approaching a consensus that the novel is at its core the record of a religious experience and that the novel is a distinctly Jewish work.[1]

I would suggest that the religious theme developed in *Call It Sleep* depicts the birth and childhood of a New-World messiah whose story con-

[1]Whereas Walter B. Rideout describes *Call It Sleep* as "the most distinguished single proletarian novel" (186) and Kenneth Ledbetter calls it "the most authentic and compelling expression the American proletariat has received" (123), Roth has said: "It's certainly not a proletarian novel" (Freedman, "Conversation" 152). In an interview with John S. Friedman, Roth contended that *Sleep* had nothing to do with either escapism or "the cataclysmic upheavals of the Depression" (33). Leslie Fiedler, writing in anticipation of the novel's reappearance in 1960, declared: "Roth's book aspires not to sociology but to theology; it is finally and astonishingly a religious book" ("Neglected Masterpiece" 105). Fieldler's position received confirmation when Harold U. Ribalow's introduction to the 1960 edition quoted a letter from Roth: "There is one thing I like above all others, and that is redemption . . ." (xix). Since 1960 a number of other commentators have made the religious theme the critics' choice (James Ferguson 211; Field 22; Knowles 393; Lyons, *Henry Roth*; Freedman, "Mystical"). Bonnie Lyons, whose excellent *Henry Roth: The Man and His Work* is the only book-length study of the author, depicts David as undergoing

Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 35, Number 4, Winter 1989.

flates elements of the Jewish and the Christian traditions and is a version of the birth-of-a-hero myth dealt with by Otto Rank in *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (1909) and by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Rank derives his hero myth from what Freud identified as the family romance—the widespread tendency of youngsters to reject their biological parents and to imagine themselves the children of other, usually more glamorous, progenitors. Freud sees this tendency as a struggle of the child to break the bonds of the Oedipal relationship and to establish psychological independence. This is the significance of the quarrel over David Schearl's paternity and of his unusually strong and persistent Oedipal bond. His rejection of the hostile father is consonant with both Rank's myth and Freud's romance; his rejection of his mother is less evident but equally important in his struggle to gain mature freedom. Further, although *Call It Sleep* is an intensely Jewish novel, it is also very much an American novel in its depiction of the New York scene and as a part of the major tradition that deals with the supposed exceptional mission and destiny of the American people.

Call It Sleep traces the growth of an immigrant child in Brownsville and the lower East Side of New York City from age six to about age eight. Albert Schearl has come to the New World alone in 1905 and is joined in 1907 by Genya and their son David. From the moment of their reunion at Ellis Island, there is tension between the parents—between the gloomy, threatening, vituperative father and the gentle, submissive, but ardently protective mother. David clings so tenaciously to his mother, and is so fearful—and later so resentful—of his father, that the normal Oedipal relationship is aggravated and prolonged. Albert Schearl has some reason to doubt that he is the child's father; his suspicions poison the atmosphere of the home, while David overhears enough adult talk to suspect that he is not the son of the terrifying god of wrath who rules the family. The child proves to be unusually intelligent and sensitive, so that he suffers more than most of his peers from the rough-and-tumble of city street-life. Enrolled in cheder, he is an eager pupil who quickly earns the approval of the rabbi and who shows an unusual interest in the story of Isaiah. Stimulated even by meager religious instruction, the boy has—or believes that he has—a series of mystic experiences that will ultimately lead him to a terrifying climactic adventure in which he is nearly

three stages of initiation described by Mircea Eliade and as manifesting a renewal of the tradition of Jewish mysticism (107-110). William Freedman argues that David exhibits the traditional personality of the mystic and is to be identified with Christ because the boy pursues a "quest for redemption, salvation, and the blazing light of God," which produces a "symbolic tale of ecumenical reconciliation wherein the Son . . . achieves . . . rebirth and the acceptance of the pacified Father" ("Mystical" 27, 30). Although I have little disagreement with these conclusions, I hope to add several significant dimensions to the picture. Fiedler writes of *Call It Sleep* as a "specifically Jewish book" (*Jew* 38). Roth said in a 1969 interview with David Bronsen, "I do not regard *Call It Sleep* as primarily, a novel of Jewish life" and expressed similar views in an interview with Bonnie Lyons in 1972 (Brosen 269; Lyons, "Interview" 67).

electrocuted by the current in the slotted rail of a street-car track. He survives to achieve a kind of reconciliation with his father and a sense of triumphant acquiescence in the conditions of his life.

The boy's characteristics and experiences are strikingly like those of the hero-messiah as depicted by Rank, Campbell, and others. David's given name means "the elect of God" (Ginzberg 533); it also identifies him with the Old Testament King David, who, according to Ezekiel, was to return as the messiah and rule eternally over the future united and perfected state (Ezek. 34: 23-24). Isaiah had foretold a messiah who would be "a shoot from the stump of Jesse," the father of David (9: 1-6; 11: 1-16; 32: 1-5). Centuries later the gospel writers identified Jesus as that messiah and provided a lineage that derived the Saviour from the house of David (Matt. 1: 1-17; Luke 1: 27). John Gabel and Charles Wheeler note that "When the gospels present Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, they are drawing on Jewish tradition. In Hebrew *mashiah* means 'anointed one'; the equivalent in Greek is *christos*, hence 'Christ.' The title refers to the coronation ceremony: The chosen king is . . . God's choice and reigns with divine backing" (161).

In Hebrew apocalyptic literature, the word *messiah* was applied to persons of unusual perception deemed worthy of receiving the message and mission of God (Buttenweiser 505; Campbell 319). Like the opening phases of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *The Education of Henry Adams*, (and indeed many a bildungsroman), the earliest passages of *Call It Sleep* depict the awakening of an unusual intelligence. From precise observation of details the five-year-old boy quickly moves to speculation about their meaning and often to reflections of precocious, although not implausible, sophistication. Having observed that a wedding and a funeral used the same carriages, for example, David concludes that "everything belonged to the same dark" (70)—a proposition that he converts into the paradox, implied but unexpressed: everything is at once both light and dark.

Enrolled as a student in the cheder of Rabbi Yidel Pankower, David displays an unusual facility in pronouncing Hebrew. Although among the youngest, he is the one pupil who can remember all of the "Chad Godyah," a traditional Aramaic song usually recited by a child at the end of the Seder service. It is a text appropriate to a novice messiah, for it was once believed to be an allegory promising the redemption of Israel ("Had Gadhya" 1048). Obtuse and vulgar though Reb Pankower is in many ways, he is fully able to appreciate David's eager response to the language of God, to commend the boy as "an iron head" (217), and to speculate, "You may be a great rabbi yet—who knows!" (233). Here is a child, then, of exceptional intelligence and aptitude for penetrating the divine mysteries.

Like the prophet-messiahs of history, David sometimes experiences the mystic state. During the Passover season in 1913, David is "content yet strangely nostalgic"—that is, in the mood that enfolds him at each Passover. Sitting on the edge of a dock fronting the East River, he is dazzled by a broad band of sunlight reflected from the water and falls into a trance: "The brilliance was hypnotic. He could not take his eyes away. His spirit yielded, melted into light." Abruptly he is awakened from his reverie by the noise of a tugboat chugging past and by the whistle of a man on board who shouts, "Wake up, Kid . . . 'fore you throw a belly-w'opper!" (248). David is alarmed to find himself in danger of falling into the river and lurches backward to safety.[2] His reflection on this experience further identifies it as a mystic spell: "What was it he had seen? . . . It was as though he had seen it in . . . a world that once left could not be recalled" (248).[3]

At several points late in the novel, usually when David is running and is under the impress of strong emotion or a powerful sense of purpose, he feels impelled by an irresistible force outside himself. As he is breaking into the locked cheder in a desperate effort to learn more about Isaiah, David reflects, "An enormous hand was shoving him forward" (255). Similar language appears elsewhere: "an ineluctable power tore him from the moorings he clutched" (379); "an act, ordained, foreseen, inevitable at this very moment" (399-400; see also 413, 437). These are David's illusions, and they are those of a servant of God.

David Schearl also meets the traditional expectation that the messiah will appear in a time of distress, when the land is "blighted by suffering, death, sin and other evils" and in an era that "has to be changed and superseded by a new age" (Buttenweiser 11: 1017; Campbell 352, 353). Without editorializing, Roth depicts that time in the life of the Golden Land when the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free" swarmed into New York to find persistent poverty, discrimination, and cultural blight as their virtually universal fate. The heartbreaking contrast between the

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[2]A number of commentators have seen in the tugboatman, who may well have saved David from a fatal tumble into the river, an image of Christ. Certainly Roth's description is suggestive: "a man in his undershirt, bare, outstretched arms gripping the doorpost on either side" (248). (Note Albert's posture at the conclusion of the preceding chapter: "His stretching arms pressed against both sides of the door-frame till it creaked. 'We need some light' " [242].) David's fantasy as he regains consciousness after his massive electric shock includes a climactic image of the tugboatman crucified on a telephone pole.

[3]One is reminded of the conclusion of Chapter Thirty-Five, "The Mast-Head," in *Moby-Dick*, in which a "young Platonist" is "lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie" that he is in danger of falling into the ocean, which he takes for "the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 156-157). Freedman, in "Mystical," deals fully with David's mystic qualities and suggests that Roth either was well read in the literature of mysticism or had himself achieved the mystic state. Roth has several times acknowledged more or less inclination toward mysticism (Howard 76; Lyons, "Interview" 64; Freedman, "Jerusalem" 21), but in a conversation with the present writer in Albuquerque on 18 October 1986, Roth spoke of himself in the 1930s as "too much the unbeliever" to have experienced mystic states.

promise of the New World and the grim particularity of Roth's picture of New York slum life makes a comment upon the American Dream no less devastating than the parables of Dos Passos, Fitzgerald, or Hemingway.

This theme is introduced by the wry epigraph of the Prologue:

> *(I pray thee ask no questions*
> *this is that Golden Land)*

and by the immigrants' first disconcerting glimpse of the Statue of Liberty, whose welcoming brilliance is ominously darkened and whose guiding beacon becomes the shadow of a sword (14).

In this blighted land the debility of traditional religious institutions is epitomized in the condition of the cheder David attends. The rebbe, abusive, imaginatively foul-mouthed, greasy, and tobacco-stained, rules a pack of rowdies whose incapacity for the study of Hebrew is exceeded only by their reluctance. The atmosphere is tainted with sweaty bodies, the rebbe's cigarette smoke, and "gollic fahts," while the racket of scuffling boys and their alternating outbursts of glee and quarreling drown out the recitations of the language of God. David has been carried into a waste land where poverty, crowded tenements, stench, and noise, with their consequent pain, fear, and guilt, are the realities that belie the promise of "that Golden Land."[4]

In yet another way, David's experience parallels that of the prophets of history: he has his time in the wilderness (Campbell 321; John Ferguson 141). In a rough-and-tumble street game, David knocks down—and knocks out—a boy who has been tormenting him. Frightened by his antagonist's lifeless appearance, David flees along a street that leads him out into the country.[5] Delighted by the row of telephone poles that stretches endlessly "up the hill of distance" (193), he chants, "Hello, Mr. Highwood. . . . Goodbye Mr. Highwood." But soon he is bewildered in a frighteningly unfamiliar area. Later David recognizes a parallel with the experience of biblical prophets when he overhears Rabbi Pankower explaining the circumstances in which Isaiah saw God. The child muses, "—Where did he go to see Him? God? Didn't say. . . . Way, way, way, maybe. Gee! Some place, me too . . . When I—When I—in the street far away. . . . Hello, Mr. Highwood, goodbye Mr. Highwood. Heee! Funny!" (229-230; first ellipsis mine). Thus David, like Isaiah—and like Christ—has a sojourn in the wilderness.

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[4]Walter Allen praises Roth's skill in rendering the debased English of the slum boys as an index of the immigrant's lot in a society "with no culture at all" (175). Useful correctives to such overestimates of the immigrants' cultural poverty are the accounts of Jewish immigrant culture in New York in Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers* and of all the immigrant cultures in Oscar Handlin's *The Uprooted*.

[5]Michael Shapiro has called my attention to a parallel in the life of Moses, who in his young manhood slew an Egyptian for beating a Hebrew and then fled to Midian to escape Pharaoh's wrath (Exod. 2: 11-15).

Like them he experiences temptation as well. Leo Dugovka, the only major gentile figure in *Call It Sleep*, performs two crucial functions in David's development. As a Roman Catholic, he is the chief source of David's exposure to Christian thought and ritual. In this role he aids David in achieving the ecumenical character that qualifies him as a possible savior of the cosmopolitan American world. But as one who introduces David to the possibilities of sensual delights, he plays the role of tempter, and in this instance is more successful than the devil was in his efforts to corrupt Jesus.

David first encounters Leo on the tenement's roof, "that precinct in the sky, that silent balcony on the pinnacle of turmoil" (299), where they can look out over the neighborhood. With his talk of freedom from a mother's supervision and of kites, roller skates, and distant streets, Leo is, in effect, offering the younger boy "all the kingdoms of the world" (Matt. 4: 8). The setting and Leo's street-wise confidence make David eager to learn from the older boy. Recently sensitized by the cheder to things religious, David is especially fascinated by Leo's crude accounts of Catholic doctrine. Leo promises to give him a broken rosary but only at a price. David, eager to obtain the rosary, takes on the role of pander and introduces Leo to his cousin Esther, with whom the older boy "plays bad"—whom, indeed, he rapes, although with the girl's half-willing collusion. This incident in a stinking cellar, as William Freedman has pointed out ("Mystical" 35), is an aspect of David's descent into the underworld—an event that once again places him among the heroes of legend.

The quest of David as hero-messiah is a search for "God's light." Indeed, as a number of critics have observed, the dominant symbol pattern of the novel is the contrast between light and dark; between good and evil (Lyons, *Henry Roth* 40-42; Freedman, "Mystical" 27). Driven by a child's fear of the dark, David races with pounding heart every time he must pass the cellar door of the Brownsville tenement. Soon he learns that rats, decay, and foul odors as well as the smuttiness of coal belong to the cellar. Again, the darkness and mothball stench of the closet where Annie, the crippled neighbor girl, gives David a crude initiation into the mechanics of sex further extend this set of associations. At a still later stage, Leo's assault upon Esther deepens the evil import of cellar, darkness, stench, and sexual encounter.

But in Book Three, "The Coal," the matter is complicated by David's discovery that coal—a burning coal—was thrust by an angel against Isaiah's lips to purify him. The coal used as the agent of cleansing can hardly be the filthy substance in the cellar; David postulates an "angel coal" in God's cellar as something bright and purifying (231). Later he discovers, however, that the two converge and eventually coalesce, so that God's coal—brilliant, burning, and cauterizing—is one with the filthy black coal of the foul cellar (255, 261). In fact he is recognizing that coal has

two aspects, as the carriages used for weddings and funerals have two functions. Both conclusions recognize the moral ambiguity of life.

Light also symbolizes the power of God as well as the blinding divine understanding that engulfs the mystic and takes him out of himself. Gazing out over the river, David sees the essence of divinity in "a plain, flawless, sheer as foil to the serried margins. . . . White. Brighter than day. Whiter. And he was" (247).

Almost immediately after this vision, David is accosted by three Irish toughs who force him to thrust a home-made sheet-metal sword into the crack of the electrified rail on the car-tracks; "power, gigantic, fetterless, thudded into day! And light, unleashed, terrific light bellowed out of the iron lips" (253). Taking refuge in the cheder yard, David muses upon the immanence and power of God and associates them with the river, coal, and whiteness. When the rabbi discovers the boy, David gives a garbled account of his motives for invading the cheder, saying, " 'I saw a coal like—like Isaiah. . . . Where the car-tracks run I saw it.' " The rabbi breaks into derisive laughter: " 'Fool!' he gasped at length. 'Go beat your head on a wall! God's light is not between car-tracks.' " But Pankower is wrong: "The rabbi didn't know as he knew what the light was, what it meant, what it had done to him" (257). God's light is indeed between car-tracks—as it is everywhere—unknown to the man of God, known to the child.

But if David is seeking purification, he is also seeking salvation—seeking to be saved from the wrath of a father like an angry, irrational god, from the terrors of the streets, from dangers unknown as well as only too well known. With each recurrence of the Passover season, David feels the renewal of life and of hope for serenity and security (221). But always there is a relapse from whatever sense of confidence he has acquired and a renewed struggle with dangers and fears. Indeed, his crises intensify as he grows and ranges more widely. Ultimately individual salvation eludes him; David reaches at last a scrutiny that is conditioned upon his acceptance of life in the community of his fellows, rather than upon escape from it.

Paramount among David's qualifications as a messiah is the mystery of his parentage. As Otto Rank and others have shown, heroes, including prophets and messiahs, are often the product of a miraculous or mysterious birth (Rank 65; Campbell 297-314; Kluckhohn 227). Like Moses, Jesus, and innumerable heroes of myth and fairy tale, David may not be—but then again may be—the child of his nominal father.[6]

The doubt is prompted by the arrival of Genya's younger sister Bertha, who annoys and frightens Genya by probing an old sore spot—the secret

[6]Compare Billy Budd as a Christ figure: " 'Who was your father?' 'God knows, sir' " (Melville, *Billy Budd* 16).

surrounding an early love of the older sister. Moved finally by renewed memories of that concealed and cherished episode, Genya pours out to Bertha the tale—or perhaps most of the tale—of her romance with Ludwig, a Christian organist in the old Austrian village. It is a story of youthful passion, of secret meetings, and finally of intervention by the girl's outraged parents and of betrayal by the young man's opportunism.

David, always alert and inquisitive, has hidden himself so as to overhear this enthralling conversation. Even so, he is tantalized by the occasional drift of the talk from Yiddish into Polish, a language unknown to him. The gaps in the account leave room for his imagination to build beyond what he actually hears. David's embellishment of the narrative harmonizes with his at least latent wish to be rid of his putative father; he concludes that he is the son of the shadowy and romantic Ludwig. At a moment of great stress, the child seeks refuge in the cheder and pours out to his rabbi a garbled tale of disaster compounded of fragments of his mother's secret, with some fanciful additions from his own version of what Freud and Rank have called "the family romance" (Freud, "Family Romances" 237-241; Rank 67-71):[7] his mother is dead; he is the son of an organist in a remote unidentified country; the people he lives with are his aunt and her husband. Reb Pankower carries this tale to the Schearls. The story reawakens Albert Schearl's secretly nurtured suspicion that David is not his son; in a bitter confrontation after the rabbi leaves, he accuses Genya of having colluded with her parents to deceive him. Most critics have taken the view that Albert's suspicions are the delusions of a maddened mind (Redding 188; Samet 577; Rideout 187; Knowles 398; Lyons, *Henry Roth* 51-52; Fiedler, "Neglected Masterpiece" 104). In fact, however, a good bit of evidence supports Albert's contentions.

By her own account, Genya has undoubtedly had a love affair with an impoverished Christian youth named Ludwig. Indeed there is little room to doubt that Ludwig and Genya have had sexual intercourse. Her outraged father had no doubt when he shouted, as Genya tells Bertha, "I tell you she'll bring me a 'Benkart' yet, shame me to the dust. How do you know there isn't one in that lewd belly already . . .?"[8] When Bertha

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[7]The six paragraphs in Otto Rank's *Myth* dealing with the family romance are a direct quotation of Sigmund Freud's "Family Romances" of 1908. I have quoted Freud's *Standard Edition* as prior, better translated, and more authoritative, while recognizing that Freud several times commended Rank's work in establishing the connection between the family romance and hero myths ("Material" 256 n2, 266 n1; "Dream-Work" 400 n2; "Three Essays" 226 n1).

[8]Yiddish *Benkart* is presumably cognate with German *Bankert* = bastard. The cruelty of the enraged father's accusation is indicated by Cassell's gloss upon the noun *Bank* = bench: "*von der Bank gefallen sein* or *auf der Bank erzeugt* [engendered] *sein*, be a bastard" (*New Cassell's* 56). The expression calls up images of encounters in taverns or woodsheds.

rails against their father at this point in the conversation, Genya concedes, "Well, I wasn't entirely innocent" (202).

However well disposed the reader is toward the gentle, honest, warmly sheltering Genya, the events that have dropped a bitter seed of suspicion into Albert's soul cannot simply be ignored. His theory that Genya was pregnant at the time of their wedding, that the child was well above average size at the alleged age of twenty-two months, that Albert was hustled off to New York with funds provided by his in-laws so that he could not personally ascertain the date of the child's birth, and that the birth certificate was conveniently mislaid so that it could not bear witness to the misdeed—all these circumstances are plausible and perhaps actual. Indeed, the doubts about David's paternity are never satisfactorily resolved. The effect of this measure of doubt is not to establish that David is in fact the son of Ludwig the Christian organist but rather to introduce some doubt, to envelop the child's birth—and particularly his paternity—in a cloud of mystery, and thus to qualify him further as a hero of myth, as a potential messiah.[9]

In adopting an embroidered version of the story of Ludwig as his own history, David abolishes his terrifying natural or nominal father. But he also converts his mother into an aunt, a maneuver that marks an important stage in his escape from the Oedipal embrace.

David's moment of closest attachment to his mother occurs early in the novel in the warmth of home on the sabbath eve in "the hushed hour, the hour of tawny beatitude" (71). "He was near her now. He was part of her. The rain outside the window set continual seals upon their isolation, upon their intimacy, their identity" (68). But before long this intimacy is invaded by the advances of Joe Luter, Albert's friend from the shop, who is for a short time a boarder at the Schearls' table. Observing Luter's ogling of Genya as she moves about the kitchen and noting an insinuating tone in his conversation, David becomes uneasy about his own loving observation of his mother (40, 64). This uneasiness, although seemingly arising from a desire to protect his mother's virtue, actually marks the beginning of the child's regarding her with growing sexual curiosity and hence of his separation from her. While playing in the street, David sees Luter heading toward the flat at a time when Genya is there alone and surmises that the two are going to "play bad." Subsequently he believes that they have done so, although in fact the reader understands that Genya has repelled her would-be seducer (89, 95, 115-116, 123-124).[10]

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[9]During our conversation in Albuquerque, both Muriel and Henry Roth emphatically agreed that the doubts about David's paternity are never resolved.

[10]The astonishing fidelity with which Roth has recorded the Oedipal pattern is shown by Freud's description of the stages of the family romance: "The child, having learnt about sexual processes, tends to picture to himself erotic situations and relations, the motive force behind this being his desire to bring his mother (who is the subject of the most intense sexual curiosity) into situations of secret infidelity and into secret love-affairs" ("Family Romances" 239).

Returning to the flat one afternoon from a disastrous episode with his irate father and from a cheder session where he has for once behaved like a dunce, David discovers the neighborhood in an uproar over an escaped canary. In his distress he ignores this excitement and rushes to the flat. Finding the door locked, he raps furiously until his mother appears, just emerged from her bath, and wrapped in a clinging gown. David seeks her embrace and experiences a bliss that is intensified by his father's absence and novel only in being charged with a half-conscious sexual aura. Learning that his father is soon to return, he flees to the street, where he discovers that the boys have pursued the fugitive canary to the rooftop. Across the light well they have spied upon a woman stepping from her bath in a laundry tub—obviously David's mother, and obviously drawn from her concealment in the tub by his imperious pounding at the door. Outraged at the peepers but tormented by guilt as well, David nevertheless finds a moment to blame his mother: "Why did she let them look. . . . And she let me look at her! Mad at her!" (295). Seeking to hide his tears, David starts toward the flat but is drawn to the pure air and freedom of the rooftop he has never yet visited. Although he cannot peep into the windows of his own flat, and indeed has no conscious intention of doing so, his movements are stealthy.

As he returns to the flat, he takes care to make noises in the hallway that will imply that he has just come up from the street. At home once more, he finds his mother in what the reader recognizes as a state of postcoital lassitude. David does not understand what has happened, but he does recognize that a pair of decorative bullhorns his father has bought connect the image of a man felled by his father's powerful fist and the spectacle of his mother bemused in unwonted contentment. For the first time he feels shut out from intimacy with his mother.

David continues to vacillate between passionate attachment to his mother and rebellion against her, but never again is the sense of intimacy and identity as close as it had been before he began a career of independent adventures. The bitter despair of these childish tragedies is the true dark night of David's soul; like the anguish of classic mystics and prophets it marks a turning toward self-reliance and serenity, toward ultimate escape from the Oedipal bond. As Freud puts the matter, "Every new arrival on this planet is faced by the task of mastering the Oedipus complex; anyone who fails to do so falls a victim to neurosis" ("Three Essays" 226n).

David's second and nearly fatal encounter with the street-car tracks takes the form of a death-and-resurrection drama. The prelude and stimulus to this catastrophe is the confrontation between Genya and Albert concerning David's paternity. During this quarrel, David stammers out a confession of complicity in Leo's misdeed and asks punishment from his father. At this point Roth explicitly identifies David with Christ: "And

the words he spoke were like staggering burdens he bore up a great steep where his own sighs battered him, where he floundered in his own tears" (400). Albert works himself into a frenzy and claims the right to destroy this "goy's get." While Bertha and her husband wrestle with Albert, Genya rescues the child by thrusting him out the door.[11]

Irresistibly impelled by the same external force that he has experienced several times earlier, David heads again toward the car-tracks, bearing a long-handled milk ladle he has found on the street. Now the action emerges from the confines of the Jewish neighborhood into a nearby area where the cast of characters takes on a thoroughly American diversity of nationalities, occupations, and avocations. Their talk, by turns comic, stupid, obscene, or aggressive, includes references to Christ, His ministry, and the events of the Passion. The result is to underscore the juxtaposition of the ordinary and the divine and to identify David unmistakably as a Christ figure.

Although there are procreative overtones in many of these remarks, suggestive of an impending birth, the reference to the Gospel accounts of the Passion is even more important in strengthening the role of David as an ecumenical messiah figure. The sexual reference of "How many times'll your red cock crow, Pete, befaw y' gives up?" (418) is less important in this chapter than its paraphrase of Christ's prediction to Peter that "Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times" (Matt. 26: 34; Fiedler, "Neglected Masterpiece" 107). And after the calamity, Pete, the hunchback on crutches, denies aid to the injured David. The phrase "in the crack be born" (411), however, when considered in conjunction with David's posture as he straddles the slotted rail to insert the dipper's handle between "the long, dark, grinning lips. . . . like a sword in a scabbard" (413) clearly suggests an insemination that will assure the rebirth of the self-created creator close upon his symbolic death in a blaze of the light that has come to symbolize divine power.[12] Upon the discovery of the accident, a rapid series of exclamations all add to the identification of David Schearl with Christ: "Jesus!" "Holy Mother o' God!" "Christ, it's a kid!" "A stick, for Jesus sake!" "Bambino! Madre mia!" (420-421).

As David fades into unconsciousness, his reverie includes a "swirl of broken images" (431), with the tugboatman in his crucified posture hanging among the wires of the Mr. Highwood telegraph poles and with the sugar tongs (*Zwank*) that his mother used to demonstrate the limited human grasp of the infinite fusing with the tongs the angel used to seize the burning coal from the altar to purify Isaiah's lips. Driven downward

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[11]The exposure of the child is a regular feature of hero-in-disguise myths, as in the story of Moses or in *The Winter's Tale*. The baby in a basket upon the water is reported to be the most frequent form of the motif, but the variants are numerous (Kluckhohn 278). In *Call It Sleep* the recurrent form of the motif is exposure to the terrors and dangers of the streets.

[12]Roth was no doubt aware that the Latin for *scabbard* is *vagina*.

by his father's thundering voice, he diminishes into darkness and extinction.

But then, as the doctor works to revive the stricken boy, "*out of the darkness, one ember*"; the image that marks his resuscitation is of light emanating from coal (430). Images of serenity and silence engulf the last glimpse and echo of the terrifying father; finally it is the recollection of the tugboatman who wakened him from his riverside vision—and saved him—that marks his return to consciousness. Thus the David-Christ messiah is resurrected admist a melange of images drawn from his Jewish background and from the predominantly Christian society in which he is to come of age.

After the melodrama of the immolation-and-resurrection scene, the final chapter of *Call It Sleep* is relaxed and calm. In this conclusion one critic has seen resignation (Syrkin 93), whereas others have read it as a parable recording the paralysis of Roth's creative powers (Epstein 39, 43; Fein 46-50). I doubt that the novel is prophetic in this way; rather, I take the author's characterization of David's state at the conclusion as literally accurate: "not pain, not terror, but strangest triumph, strangest acquiescence" (441).

The final stages of the hero-messiah myth usually include either the killing of the hero by his father, the killing of the father by the hero, or their reconciliation. According to Freud, the successful outcome of the romantic fantasy that is the individual psychic parallel of the myth is "the liberation of an individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents" ("Family Romances" 237); the child who masters the Oedipal relationship and thus escapes neurosis learns, by accepting his real parents, to overcome the fear of the presumably hostile father. Joseph Campbell is emphatic in identifying one outcome of the hero's quest as a recognition that "I and the Father are one" (349; John 10: 30).

In the final chapter of *Call It Sleep*, a reconciliation of sorts is achieved. Although he has long believed that he wishes such an outcome, Albert is sobered by the real possibility of David's death. In his chastened mood, though with some residual hesitation about the boy's age, he accepts David as his son, in the one English utterance he makes in the novel: "My sawn. Mine. Yes. Awld eight. Eight en'—en' vun mawnt. He vas born in—" (437). After the bitter eloquence that has typified his Yiddish speech throughout the novel, this halting language testifies to his reduced condition. No longer is he for David the avenging Yahweh of the child's infancy.

The final paragraph of *Call It Sleep* is deftly organized. Genya is comforting the injured child, and he is accepting her ministrations, although with the mental reservation that has become characteristic of his attitude toward his mother as he gradually masters his Oedipal connection with her:

"And then you'll go to sleep and forget it all." She paused. Her dark, unswerving eyes sought his. "Sleepy, beloved?"

"Yes, mama."

He might as well call it sleep. It was only toward sleep that every wink of the eyelids could strike a spark. . . . (441)

He might as well *call* it sleep; but it is not sleep and forgetting; it is a state of reverie that lets him recall and evaluate images drawn from all his brief conscious life: images of glitter, sheen, glow—all the varieties of light that have brought his reassurance and delight; scenes from the life of the street; auditory images: "all sounds that lay fermenting in the vats of silence and the past" (441).

All of this reverie leads him to feel, "not pain, not terror, but strangest triumph, strangest acquiescence" (441). The novel ends, then, not in paralysis and defeat, not in the death of the artist, but in serenity, in liberation from the tyranny of a hostile father, the domination of an adoring mother, and the terrors of the unknown. Young though he is, David has come through the worst dangers of an immigrant childhood. After the perils of his quest, according to Campbell, the hero returns to the ordinary world, where as a result of his adventures he can teach his fellow citizens and serve them in a prolonged state of calm (20, 193). Perhaps David will fulfill Rabbi Pankower's grudging prediction: "You may be a great rabbi yet—who knows!" (233). Having learned the ambiguous moral nature of the world and having accepted life in the less than ideal human community, this obscure child of humblest origins may yet become the teacher, interpreter, examiner, guide, and comforter to the American people. He may become, indeed, the Messiah of the New World.

Roth's novel is a modern redaction of a widely diffused myth, although with significant alterations. The theme of the prince in humble guise is one of the most ubiquitous and enduring motifs in world literature; its usual outcome is the elevation of the apparently lowly to their rightful positions. Often the hero of myth or legend is the scion of wealthy, royal, or divine parents. He has been cast out either by the hostile father or by protectors shielding him from the father and has been adopted by humble parents—servants, peasants, or fishermen. The possible alternate father of David Schearl is neither wealthy, nor aristocratic, nor royal, nor divine, nor otherwise powerful. Roth's attribution of noble qualities to a person of genuinely commonplace origins—that is, one who is not a prince in disguise but who may nevertheless be inspired by the divine afflatus—is fitting in a democracy of common people, whose leaders can emerge from among the most miserable and despised part of its population. In addition, the myth of the messiah in *Call It Sleep* is distinctive in its violation of old xenophobic taboos to produce an American child. In Roth's parable his potential hero may be the child of a Jewish mother and a Christian father, a mixture that will particularly qualify him as

the leader of a polyglot nation of nations where "all tribes and people are forming into one federated whole; and there is a future which shall see the estranged children of Adam restored as to the old hearthstone in Eden" (Melville, *Redburn* 169). Roth has bestowed American citizenship upon traditional materials to develop a myth for a democratic society.[13]

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[13]My thanks are due to my colleagues, Professors George Hendrick, Frank Hodgins, Alan C. Purves, Robert L. Schneider, and Michael Shapiro for helpful suggestions at several stages of this project.

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HANA WIRTH-NESHER

Between Mother Tongue and Native Language: Multilingualism in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*

HENRY ROTH'S *Call It Sleep* is a multilingual book, although it is accessible to the American reader who knows none of its languages other than English. In order to portray a world that was both multilingual and multicultural, Roth used a variety of narrative strategies, some designed to simulate the experience of his immigrant child protagonist and others designed to translate these experiences for his general American reader. *Call It Sleep* is a classic example of a work in which several cultures interact linguistically, thematically, and symbolically, and it is also an interesting case of ethnic literature, the Jewish-American novel.

Henry Roth offers a classic example as well of the author of a brilliant first novel who keeps the critics speculating as to whether his second work will live up to the first. In his case, the silence that followed that first dazzling performance could be interpreted as a larger cultural phenomenon than a mere individual writer's block. Occasionally what appears to be one artist's dilemma can also be a symptom of a cultural cul-de-sac. Such was the case of Thomas Hardy's last novel, *Jude the Obscure,* which carried the bleakness of the Victorian age and the Victorian novel to its limits, and such was the case of Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep,* which embodies the paralysing ambivalence of the Jewish immigrant writer in America, although not every writer's response to this conflict has been silence. Throughout Jewish literary history, writers have developed different narrative strategies for representing the multilingual and multicultural world which they inhabited.

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As early as 1918, the Yiddish literary critic Baal Makhshoves argued that the mark of Jewish literature is its bilingualism. Although he was taking this position within the cultural context of the Czernowitz conference and the antagonism between Hebrew and Yiddish, he made claims for the status of Jewish literature from biblical times to the present. In every text that is part of the Jewish tradition, Baal Makhshoves wrote, there existed explicitly or implicitly another language, whether it be Chaldean in the Book of Daniel, Aramaic in the Pentateuch and the prayerbook, Arabic in medieval Jewish philosophical writings, and, in his own day going back as far as the fifteenth century, Yiddish. "Bilingualism accompanied the Jews even in ancient times, even when they had their own land, and they were not as yet wanderers as they are now," he wrote.[1] "We have two languages and a dozen echoes from other foreign languages, but we have only *one* literature."[2] When Baal Makhshoves refers to bilingualism, he means not only the literal presence of two languages, but also the echoes of another language and culture detected in the prose of the one language of which the text is composed. "Don't our finer critics carry within them the spirit of the German language? And among our younger writers, who were educated in the Russian language, isn't it possible to discern the spirit of Russian?"[3]

Bilingualism and diglossia, in their strict linguistic sense and in their broader cultural meanings, have always been distinguishing features of Jewish culture and one major aspect of that enigmatic concept, Jewish literature. By bilingualism, I mean the alternate use of two or more languages by the same individual, which presupposes two different language communities, but does not presuppose the existence of a bilingual community itself.[4] Diglossia, on the other hand, is the existence of complemetary varieties of language for intragroup purposes, and therefore it does not necessitate bilingualism, as the linguistic repertoires are limited due to role specialization.[5] In short, as Fishman has pointed out, bilingualism is essentially a characterization of individual linguistic versatility whereas diglossia is a characterization of the societal allocation of functions to different languages. Diglossia is obviously not unique to Jewish civilization. In European culture, for example, the idea that certain languages were specially proper for specific purposes lasted into the sixteenth century, with one of its literary products being macaronic verse.[6] But both bilingualism and diglossia are central concepts in any discussion of Jewish literature, for they presuppose that a truly competent reader of the text must be in command of more than one language, and consequently of more than one culture. When Henry Roth used Hebrew, Yiddish, and Aramaic for specific purposes in his novel, he was employing a device used widely within Jewish literature, and within what has come more generally to be called ethnic literature.

The centrality of both bilingualism and diglossia in Jewish culture has been explored extensively by scholars and literary critics, among them

Max Weinreich, Uriel Weinreich, Joshua Fishman, Itamar Even-Zohar, Binyamin Harshav, and Dan Miron.[7] The extent to which bilingualism is rooted in European Jewish life is expressed by Max Weinreich in his *History of the Yiddish Language:* "a Jew of some scholarly attainment, born around 1870, certainly did not express only his personal opinion when he declared that the Yiddish translation of the Pentateuch had been given to Moses on Mt. Sinai."[8]

Both the diglossia and bilingualism of Jewish literature are particular variants of Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia in the novel. According to Bakhtin, prose fiction maintains an inner dialogue among different languages, so that a text in one language, from the linguistic perspective, contains within it other languages, which can be social, national, generic, and professional, among others. These languages do not exclude one another, but intersect in a variety of ways. "All languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique, are specific points of view on the world, forms of conceptualizing the world in words, specific world-views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings, and values."[9]

Bilingualism and diglossia pose interesting mimetic challenges for the writer who aims for a community of readers beyond those who are competent in all of the language variants employed in his text. Moreover, in the Jewish literary tradition, multilingualism often means allusions, metaphors, and tropes that are derived from at least two widely divergent traditions, the Jewish and the non-Jewish worlds. This cultural situation necessitates various translation strategies for the author, ranging from literal translation from one language to another in the text (sometimes consciously underscoring the differences in world-view of the languages) to the felt sense of translation, as the language of the text contains within it the shades of the other absent language or languages. All authors dealing with a multilingual and multicultural reality have had to devise mimetic strategies for conveying a sense of foreignness, whether it be explicit attribution of speech in "translation," selective reproduction of the source language, or more oblique forms, such as verbal transpositions in the form of poetic or communicative twists.[10] The most challenging for the reader has been the transposition of a different set of values, norms, images, or allusions from an alternative culture.

The strategies for presenting this multicultural reality are varied within Jewish literature. In the case of Jewish-American writing of which Henry Roth is a striking example, those writers who actually have some knowledge of an alternative Jewish literary tradition, in Hebrew or in Yiddish, have located their own works between two traditions, the English and the Yiddish, the Christian and the Jewish. This can express itself not only in linguistic borrowings by incorporation of phrases from the other language, but also by allusions to the other traditions, or to the

borrowing of models and types from the other canon. Just as Yiddish poets in America placed themselves in the line of Whitman and Emerson, so writers like Henry Roth, Abraham Cahan, Saul Bellow, and Delmore Schwartz, composing in the English language, often draw on quotations from Jewish sources, intersperse Yiddish words, and turn their characters into types within two cultural frames of reference.

In Abraham Cahan's landmark novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky,* the alternative tradition is the very theme of the work; the central protagonist traces his intellectual assmiliation to the English world to his reading of a Dickens novel, but he continues to measure his moral development against the Jewish world that he has abandoned. In the writings of Saul Bellow, for example, this alternative tradition is evident in the intellectual repertoire of his central protagonists, who are repeatedly invoking European figures as predecessors, muses, and mentors. Just as Augie March is clearly a literary grandchild of Huckleberry Finn, so Herzog and Sammler are children of Montaigne and Dostoevsky, of Continental European thought and letters. In some cases it is the other language that haunts the English prose, at times artfully and self-consciously, as in the stories of Delmore Schwartz, when the English reads like a translation from the Yiddish; at other times unself-consciously, as in the Yiddishized English of Anzia Yezierska's fiction, suggesting in the language and syntax a merging of cultures. In one of Cynthia Ozick's works, to cite yet another variation, the imminent extinction of Yiddish language and culture is the very subject of the story, as the Yiddish writer is left wholly dependent on translation itself to assure some precarious survival.

In each of the above works, the emphasis is on a divided identification with more than one culture, and while this is not exclusively a Jewish literary characteristic, it has been one very dominant aspect of Jewish literature and culture.

Henry Roth's novel *Call It Sleep* is a particularly interesting example of the part that multilingualism and translation play in Jewish literature. In that work, Roth uses languages other than English, as well as textual and cultural references outside of the English and American literary tradition. Roth grew up with Yiddish as the language of his home and neighborhood, among the Jewish immigrants on the lower East Side, and along with many of them, he went on to study at City College. There he was introduced to the world of English literature. He obviously created his novel against the entire backdrop of English literature, and more specifically American literature, referring in his interviews to Shakespeare, Joyce, Faulkner, Frost, Steinbeck, Hart Crane, Daniel Fuchs, and James Farrell, among others. Roth writes for an implied reader who is well versed in English literature and the Western Christian tradition; although he has used a number of translation strategies for the non-English language and culture present in his text, his novel requires that

the reader be familiar with some aspects of Jewish tradition. The full artistic scope of his work cannot be comprehended without this multiple cultural grounding. I would like to examine how Roth makes use of multilingualism and translation in his masterful novel as a way of identifying how the book partakes of more than one literary and cultural tradition, and how its artistic strategies express Roth's specific response to the dilemma of the self-consciously Jewish author writing in a language steeped in non-Jewish culture.

The book is almost entirely narrated[11] from the perspective of David Shearl, a boy of eight, with the exception of the Prologue and one short section seen through the eyes of the Hebrew school teacher. It is about an immigrant child's quest for a personal and cultural identity apart from his parents; it traces the arduous and bewildering path of assimilation. It is a book written in the English language but experienced by the reader as if it were a translation, for David's main actions and thoughts are experienced in Yiddish. The original experience in the source language is almost entirely absent. When the original language is reproduced, it is rendered in transliteration, a phonetic transcription, rather than an authentic recording using the actual alphabet, so that from the American reader's perspective, the original language is both irretrievable and incomprehensible. Everything is experienced at a remove linguistically. While the Yiddish language is "home" for David and is associated with his parents, particularly with his mother, it can be an alien language for the reader. Occasionally Roth will provide a translation for the reader who is not familiar with Yiddish, but he will also reproduce the Yiddish for its own sake.

Although one does not have to know Yiddish to understand the book, one does have to be familiar with Jewish culture to understand all of the motifs and to appreciate the artistic pattern. From the point of view of the reader, "foreign" languages intruding on the English text are Yiddish, Hebrew, and Aramaic. While Yiddish is the spoken language of the home, the other two languages are reproduced only as liturgy, as quotations from Jewish textual sources. In other words, Roth treats Hebrew in the Jewish traditional sense of the sacred language or *loshn-koydesh.* As Max Weinreich has noted, for Ashkenazic Jewry Hebrew was the language of the sacred texts, of the immovable basis of study. Just as Yiddish was the language of speech, so Hebrew was the language of whatever had to be committed to writing.[12] Just as Yiddish was the unmediated language, the one that the people used for face-to-face communication, so *loshn-koydesh* (non-modern Hebrew) was the mediated and bookish language.[13] For the central protagonist, Hebrew and Aramaic are also foreign languages, the sounds being as incomprehensible to his ear as they would be to that of the English-speaking reader. Yet they are part of his home culture, because they are central components of his Jewish identity. Thus, David is

bilingual and multicultural, his bilingualism consisting of Yiddish and English, and his multiple cultures consisting of Yiddish as home and everyday life, English as the street and the culture to which he is assimilating, and Hebrew and Aramaic as the mysterious languages, the sacred tongues, that represent mystical power to him and that initiate him into the Jewish world. Moreover, Yiddish, Hebrew and Aramaic are all languages of his Jewish culture, while American English, the language of the author's primary literacy, is the language of the "other" in that it is the language of Christianity. Roth's novel charts the struggle with this linguistic and cultural "other," as it speaks through the author and his Jewish child protagonist.

The book maps David's movement outward, away from home both psychologically, as he experiences his oedipal phase, and sociologically as he moves out of his Yiddish environment toward American culture. While Roth's implied reader may not know either Yiddish or Hebrew, he is expected to know the broader cultural significance within Judaeo-Christian civilization of the liturgical passages reproduced in their original, and as a result will be aware of David's location at the nexus of several cultures, far beyond anything that the child can ever comprehend. Furthermore, the book's theme of the irrevocable move away from home, both socially and psychologically, and the concomitant irretrievable losses, is evident in the mimetic strategem as well, for the reader experiences the actions at a linguistic remove, as if it were a translation with a missing original, or from a forgotten language.

Because Yiddish is the absent source language from which the thoughts and actions in English are experienced, it competes with English as the "home" language, or to put it another way, Yiddish is the home culture and English is an everyday language for David, but a foreign culture. Consequently, while actual transliteration from Yiddish is an intrusion in the English text, English intertextual references can also be an intrusion in the cultural context, because the world of English culture is alien to the text's cultural environment. The odd result is that English, the language in which the text is written, can itself be experienced as alien by the reader as well as the characters, as a type of self-distancing or reverse interference. Yiddish reproduction in the English text, in contrast, causes no discomfort to the characters for the selective reproduction is a mimetic device experienced only by the reader, and it brings an alien element to the text for readers unfamiliar with Yiddish. Hebrew reproductions are experienced as alien by the characters and by the American reader, but as less so by the reader who has the cultural background to identify them and to comprehend their cultural implications.

The Prologue, one of the only passages in the book rendered from an omniscient narrator and not through David as focalizer, introduces the main themes as well as the problem of translation, of bilingualism and

biculturalism. It begins with a homogenous English text and moves toward Yiddish; it moves inward, from the general description of New York Harbor and the mass immigration as part of the American experience, to the specific characters and their Yiddish world. The Prologue opens with an epigraph in italics: "I pray thee ask no questions / this is that Golden Land." Traditionally, epigraphs provide a motto for a chapter or for an entire work, and they are often quotations from another text. In this case, the epigraph sounds like a quotation, and with its archaic second person singular, it can be associated with English prose of an earlier period. But it is not attributed to any source, nor is it a quotation that is easily recognizable on the part of a literate English reader. Moreover, the capitalizing of "Golden Land" draws attention to that phrase, *di goldene medine,* which in Yiddish is a popular way of referring to America, standard fare on Second Avenue but also echoed in Yiddish poetry as in Moshe-Leyb Halpern's poem, *In goldenem land.*[14] The epigraph is a purely invented quotation, one that *seems* to be part of English literature, but at the same time seems to be a statement from Yiddish, just as the novel itself, written in English and in the modernist experimental tradition of Joyce, also partakes of the world of Eastern European Jewish culture.

Furthermore, the epigraph itself is repeated three pages later as the reported first utterance of David's mother, "And this is the Golden Land." Roth adds, "She spoke in Yiddish." This explicit attribution of a different language to her speech is the first indication, after the general portrait of newly arrived immigrants, that the novel takes place in a Yiddish-speaking environment, and it provides what Sternberg has called "mimetic synechdoche."[15] Once again, after all of the dialogue conveying the miscommunication and tension between the newly arrived immigrant mother and the settled immigrant father who perceives himself to be partly Americanized, there is a further repetition of the golden land motif near the end of the prologue in the narrated interior monologue of Genya, "This was that vast incredible land, the land of freedom, immense opportunity, that Golden Land." But the prologue actually ends with a short dialogue in Yiddish without any translation:

> "Albert,"she said timidly, "Albert."
> "Hm?"
> "Gehen vir voinen du? In Nev York?"
> "Nein. Bronzeville. Ich hud dir schoin geschriben."[16]

In short, the prologue ends with establishing the literal location of Albert and Genya, not in the golden land, but in a real place called Bronzeville. And it is accessible only to the bilingual reader.

The movement of the prologue is inward, from English to Yiddish, from the general depiction of immigration with the image of the Statue of Liberty and the synoptic view of the couple to the individual characters

and their specific plans. It moves from the metaphor of the Golden Land, first appearing in an English epigraph, to identification of the golden land with the dreams of the Jewish immigrant conveyed in English translation, to the final exchange in Yiddish, which displaces the figurative America with a literal geographical location. With each new repetition, the golden land slips into an ironic tone, reinforced by the very tarnished, industrial and demystifying description of the Statue of Liberty marking the entry to America.

The rest of the novel moves in the opposite direction as that of the Prologue, namely outward, from David's mother's kitchen, the realm of Yiddish, to the street and the English world. David's first word, "Mama," rather than "Mommy" or "Mother" marks him as an immigrant. For the first several pages the dialogue between David and his mother takes place in refined, sensitive, and normative language. "'Lips for me,' she reminded him, 'must always be cool as the water that wet them'" (18). Only when David descends to the street and his speech in English dialect is reproduced—"Kentcha see? Id's coz id's a machine" (21)—does the reader realize that the previous pages were all taking place in Yiddish. The next stage in the movement toward English is the introduction of English folklore in the form of children's street chants, transported onto the streets of New York: "Waltuh, Waltuh, Wiuhlflowuh / Growin' up so high; / So we are all young ladies, / An' so we are ready to die" (23). Not only is the dialect comical, but the refrain is clearly a foreign element in David's world: Walter is not a Jewish name; wildflowers, even figuratively, are not in evidence anywhere in the urban immigrant neighborhood, and the rest of the book demonstrates that romantic love, young ladies ready to die, is a concept alien to David's world. The additional irony in this folklore is that its sexual connotations are not evident to the children who are chanting the rhyme.

Allusion to English sources, whether they be street chants, fairy tales, or songs, are always experienced as foreign, and are always ironic. When David perceives their boarder Luter as an ogre, he places him in the folk tale of Puss in Boots (36), in a world of a marquis who marries a princess; and when he tries to keep himself from fearing the cellar door, he repeats stanzas from an American patriotic song, "My country 'tis of dee!" only to reach the refuge of his mother's kitchen with the line, "Land where our fodders died!" Quotations or allusions from English culture, despite their being embedded in an English text, appear as something foreign, as translation from another place.

The felt presence of an absent source language, then, which occasionally makes the English text read as if *it* were a translation, is conveyed in a number of ways: by explicit attribution of phrases as Yiddish in "reality"; by selective reproduction of Yiddish phrases; by English rendered in Yiddish dialect; and by references to English culture as if it were

an intrusion into the main cultural environment of the text. Before looking at intertextual elements from Jewish culture, we need to examine three other strategies for conveying the multilingualism of the text and its cultural world: interlingual homonyms, self-embedding, single word cultural indicators.

In the first instance, English words are perceived to be homonyms for Yiddish words, and are therefore either accidentally or deliberately misunderstood. When David hears the word "altar," he thinks it means "alter," the Yiddish for old man. When his aunt announces that her dentist is going to relieve her of pain by using cocaine, the others hear "kockin," the Yiddish equivalent for defecating (160). And Aunt Bertha herself plays on the similarity between the molar which her dentist is going to extract, which she pronounces as "molleh," the Yiddish word for "full," to invent a vulgar pun. "I am going to lose six teeth. And of the six teeth, three he called 'mollehs'. Now isn't this a miracle? He's going to take away a 'molleh' and then he's going to make me 'molleh' (160)." David makes the mental note that "Aunt Bertha was being reckless tonight."

In the case of self-embedding, a word, phrase, symbol, or archetype which is actually in English is imported into the dialogue, rendered as verbal transposition of Yiddish into English, and this English element appears to be foreign, as "other" within the rest of the *English* text. Here is an example in a dialogue between Aunt Bertha and David's mother Genya:

> "I'm not going to the dentist's tomorrow,"she said bluntly. "I haven't been going there for weeks—at least not every time I left here. I'm going 'kippin companyih'!"
>
> "Going what?" His mother knit her brow. "What are you doing?"
>
> "Kippin companyih! It's time you learned a little more of this tongue. It means I have a suitor." (163)

Finally, occasionally a single word, because it has no referent in the home culture, evokes the entire alien culture. This is true of the word organist when David overhears his mother and aunt speaking in Yiddish. "What was an 'orghaneest'? He was educated, that was clear. And what else, what did he do? He might find out later if he listened. So he was a goy. A Christian. . . . Christian . . . Chrize. Christmas. School parties" (196). The world "altar" also functions as one of these single word indicators, as well as a homonym. In fact, in each of the above three types of bilingual strategies, there is a conflict of cultures, for obviously both the church and romantic courtship are alien to much of the Eastern European Jewish world of the turn of the century.

The absent home language, then, is an exacting and even persecuting presence as it turns David's Americanness, through English, into an agent of the "other." This is developed further in the motifs that accompany the

other "Jewish" languages in the text. The most complex and significant instance of diglossia in the book is the infiltration of Hebrew and Aramaic, of *loshn-koydesh,* for David is bilingual when it comes to Yiddish and English, but diglossic when it comes to the sacred languages used only in connection with liturgical texts. In David's heder class he is introduced to Hebrew, first through the learning of the alphabet which is reproduced in the text, and then through the study of a passage from Isaiah recounting the angel's cleansing of the prophet's lips with a burning coal. Roth solves the problem of the reader's incomprehension of the transliterated passage by having the rabbi explain it to the children in Yiddish, which appears in the text in English, thus by translation twice removed: "And when Isaiah saw the Almighty in His majesty and His terrible light—Woe me! he cried, What shall I do? I am lost!" David identifies the fiery coal with an object in his own natural environment, and therefore with the possibility of revelation in his own life. This is communicated in quoted interior monologue: "But where could you get angel-coal? Hee! Hee! In a cellar is coal. But other kind, black coal, not angel coal. Only God had angel-coal. Where is God's cellar I wonder? How light it must be there" (227). As the cellar has previously been the dark place which David fears, particularly because it is associated with the children's sexual games, David is now faced with the sacred and the profane in one image.

Since David does not understand Hebrew, the Aramaic passage is functionally the same as the Hebrew one, another aspect of *loshn-koydesh*: it introduces him to a popular and significant document in Jewish culture, namely one of the concluding songs of the Passover seder, *Ḥad gadya.* Roth gives the reader who is unfamiliar with the Passover liturgy the translation of the song by having the rabbi ask, "Who can render this into Yiddish?" David responds with the last stanza which repeats all of the preceding ones: "And then the Almighty, blessed be He . . . killed the angel of death, who killed the butcher, who killed the ox, who drank the water, that quenched the fire, that burned the stick, that beat the dog, that bit the cat, that ate the kid, that my father bought for two zuzim. One kid, one only kid!" (233).

Although the reader is provided with translations of these two texts, in one case a loose paraphrase and in another an exact translation, the significance of these passages in the novel are clear only when they are perceived within both Jewish and Christian tradition, for they reappear in the final brilliant mosaic, chapter XXI. Both passages are associated with the spring, with Passover, and with the theme of redemption. In *Ḥad gadya* the lyrics are cumulative, as the song runs through a hierarchy of power with each succeeding element overpowering the preceding one, until it reaches an omnipotent god. The kid is purchased for slaughter and ceremonial feasting, to recall the slaughter of the paschal lamb by the

Hebrews in ancient Egypt, providing the blood on the doorpost to identify the Hebrew homes for the Angel of Death to pass over during the smiting of the Egyptian first-born. The one only kid about whom David sings is David himself, an innocent sacrifice either for his parents' "sins" (mother's affair with a Gentile and father's passive witness to his father's death) or for those of the tough technological and vulgar city in which he finds himself. But as the languages of the climactic chapter indicate, he is also that other paschal lamb, namely Christ. Two cultural traditions, in some sense complementary and in others oppositional, co-exist in this section, as they do in David's and Roth's world.

The book of Isaiah prophesies redemption through the coming of the Messiah. In Christian hermeneutics, it is read as prefiguring the birth of Christ. Moreover, in Christian tradition, Easter is linked with Passover, with the Crucifixion, with redemption through the sacrificial offering of the one only kid, Christ himself, the sacrificial lamb who takes the sins of the community upon himself. In historical terms, Easter was also when tensions between the Jewish and Gentile communities were at their height in Eastern Europe, often taking the turn of blood libels and pogroms. All of this is eventually evoked in the final scene, when the multilingualism and biculturalism are placed in social, historical, religious, and psychological contexts.

In the last section, David runs from his father's wrath after the rabbi discloses the child's story denying Albert's paternity, insisting that his real father was a Christian organist, his mother's first love. To protect himself, David grabs his father's zinc milk ladle, and rushes to the crack in the trolley car tracks where, in an earlier scene with neighborhood boys, he witnesses the release of electric light from a short circuit. Associating the light between the tracks with God, David seeks refuge from the parents he believes have betrayed him. The electric charge is conducted through his body and he falls unconscious onto the cobblestones.

What follows is the most artistically innovative section of the book, as his loss and subsequent regaining of consciousness, his death and rebirth, are depicted among the cries of urban immigrants in the accents of their native tongues. Here social and spatial boundaries are transcended as a mass of individuals from diverse backgrounds fear and grieve for the prostrate child on the city street.[17] With a minimum of omniscient narration, Roth uses two alternating modes in this climactic scene—reported speech of witnesses to David's suffering, before, during, and after the event and italicized sections which are psycho-narration, rendering David's perceptions in formal and self-consciously poetic language. The former are multi-lingual and multi-dialectical; the latter are self-conscious literary English. The alternation between the styles creates ironic contrasts as one mode spills over into the other. The dialogue of the

street is marked by its vulgarity and preoccupation with sex. "Well, I says, you c'n keep yer religion, I says, Shit on de pope," says O'Toole in Callahan's beer-saloon at the start of this section. ". . . [w]'en it comes to booze, I says, shove it up yer ass! Cunt for me, ev'y time, I says" (411). When David's thoughts as he runs toward the rail are juxtaposed to O'Toole's declaration, they resonate with sexual as well as religious connotations. "Now! Now I gotta. In the crack, remember. In the crack be born" (411). The italicized report of his consciousness, occurring simultaneously, is marked by its epic and lofty tones.

More than any other section of the book, this final sequence, with its Joycean epiphanies and stream of consciousness and with a collage of disembodied voices reminiscent of Eliot's *Wasteland,* identifies Roth as a modernist writer. The italicized section is very deliberately artistic in the tradition of English and European literature, with languages and constructions that are borrowed from medieval romance quests and from epics. The dipper is like a "sword in a scabbard" (413), "like a dipped metal flag or a grotesque armored head" (414), his father is a mythical figure, "the splendour shrouded in the earth, the titan, dormant in his lair" (418), and his action of inserting the dipper is compared to the end of a romantic quest, "the last smudge of rose, staining the stem of the trembling, jagged chalice of the night-taut stone with the lees of day" (418). The moment of his electrocution is filled with "radiance," "light," "glory," and "galaxies." It is self-consciously literary to the point of even tunneling into the "heart of darkness" (430). In this section of the book, Roth demonstrates clearly his identification with a tradition of English literature. There is only one reference to another culture, and it is to "Chad Gadya" and also to the father's command to "Go down" (428), with Moses clearly implied.

In the reported speech of the bystanders, Roth makes use of dialect: Yiddish, German, Irish, and Italian, and selective reproduction of other languages, namely Yiddish and Italian. But most importantly, he depicts the convergence of the English/Christian tradition and the Yiddish/Hebrew Jewish tradition, and their equivalents in the social/historical and psychological motifs of the book.

In psychological terms, David's thoughts about the crack between the car tracks where he seeks a spiritual rebirth through contact with a masculine God, also evoke his desire to return to the womb, to the mother and the source of that oceanic oneness that he now seeks in a sublimated form. It is his mother who forces the separation by sending him into the street to escape his father's tyranny, and therefore David is both running away from his actual mother and running toward an image of that mother in the crack between the car tracks. The electric force between the tracks is thus the power of both the male and female principles, his father and his mother, the God of Isaiah and the mother image at once. At the same time,

as David flees from his wrathful father brandishing a whip, and he seeks refuge in the divine power between the cracks, in a paternal God who will punish his punitive father, he also imagines his own father as that male God who will punish *him* for his sin of denying his real fatherhood and taking on a Christian past. David dies a symbolic death as he imagines that he no longer sees his own face when he peers into a series of mirrors reflected infinitely. As he is driven out of his home and exposed to the electric charge, he feels himself become "the seed of nothing. And he was not . . ." (429). Bystanders conclude that he is dead. The first glimmer of regaining consciousness—"and nothingness whimpered being dislodged from night" (430)—occurs as he recalls coal in the cellar below the city streets, the light of God powerful enough to strike down his father, to still "the whirring hammer." Just as David had symbolically killed his father when he invented a story about a Christian father who was an organist, so in his semi-conscious state, a divine power greater than that of his father stills the dread hand and voice and frees him. The psychological dimension of his ordeal is one of a transformation of identity away from the parental and toward the spiritual.

While the social backdrop for this scene of death and rebirth is multilingual, the individual experience as rendered through David's semi-conscious monologue is entirely in a lofty and literary English, as if David dies out of his immigrant life and is born into the world of English literacy and culture, the world of Henry Roth's literary identity, but at the cost of killing both the father and the mother. In traditional Ashkenaz Jewry, Yiddish is referred to as the mother-tongue, *mame-loshn,* and the sacred language Hebrew as the father language or *fotershprakh.*[18] In this case, David abandons both Yiddish and Hebrew, and the multilingual immigrant din of the street, for an English literary language that speaks through him. It is presented as an accident brought on by multiple misunderstandings in a multicultural world. David becomes an emblem of Henry Roth, the bilingual immigrant and Jewish writer, who is cut away from the mother-tongue, whose proficiency in the newly acquired language exceeds that of the mother-tongue, but who cannot transfer his emotional involvement to that acquired language.[19] Furthermore, the loss of the mother-tongue in the process of Americanization carries an additional hazard for the Jewish writer, namely the Christian culture with which English is imbued. This is developed in the liberation from slavery theme which Roth pursues throughout the last section of the novel.

This theme is cast in language beyond the boy's personal plight, language with social, historical, and religious dimensions. The social and historical motifs are conveyed in references to the class struggle, as expressed in the dates of attempted revolutions and periods of worker oppression; recent Jewish history in the form of the pogrom; and the American dream as a form of liberation from bondage for the immigrant.

An unidentified voice proclaims the message of socialist ideology: "'They'll betray us!' Above all these voices, the speaker's voice rose. 'In 1789, in 1848, in 1871, in 1905, he who has anything to save will enslave us anew!'" (417). Such passages are often cited as evidence that *Call It Sleep* is truly a proletarian novel. In addition to the class struggle, Roth also refers to the Eastern European background of his characters in the Yiddish calls for rescue, quoted in Yiddish and without translation, "Helftz! Helftz! Helftz Yeedin! 'Rotivit!'" (421). Finally, the same soapbox orator alludes to the national American context in the mocking evocation of the Statue of Liberty, symbol of the Golden Land: "And do you know, you can go all the way up inside her for twenty-five cents. For only twenty-five cents, mind you! Every man, woman and child ought to go up inside her, it's a thrilling experience" (415). That David's oppressive life and near-death run parallel to the lives of these immigrant bystanders is further emphasized by Roth's reference to them as "the masses . . . stricken, huddled, crushed by the pounce of ten-fold night" (422). All of this is rendered in a multilingual collage.

The Christian strain in this entire last section is very bold, with numerous references to the New Testament, and primary focus on the betrayal of Christ. The poker players rejoice "T'ree kings I god. Dey come on huzzbeck"—and vulgar jokes are cast in biblical terms—"How many times'll your red cock crow, Pete, befaw y'gives up? T'ree?" (418). The red cock metaphor condenses the religious and the sexual connotations, and even refers to a historical one, for Emma Lazarus, the Jewish poet whose poem appears on the base of the Statue of Liberty, was the author of a poem entitled "The Crowing of the Red Cock," which reviews the persecution of the Jew by the Christian through the ages. The satiric treatment of these Christian elements is also evident in the reference to the woman Mary who was with child, but had an abortion. In this climactic chapter, David becomes the paschal lamb, the one only kid in *Ḥad gadya,* but also a Christ figure, as the Jewish and Christian traditions are conflated. When he is first noticed by the people, a bystander shouts, "Christ, it's a kid!" (420). When the hospital orderly administers ammonia, a member of the crowd claims that it "Stinks like in the shool on Yom Kippur."

David thinks of himself as the kid in the Passover liturgy, and he seeks the God of the Book of Isaiah in the Jewish scriptures. But he is perceived by the crowd of immigrants, by America's melting poet, as a Christ figure. As he leaves Yiddish behind, the *mame-loshn,* the language of nurture but not literacy for him, and Hebrew and Aramaic, *loshn-koydesh,* the "foreign" languages of his liturgy and his spiritual identity, he is left with English, his genuine native language, which is at the same time the language of the "other," the language of Christianity. At the end, in his semi-conscious state, the English language speaks through him, as

it does throughout the book, and it kills the kid who is reborn as Christ. To assimilate, for Roth, is to write in English, to become the "other," and to kill the father. At the time that Roth wrote *Call It Sleep,* he identified as a Communist and he consciously embraced a vision of assimilation into a larger community beyond that of religion and nationality. In 1963, he made his often quoted and later recanted statement that the best thing that Jews could do would be "orienting themselves toward ceasing to be Jews."[20] In *Call It Sleep,* Roth's central protagonist, a Jewish child, is shown to be overly assimilated, to become Christ. This is not what he consciously seeks; it is an imported self-image, an archetype taking root in his consciousness as the English language becomes his sole means of expression. In the climactic linguistic and cultural collage of the last section, David becomes a naturalized American by becoming a Christ symbol, and the English language is experienced as a foreign tongue and a foreign culture inhabiting his psyche. Whether he desires it or not, David is destined to live a life in translation, alienated from the culture of *his* language. It is no wonder that Roth could write no second book.

Among the few stories and sketches that he did write in later years, now collected in *Shifting Landscapes,* are two that further demonstrate this dilemma of the Jewish writer in his relation to his languages and culture. In "Final Dwarf" a naive Maine farmer (Roth's occupation at that time) nearly kills his immigrant New York father, but he cannot bring himself to do so. But more significantly, in "The Surveyor" an American Jewish tourist to Spain is apprehended for attempting to determine, with precision, the exact site of the *auto da fé* in Seville in order to lay a wreath. When asked by the police about his action, he says, "I was attempting to locate a spot of some sentimental value to myself . . . A place no longer shown on the maps of Seville."[21]

In *Call It Sleep,* Roth's fiction conveys the cultural ethos of immigration, of ethnicity, of living at the nexus of several cultures, of being haunted by missing languages, of being intellectually estranged from the mother-tongue and emotionally estranged from one's native language. He did so by various techniques of translation, linguistic and cultural, woven throughout his novel. But to write another novel, he would have had to kill his father and to embrace the Christian world, the one of the Inquisition in Seville, of the rosary innocently cherished by David. This he could not do. Yet he gave his readers a brilliant artistic document of a cultural dead end. Yiddish has the last word in the street chorus, and it is a disembodied and anonymous voice, "Gott sei dank." It speaks for Roth's readers.

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NOTES

1. Baal Makhshoves (Israel Isidor Elyashev), "Two Languages—Only One Literature" [Yiddish], in *Geklibene verk* (New York, 1953), p. 122 (my translation).

2. Ibid., p. 119.

3. Ibid., p. 117.

4. William Mackey, "The Description of Bilingualism," in *Readings in the Sociology of Language,* ed. Joshua Fishman (The Hague, 1968), p. 554.

5. Joshua Fishman, *Sociolinguistics: A Brief Introduction* (Rowley, Mass., 1972), pp. 52–54. Fishman is basing his definitions on the work of Charles Ferguson, "Diglossia," *Word* 15 (1959).

6. Leonard Forster, *The Poet's Tongues: Multilingualism in Literature* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 4.

7. See Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language* (Chicago, 1980); Uriel Weinreich, *Languages in Contact: Findings and Problems* (New York, 1953); Itamar Even-Zohar, "The Nature and Functionalization of the Language of Literature Under Diglossia" [Hebrew], *Hasifrut* 2 (1970): 286–302 and "Aspects of the Hebrew-Yiddish Polysystem," in *Polysystem Theory* (forthcoming); Benjamin and Barbara Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry* (Berkeley, 1986); Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: A Study in the Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1973).

8. Max Weinreich, p. 249.

9. M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin, 1981), p. 292.

10. Meir Sternberg, "Polylingualism as Reality and Translation as Mimesis," *Poetics Today* 2 (1981): 225–32.

11. Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, 1978).

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14. See *American Yiddish Poetry* , p. 404.

15. Sternberg, p. 225.

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17. See Hana Wirth-Nesher, "The Modern Jewish Novel and the City: Kafka, Roth, and Oz," *Modern Fiction Studies* 24 (1978): 91–110.

18. Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language,* p. 270.

19. Uriel Weinreich, *Languages in Contact,* p. 76.

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Ethnic Passages

Literary Immigrants in Twentieth-Century America

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The University of Chicago Press
* Chicago and London *

1993

inscription of patriarchy, but Yezierska renews her resistance to a heritage that continues to threaten her.

Sara says, "And now I realized that the shadow of the burden was always following me, and here I stood face to face with it again" (295). In narrating Sara's life story, Yezierska seems as drawn as her protagonist is to a conservative denouement: it is Yezierska, after all, who overdetermines Sara's destiny, who seems incapable of imagining any other solution to the disappointments of teaching. But if we insist on interpreting the plot of *Bread Givers* as evidence of the continuing hold of Eastern European Jewish tradition over Yezierska's imagination, we must also have recourse to our knowledge of Yezierska's subsequent biography. Whether Yezierska means us to see Sara's marriage as a victory or a defeat, as a workable compromise or as doomed from the start, we know that she herself never returned to Levitas, never remarried, and never renewed responsibility either for her own father or her daughter. We know, too, that she continued to write and publish: novels in 1927 and 1932, minor contributions to the Federal Writers' Project, an autobiography in 1950, and intermittent short stories until her death in 1969. Unlike Sara, Yezierska sought "the real America" not within the relatively comfortable institutions of her successful peers but within a more tenuous community of writers and readers, a transnational community whose common ground would be to deromanticize immigrant experience and which failed to coalesce in her lifetime.

3

Oedipus in Brownsville: Parricide, a House Divided, and *Call It Sleep*

> At some point in the fifties it would become clear that the problem we faced was no longer how to fight for modernism, it was to consider why the fight for it had ended in so unnerving, almost unseemly a triumph.
>
> Irving Howe[1]

In the late 1920s, a young Lionel Trilling wrote a series of book reviews for *The Menorah Journal* in which he criticized his fellow American Jews for producing immigrant novels "without poetry, without imagination . . . without sophistication." Distinguishing between form and content, Trilling made it clear that he did not oppose the fictional topoi of migration and mobility as much as he did the techniques of "realistic" fiction, what he called "the shoddy prose of Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, and Upton Sinclair."[2] A half-dozen years later, Joseph Wolf used the cutting-edge *Partisan Review* as a forum to hail the beginning of a post-Dreiser era in American-Jewish fiction: "The author [of today] has been a student of the best in modern literature; he has read Joyce and Proust, he is familiar with Symbolist poetry."[3] From the late 1920s through the mid-1930s, Delmore Schwartz, Daniel Fuchs, Meyer Levin, Charles Reznikoff, and others were praised for "more mature" treatments of immigrant subjects.[4] Reviewing *By the Waters of Manhattan*, Trilling himself claimed Reznikoff's first novel "not merely a finer but a truer story than previous attempts in the field of American-Jewish immigrant fiction."[5]

For Wolf, the cutting edge in 1935 meant one novel: Henry

Roth's autobiographical tour de force, *Call It Sleep*. "*Call It Sleep* is more than the best novel of Jewish-American life to appear up to the present time," concluded Wolf. "This first novel by Henry Roth can easily take its place as one of the most outstanding books of the past ten years. *Call It Sleep* is the most promising novel since Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*."[6] Although several critics of the 1930s echoed Wolf's praise, the novel went out of print almost immediately and was by and large lost to memory as well, that is, until it was "rediscovered" in 1957, when both Alfred Kazin and Leslie Fiedler nominated it as one of the most neglected books of the previous twenty-five years.[7] At the height of its renewed salience, R. W. B. Lewis judged *Call It Sleep* "incomparably the best" of immigrant narratives and "indeed, to speak without equivocation, one of the classic American novels."[8]

Call It Sleep follows an Austrian Jewish immigrant boy from age six to eight as he deciphers, tries to escape from, and yet only succeeds in exacerbating an Oedipal triangle more than coincidentally reminiscent of Eugene O'Neill's threesomes in *The Great God Brown:* a lone male child, terrified of sex yet driven to an increasingly hallucinatory probing of his parents' troubled sexuality; the father economically and culturally disenfranchised, prone to impotence and a compensatory paternal rage, feeling increasingly isolated from wife and child; the mother betrayed in her marriage, turning vengefully to the affection of the son, exposing him to the ultimate divergence of his awakening desire and her growing need. If it was O'Neill who confirmed and organized Roth's Oedipal suspicions, it was the narrative techniques of James Joyce (stream of consciousness, Freudian and Judeo-Christian symbolism, the psychological apportioning of narrative) that helped Roth to focus not on late adolescence and early adulthood—the classic locus of psychological fiction—but rather on early boyhood. The assault against lingering Victorian sensibilities marked the novel as irredeemably modern. Eliot's influence can be felt throughout the novel as well, in what Howe praised as its "obligato of lyricism," its stunning sensual impressionism, and its poetics for redeeming the debris of the contemporary cityscape. Eliot is climactically present in the visionary collage of Lower East

Side voices through which Roth himself seeks the anodyne his protagonist cannot find.

The point here is not to praise the novel for achieving a "sophistication" that realism putatively lacks, which would be to reiterate the way it originally was received and the way it was promoted in the 1960s. It is to recognize, rather, how modernist breakthroughs in figuration and meaning-making could serve a second-generation writer wishing to recover what Trilling calls the "solid, raw, sociological truth" of immigration.[9] "Roth's novel patiently enters and then wholly exhausts the immigrant milieu," writes Howe.[10] "It is a *specifically* Jewish book," adds Fiedler, "the best single book by a Jew about Jewishness written by an American, certainly through the thirties and perhaps ever."[11] Although these testaments date from the 1960s revival of the novel, *Call It Sleep* seems ideally suited for critics impatient with ethnic sentimentalism and committed to exploring the explosive, discomforting interactions of ethnicity, gender, and class. *Call It Sleep* identifies how masculine insecurities originating in Eastern Europe were exacerbated by stepwise migration (first the father, then the mother and children), by the transformation from rural stability to urban poverty-cum-mobility, and by the discordance between a boy's formal education in Judaic guilt and his informal one in Christian redemption. In so doing, the novel demonstrates the resiliency of Yiddish family culture, which reproduces itself (for better *and* for worse) through a psychological dynamic—across the generations, amidst the ebbing of Orthodox Judaism, and against the temptations of middle-class conformity.

After a small flurry of attention in the 1960s and early 1970s, professional interest in *Call It Sleep* seems to have all but evaporated. The novel is represented in none of the plethora of state-of-the-art anthologies (not even in the much-lauded Heath omnibus), each of which has been published in the last four years and each of which lays claim to multiculturalism and canon revision.[12] Jewish immigrant realists—Abraham Cahan, Mike Gold, and even Anzia Yezierska—are figured prominently in the *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, but Roth is mentioned only in passing, as if his warrant upon our

attention did not extend beyond the mandate of pluralistic inclusiveness itself.[13] Although we have learned to be as wary of countercanons as of canons themselves, I wonder if *Call It Sleep* might deserve to be named, once again, one of "the most neglected books of the past 25 years."

It is curious that we would have any hesitation at all in teaching and studying *Call It Sleep*. On the one hand, we can invoke the term "high modernism" with a great degree of rigor. "T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and Eugene O'Neill were the writers of major stature that interested me back then," recalls Roth.[14] *Call It Sleep* welcomes New Critical analysis and is also quite hospitable to the thematic concerns characteristically employed in the name of formalism. At the same time—and this is what is most surprising about its poor salience recently—*Call It Sleep* envelops the reader in the world of the Lower East Side as thoroughly as any narrative before or since. As Wai-chee Dimock reports, American literary studies are making a move away from "the local, the verifiable, and the unique" and toward "the speculative and the relational."[15] One would expect *Call It Sleep* to be a source of great interest, then, because it invites speculation across the boundaries between immigrating and expatriating, between canonization and relative obscurity, between the United States and Europe, and between fiction and the genres of poetry and drama.

That *Call It Sleep* continues to fall through the cracks of academic reception is a function of its capacity to continue to frustrate our terms of critical inquiry. During the postwar years when the American canon was being formulated, critics praised *Call It Sleep* for breaking down the barriers of realism, yet the novel ran aground of their insistence that to ascend to modernist technique requires dispelling the politics of an ethnic agenda. Too much was at stake in the interdependent modernist notions of aesthetic transcendence and humanist universalism for critics to deal fully with the insistent Jewishness of Roth's novel. Since the early 1970s, *Call It Sleep* has been noted for its unapologetic saturation in urban Jewish folk life, but it now founders on the assumption that to write of marginal experience is to write outside of mainstream aesthetics. Too much is now at stake in the notions of ethnocultural authenticity for critics to deal with its insistent high modernism.

How impolitic it has become to speak of a minority writer's interest in canonical aesthetics is illustrated by the state of the exemplary minority criticism of our time, criticism concerned with African-American literature. Robert Stepto writes that contemporary critics have become apprehensive of acknowledging how black writers necessarily use and often self-consciously celebrate established forms of Anglo-American literary practice. It is as if these critics fear discovering in writerly engagement with mainstream aesthetics evidence "of black writers 'escaping' from their culture and 'passing' into the world of Art," "of black writers pouring 'black content' into 'white forms,'" and "of the subjugation of the Afro-American or the near-colonization of his or her critical intelligence."[16] It is this wariness, shared by students of other minority traditions, that has frustrated the critical recovery of a work as enabled by high modernism as *Call It Sleep*.

Given present-day suspicions of assimilation, one of the daunting facts about ethnic modernists is how many of them understood themselves to be engaged in Emersonian remaking, both culturally and socially. Leslie Fiedler writes that, for those who started out in the 1930s, the typifying figure was "a second generation Jew . . . trying to find his identity in the pages of *transition*."[17] "Most of the New York writers," recalls Howe, possessed "a strong drive to both break out of the ghetto and leave the bonds of Jewishness entirely. . . . They meant to declare themselves citizens of the world."[18] They did not seek assimilation in the sense of a blind naturalization into the U.S. middle class; instead they sought entry into what Daniel Aaron has called "the universal republic" of letters, a multinational community of self-marginalized intellectuals reaching for aesthetic achievement.[19] Not only entering but "opening up" this republic, the New York intellectuals gave the reception of high modernism an Eastern European bent; first they reworked literary journalism, then contemporary literature, and finally the academy according to received senses of spiritual value and social purpose, including (paradoxically) the strain of universalism within Jewish thought itself. What is per-

plexing, then, is not that the New York intellectuals abandoned all of their cultural heritage in a rush to embrace modernism (how would anyone succeed at total self-transformation?), but that many of them were motivated by the prospect of self-transcendence, and many of the rest were savvy enough, in the face of anti-Semitism, to talk as if they were.

Roth abandoned his parents upon matriculating at City College in favor of an international family, a network of artists and critics obsessed with European experimentation.[20] He replaced Judaic observance with the creed of "art for art's sake," which he absorbed in tutelage to his live-in lover, New York University professor Eda Lou Walton. "Like so many first generation American Jewish youth, I had already come to disassociate from family, Judaism, the whole thing—and to embrace the American scene, the new American attitudes."[21] He turned to Eliot, Joyce, and O'Neill, a Catholic literary trinity:

> Eliot's *Waste Land* had a devastating effect on me, I felt stunned by the vastness of its conception. . . . Some of the plays of Eugene O'Neill left a deep imprint. I went to see *The Great God Brown* . . . and came away feeling that I had been listening to the inner voice of a man. I had already read Joyce as a freshman in college, and a copy of *Ulysses* . . . introduced me to an entirely new way of seeing things. I felt I could see doors swing open on untried possibilities in literature.[22]

In *Call It Sleep,* Roth looked back at his boyhood with a model of intrafamilial intercourse derived from the grandson of Irish Catholic immigrants, with technologies for investigating precocious forms of sexuality and religious mysticism derived from the most influential literary Irishman of the century, and with a commitment to the receptive power of the word derived from an expatriated old-stock American on his way to the most insistent of all Catholicisms—that of conversion.

In large measure, then, Roth did undergo something like a religioaesthetic conversion. Yet there remains the fact of his novel: in *Call It Sleep* he returned imaginatively to the Lower East Side, and in returning he recast his struggle for self-

universalization in a highly particularistic light. In 1972, when Bonnie Lyons asked Roth what he had learned from *Ulysses,* he replied, "What I gained was this awed realization that you didn't have to go anywhere at all except around the corner to flesh out a literary work. . . . In stream of consciousness I saw that my own continual dialogue with myself could be made into literature."[23] What clearer provocation could there have been to experiment with Jewish stream of consciousness than the fact that Joyce centered *Ulysses* upon Leopold Bloom?

The version of *Call It Sleep* we have received from the 1960s shows Roth breaking through realist sociology to achieve genuine literary merit. Fiedler writes, "Cued by whatever fears, Roth's turning to childhood enables him to render his story as dream and nightmare, fantasy and myth—to escape the limits of that realism which makes of other accounts of ghetto childhood documents rather than poetry."[24] At every opportunity, Roth has described his novel as an impressionist tone poem that achieves univocal expressiveness at the expense of social insight:

> In sticking to the child and patterning the world around him, I was able to use all my lyrical impulses. And therefore the whole texture of the novel is like that of a long poem or metaphor. . . . When I think of novelists like Bellow or Philip Roth, social commentary seems to be the most important aspect of their books. In *Call It Sleep,* social commentary was anything but. What *was* important was the sensuous world that kind of flowed and the subjective reaction to this sensuous world.[25]

Roth's characterization of the novel as a "long poem or metaphor" has led critics to focus, in the fashion of high formalism, on its "symbolic structure" or its "use of motifs."[26] Within the lyric density of Roth's prose await surprises for all of us smitten with language and in his unpacking of boyhood phantasmagoria lie insights for those of us interested in developmental psychology, particularly young male sexuality. But to acknowledge that the novel seduces with linguistic pleasures or presses beyond ethnic parochialism is not to discount—Roth's

own testimony to the contrary, notwithstanding—its contribution to reconstructing immigrant experience.

For Fiedler and Roth, the key to transcending "social commentary" was the turn to boyhood—as if the "dreams and myths" of Jewish sons had not helped to make the Lower East Side what it was, as if challenging those dreams and myths were not integral to comprehending the social world in which they lived. To my mind, the formula they have left us is backwards. *Call It Sleep* is valuable to us because its boy's-eye view provides special insight into especially Jewish concerns. Its high modernism neither guarantees transcendence nor signifies a kind of extraethnic literary bonus. The Freudianism that Roth derived from O'Neill, the narrative strategies he gleaned from Joyce, and the lyricism he modeled upon Eliot are indispensable to the ethnic perspective of the novel, doing sociohistorical recovery work that has not and probably could not be done as well in any other way.

Mario Puzo writes of the urge to "retrospective falsification" that bears down upon adults trying to recollect immigrant experience.[27] Mediating recollection is not only time, not only maturity, but the guilt and glory, the pride and prejudice of having escaped immigrant confines to become a writer in English. In returning to his childhood, Roth works to penetrate the barriers of rationalization and repression that falsify memory, and he does so by investigating the forces at work within the immigrant family that erect those barriers in the first place.

"The whole substance of the novel is presented as what happens inside the small haunted head of David," writes Fiedler, "aside from a prelude, in which the arrival of David and his mother in America is objectively narrated."[28] Roth wrote what he himself called a "prologue" after drafting the novel. It is often praised for being able to stand on its own and anthologized as if to underscore the point. In light of Roth's recollections of his own parents, it seems to function as a chastening reminder to himself that his own father's tendency to violence was, after all, fairly minor and his mother's maternalism more defensive than impassioned. But Roth's opening gesture is neither as autonomous nor as self-indulgent as it might seem. Functioning as the reader's port of entry into the novel, the

prologue dramatizes how the dislocations of migration—economic disappointment, marital separation, and ethnolinguistic disenfranchisement—converge to spark and fuel familial psychodynamics. *Call It Sleep* has been celebrated for "transcending" the putative confines of its Brownsville/Lower East Side setting, however Roth introduces the Schearls under the shadow of the Statue of Liberty not in order to leave the issues of Ellis Island behind but to reexamine them through the lens of Oedipus.

The situation and melodramatic conceit of Roth's prologue is so established a set piece that it seems to be taken directly from *Yekl*, Abraham Cahan's 1896 novel that made his reputation as a novelist. *Yekl* is widely accepted as the founding text of English-language immigrant realism. Here is the shared scenario: Two to three years before the opening of the novel, a young Jewish man of Eastern European extraction migrated to the United States, leaving behind a bride who is pregnant or has just given birth for the first time. He now goes to claim his wife, dimly remembered, and his son, even less known, at Ellis Island. Hyperconscious about his family's evident foreignness, he insists upon the removal of a telltale piece of headgear: the wife's Orthodox wig in *Yekl* and the son's polka-dot hat in *Call It Sleep*. The wife is disconcerted by her husband's "Yankeeness" and alerted to what in intervening years might have come between them. In both instances, the boy is frightened, cries, and seeks refuge in his mother's arms.

The Ellis Island reunion has become a set piece not only because it is representative—with the exception of the Irish, the men came first—but because the conceit of stepped migration puts into temporal relief the diverging settlements of men and women, particularly emphasizing the male experience of that divergence. For all the refutation of Oscar Handlin's central metaphor of being "uprooted," the image still basically applies: there has been a journey from a village or town, poised at some juncture between feudalism and capitalism, to New York City, which was, by 1890, *the* metropolis, synonymous with multinational industrial capitalism. New York, New York: where wage labor presents unprecedented opportunities for success yet also unprecedentedly brutalizing forms of failure; where intergroup competition and seduction begins with

those of neighboring regions and moves increasingly beyond boundaries of nation, language, and faith; and where traditional forms of valuation (especially self-valuation), rooted in pre-Enlightenment religions, suffer before both the still-potent Protestant self-justification and the increasingly persuasive culture of consumption.

More is at issue in the debate over dress than the mild stigma of "greenhorn." Just below the surface are exchanges of meaning and contests of will, initiated though by no means fully orchestrated by the settled yet vulnerable male. In the conceit of stepped migration, it is the young man who has put his understanding of himself as an individual, a husband, and a father on the line. He reaps the rewards of interpreting how to proceed and incurs the dangers of its consequences. Upon him lies the new task of cultural mediator for the family. As he explains changing cultural traditions to his wife, he is, in effect, working to recruit her to his way of looking at America. He presents a brief on behalf of his past actions (at once a plea for solace and a gambit for praise) as well as a policy statement for proceedings that are to include the wife and implicate the only son.

Although there are portents of dissent in *Yekl*, the reunion goes well enough and is credited by Cahan to his title character's felt success. In the three years preceding the arrival of his wife and child, Yekl, who now calls himself "Jake," has won promotions in the garment trades, enjoyed the camaraderie of his fellow workers, and become something of a favorite on the playing fields and at the dance halls after work. Taken aback by Gitl's "bonnetless, wigged, dowdyish little greenhorn" appearance, Jake adopts the roles of reunited lover and native informant, a winsome combination to coax Gitl into replacing her wig with a kerchief. When Jake realizes that the kerchief makes her look like "an Italian woman of Mulberry Street," he accepts disappointment with good humor and gracefully drops the subject. At the end of the scene, Gitl pokes fun at Jake, which is her way of lending reserved approval and of affirming their prospects as a family in America.[29]

Roth sets his reunion in 1907, "the year that was destined to bring the greatest number of immigrants to the shores of the United States." Yet he distinguishes his threesome, saying,

"The truth was there was something quite untypical about their behavior."[30] If Roth follows Cahan in taking the experienced young male as the cultural mediator for young women and children, he departs from Cahan in choosing a figure who has undergone a much more frustrating, apparently less characteristic, settlement. As he boards the ferry to Brooklyn with his wife Genya and son David, Albert feels that he has failed them in the effort to become reestablished in the new land, and he listens defensively for any sign that Genya judges him harshly. Meanwhile, Genya wonders whether the possibility of economic gain has been worth the cost of parting from her husband shortly after marriage and of raising their child for two years without him.

The prologue of *Call It Sleep* presents a wealth of technical tip-offs suggesting Roth's immersion in the psychodrama of O'Neill. First and foremost, he seems to have "staged" the reunion as much as possible without jettisoning the form of the novel entirely. We do not see the moment when the family members first meet. Instead we come upon the threesome, discussion in progress, as they board a ferry bound for Manhattan. Not only is the narrative of the prologue entirely limited to their actions during the crossing (as if it were a single dramatic scene), but the boat motif is exactly the kind of staging device that O'Neill, the ex-sailor, used so prominently in his early plays. To introduce the Schearls, Roth describes dress and posture but lets character reveal itself by speech and gesture. He sets the scene at dusk on a late spring day, giving us directions of light and atmosphere as O'Neill always does; he directs mother and son to stare, wondrously, at the Statue of Liberty, a melodramatic backdrop, as heavy-handedly laden with Freudian and Christologic imagery as anything in O'Neill. Even the audience is inscribed in the text, in the form of a peddler woman and some "overalled men in the stern" who watch and respond to the reunion.

Roth's favorite O'Neill play, *The Great God Brown*, also features what O'Neill had called a "prologue." In their respective prologues, O'Neill and Roth each introduce father-mother-son families (O'Neill actually has two of them) at moments of socioeconomic transition, yet both press beneath their planning for mobility to uncover "irrational" and primarily sexual moti-

vations. Both foreground the parental battle in order to demonstrate how the son is inserted into an Oedipal triangle, exposing him as a victim at the outset. Both writers thereby prepare their readers for an investigation of the son's response, his manifestations of need and desire, several years down the road. Seven years have passed when the curtain rises for act 1 of *The Great God Brown;* it is four years later when chapter I of *Call It Sleep* discovers David Schearl at his kitchen sink.[31]

Two small skirmishes reveal the trouble between Genya and Albert. When she fails to identify him to the Ellis Island supervisor as her husband, he construes a breach of trust. She then answers by noting how "haggard" and "thin" he looks. "'You've gone without food,'" she chides (12). Albert's resentment seems to reflect a preoccupation with performance and fear of exposure, and leads to a second round of chastising Genya. At his request she attempts to procure an infant-priced ferry ticket for their son, David, who is several months older than the requisite two years. When her awkward lie fails, he takes the small embarrassment personally, suggesting that he came up with the idea more to test her allegiance than to save money, squandering her support in her first gesture of offering it. At the same time, Albert seems overly preoccupied with the size and maturity of his son, insisting simultaneously that David is both small for his age and "'big enough to stand on his own feet'" (13), as if the boy were old enough to be held accountable for the kind of self-reliance that he fears is missing in himself.

Although wary of speech, Albert signals his anxieties loudly and has done so in advance of the actual reunion. Genya's alertness to David comes at the price of near obliviousness to the deeper strains in her husband's embarrassment. Given that he went to the trouble to supply Genya with American clothing, and given how he has already behaved on the ferry, it is surprising that she fails to anticipate his irritation at David's outlandish hat:

> "Pretty? Do you still ask? His lean jaws hardly moved as he spoke. "Can't you see that those idiots lying back there are watching us already? They're mocking us! What will the others do on the train? He looks like a clown in it. He's the cause of all this trouble anyway!" (15)

Albert demands that Genya remove the hat. The bickering frightens David, who intuits not only their impatience with each other but Albert's impatience with him.

When Genya invokes the boy's susceptibility to the chilly weather, she makes a show of just the kind of overprotectiveness that Albert has made a point of questioning. He therefore feels justified in interpreting her refusal as auguring resistance to his efforts to establish paternal and husbandly authority. "While his wife looked on aghast, his long fingers scooped the hat from the child's head. The next instant it was sailing over the ship's side to the green waters below" (15). If he intends the act not simply as revenge (a small sad test of his potence) but as a "second chance" for her to welcome him as the patriarch, it fails completely. His eruption into violence at the defenseless child confirms to her that he is not ready to take either of them into custody. "She lifted the sobbing child to her breast, pressed him against her. With a vacant stunned expression, her gaze wandered from the grim smouldering face of her husband to the stern of the ship. . . . Tears sprang to her eyes" (15). On one side stands father, alone, jaw tightened in delusory self-justification; on the other stand mother and child, united in a community of teary apprehension.

It is in Albert's nature to feel the burdens of being a husband and a father more deeply than most. If we understand the home to be in many ways the center of premodern cultures like Eastern European Judaism, then women like Genya, who do not work outside the home and who move only among those who speak her dialect, are granted a special privilege: dispensation from the rigors not only of industrial labor but of interethnic contact. "'Within this pale is my America,'" notes Genya in the fourth chapter of the novel, "and if I ventured further I should be lost'" (33). As they shuttle between work and home, men must of necessity negotiate change more than women need do, and it is the men who take the lead in instructing the young, especially boys, in the terms of such negotiations. By tearing off the polka-dot hat, Albert signals a

dreadful, and dread-filled, impatience at the responsibilities that lie before him. Directed at Genya, the gesture is a tantrum of self-pity for her refusal to grant him instantaneous inviolability and an expression of resentment that he must earn her respect and affection by sponsoring their way on this side of the Atlantic. Directed at David, it is a grotesque parody of cultural mediation and paternal instruction, premature and self-defeating.

Venting his own anxieties by scapegoating the child he does not know, Albert takes a first, prototypical step toward locking himself and his son in a vicious circle of paranoia and preemptive betrayal. Albert's action seems to accuse David (absurdly) of something like a failure of filial duty and toddler masculinity, but, of course, it is Albert himself who has sent David into tearful retreat and thus failed as protector and role model. Although David is too young to comprehend and remember in ordinary terms, his crying not only voices a short-term complaint against his father's abrupt intercession but also registers, in the recesses of unconscious memory, a sense of the origin and purpose of this peculiar form of paternal violence. At a deep level, David is being educated into the pattern of suspicion and anticipatory redress that epitomizes his father's behavior. It is not only a recurrent personal threat; it is his primary illustration of what it means to be a male of Jewish descent in America.

If David's unmistakable precursor is Stephen Dedalus, especially during the latter's first years at Clongrow, David is even more of a mama's boy than Stephen, his nascent sexuality is more directly and importantly implicated in Oedipal struggle, and that struggle is at least as carefully contextualized in immigrant New York as Stephen's is in Dublin. In interviews, Roth says he assumed while writing *Call It Sleep* that David was "almost completely victimized, passive," and that only after much personal "maturing," well after completing the novel, did he "come to see the child as much more active, not victimized but on the contrary doing his own share of victimizing."[32] Roth may have been feeling sorry for himself while writing the novel, but the portrait of David that

emerges from the instinctual operations of his pen is more skeptical than he credits.

One way of looking at *Call It Sleep* is to see it as Roth's effort to trace the roots of antiassimilationist rhetoric in his own experience and to deal with the two sides of its lingering legacy: on the one hand, to dispel the bitter feeling that he was pushed out of the fold of family and faith by his father; on the other hand, to absolve himself of the guilt that he actually goaded his father into doing the pushing. By patiently reconstructing early boyhood, Roth fingers neither father nor son but rather the dynamics of male assertion and doubt to which both are heir and through which they "victimize" each other. In thereby uncovering continuities in male self-conception and father-son interaction, Roth is able not simply to elude assigning responsibility for abandoning his past but, far more profoundly, to elude the informing presumption (shared by father and son, Jew and Gentile) that he has escaped it at all.

In the first chapter of the novel, David remembers one evening during dinner when Albert complained about being received with hostility at work. When Genya declined to commiserate, Albert flung his plate to the floor. In trepidation, David now leaps from memory to prophesy:

> And other pictures came in its train, pictures of the door being kicked open and his father coming in looking pale and savage and sitting down like old men sit down, one trembling hand behind him groping for the chair. He wouldn't speak. His jaws, and even his joints, seemed to have become fused together by a withering rage. David often dreamed of his father's footsteps booming on the stairs, of the glistening doorknob turning, and of himself clutching at knives he couldn't lift from the table. (22)

David is his father's son, meaning that he is all too prepared to anticipate a slight and to strike out, prematurely, against it. Despite his tendency to suspect David of following in the path of his own failures, and despite his tendency to get into scuffles with other men at work, Albert, at this point, has never laid a hand on his son. It is David who wills his father's anx-

iousness into actual paternal violence; it is David who, imagining such a result, reaches for knives to rend his father's flesh asunder; and it is David who wakes up from this self-fulfilling reverie apprehensive that he cannot move quickly and strongly enough to the attack.

Freud understood how parricidal desire is born of filial fear, and O'Neill understood at least as well as Freud how the chain of suspicion can fulfill itself, emotionally if not literally, through the psychological games families play. Roth follows Freud in taking sexual investigation to be the primary manifestation of filial suspicion, and he follows O'Neill in charting the provocations that ensue from the act of inquiry itself. *Call It Sleep* is divided into four titled sections. In section 1, "The Cellar," David investigates with zeal and not a small degree of accuracy the efforts of his father's first and only "friend" in America, a man called Luter, to sleep with Genya. It is an extraordinary pastime for a boy still several months shy of his sixth birthday. By attributing to his father a murderous invulnerability, David works himself into a state of hyperattention in which he so intolerantly and self-indulgently probes Albert's masculinity that he provokes paternal rage, drives a wedge between Albert and Genya, and thus claims Genya (heretofore held guilty as "overprotective") for himself.

Luter, Albert's foreman at the print shop, is from the same region of Austria as the Schearls and a bachelor in need of a place to board. When Albert invites Luter to take suppers with his family, Luter accepts with a mind toward seducing Genya. While Albert is enjoying an evening of vaudeville, Luter treats Genya to veiled propositions that animate her in a way David has never noticed before. On a subsequent theater night, Genya avoids Luter by taking David to visit Yussie and his family. Not only is David confirmed in his sense of danger, but Yussie's older sister Annie tricks David into "playing bad," which horrifies him and sharpens his comprehension. As David investigates Luter's advances, he poses and acts upon a series of questions—will his mother play bad with Luter? does his father not care or not know? what will happen if he finds out?—that channel filial doubt into an Oedipal challenge of breathtaking sophistication.

David attributes to his father a super-potency against which

he must struggle to legitimate himself, which accounts for the surface rivalry over Genya. But he also contrarily (and this is what makes for overdetermination) construes his father's vulnerability as tantamount to paternal abdication, which lends yet further justification to his Oedipal rebellion. From the moment in which he takes Luter's prospects seriously, David works to unseat his father sexually and to cast himself in his father's stead (though not quite in his father's bed) as his mother's white knight. When Luter withdraws because Genya ends the flirtation, David decides that he has actually made the conquest: "They would never be answered these questions of why his mother had let Luter do what Annie had tried to do; why she hadn't run away the second time as she had the first; why she hadn't told his father; or had she; or didn't he care" (115–16). *Or didn't Albert care:* although David's youth warrants mercy, his fantasized cuckolding of his father is still an extraordinary act of filial aggression.

Confused and distressed by Luter's withdrawal, lashing out rather than seeking an explanation, Albert beats David for the first time, with a clothes hanger, ostensibly for fighting with his playmates. "'My blood warns me of this son!'" he cries, meeting hysteria with hysteria. More is at stake in his anxiety than his intuition that his son's imagination is in Oedipal overdrive. In the aftermath of the beating, Genya threatens Albert:

> "Go out. Or I shall go."
> "You?"
> "Yes, both of us." (85)

Albert punishes David because he resents the boy's estrangement, yet the effect of his plea for recognition is to drive Genya and David into a tighter circle of mutual consolation. If what Albert fears is further alienation within the home, then his rage is as self-defeating as David's fantasy is self-fulfilling. Indeed, it tends toward the same end.

At the close of "The Cellar," in the immediate aftermath of these brutalizing disappointments, Albert bloodies his hand in a printing accident that Roth represents as a kind of symbolic self-castration. "'I—I have no fortune with men,'" he says, but then he glares at David in such a way that David knows he is being held partly responsible. "Why?" David asks himself.

"What had he done? He didn't know. He didn't even want to know. It frightened him too much" (137). David represses his curiosity, sensing that he may find he *is* accountable for wounding his father. The combination of Albert's self-flagellation and David's self-restraint is initially salutary. Albert finds less stressful work as a night-shift milkman, and the family moves to the Lower East Side. During the following year's calm, as the Schearls begin to move from toleration to mutual enjoyment, the questions that David and Albert have raised of one another simmer below the surface awaiting aggravation.

In "The Picture," the second section of the novel, David eavesdrops on a conversation between his mother and his aunt Bertha, who challenge his ingenuity by speaking partly in Polish, a language he does not know. Back in Europe, six months before she met Albert, Genya had taken a lover, an organist in a local church. This man had betrayed her, first by marrying a wealthier woman and then by asking Genya to continue their affair. To David's ears, the crucial fact of his mother's violation—what pricks his curiosity, then transforms it into an obsession—is that her lover was a Gentile, or rather, in the term he now learns for the first time, a goy. "So he was a goy. A Christian. They didn't sound the same." Previously he had associated "Christians" with minor schoolboy enthusiasms (school vacation at Christmas) and with what he understood to be inconsequential adult belittlement ("Jesus Crotzmich, the grocery man said") (196). The new term, "goy," invokes the specter of the Other, the forbidden, the desired because despised, the despised because desired. Genya's "voice took on a throbbing richness now that David had never heard in it before. The very sound seemed to reverberate in his flesh sending pulse after pulse of a nameless, tingling excitement through his body" (197).

When Genya's father, a religious scholar, learned of the affair, he threatened to expel her from home on the grounds that she had, in effect, disinherited herself. His accusation of a moral violation—"'you false slut!'"—is encompassed within the far larger sanction against exogamy, in which he accuses her of having deliberately forsaken her birthright as a Jew: "'Esau's filth.'" "'She's begun with goyim! Why should she stop!'" What David hears especially well is how readily his

grandfather, in spite of all of his daughter's pain, took himself to be the real victim of the affair:

> "Somewhere, in some way I have sinned. Somehow, somewhere, Him I have offended. Him! Else why does He visit me with anguish great as this? . . . I tell you she'll bring me a 'Benkart' yet, shame me to the dust. How do you know there isn't one in that lewd belly already. . . !" (201–2)

Interpreting through the veils of language, foreign references, and adult experience, David assimilates this narrative of betrayal and revenge to his idiom of masculine power and frailty: for him, Judaic law is the responsibility of men, including the men of his own lineage, who are empowered by the sacredness of the Law within the Jewish community yet are made vulnerable to the energies of individual (particularly sexual, particularly filial) desire.

At the end of this section, Genya buys a picture of cornflowers, which reminds her of how she ultimately weathered her humiliations: with her self-esteem regenerated like the seasonal blossomings, Genya was reconstituted in the social order by Albert's proposal of marriage. Rather than hearing her relief and gratitude, however, David marches down a chain of Freudian significations from past to present: "What had happened? She liked somebody. Who? Lud—Ludwig, she said. A goy. An organeest. Father didn't like him, her father. And his too, maybe. Didn't want him to know? Gee! He knew more than his father. So she married a Jew" (205). It is crucial to David's misreading that his grandfather's suffering ("Father didn't like him, her father.") somehow be passed along to Albert ("And his too, maybe."), that Genya's transgression against her father should constitute in and of itself a preemptive strike against Albert.

Albert married, unwittingly and against masculine norms, an unchaste woman. In David's not quite articulated interpretation, Albert has been made to and continues to suffer the consequences of Genya's defiance (by David's illogic *has* been "cuckolded" before they were even married). Not only is Albert *still* unaware of the secret, but he embarrasses himself by not even trying to find out. David, in contrast, is both bur-

dened and privileged to know "more than his father." For the next couple of years, David deposits "those curious secrets" in a back corner of his brain, where the issues they raise are suppressed but not vanquished, the information he has gleaned temporarily forsaken yet preserved for eventual use against Albert. What David represses most deeply is Genya's father's ultimate accusation: "Benkart, yes, benkart in belly, her father said. What did that mean? He almost knew" (205). As Marcus Klein notes, "according to [Freudian] formula, little David is allowed to suspect, continuously, that the father is not his real father."[33] I would add that David also feels compelled to suspect, through much of the novel, that his real father is not a Jew.

David suspects that he in and of himself constitutes an "abomination" to the faith, a suspicion that is fueled by and in turn fuels his struggle with Albert. In the third section of the novel, "The Coal," Roth explores David's Pyrrhic success at cheder (what the next generation will call "Hebrew school") to reveal the interweaving of intergenerational rivalry and American Jewish identity. Significantly, it is Albert who suggests that David enroll in cheder, where he feels tremendous pressure from the rabbi to excel and thus demonstrate the vitality of faith amidst the secularized American-born students. "'This one I call my child. This is memory. This is intellect,'" proclaims the rabbi, "'You may be a great rabbi yet—who knows!'" (233) Because religious maintenance is presented as a responsibility of maturing boys, questions of the sacred and of peoplehood contribute to David's felt need to prove himself. Yet because he identifies paternal authority with the letter of the law, transgression against the law, which leads ultimately to symbolic acts of disaffiliation, becomes an ideal medium for filial self-assertion. It therefore should come as no surprise that the step from recitation (for which David is praised) to actual religious instruction stirs in David "the old horror," reversing the intergenerational rapprochement that had begun (even Albert has been expressing quiet satisfaction) and setting David on the road to an insidious, insinuating retrieval of his mother's secret.

Reb Pankower instructs David in a doctrine of salvation contingent upon absolute purity and in a Canaanite notion of a

righteous God, who moves amongst the wayward to dispense punishment. The revelation of Isaiah's uncleanliness plays into David's performance anxieties and provokes him to a new level of self-vigilance. "He [Isaiah] said dirty words, I bet. Shit, pee, fuckenbestit—Stop! You're sayin' it yourself. It's a sin again! That's why he—Gee! I didn't mean it" (231). Throughout the section, which takes place during Passover, David finds himself put to various tests: is it really a sin to light the gas after dusk on the Sabbath? can one use a Yiddish newspaper as toilet paper? what if an Italian street cleaner interferes in the ritual burning of leavened breads? David recurrently judges that he, and the boys and men around him (including Albert), will fail. In a final desperate effort to fulfill this Passover rite and thus redeem himself, David seeks to burn the wooden spoon that has held the leavened crumbs. Because Oedipal angst is integral to David's play for ethnoreligious self-justification, that struggle is bound to be self-imploding, at least as Roth represents it.

Down by the river, where David has gone with the spoon, he runs into three Gentile kids playing hooky, who immediately bait him into denying that he is Jewish. "'I'm a Hungarian. My mudder 'n' fodder's Hungarian. We're de janitors,'" he protests (250). Urinating together, the threesome challenge David to do the same, brilliantly cornering him into both a de facto repetition of his lie and a de facto confession of his lineage:

> At the foot of the junk-heap, the lieutenant named Weasel stopped. "Waida minute," he announced, "I godda take a piss."
>
> "Me too," said the others halting as well. They unbuttoned. David edged away.
>
> "Lager beer," chanted Pedey as he tapped forehead, mouth, chest and naval, "comes from here—"
>
> "Ye see," Weasel pointed triumphantly at the shrinking David. "I tol' yuh he ain' w'ite. W'y don'tchiz piss?"
>
> "Don' wanna. I peed befaw."
>
> "Aw, hosschit." (251)

However much we wish to grant that displaying a circumcised penis before a gang of Gentile toughs is not a sensible act for a

Jewish boy, more is at stake here than exposing David to youthful anti-Semitism. Roth is also, indeed primarily, naturalizing a central Freudian metaphor within an interethnic context and thus restoring its psychosocial resonance and its aesthetic power.

Circumcision inscribes Judaism upon one's masculinity. Here David experiences Jewish identity as a burden demanding not only moral vigilance of oneself and others but also a particular kind of masculine courage, of performance among men. Fearful from the start of the novel that he may not be "up to" what is demanded of him, here he faces anti-Semitism as a challenge to, and for, his manhood—and he fails, "shrinking" before the boys. In one sense, David is unable to proclaim his patrimony because he lacks grace under pressure; he can't even say "piss," a sign of aspirations to maturity among preadolescents, only the juvenile "peed." Conversely, in failing to stand up to those who wish to strip him of his patrimony, David has been unable to meet an ideal of masculinity that he as a Jew (as a student of history) understands to be more profound than courage qua courage, that is, the public defense of Jewish peoplehood.

If "The Coal" section of *Call It Sleep* traces how the mandate of religious identity fuels David's filial fears and self-loathing, the final section of the novel traces how David, in seeking to combat that self-doubt, intuitively seizes upon the idiom of Jewish disavowal. One afternoon, David accompanies his father along an alternative milk route and fails at his assignment, which was to protect milk from being stolen. Albert runs down two men, whom he beats with a whip. Then he takes his frustration out on David, reiterating the old charge: "False son! You, the cause!" (282). What David finds particularly bewildering this time around is the "profound and incomprehensible contentment" he discovers in his mother late that same afternoon (297). The seemingly unprecedented fact of sexual reunion between his parents stirs David to jealousy, a rage exacerbated by his sense that, this time, his mother is in on the betrayal. If his father's all-too-evident sexual and emotional insecurities have long provoked resentment and self-questioning, now he is threatened, in the double bind of Freudian boyhood, by Albert's return to potency. On the one hand, David convicts

himself of being a "cry baby! cry baby!" like his father; on the other, he interprets Albert's fulfillment of Genya as staking a claim against himself. In postcoital celebration, Albert buys a pair of bull's horns that remind him of Austria. David, however, "sensed only that in the horns, in the poised power of them lay a threat, a challenge he must answer, he must meet. But he didn't know how" (299).

David meets the challenge by befriending Leo Dugovka, a twelve-year-old Catholic Pole who flies kites on the roof of the tenement and spirits himself across neighborhoods on roller skates. "Leo wasn't afraid!" Leo gives the illusion of having transcended his boyhood, mastered the neighborhood, even conquered interethnic strife—"'I et ev'y kind o' bread dey is. Aitalian bread-sticks, Dutch pummernickel, Jew rye'" (320)—yet for David to take Leo as a father surrogate is tantamount to Oedipus's decision to flee the prophesy of Tiresias. David attributes Leo's self-reliance to his Catholicism, in particular, to the medallion of Virgin and Child that he wears on a leather string. Leo "was not only free of his parents, but he also wore something about his neck that made him almost god-like" (305). Leo offers David male comradeship and a masculine role model without familial complications, just as the scapular Leo wears holds forth a promise of redemption. Underneath David's utopianism lies a paradoxically doubled drive *both* to wound his father as much as possible and to confess to all within hearing (but especially to his father) that he has, indeed, been plotting vengeance. "'Jews is de Chris'-killers,'" Leo explained, showing David the first crucifix he has ever seen, "'Dey put 'im up dere'" (323).

David's quest for an amulet like Leo's leads directly to reclaiming his mother's secret and putting it to work. In exchange for a broken rosary, David introduces Leo to a sexually active female stepcousin, who, unaware that she has been set up, does in fact indulge Leo. If one of the lessons of Genya's past is that Jewish men lay claim to the endogamy of "their women," then, in bartering his stepcousin to Leo, David is restaging what he understands to be the primal scene of his mother's disloyalty. "'W'as's a orr—aorrghaneest?'" David asks Leo (321). In a fever of guilt for what he has done, David runs to Rabbi Pankower, where he reveals not only that the

specter of Genya's first lover has returned to haunt him but that he has extrapolated from the event, deliriously, to create his Oedipal trump card: his father is not Albert but a church musician back in Austria.

David's imaginative defathering of himself is an effort both to enact what he imagines within the psychodrama of the family and to excoriate himself for his parricidal endeavors. When Pankower reveals David's fantasy to Albert, it plays into his father's long-standing insecurities about David's paternity and loyalty, instigating a resurgence of the antifilial rage that once again forces Genya to take a stand against Albert and with David. At the same time, David seeks the catharsis of revelation and penance: he confesses the story to Reb Pankower (who represents paternal authority) as Leo would to a priest, and he himself hands his father the whip, asking for his own punishment. Stunningly, the confession fails as an effort to dispel transgressive repercussions, precisely because Albert is just the kind of man to take the confession of disloyalty as the ultimate act of disloyalty, a fact that David has begun to comprehend at the deepest level of his consciousness.

As both catharsis and weapon, a significant element of David's fantasy confession is that he contains goyish blood, as if being born of a profanation against his faith has predetermined that he will believe and act profanely. By wearing the rosary, which tumbles out in the course of the beating, David makes sure his father gets the point. In taking the rosary as proof of David's story, Albert puts a sardonic literalizing twist on what is perhaps the most frequent leitmotif of immigrant literature (a theme already sounded by Genya's father), namely, the curse of the infidel child: "'God's own hand! A sign! A witness! . . . A proof of my word! The truth! Another's! A goy's! A cross! A sign of filth! Let me strangle him! Let me rid the world of a sin!'" (402). As the son is disinherited for his violation against the faith, so he is excised from the patrilineal ancestry. David not only disclaims his sonship; his father is only too willing to accept the disclaimer.

For Roth, there is great significance in David and Albert meeting on the common ground of David's betrayal. In the scene leading up to Albert's curse, we learn why Albert has been suspicious of David all this time. Albert has long felt accused, indeed has accused himself, of allowing his own father to be gored to death by a bull in the months preceding his marriage to Genya. On a pragmatic level, he has always wondered why Genya would allow herself to be married to a man with such a shadow hanging over him. He asks Genya, "'Didn't [my mother] tell you that my father and I had quarreled that morning, that he struck me, and I vowed I would repay him?" (390). Now he decides that Genya accepted his proposal because she was pregnant, and that David's "corrupting" presence in the household accounts for his prolonged impotence.

Under Albert's accusation that David was sired by another lies the more devastating fear that David, on the contrary, might be all too much his son. In David's filial anxiety and anger, Albert recognizes his own Oedipal paranoia. Is it any wonder then that he fears "insanely" for his life? Recall a much earlier curse: "'I'm harboring a fiend! . . . A butcher! And you're protecting him! Those hands of his will beat me yet! I know! My blood warns me of this son! This son!'" (85). If Albert can be said to intuit that the Oedipal cycle is itself a Schearl family tradition, then the novel can be said to have revealed how masculine culture (among these males at least) is reproduced not only despite but indeed through the mechanism of Jewish disaffiliation. In light of Albert's past, but more importantly in light of the unfolding psychodrama, David's disavowal of Albert constitutes not so much a relinquishing of his patrimony as a self-fulfilling tightening of the masculine knot that has, for two generations at least, bound Schearl father unhappily to Schearl son.

In his essays and lectures of the mid-1980s, Raymond Williams has argued, more strongly than anyone else I have read, that "the key cultural factor" shaping literary modernism was "the fact of immigration." In recent years, social historians have insisted that those whom we classically think of as immigrants, the poor who pursued wage labor, were able to reinstall their communities, languages, and folkways on foreign shores.[34] This was not so, says Williams, for "the restlessly mobile emigré or exile, the internationally anti-bourgeois artist." In Williams's estimation, the truly uprooted were the expatriated intellectuals—from Joyce and Eliot to Beckett and

Ionesco—who emigrated as individuals and made themselves strangers in strange lands. From the "endless border crossing" emerged the stereotypical figure of modernist autobiography, that "intense, singular narrative of unsettlement, homelessness, solitude and impoverished independence: the lonely writer gazing down on the unknowable city from his shabby apartment."[35]

Williams is not especially interested in migration as a theme, however. What fascinates him most is the contribution that migration has made to the sine qua non of modernism, the emphasis on literary form:

> But the decisive aesthetic effect is at a deeper level [than theme]. Liberated or breaking from their national or provincial cultures, placed in quite new relations to those other native languages or native visual traditions, encountering meanwhile a novel and dynamic common environment from which many of the older forms were obviously distant, the artists and writers and thinkers of this phase found the only community available to them: a community of the medium; of their own practices.[36]

Out of the ruins of the civilizations and folkways that these artists left behind rose the nearly universal obsession with innovations in form, an effort on the part of the dislocated to construct a common ground out of the material of writing itself. Following Williams's reasoning, writers like Roth, who first experienced migration and then self-conscious ethnic disaffiliation, ought to have found the allure of form as community especially potent.

The place in *Call It Sleep* to examine "the search for community through form" is its celebrated penultimate chapter. In a retreat from his father that is also a quest of his own, David runs, at night, through the East River warehouse district and out across the riverside flats, then pushes a zinc milk ladle into the slot between the trolley tracks that carries the live rail—to jolt himself, or so he thinks, into purity and grace. During the height of the novel's academic popularity, the twenty-two pages of chapter 21 were judged, in Allen Guttmann's words, "among the most remarkable in American literature, comparable perhaps to Captain Ahab's defiant worship of the fiery God who torments him."[37] Darkly lyrical, feverishly mythopoetic, David's monologue on the run, which is italicized and laid out in free verse, would have captured the imagination of postwar readers (trained in Eliot, steeped in existentialism) on its own, but there is more to the chapter than what David has to say to himself.

In a dramatic montage as richly multicultural as anything in the linguistic hybridizations of the recent "beyond ethnic boundaries" literatures, Roth crosscuts David's monologue with snippets of talk, only some of which the boy possibly could be hearing. We are presented with a stunning variety of street patois from a dozen or so voices representing immigrant New York, including Brits of various stripes as well as the usual, putatively more colorful descendants of Ireland, Italy, and Eastern Europe. As David approaches the trolley tracks, these conversations become more attenuated and difficult to differentiate, yielding a montage of phrases, traceable to their originating conversations yet heavily weighted, by repetition and contiguity, with images taken from Freud and Jung, the Cabala and the Mass, Zoroastrianism and *The Golden Bough*. When David at last reaches the third rail, throwing up a thunderous spark and electrocuting himself, the individual witnesses converge into a Samaritan crowd, running for a doctor, determining the boy's identity, and accompanying the ambulance home.

Chapter 21 comes upon the reader in just the same way, and with at least as much impact, as if the last section of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* had led without interruption into the first chapter of *Ulysses*. Symbolic to the point of vertigo, hallucinatory in effect if not in composition, the chapter welcomes the kind of patient exegesis proffered by Joyce in *Ulysses*, by Eliot in *The Waste Land*, and, most accurately, as Marcus Klein has noted, by Hart Crane in *The Bridge*.[38] The traditional interpretation has been to follow Roth's lead and read the chapter biographically, as the crossing of the final threshold between ethnic sociology and transethnic aesthetics: "The ending of *Call It Sleep* came as sort of an artistic accession or an assumption into artistry," reports Roth. "The whole process of development of the writer took place in *Call It Sleep*—starting

from just an autobiography to a self-conscious literary person." The chapter itself seems to confirm Williams's thesis that the energy within modernism underlying the extravagant play of form was responsiveness to "the open and complex and dynamic social process" in literary innovation. "There is something positive in the writer striving for the broader awareness that enables him to interrelate many more disparate elements in an art form," comments Roth.[39]

The decisive formal effect in chapter 21 is a crosscutting among diverse voices. These voices echo each other's actual phrases (sometimes intentionally, sometimes by wild coincidence) and also share a kind of strobic speech pattern that alternates between down-and-dirty street witticism and a surreal, blasphemous spirituality. Let me illustrate by tracing one trail of reference, which branches out, roughly speaking, from the streetside proselytizing of a "goggle-eyed yid": "'Only the laboring poor, only the masses embittered, bewildered, betrayed, in the day when the red cock crows, can free us!'" cries the revolutionary (417). The phrase "red cock crows" is picked up by Husky O'Toole, a "mick" who hangs out in Callahan's bar and whose surname is slang for the male sexual organ. O'Toole addresses another of the barflies, whose first name Peter is similarly allusive: "'how many times'll your red cock crow, Peter, befaw y' gives up? T'ree?'" (418). O'Toole's playfully rhetorical question alludes to the apostle Peter's denial of Christ and is indicative of a kind of irreverence toward the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament that permeates the chapter: O'Toole calls himself "'a fuckin' atheist,'" but the spirit of his blasphemy, like that of most of the others, is paradoxically good willed and expansive rather than a denial.

Throughout the section there is a sustained pun on card/cod/got/god, which points again both in the direction of sex (codpiece, card as a male dilettante, fish as female genitalia) and of the deity. Taking up this particular invitation to double entendre, one of the British sailors praises his national dish of fish-and-chips: "'Christ knows how many chaps can be fed off of one bloody cod—'" (417). He refers, on the one hand, to the sexual servicing of several men by one woman, the word "bloody" hinting at both physical violation and menstrual

phobia, while offering an even scarier reminder that the prostitutes in Callahan's bar are talking about an abortion performed with ice tongs. He refers, on the other hand, to Jesus' miracle at Bethsaida, where, according to Luke, the answer to how many people could be fed on one fish was an even five thousand.

There are more cross-references among the speakers I have named. And there are more speakers: Bill Whitney the watchman who mumbles to himself on his rounds; "a kindly face American woman" whose climb up the Statue of Liberty is rehearsed in unintended double entendre; and MacIntyre the motorman, who exchanges curses with an Armenian peddler blocking the tracks. Throughout the section, Roth brings together fragments from these conversations, repeating them in attenuated or revised form and introducing surprising echoes. The voices merge climatically into a single chorus:

> "Dere's a star fer yeh! Watch it! T'ree Kings I god. Dey came on huzzbeck! Yee! Hee Hee! Mary! Nawthin' to do but wait fer day light and go home. To a red cock crowin'. Over a statue of. A jerkin'. Cod. Clang! Clang! Oy! Machine! Liberty! Revolt! Redeem!" (418–19)

Roth reproduces the conflation of moments from different conversations as if it were a monologue, the apotheosis of his formal experiment.

Williams hesitates between affirming the play of the medium as a goal in itself and speculating that the particular kind of formalist experiment—encompassing fragmentation, montage, heteroglossia, and so forth—reflects the particular challenges facing the expatriated intellectual in the metropolis. He tempts us with a sense that social energies lie beneath what critics (Edmund Wilson and Malcolm Cowley on these shores) have long regarded as the turn against the social, but we are left with only the vaguest sense—"a community of the medium," "the only community available to them"—of where that social desire tended, never mind what it actually achieved. In the particular instance of Roth, the play of formalism readily suggests a symbolic act of figuration: a merging of peoples in

the tradition of American alchemy. In converging but not fusing the vernaculars, Roth imagines a melting pot as that image is traditionally used, not as an initiation rite into Anglo-conformity but as a magic cauldron of syncretism.[40] We may construe his representative figures as reflecting shame in his origins, but the orgy of multivocality is as ambitious (and, I think, as radically humane) as anything in the more poetic strains of melting-pot utopianism.

Reading chapter 21 as a visionary social act, we acknowledge that a forging of common ground is one of Roth's implicit agendas in the concluding pages of *Call It Sleep.* But the community is not necessarily the conjoining of "internationally anti-bourgeois" artists—"from Apollinaire and Joyce to Beckett and Ionesco"—that Williams has principally in mind.[41] It seems to me that Roth took the successful functioning of Walton's circle of modernist sympathizers as a given: if he did not entirely disappear into it, he understood his reservation to be an act of artistic distancing, not a product of cultural anarchy and social fragmentation. More important, one presses allegory too much (and in a dangerously self-referential direction) to insist that the coterie of working-class and underclass characters in chapter 21 are really stand-ins for Roth's peer group. It is not coincidental that Roth drafted this section of the novel in the dark months following the stock market crash of 1929. The group Roth assembles can and should be taken on their own terms, their convergence over David's body constituting a rhapsody of proletarian camaraderie.

Whichever class configuration we settle upon, whether we push beyond immigrant multiculturalism to emigré multiculturalism or not, we run the risk of discounting David. Roth insists that he "left the child" and "wandered all over the city," but, of course, he held the child in the back of his mind all the time.[42] It is not a coincidence that the author of the most extravagant, and serious, combination of graphic innuendo and Judeo-Christian blasphemy in chapter 21 remains David himself: *"In the crack,/remember. In the crack be born"* (411). It is not a coincidence that David reaches his climax, inserting the milk ladle between the trolley tracks, just at the moment when the collage of voices reaches its tightest focus. After the speech

merges into a single quotation, Roth cuts immediately to David's self-electrocution:

> *Power*
> *Power! Power like a paw, titanic power,*
> *ripped through his body and shackled him*
> *where he stood. . . . he*
> *writhed without motion in the clutch of*
> *a fatal glory, and his brain swelled*
> *and dilated till it dwarfed the galaxies*
> *in a bubble of refulgence.* (419)

As David is shocked, the individuals whose voices we have been overhearing are terrified. Gathered into a crowd over the still, small, burned frame of this nine-year-old boy, they stand riveted, breathless, in terror for David's life.

Not only does the commingling of voices occasion David's act of purification, but the crowd, in the raw humanism of its concern, carries him aloft symbolically (floating that "bubble of refulgence") before literally doing so. In the climax of the chapter, a young physician awakens David:

> the interne glanced while he drew
> "Waddayuh say, Doc?"
> a squat blue vial from his bag, grimaced, un-
> *(Zwank! Zwank! Nothingness beatified reached out its hands. Not cold*
> *the ember was. Not scorching. But as*
> *if all eternity's caress were fused and*
> *granted in one instant. Silence)*
> corked it, expertly tilted it before
> *(struck that terrible voice upon the*
> *height, stilled the whirling hammer.*
> *Horror and the night fell away. Exalted, he lifted his head and screamed*
> *to him among the wires—"Whistle,*
> *mister! Whistle!)*
> the quiet nostrils. The crowd fell silent, tensely watching.
> "Amonya."
> "Smells strong!"
> "Stinks like in de shool on Yom Kippur."

(Mister! Whistle! Whistle! Whistle!
Whistle, Mister! Yellow birds!) (430–31)

David understands himself to be going through some process of contrition, penance, and second birth—the stilling of Oedipus's "whirling hammer"—which he associates with Pankower's Old Testament lessons, particularly Isaiah 6, and with Leo's misinstructions in Catholicism. But we understand David's accomplishment from a wider perspective that takes in the multitude whose concerted concern is epitomized in the intern. David's task—to extricate himself from the Oedipal struggle altogether—is too difficult for him to effect on his own, and the magical regimes of Judaism and Christianity are too much implicated as cause to function, hybridized, as a medium for psychological purification. Roth has elicited the folk of the city on David's behalf; they perform at his direction in a utopian rite of initiation that derives as much from his own reading of Joyce and Frazer as from David's immersion in cheder mysticism and street Catholicism. If heretofore we have wrestled with the temptation to speak of David as the mere occasion for a postmodern explosion of multivocality, the formula of means and ends here threatens to reverse itself, throwing new light on what has transpired previously. It is as if Roth has taken David's impossible struggle for psychological self-transcendence to heart and orchestrated a ritual of spiritual catharsis, a paganish chanting of Lower East Side peoples, to help him in ways he cannot help himself.

It is a measure of the ultimate force of the novel (and not just a New Critical drive toward "coherence") that, for all the praise heaped on the lyric inventions of chapter 21, the focus of critical debate is David's psychological state and prognosis after his self-induced "shock therapy." "Not pain, not terror, but strangest triumph, strangest acquiescence," concludes the novel. "One might as well call it sleep" (441). Walter Allen, in his afterword to the 1964 paperback, takes David's version of what he has been through at face value, attributing to the boy "a vision that unifies his fragmented world and, in a sense, reconciles him to his experience of that world" (447). The qualifying phrase, "in a sense," hedges Allen's bet. In the clearest statement of disagreement, Fiedler argues that "his intended

sacrifice redeems no one": "The boy does not die, the world is not made clean." Pressed to resolve the dispute over whether David does or does not have a "private, internal transformation," Roth wisely waffles (why should he have to solve the dispute?), crediting David with a "triumph" of "intent": "The triumph he feels in the end was that he made the attempt, even though it is a failure."[43]

From the earlier cycles of preemptive betrayal with his father, David comprehends at some unconscious level that running away plays into his father's anxieties, thus constituting a gesture not of escape but of defiance. In chapter 19, during the ruckus of revelation at the apartment, David hands Albert a whip, asking to be beaten. However much he intends an act of penance, he floods the filled well of his father's guilt. Although he thinks he is pursuing transcendence, his act of self-electrocution is motivated as an act of revenge against his father for the very beating that he himself has had no small hand in soliciting. "Yuh dared me . . . Yuh double-dared me . . . Now I gotta. . . . *Now I gotta make it come out"* (409).

Competitive male display—father to son in the horns and the bullwhip, son to father in the cross of the rosary and now in the milk ladle—is signaled not only in the erotic language of David's explicit intent, to make it come out, but in his tallying, when the ambulance returns him home in chapter 23, of the effect upon his father:

> His father threw his chair back, sprang to his feet. His eyes bulged, his jaw dropped, he blanched.
>
> For the briefest moment David felt a shrill, wild surge of triumph whip within him, triumph that his father stood slack-mouthed, finger-clawing, stooped, and then the room suddenly darkened and revolved. He crumpled inertly against the cradling arms. (434)

For David, sleep is the irony that Oedipal victories are by their nature self-defeating. In his moment of shrill, wild triumph over his father (a feeling that is said to "whip" through David), it is not his father who crumples but David himself who crumples into his father's arms, an act that is, at one level of

signification, not transcendence but the cradle of the Oedipal dilemma itself.

Yet Albert here blanches not with concern for himself (as it has always seemed he did before) but at last for David, and David, in relinquishing the spirit of struggle, collapses not into Genya's arms but into Albert's. If David's confession of sexual betrayal and of a wanderlust toward Christianity is finally as much a provocation (given his father's temperament) as a gesture for reconciliation, David's running away is a blatant provocation—watch me, father, I'm going to kill myself!—that, in practical terms, may improve the Schearls' day-to-day life. In bed, David reawakens to consciousness, listening as Albert leaves the apartment to purchase ointment for the burn on his son's foot: "A vague, remote pity stirred within his breast like a wreathing, raveling smoke, tenuously dispersed within his being, a kind of torpid heart-break he had felt sometimes in winter awakened deep in the night and hearing that dull tread descend the stairs" (440). Rather than returning to his fevered delusions, or to the eavesdropping that has caused so much of the trouble, David, like an "ordinary" small boy, simply seems to track the goings-on about him. I am unsure whether the pity he feels is for himself or for his father. If for Albert, as it may well be, then Roth has afforded David, just before his final sleep of the novel, an unprecedented insight. One need not rely upon an overreading of this moment, and indeed should not, for David is still a child and the burden of amelioration is not his to bear.

Nor will the burden of mediation fall on Genya alone, as it always has. For all the stark antipathy between Genya and Albert in chapter 19, the confrontation is now revealed to have opened the way to a reaffirmation of their marriage. Not only does Genya have a better understanding of the cycle of mutual fear and preemptive self-assertion that has joined father and son (the truth is fully out), but in the penultimate moment of the novel, after David's collapse, she goes beyond insisting that "none foresaw this" to confessing her own responsibility in keeping from Albert while revealing to David the secret of the cornflowers.

> "It—it's my fault you'd say. Is that it?"
> She shook her head wearily. "What use is there to talk about faults, Albert? None foresaw this. No one alone brought it on. And if it's faults we must talk about it's mine as well. I never told you. I let him listen to me months and months ago. I even drove him downstairs to—to—"
> "To protect him—from me?"
> "Yes." (440)

Once again, Roth proves that he is a student of O'Neill. What one carries away from the novel as the prognosis for the family depends on how this exchange is performed. I prefer to credit Albert with a conciliatory, expeditious will.

On the one hand, Albert is said to click his teeth at Genya's stinging revelation. On the other hand, he himself has staged this exchange, in a subtle but utterly crucial way. Immediately prior to the exchange, he produces a slip of paper with the name of an ointment for the burn on David's foot, which Genya goes to take, assuming he wants her to play servant. He volunteers to go to the druggist himself. He reports the doctor's conviction that David will be better in a day or two, thereby putting the danger into perspective and lowering the tension level. Only then, after fairly well orchestrated preparation, be it defensive or contrite, does Albert raise the question of guilt and of his own guilt in particular.

I rest my case for hope, however, not on how Albert sets up the exchange but on how he closes it. Before the mutual admissions, when Albert volunteered to go to the druggist, "his preemptory tone lacked force as though he spoke out of custom, not conviction" (440). In the immediate aftermath of the mutual admissions, he makes good on his promise, exiting without a dance of self-congratulation to get the ointment. It is an act of palliation not only for David but for Genya, and it is an act, above all, that lends a tacit seal of approval to how David and Genya care for one another. In leaving the apartment, Albert allows Genya to go alone to David's bedside, making possible the final exchange in the novel:

> "Perhaps you'll be hungry in a little while," his mother said persuasively. . . . "And then you'll go to sleep and forget it all." She paused. Her dark, unswerving eyes sought his. "Sleepy, beloved?"
> "Yes, mama." (441)

Albert, meanwhile, has volunteered to be out on the street doing, albeit in a small way, what has to be done. In embracing the opportunity to provide, he makes a first step toward establishing his authority as a patriarch; in accepting a certain distance from the circle of mother and child, he makes a second tentative step toward securing himself in trust and ardor with Genya, and in respect and love with David, his only son.

4

The Old Man and the Boys in the Busheling Room: Form, Influence, and "The Tailor Shop"

My designation of Henry Miller as an ethnic writer will surprise most readers. Miller is not even mentioned in the bibliographies of German-American literature, including one that claims to be exhaustive.[1] Of two dozen anthologies devoted to "minorities in literature," I have seen only one that is imaginative and expansive enough (two volumes, over two hundred contributions) to include a selection by him.[2] Neither the Ethnic Studies Committee of the Modern Language Association nor the Society for the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States has published a paper or sponsored a talk, to my knowledge, in which Miller made a significant appearance. Although he is one of only a few major American writers whose most important work was produced during the 1930s, and although critics recently have turned to the 1930s in part because this time was a watershed for ethnic writers and ethnic themes, Miller has yet to be associated in any significant way with the literary production of the Great Depression.[3] The closest approaches have been made in passing by critics who expand party-line definitions of proletarian literature, such as Alfred Kazin and Marcus Klein.[4]

As the grandson of Protestant Germans who worked their way up from lower Manhattan to outer Brooklyn, Miller was too Teutonic and too fortunate to be certified, under current dispensations, as "the Other." Employed as a personnel boss for Western Union during the 1920s and expatriated to Paris in the wake of the stock market crash, he is judged to have forsaken whatever authenticity he merited as a plebe. As a writer who focused on challenging high modernist aesthetics, he is said to have dissipated his promise as a Dreiserian naturalist in

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Joint Evaluation in (Modernist) Narrative: Henry Roth's Call It Sleep

The idea that an element of "evaluation" forms an integral part of (oral) narratives was introduced by William Labov to account for certain non-narrative elements of storytelling. Storytellers – so Labov's argument went – are continuously warding off "the withering rejoinder, 'So what?'" (Labov 1972: 366), which is why they provide direct or indirect evaluations to prove that their story is worth telling. When Labov's framework for oral storytelling is applied to written narratives, however, the joint nature of evaluation becomes evident: the reader who sets out to read a story or a novel will assume that there is a point to it – otherwise he/she will set the book aside – and will look for that point him/herself. If the story or the novel features authoritative figures (narrators, reflectors, protagonists) that provide consistent and reliable evaluations, the reader's own search for a point will tend to be a positive or negative response to all or some of them (cf. Morini 2009: 15-17).

If evaluation is seen as a cooperative process, it is interesting to observe what happens when the evaluations provided in the narrative are either unreliable (as in much modernist writing) or virtually non-existent (Hemingway's or Carver's short stories come to mind). In what follows, Henry Roth's late-modernist novel, *Call It Sleep*, is offered as a case of evaluative unreliability producing evaluative openness. Section 1 presents a brief summary and narratological elu-

Textus XXIII (2010), pp. 83-102.

cidation of the whole work – alongside some critical reactions which demonstrably respond to its openness; but since an evaluative analysis of the whole novel would self-evidently be impossible within the space of this article, section 2 focuses on a single episode (of oral storytelling within the written narrative) to shed light on the techniques whereby evaluative openness is created.

1. *Modernism and Evaluative Openness*

Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* was one of the most remarkable literary cases of the twentieth century. First published in 1934 to critical acclaim but modest sales, this narrative account of Jewish immigrant life in New York only reached a vast audience when a paperback edition appeared a full three decades later, and was hailed as a recovered masterpiece by Irving Howe on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*. Meanwhile, its author had more or less accepted that he was never going to overcome his writer's block and write a second book, and was earning a living as a waterfowl farmer in Maine (Kellman 2005: 4). And although Roth eventually managed to finish four books of a new sequence in his late eighties (*Mercy of a Rude Stream*), these proved to be a far cry from the kind of writing that had earned him a small but influential group of academic admirers.[1] In the end, his literary fame will have to rest on a single autobiographical novel he wrote as a young man; and while that novel has been read (or at least bought) by more than a million people, its style has perhaps received less critical attention than it deserves.[2]

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[1] Roth's most influential critics feature in Wirth-Nesher (1996). Among these, a special mention must be reserved for Mario Materassi, who was among the first "re-discoverers" of Roth (Kellman 2005: 242) as well as his Italian translator and main Italian popularizer (cf. Materassi 1985).

[2] The critics who have dedicated book-length studies to *Call It Sleep* have written chapters on Roth's style – but so far, that kind of analysis has been conducted in the somewhat impressionistic manner which was typical of literary criticism in the 1970s and 1980s (cf. in particular Lyons 1976: 39-96); alternatively, articles and book chapters have been dedicated to single aspects of Roth's style, such as his use of "stream of con-

Technically, *Call It Sleep* is a modernist novel, its most evident models being Joyce's *Ulysses* (Lyons 1976: 117-124; McHale 1996) and T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* (Fiedler 1996: 19), as well as Eliot's "mythic" interpretation of Joyce's work. Roth himself declared that he had learnt from Joyce "that I could talk about urban squalor and develop it into a work of art" (Wirth-Nesher 1996: 5); he had also evidently learnt much about the use of free direct and free indirect discourse, because *Call It Sleep* is built by weaving the oral voices of its characters into the narrative. It is a typical modernist *Bildungsroman*, presenting the images, sounds,[3] and smells it records for the impressions they leave on the young protagonist's "experiencing self" (Diamant 1986), while an invisible third-person narrator is ostensibly paring his fingernails elsewhere. However, like other "second generation" modernist novels of the 1930s – most notably Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Scots Quair* (1932-1934) – *Call It Sleep* puts those techniques to the service of a narration whose main focus is personal and social: Roth's novel is at least as much about a young boy's education in Brownsville and the Lower East Side (the two Jewish New York neighbourhoods in which the boy's family settles) as it is about the *way* in which those neighbourhoods are perceived by the experiencing self.

The *fabula* of *Call It Sleep* is as simple as its techniques are complex. Oedipally attached to his sheltering mother, young David Schearl (his onomastics is telltale: "beloved" in Hebrew plus "scissors" in Yiddish) must strive to get his bearings in a city which is – to him – every bit as big, incomprehensible and menacing as his violent, jealous father. His education, the process whereby he becomes part of his American surroundings by being progressively cut off from his Jewish origins, is presented as a fundamentally linguistic matter. Coming as he does from a Yiddish-speaking family, David must learn to decode the opaque signifieds of "English" and "Ying-

sciousness" and free indirect speech (McHale 1996) or his use of multilingualism (Wirth-Nesher 2006: 76-99; Fischer 2003: 295-322; Buelens 1997).

[3] In the afterword to the 1964 paperback edition, Walter Allen wrote that *Call It Sleep* "must be the noisiest novel ever written" (Roth 1964: 445). On a related note, Stephen J. Adams (1989: 44) has noted that "Though the text has not entirely traded eyes for ears, it has at least altered the usual ratio".

lish" (Fischer 2003: 231-232) that are current among his peers, so as to be accepted and find his place in the outside world. While Yiddish is established from the very beginning as the language of home, "The rest of the novel moves in the opposite direction to that of the prologue, namely outward, from David's mother's kitchen, the realm of Yiddish, to the street and the English world and word" (Wirth-Nesher 2006: 82). Interestingly and revealingly, as will be seen in the next section of this article, Yiddish is rendered in the novel as poetic English – while the frightening "voices of the street" are reproduced phonetically:

> 'I told yuh it wuz a kid,' [David] heard the stocky one say. And then loudly, 'Hullo there, big boy!' Opposite the doorway of the wagon, he smiled affably, widely, yellow butts of his teeth circled on top like bitten grains of corn. 'Waddaye say!' (Roth 1991: 273)

English is not the only difficult tongue David must strive with in his linguistic education: even more opaque are Polish – which his mother and aunt use to communicate secrets he must not be told – and Hebrew – the language of religious education, which he is asked to pronounce before he understands a single word of it. Caught in this net of languages and language varieties, the young boy has to find his way in a universe which was not created for his use by struggling through a series of intercultural ordeals. When his father lashes him for betraying his cousin to the sexual appetites of a young Pole – and pocketing the young Pole's crucifix into the bargain – young David flees in a panic, and in his fevered state tries to seize "power" by dropping a zinc milk ladle onto the electrified third rail of the elevated railway. In the state of unconsciousness following his inevitable electrocution, all the disparate languages of the street flood his brain in high modernist fashion. Hours later, when he is recovering and falling asleep in his own bed after miraculously escaping death, David appears to come to a sort of uneasy armistice with his swarming, heteroglossal surroundings:

> He might as well call it sleep. It was only towards 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 blonde hair, red faces, of the glow on the outstretched, open palms of legions upon legions of hands hurtling towards him. He might as well call it sleep. It was only towards 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 towards sleep one knew himself still lying on the cobbles, felt the cobbles under him, and over him and scudding ever towards him like a black foam, the perpetual blur of shod and running feet, the broken shoes, new shoes, stubby, pointed, caked, polished, buniony, pavement-bevelled, 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. (Roth 1991: 440)

One might call this ending an example of perfect closure, a sensory symbol of the boy's coming to terms with his "new world". But this passage has been seen by some critics as a "cryptic summative legacy" (Lesser 1981: 162; cf. also Fink 1985) rather than the closing of a narrative circle: according to these critics, Roth's final paragraph does not signal a rite of passage, a growing out of the oversensitivity of childhood – it only suspends the young boy's terror in the momentary acquiescence of falling asleep. More generally, while *Call It Sleep* invites a *Bildungsroman*-like reading, it never allows the reader to envisage a real sense of progression from a lesser to a greater degree of development. The novelistic technique plunges the reader into the sensory experience of the growing boy,[4] and that experience is never interpreted from outside this limited perspective. In narratological terms, the novel is centred almost exclusively on a single reflector whose mental processes are shown to be very idiosyncratic, accumulative rather than selective (as Mario Materassi puts it

[4] David's point of view is presented by an alternation of reflector narrative, free indirect thought and free direct thought ("With knees drawn up, David watched her wipe the linoleum beneath his chair. The shadow between her breasts, how deep! How far it – No! No! Luter! When he looked! That night! Mustn't! Look away!").

in a perceptive essay, "Meaning, in *Call It Sleep*, issues from accruement rather than selection"; Materassi 1996: 52). Events are usually presented, sometimes described, but never or almost never evaluated by a strong external authority in Roth's novel: whatever happens is continuously evaluated by the boy – an "internal" (and often limited[5]) viewpoint on which the reader cannot fully rely – while a more external point of view, a more authoritative voice (a third-person omniscient narrator, or a first-person older narrator as in *David Copperfield*) would close off the narrative and give it a sense of consistent progression. In the above-quoted ending, David's sense of peace and acquiescence is described from within his consciousness (even that final switch from "he" to "one" might only be a prelude to the dispossession of sleep): how is the reader to know that the boy will wake up any different from what he used to be?

In a book-length stylistic study of Jane Austen's narrative techniques, I have tried to demonstrate how the peculiar "openness" of Austen's mature novels, their effect of "semantic indeterminacy", is created by positing one or more "evaluative centres" (basically, the narrator and his/her reflector) and then systematically dismantling their authority (Morini 2009: 15-36). Roth, as a modernist writer, goes one step further than Austen: choosing to present rather than describe, he tends to withhold any authoritative comment, thus saddling the reader's shoulders with the greater part of the evaluative task.[6] In *Call It Sleep*, evaluation is always collaborative, an unsigned contract between writer and reader, investing both the general structure of the novel and the meaning of single episodes.

In what follows, I will analyze a passage in which David's mother tells him a story about her grandmother, by having recourse to the

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[5] In cognitive terms, the boy's point of view is limited because he has very few schemata at his disposal (cf. Bartlett 1932; David, for instance, does not know about coffins, or Christ). Also, his hyper-sensitiveness makes for very rapid, "impressionistic" interpretations of events, as in the passage quoted in the previous note.

[6] Furthermore, it must be noted that while a sense of progression from a less to a more developed state of consciousness can be traced in various modernist novels – for instance, Joyce's own *Bildungsroman*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* – *Call It Sleep* appears to remain suspended from beginning to end, perhaps because of Roth's suspended judgment on the events of his childhood (cf. Kellman 2005: 69 ff.).

methodologies of Labov's narrative theory (Labov and Waletzky 1967; Labov 1972; Labov and Fanshel 1977) and making occasional reference to some recent theories of "evaluation" which have stemmed from Labov's remarks on the "point" of narrative (in particular, I will make use of Thompson and Hunston's exhaustive 2000 introduction). My reason for selecting this passage is that it contains an oral narrative told by David's beloved mother in the safety of home – an ideal situation for the protagonist-narrator, as well as (one might be led to expect) for the reader in search of a "point". That reader might expect this story to contain a clear moral, or at least to offer some guidance in David's quest for meaning and security – but David's mother provides no clear explanation, and David's evaluation of the story is intuitive rather than rational. After all, David's Yiddish world proves to be as undecipherable as the post-babelic New York neighbourhoods into which he is plunged against his will.

2. *Evaluative Analysis*

In their 1967 essay on "Narrative Analysis", William Labov and Joshua Waletzky set out to analyze narrative not as a structuralist patchwork of actions or themes, but as "a verbal technique for recapitulating experience" (Labov and Waletzky 1967: 13). They noted that any narrative serves two functions – referential and evaluative – the evaluative part being meant to prove that the story is worth telling. This essay being included in a collection published by the American Ethnological Society, the authors' focus was obviously more on oral than written storytelling: but their structural subdivision of stories into an "orientation" (basic information on people, time, place), a "complication" (or complicating action), a "result" (or resolution) and a "coda" has been very influential in stylistics and evaluation theory[7] – and the classification of evaluative modes

[7] Above all in Labov's 1972 reformulation, which turns the previous four-point structure into a six-point one: "evaluation" (which, however, is said to be pervasive) and the "abstract" (i.e., the narrator's initial summary of the whole story) are added to the

in Labov (1972: 370-393) is particularly useful for the purpose of tracing evaluation in an "oral" story contained in a written narrative.

The story told by David's mother, Genya, to her son in book I of *Call It Sleep* fully vindicates Labov and Waletzky's claim that oral stories are often quite complex, layers of stories added to stories or narratives within narratives (Labov and Waletzky: 20). In this case, Genya's account of her grandmother's ageing and death can be split into at least four parts: (1) a first narrative giving details of her grandmother's life with her husband (pp. 64-65); (2) a shorter narrative explaining that when Genya's grandmother grew old she would not go out of the house in autumn (p. 65), and (3) a final story about an occasion in which she *did* go out in autumn (accompanied by Genya), which encapsulates (4), a shorter story about a peasant's death (told by Genya's grandmother herself). However, these successive and interlocking stories are not on the same narrative footing, and do not take place on the same temporal plane: in terms of Catherine Emmott's "discourse perspective" on fiction, (1), (2) and (3) are "unframed texts" – i.e., stories relating habitual actions, events which took place over a long period of time – while only (4) is a "framed text" – a story about a specific occasion – and as such commands the listener's and the reader's attention in a more pointed way (Emmott 1997: 236-266). In Labov and Waletzky's structure, the first three narrative stretches can be roughly said to provide contextual "orientation" for the fourth, though they themselves are stories in their own right, exhibiting all the stages identified by Labov, and as such contain evaluative passages as well as "referential" information.

Roth's ability to reproduce the conditions of oral storytelling is evident in his communal, "empathetic" construction of the narrative (Ong 1982: 45-46). Labov has often been criticized for disregarding the interactional aspects of stories (cf. Cortazzi and Jin 2000: 110), but a later development of his model allows for the possibility that a

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four categories of the 1967 essay (Labov 1972: 363). For the use of Labov (1972) in stylistics and narratology, cf. Black 2006: 39-43, 154-155; for a summary of Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Labov (1972) as tools for narrative analysis, cf. Toolan (1998/2001: 143-159).

story be told as a response to the listener's request:

> If A makes a request for information to B, and B immediately begins a narrative, then B is heard as asserting that the evaluative point of the narrative will supply the information requested. (Labov and Fanshel 1977: 109)

Genya's story is told in response to David's request for information as to the death of her grandmother ("Then why did she die?" he asks ingenuously), and can therefore be considered as a rather privileged narrative form. For while narrators must normally demonstrate that their stories are worth telling, that they have a "point", a response-narrative of this sort carries its own unassailable presumption of relevance. Genya answers her son's question with another question ("Do you want to know what I think?"), and when she starts telling what she thinks ("Yes!" he says "eagerly"), it turns out that her opinion can only be given in narrative form. This is a condensed version of part (1) of her narrative, containing general information on her grandmother and on her grandmother's relationship with her husband:

> 'She was very small, my grandmother, very frail and delicate. The light came through her hands like the light through a fan. What has that to do with it? Nothing. But while my grandfather was very pious, she only pretended to be – just as I pretend, may God forgive us both. Not long ago, she had a little garden before her house. It was full of sweet flowers in the summertime, and she tended it all by herself. My grandfather, stately Jew, could never understand why she should spend a whole spring morning watering the flowers [...] when she had so many servants to do it for her. [...] And once she told him that she was sure the good Lord would not be angry at her if she did steal a little from Esau's heritage – the earth and the fields are Esau's heritage – since Esau himself, she said, was stealing from Isaac on every side – she meant all the new stores that were being opened by the other gentiles in our town. What could my grandfather do? He would laugh and call her a serpent. Now wait! I'm coming to it.' She smiled at his impatience. (Roth 1991: 64-65)

In Catherine Emmott's terms, the only framed part of this story, recalling events which took place in a specific temporal order, is the one whose beginning is signalled by "once" – though the two parts

are clearly linked in terms of topical coherence, serving as they do to present the protagonist's independent (and irreligious) character. The opening physical introduction is meant as a general orientation – as Genya makes clear, it has "nothing" to do with David's question, i.e., with the point of the narrative – as is the subsequent description of the little garden which grandmother used to tend "all by herself". However, in the midst of description some evaluative comments can be traced which give "point" to the framed ending. Just after stating that her initial comments on her grandmother's frailty are "pointless" (in the evaluative sense), Genya appears to indicate that what she is going to say – by contrast – is important, and may provide a key to what follows ("But while my grandfather was very pious, she only pretended to be – just as I pretend, may God forgive us both"). In this case, the evaluative comment is very direct, though its bearing on the rest of the story is not clear: the protagonist (along with the narrator) is described as an impious person, and piety is presented as a good thing ("may God forgive us both"). The protagonist's husband, by contrast, is described as a "stately Jew", and various evaluative traces build up a connection between piety and leaving manual labour to the servants. Labov (1972: 372-373) details a number of techniques whereby a narrator may "embed" his/her evaluations within his/her narrative – for instance, by introducing a third person who evaluates the action for the narrator, or by reporting what people did rather than what they said. In this case, we are given the husband's evaluation of his wife's actions ("[he] could never understand why [...]") as well as his reactions to her words in the final framed narrative ("What could my grandfather do? He would laugh and call her a serpent"). Genya's rhetorical question ("What could my grandfather do?") can also be read as an evaluation: in Labov's 1972 taxonomy, it is a "comparator", setting what *is* against the backdrop of what *is not* or *might have been* (Labov 1972: 380-387).[8] It is Genya's opinion, or the opinion of

[8] Thompson and Hunston (2000: 21) provide a slightly different definition of "comparators" as anything involving "comparison of the object of evaluation against a yardstick of some kind [...] comparative adjectives; adverbs of degree; comparator adverbs as *just*, *only*, *at least*; expressions of negativity (morphological, such as *un-* and

Genya's grandfather, that the only sensible reaction to his wife's behaviour is good-natured laughter.

Two characteristics of Genya's storytelling technique can be noted from this very beginning: on the one hand, she involves David in the creation of the story (she provides all the contextual information he needs, she points out the crucial passages for him by verbal and gestural means); on the other, she refuses to make her point explicit, convinced as she appears to be that the explanation lies in the facts themselves. In fact, when she says "Now wait! I'm coming to it", thus indicating that she is about to come to the point, what David gets as a reward for his impatience is another unframed narrative (2) about the protagonist's behaviour in old age:

> 'As she grew older, she grew very strange. Shall I tell you what she used to do? When autumn came and every thing had died –'
> 'Died? Everything?' David interrupted her.
> 'Not everything, little goose. The flowers. When they died she didn't want to leave the house. Wasn't that strange? She stayed for days and days in her large living room – it had crystal chandeliers. You wouldn't believe how quietly she would sit [...] and her hands folded in her lap – so. [...] Not till the first snow fall, did she willingly leave the house again.
> 'Why?' (Roth 1991: 65)

Once again, Roth foregrounds the communal nature of storytelling and the importance of shared contextual knowledge by having David ask very simple "orientation" questions. More crucially, David reiterates his final why-question because he feels that the point he is looking for is still being evaded, even though evaluations *are* provided by his mother (the point of this passage being that her own grandmother's behaviour was "strange"). Here, the presence of evaluation is also signalled by what Labov calls "intensifiers", i.e., ways of selecting and strengthening a single item in a linear series of events:[9] Genya calls attention to the strangeness of her grandmoth-

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other affixes; grammatical, such as *not*, *never*, *hardly*; and lexical, such as *fail*, *lack*)".

[9] Labov's use of the term "intensifier" is not standard. In his terminology, an intensifier is a non-narrative element that interrupts the flow of events to select one for the listener's attention. Labov distinguishes various kinds of intensifiers: "gestures" (Genya's imitation of her grandmother), "expressive phonology", "quantifiers" ("*very* strange"),

er's behaviour by repeating her evaluator ("strange") twice, and by strengthening it or pointing at it ("*very* strange"; "wasn't *that* strange?"); and she underlines with a gesture ("her hands folded in her lap – so") a crucial detail illustrating that strangeness. But these intensified comments do not provide an answer to David's general question, and his renewed request for explanation triggers a further narrative turn (3a), which is said to contain an "answer" that he must find for himself:

> 'Here is the answer. See if you can find it. When I came to visit her once on a day in late autumn, I found her sitting very quietly, as usual, in her large arm-chair. But when I was about to take my coat off, she said, keep it on, Genya, darling, there is mine on the chair in the corner. Will you get it for me, child?
> 'Well, I stood still staring at her in surprise. Her coat? I thought. Was she really of her own accord going out in autumn? And then for the first time I noticed that she was dressed in her prettiest Sabbath clothes – a dark, shimmering satin – very costly. I can see her yet. And on her head – she had never let them cut her hair – she had a broad round comb with rows of pearls in it – the first present my grandfather had ever given her. It was like a pale crown. And so I fetched her coat and helped her put it on. Where are you going, grandmother? I asked. I was puzzled. In the garden, she said, in the garden. Well, an old woman must have her way, and into the garden we went. The day was very grey and full of winds [...] And then she said a very strange thing. (Roth 1991: 65-66)

For the first time since Genya started, David and the reader are given a framed text in which most separate clauses denote separate actions. In their 1967 essay, Labov and Waletzky try to isolate the story units which "recapitulate experience in the same order as the original events"; they call a succession of such units a "primary sequence", and proceed to note that many narrative units do not form primary sequences (Labov and Waletzky 1967: 21,29). Even in a story relating events in very tight chronological order, there will be displaceable clauses interrupting the basic order "A then B" – and it is to these "free" or "restricted clauses" that one must look if one is

"repetition" (the two occurrences of "strange"), and "ritual utterances" (Labov 1972: 378-380).

searching for evaluation (or orientation). In this case, most evaluations are embedded in the narrative by attributing them to the speaker at the time the action takes place ("Well, I stood staring at her in surprise [...] going out and in autumn?"; "Well, an old woman must have her way"; cf. Labov 1972: 372), but there are also intensifying adverbs ("very costly") and repetitions ("In the garden, she said, in the garden") pointing to the importance of grandmother's decision to come out in autumn. Maddeningly for David, the crucial events are underlined but not explained, and then the framed story is interrupted to start another (4), the importance of which is again underlined by an introductory comment ("And then she said a very strange thing"):

> '[...] Do you remember Petrush Kolonov? I wasn't sure. A goy, she said, a clod. He worked for your grandfather many years. He had a neck like a tree once, but he grew old and crooked at last. And when he grew so old he couldn't lift a faggot, he would sit on a stone and look at the mountains. This was my grandmother talking, you understand?'
> David couldn't quite follow these threads within threads, but nodded. 'Why did he sit?' he asked, afraid that she might stop talking.
> She laughed lightly. 'That same question has been asked by three generations. You. Myself. My grandmother. He had been a good drudge this Petrush, a good ox. And when my grandmother asked him, Petrush, why do you sit like a keg and stare at the mountains, his only answer was, my teeth are all gone. And that's the story my grandmother told me while we walked. You look puzzled,' she laughed again.
> He was indeed, but she didn't explain. (Roth 1991: 66)

Just as story is embedded within story, evaluation is embedded within evaluation here – both kinds of encapsulation confusing David so that he has to ask questions. Again, Genya provides some orientation because she is aware that her son may have difficulties finding his way in all these "threads within threads" ("This was my grandmother talking, you understand?"), but as usual she refuses to explicate the point of either this sub-narrative or of the longer, framed narrative which contains this episode ("she didn't explain"). By a circular movement, the point of any story is the story itself, or

another story.[10] Petrush Kolonov's "evaluative" answer ("his *only* answer"; another intensifier) appears to bear no relation to the rest of the story – though a more sophisticated listener/reader than David will probably start to build connections between the cycle of nature and human acceptance of old age and death – and yet in Genya's final reiteration ("And that's the story my grandmother told me while we walked") the whole passage (4) is obscurely linked to the evaluative net of (3) – if one recalls that Petrush' tale had been prefaced by an evaluative clause signalling its importance in the tale of Genya's grandmother.

David's expectation, by now, has grown to a paroxysm, and the reader him/herself, however sophisticated, may expect some kind of point to be made at last. But as the story draws to a conclusion (3b), its evaluation remains implicit and mostly embedded:

> 'And so we walked and the leaves were blowing. Shew-w-w! How they lifted, and one blew against her coat, and while the wind held it there, you know, like a finger, she lifted it off and crumbled it. And then she said suddenly, come let us turn back. And just as we were about to go in she sighed so that she shivered – deep – the way one sighs just before sleep – and she dropped the bits of leaves she was holding and she said, it is wrong being the way I am. Even a leaf grows dull and old together! Together! You understand? Oh, she was wise! And we went inside.' (Roth 1991: 66)

Just like (3a), this is a heavily framed narrative, the bulk of which consists of chronologically-ordered actions. However, the course of those actions is interrupted by a number of explicit or implicit evaluations which, clustering as they do towards the end of the story, alert the listener and the reader to the presence of a crucial narrative "point". Most of the events are underlined by intensifiers and comparators: the wind is imitated ("Shew-w-w!") and its force is

[10] Thompson and Hunston (2000: 6) have pointed out that the three uses of evaluation are expressing the writer's (or speaker's) opinion, constructing/maintaining relations between writer/speaker and reader/listener, and organizing the discourse. In Genya's case the third function is particularly evident, and yet the disposition of her story is by no means simple: the evaluations in (1) serve as a general orientation for (2) and (4); the evaluative net of (2) prepares the listener/reader for what happens in (4); while (4) is given as an explanation of (2), and (3) is a sort of evaluative double of (4).

measured on the leaves ("How they lifted"); Genya's grandmother's shiver is marked by an intensifier ("deep") and compared to "the way one sighs just before sleep". Towards the end, the evaluation becomes more and more explicit (less embedded) as grandmother's comment ("It is wrong being the way I am [...] together") is followed up by the narrator with a reiterative (i.e., intensifying) reinforcement ("Together! You understand?") and a comment in her own voice ("Oh, she was wise"), before the story is rounded off with a final action-clause.

When the story comes to an end, it is no wonder that David feels cheated: Genya's sequence of framed and unframed stories has unfolded with no explicit point ever being made – and what is even more maddening to the child, with a point ever promised and ever postponed, and with every successive narrative chunk being introduced as proving the point of the whole. Furthermore, even if the child could extract a clear point from a long series of embedded or explicit but unexplained evaluations, he would be left with a rather confusing string of judgments. Geoff Thompson and Susan Hunston have noted that evaluation can be conducted along three main axes – "good-bad", "expectedness", and "importance"[11] – and, obviously, a child would expect to find a clear good-bad evaluation (a moral) in any good story. Genya's compound narrative had begun with a good-bad judgment on her grandmother's (and her own) impiety, and ends with an apparently incompatible judgment on her grandmother's wisdom. Between these two judgments, a number of explicit evaluations signalling the importance or the (un)expectedness of an action ("Do you understand?"; "She grew very strange"; "Wasn't that strange?") are underpinned by an even greater number of embedded, implicit evaluations that stir the listener's curiosity but provide little explanation. Inevitably enough, David protests, and the accents of his complaint remind us that a story without evaluation, or a story in which the narratee manages to find no evaluation, is not even a story ("You – you haven't told me everything! [...] You haven't even told me what happened?"; Roth 1991: 66).

[11] They actually add a fourth dimension, but I find the distinction between "expectedness" and "certainty" too thin to be useful (Thompson and Hunston 2000: 25).

Eventually, Genya adds some material details on her grandmother's death which round off the story more satisfactorily for her young listener. But even then – and this is characteristic of the whole novel, from the child's first semantic explorations to his last attempt at embracing his surroundings – the listener's comprehension does not take place rationally, but intuitively, more as a result of his mother's physical presence than by way of logical and/or linguistic explanation. The reader, of course, may make his/her own sense of the whole story – but his/her main source of internal evaluation remains David Schearl's excitable, unfocussed imagination:

> 'Haven't I?' She laughed. 'There's hardly anything more to tell. She died the winter of that same year, before the snow fell.' She stared at the rain beating against the window. Her face sobered. The last wink of her eyelids before she spoke was slowest. 'She looked so frail in death, in her shroud – how shall I tell you, my son? Like early winter snow. And I thought to myself even then, let me look deeply into her face for surely she will melt before my eyes.' She smiled again. 'Have I told you enough now?'
> He nodded. Without knowing why, her last words stirred him. What he had failed to grasp as thought, her last gesture, the last supple huskiness of her voice conveyed. (Roth 1991: 66-67)

3. *Conclusion*

As seen above, most of *Call It Sleep* is centred on a very young and very timid reflector whose confused evaluations are never verified by a more reliable external narrator. However, even on a reassuringly domestic occasion – in which an internal narrator takes charge – no single "point" is offered by the character telling the story or grasped by the narratee/reflector. The reader is once again left to his/her own interpretive devices, as demonstrated by the only two critics who (to the best of my knowledge) have mentioned the story of Genya's grandmother: Bonnie Lyons has described it as a story about "a strange, gentle woman" who chooses to die a "self-willed death" in tune with the seasons – a cultural narrative imparting "a sense of the past [...] of which David is deprived" (Lyons

1976: 67); while Ruth Wisse has agreed that it is a story about a woman making "of death a seasonal matter in which human beings show dignity by recognizing their affinity with leaves", but has also seen it as an "emotionally unsatisfying (but artistically haunting)" response to David's fear of death (Wisse 1996: 65). While these two comments do not necessarily elide each other, they underline different interpretive possibilities created by the open-ended story within the story.

For the rest of this evaluatively inconclusive (but artistically haunting) novel, the reader is basically in the same plight as when he/she reads Genya's oral narrative:[12] the deictic centre of *Call It Sleep* never shifts from David's consciousness, and David is always in the position of listener, overhearer, insufficiently informed informer. As the protagonist strays further and further from home and Yiddish, the physical and linguistic contours of his expanding world become more and more incomprehensible and menacing: the above analysis demonstrates that even in his domestic surroundings and in the sheltering presence of his mother, young David Schearl is presented with the details of events, not with their (explicit) point. He is told *how* things happen, not *why* they do.

And so, one might add, is the reader. At the end of the novel, when one is invited to "call it sleep", one is certainly willing to do so: but as for deciding what exactly sleep *is* – or, in cohesive terms, what *it* is – that, or it, is quite a different point to be made.

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[12] Diversity of critical judgement is a clue to the evaluative openness of the novel (cf. Morini 2009: 15-17). Witness, for instance, the variety of judgements elicited by the ending, which has been seen as an example of "(presumably) redemptive" closure (McHale 1996: 86, 98) as well as "a cryptic summative legacy" (Lesser 1981: 162), or, more biographically and imaginatively, as "the turbulent creation of a young Jewish American author, galvanized into artistic birth and baptized by fire into his calling as English writer" (Wirth-Nesher 2006: 95).

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