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*Edited By*

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## Encountering the Idea of America

JULIAN LEVINSON

A remarkable consistency underlies the writings of nineteenth-century American Jews: In multiple genres from poems to sermons to newspaper editorials, they present their adopted nation as a glorious land brimming with promise. To have gained American citizenship, they announce, was to have recovered the basic conditions for human dignity after two millennia of degradation in the Old World. Hence nineteenth-century Jewish American writings abound in images of regeneration, rebirth, and new beginnings. To some extent this optimism reflects the outlook of modern Jewry during the age of emancipation, a time when countless Jews in the United States as well as in Central and Western Europe (especially France) set their hopes on the emerging liberal nation state.<sup>1</sup> But if nineteenth-century American Jews can be seen as a type – perhaps *the* type – of modern Jewry, there are also ways in which the Jewish encounter with America must be treated as a special case. Because of the distinctive ways in which political and religious discourses are configured in the national mythos, including a heavy emphasis on the language of biblical prophecy, America has appeared to many Jews not merely as a haven of political freedom, but as a nation allied with their own deepest spiritual aspirations *as Jews*. American Jewish optimism has thus included the sense that here, at last, some abiding, underlying Jewish essence would emerge and flourish.

In what follows, I track the dynamic interaction between Jews and America – or, more precisely, with the *idea* of America as they understood it during the nation's first century of existence. My analysis focuses on three foundational figures: Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785–1851), Isaac Mayer Wise (1819–1900), and Emma Lazarus (1849–1887).<sup>2</sup> Each had a multifaceted career combining textual production and public advocacy: Noah was a playwright, journalist, and politician and easily the most famous American Jew prior to 1850; Wise was a rabbi, novelist, journalist, and the foremost

leader of American Judaism by midcentury; Lazarus was the best-known English-language Jewish poet of her age, and she too crossed into the political realm, advocating on behalf of victimized East European Jews. In their energetic promotion of America as the center of Jewish modernity, they provide a group portrait of nineteenth-century American Jewry at its most optimistic. Even before the mass migration of Jews from Eastern Europe of 1881–1924, they had already set the terms for the view of America as a new beginning for Jewish life.<sup>3</sup> While the mainspring for their analysis of Jewish modernity is the idea of America itself, their primary linguistic medium, English, created an ideational setting on its own, making their writings a staging ground for the revision of Jewish culture and identity in America (Wise wrote important works in German as well, but his vision of American Judaism crystallized in English). For Noah and Lazarus, another key context is New York City, the most religiously and ethnically diverse city in the new republic, which encouraged the creation of a self-confident, assertive Jewishness. The question, as we turn back to these key originators of American Jewish discourse, is how they absorbed prevailing political and religious discourses while carving out a space for Jewish particularism.

### A Utopia of Individuals

To understand America's transformative power on the Jewish self-image, we must consider that especially in its early years the United States constructed itself more as an *ethos* (a guiding set of principles) than as an *ethnos* (a specific group of people).<sup>4</sup> However much its actual history may be linked to specific actors working out their own aims, the nation projected itself not merely as a swath of geography, but as a glittering, triumphant *Idea*. Such ideological grandiosity is a prerogative of all revolutionary societies. But America's idealistic reading of itself was and has remained particularly vivid. One reason has been the malleability of the Idea of America. In its most concise form, the national purpose has been defined as the liberation of the individual from arbitrary, external restraints, the realization of the principle of *laissez faire*. As such, diverse groups of people have seen "America" as a sphere for the fulfillment of their own purposes, an invitation to imagine themselves as they would be without any external impositions.

No single document has laid out this promise with greater authority as far as Jews were concerned than George Washington's letter to the "Hebrew Congregations of New Port" (1790). While traveling through Rhode Island,

Washington had received a warm response from the Newport congregation. In exchange he offered an unequivocal welcome:

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy. . . . All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. . . . May the children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants, while every one shall sit in safety under his own fig-tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.<sup>5</sup>

Washington offers the American public sphere as a neutral space for self-realization, an Edenic clearing. Washington's central metaphor, the fig tree, is taken from eschatological passages in Micah and Zachariah; here it suggests the triumph of laissez faire liberalism. Unlike Napoleon Bonaparte, whose fear of disloyalty led to his famous interrogation of the Assembly of Jewish Notables at roughly the same time (1806), Washington understands citizenship as conferring "immunities" without proof of loyalty. Washington seems, furthermore, to be making the safety of Jews a litmus test for American ideals: The "enlarged and liberal policy" of his government is proven by the safety and freedom of Jews. The shape or *content* of Jewish identity is construed as a wholly private matter, a message that would have resonated with the terms set by Rhode Island's religious culture more generally, given its origins in Roger Williams's ideology of religious dissent and radical autonomy.

As they embarked on their American adventure, Jews inevitably rescripted their identities and sense of collective purpose in terms consistent with the broader national project. As intellectual historians from Ralph Barton Perry to Daniel Walker Howe have observed, this project can be seen as the crystallization of two distinct intellectual currents: seventeenth-century English political thought, exemplified by John Locke and his Enlightenment successors, and the radical Protestant Reformation, embodied by the Puritan settlers and other dissenting groups.<sup>6</sup> Despite (or maybe *because of*) their often contradictory agendas, these two traditions have joined to lend a special fascination to the "Idea of America." A key aspect of this intellectual inheritance has been the American emphasis on the sufficiency of the individual: Protestants called upon people to read and interpret Holy Writ for themselves; the enlighteners affirmed the individual's ability to discover truth through one's own reason and experience. This focus on the individual has shaped the characteristically American culture of self-help and self-improvement. The idea is that the "natural" self stands in need of correction, but that the powers of

correction already lie buried within the self. What endangers this process of self-correction, according to these traditions, are faulty institutions and stultifying inherited traditions. Hence, a second result of its intellectual heritage has been the American affinity for what Isaiah Berlin calls “the concept of negative liberty” – an understanding that liberty consists chiefly in the freedom *from* external barriers and harassment by others.<sup>7</sup> On this score, Reformation attacks on the demonic papacy anticipate in tone and purpose James Madison’s attacks on the “blind veneration for antiquity, for custom, or for names.”<sup>8</sup> In both cases the individual must be rescued from some prior, entrenched set of norms; the prerequisite for salvation – whether defined in secular or religious terms – is the negative gesture of clearing away obstructions.

Furthermore, the Enlightenment and the radical Protestant Reformation have combined to lend a millenarian sense to America’s national mission. Prudence, hard work, and compromise would be necessary – a pragmatic realism was built into these traditions – but redemption of some kind has been seen as an imminent reality in the New World. The Declaration of Independence may be a largely secular document, casting God as a deistic abstraction, but the mythical role in the collective mind of the break from England has been reinforced by the memory of Puritan New England.<sup>9</sup> And the revolutionary generation’s overall spirit of hope was anticipated by the dissenting impulse of the Great Awakening (1730–1743). Even as the impulses behind the Reformation were secularized in the generation of the founders and thereafter, the structure of Christian eschatology, an abiding millenarianism, continued to inform the national self-image. The result has been a sense of national mission aimed at a fundamental transformation of the individual. In the famous words of Hector St. John De Crevecoeur, in America “individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men whose labors and posterity will one day make great changes in the world.”<sup>10</sup> Formulated in this way, America’s mission involves at once the liberation of its citizens and their fundamental *transformation* into some new kind of person.

The antagonism toward the past radiating from the American idea, not to mention its Christian overtones, would appear to clash at every turn with the claims of traditional Judaism, particularly in its premodern rabbinic form. Antiquity, custom, names – the very concepts that elicit Madison’s ire serve as positive sources of value in traditional Jewish identity. As Yosef Yerushalmi, Arnold Eisen, and others have argued, even more attenuated versions of modern Jewish identity have emphasized cultural memory, the imperative of situating the self within, not in opposition to, the continuities of history.<sup>11</sup> In view of these fundamental tensions between the idea of America and traditional

Jewish models of selfhood, it is evident that the American cultural milieu that Jews were entering into was not quite so neutral after all. To accept the invitation to reside beneath their own “fig-trees” was also to absorb distinct assumptions about history, selfhood, and community, which American Jews would inevitably adopt, particularly when expressing themselves in English, to define their identities. Under the sign of the American ethos, all collective projects inherited from the past would come to appear as less binding than individual pursuits, the demands of the past would be generally seen as a threat to personal autonomy, and the future would come to be anticipated as a time of dramatic transformation in one’s personal life. How would Jewishness be rewritten under these new ideological conditions? And how would Jewishness itself provide a perspective from which to reimagine America itself?

### Fig Trees in Upstate New York?

One of the most audacious attempts to link Jewish history with America was made by Mordecai Noah. A brief biographical sketch reveals a figure of titanic energy, at once politician, playwright, journalist, and utopian dreamer. Noah was one-quarter Sephardic, three-quarters Ashkenazi, but he emphasized his Spanish descent because it lent him elevated status among Jews and others in America. His family background gave him authority to speak as both a Jew and an American: His father served in the Pennsylvania militia during the Revolutionary War, and his mother hailed from a family that included the “Reverend” David Mendes Machado, who served New York’s sole congregation, Shearith Israel, from 1736 to 1747.<sup>12</sup> As a playwright, Noah wrote half a dozen plays including a well-received popular romance about the War of 1812 called *She Would Be a Soldier, or The Plains of Chippewa* (1819).<sup>13</sup> These plays contributed to the development of an indigenous American-themed literature; an 1836 survey of American literature in the *New York Mirror* listed Noah as one of the nation’s outstanding writers. During his political career Noah was sheriff of New York, a member of Tammany Hall, and ultimately U.S. consul to Tunis under President Madison. His work as a journalist – he edited the New York newspapers *National Advocate* and the *Enquirer* – further embedded him in the political and cultural world of antebellum America. When Noah set about imagining a Jewish future in the New World, he was expressing at once his personal loyalties as a Jew and the deep logic of American political culture.

Noah’s claim to Jewish fame hangs on the plan he hatched during the late 1810s to establish a colony for his coreligionists in Upstate New York. Having

learned of the availability of Grand Island, located in the Niagara River near the soon-to-be completed Erie Canal, Noah sought out financial backers and purchased the land in 1825.<sup>14</sup> He hoped to attract Jews from around the world to this “asylum,” where they would establish a thriving economy and “regenerate” themselves under the influence of American democracy. Noah named his sanctuary “Ararat,” after the mountain where the Bible’s Noah discovered dry ground after the flood. By evoking his biblical namesake, this name reflects Mordecai’s self-fashioning as modern savior of the Jews. It resonates, furthermore, with what is arguably *the* central image in the rhetoric of American exceptionalism: John Winthrop’s casting of his Puritan community as a “city upon a hill” (from Matthew 5:14). Both Winthrop and Mordecai Noah evoke biblical mountaintops to portray arrival in America as a metaphorical ascent. These allusions underscore the auspiciousness of these settlement plans, lending them the aura of divine sanction and eschatological promise.

Noah’s vision of a Jewish asylum in America did not appear out of the blue. The buoyant, self-confident years following the War of 1812 witnessed a number of proposals to establish Jewish colonies in the New World. Two were conceived by enterprising Jewish developers; at least two more were planned by missionaries hoping to convert the Jews.<sup>15</sup> By contrast Noah’s plan was fueled by a philanthropic concern for Jews suffering throughout the world – and by the conviction that an asylum in America would provide the setting in which a strengthened, modernized sense of Jewish collective purpose would emerge. Noah’s plan also advanced further than other schemes – as far, in fact, as a grandiose dedication ceremony, which Noah staged as an ecumenical media event. Transportation to Grand Island could not be procured on the day set for the ceremony, so it was staged in the neighboring city of Buffalo. A procession advanced from the Masonic Lodge to the largest available building, the Episcopal Church of Buffalo. Here a band played Handel’s *Judas Maccabees*, a morning service was conducted by the reverend of the church, and a series of biblical passages were recited, including eschatological statements from Jeremiah 31 and Zephaniah 3:8 (e.g., “Therefore wait for me, declares the Lord, for the day I will stand up to testify”). This cobbling together of allusions and cultural forms underscores Noah’s penchant for seeking out common ground linking Jews and Christians. It also suggests that religious differences might be eased over when biblical eschatology – God’s ultimate plan for humankind – was emphasized over questions of doctrine. But unlike the Christian listeners in the audience, who would have been prompted by these readings to imagine their souls in the afterlife, Noah had in mind the regeneration of the Jewish people *as a nation* in the here and now.

Noah then delivered a stirring proclamation, which must be considered a foundational text in the history of American Jewish optimism. Attired in a gown borrowed from a local actor (who had used it in a recent production of *Richard III*) and pronouncing himself a judge of Israel, Noah presented his vision of Ararat as the antidote to Jewish affliction. He begins with the reminder that Jews are and shall remain the chosen people, the first to proclaim God's unity and omnipotence. Judaism embraces, he claims, "all that is pure and upright, all that is just and generous."<sup>16</sup> He insists that Providence has destined Jews to remain a distinct people; despite being scattered throughout the world, they have retained an underlying "homogeneousness of character."<sup>17</sup> He then traces the wanderings of the "Hebrew nation" from their biblical beginnings through the centuries of suffering in Europe and on to what he foresees as their imminent arrival en masse in America. Here, Noah modulates into a recognizable American key, constructing today's Jews as latter-day pilgrims, in quest of religious freedom. The American nation, buttressed by the Constitution, will enable the "full and unmolested enjoyment of their religious rights, and of every other civil immunity, together with peace and plenty."<sup>18</sup> Echoing Washington's letter to the Hebrews of Newport, Noah calls America a "land of milk and honey, where Israel may repose in peace, under his 'vine and fig tree'."<sup>19</sup> Referring to his own speech as a "declaration of independence," Noah implies that Jews are poised to recapitulate in their own experience the drama of the revolutionary generation.

In this speech, Noah inaugurates what might be called the discourse of American Jewish triumphalism:

This effort [to secure a refuge for the Jews] makes men and citizens of them, gives them a name, an interest and a voice among the nations of the earth – thus, in fact, fulfilling the promises made to the descendents of the Patriarchs – that the Lord God may say to an admiring and astonished world, "Behold my people Israel."<sup>20</sup>

Noah's gendered language (Jews will become "men and citizens") signals a defiance of a history of Jewish subjugation while also recalling Crèvecoeur's description of Americans as a "new race of men." And yet Noah modifies this narrative of transformation, making this newness appear less as a fundamental alteration than the long-awaited realization of Judaism's original purpose. While he portrays Jews as beneficiaries of the American system (i.e., Jews will be made into "men and citizens"), he also describes them as bearers of an ancient tradition that produced America in the first place. Noah views America as the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, the very promise that

was preserved by Jews through their long stateless history. Elsewhere, Noah suggests American constitutionalism itself has its origins in the Sinaitic revelation: "The code of laws which the Almighty through Moses presented to the children of Israel forms *even at this day* the basis of every civil and religious institution" (emphasis added).<sup>21</sup> In this view America enables the Jews to realize the deepest purpose of their own national heritage, since America answers the promise originally given to Abraham, their patriarch. The effect of this claim, which will recur in later instances of American Jewish public rhetoric, is to suggest that Jewish distinctiveness need not be erased in America: the Crevecoeur-esque language of self-transformation is recast as a narrative of self-fulfillment.

Even as he thus elects America as a destination for the world's Jews, Noah cannot ignore the traditional view of the Land of Israel as the telos of Jewish history. Indeed by choosing "Ararat" rather than, say, Canaan or Zion, as the name of his asylum, Noah suggests that America may be a turning point, a refuge from the storm, but not the journey's ultimate end. "Is it proper for me to state," he announces, "that this asylum is temporary and provisional. The Jews never should and never will relinquish the just hope of regaining their ancient heritage."<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Noah insists that America has a unique role to play as the preparatory stage for ultimate restoration. He speculates that if the Jews of the world were suddenly to find themselves in the Holy Land, they would inevitably enter into conflict with one another: "the diversity of opinions and views would create *factions* as difficult to allay as those fatal ones which existed at the time of the first and second Temples" (emphasis added).<sup>23</sup> Once exposed to the "science of government" in the United States, Jews will acquire the necessary skills to run their own commonwealth. Once again Noah bases his model of Jewish redemption on American political history. The *Federalist Papers* devote sustained attention to "the dangers of factions," and here Noah proposes that Jews have suffered from this very scourge, which requires them to learn from America's enlightened constitutional government. Thus, however much Noah sustains traditional notions of Jewish nationhood, he adds a new twist to the metanarrative of Jewish history: A sojourn in the United States, including a rigorous apprenticeship to the science of government will be a necessary prelude to their final restoration. America is thus a crucible for a reconstituted Jewish nation.

In retrospect, Noah's Ararat scheme looks hopelessly quixotic. The island was never settled by a single Jew, and Noah soon became involved in other matters. But the sheer grandiosity of the plan stands as a reminder of the power of the idea of America over Jews from the nation's earliest years. Moreover, even

after the demise of Ararat, Noah remained steadfast in his faith in America as a transformative agent in Jewish history. By the 1840s, with the Ottoman Empire in steep decline and the Christian West caught up in its “rediscovery of the Holy Land,” Noah seized the opportunity to propose that the United States should purchase the original Land of Israel and establish it as a Jewish colony. He laid out his vision in his *Discourse on the Restoration of the Jews* (1845), originally given as an address before the Broadway Tabernacle, one of the most influential Presbyterian churches in Manhattan (presided over by the famous evangelist Charles Grandison Finney). Here, in a grand ecumenical gesture, he builds an eschatological narrative in which Jews and Christians alike will find their salvation. The mediating term, the literal and figurative meeting ground for these distinct religious communities, is the American nation, which Noah frames as a joint effort to manifest God’s purposes on earth. Even though his Ararat scheme failed, Noah remained convinced that America would play a transformative role in Jewish history; a dispersed, subjugated people would become under American auspices a coherent, enlightened, and self-determined nation.

### Returning to the Jewish Fold – in America

On numerous issues facing American Jews in the nineteenth century, Mordecai Noah and Isaac Mayer Wise took opposing sides. Born in Bohemia in the aftermath of the enlightened monarchy of Joseph II, Wise became an early advocate of Reform. Inspired by the innovations taking place in Hamburg, Dessau, and Frankfurt, Wise advocated for a Judaism consistent with the spirit of the age.<sup>24</sup> Such a Judaism would be rational, associated with a deistic God, and rooted in the doctrine of the mission of Israel to spread ethical monotheism. Hired as a rabbi in the town of Radnitz (in present-day Czech Republic), Wise sought to introduce Reform’s agenda, including sermonizing in German and amending the liturgy. He soon chafed against entrenched local Jewish leadership, a sign to the young Wise that a progressive Judaism could only blossom in new surroundings. He emigrated to the United States in 1846, eventually settling in Cincinnati, where he served as a rabbi for forty-six years and spearheaded initiatives to establish Reform Judaism on sure footing in the United States. In his program for American Jews, Wise considered himself a moderate reformer. What he sought above all, he claimed, was to transform American Jews from a dispersed group into an organized, respectable community.

However much Wise saw himself as the great unifier of American Judaism, his views proved far too progressive for somebody like Noah. While Noah’s

own personal observance was irregular, he publicly espoused a traditionalist, “Orthodox” position on matters of religious practice and doctrine. Wise and Noah also differed sharply over the meaning of Jewish nationhood. From his Ararat plan to his *Discourse on the Restoration of the Jews*, Noah described the Jews as a national body. While he embraced America as a true home for himself and those already established there, he never relinquished the traditional view of Zion as the site of the final in-gathering of the exiles. For Wise, by contrast, any talk of Jewish nationhood in the present tense smacked of atavism. In the months leading up to the First Zionist Congress in 1897, Wise decried the “political national sentiment of olden times.” The Zionist movement threatened to erode Judaism’s “universal and sanctified ground and its historical signification.”<sup>25</sup> Wise insisted that American Jews already possessed all of the civic protections they could possibly desire: The messianic age was already dawning in the United States.

Given their differences, it is striking that Wise and Noah sound nearly identical when discussing the overall significance of America in Jewish history: Both saw America as a political experiment shrouded in divine purpose – and the threshold linking Jews with modernity. Whereas Noah sees America as a new phase in Jewish national existence, Wise emphasizes America’s role in purifying Judaism as a religion. In both cases, immigration to America is linked with Jewish self-realization. Consider how Wise tied his personal history to America in a sermon delivered on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday. Recalling his years of struggle with the rabbinate in Bohemia, Wise says, “The irresistible longing for other conditions; another state of things generally became to me finally the message to Abraham – ‘Get thee out of thy country, and far from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house unto the land which I shall show thee.’” Then, in an antiquarian bookstore in Prague, he experienced a shock of recognition while reading “a set of [American] journals from the year 1780–1790” (the letters of Richard Henry Lee, the leading revolutionary figure from Virginia and staunch defender of states’ rights). These became his divine call: “That literature made of me a naturalized American in the interior of Bohemia.”<sup>26</sup> In Wise’s conversion narrative “America” functions as the summoning call, answering his conflicts with both anti-Semites and local Jewish leaders in Bohemia.

Wise’s redemptive personal narrative served as the basis of his first published work of fiction, a novella entitled “The Convert” (1854).<sup>27</sup> Though not generally discussed as a fiction writer, Wise produced a substantial body of fiction that served to underscore and publicize his agenda. Attention to this oeuvre reveals not only that American Jewish fiction has a longer history than

is typically acknowledged, but that its origins lie in the effort to revitalize Jewish life. Written under the pseudonym “the Jewish American novelist,” Wise’s fiction was published in the *Israelite*, the newspaper he founded in 1854 to serve as a “fearless organ” for the “progress, enlightenment, and spiritual striving” of modern Jews.<sup>28</sup> Most of Wise’s novels served this didactic purpose by dramatizing heroic episodes from the distant Jewish past (e.g., *The First of the Maccabees* [1855] and *The Combat of the People; or, Hillel and Herod* [1858]). “The Convert,” serialized over the first five issues of the *Israelite*, was atypical in this regard, focusing on the identity crisis of one specific modern Jew. Though bound by the conventions of nineteenth-century melodrama, Wise’s novella sketches out a narrative structure, based on rebellion and return, that will replay itself in various guises in subsequent Jewish American works (e.g., Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers* [1925], Ludwig Lewisohn’s *The Island Within* [1928], and Samson Raphaelson’s “The Day of Atonement,” the basis for the movie *The Jazz Singer* [1927]).

Wise’s story begins in Bohemia, where a traditionally observant family is mourning the conversion to Christianity of their prized son, the promising medical student Moses Baum. We learn that this Moses has converted to Christianity in order to rise in the medical profession. Moreover, he was left unmoved by the rituals of his home, where he was forced to pay lip service to a tradition that had become irrelevant. (An aura of corruption lingers around his Orthodox family, who seem most concerned with marrying their other son to a wealthy girl.) Now living in Prague, Moses becomes the center of a web of intrigue. His close friend Isaac is a progressive-minded theology student whose views are identical to Wise’s and who hopes to marry Moses’s sister. The condition placed by Moses’s father on the marriage is that the friend draw Moses back to Judaism. A complicated set of plot turns leads eventually to a triumphant conclusion. Saved by his friend from a blackmailing Jesuit priest, Moses happens to attend a Kol Nidre service in the majestic new Reform Temple in Prague. The service precipitates a deeply troubling dream in which he is forced by the priest to kill his father (the abandonment of Judaism is figured here through the motif of parricide). Waking in a cold sweat, Moses declares that he will return to a Judaism modeled on his friend’s Reform vision. Together with another former convert and the newly married couple, this modern-day Moses leads the way to the new promised land: “We go to America and become Jews again. There a man is entitled to his own views and none is bound to be a hypocrite in order to obtain an honorable position in society.”<sup>29</sup> In the final words of the story we learn that he has become the “founder of a Hebrew congregation in the far west.”

Wise offers his protagonist three options in this narrative: Subordinate oneself to a stagnant Orthodoxy; convert to Christianity in a calculated effort to succeed; or embrace an authentic form of Judaism that reflects the spirit of the age. The right choice is only possible, of course, in a land unburdened by the corruptions of Old World society, both Jewish and Christian. Aimed no doubt at flattering his Cincinnati congregants, Wise's praise of the "far west" resonates with the great frontier myth of America, suggesting that Judaism can be modernized in a land free of the weight of history.

Just like Noah, Wise reads America as the fulfillment of promises originally given to the biblical Israelites. This "dispensationalist" view is nowhere more explicit than in a Fourth of July editorial that Wise published in 1858 in the *Israelite*. Here Wise proposes that the American Declaration of Independence must be seen as the second stage in a spiritual history that begins with the Israelites' liberation from Egypt: "Moses forms one pole and the American revolution the other, of an axis around which revolves the political history of thirty-three centuries."<sup>30</sup> The Fourth of July is thus linked with Passover; both are commemorations of divine interventions on behalf of liberty and justice and against arbitrary despotism. Consider Wise at the height of his enthusiasm:

The fourth of July is the day of second redemption of mankind, the spirit of God as revealed through Moses and the prophets as far as this earth is concerned, was incarnated in a modern and suitable form and destined to conquer the nations, to break the chains of servitude . . . that every eye may behold the sacred sun of truth and be delighted with its glorious rays, that every mind perceive the great laws of God, the path of truth and salvation.<sup>31</sup>

Wise's view of history sounds very much like Christian supercessionism, the doctrine that the church has replaced Israel in the divine scheme of salvation. The "second redemption of mankind" represents a universalizing of the principle of liberty first enacted at Sinai. Now it is not only Israel but "every eye" that beholds the divine truth. In a direct echo of Christian rhetoric, he even construes American democracy as the "incarnation" of the Mosaic revelation. But this substitution of America for the body of Christ accomplishes more than a mere cosmetic rearrangement of Pauline eschatology. First, Wise displaces an embodied savior by a historical event: the American Revolution. This is a secularizing move, rooting agency in a collectivity struggling against external oppression. Second, Wise maintains that the "first redemption," Israel's original covenant, retains its original validity, having been verified by

enlightened politics. The “second redemption” of the Fourth of July proves that the first one was already sufficient.

But if the “second redemption” has already occurred in America, why should Jews remain Jews? This question, so vexing to Reform Jewish communities of the future, did not preoccupy Wise as much as it might have. Instead, he imagined a future in which Jews and Christians alike would embrace a universal religion, a rational set of principles wholly compatible with liberal democracy and rooted in “the sublime Jehovah conception.” Such a view was what he understood Judaism to be at its core; its realization would represent the fulfillment, not the cancellation, of Judaism. Thus the chief order of the day was to clear away the dross of rabbinism and allow the underlying truth of Judaism to blossom forth. Wise’s master narrative, to put it another way, entailed the uncovering of the true Judaism, a pure ethical monotheism. Wise believed that this would be the very outlook of Crèvecoeur’s “new race of men.” America would witness the fulfillment of Judaism, since the enlightened liberalism that defined the idea of America reflected the essential truth of Judaism.

### Emma Lazarus as Jewish American National Poet

The nineteenth century was a great period for the blossoming of the office of “national poet.” As diverse nationalist movements from Bulgaria to Belgium gathered momentum throughout the century, they typically enshrined a single poet as the representative voice of the people. These poets frequently belonged to European Romanticism in general, but their themes addressed their nation’s burgeoning sense of itself as a unique phenomenon, with its own sensibility, native landscapes, heroic figures from the past, and aspirations for the future. While Walt Whitman played this role most clearly for nineteenth-century Americans generally, from the standpoint of American Jewish culture, the best candidate for national poet was Emma Lazarus. Previous poets like Penina Moise and Rebecca Hyneman had specialized in liturgical poems and works based on biblical motifs. But Lazarus must be credited with producing the most wide-ranging, visionary, historically informed, and “patriotic” Jewish poetic oeuvre in nineteenth-century America. She crafted a poetic voice that spoke from and for the Jewish people as a burgeoning nation, posed for a renaissance. Like Noah and Wise she envisions the American phase of Jewish history as a key turning point, an opportunity to reform Judaism in the image of an enlightened modern nation. Her poetic

project reinforced an overall upsurge in Jewish self-awareness in the 1870s and 1880s that Jonathan Sarna has called “the Jewish Great Awakening.”<sup>32</sup> In Lazarus’s work, I would argue, Wise’s vision of America as haven for modern Jewish spirituality unites with Noah’s vision of America as the crucible for modern Jewish nationhood.

Lazarus’s cultural outlook was shaped by her Sephardic family background, her direct participation in the culture of American Transcendentalism (a key presence in her early life was Ralph Waldo Emerson), and her nearly pious regard for the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the modern “science” of Jewish learning, imported from Germany.<sup>33</sup> Born into a prosperous family with deep roots in America, Lazarus moved in the world of New York’s Sephardic elite. Her grandfather was president of Shearith Israel from 1846 to 1849, coediting the country’s first English-Hebrew prayer book. Unlike Jews from German-speaking lands, she had no connection with Reform Judaism and its denationalizing campaign, which she came to see as an offense to the reality of Jewish experience. She embraced the view of Hebrew culture in medieval Spain as a golden age and as her direct cultural lineage (part of her poetic apprenticeship involved translations of Judah ha-Levi, Ibn Gabirol, and others). Like writers linked with other movements of national consciousness building, she saw her work as a recapitulation of an earlier moment of cultural glory. Her hopes for an imminent Jewish renaissance were bolstered by her enthusiasm for the Emersonian project of forging an indigenous American culture. Inspired by Emerson’s call to create a poetry answerable to the American present, Lazarus reinterpreted this as a mandate to provide a foundation for a renewed sense of Jewish nationhood.

At the same time, Lazarus’s education in Jewish history occurred under the auspices of the Prussian-born Gustav Gottheil, who immigrated to America in 1873 to serve as Temple Emanuel’s rabbi. Gottheil inspired her to study Hebrew and Jewish history and exposed her to the approaches of German historiography. Central to this approach was the notion that Judaism contained a single idea, which in Hegelian fashion develops under different forms throughout history before being finally brought to maturity. Thus for Lazarus the Jewish people were not some static entity that had achieved greatness in the past; they were instead defined by an underlying spirit (i.e., *Geist*) that would reach an expressive fullness in the modern world. This notion of a Jewish nation formed through a history of struggle would provide the great theme of her poetry.

Beginning in the early 1880s, when the outbreak of anti-Jewish violence across Russia brought the “Jewish question” palpably to life for American Jews,

Lazarus devoted herself to celebrating Jewish heroism and galvanizing a sense of collective purpose among American Jews. She also became deeply involved in philanthropic work on behalf of the persecuted Jews of Russia, joining with a group of wealthy New York Jews to form the Society for the Improvement and Colonization of East European Jewry. In a reprise of Mordecai Noah's earlier efforts, they hoped to resolve the crisis now facing Russian Jewry by purchasing land in Palestine for the purpose of resettlement. Lazarus's poems from this period included hagiographic works about Bar Kochba and Rashi, a long narrative poem based on a fifteenth-century epistle from a loyal Jew to a converted Jew, a verse tragedy about medieval Jewish martyrdom, translations of Spanish Hebrew poets, and broad reflections on the Jewish soul. These poems typically envision Jewish history in the Old World as a relentless struggle amid brutal oppression, a tragic existence that belies the grandeur of Israel, who has served as bearers of God's truth. In "The Choice" (1884), for example, the poet associates the fate of Israel with a "narrow track" along an "abysmal verge" where "all men shall hate and hound thee and thy seed."<sup>34</sup> At the same time it is to Israel that God has placed "my lamp for light." The identical image appears in "Gifts" (1883), where "the Hebrew" is described as leading a life opposed to the idols of the pagan world – "cursed, hated, spurned" and yet "immortal through the lamp within his hand."<sup>35</sup> Numerous poems use stridently martial language to describe an imminent rebirth of Israel. In "The Banner of the Jew" (1882), she calls out to Israel to "Recall to-day / The glorious Maccabean rage."<sup>36</sup> Insisting that Israel's "ancient strength remains unbent," she yearns to see it manifest itself again as of yore: "Oh for Jerusalem's trumpet now, / To blow a blast of shattering power."<sup>37</sup> The antagonist in these poems remains unspecified; more important is their basic narrative structure moving from oppression to triumphant release.

Lazarus also wrote numerous prose works during this period, including a series of fifteen articles published between 1882 and 1883 under the title *An Epistle to the Hebrews*. Drawn from a New Testament work traditionally attributed to Paul, this title underscores Lazarus's sense of her own project as that of galvanizing a new consciousness, a new dispensation, for American Jews. Like both Noah and Wise, Lazarus sees America not merely as refuge but as a nation whose deep purpose corresponds to the spirit of Israel. It is revealing that when she wrote "The New Colossus" (1883) for a fund-raiser to build a pedestal for the Statue of Liberty, she used the very same image of the lamp in her most famous lines to represent the promise held out by America to newly arrived immigrants: "Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, / I lift my light beside the golden door."<sup>38</sup> America, which is metonymically presented

through the Statue of Liberty, appears in a similar guise to Israel's: Both stand opposed to the benighted Old World; both embody the divine will to bring righteousness.

Lazarus's most sustained effort to weave the destiny of the Jews into American history occurs in the last work to be published during her lifetime, a cycle of seven poems entitled *By the Waters of Babylon: Little Poems in Prose* (1887). The first poem, "The Exodus," begins with the expulsion from Spain, narrated as a collective trauma that in effect creates the Jewish nation as a unified body: "Noble and abject, learned and simple, illustrious and obscure, plod side by side, all brother now, merged in one routed army of misfortune."<sup>39</sup> This scene rehearses the departure from Egypt of a "mixed multitude" that over the course of their desert wanderings will become the consolidated people of Israel. Just as Lazarus's "despairing exiles" are leaving Spain, the "world-unveiling Genoese" is departing on his voyage to discover America, heralding Israel's future liberation. Here the figure of Columbus, another metonym for America, has displaced the figure of Moses as the agent of national redemption.

Finally, the poem envisions the rejuvenation of the Jewish people in the American heartland, figured as an Arcadian paradise: "The herdsmen of Canaan and the seed of Jerusalem's royal shepherd renew their youth amid the pastoral plains of Texas and the golden valleys of the Sierra."<sup>40</sup> This rebirth appears as a collaborative project: America provides a setting for the revival of Jewish strength, which is also represented as a welling up from the depths of Jewish history. The poem's final section represents this as a sublime breakthrough:

Long, long has the Orient-Jew spun around his helplessness the cunningly  
enmeshed web of Talmud and Kabbala. . . .

But when the emancipating springtide breathes wholesome, quickening  
airs . . . lo, the Soul of Israel bursts her cobweb sheath, and flies forth in the  
winged beauty of immortality.<sup>41</sup>

Lazarus's language recalls Wise's Reform agenda, adding a host of metaphors distinguishing the Judaism of the past from the glorious American present: The Talmud and the Kabbala are textual accretions that must be cast away so that the pure "Soul of Israel" can be liberated; the cunning, aged, and orientalized Jew has transformed within the space of the poem into a youthful angelic figure. Even as Lazarus's proto-Zionist work and her repeated claims to speak for "the Jewish nation" identify different political and social priorities than Wise's, both construct triumphant visions of

America as the site of Jewish fulfillment, a process that is seen as a spiritual purification.

### Conclusion

We might characterize the discourse whose origin we have traced here as “American Jewish dispensationalism”: America is cast as a dramatic new phase in the long duree of Jewish history, when something imagined as the underlying truth of Judaism will emerge. While the terminology that defines this discourse is shot through with providential language of contemporaneous evangelical Christianity, in Jewish hands this language is more typically directed toward more secular ends: It emphasizes self-realization within American social and political life rather than in a spiritualized future. For both Noah and Lazarus, an engagement with the idea of America ultimately leads to a renewed sense of the importance of Jewish nationhood, which translates into proto-Zionist activities. The view of America as somehow allied with particularistic Jewish ends is dependent on a reading of America as *ethos* rather than *ethnos*. It is possible for Lazarus to imagine that “the Soul of Israel” will find its natural place in America because America is seen as an outgrowth of biblical religion: According to this conceit, Jews have been proto-Americans throughout history and America is but an outgrowth of Judaism.

By the end of the nineteenth century, waves of Jewish and other immigrants combined with an economic downturn led to a backlash against newcomers of all kinds (and, often, Jews in particular), so that it would become increasingly difficult to maintain this view of an American-Jewish symbiosis. The antiimmigration movement known as nativism, which combined populist and elite elements, began to assert that America was and had been for generations a land belonging to one people: white Protestant Anglo-Saxons.<sup>42</sup> This view was typically bolstered by implicit or explicit biological theories. Crevecoeur had spoken of Americans as a “new race of men,” but this language was now tinged with a greater sense of biological determinism than he could have meant it in his pre-Darwinian century. In this new context it would become more difficult to sustain the Jewish dispensationalist view of America, the idea that a new era had dawned for Jews that would also restore them to their origins as a people. Or, more precisely, when this kind of view was set forth, as it was quite powerfully in Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land* (1912), for example, it has a new implicitly polemical thrust. Noah, Wise, and Lazarus can all blithely assert that the Jewish vision and the American vision are complementary (if

not identical). They can also affirm that America will therefore play a decisive role in the unfolding of Jewish life, particularly in its modernization. But from the 1890s onward, those who make these kinds of claims are implicitly arguing against those who reject them. By focusing on the period before the nativist backlash and before the rise of theories of biological determinism, we can see the formation of a distinctly American Jewish rhetoric that will endure, even as it comes to represent a position that must be strenuously defended. In the glorious visions of Mordecai Noah, Isaac Meyer Wise, and Emma Lazarus, as in those moments in subsequent American Jewish culture when their rhetoric resurfaces, we see an America that represents an ideal, a promise of Jewish self-determination and fulfillment.

### Notes

- 1 For a useful recent discussion of attitudes toward emancipation, see Israel Bartal, "Messianism and Nationalism: Liberal Optimism vs. Orthodox Anxiety." *Jewish History* 20:1 (2006): 5–17.
- 2 For a collection of essays on the question of American Jewish exceptionalism see, *Why Is America Different?: American Jewry on Its 350th Anniversary*, ed. Steven Katz (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 2010). See also, Tony Michels, "'Is America 'Different?': A Critique of American Jewish Exceptionalism." *American Jewish History* 96:3 (September 2010): 201–224.
- 3 For an insightful reading of Jewish engagements with the Idea of America, particularly during the period of the East European immigration, see chapter 5, Eli Lederhendler, *Jewish Responses to Modernity: New Voices in America and Eastern Europe* (New York: New York University Press, 1993).
- 4 See *The Idea of America: A Reassessment of the American Experiment*, ed. E. M. Adams (Cambridge: Ballinger, 1977). For a tendentious promotion of the American ethos, see David Gelernter, *Americanism: The Fourth Great Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).
- 5 Jacob Rader Marcus, *The Jew in the American World: A Sourcebook* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 77.
- 6 Ralph Barton Perry, *Puritanism and Democracy* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1944); Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 7 Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," [1958] in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).
- 8 *The Federalist*, No. XIV (James Madison), ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1911), 81.
- 9 For a discussion of the ways Puritan millennialism reappeared in nineteenth-century American thought, see Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).
- 10 Hector St. John De Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, ed. W. P. Trent and an introduction by Ludwig Lewisohn (New York: Fox, Duffield, 1904), 55.

- 11 See Yosef Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982); and Arnold Eisen, *Rethinking Jewish Modernity: Ritual, Commandment, Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- 12 For the most thorough biographical information on Noah, see Jonathan Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* (Teaneck, NJ: Holmes & Meier, 1981). An indispensable source for the study of Noah's own writings is *The Selected Writings of Mordecai Noah*, ed. Michael Schuldiner and Daniel J. Kleinfeld (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999). For recent studies of Noah in the contexts of Jewish literature and American culture, see Michael Weingrad, *American Hebrew Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011) and Rachel Rubinstein, *Members of the Tribe: Native America in the Jewish Imagination* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010).
- 13 See Schuldiner and Kleinfeld.
- 14 See Sarna. For a discussion of Noah's project in the backdrop of Jewish history in Buffalo, see Selig Adler, *From Ararat to Suburbia: The History of the Jewish Community of Buffalo* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1960).
- 15 See Sarna.
- 16 Schuldiner and Kleinfeld, 112.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid., 107.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid., 118.
- 21 Ibid., 113.
- 22 Ibid., 112.
- 23 Ibid., 113.
- 24 See Michael Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995); and Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism*, 2nd rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
- 25 Jacob Rader Marcus, *The Jew in the American World: A Source Book* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 382.
- 26 Max B. May, *Isaac Mayer Wise: The Founder of American Judaism: A Biography* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1916), 41.
- 27 Isaac Mayer Wise. "The Convert," *Israelite* 1:1 (1854). (Serialized over five issues.)
- 28 Isaac Mayer Wise, *Reminiscences* (Cincinnati: Leo Wise and Company, 1901), 267. See also Michael P. Kramer, "Beginnings and Ends: The Origins of Jewish American Literary History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael P. Kramer, 25 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 29 Isaac Mayer Wise, "The Convert," *Israelite* 1:5 (1854): 3.
- 30 Isaac Mayer Wise, "The Fourth of July, 1858," in *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Jules Chametsky, et al. (New York: Norton, 2001), 84.
- 31 Ibid., 86.
- 32 Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).
- 33 For biographical information on Lazarus, see Esther Schor, *Emma Lazarus* (New York: Schocken Books, 2006); Bette Roth Young, *Emma Lazarus in Her World: Life and Letters* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995); and Diane Lichtenstein, *Writing Their Nations: The Traditions of Nineteenth-Century American Jewish Women Writers*

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). See also Julian Levinson, *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

- 34 Emma Lazarus, *Selected Poems and Other Writings*, ed. Gregory Eiselein (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2002), 265.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 241.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 182.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 183.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 233.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 242.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 245.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 247.
- 42 John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism (1860–1925)* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955).

## Immigration and Modernity 1900–1945

WERNER SOLLORS

### From American Strangeness to Familiarity

In an 1898 sketch, “Imagined America,” Abraham Cahan describes his vision of America as a “luxuriant many-colored meadow, with swarms of tall people hurrying hither and thither on narrow footpaths. They were all young and beardless and all men.”<sup>1</sup> Seeing Staten Island confirms his image of America as a meadow, yet Cahan remains struck by the “unreality of things.” “The ice here is not cold, . . . the sugar is not sweet and the water is not wet,” he tells himself. When he sees a cat he rejoices, “They have cats here! . . . And just like ours, too!” Yet soon he wonders whether the cat was just “a mechanical imitation of one,” for he expects that there might be “artificial dogs and artificial cats” in America. Similarly he suspects that a Christian missionary might not be “a genuine man,” for the froglike way he pronounces the American R. For the Russian- and Yiddish-speaking immigrant from Lithuania, everything American seems “artificial, flimsy, ephemeral, as if a good European rain-storm could wipe it all off as a wet sponge would a colored picture made with colored chalk on a blackboard.”

“America is not Russia”<sup>2</sup> became the formula for Jewish migrants to make sense of a world divided between the familiar place of birth and the strange place of arrival. Cahan’s beardless men suggest religious pressures that made Jewish migrants change appearance and customs, while the missionary’s guttural R that Cahan cannot imitate points to linguistic obstacles.

In 1952, *Partisan Review* ran the symposium “Our Country, Our Culture.” In the aftermath of World War II, when artists could “no longer depend fully on Europe as a cultural example and a source of vitality,” the editors wondered whether a “reaffirmation and rediscovery of America” was under way.<sup>3</sup> Jewish intellectuals who responded generally adopted an American point of view, and only David Riesman referred to Jews. While “Germans, Frenchmen, and Jews can testify that it is hard to detach one’s loyalties from a weak, threatened,

or defeated nation," Riesman wrote, "it is perhaps even harder to attach one's loyalties to a newly powerful one." Leslie Fiedler's comment that "there is no better place for the artist than America" was more representative.<sup>4</sup>

In the first half of the twentieth century the strange New World became a more familiar home to Jewish migrants, a process called "assimilation." The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines assimilation as the "action of making or becoming like; the state of being like; similarity, resemblance, likeness."<sup>5</sup> To what extent can a reading of selected major works by Jewish American writers from Mary Antin to Isaac Rosenfeld illuminate this growing "likeness"? And can one imagine an alternative literary history? These are the questions the following pages will address.

### First-Person-Singular Narratives of Migration and Assimilation

*Mary Antin (1881–1949)*

Immigrant narratives represent the process of migration and assimilation and help to give shape to an individual's transformation. The classic American text that gave life to the underlying "from . . . to" formula was Mary Antin's autobiography, *The Promised Land* (1912), offering a vivid account of her transformation from early life in Polotzk (now Belarus) to her adolescent and adult years in Boston, including the Dover Street ghetto. Having completed her manuscript when she was only thirty years old, she begins her book dramatically:

I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over. Is it not time to write my life's story? I am just as much out of the way as if I were dead, for I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell. . . . I could speak in the third person and not feel that I was masquerading. I can analyze my subject, I can reveal everything; for *she*, and not *I*, is my real heroine.<sup>6</sup>

Antin's dance with pronouns expresses her life in a doubled world. The third-person-singular *she* spoke Yiddish and belonged to a world defined by faith and family. The first-person-singular *I* is a modern individual who writes in (often quite beautiful) English. As a girl, *she* did not have access to a full Jewish education. As a Jew, *she* was fearful of Russian pogroms and the power of the czar. *I*, on the other hand, benefited from America's public educational system and the democratic country's offer of extending citizenship to immigrants. Appropriately, *The Promised Land* consists of a Russian and an American section. Driving home their dissimilarities, Antin employs the

formula “America is not Polotzk.”<sup>7</sup> She associates Russia with a mediaeval mind-set and America with the modern spirit.

Antin wrote a personal, introspective memoir as well as a book that “speaks for thousands; oh, for thousands!”<sup>8</sup> Antin explains, “All the processes of uprooting, transportation, replanting, acclimatization, and development took place in my own soul. I felt the pang, the fear, the wonder, and the joy.”<sup>9</sup> *The Promised Land* inspired educators and reformers, was used in civics lessons, and became a model for other immigrant writers. Antin recognizes the power she had as a democratic citizen, and it fuels her patriotism. She experiences hardships, caused not only by poverty but also by prejudice. Yet the most dramatic test occurs when her beloved teacher Miss Dillingham serves ham, “forbidden food,” giving Antin “a terrible moment of surprise, mortification, self-contempt.” Antin confesses, “I ate, but only a newly abnegated Jew can understand with what squirming, what protesting of the inner man, what exquisite abhorrence of myself.”<sup>10</sup> She did something that her “inner man” found repulsive.

Antin originally wrote the lively account of her 1894 transatlantic voyage in Yiddish and addressed it to an uncle.<sup>11</sup> She then translated and adapted the letter for publication in her first book, *From Plotzk to Boston* (1899) (a “from . . . to” title that misspelled the name of her birthplace), addressed to a philanthropic American Jewish audience. Antin adjusted the text yet another time for inclusion in *The Promised Land*, now appealing to a general, non-Jewish American reader. The textual changes in these three versions embody the transition that Antin underwent and the parallel changing presentation of her own self.

Antin looks at migrants like her as “the strands of the cable that binds the Old World to the New.”<sup>12</sup> Having made the shift from Yiddish to English, Antin plays the role of a mediator and translator and offers English explanations as appositions in the text (“a *yeshibah bahur* – a student in the seminary”) and in footnotes (she defines *mezuzah* as “a piece of parchment inscribed with a passage of Scripture, rolled in a case and tacked to the doorpost”).<sup>13</sup> She appends a substantial glossary of terms, for example: “Earlocks (Hebrew *peath*). Two locks of hair allowed to grow long and hang in front of the ears. Among the fanatical Hasidim, a mark of piety.”<sup>14</sup> Antin leaves some words untranslated, such as *schwimmen* or *Zukrochene Flum*, mentions a “buzzing sound to the dreadful English *th*” that a schoolteacher could not eradicate, and indicates that, despite her unequivocal love of English, her origins left traces in her pronunciation: “I learned at least to think in English without an accent.”<sup>15</sup>

Antin writes about her family as “frightened pilgrims from Polotzk” and claims that her upward route from “the tenements of the stifling alleys to a

darling cottage of our own . . . was surveyed by the Pilgrim Fathers.”<sup>16</sup> Antin was criticized for telling an American success story; thus Michael Gold called her a “bright slum parvenu.”<sup>17</sup> A century later, her autobiography could be read in tandem with her self-deprecating self-description in a 1926 letter to her publisher. By then her marriage to Amadeus Grabau, a Lutheran German American paleontologist, a love marriage to which she only alluded in *The Promised Land*, had ended. Her lectures in support of an open-door immigration policy had proved futile, and she had suffered a nervous breakdown: “Seldom has an author created so much of a flurry by such a meager literary performance,” she wrote about herself.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps she had simply published her autobiography too early in her life.

### *Abraham Cahan (1860–1951)*

Sometimes, when I think of my past in a superficial, casual way, the metamorphosis I have gone through strikes me as nothing short of a miracle. I was born and reared in the lowest depths of poverty and I arrived in America – in 1885 – with four cents in my pocket. I am now worth more than two million dollars and recognized as one of the two or three leading men in the cloak-and-suit trade in the United States.<sup>19</sup>

Thus begins Abraham Cahan’s best-known novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), in which Cahan plays with the first-person-singular and success-story format of the immigrant autobiography, transforming it into a fictional account. The Russian Jewish protagonist and narrator from the Lithuanian town of Antomir (then a part of Russia) shares many experiences with his author while also becoming a ruthless capitalist entrepreneur who stands in nearly complete antithesis to everything that his socialist-reformist creator cherished. Whereas Cahan wrote critical comments on exploitation in the socialist press, Levinsky is excoriated as a “fleecer of labor” in the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* – but feels, after an initially indignant reaction, grateful since “The same organ assailed the Vanderbilts, the Goulds, the Rothschilds, and by calling me ‘a fleecer of labor’ it placed me in their class. I felt in good company.”<sup>20</sup>

David Levinsky leaves Russia after his mother is killed in an Easter Sunday pogrom while protecting David. On New York’s Lower East Side David soon dons American clothes, cuts off his side locks, and sports a “modern” look. He barely recognizes himself in the mirror: “It was as though the hair-cut and the American clothes had changed my identity.”<sup>21</sup> In America, he not only assimilates but also mass-produces the “ready-made” clothes that help so many others to assimilate. Yet despite his “rise,” his business victory over

the German Jewish establishment, Levinsky never feels completely at home in America.

Levinsky's attitude toward English alternates between repulsion and attraction. He regards some English words (such as "satisfaction," "think," and "because") as so obnoxious that his strong reaction facilitates his memorization.<sup>22</sup> David hears the phrase "all right" so often that he guesses the meaning from context. As the first bit of English David acquires, "all right" appears more than thirty times in the novel. Cahan's narrator comments on his own mistakes and his tendency to fall into a Talmudic singsong when speaking English. He makes more than a hundred references to incomplete linguistic assimilation in other characters, such as mispronunciations and language mixing: For example, Mrs. Margolis takes "pains to produce the 'th' and the American 'r,' though her 'w's were 'v's."<sup>23</sup> Readers have noticed a certain stilted quality in Cahan's own diction that might be attributed to his own lingering unfamiliarity with idiomatic English.<sup>24</sup> Like Antin, Cahan offers translations of Jewish terms, though he gives the English meaning first, as in "a school for religious instruction or *cheder*."<sup>25</sup>

The notion of falling "in love" appears as part of America's strangeness to Levinsky, who, after multiple courtships, ends up lonely at the end: "To be 'in love' with a girl who was an utter stranger to you was something unseemly, something which only Gentiles or 'modern' Jews might indulge in."<sup>26</sup> Levinsky's uniformly ill-fated courtships highlight his inability to strike up a lasting relationship. "There is always something!" as Leslie Fiedler comments on the impediments to Levinsky's search for the right woman, which makes the novel also a story of failed love.<sup>27</sup>

The migrant's divided world separates his life into the times before and after migration. Cahan expresses this sentiment when he writes, "The day of an immigrant's arrival in his new home is like a birthday to him. Indeed, it is more apt to claim his attention and to warm his heart than his real birthday."<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, Levinsky celebrates the twenty-fifth anniversary of his landing with his shipmate Gitelson. However, Levinsky realizes that the gap between him and Gitelson, who has remained a poor tailor, has become so unbridgeable that Levinsky's ostentatious largesse at the Waldorf Astoria does nothing but embarrass Gitelson. Levinsky is revolted by Gitelson, both feel awkward in front of the hotel waiter, and afterward his heart is heavy with "self-disgust and sadness."<sup>29</sup> One of the last "episodes of a lonely life" (the title of the last book of the novel), it reveals that Levinsky sees his life as a tragic failure and regards himself as a "victim of circumstance." Though he has become an atheist, a successful American businessman, and a member of a fashionable

German American synagogue, he finds, with nostalgia, that “David, the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher’s Synagogue” in Antomir, “seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well-known cloak-manufacturer” in New York.<sup>30</sup> Antin’s *Promised Land* started with the divided world of Russia and ended on a note of unified fulfillment in America; Cahan’s *Levinsky* inverts this process and shows the successfully assimilated protagonist reminiscing about his lost Old World identity.

*Anzia Yeziarska (1880–1970)*

Anzia Yeziarska’s *Bread Givers* (1925) continues the genre of first-person-singular immigrant narratives.<sup>31</sup> Like Antin, the narrator identifies with American beginnings: “I felt like the pilgrim fathers who had left their homelands . . . and trailed out in search of the New World.”<sup>32</sup> Sara seems animated by a direct authorial investment, close to Yeziarska’s ego myth. The novel inserts a few non-English – mostly Yiddish – words here and there, including *Nu, Ach!*, *yok*, *gazlin*, and *gefülte fish*, without explanations. Occasionally, the sense of a Yiddish original shines through the prose, as if one were reading a literal translation. This is the case when characters speak directly (“Give only a look on the saleslady”) and in Sara’s own narrative voice: “But from always it was heavy on my heart the worries for the house as if I was mother.”<sup>33</sup>

Unlike Antin’s Polotzk or Levinsky’s Antomir, Yeziarska’s place of birth and childhood, *Maly Plock*, in Russian Poland, does not become a fleshed out site of memory. When asked what she remembers of Poland, Sara answers, “Nothing – nothing at all. Back of me, it’s like black night.”<sup>34</sup> Hester Street serves as stand-in for the Old World, and the dualism of two worlds within one person turns into the generational conflict the book names in its subtitle: *A Struggle between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New*.

Reb Moishe Smolinsky, Sara’s father, embodies the Old World; he keeps studying the Talmud and does not work for a living. Sara’s mother, Shenah, wishes she were a widow, for people would then pity her rather than “think I got a bread giver when what I have is a stone giver.”<sup>35</sup> The father wants to arrange financially advantageous marriages for his four daughters. The Smolinsky girls Bessie, Mashah, and Fania agree to their father’s disastrous schemes rather than marrying the men they love. But rebellious Sara exaggeratedly views her father as “a tyrant more terrible than the Tsar from Russia.”<sup>36</sup> (Sara’s father also draws a political analogy in giving Sara the German nickname *Blut-und-Eisen*, alluding to Bismarck’s “iron and blood” strategy to achieve German unity.)<sup>37</sup>

Sara refuses to enter the kind of marriage her sisters did: “No! No one from Essex or Hester Street for me. . . . I’d want an American-born man who was his own boss. And would let me be my boss.”<sup>38</sup> Sara turns down a marriage proposal by a wealthy suitor for the reason that “it wasn’t the real love.”<sup>39</sup> She goes her own way, attends college to get a teacher’s degree, and becomes independent. Sara tells her father, “I’m going to live my own life. Nobody can stop me. I’m not from the old country. I’m American!”<sup>40</sup> Her father declares her dead to the family: “May your name and your memory be blotted out from this earth.”<sup>41</sup> She later also defies Jewish law when her mother dies by not tearing her garment as a sign of grief.<sup>42</sup>

One does not have to match the four Smolinsky daughters to Tzeitl, Hodl, Chava, and Beilke, to read *Bread Givers* as a rewriting of Sholem Aleichem’s *Teveye the Dairyman*.<sup>43</sup> But there the father, Teveye, narrates, whereas Yeziarska lets Sara tell the story. At first, therefore, Sara’s father appears like the tyrant his rebellious daughter sees in him. When Reb Smolinsky is finally reduced to peddling wares on a pushcart he laments that his daughters leave him in his old age, “as they left King Lear – broken – forgotten.”<sup>44</sup> The reference to Lear may seem far-fetched, but Sara does resemble Cordelia, the daughter who cares most for her father. “A longing to see Father came over me,” Sara tells the reader, and her father will not have to end with Lear’s howl.<sup>45</sup>

Sara’s marital choice, Hugo Seelig (the surname means “blessed” and evokes *Seele*, or soul), can see the world from both perspectives. Seelig asked Sara what she remembers of Poland, and in contrast with her, he still has a few memories: “The mud hut where we lived, the cows, the chickens, and all of us living in one room. I remember the dark, rainy morning we started on our journey, how the whole village, old and young, turned out to say good-bye.”<sup>46</sup> In this brief account the Old World setting has shrunk to a departure scene. Still, the “wonderful discovery” that Sara and Seelig are from the same “government” in Poland makes her rejoice that they have “sprung from one soil,” are “of one blood,” and are “*Landsleute* – countrymen!”<sup>47</sup> Happily, Seelig is also a boss – he serves as a principal at the school where Sara teaches Jewish children to lose their Yiddish accent and assimilate to an English-speaking world.

At the end father and daughter reunite. As if she had not earlier questioned this very notion, Sara asks her reader, “Can a tree hate the roots from which it sprang? Deeper than love, deeper than pity, is that oneness of the flesh that’s in him and in me.”<sup>48</sup> Seelig’s readiness to take Hebrew lessons astonishes Smolinsky, softening the old man’s belief that in America “Jewishness is no Jewishness.”<sup>49</sup> Sara and Seelig invite her father to stay with them, and as the

old man chants, “Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble” from the Book of Job, Sara ends the narrative: “But I felt the shadow still there, over me. It wasn’t just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me.”<sup>50</sup>

Yezierska’s autobiographically inspired mode of writing makes most of her works “somewhat similar.”<sup>51</sup> Her ego-myth centers on recurrent themes: growing up in poverty; breaking with the patriarchal religious orthodoxy of a father figure; falling in love with an idealized man; achieving success and fame but snobbishly being unable to enjoy it; and suffering from loneliness and feeling a powerful nostalgia for the *gemeinschaftly* ghetto. Yezierska’s fiction is often read biographically, and *Bread Givers* has therefore been faulted for the absence of Yezierska’s brothers; her autobiography, on the other hand, is considered fictionalized.<sup>52</sup> While she has been praised for sounding a fresh voice, she clearly also aimed for the popular vein of feuilleton romances that draw on easily readable clichés. Readers of *Bread Givers* will have to judge whether the remarkable translated effect of sentences like “Hugo’s red roses on my table – almost I could have wept for them” will prevail over such subliterary ones as “Every drop of blood seemed to leave my heart”; “I sighed with happiness”; or “Mother’s dying eyes rose before me.”<sup>53</sup>

#### Samuel Ornitz (1890–1957)

*Haunch, Paunch and Jowl: An Anonymous Autobiography* (1923) is a first-person-singular narrative told by a cynical, corrupt, Tammany Hall-connected, and overweight judge named Meyer Hirsch. Meyer’s belly and double chin make him the target of socialist caricature and give him the nickname that serves as the novel’s title.<sup>54</sup> The American-born author Samuel Ornitz, a son of immigrants from Russian Poland, withheld his name from the published novel. The historical setting in the 1890s gives Ornitz an opportunity to sound sensationalist themes with a mildly modernist accent. The triple-period indicating elision “...” appears more than fifteen hundred times, contributing to the breathless, hurried quality of the writing that has been taken for stream-of-consciousness prose. With epigraphs from Montaigne, Rousseau, and Henry Adams, the book promises the reader a confession – “I want to tell everything” – but immediately reneges on that promise by adding, “even if I tell pathological lies the truth will shine out like grains of gold in the upturned muck.”<sup>55</sup> *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl* is a mock-autobiography.

Born in steerage on a transatlantic ship and milk-fed by a goat (which is why his mother calls him *ziegelle*), Meyer can remember only as far back as the

Lower East Side and his Ludlow Street gang of youngsters. Ornitz explains Yiddish terms parenthetically, even, quite annoyingly, in direct speech. Thus his mentor, Uncle Philip, tells Meyer: “Speak to me *momme loschen* (mother tongue) not that nasty gibberish of the streets,” English.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, Meyer makes clear that “Yiddish, the lingo of greenhorns, was held in contempt by the Ludlow Streeters who felt mightily their Americanism.”<sup>57</sup> Ornitz also provides parenthetical translations of underworld slang, like “‘roll a lush’ (rob a drunken man),” “‘stick up’ (highway robbery),” “‘open a big safe with ‘soup’ (nitroglycerine),” or “‘fix’ (bribe) cops and judges.”<sup>58</sup> Meyer explains “allrightniks”: “The newly rich Russian, Galician, Polish and Roumanian Jews have squeezed out the German Jews and their Gentile neighbors. Great elevator apartment structures are being put up to house the clamoring *Allrightniks*.”<sup>59</sup>

Ornitz made fun of the clichéd “from . . . to” narrative, “From Wretches to Riches,” as an “anarchist with a weakness for puns” puts it.<sup>60</sup> Meyer looks at the generational divide between “street gamins” and “old-world parents” in transatlantic terms: “an ocean separated us.”<sup>61</sup> Uncle Philip (whose father, Meyer’s grandfather, was a “clever horse thief” in Europe) tells Meyer, “We’ve got nothing to look back to. It’s up to us to be ancestors.”<sup>62</sup> Meyer reports a political speech, “a hair-raising recital of the horrors of Jewish persecution in Russia that splashed vitriolic denunciations upon the Tsar and his government as being officially responsible for the pogroms.”<sup>63</sup> Such Old World stories aim only at securing electoral votes.

The novel fans out to a panoramic mode, and figures keep reappearing from childhood gang times to life on Riverside Drive, or “Allrightniks Row.” Different characters articulate inflammatory opinions on Jews. The socialist Simon Gordin, for example, echoes William Z. Ripley’s argument that Jews are not a race but the “composite people of the world” with whom they have intermingled. “Jews are not Jews. They are Germans, Russians, Britons, Italians, Turks, Africans, and so on.”<sup>64</sup> The Harvard-trained Lionel Crane, né Lazarus Cohen, who specializes in “race psychopathology,” maintains that the Jew’s “outlandish ways and attire, his beards and ear-locks,” his “maddening belief” in being “the chosen of the One and Only God,” mark him as “always the repellent foreigner awakening unpleasant associations.”<sup>65</sup> The American Jew misses the chance of demonstrating that he is not “the grasping, merciless, self-centred Shylock” or Dickens’s Fagin (out of whose name Ornitz creates an -ism). Crane criticizes Jews for importing “Old World ways of gaining a livelihood” that may have been excusable there. “But here, in America, shall we condone usury, faginism, receiving stolen goods, corrupting officials,

procuring, brothel-keeping, sharp-dealing, legitimatizing the cheating and over-charging of Gentiles, labor-sweating?”<sup>66</sup>

The atheist Avrum Toledo gives a campaign speech in which he argues, “Jewish ways made it easy for the Russian *agents-provocateur* to inflame the peasants,” who “find themselves systematically cheated and impoverished by the wily Jewish traders.” Avrum says, “We know the Government inspires the outrages,” but then he asks: “How about the people whom it is so easy to incite against our people? Have we wronged them in any way? Where is our fault, in what way do we help along the happening of pogroms!”<sup>67</sup> Of course, Avrum loses the electoral campaign, is nearly lynched, is accused of “justifying – justifying pogroms!,” and, as a Sephardic Jew, is loathed as a “Spaniard.”<sup>68</sup>

Ornitz imagines Jewish assimilation in America not only as becoming similar to Anglo-Americans (or German Jews) but also as cultural blending in music.<sup>69</sup> At the Rathskeller, Sam Rakowsky and Al Wolff play an Irish jig and suddenly “slip into a Jewish wedding *kazzatzka* (Russian-Jewish lively dance)” to an enthusiastic crowd.<sup>70</sup> The mixing with African American music surpasses this blend, for as Meyer puts it: “Ragtime has the whole country jogging. From the World’s Fair in Chicago it sent syncopated waves bounding across the length and breadth of the land. The negroes had given America its music. Soon the white man started stealing the negro’s music and making it his own.”<sup>71</sup> Urged “to make use of the negro plantation, levee and spiritual songs with their pulsating African rhythm and ornament them with Semitic colors and figures,” Al and Sam create ragtime hits and become immensely rich in a song-publishing enterprise.<sup>72</sup> The verb “jazz” emerges: “Whenever they appropriated a melody or strain they simply jazzed it up into one of their syncopated hodgepodes.”<sup>73</sup> Meyer comments, “And their music became the music of America, and its leading motive was always the throbbing African rhythm.”<sup>74</sup>

Such passages may be Ornitz’s freshest contribution to American Jewish literature. Antin mentions comb music in Polotzk, where she knew “the polka and the waltz, the mazurka, the quadrille, and the lancers,” and she represents one brief African American encounter in *The Promised Land*; Levinsky encounters no single black character, and the dances he mentions are mostly waltzes; Yeziarska has Sara’s mother remember “dancing the *kozatzkeh*” in Poland and gives Sara one evening in a Manhattan club, where “drunk with the fiery rhythm of jazz,” Sara loses “herself in the mad joy of the crowd.”<sup>75</sup> Ornitz gives full stage to the African American-inflected music scene and the vocabulary of jazz, ragtime, and “syncopated hodgepodes.”

*Michael Gold (1894–1967)*

Unlike Ornitz, the American-born Michael Gold loathed ragtime and jazz. Instead he believed in “conversion to Socialism” as his version of Jewish assimilation.<sup>76</sup> Gold’s *Jews without Money* (1930), more “an unstructured memoir than a novel,” is a first-person-singular narrative of twenty-two somewhat chronologically arranged vignettes.<sup>77</sup> In two segments the narrator’s father tells the story of his immigrating to America; he left Romania after he scandalously refused to go through with a marriage his parents had arranged, whereupon his father told him: “Go, infidel, and eat the bread of sorrow and shame in America. I am no longer your father.”<sup>78</sup> In the rest of the book the narrator himself dominates. The novel begins, “I can never forget the East Side Street where I lived as a boy.”<sup>79</sup> Gold clearly invites the reader to think of narrator and protagonist as the same “Mike Gold” and arranges episodes in his life from his fifth birthday to age twelve. Despite the fact that Gold was born Itzok Isaac Granich, published under the name Irwin Granich, and only in his twenties adopted the pen name “Michael Gold,” his child protagonist goes by “Mechel,” “Mike,” or “Mikey.”<sup>80</sup> Fictionalization further appears in the substantial revisions Gold undertook of previously published material. He intensified the melodramatic effect upon the reader while reducing any sense of guilt of the narrator.<sup>81</sup>

Like his predecessors starting with Mary Antin (whom Gold loathed but to whom he owed much), Gold offers numerous translations and explanations for a presumably Christian audience. Gold italicizes Yiddish, Hebrew, German, and Romanian words like *chaidex*, *goy*, *mezuzah*, and *gefulte fish* and explains them by apposition or by context.<sup>82</sup> When Gold resorts to a Christian baseline, one wonders what the Yiddish or Hebrew translator did with a simile like the following: “The Jewish holidays were fascinating to children. It was like having a dozen Christmases during the year.”<sup>83</sup>

Gold explains not just Jewish words, but Jews themselves: “Jews are as individualized as are Chinese or Anglo-Saxons. There are no racial types. My father, for instance, was like a certain kind of Irishman more than the stenciled stage Jew.”<sup>84</sup> He describes Jewish customs in broad generalizations: “Tattooing is forbidden to Jews; the body must be returned to God as He created it.”<sup>85</sup> “Jews are not drunkards; they think it is disgraceful and Christian to be heavy drinkers.” Gold’s narrator states in his authoritatively generalizing voice – even though the protagonist’s father had said a few pages earlier: “I was always fighting and drinking.”<sup>86</sup> As promised by the book’s programmatic title, *Jews without Money*, the narrator also wishes to correct anti-Semitic stereotypes. Gold’s narrator also asserts: “There never were any Jewish gangsters in Europe,” a

claim that would have surprised Ornitz's Philip.<sup>87</sup> Echoing Mary Antin, Gold writes: "The Jews had fled from the European pogroms; ... from a new Egypt into a New Promised Land." Only Gold adds: "They found awaiting them the sweatshops, the bawdy houses and Tammany Hall."<sup>88</sup> Corrupt politicians and ruthless employers have created the trap of poverty in which immigrants find themselves, amid filth and bedbugs, in the Chrystie Street red-light district where Mikey shockingly finds prostitutes commonplace: "The girls winked and jeered, made lascivious gestures at passing males. ... They called their wares like pushcart peddlers. At five years I knew what it was they sold."<sup>89</sup> Gold embellishes what the child saw with paradoxical metaphors: "Earth's trees, grass, flowers could not grow on my street; but the rose of syphilis bloomed by night and by day."<sup>90</sup>

Many forms of violence compose daily life, and Gold describes some incidents graphically. When the protagonist's friend Joey Cohen falls and is killed under a horse car the narrator describes the bystanders picking up "the broken body," without a head. "Later it was discovered under the car, hanging from the bloody axle."<sup>91</sup> Sometimes the communist Gold adds a political point. When Louis One Eye tries to rape the protagonist's beloved aunt Lena and everyone judges him, the narrator comments, "I hate more those who took an East Side boy and turned him into a monster useful to bosses in strikes, and to politicians on election day."<sup>92</sup>

Gold gives the reader snapshots of Lower East Side life, for example, when he describes Moscovitz's restaurant, decorated with a chromo of Theodore Roosevelt at San Juan and a crayon portrait of Theodor Herzl draped with a Zionist flag; the owner plays traditional Rumanian folk tunes (the *doina*) that the vestmaker Mottke considers "better than your American ragtime," for it is "music – not this pah-pah-pah ragtime." Mikey's father agrees, "music of the soul."<sup>93</sup> (Here one could imagine another dialog with Ornitz.)

Assimilation appears in the waning authority of Reb Samuel. A member of his Chassidic congregation takes off his orthodox beard "because in America beards are laughed at" and argues successfully that he has not broken Mosaic law since he did not use scissors or a razor but a "white powder ... that eats away the beard without cutting or shaving."<sup>94</sup> This satirical scene goes along with Gold's reported statement that he was "one of those who only see good in assimilation" and was ready to give up all that "is good in the Jewish tradition in return for a greater good."<sup>95</sup>

*Jews without Money* quite shamelessly employs sentimental strategies, in passages that have been called "mawkish" and full of "schmaltz."<sup>96</sup> For instance, Gold writes, "My humble funny little East Side mother! How can I ever forget

this dark little woman.” The narrator soon turns to apostrophe and a political punch line: “Mother! Momma! . . . I cannot forget you. I must remain faithful to the poor because I cannot be faithless to you! I believe in the poor because I have known you. The world must be made gracious for the poor. Momma, you taught me that.”<sup>97</sup> It sounds as though Gold’s Mikey would walk a million miles for one of Momma’s smiles.

Gothic episodes, political points, and sentimental passages help to prepare the reader for the concluding apostrophe to the workers’ revolution: “You are the true Messiah. You will destroy the East Side when you come, and build there a garden for the human spirit.”<sup>98</sup> After Gold, the vogue of first-person narratives ebbed, then returned in the mid-1940s as a changed genre that would ultimately flourish with Saul Bellow’s 1953 novel *The Adventures of Augie March*.

## Breaking Up the First-Person Narrative

*Henry Roth (1906–1995)*

The year 1934 witnessed an aesthetic revolution in Jewish American fiction with the publication of Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*. While remaining close to the tradition of autobiographically inspired fiction, Roth’s protagonist David Schearl is eight years old at the end of the novel, an age with which autobiographic fiction more likely begins. Roth also discards the sustained first-person-singular format and refracts his novel into different patterns of narration. Yet entering an individual consciousness and exploring the world from the sensory point of view of a fearful immigrant child who begins to wonder about sexuality, death, and family origins render a fuller understanding of David’s mind.

In the “prologue” an informative historical-social narrative voice orients the reader in place (Ellis Island, New York) and time (a Saturday in May 1907, “the year that was destined to bring the greatest number of immigrants to the shores of the United States”). One expects to be in the hands of a knowledgeable and reliable third-person narrator, who soon introduces the Schearls, as Albert meets his arriving wife, Genya, and his son, David. An ominous description of the Statue of Liberty in a rather striking sentence cancels that expectation: “Against the luminous sky the rays of her halo were spikes of darkness roweling is the air; shadow flattened the torch she bore to a black cross against flawless light – the blackened hilt of a broken sword. Liberty.”<sup>99</sup> A Kafkaesque shadow hangs over the Schearls. Sullen Albert doubts that he is David’s father and, in an assimilative gesture, throws David’s embarrassingly old-country hat overboard.

A new narrative voice takes over at the beginning of book one, "The Cellar," and dominates throughout the novel, except in three later chapters. David, who was twenty-two months old in the prologue, is now five. Roth's new third-person narration takes small David's point of view with strikingly beautiful images – the high-up water tap out of reach and Genya, his beloved mother, "tall as a tower."<sup>100</sup> When David leaves the apartment for the dark hallway, he represents the closing of the door with an anthropomorphic simile: "Behind him, like an eyelid shutting, the soft closing of the door winked out the light."<sup>101</sup> Roth describes with alliterating lyricism the sudden return of light when David opens the front door: "A dazzling breaker of sunlight burst over his head, swamped him in reeling blur of brilliance, and then receded." David fears everything: darkness, the cellar, his unsuccessful father's irascibility, Luter's flirting with his mother, and Annie's sexual advance toward him.

David's memory of Europe consists of nothing but weak images and sensory impressions: "Fragments of forgotten rivers floated under the lids, dusty roads, fathomless curve of trees, a branch in a window under flawless light. A world somewhere, somewhere else."<sup>102</sup> Dialogue often appears in direct discourse, and here Roth employs the method of using beautifully phrased, sometimes Yiddish-inflected English when characters are speaking Yiddish (the mother's "lips for me . . . must always be cool as the water that wet them") and terribly accented and at times quite vulgar English when characters use English, as in the boy Yussie's "We usetuh find cigahs innuh gudduh" or his sister Annie's "Put yuh han' in my knish. . . . Jus' once."<sup>103</sup>

David's inner thoughts are expressed in free indirect discourse (sometimes set off by an initial dash), alternating with third-person narration and direct discourse. This method sets in when David sees the cellar door bulging with darkness: He wonders, "Would it hold?" and is relieved: "It held."<sup>104</sup> The method intensifies and reaches a high point when David cannot find his way home ("I'm losted"), and his interior monologues expand.<sup>105</sup> Thus a striking paragraph describes telegraph poles that he addresses as "Mr. High Wood" and ends with a sentence about a cat that "eyed David as he passed." Roth follows this with David's thoughts, first in free indirect discourse ("Milk-supper, maybe, when he came upstairs") and then in present-tense direct speech in which David's "I" appears:

Like it, like it, like it. I – like – it. I like cake but I don't like herring. I like cake, but I don't like what? I like cake, but I don't like, like, like, herring. I don't don't – How far was it still?

The sidewalks were level again.<sup>106</sup>

Blending three modes of narration in seemingly effortless transitions, Roth captures the feeling of a small boy lost in a strange city. The sentences alternate from beautifully sprawling lyrical prose to staccato fragments of lined-up nouns.

In book two, “The Picture,” the family has relocated to Manhattan’s East Side, to a place based on the Roths’ apartment at 749 East 9th Street that the narrator describes laconically, Hemingway-style, distilled from a much longer passage in the manuscript: “There were four rooms in the flat they lived in. There were eight windows. Some faced 9th Street, some faced Avenue D, and one looked out upon the dizzying pit of an airshaft. There was no bathtub.”<sup>107</sup> David overhears conversations between his mother and her comic counterpart, Aunt Bertha, who offers comic relief in off-color and bilingual puns. They talk about Veljish, their Galician hometown in Austrian Poland, which Bertha describes as “still as a fart in company” and mention vague stories about his mother’s scandalous relationship with Ludwig, a Christian organist.<sup>108</sup> David spins this into a growing family-romance fantasy:

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. What did she say before? Benkart, yes, benkart in belly, her father said. What did that mean? He almost knew.<sup>109</sup>

In book three, “The Coal,” David is seven and encounters religion in a fuller way. He goes to cheder, learns Hebrew words (Roth gives no translation) that he incorporates into some of his interior monologues, and thinks about dietary rules: “First you read, adonoi elahenoo abababa, and then you say, And Moses said you mustn’t, and then you read some more abababa and then you say, mustn’t eat in the traife butcher store. Don’t like it anyway. Big brown bags hang down from the hooks. Ham.”<sup>110</sup>

They recite the *chad godya*, and David becomes fascinated by the biblical story of Isaiah’s coal: “– And why did the angel do it? Why did he want to burn Isaiah’s mouth with coal? He said, You’re clean. But coal makes smoke and ashes. . . . – With a zwank, he said it was . . . Wonder if Isaiah hollered when the coal touched him. Maybe angel-coal don’t burn live people.”<sup>111</sup> David is surrounded by foul language, and his quest for a ritual purification now takes on Isaiah’s rhetoric. This combines with numerous other leitmotifs of the novel, among them David’s quest for “flawless light” (an expression introduced in the prologue), “brighter than day,” which is fueled by a vision he has at the East River: “In the molten sheen memories and objects overlapped. Smokestacks

fused to palings flickering in silence by. Pale lathes grew grey, turned dusky, contracted and in the swimming dimness, he saw sparse teeth that gnawed upon a lip; and ladders on the ground turned into hasty fingers pressing on a thigh and again smokestacks."<sup>112</sup>

Book four, "The Rail," is the longest, most intense, and most experimental part of the novel. David, now eight years old, has experienced all kinds of threats and slights from other children, has betrayed his cousins to his Polish Christian friend Leo Dugovka in return for getting a rosary, has been whipped by his father, and has announced to the rabbi his more fully developed belief that he is not his parents' child; he now wants to do the heroic deed of inserting a ladle into the high-voltage third rail of the Eighth Avenue trolley line to produce perfect light. The tempo of the book accelerates, as David once again runs "screaming northward."<sup>113</sup> Thus ends chapter 15, and the following chapter begins: "Threading his way among the hordes of children, hurdles of baby carriages," making the reader expect David to be the subject.<sup>114</sup> But as if Roth were playing a joke on his dominant form of narration, he has suddenly switched the center of consciousness from David to Rabbi Yidel Pankower, calling attention to the narrative pattern itself. The rabbi offers a different point of view, as he worries about the future of Yiddish youth, this "sidewalk-and-gutter generation . . . brazen, selfish, unbridled."<sup>115</sup> Pankower, who has earlier warned David that "God's light is not between car-tracks," has a point, but he would be more convincing if he did not worship the old-time Reb R'fuhl, who flogged when he was angered, "and when he flogged he took their pants down and spread the flap of their drawers" and Pankower himself "held the culprit's legs while the straps sank into the white buttocks."<sup>116</sup> Two chapters later, Roth again breaks up the pattern by presenting another scene, mostly in dialogues, in which David is absent.

And as if these variations in narrative form were not enough, Roth adds a carefully structured experimental section in the long penultimate chapter of the novel that splices segments of different narrative strands into each other, a literary method inspired by film montage. This serves as the high point of the novel, both thematically and formally, as David goes through with his triumphantly self-destructive project, sticks a metal dipper into the rail, and causes a short-circuit along the trolley line, subjecting himself to a severe shock. At the center of this long, dramatic scene are the italicized passages that follow David, as in:

*— So go! So go! So go!  
But he stood as still and rigid as*

*if frozen to the wall, frozen fingers  
clutching the dipper.*<sup>117</sup>

These segments, ranging in length from one line to more than twenty lines and set as if they were poetry, are interrupted, sometimes in midsentence or even midword (“*cross-ing*”) by voices from various points of Lower Manhattan: Bill Whitney’s warehouse at the East River, Callahan’s beer saloon, Jim Haig’s ship at the Cherry Street pier, the prostitutes Mary and Mimi, and the motorman Dan MacIntyre on the Eighth Street trolley approaching Avenue A, where a political orator invokes 1789, 1848, 1871, and 1905 and the “laboring poor, . . . the masses embittered.”<sup>118</sup> David’s dipper is “consumed in roaring radiance, candescent,” and after a few pages of diverse bystanders’ surprised reactions to the shock, David’s italicized voice returns, in parentheses as if to indicate his weakened state, and reiterates such keywords of previous scenes of the novel as “*M-s-ter. H-i-i-i-i. Wo-o-o-d,*” “*Chadgodya!*,” “*Zwank!*,” and “*David touched his lips. The soot / came off on his hand. Unclean.*”<sup>119</sup> At the end, David is taken home, cannot answer his mother’s question why he did it, and hears his father acknowledging that David is “*My sawn. Mine. Yes. Awld eight.*”<sup>120</sup> Roth leaves the boy’s ultimate fate open, ending with a long lyrical passage from which the novel’s title is taken. “*He might as well call it sleep. [. . .] It was only toward sleep that ears had power to cull again and reassemble the shrill cry, the hoarse voice, the scream of fear, the bells, the thick-breathing, the roar of crowds and all sounds that lay fermenting in the vats of silence and the past. [. . .] One might as well call it sleep. He shut his eyes.*”<sup>121</sup>

## Alienation

*Isaac Rosenfeld (1918–1956)*

The return to the first-person singular narrative was not a return to the migration story. In Isaac Rosenfeld’s *Passage from Home* (1946), the title’s “*passage*” refers to the temporary summer relocation of the fourteen-year-old protagonist Bernard Miller from West to North Chicago. He leaves his petit-bourgeois family and moves to the apartment of his bohemian Aunt Minna, Bernard’s deceased mother’s sister, who has become a stranger to the family. Bernard is struck by the freedom of her place and its modernist decor: “*The pictures on the wall, their wild, broken colors and unrecognizable forms, took on meaning and welcomed me. Here dwelt that spirit which we barred from our lives, and in its freedom it was friendly, not raging, and not destructive, but liberal.*”<sup>122</sup> The novel starts with a lovingly and lavishly described Passover

Seder, with the *chad godya* explained to the reader as “a song in the manner of The House that Jack Built.”<sup>123</sup> Present at the Seder are not only the extended family, but also Willy, a Christian who incongruously sings, “It’s that old time religion / And it’s good enough for me,” with a Bible-country voice and a southern drawl.<sup>124</sup>

What attracts Bernard to Minna (who does not attend the Seder) is her non-conformism, “her withdrawal from the family, . . . her striking out into a cold, aloof, inaccessible world, essentially Gentile, where one became, as my stepmother put it, ‘*wie die goyim*,’ or even worse.”<sup>125</sup> Bernard associates Minna with erotic freedom; however, when he tries to kiss her, she rebuffs him, and Bernard now schemes to put Willy together with Minna. Increasingly detached from his father, Bernard visits his grandparents in the old Jewish neighborhood. He feels embarrassed by his aged, untidy, bearded grandfather, who wipes “his hands on his jacket before drawing out a crusty handkerchief.”<sup>126</sup> In earlier fiction, disgust was often provoked by the New, by non-Jewish American features (like Cahan’s missionary’s English) or nonkosher food (Antin’s ham), but here it is generated by the stereotypically Old. Yet Bernard finds his grandfather “transformed into a new person,” “raised to nobility,” when elated to genuine enthusiasm in a Chassidic synagogue.<sup>127</sup>

In part two, Bernard’s stepmother asserts that Minna had supposedly kidnapped him when he was still young and proposed that Bernard’s father marry her shortly after the death of Bernard’s mother. Bernard seeks out Minna. He waits for her outside the office building where she works, and in the city’s crowd he has contradictory emotions of feeling part of these other lives and “alone, an object among objects.”<sup>128</sup> He wonders, “why was there so wide a gulf between person and person” and why “should one man be a Negro, another have freckles on his nose, a third, a yellow moustache?”<sup>129</sup> “Or the Negro, . . . why was he a Negro and I a Jew? Why not the other way around? Or both of us Negroes, or both Jews?”<sup>130</sup> Such questions prompt Bernard to meditate on human diversity, on every man’s isolation from his fellow man, and on his own identity in a long passage close to the center of the novel that has been seen as the core of Bernard’s alienation and of Rosenfeld’s existentialism.<sup>131</sup>

I had never been without the realization that an empty space, which one might never hope to fill, stretched between person and person, between ignorance and knowledge, between one hand and the other, condemning all to loneliness. . . . As a Jew, I was acquainted, as perhaps a Negro might be, with the alien and the divided aspect of life that passed from sight at the open approach, but lingered, available to thought, ready to reveal itself to anyone

who inquired softly. I had come to know a certain homelessness in the world, and took it for granted as a part of nature.<sup>132</sup>

The family gathering at a holiday might be a moment at which assurance “would rush back in flood, and one could feel the presence of God in it,” but then, “this too would vanish” and leave only the unanswerable question “‘What am I?’ For as the Negro might ponder his outer body, asking himself why it should differ from other men’s when inwardly he felt his common humanity, so I would consider my skin, my eyes, my hair, and wonder why I should feel an inner difference when outwardly I feel the same as other men.”<sup>133</sup> One can detect a faint echo here of Cahan’s David Levinsky, to whom Rosenfeld devoted an essay. Bernard may be more fully assimilated than Levinsky and “feel the same as other men,” but his feeling of “inner difference” and homelessness is both more vague and more intense.<sup>134</sup>

Minna is married to a man named Fred Mason, adding more complexity to her relationship with Willy. Fred reveals that Bernard’s father assaulted Minna shortly after Bernard’s mother’s death and asked her to be his mistress. This confrontation changed her from a pious Old World girl to a cynical Chicago bohemian. Fred’s revelation intensifies Bernard’s feeling of dissolution that he experienced earlier: “I felt myself again dissolving, as I had on the crowded street, divided and drawn off into others.”<sup>135</sup> Fred’s story is dramatically confirmed when Minna arrives, uninvited, at Bernard’s father’s fortieth birthday party and blows up the placid family façade. Meanwhile his grandfather, “in all his shabby patriarchy,” calls Minna, in Yiddish, “a devil and a plague, an evil woman, an abandoned creature, a black soul, a streetwalker, a whore, a disgrace to women and a temptation to men, and altogether unfit to remain for one moment in a Jewish home.”<sup>136</sup> Bernard, too, leaves and moves in with Minna and Willy but soon finds himself humiliatingly excluded from their lives, and even a conversation about forests between Willy and Minna makes him feel left out: “It was only I who had never set foot in a forest.”<sup>137</sup> The image of the forest that distances Bernard from Minna and Fred’s Old World memories is not a pleasant country scene but a memento mori, evoking sinister “old German fairy tales” about “some of the worst cruelties, chopping a head off, eating someone alive, getting imprisoned in a tree or a rock. . . . It’s the woods that do it.”<sup>138</sup> One wonders whether, in a novel published in 1946, this might be a veiled allusion to what Rosenfeld, in a 1944 essay, called “recent sufferings.”<sup>139</sup> Perhaps an undertone of post-Holocaust emptiness pervades the novel.

Bernard soon sheds his rosy idealization of Minna’s world. A nauseating roach in the sink turns the kitchen “into a room of utter disorder,” and a

precisionist, three-paragraph-long description of bedbugs (that should have made Mike Gold happy) introduces a new revulsion. The lure of Minna's bohemian existence fades: "Proximity had robbed it of its charm."<sup>140</sup> Bernard returns home, but there is no reconciliation. He feels that talking with his father "established nothing. I might as well never have left, or never come back."<sup>141</sup> (That last sentence reads like the death certificate of the "from . . . to" narrative.) The novel ends with Bernard's open-ended summary: "My only hope had been to confess that I did not love him, to admit that I had never known what love was or what it meant to love, and by that confession to create it. Now it was too late. Now there would only be life as it came and the excuses one made to himself for accepting it."<sup>142</sup> *Passage from Home* projects a sense of ironic detachment, of a more generally human inability either to reach others or to eradicate the yearning to do so.

### Jewish? American? Literature?

In the first half of the twentieth century, the representation of specific places of origin shrank to brief references or abstractions but did not yet lead to such generalizing terms as "shtetl," a word first documented in English only in 1949.<sup>143</sup> Works representing the receding themes of migration and forms of assimilation in ready-made clothing, name changes, public schools, marital choice, ragtime music, and socialism reveal other shared features: nonidentity of the Old World and the New; references to pogroms and the czar and the motif of haircuts and beardlessness; upward mobility; generational tensions; marriage based on romantic love; and linguistic and cultural mediation.

Yet drawing a story line from strangeness to feeling at home in America may simplify a complex set of contradictory developments. Antin already used the American "we" at the beginning of the period, while Rosenfeld's novel suggests that the end point of assimilation may mean homelessness, or becoming a "lost young intellectual, a marginal man twice alienated," as Irving Howe characterized a new Jewish social type who "has largely lost his sense of Jewishness, of belonging to a people with a meaningful tradition, and . . . has not succeeded in finding a place for himself in the American scene or the American tradition."<sup>144</sup> In fact, alienation made the Jewish figure in midcentury literature attractive as *outsider* rather than as the bland embodiment of assimilation, now understood as undesirable conformism.

Does Jewish difference or Americanness define Jewish American literature? In 1947 Elliott Cohen, the editor of *Commentary*, wondered what constitutes

Jewish culture in America and suggested that its touchstone could be neither “similarity to our neighbors” nor “complete Jewish distinctiveness.”<sup>145</sup> Cohen had a humorous streak and mocked the reduction of Jewishness to *kozatzky*, “etchings of Jews with beards” (problematic, “now that beards are disappearing”), and to literature about “the East Side (downtown): the Jews of the East Side (uptown) . . . , lacking beards, . . . are presumably not ‘real’ Jews.”<sup>146</sup> Cohen offered a more general assessment:

The truth is that Jewish culture, like all other cultures, is a combination of likeness and difference, of the particular and the universal, of elements contributed by men of both Jewish and “non-Jewish” blood. Even the Jewish culture of Biblical Palestine was not exclusively Jewish. Nor is – or will be – the culture of the Jewish homeland being built in Palestine today.<sup>147</sup>

Hence Jewish culture would always have “plural sources” and include “the heretic, the rebel, and the ‘alienated.’”<sup>148</sup>

Could one perhaps imagine a literary series of Jewish-themed works that do address Cohen’s point? This is the question that I would like to answer briefly in the concluding section, with a focus on a truly remarkable but too rarely read Jewish American novel of manners, and on a novel that traces a development away from America, before concluding with a reading of a subtle short story about listening to an American immigrant tale and about alienation.

## Being American, Being Jewish

Sidney L. Nyburg (1880–1957)

I wish I could tell you I had landed in America with only one rouble in my pocket and one English word – a profane one at that – in my vocabulary; I’d like to write of starvation in a garret and membership in a trade’s union of striking garment workers, and ultimate wealth and success gleaned by superhuman toil and patience. But prosaic truth constrains me to admit ruefully having been born right here in Baltimore, where my parents also were born, and the only garret I can speak of at first hand is the one I used to hide in as a boy when I wanted to eat apples and read novels instead of dutifully visiting my music teacher.

Responding to questions about his novel *The Chosen People* (1917), the lawyer and novelist Sidney L. Nyburg described himself in explicit antithesis to the beginning of Cahan’s *Rise of David Levinsky*.<sup>149</sup> *The Chosen People* is breezily told by an ironic, near-omniscient narrator, who can move from one social setting to another, enter various consciousnesses, and make the reader understand

their contradictory motives. Nyburg mentioned George Eliot and Robert Louis Stevenson among the writers he cherished, and his narrator feels comfortably at home in English and takes pleasure in holding up in quotation marks, in the manner of Henry James, such new or local words as “news,” “magnificent splash,” “kept in,” “square,” “make-up,” “taxi,” or labor union “local.” Place and time of the action, the city of Baltimore from 1915 to 1916, are represented with such precision that the central conflict seems to emerge directly from the setting. Rather than tension between Jews and Gentiles, an intra-Jewish opposition advances the plot. The area around Eutaw Place, where the German Reformed Beth El Temple and its president’s posh residence are located, makes a dramatic contrast to the “absurd quarters” of the Russian Jews’ East Baltimore ghetto around East Lombard and Albemarle Streets. Capital and labor, German and Russian Jews, Reform and Orthodoxy are stacked against each other, just waiting for a violent incident to catalyze a big crisis, all within a Jewish world.

Nyburg’s major Jewish characters are doubly *unalienated*, for they generally feel comfortable in their various and often conflicting forms of Jewishness as well as in their American identities. The central figures marking the axis of the plot are the twenty-three-year-old idealistic German Jewish Reform rabbi Philip Graetz and the Russian-born Jewish lawyer David Gordon, a sarcastic pragmatist and a confirmed agnostic. Philip’s “knowledge of men and women,” we are told, “was based altogether upon his own imagination, and the books he had read.”<sup>150</sup> Socially “shy and ill at ease,” he is given to enthusiasms in valiant pursuit of such ethical ideals as social justice, and he craves to “live his sermons.”<sup>151</sup> Such characteristics make him a well-intentioned rabbi, but less an effective hero than a “Jewish Don Quixote” fighting windmills.<sup>152</sup> An orphan from a western village, Philip has no social connections at the beginning, but as a charismatic rabbi he soon builds up a strong following, most especially among female congregants. He becomes the unofficial fiancé of orphaned Ruth Hartman, a wealthy heiress and the strong-willed niece of Clarence Kaufman, the synagogue’s president and owner of the large Pioneer Clothing Company.

David Gordon, Baltimore’s most successful lawyer, serves as Philip’s counterpart and foil. He radiates self-confidence, has an uncanny political sensibility, can manipulate the press, and impudently wisecracks his way through anything. “I get my relaxation by saying whatever I happen to please – except, of course, regarding matters of business. I even talk impudently to myself, when there’s no one else to stir up,” he says.<sup>153</sup> Though not observant, he cannot make himself eat oysters. David comes across as

a cynic, but he is actually a tempered idealist toward Baltimore's divided Jewish world as well as a supporter of Zionism. Whereas Philip's innocent seriousness sometimes makes him appear ridiculous (though never to the extent that the reader stops identifying with him), David's street smarts convey solemn messages in the form of jokes. When asked whether he can get his people to stand behind any agreement reached, David quips, "I'm like the Czar, . . . my word is absolute law, but if I stretch my despotism too far, I'm apt to lose my head."<sup>154</sup> Quite a wisecrack for a novel published six months before the October Revolution!

The first inkling of the gulf that divides Baltimore's Jewry occurs in a chapter ironically entitled "The Brotherhood of Man," when Philip is summoned to Johns Hopkins Hospital in the middle of the night to speak to a dying Jew. Bertel Thorvaldsen's huge marble statue in the hospital's rotunda of "the Christ, the arms outstretched, the face filled with Divine Compassion," stuns Philip. Pondering "the Great Rabbi of Bethlehem," Philip thinks, "He too was a Jew" and "we, who will not believe Him to be more than He truly was . . . understand Him best, – who can best teach the world what He meant it to know."<sup>155</sup> Philip visits the patient, "whose every feature proclaimed the Jew," whose "long and untrimmed beard was coarse and of the blackness of charred wood," accentuating "to an almost ghost-like whiteness the deathly pallor of his brows." Philip realizes, however, that he cannot "understand one single phrase the poor creature was racking his soul to utter!"<sup>156</sup> Feeling that "this forlorn immigrant shared with himself the wonderful traditions of the Martyr Race," Philip ignored the language obstacle, yet his efforts to communicate in German with the injured man prove futile.<sup>157</sup> Philip can only understand "the contemptuous syllable 'goy' – which he knew to be this dying man's pitiless judgment upon himself as one who was in truth no Jew at all – a stranger and an alien."<sup>158</sup> Apart from "goy," the otherwise omniscient narrator withholds from the reader the dying man's Yiddish words, thus rejecting the role of mediation that played such a large part in the literature of migration and assimilation.

Philip feels terrible and gives a contrite sermon to his "parishioners" (as the members of his synagogue are called), who admire him all the more for his public penance. He moves them to tears with his reminder that Moses said man should love his neighbor as himself. "Philip naively accepted these tears without any doubts, but really, they were tokens of the type of grief one thoroughly enjoys as a proof of his own unusually delicate sensibilities; such unrestrained emotion as we love to display under the spell of a great tragedian."<sup>159</sup> Nyburg's narrator takes this opportunity to make sarcastic

observations on the congregation's lack of self-analysis: "The men and women who heard his words were, for the time at least, profoundly sympathetic toward their less fortunate brothers and sisters. They would, in fact, have made any sacrifice to bring them happiness – provided, of course, it was not unreasonable, and had no tendency to disturb existing economic conditions or the niceties of social distinctions."<sup>160</sup> Although David warns Philip that "it wasn't only the Yiddish" that prevented his understanding the Russian, Philip takes Yiddish lessons from a boy from the ghetto who wonders why this rabbi who was "almost a Christian" "should want to learn Yiddish, when he could already speak with amazing fluency four other languages – real languages – the kind one had to know to win college degrees."<sup>161</sup>

As a Jew, Graetz experiences some social distancing from Christians, who like to meet him but never invite him to their homes; he also notices that Dr. Manning pauses slightly before using the word *Hebrew*, "as though he were anxious to choose a term bearing the least offensive significance," and the narrator informs the reader that Manning "secretly wondered at the strange quality of these Jews who were willing to leap eagerly from their comfortable beds at the call of some pauper with no claim upon them except the tie of a common race."<sup>162</sup> On the other hand, the form of worship in Philip's temple barely differs from that of the Unitarian, and Orthodox Jews regard him as a goy who does not eat food "prepared according to the dietary laws set forth in the Scriptures."<sup>163</sup> What does it mean to be Jewish in modern America, the novel asks, and can Jewishness unite people who are divided by language, manners, and especially class? It is Philip's quixotic belief that it can, and in more ways than through philanthropy, for he does not want to be merely an "apostle to the genteel."<sup>164</sup>

The center of the novel puts this belief to a comprehensive test. The rabbi finds out that a strike has started at the Pioneer Clothing Company as a result of Kaufman's refusal to employ union labor. This alienates Philip somewhat from Ruth (Kaufman's niece). In the daily confrontation of picketing strikers, scabs, and police an incident occurs that heats up the conflict, as the chapter title has it, "A Little Matter of Homicide." An American-born prounion Russian Jew named Israel Ginzberg, who speaks English and Yiddish, is fired: He finds "in a pay envelope a politely impersonal note announcing the ability of his employers to continue their commercial careers without further aid from him."<sup>165</sup> Ginzberg gives intemperate speeches at a labor rally. As a result of a chain of coincidences, a striker

kills a scab by throwing a brick. Ginzberg is charged with incitement to murder. As Ginzberg's attorney, David Gordon successfully manipulates his public image and makes him a popular hero. Philip Graetz visits Ginzberg's wife in the ghetto, and she yells at him to leave. Now Philip, frustrated but still filled with good intentions, meets Ellen Stewart, a slightly older, "unmistakably Celtic," socialist nurse, who, as an "out and out Christian" (though she is not religious), is more readily accepted by Russian Jews than is the rabbi. He keeps meeting with her and loves talking with her and arguing about socialism, with Philip demanding that it is necessary to "be sure that the remedy isn't worse than the disease."<sup>166</sup> Before they fully realize it, they have fallen in love.

This makes for a double conflict. Philip wants to end the strike by drawing together capital and labor. He also has to decide whether to follow his love for the non-Jewish Ellen, thus ending his career as a rabbi at Beth El. This love, however, would also push him toward more engagement with poor Jews than if he allied himself with the Jewish heiress Ruth. In the labor plot, Philip goes to the union office and visits Kaufman but accomplishes little. The union representatives look at him as Kaufman's rabbi, and Kaufman tells him the story of his Bavarian immigrant parents and how he worked his way up and built a company that he simply will not share with any union, Jewish or not. David Gordon's publicity campaign against Pioneer Clothing resolves the problem, forcing Kaufman to make a deal in which Gordon gets as much for the workers as possible. In the love plot, Philip is equally ineffectual, as Ruth and Ellen decide for him. Ruth realizes that Ellen is on Philip's mind when she sees him look at her from afar: "There's nothing I wouldn't have given to have him look at me like that," she tells her brother-in-law, the surgeon Rob Frank, "but he never did."<sup>167</sup> Determined to get Philip back, Ruth schemes to buy Kaufman stock so as to get a say in the company and to force Pioneer to settle – all this to put Philip's enthusiasm to rest. And Ellen, realizing that their relationship would endanger Philip's position, suddenly leaves Baltimore. When the strike is settled in a secret meeting and a press statement is needed, Kaufman hypocritically proposes "to give some credit for this agreement to Dr. Graetz – our Rabbi, you know," and he lies, "His arguments have had great weight with me."<sup>168</sup> Philip knows that he has failed but is now publicly celebrated as a great mediator. At such a "Happy Ending" even David Gordon must chuckle and "appreciate the irony of existence in general, and of Rabbis, clothing merchants and labor disputes in particular."<sup>169</sup>

The narrator's Olympian irony is a constant presence in this novel, whether directed at characters and their manners or at situations; it even informs the description of settings. Thus Ginzberg's prison cell is "sufficiently roomy to enable its occupant to indulge in three uninterrupted paces."<sup>170</sup> Yet with all its self-consciously genteel humor, *The Chosen People* is not a frivolous novel. An epigraph from Exodus (omitted in the modern reprint) reinforces its seriousness: "And ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The novel's examination of a Jewish ideal is in part informed by George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, the proto-Zionist novel that inspired Emma Lazarus to describe Eliot as the writer "who did most among the artists of our day towards elevating and ennobling the spirit of Jewish nationality."<sup>171</sup> George Eliot drew on Heinrich Graetz's famous *History of the Jews*, and it has been noted that Nyburg signals this connection by choosing this very surname for his rabbi.<sup>172</sup>

Nyburg, whose grandfather immigrated to Baltimore from Holland, shared with Philip and David the belief in a Jewish idealism. David, near the end of the novel, drops his cynicism and tells Philip that he believes in one thing, "the Jew. There's something about us – I don't know what – that the world needs."<sup>173</sup> Such a pronouncement resembles Nyburg's own belief in "a distinctive Jewish idealism" that he formulated in an article, "Jewish Ideals in a Changing World."<sup>174</sup> The American pluralist Nyburg expected that there would be, after World War I, many ways to express Jewish idealism and striving for justice, internationally and nationally. It could be Zionism, for "right or wrong, wise or wholly an illusion," it is "a splendid example of Jewish idealism."<sup>175</sup> It could be religious faith, as long as that produces "inspiration for the work before us"; and it could even be assimilation: "For if we are to be assimilated, at least it is our duty to discuss and determine the terms upon which we are to be merged, and accomplish this solution in such manner that our dearly bought racial attributes may be given to other races as a contribution, and not idly lost in mere thoughtless disappearance."<sup>176</sup> Capitalists like Montefiore exemplified this idealism, as did a "Jew, Marx, who gave to hosts of despairing men a new gospel of freedom."<sup>177</sup> No matter which expression Jewish idealism takes, the "facts of history and heredity are not to be brushed aside."<sup>178</sup> In a nearly all-Jewish cast, *The Chosen People* portrays a rabbi, a lawyer, a surgeon, a factory owner, and a banker as well as workers and union officials, with different degrees of irony but never completely without sympathy. Nyburg's novel pays very little attention to any tension between being American and being Jewish and feels as if it originated in a different fictional universe than most of the migration and assimilation tales. Taking it as the starting point

of a Jewish American tradition thus yields a new story line, a decade later, a better-known novel, also inspired by *Daniel Deronda*, did explore a tension between American identity and Jewishness.

*Ludwig Lewisohn (1882–1955)*

*The Island Within* (1928) opens dramatically: “Until the other day we Americans lived as though we had no past.”<sup>179</sup> While “we Americans” is the subject of Ludwig Lewisohn’s novel’s first sentence, by the end an intense Jewish knowledge defines its central character, a knowledge anchored in history, genealogy, and a forward-looking quest for a fulfillment of Jewishness in a mission that lies ahead for the protagonist and challenges his American assimilation.

Lewisohn opens most of the novel’s seven books on topics that provide broader historical, political, and psychological contexts for the overall plot: immigration restriction and the American sense of the past, global migrations and comparative patterns of assimilation, Jews and the inferiority complex, Pharisees and Jewish resistance, protective mimicry, the notion of progress, as well as King Haman, pogroms, and White Terror. The last two books’ contexts directly bear on the novel’s plot, as the marital crisis between the psychiatrist Arthur Levy and the gentile writer and “new woman” Elizabeth Knight, narrated in the third person, comes to a head. While Lewisohn obsesses over the marriage crisis plot, here he presents it as merely the foreground to a much deeper Jewish crisis in Levy and in America. Assimilating Jews like Arthur who try to fold Jewishness into a general American identity and deny “any tradition or character of their own” are in reality “trying to do a thing that was inhuman, that no one else was trying to do,” for even the most radical spirits relied on their various national cultures. Arthur realizes the tenuousness of the assumption that assimilated Jews were Americans like other Americans when he asks Elizabeth whether he is an American, and she answers distractedly, “No, of course not!”<sup>180</sup> Though she quickly revises her answer, her first unconscious response carries more weight.

Arthur is drawn to Judaism in several ways. Like George Eliot, he reads Graetz’s *History of the Jews*.<sup>181</sup> Working in a Jewish hospital, Arthur realizes that in an all-Jewish environment one is “less consciously and agonizedly Jewish.” The orthodox Reb Moshe Hacoheh then approaches and tells Arthur, “I believe we are *meshpocheh* – kinsfolk; do you know the expression?”<sup>182</sup> And, indeed, it turns out that their great-grandfathers were brothers and that Arthur descends from a famous rabbi. The richness and texture of Jewish life entrance Arthur more than the “poor and colorless and thin” state of the “Americanized Jew.”<sup>183</sup>

When Reb Hacoen gives Arthur an eleventh-century manuscript that had come down in their family, about the Crusaders slaying Jews in the Rhineland, Arthur reads it with horrified fascination and realizes that the Jews' "actual martyrdom" has never ended. "Yesterday in Russia, today in Rumania, tomorrow where?"<sup>184</sup> He decides to go to Romania on a mission for Reb Hacoen to investigate the condition of Jewish communities there. Arthur's father, Jacob Levy, who had heard the story of the manuscript, articulates in his accented diction what amounts to an answer to the novel's first sentence when he states that "it's natural of people to be proud of deir ancestors" and that "America used to say: Dis is no place vere ancestors count. Only individooal vorth. . . . But det didn't last long."<sup>185</sup> Now that Arthur Levy identifies with his Jewish ancestry and history, the novel can end with his new certainty "that the sky curved over him like a tent against the outer darkness and that the earth which his foot trod was his natural habitation and his home."<sup>186</sup> This completes the movement from America to his "island within."

An appreciation of George Eliot as a Zionist uncovered the similarities between *Daniel Deronda* and *The Island Within*, for in both novels "a strange, mystical, prophet-like character" meets a modern Jew, and "the result is a warm, powerfully responsive return to Judaism."<sup>187</sup> Of course, unlike Daniel Deronda, Arthur Levy knows that he is Jewish all along, but does not act on this knowledge until his family history and the more general Jewish past catch up with him; and while Deronda does not pursue a romance with Gwendolen Harleth, Levy separates from his wife, Elizabeth. Ludwig Lewisohn had a long-standing familiarity with George Eliot, and his references to the Mainz rabbi Kalonymos in *The Island Within* constitutes an additional hint to *Daniel Deronda*.<sup>188</sup> Lewisohn's ambitious novel challenges the fiction of assimilation and reminds us that "dissimilation" tends to accompany assimilation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "dissimilation" as the "action of making, or process of becoming, unlike," and it is a word that accurately describes Arthur Levy's development.<sup>189</sup>

The novels by Nyburg and Lewisohn do suggest an alternative *Deronda* tradition in Jewish American literature as they present, in their different ways, modes of being Jewish in America outside the migration and assimilation narrative. Nyburg's capacious understanding of Jewish idealism in America has a pluralistic openness that welcomes the Zionist and the assimilationist, the rabbi and the atheist, as well as the Russian worker and the third-generation settled elite. Lewisohn explores the tension between Jewish and American identity and, resolving it in favor of the former, takes his protagonist away from America.

## Coda

*Delmore Schwartz (1913–1966)*

Delmore Schwartz's short story "America! America!" (1940, 1948) focuses on an artist who recognizes that he had been fleeing from his Jewish family and America. He returns because World War II ends his expatriate life in Paris and he listens distractedly to his mother telling him a sad story of the Russian immigrant Baumann and his family.<sup>190</sup> Because of his ease in establishing social contacts, Mr. Baumann has been successful as an insurance salesman. His American-born children, Dick, Martha, and Sidney, grow up in comfort. But despite the parents' efforts, Dick and Sidney never amount to anything, and Sidney attempts suicide. "America! America!" was the immigrants' exclamation in astonishment at the new country's inventiveness, but Mrs. Baumann says with bitterness, "this is what we came to America for, forty-five years ago, for this," meaning Sidney.<sup>191</sup> The frame closes with the mother's shocking comment that human beings are "ruined by their best qualities."<sup>192</sup> Narrated in the son's third-person perspective, and switching between the narrative situation and the Baumann tale, the story asks what difference it makes for a son to understand himself in the context of preceding and surrounding lives. The story is beautifully developed, subtly nuanced, and remarkably balanced, a miniature *Absalom! Absalom!* that also anticipates the kind of tale Philip Roth would tell in *American Pastoral*.

Two versions of the story – from 1940 and 1948 – differ significantly, starting with the artist's name and profession. Originally a musician named Belmont Weiss, he became the writer Shenandoah Fish.<sup>193</sup> Both versions of the story highlight trendy words or worn-out clichés that add up to the idiom of the American tale, like "insurance game," "goods," "stopped at nothing," or "this was a cut-rate, cut-throat world."<sup>194</sup> Mrs. Fish both reports and uses these italicized words, at times giving her own irony, criticism, and interpretation to the story she tells. The Baumanns' story is thus doubly mediated. It first filters through the mother and then through the son's irony, as he reacts to the Baumanns' imagined "America! America!" to his mother's story, and finally to himself.

Between 1940 and 1948 Schwartz extensively revised, and not exclusively for stylistic reasons.<sup>195</sup> For example, topographic specifics relating to the migration experience (Romania and Ellis Island) and to New York (Wall Street, Brooklyn, the Catskills, and "a well-to-do suburb on Long Island") disappear, and Schwartz relocates the Baumanns' apartment from "near Eastern Parkway" to "near a great park."<sup>196</sup> Schwartz also reduces specifically Jewish

references. Originally, Mrs. Baumann tells “endless stories of her children, of friends, and of Jewish activities,” later only “many stories.”<sup>197</sup> Schwartz trims the phrase “during the high holy days, during Passover” to “on religious holidays,” changes “Judaism” to “Zionism,” and Jews from a “race” into a “people.”<sup>198</sup>

This thinning out of Brooklyn Jewish specifics is offset by added passages that give the reader a fuller understanding of Shenandoah’s detachment. The would-be expatriate is as distant from others as the Old World is from the New or as one generation is from another: “He reflected upon his separation from these people, and he felt that in every sense he was removed from them by thousands of miles, or by a generation, or by the Atlantic Ocean.”<sup>199</sup> Schwartz once joked that he was “of Russian-Jewish distraction,” and his story holds up Shenandoah’s glib feeling of ironic superiority to the elders and their stories.<sup>200</sup> Like Rosenfeld’s Bernard Miller, Shenandoah Fish experiences an identity crisis and has to ask himself repeatedly who he is.<sup>201</sup> Shenandoah questions the nature of his work as an expression of a generation that was “full of contempt for every thing important to their parents,” and, as he listens to his mother, he realizes that perhaps this “was the starting-point and compelled the innermost motion of the work to be flight, or criticism, or denial, or rejection.”<sup>202</sup> This detachment imbues both versions of the story, but the ending changed from the earlier feeling that “all those lives inhabited the air he breathed and would be present wherever he was” and that “their America would always be present in him” to the later conclusion: “No one truly exists in the real world because no one knows all that he is to other human beings, all that they say behind his back and all the foolishness which the future will bring him.”<sup>203</sup>

This essay has sketched two ways of narrating Jewish American literary history. Though the end point in both cases is alienation, the reader will have to decide whether the story of increasing assimilation that begins with Antin and Cahan or an alternative story that, inspired by *Daniel Deronda*, would start with Nyburg’s Jewish idealism and Lewisohn’s dissimulation might have more resonance today.

## Notes

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- 1 Moses Rischin, ed., *Grandma Never Lived in America: The New Journalism of Abraham Cahan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, [1985]), 147–150.

- 2 See Abrahm Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917; repr. with an introduction by Jules Chametzky, New York: Penguin, 1993), 96.
- 3 *Partisan Review* 19:3 (May–June, 1952): 282–286, here 286. [http://hgar-publ1.bu.edu/en\\_GB/web/partisan-review/search-collection/path:284018](http://hgar-publ1.bu.edu/en_GB/web/partisan-review/search-collection/path:284018). Accessed August 26, 2014.
- 4 *Partisan Review* 19:3 (May–June, 1952): 310–315, here 313–314. [http://hgar-publ1.bu.edu/en\\_GB/web/partisan-review/search-collection/path:284018](http://hgar-publ1.bu.edu/en_GB/web/partisan-review/search-collection/path:284018). Accessed August 26, 2014.
- 5 <http://www.oed.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/Entry/11934?redirectedFrom=assimilation#eid>.
- 6 Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1912), xi. Project Gutenberg Ebook. <http://www.gutenberg.org/2/0/8/8/20885/>.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 193.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 249.
- 9 *Ibid.*, xiv.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 250.
- 11 Sunny Yudkoff, “The Adolescent Self-Fashioning of Mary Antin,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 32:1 (2013): 4–35, and “Translation of Mary Antin’s Yiddish Letter (Precursor to *From Plotzk to Boston*).” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 32:1 (2013): 36–66.
- 12 Antin, *Promised Land*, xiii.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 46, 115.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 368.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 193, 67, 205, 360.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 178, 358.
- 17 Irwin Granich, “Surveys of the Promised Land,” *Liberator* (July 1918): 32–33; here 32.
- 18 Evelyn Salz, ed., *Selected Letters of Mary Antin* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 107–108.
- 19 Cahan, *Levinsky*, 3.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 273.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 101.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 133–134.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 229.
- 24 Isaac Rosenfeld, “The Fall of David Levinsky,” in *Preserving the Hunger: An Isaac Rosenfeld Reader*, ed. Mark Shechner (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 159, and Jules Chametzky, “The Assimilation of the American Jewish Writer,” in *Our Decentralized Literature: Cultural Mediations in Selected Jewish and Southern Writers* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 49–50. Louis Harap, *Creative Awakening: The Jewish Presence in American Literature, 1900–1940s* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 46.
- 25 Cahan, *Levinsky*, 16.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 27 Leslie Fiedler, “The Jew in the American Novel,” in *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler*, vol. 2 (New York: Stein & Day, 1971), 65–117, here 79.
- 28 Cahan, *Levinsky*, 513.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 516.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 530.

- 31 Julian Levinson, "Cinderella's Dybbuk: Anzia Yeziarska as the Voice of Generations," in *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 94–95.
- 32 Anzia Yeziarska, *Bread Givers: A Struggle between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New* (1925; repr., with introd. by Alice Kessler-Harris, New York: Persea Press, 1975), 209.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 278.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 127.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 65 and 205. Nicholas Karl Gordon, "Jewish and American: A Critical Study of the Fiction of Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yeziarska, Waldo Frank, and Ludwig Lewisohn," Diss., Stanford University, 1968, 92.
- 37 Yeziarska, *Bread Givers*, 20 and 23. See also 70, 76, 135, 137, and 279.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 66.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 204.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 138.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 208.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 255.
- 43 Martha Gimpel Miller, "Tevye's Daughters: Jewish Experience and Women's Identity in the United States," Diss., University of North Carolina, Greensboro, 2000, 37–38; Judith Sanders, "Her Literary Dowry: Anzia Yeziarska Reconsidered in the Context of Yiddish Literature," *Yiddish* 13:4 (2004): 1–8.
- 44 Yeziarska, *Bread Givers*, 284.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 282.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 278.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 279–280.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 286.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 293–294.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 297.
- 51 Harap, *Creative Awakening*, 47–48. See also David Martin Fine, "In the Beginning: American-Jewish Fiction, 1880–1930," in *Handbook of American-Jewish Literature: An Analytical Guide to Topics, Themes, and Sources*, ed. Lewis Fried (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 15–34, here 28.
- 52 Hannah Adelman Komy, "Lies Her Mother Told Us: Louise Levitas Henriksen's Critique of Anzia Yeziarska's Autobiography," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 26:3 (2008): 33–47, esp. 39.
- 53 Yeziarska, *Bread Givers*, 282.
- 54 Samuel Ornitz, *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl: An Anonymous Autobiography* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1923), 251, 288; see also 253 and 268, digitized at [babel.hathitrust.org](http://babel.hathitrust.org).
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- 56 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 58 *Ibid.*, 89.
- 59 *Ibid.*, 295.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 211.
- 61 *Ibid.*, 30.

- 62 Ibid., 104, 105.
- 63 Ibid., 211.
- 64 Ibid., 92; William Z. Ripley's *The Races of Europe: A Sociological Study* (New York: Appleton, 1899), 368–400.
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- 67 Ibid., 212–213.
- 68 Ibid., 212–213.
- 69 Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 80–94.
- 70 Ornitz, *Haunch*, 115, 116.
- 71 Ibid., 146.
- 72 Ibid., 148.
- 73 Ibid., 160.
- 74 Ibid., 151.
- 75 Antin, *Promised*, 107; Yeziarska, *Bread Givers*, 31, 193.
- 76 See Rachel Rubin, *Jewish Gangsters of Modern Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 94.
- 77 Allen Guttman, *The Jewish Writer in America: Assimilation and the Crisis of Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 141.
- 78 Michael Gold, *Jews without Money* (1930; repr. New York: Bard Books, Avon Press, 1965, 1972), 68.
- 79 Gold, *Jews*, 5.
- 80 Richard Tuerk, "Jews without Money as a Work of Art," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 7:1 (Spring 1988): 67–79; Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 19–29.
- 81 Gold, *Jews*, 199–208; Gold, "Poverty Is a Trap," *New Masses* 2 (January 1927): 18–21; Tuerk, "Jews," 70–72.
- 82 Gold, *Jews*, 43, 44, 64, 66, 83, 113, 122, 130, 138, 144, 145, 148, 205.
- 83 Ibid., 132.
- 84 Ibid., 55.
- 85 Ibid., 53.
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- 87 Ibid., 23.
- 88 Ibid., 6.
- 89 Ibid., 6–7.
- 90 Ibid., 57, 112, 7.
- 91 Ibid., 31.
- 92 Ibid., 99.
- 93 Ibid., 81.
- 94 Ibid., 141.
- 95 Paul Berman, "East Side Story: Mike Gold, the Communists and the Jews," *Radical America* 17:8 (July–August 1983): 39–54, here 41.
- 96 Chametzky, *Our Decentralized*, 50–51, and Berman, "East Side Story," 44–45. Fiedler, "Jew," 90.
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- 98 Gold, *Jews*, 224.
- 99 Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (1934, repr. New York: Bard Books/Avon Press, 1964), 14.
- 100 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 101 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 102 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 103 *Ibid.*, 18, 21, 54.
- 104 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 105 *Ibid.*, 99.
- 106 *Ibid.*, 93, 95–96.
- 107 *Ibid.*, 144.
- 108 *Ibid.*, 153.
- 109 *Ibid.*, 205.
- 110 *Ibid.*, 226.
- 111 *Ibid.*, 230.
- 112 *Ibid.*, 247–248.
- 113 *Ibid.*, 372.
- 114 *Ibid.*
- 115 *Ibid.*, 374.
- 116 *Ibid.*, 257, 374–375.
- 117 *Ibid.*, 412.
- 118 *Ibid.*, 418, 417.
- 119 *Ibid.*, 419, 425–427, 430.
- 120 *Ibid.*, 437.
- 121 *Ibid.*, 441.
- 122 Isaac Rosenfeld, *Passage from Home* (1946; repr. New York: Markus Wiener, 1988), 23.
- 123 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 124 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 125 *Ibid.*, 41.
- 126 *Ibid.*, 86.
- 127 *Ibid.*, 94, 118.
- 128 *Ibid.*, 115.
- 129 *Ibid.*, 116.
- 130 *Ibid.*, 116–117.
- 131 See Daniel Bell, “A Parable of Alienation,” *Jewish Frontier* 13:11 (November 1946): 12–19.
- 132 Rosenfeld, *Passage*, 117–118.
- 133 *Ibid.*, 118.
- 134 Rosenfeld, “The Fall of David Levinsky,” 155, 156.
- 135 Rosenfeld, *Passage*, 139.
- 136 *Ibid.*, 165.
- 137 *Ibid.*, 187.
- 138 *Ibid.*, 186–187.
- 139 Isaac Rosenfeld, “The Situation of the Jewish Writer” (1944), reprinted in *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, ed. by Jules Chametzky, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum, and Kathryn Hellerstein (New York: Norton, 2001), 573.

- 140 Rosenfeld, *Passage*, 171, 194–195, 240.
- 141 *Ibid.*, 279.
- 142 *Ibid.*, 280.
- 143 Abraham Ain, “Swislocz: Portrait of a Jewish Community in Eastern Europe,” *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 4 (1949): 86–114, here 86.
- 144 Irving Howe, “From the American Scene: The Lost Young Intellectual: A Marginal Man, Twice Alienated.” *Commentary* 2:4 (October 1946): 361–367, here 361.
- 145 Elliot Cohen, “Jewish Culture in America: Some Speculations by an Editor,” *Commentary* 3:5 (May 1947): 412–420, here 414.
- 146 *Ibid.*, 415.
- 147 *Ibid.*, 415.
- 148 *Ibid.*, 417.
- 149 Letter to Miss Ella Fleishman of the Omaha, Nebraska, *Daily Bee* (December 24 1918), American Jewish Archives, Marcus Repository, SC-9241. Sidney L. Nyburg, *The Chosen People* (1917; repr. with an introduction by Stanley F. Chyet, New York: Markus Wiener, 1986), 82.
- 150 Nyburg, *Chosen*, 25. See also 51, 79, and 93.
- 151 *Ibid.*, 26, 199.
- 152 *Ibid.*, 259; also 84 and 186.
- 153 *Ibid.*, 100.
- 154 *Ibid.*, 323.
- 155 *Ibid.*, 59.
- 156 *Ibid.*, 63, 64.
- 157 *Ibid.*, 64, 65.
- 158 *Ibid.*, 65.
- 159 *Ibid.*, 82.
- 160 *Ibid.*, 82.
- 161 *Ibid.*, 76, 94.
- 162 *Ibid.*, 61, 69.
- 163 *Ibid.*, 95.
- 164 *Ibid.*, 79.
- 165 *Ibid.*, 138.
- 166 *Ibid.*, 204, 212, 217.
- 167 *Ibid.*, 260.
- 168 *Ibid.*, 320, 329.
- 169 *Ibid.*, 329.
- 170 *Ibid.*, 155.
- 171 Lazarus, dedication to George Eliot in *The Dance to Death: A Historical Tragedy in Five Acts*, in *The Poems of Emma Lazarus*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin – Riverside Press, 1889), 69.
- 172 Wendy Zierler, “A Dignitary in the Land? Literary Representations of the American Rabbi,” *American Jewish Studies Review* 30:2 (November 2008): 255–275, here 257. James L. Ford, “In the Book World,” *New York Herald* (March 17, 1917): 6.
- 173 Nyburg, *Chosen*, 353–354.
- 174 Sidney L. Nyburg, “Jewish Ideals in a Changing World: An Address to Jewish Youth” *Menorah Journal* 4:2 (April 1918): 63–72.

- 175 Ibid., 71.
- 176 Ibid., 72.
- 177 Ibid., 72.
- 178 Ibid., 64.
- 179 Ludwig Lewisohn, *The Island Within* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1928), 3.
- 180 Ibid., 288–289.
- 181 Ibid., 286.
- 182 Ibid. 306, 307. Lewisohn also develops partial analogies between Jews and Negroes, 306, 320.
- 183 Ibid., 320. Here the novel resonates with the introductory essay of Book II, where Lewisohn examined assimilation and found that in America there are “Jewish gangsters on the East Side and rabbis who make religion hum with gyms and teams and get-together meetings and business men of the red-blooded go-getter variety.” 42–43.
- 184 Ibid., 341.
- 185 Ibid., 348.
- 186 Ibid., 350. The title of Gustav Meyrink’s German translation of the novel, *Das Erbe im Blut* (Leipzig: Paul List, 1929), emphasizes the biological sense of Levy’s Jewishness rather than seeing it as the result of a process of dissimulation.
- 187 Chaim Cohen, “Daniel Deronda: An Early Zionist.” *Canadian Jewish Chronicle* (Montreal, December 30, 1930): 22.
- 188 Lewisohn, *Island*, 328, 335. Lewisohn, *Up Stream: An American Chronicle* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922), 93; Lewisohn, *The Answer: The Jew and the World, Past, Present and Future* (New York: Liveright, 1939), 290; Lewisohn, *Theodor Herzl: A Portrait for This Age* (New York: World, 1955), 55.
- 189 Kurt Dittmar, *Assimilation und Dissimilation: Erscheinungsformen der Marginalitätsthematik bei jüdisch-amerikanischen Erzählern 1900–1970* (Frankfurt, Bern, Las Vegas: Lang, 1978), 319–439.
- 190 Delmore Schwartz, *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities and Other Stories*, ed. and introd. James Atlas, with a foreword by Lou Reed and an afterword by Irving Howe (New York: New Directions, 2012), 13–37. This 1948 version of Schwartz’s story differs in significant ways from its first publication in *Partisan Review* 7:2 (March–April 1940): 112–134, digitized at [http://hgar-publ.bu.edu/web/partisan-review\\_search-collection\\_detail/283923](http://hgar-publ.bu.edu/web/partisan-review_search-collection_detail/283923). Henceforth, excerpts will be annotated either as “Schwartz, *Dreams*” or “Schwartz, *Partisan*.” Irving S. Saposnik, “Delmore Schwartz’s America.” *Studies in Short Fiction* 19:2 (Spring 1982): 151–155, here 152.
- 191 Schwartz, *Partisan*, 133; Schwartz, *Dreams*, 36.
- 192 Schwartz, *Partisan*, 133 (“finest qualities”); Schwartz, *Dreams*, 37.
- 193 Saposnik, “Delmore,” 152.
- 194 Mark Goldman, “Reflections in a Mirror: On Two Stories by Delmore Schwartz,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 2 (1982): 86–97, here 96 n. 5. Victoria Aarons, “The Ethical Fiction of Delmore Schwartz: Identity, Generation, and Culture,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Series 77:4 (April 1987): 255–282, here 274.
- 195 The new version gives a sentence to Mrs. Fish that belongs to Shenandoah’s father: Schwartz, *Partisan*, 124; Schwartz, *Dreams*, 26.
- 196 Schwartz, *Partisan*, 118; Schwartz, *Dreams*, 19.
- 197 Schwartz, *Partisan*, 117; Schwartz, *Dreams*, 19.

- 198 Schwartz, *Partisan*, 114: “You had to join various lodges and societies of your own class and race”; Schwartz, *Dreams*, 15: “It was necessary to join the lodges, societies, and associations of your own class and people.”
- 199 Schwartz, *Dreams*, 23.
- 200 Cited in Saposnik, “Delmore,” 151.
- 201 Cahan, *Levinsky*, 101; Schwartz, *Dreams*, 14, 37.
- 202 Schwartz, *Dreams*, 23–24; Schwartz, *Partisan*, 121.
- 203 Schwartz, *Partisan*, 134; Schwartz, *Dreams*, 37.