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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The book is almost entirely narrated¹¹ from the perspective of David Shearl, a boy of eight, with the exception of the Prologue and one short section seen through the eyes of the Hebrew school teacher. It is about an immigrant child's quest for a personal and cultural identity apart from his parents; it traces the arduous and bewildering path of assimilation. It is a book written in the English language but experienced by the reader as if it were a translation, for David's main actions and thoughts are experienced in Yiddish. The original experience in the source language is almost entirely absent. When the original language is reproduced, it is rendered in transliteration, a phonetic transcription, rather than an authentic recording using the actual alphabet, so that from the American reader's perspective, the original language is both irretrievable and incomprehensible. Everything is experienced at a remove linguistically. While the Yiddish language is "home" for David and is associated with his parents, particularly with his mother, it can be an alien language for the reader. Occasionally Roth will provide a translation for the reader who is not familiar with Yiddish, but he will also reproduce the Yiddish for its own sake.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Albert," she said timidly, "Albert."

"Hm?"

"Gehen vir voinen du? In Nev York?"

"Nein. Bronzeville. Ich hud dir schoin geschriben."¹⁶

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm not going to the dentist's tomorrow," she said bluntly. "I haven't been going there for weeks—at least not every time I left here. I'm going 'kippin companyih!'"

"Going what?" His mother knit her brow. "What are you doing?"

"Kippin companyih! It's time you learned a little more of this tongue. It means I have a suitot." (163)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOTES

1. Baal Makhshoves (Israel Isidor Elyashev), "Two Languages—Only One Literature" [Yiddish], in *Geklibene verk* (New York, 1953), p. 122 (my translation).
 2. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
 4. William Mackey, "The Description of Bilingualism," in *Readings in the Sociology of Language*, ed. Joshua Fishman (The Hague, 1968), p. 554.
 5. Joshua Fishman, *Sociolinguistics: A Brief Introduction* (Rowley, Mass., 1972), pp. 52–54. Fishman is basing his definitions on the work of Charles Ferguson, "Diglossia," *Word* 15 (1959).
 6. Leonard Forster, *The Poet's Tongues: Multilingualism in Literature* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 4.
 7. See Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language* (Chicago, 1980); Uriel Weinreich, *Languages in Contact: Findings and Problems* (New York, 1953); Itamar Even-Zohar, "The Nature and Functionalization of the Language of Literature Under Diglossia" [Hebrew], *Hasifrut* 2 (1970): 286–302 and "Aspects of the Hebrew-Yiddish Polysystem," in *Polysystem Theory* (forthcoming); Benjamin and Barbara Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry* (Berkeley, 1986); Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: A Study in the Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1973).
 8. Max Weinreich, p. 249.
 9. M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin, 1981), p. 292.
 10. Meir Sternberg, "Polylingualism as Reality and Translation as Mimesis," *Poetics Today* 2 (1981): 225–32.
 11. Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, 1978).
- For illuminating readings of *Call It Sleep* see Murray Baumgarten, *City Scriptures: Modern Jewish Writing* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982); Naomi Diamant, "Linguistic Universes in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*," *Contemporary Literature* 27 (1986): 336–55; Wayne Lesser, "A Narrative's Revolutionary Energy: The Example of Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*," *Criticism* 23 (1981): 155–76.
12. Max Weinreich, "Yiddishkayt and Yiddish: On the Impact of Religion on Language in Ashkenazic Jewry," in *Readings in the Sociology of Language*, ed. Joshua Fishman (The Hague, 1968), p. 410.
 13. Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, p. 252.
 14. See *American Yiddish Poetry*, p. 404.
 15. Sternberg, p. 225.
 16. Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (New York, 1964), p. 16. All further page references will be cited in the text.
 17. See Hana Wirth-Nesher, "The Modern Jewish Novel and the City: Kafka, Roth, and Oz," *Modern Fiction Studies* 24 (1978): 91–110.
 18. Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, p. 270.
 19. Uriel Weinreich, *Languages in Contact*, p. 76.
 20. Bonnie Lyons, *Henry Roth: The Man and His Work* (New York, 1976), p. 172.
 21. Henry Roth, *Shifting Landscapes* (Philadelphia, 1987), p. 142.

