"Shpeaking Plain" and Writing Foreign: Abraham Cahan's *Yekl*

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> The East Side cafes . . . showed to my inner sense, beneath their bedizenment, as torture-rooms of the living idiom; the piteous gasp of which at the portent of lacerations to come could reach me in any drop of the surrounding Accent of the Future. The accent of the very ultimate future, in the States, may be destined to become the most beautiful on the globe and the very music of humanity (here the "ethnic" synthesis shrouds itself thicker than ever); but whatever we shall know it for, certainly we shall not know it for English.
> —Henry James, *The American Scene*

> *America for a country and* 'dod'll do' [*that'll do*] *for a language!*
> —Abraham Cahan, *Yekl*

Abstract Abraham Cahan's first English novel, *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*, is a multilingual narrative whose literary strategies bear the marks of both Yiddish language and literature and American local color writing at the end of the nineteenth century. This article examines two aspects of "plain speaking" in Cahan's writing; the intersection of these two different cultural and literary traditions in relation to prevailing notions of realism exemplified by the role of William Dean Howells in the creation of *Yekl* and the poetics of ethnic writing exemplified by the use of dialect, translation strategies, multilingual word play, and other techniques.

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In 1896, fourteen years after immigrating to America from Lithuania at the age of twenty-two, Abraham Cahan published his first novel in English, *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto.* Despite his active career as a Yiddish journalist for the Socialist Yiddish weeklies *Neuetseit* and *Arbeiter Tseitung*, it was his reading of English and American novels that inspired him to write fiction in English. *Yekl* is a story about Americanization. A Russian Jew named Yekl leaves his wife and son in the Old World and immigrates to the United States where he becomes Jake, a sweatshop worker so enamored of the America of prizefighting and dancing schools that he cannot resume his former life when his family eventually joins him. Moreover, he finds his wife Gitl's Old World appearance and behavior so repellent that he divorces her in order to marry Mamie, a flirtatious Americanized sweatshop operator. The divorce frees Gitl to marry Jake's nemesis, Bernstein, a Talmud scholar turned grocer in his quest for prosperity in America.

One of the sweatshop workers makes the observation, "America for a country and *'dod'll do'* [that'll do] for a language!" (Cahan 1970 [1896]: 21). In order to make this comic pun accessible to an American reader, Cahan added the explanation in brackets. Throughout the novel *Yekl*, the reported speech of characters is always represented as an English translation of an absent Yiddish original. Actual English words, which are frequently interspersed in dialogue, are reproduced in italics to signify their foreignness; italicized words are marked by the characters' accents. How can an American reader, for whom English is familiar and Yiddish dialect foreign, process this multilingual pun?

To complicate matters even further, the words that require "translation" for the American reader are the only ones actually uttered in the English language and are reproduced mimetically, whereas most of the speech represented in the book is originally uttered in the foreign language and represented throughout as normative English. The homonymous conflation of *'dod'll do* and "Doodle" as in Yankee Doodle is evident only if the English words "that'll do" are pronounced with a Yiddish accent. Since Cahan can rely neither on his readers' recognition of this nor on their ability to reproduce the sounds that will yield the pun, he provides the gloss. But he can rely on the reader's knowledge of Doodle. For Cahan, identifying English as Yankee Doodle language both ridicules and celebrates it. On the one hand, the name Yankee was originally a term of contempt or derision applied by the British to the colonists; on the other, by 1895 it already had a long tradition of proud use among New Englanders and Northerners generally. Immigrants who aspired to become Yankees had only the latter meaning in mind, but the former sense added another dimension to their comic declaration. In aspiring to speak American English, they were also

identifying with a language and culture that at an earlier stage of its development was an object of scorn for a world power that did not recognize its legitimacy. The immigrants who are dubbing English the language of *dod'll do* are referring both to the comic sound of the words to their foreign ears and to their own stumbling efforts to utter those sounds. In short, whatever they succeed in pronouncing will simply "have to do," will have to pass for English, although it may not sound like English to the discerning American listener or reader. To be in the position of fully understanding this pun, the reader needs both to invoke American culture—Yankee Doodle—and to reproduce the sounds that the immigrant makes; to be both American and, while reading this work, foreign. How Cahan negotiates these languages and cultural differences, and where he locates himself, will be the subject of this essay.

"I Like to Shpeak Plain, Shee?"

Speaking plain is Jake's badge of honor and, in his terms, his mark as an American. Speaking plain is also presumably one of the signals of realism in postbellum American fiction. But what is speaking plain? Can it be translated into writing? What part does speaking play in reading? If Abraham Cahan, as self-professed realist, aims to "speak plain" in his first English novel, *Yekl*, to what extent is that a thematic as well as a stylistic declaration?

For some writers of the time, speaking plain was a marker of *realism*, an attempt to give voice to the people. When James Russell Lowell in *The Biglow Papers* called for the literary representation of the vernacular before the Civil War, he expressed Romantic sentiments about the vibrancy of regular folk. For Lowell (1890: 158) the representation of dialect meant that the enlivening effects of faded diction would give way to a "sound and lusty book. . . . True vigor and heartiness of phrase do not pass from page to page, but from man to man." As Gavin Jones (1999: 45–48) has noted, what may appear to be a democratic appeal and an inclusive concept of American language and literature is actually a conservative reification of the original vigorous Anglo-Saxon folk origin of the American people. "Language is the soil of thought, and our own especially is a rich leaf-mould," wrote Lowell (1890: 158). The rage for dialect writing after the war had complex and contradictory motives. In some cases, it may have stemmed from the same romantic national sentiment that linked the people with manly Anglo-Saxon roots, and in the wake of mass urbanization and immigration, it located the heart of America in regional writing seemingly uncontaminated by those new folk who threatened the national character and language, threatened this character *by* their language. But in many cases,

dialect writing attempted to render the speech of racial, ethnic, and class difference as part of a project of realism that did not privilege any single dialect (Ammons and Rohy 1998; Brodhead 1993; Jones 1999; Sundquist 1982). For William Dean Howells, about whom I will have more to say later, dialect was a matter of literary verisimilitude; it was part of his commitment to realism. Abraham Cahan's work, as exemplified by the excerpt above, needs to be placed within the context of both realism and dialect writing, terms that are not necessarily synonymous.

The subject of realism in America is multifaceted, from Richard Chase's (1957) influential claim that canonical American literature aims toward romance rather than realism to Trilling's (1950) charge that American culture can be encapsulated in readers' preferences for the material realism of Dreiser rather than the psychological realism of James. More recently Eric Sundquist (1982: 4) has observed that, unlike European traditions of realism, American realism has "no philosophical or political program, no reliable spokesmen, and thus no literary heros." He singles out Howells as the only American author who fully heeded the demands of realism in a European sense without backsliding into romance in his "continual insistence on the proprieties of the everyday, stable characterization, and moral certainty" (ibid.). Habegger (1982: 199–235) has suggested that American postbellum realism was a reaction against popular literature written by women writers in mid-nineteenth century America and that it was characterized by, among other features, detailed verisimilitude and unhappy endings. The exceptional case of Howells and the reaction against what was perceived to be a feminine tradition in American letters are both salient points with regard to Cahan's novel and I will be addressing them in my reading of *Yekl*.

No summary of the discussion of American realism could do justice to the complexity of the subject, but for my purposes I would like to offer the main traits outlined by Shulman (1991: 160) in his recent essay: "the emphasis on the commonplace, on the ignored or despised; . . . the possibility of sympathy and satire; the awareness of regions and regional differences; *the sensitivity to American dialects and their class and racial implications.*" The mention of dialect and regional writing finds echoes in other definitions of American realism and it is particularly significant in an analysis of Cahan's writing. The most important feature of American realism, writes Berthoff (1965: 7), is the use of "plain speaking and the free use of common idiom." Jake boasts of his plain speaking, Cahan aims to speak plain, and Howells praised Cahan for exactly that quality. But the phonetic rendering of speech as written words on the page could never be "correct" mimetically. "The novelist does not and cannot achieve linguistically exact and complete reproduction of empirical data of those alien languages he incor-

porates into his text," writes Bakhtin (1981 [1975]: 366), "he attempts merely to achieve an artistic consistency among the *images* of these languages." Insofar as realism meant representing plain speech, it often intersected with dialect writing. Insofar as dialect writing was always the artistic image of language, it could never be realistic.[1]

I will be examining two aspects of "plain speaking" in relation to Cahan's *Yekl*: the first concerns an episode in American literary history in which two cultural and literary traditions intersect, each with its specific notions of realism; the second concerns Cahan's writing as dialect literature in the context of the vernacular and local color writing of the period. The first aspect focuses on cultural and literary history and the latter on the poetics of ethnic writing.

Who Speaks Plainly? Yankel, Yekl, Yankee, Jake?

When Cahan immigrated to the United States in 1882, he brought with him literary and intellectual influences from Eastern Europe. Within the Jewish world, language battles were being waged as part of broader cultural and ideological wars. The traditional, religiously observant civilization sought to maintain the existing multilingual model: Hebrew as the language of learning, law, and liturgy; Yiddish as the language of everyday practical life; the local language (Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, and so forth) for transactions with the gentile world. But the Enlightenment precipitated a movement to educate the Jews to participate in the secular Western world, to wean them away from what newly emerging secularists deemed superstitious, medieval practices. At first, Enlightenment writers (*maskilim*) wrote their treatises in Hebrew. Eventually they came to realize that in order to reach masses of readers, they would need to adopt the language of the masses, Yiddish. This marked a turning point in Yiddish letters and the beginning of a renaissance in Yiddish literature, with such well-known comic and satirical writers as Mendele Mokher Sforim and Sholem Aleichem.[2]

It is within this milieu that Abraham Cahan began to write in Yiddish shortly after his immigration to the United States in 1882 and continued to do so until a few years before his death in 1951. Furthermore, his Yiddish writing was related to his ideological commitment to social reform, and in Russia, to revolutionary activity that forced him to flee the country. During the 1890s, while he was writing *Yekl*, Cahan continued his project of edu-

1. Sternberg (1982) offers a detailed analysis of the correspondences between linguistic form and representational function.

2. For extensive treatments of this subject, see Harshav 1990; Kronfeld 1996; Miron 1973; and Seidman 1997.

cating the masses by translating into Yiddish the works of Marx, Darwin, Spencer, Tolstoy, Howells, and Hardy. Influenced by Howells and Tolstoy, Cahan wrote a lengthy essay in English entitled "Realism," which appeared in the *Workmen's Advocate* in 1889. In it he argued that literary realism, because it wrote honestly about life, would necessarily combat inequality and injustice and would lead toward socialism. The power of realistic art, wrote Cahan (1969: 405), arose from "the pleasure we derive from recognizing the truth as it is mirrored in art."

Cahan's commitment to realism as an ideological, social, and literary project, in keeping with the worldview of Russian intelligentsia, had its counterpart in America in the writings of William Dean Howells. In his essay "Realism," Cahan praised Howells: "As a true realist he cares little for ideas; and yet it is just because he is such, because of his fidelity to the real, *that he cannot help embodying an idea in his works*"—*namely*, a critique of capitalist society. In ordinary circumstances the struggling immigrant writer would never have been granted an audience with the leading man of letters of his newly adopted nation. For that reason the story of Howells's initiative and intervention on behalf of Cahan's career is rare and intriguing, as Cahan wrote *Yekl* at Howells's recommendation. The American author had first met Cahan in 1892 when he was doing research for the opening sections of *A Traveler from Altruria*, for which he needed first-hand knowledge of union organizers. Having heard of Cahan, who was then the editor of the *Arbeiter Tseitung*, Howells invited him to his home. Howells was surprised to learn that the Yiddish writer and activist was a great admirer of his work. Their second meeting three years later occurred soon after Cahan's translation of *A Traveler from Altruria* into Yiddish and resulted from Mrs. Howells's discovery of Cahan's English short story, "A Providential Match" (Cahan 1895b). Howells encouraged the gifted immigrant writer to produce a longer work on ghetto life, which he promised to place with a publisher. After Cahan completed the manuscript of what was to appear as *Yekl* and delivered it to Howells, he was invited for dinner to discuss the work. It was over coffee in Howells's study that evening *that the American writer renamed* Cahan's first English novel (*and its main* character) in a curious episode of cross-cultural literary history.[3]

Cahan wrote *Yekl* twice, first in English and then in Yiddish. The title of the Yiddish version, *Yankel the Yankee*, is the one he originally proposed for the English version that he submitted to Howells.[4] Yankel, the Yiddishized

3. For more details about their literary friendship, see Kirk 1962.

4. For a history of the reception of the manuscript and the work and a comparison of the Yiddish and English versions, see Taubenfeld 1998.

endearing form of Jacob, serves both as a generic Jewish name and as a reminder of the biblical Jacob, whose name change to Israel after wrestling with the angel is a founding moment for the people of Israel. Howells was adamantly opposed to this title, claiming that it was "all right for vaudeville, but not for a story like yours" (Cahan 1928: 36). He thought that the similarity in sound (*zusammen-klang*) of Yankel and Yankee was unfelicitous and contrived, in other words, unrealistic. In an effort to think up a more suitable title, Cahan began to suggest other Yiddish names to the American author, and when he mentioned "Yekl," Howells stopped him to say that it had exactly the right ring to it. Howells also suggested dropping "The Yankee" and adding instead the subtitle "A Tale of the New York Ghetto." No doubt he counted on this phrase to attract readers who might want a glimpse of the exotic world of urban slums; in this case through local color writing of New York's Lower East Side. It is evident from Cahan's memoirs that he was immensely flattered by Howells's praise and enamored of his genteel Christian American family and home. According to Cahan, everything in the house reflected "spiritual nobility," in particular Mrs. Howells's demeanor, tact, and hospitality. Cahan (1928: 35) relates only one item from several hours of conversation that evening: Mrs. Howells's reminiscence from a trip to Berlin, where she accurately recognized a fellow Bostonian on the tram merely by observing how the other traveler nestled herself within her shawl. Since for Cahan the high point of the evening was Howells's praise for his portrait of Yekl as an unforgettable and convincing type (and his renaming of the character), it is not surprising that he should have recalled Mrs. Howells's delight at being able to recognize a type, her fellow Yankee-Bostonian.

The motif of "types" is carried to the very end of this chapter of Cahan's memoir, but in the context of social and cultural hierarchies. Sprinkling his account of that fateful evening in Howells's home with English words such as "dinner," as if to imply that no Yiddish word could convey the precise social interaction and ambience of the evening meal in America, Cahan recalls that just as he was about to leave, Howells detained him for another few minutes to share with him a letter which he had received from the towering figure of literary realism, Turgenev, praising one of Howells's works. Cahan seizes the opportunity to elevate his own status in this chapter in which he is dwarfed by Howells's literary reputation, social status, and refinement. First, by noting how pleased Howells was to receive Turgenev's praise, Cahan has momentarily reversed the literary pecking order: the American writer is in awe of the Russian writer with whom Cahan can identify (and with whom Howells obviously associates Cahan). Second, Cahan permits himself a condescending observation regarding Turgenev, namely

that the letter was written in excellent English with the exception of one word, which the Russian author used in a non-English manner—"physiognomy," a word associated with physical types. Cahan's Americanization and his new status as an American author have now given him the edge over Turgenev.

Since Howells obviously read Yankel as a type, what association with the name "Yekl" led him to choose it as perfectly suited for Cahan's character and consequently for the American title of the novel? Although Howells did not know Yiddish, he had learned German in order to read the works of Heinrich Heine, who, Howells (1895: 125) wrote, "dominated me longer than any author that I have known." This is not surprising; interest in Heine in nineteenth-century America was part of a larger interest in German literature and culture that influenced American intellectual life for much of the rest of the century and up to World War I. Heine's influence on Howells was particularly profound. According to Howells's biographer Kenneth Lynn (1970: 78), "Never had an author so dominated Will's imagination." Howells translated numerous poems by Heine, wrote poems that imitated Heine's poems, and even when he shifted to prose, Howells adapted Heine's view that the life of literature originated in the "best common speech" (ibid.: 79). Lynn notes that "[w]hen Howells moved toward a conversational tone and gait in his books of the early seventies, he did so not because of a know-nothing Western desire to declare his independence of established literary procedures, but, rather, because he wished to apply to American prose the linguistic ideas of a cultivated European Jew whom he had long admired" (80). He learned "plain speaking" from Heine, and his affinity for the German writer's works may have served as the source of his attraction to the name Yekl for Cahan's simple, working class Jewish immigrant character.

Exactly how could this be the case? Heine's fragmentary 1840 novel *The Rabbi of Bacherach* presents a tale of the Jewish reaction to a charge of ritual murder. Sander Gilman (1986) has pointed out that the characters of the rabbi and his wife speak impeccable German. But when they flee to the Frankfurt ghetto, they encounter a character who speaks in a mock Frankfurt dialect "which the reader is to take as proto-Yiddish" (178). This character's name is Jäkel the Fool (pronounced the same as *Yekl*). As Gilman has exposed and traced in his works, anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jews included speech representation that was considered defective German and referred to as *mauscheln*. Early nineteenth-century Germans used *mauscheln* "to characterize the manner in which they heard Jews speaking with a Yiddish accent. *Mauscheln* is a German word based on the proper name Moishe" (Gilman 1986: 138). That is, Moishe, just as Yankel, is a generic name. In 1844, the German popular philosopher Anton Ree referred to "the Jewish

dialect" as a "sick" language. In the Jewish pronunciation of German, he diagnosed a pathognomonic sign of a "specific modification of their organs of speech" (ibid.: 141).

Cahan's Yekl not only speaks with a heavy accent; he seems to suffer from a speech defect as well. Yiddish readers would have been reminded of speech impediment as literary convention going back to the country bumpkin and boor in Ettinger's 1830s play *Serkele*. Moreover, they would also have noticed that Yekl's confusion of hushing and hissing sounds in English is the mirror image of the confusion of these two sounds by Litvaks in a Yiddish speech variant referred to as *sabesdiker losn* (Sabbath speech), or solemn speech (Weinreich 1952: 362). Whereas these Yiddish linguistic associations would have been inaccessible to Howells, Yekl's lisp would still be likely to trigger associations with German literature. The young Yiddish writer identifying with the Russian Jewish intelligentsia, Cahan distanced himself from his semiliterate and semi-Americanized character, investing him with stock traits from Yiddish literature that in translation resembled a Jewish type in German literature. In seeking a new title for Cahan's novella, perhaps Howells recognized in the name Yekl the very same character he had encountered in his reading of Heine, Jäkel the Fool. Thus, the story of the transformation from Yankel to Yekl may also be a story of American gentile writer and Russian Yiddish writer importing and modifying a stereotype from Yiddish and German traditions into American literature for purposes that served them both: Howells, to provide local color and to act as mentor to a young realist from an ethnic group to which he would be drawn both for political reasons (Cahan's socialism) and literary ones (the "speaking plain" that he identified with Heine); and Cahan, to introduce a Jewish stereotype to the American reader that would launch his career as an American/English writer. Cahan's brilliant translation of a Yiddish convention into English came to life in a new context for readers ignorant of Yiddish literature but steeped in a linguistic and cultural milieu that enabled them to "read" *Yekl* on their own terms.

Local Color, Foreign Dialect

If one of the tenets of realism is imitating everyday life, then realism will also encourage the imitation of everyday speech, as "honesty to life" will then be extended to honesty to speech: "To speak plain" would have to become, in Yekl's words, "to shpeak plain, shee?" Henry James observed in 1898 (17), "Nothing is more striking, in fact, than the invasive part played by the element of dialect in the subject-matter of the American fiction of the day. Nothing like it, probably—nothing like any such predominance—

exists in English, in French, in German works of the same order; the difference, therefore, clearly has its reasons and suggests reflections." Whereas James belittled the technique of American dialect representation and chose not to practice it himself, Mark Twain relished dialect for its comic and satirical effects. In his often-quoted ironic manifesto about dialect, the "Explanatory" note to readers of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, he claims that the representation of speech has "not been done in a haphazard fashion" but "painstakingly." "I make this explanation," writes Twain, "for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding" (1885). Dialect was increasingly singled out as realism's central feature and as a democratizing poetic. According to Hamlin Garland (1960 [1894]: 74), "dialect is the life of language, precisely as the common people of the nation form the sustaining power of its social life and art." "Give us the people as they actually are," wrote Fred Patee (1915: 15). "Give us their talk as they actually talk it." In Jones's (1999: 45) terms, "Dialect was the sharp end of realism's penetrating power."[5]

When Cahan wrote *Yekl*, local color writing was the rage in America. The term was introduced by Hamlin Garland in his 1894 essay, "Local Color in Art," in which he argued that this type of writing celebrates the lived experience of the "native." Predicated on notions of authenticity and regional difference, local color writing was undoubtedly a response to both the magnitude of immigration to the United States between 1880 and 1914 (20 million) and to United States imperialism and nation building during that period (Ammons and Rohy 1998: 9). During the time of constructing "America," local color is a strategy for containing difference. On the one hand, it makes diversity appear to be characteristically American; on the other, it reduces diversity to regional deviations from a national norm. Thus, the regional writer, who is also seen as necessarily "native" to America, is quaint and marginal. According to Richard Brodhead (1993: 120), dialect writing substituted "less 'different' native ethnicities for the truly foreign ones of contemporary reality." Although local color writing can be seen as an expression of nativism, it paved the way for writing by immigrants such as Cahan who aimed for a realistic portrayal of life in their communities. When William Dean Howells suggested to Cahan that *Yekl* be subtitled *A Tale of the New York Ghetto*, he spread the mantle of local color over a neighborhood of foreigners. The New York ghetto might constitute a region, indeed might seem as regional to Howells as the American Southwest.

5. According to Susan Harris (1994), in dialect stories the narrator tends to distance the characters from his readers at the same time that he introduces them.

Howells's or James's New York and Boston were, in contrast, not considered to be regions—they were simply America.

Fiction that could be described as either realism or local color (or both) would embrace the principle of "speaking plain," a literary concept that took on a special urgency given the language debates in postbellum America that pitted the verbal critics against the scholarly philologists. The verbal critics described themselves as "linguistic police" whose role was to reintroduce "habits of deference into everyday speech" because they saw style as the carrier of the essence of cultivation and moral fiber; the philologists, on the other hand, saw language as a social convention determined by usage and dictated by the needs of communication (Jones 1999: 15–28). The philologists defended slang and dialect, which the verbal critics saw as a sign of moral degeneration.

By "shpeaking plain" Cahan's Yekl inhabits a fictional world that could be branded realistic (in some respects) and speaks a dialect, American English with a Yiddish accent. This is the crucial difference between Cahan and local color writers such as Mark Twain, Hamlin Garland, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Kate Chopin. Cahan was not writing in his native language, and he was writing out of two linguistic, literary, and cultural frameworks, one of which was not American.

Setting the Stage

Although Cahan wrote the English version of *Yekl* first, Howells failed to place it immediately with a publisher because of anti-Semitic responses that he had not anticipated. This led Cahan to translate it into Yiddish for serial publication in the *Arbeiter Tseitung*. It appeared under the pseudonym "Socius" (comrade or friend) until Appleton accepted the English version; only after the novel's endorsement in the American publishing world did Cahan assume authorship for his Yiddish readers.

Written for an American audience by a Yiddish- and Russian-speaking immigrant for whom English was learned and foreign, *Yekl* speaks in many voices, languages, and accents. It also speaks through a slippery third-person narrative voice whose attitude toward its subject is far from clear. This formal narrator of the English gives way in the Yiddish to an informal first-person speaker who claims personal acquaintance with Yekl. The Yiddish narrator "speaks plain": "I knew him. I met him a few times when his troubles were greatest. . . . I will be very satisfied if I succeed in just telling it to you as if we were talking at a table" (Cahan 1895a: 6). The following is the opening paragraph of the English text, in which both the informal first-person narrator and the reader have disappeared.

> The operative of the cloak shop in which Jake was employed had been idle all the morning. It was after twelve o'clock and the "boss" had not yet returned from Broadway, whither he had betaken himself two or three hours before in quest of work. The little sweltering assemblage — for it was an oppressive day in midsummer — beguiled their suspense variously. A rabbinical-looking man of thirty, who sat with the back of his chair tilted against his sewing machine, was intent upon an English newspaper. Every little while he would remove it from his eyes — showing a dyspeptic face fringed with a thin growth of dark beard — to consult the cumbrous dictionary on his knees. Two young lads, one seated on the frame of the next machine and the other standing, were boasting to one another of their respective intimacies with the leading actors of the Jewish stage. The board of a third machine, in a corner of the same wall, supported an open copy of a socialist magazine in Yiddish, over which a cadaverous young man absorbedly swayed to and fro droning in the Talmudical intonation. A middle-aged operative, with huge red side whiskers, who was perched on the presser's table in the corner opposite, was mending his own coat. While the thick-set presser and all the three women of the shop, occupying the three machines ranged against an adjoining wall, formed an attentive audience to an impromptu lecture upon the comparative merits of Boston and New York by Jake. (Cahan 1970: 1)

Yekl begins with a tableau that sets the scene for Jake's emergence. Idle workers are waiting for their "boss," the quotation marks signaling that the term itself is alien for them. The quotation marks may indicate that this is a word that has already become part of their Yiddish discourse in New York; previously it had no equivalent in Yiddish, being the product of the sweatshop, their new milieu. The word may also be set off because the workers don't really see him as boss. Perhaps there is something slightly ridiculous about his new position, as social hierarchies were often reversed in the New World, with scholars submitting to the authority of bosses who lacked the education that would have earned them respect back home. At this point the reader is already aware that both linguistically and socially, the word "boss" is an arena for Old World/New World tensions. The "boss" has left to seek work, but this mundane activity is conveyed in pretentious terms, "whither he had betaken himself." He isn't merely searching for work, he is on a "quest." The use of archaic, literary language for the activity described may strike a reader as a hypercorrection, perhaps an ironic one. If so, the narrative voice that had earlier placed "boss" in quotation marks is continuing in the vein of slight mockery of this person, the inflated prose matching the inflated position of the boss, who is treated mockingly by his workers and perhaps by the narrator himself. But this is also Cahan's first major publication in English, and if the reader suspects that Cahan is overreaching in his English, he or she would be placed in a position superior to the author, a problematic stance given the rest of the work.

The cast of characters in this sweatshop, portrayed before the opening speech by Yekl himself, introduces the social context of Jewish immigrant society at the turn of the century. One man reads an English newspaper, another a Yiddish socialist magazine, and two lads are discussing the Yiddish theater. The one reading the English paper is described as "a rabbinical-looking man," a term that is clearly aimed at the non-Jewish reader; the dyspeptic face and the dark beard might remind Jewish readers of stereotypical representations of the Talmud scholar, but these are not characteristics of the rabbinate. Cahan is assuming that for Gentile readers, every traditional Jew looks like a rabbi. This character brings the intensity of Talmudic learning to his study of the English language, with a "cumbrous dictionary" on his knees rather than a Talmud on a table. It is tempting to see the avid reader as Cahan himself, who learned English by devouring works of literature, just as Bernstein is intent on his American newspaper. A "cadaverous" young man has traded in the Talmud for a socialist magazine, but his body language remains faithful to Talmudic study as he sways to and fro "droning in the Talmudic tradition." The Yiddish theater is referred to as the "Jewish stage," since the words for the Yiddish language and Jewishness are synonymous in Yiddish. Forced to choose between the two words, Cahan stresses the culture of the stage rather than its language. Against this unsettled backdrop—in which the social hierarchy of eastern European Jewry has been overturned by capitalism, the "boss" has a dubious status, and the immigrant has exchanged religious tomes for English and Yiddish newspapers—the main actor makes his appearance.

Names as Signs: Jake, Yekl, Dzake

The first chapter is entitled simply "Jake and Yekl." As the story of the partial Americanization of a Russian Jewish immigrant, the chapter heading gives the reader the two names that represent the Old and the New Worlds, respectively. The sequence of this minimal story, however, is reversed, as the events relate how Yekl became Jake. How can we account for the reversal? Perhaps because of its familiarity, the American name Jake is given prominence over the disorientating foreign name. Moreover, as the name Yekl echoes Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (of the famous story published only ten years earlier), the word itself appears as an unstable identity that eventually will give way to a disreputable character.[6] The conjunction proposes that these two identities coexist; the second identity, however, is the coarse one that poses a threat to society. Although the title of the novel is *Yekl*, empha-

6. Taubenfeld (1998) attributes this insight to Werner Sollors (1986: 163).

sizing foreignness (the local color feature of the novel), in the narrative the main character is always referred to as Jake, the identity which he claims for himself.

Jake's first recorded activity is also his most dominant throughout the novel: "He had been talking for some time" (Cahan 1970: 1). In this scene Jake neither reads nor writes—he talks. It is Jake's recorded speech that fuels Cahan's prose, that captivated Howells, and that satisfied audience demand for local color and dialect writing. Throughout the novel the reported speech of characters is always presented as an English translation of an absent Yiddish original. Actual English words interspersed in the characters' speech are rendered in italics, and these italicized words are marked by the characters' pronunciation phonetically transcribed. Strictly speaking, then, the dialect of *Yekl* is the result of translational mimesis that seems peculiar in the target language (verbal transposition, to use Sternberg's [1981: 227] term, or "the poetic or communicative twist given to what sociolinguists call bilingual interference") and selective reproduction of the "foreign" language, which in this case is heavily accented English.[7]

Before Jake utters his first word, Cahan draws attention to his body, to his legs, planted wide apart on the ground, and to his "bulky" head and bare "mighty" arms (Cahan 1970: 2). Before we judge Jake's speech, the text presents us with his body—the physicality and force that Jake will affirm in actions and words. Throughout the work, Jake is self-conscious and defensive about his masculinity, which is threatened both by his status as immigrant in New World surroundings and by his nemesis, Bernstein, whose literacy is the sign of manhood in the Old World and the reason he will surpass Jake in commerce and displace him as husband in New York. The "Boston Yiddish" Jake speaks so proudly is characterized merely as containing a higher component of "mutilated English" than the speech of the New York ghetto dwellers, and his pronunciation is likened to another ethnic group's accent: "He had a deep and rather harsh voice, and his r's could do credit to the thickest Irish brogue" (ibid.). Despite his formal English, the narrator has identified himself as a Yiddish speaker able to judge the standard of Jake's speech in the native language they both share. As a result, readers feel that they are getting an authentic insider's view of the ethnic character as well as an outsider's judgment of Jake's English performance from a perspective close to their own. Insofar as Jake's Yiddish will prepare him for speaking English, he has the talent for reproducing another dialect, Irish brogue; this interlingual interference is not rendered mimetically

7. For extensive analysis of the poetics of cross-linguistic representation in narrative, see Sternberg 1981, 1998.

(Sternberg 1981: 228). Cahan relies on the reader's familiarity with it. From the point of view of gentile America and "standard" English, reproducing Irish brogue is a dubious achievement, the Irish occupying the lowest rung on the ladder of white native English speakers in America. In short, while Jake's speech may impress his fellow immigrants, he has no hope of ever passing as a mainstream American.

The emphasis on Jake's physical characteristics dovetails with his first speech, an observation about prizefighting: "When I was in Boston . . . I knew a *feller*, so he was a *preticly* friend of John Shullivan's. He is a Christian, that feller is, and yet the two of us lived like brothers. May I be unable to move from this spot if we did not. How, then, would you have it? Like here in New York, where the Jews are a *lot* of *greenhornsh* and can not speak a word of English? Over there every Jew speaks English like a stream" (Cahan 1970: 2). This boast about his superior Americanization rests on his having first lived in Boston; in American culture, this links him with the puritan founding fathers. But in this instance he derives his status from having lived among Jews who regularly misuse English, in the narrator's judgment, and from having known a Christian who was "preticly" a friend of an Irish boxing champion. His mispronunciation of "greenhornsh" can be traced to his Lithuanian roots, as discussed earlier, yet in English it comes across as the slight lisp reminiscent of the *mauscheln* that marked the Jew as an outsider in German society. By stigmatizing his character with a speech peculiarity that both marks him as a boor in Yiddish culture and echoes anti-Semitic representations of a Jewish accent, Cahan distances himself from him at the very moment that Yekl is distancing *himself* from less Americanized Jews, greenhorns.

The presser is the first in the scene to address Jake. "'*Say*, Dzake,' the presser broke in, 'John Sullivan is *tzampion* no longer, is he?' 'Oh, no! Not always is it holiday!' Jake responded, with what he considered a Yankee jerk of his head. 'Why don't you know? Jimmie Corbet *leaked* him, and Jimmy *leaked* Cholly Meetchel, too. *You can betch you' bootsh!*'" (ibid.). Recognized by his fellow operators as more American than they, Jake serves as a source of information about their new country, hence the presser's question about boxing. Yet the account given of his reply undercuts his smug self-designated Americanness. Although he attempts to imitate American gestures, his movement is no more than "what he considered" to be Yankee. The answer itself ("*Not always is it holiday!*") is a Yiddish idiom that sounds awkward and foreign in the English translation. Jake emerges as a comic figure, self-deluded about his acculturation. Despite his introjection of an American idiom—"You can betch you' bootsch!"—his accent detracts from his achievement.

The phonetic transcription of Jake's speech in the phrase "Corbet *leaked* him" adds another dimension to the text. On the level of the spoken word, Jake is importing idiomatic American English (in this case, perhaps even slang) into his Yiddish so that his spoken Yiddish, in the world of the novel, registers his ear for Americanisms. But when the word is transcribed onto the page with the purpose of providing an accurate account of the *sound* of his speech, it is necessarily also a *visual* sign. The American reader will see "leak" and have to process that back into "lick." But in the meantime, the semantic content of "leak" (as opposed to the equivalent sound of "leek") already will have done its job in accentuating Jake's crudeness, his bodily presence, as its association with urination in English usage dates back to the Renaissance.

Unlike the word "leak," which functions differently in spoken and written form and in each case has an English referent, "Dzake" is simply not an English word. In the New York ghetto world, the presser is addressing his fellow immigrant by his American name, one that he cannot pronounce. The word is not italicized, as if to indicate that it is not English, as opposed to the word that precedes it, "*Say*," which is presumably pronounced correctly. "Say Jake" is clearly what neither the presser, nor the other immigrants in the room, nor Jake himself can do. They can say Yekl's new American name only as "Dzake." For the characters, Jake's American name is unspeakable. For the American readers, the orthographic sign "dzake" is destabilizing, nearly unreadable. It can be read only by reproducing the sound made by the immigrants, by reading aloud, by speaking the word just as the foreign characters do. Processing the foreign-looking word into speech in order to read it situates the reader in the place of the immigrant, reenacting the slowed pace of encounters with strange sounds and signs. "Jake," the sign of Yekl's aspirations, is transcribed into "dzake," the sign of the unlikelihood of his ever achieving them. For a native Yiddish speaker, "Jake" and "Dzake" are equally foreign, as the letter *J* has no equivalent in Hebrew (or Russian) and as both words are rendered into a foreign alphabet. Even in the Yiddish version of *Yekl*, his name must appear with a diacritic that signals its adjustment to a nonindigenous sound. For English- and Yiddish-speaking characters and readers, "Dzake" is both a sound and visible marker that estranges.

The presence of the sign "Dzake" has far-reaching implications. As already discussed, this sign conflates the experience of the characters in the world of the fiction with the experience of the reader as he or she struggles to read and pronounce it. Because it can be read as a sign for Yekl only by reproducing the speech, it imports spoken voice into the act of reading.

As phonetic reproduction of speech, "Dzake" can be seen as part of the project of realism, to render speech as it is actually spoken. But the usage of "Dzake" also has the opposite effect. The absence of a corresponding form in the English language calls attention to the name's representation on the page, to the poetic strategy at work. Like Joyce's use of dialect in his portmanteau words, this absence promotes awareness of the materiality of the text and of the artistry of "speaking plain."[8] In this respect, it is not applicable within realism as discussed earlier. Here the multilingual and multivocal quality of the writing shares features with experimental writing that reflect back upon the opacity of language itself. For the American reader, "Dzake" is more than an encounter with the otherness of Jewish immigrant culture; it is recognition of the otherness of literary language.[9]

Tsommesh and Other Interlingual Puns

It is commonplace in poetics that disruption caused by misunderstanding is crucial to the evolution of literature. According to Juri Lotman (1979: 505–6), a special case of this type of disruption is the foreign text introduced into another culture. The foreign word can have the same energizing effect. Examples abound in *Yekl*, and they fall into a number of different categories.

In order to ensure the reader's access to interlingual puns, Cahan occasionally will provide an explanation, either in the body of the text or in a footnote. Jake's wife's name is a case in point. Given that she resists becoming Americanized, she is always referred to in the story by her Yiddish name, Gitl. But Jake bestows on her the American name "Gertie," which he pronounces "Goitie." The narrator informs the American reader that Goitie is "a word phonetically akin to Yiddish for Gentile" (Cahan 1970: 41). Moreover, for the English reader, it also possesses an unflattering association with "goiter." Jake's accent transforms the name of his stubbornly un-Americanized wife into a word whose sound deals a blow to her pride every time that he addresses her.[10]

8. Cahan makes frequent use of *eye dialect*, as discussed by Richard Bridgman (1966). Joyce represented speech in a variety of dialects, among them upper-class British speech as in "goddinpotty" and Irish speech in "waalworth of a skyerscape of most eyeful hoyth entowerly" (both from *Finnegans Wake*).

9. For the relationship between dialect and experimental modernist writing, see North 1994. For a discussion of literature as an institutionalized cultural space that negotiates and shapes patterns of cross-cultural contact, see Schwab 1996. She develops the concept of reading as a border operation requiring negotiations across boundaries marked by cultural, historic, and aesthetic differences.

10. The function of the wife as carrier of the ethnic past, and Cahan's specific version of this in his portrait of Gitl, is examined by Werner Sollors (1986: 156–65).

When Yekl threatens someone with, "I'll get out a tzommesh (summons) from court," the note for *tzommesh* is "a sour soup of cabbage and beets," usually transliterated as *tsimmes* (Cahan 1970: 46). Another such interlingual pun is Cahan's (ibid.: 25) description of America as a place "where a 'shister' becomes a mister and mister a shister." The note for "shister" is "Yiddish for shoemaker," but the pun depends upon the mispronunciation of mister as "meester" so that it rhymes with "sheester." Gitl's first lesson in American life is Yekl's insistence that she substitute the word "dinner" for "varimess." "*Dinner?*" she replies, "[a]nd what if one becomes fatter?" Cahan adds a note that "dinner" is "Yiddish for thinner" (ibid.: 38).

There are also moments when there are no clues for the American reader, and a seeming discrepancy remains enigmatic. One example is when Mrs. Kavarsky compliments Gitl on finally relinquishing some of her customs in order to become more Americanized, in this case discarding the kerchief that covers her head. Mrs. Kavarsky is enthusiastic about Gitl's decision: "*Dot's right!* When you talk like a man I like you" (ibid.: 65). The passage has little to do with gender roles, as Mrs. Kavarsky is undoubtedly saying, in Yiddish, "When you talk like a *mensch*" (a human being), which Gitl would understand as a reference to moral conduct. The word "man" in English carries with it connotations of manliness, Yekl's preoccupation, and clearly is not what Mrs. Kavarsky is praising in Gitl.

In later years Cahan himself admitted that the literal translation of idioms was not always successful, and he decided to abandon this technique in subsequent writing (Cahan 1928: 47). Although it is clear to the English reader that "the Uppermost will help" (Cahan 1970: 65) refers to God, the phrase is not very felicitous in the text. "Oi, a health to you" (ibid.: 68) is obviously an expression of good wishes, but it too would have benefited from an English equivalent. Similarly, "Little mother!" (ibid.: 64) (*Mamele*) is comic rather than endearing in its literal translation, although this wording also may have been influenced by the English translation of Russian novels in which this affectionate diminutive appears. Occasionally, however, a literal translation, such as "a darkness upon my years!" (ibid.: 62), revitalizes what would otherwise be a dead metaphor in the original.

Yekl divorces Gitl, and at the end of the novel his American self Jake is en route to city hall to marry Mamie. At the religious divorce proceedings, the legal formulas are translated from Hebrew into Yiddish so that both Gitl and Jake can understand each step of the process. But even here English invades the ritual. After the rabbi's formal address to Gitl that she express her willingness to be divorced, Mrs. Kavarsky coaches her in her reply: "'Say that you are *saresfied*,' whispered Mrs. Kavarsky. '*I'll ride*, I am *salesfiet*,' murmured Gitl" (ibid.: 85), leaving the reader to wonder how wide

the gap must be between Mrs. Kavarsky's translation into the American concept of being "satisfied" and the actual question put to Gitl by the rabbi.

"Dot'sh a' Kin' a Man I Am!"

In this world between languages and cultures, Jake defines himself in collective terms, usually in opposition to another collective identity. When one of the workers expresses doubts about the value of prizefighting, "Nice fun that! . . . Fighting—like drunken moujiks in Russia!" Jake comes to the defense of *American* fighting: "Do you mean to tell me that a moujik understands how to *fight*? A disease he does! . . . What does he *care* where his paw will land, so he strikes. *But* here one must observe *rulesh* [rules]" (Cahan 1970: 3).

At this point Jake's antagonist, Mr. Bernstein, ridicules the celebration of the body with an aside that accentuates mind over body, writing over speech, textuality over plain speaking. Looking up from his dictionary, he observes, "America is an educated country, so they won't even break bones without grammar. They tear each other's sides according to 'right and left,' you know" (ibid.: 4), a jab at Jake's right-handers and left-handers and a reference to Hebrew orthography, where a diacritic on either the left or right side of the letter *shin* determines how it will be pronounced. Specifically, it determines whether the letter will be *s* or *sh*, the very sound that Jake himself repeatedly mispronounces. Jake tends to define himself by highlighting his Americanization, by emphasizing the distance between Yekl and Jake. His nuanced understanding of prizefighting and his remote association with a champion by way of a gentile acquaintance centers him, in his eyes, within American life. Moreover, he is vigilant about marking the boundary between gentiles in America and gentiles in Russia. American fighters, he insists, are not Russian peasants. The same holds true for ballroom dancing, another physical activity that is an arena for Americanization. In the dance academy where Jake is in his element, he instructs the others in English, the official language of the place. "Don' be 'shamed, Mish Cohen. Dansh mit dot gentlemarn!" He is also quick to criticize. "Cholly! vot's de madder mitch *you*? You do hop like a Cossack, as true as I am a Jew" (ibid.: 17), he adds, indulging in a momentary lapse into Yiddish. Jake's American identity rests on his not being a Russian peasant or a Cossack, on the one hand, and his not being a bookish Jew, like Bernstein, on the other. His Americanization is tied in with his anti-intellectualism, his physical abilities, and his self-declared masculinity.

A man in Jake's eyes is someone who speaks plain, perhaps because he cannot write. Because of his devotion to the written word, Mr. Bernstein

serves throughout the novel as Jake's Other within the Jewish community. *He stands not only for some continuity of Jewish culture in the New World* but also for both the value of education in Jewish life generally as well as the privileging of writing over speech. Jake flies into a rage when criticized by Bernstein, belittling Bernstein's knowledge. "Learning, learning, and learning, and still he can not speak English. I don't learn and yet I speak quicker than you!" (ibid.: 7) Since neither Jake nor his parents could write Yiddish (although he and his father could read fluently the punctuated Hebrew of the Old Testament [Cahan's term] and the Prayer Book), his correspondence with them occurred by proxy. Whenever Jake sought out the newspaper vendor for his services as scribe, the old man would pause, after "five cents' worth of rhetoric," and ask, "What else should I write?" "How do *I* know?" Jake would respond. "It is you who can write; so you ought to understand what else to write" (ibid.: 17). This mediation is most poignant when the scribe reads the letter informing Jake of his father's death. "The letter had evidently been penned by some one laying claim to Hebrew scholarship and ambitious to impress the New World with it; for it was quite replete with poetic digressions, strained and twisted to suit some quotation from the Bible" (ibid.: 28). This verbosity, "which was Greek to Jake," impeded the scribe from realizing the full portent of what he was reading. "*Vot's der madder?*" the scribe echoes Yekl's cry. "What should be the *madder*?" "Any bad news?" asks Yekl. "Speak out!"—in other words, Speak plain. "Speak out! It is all very well for you to say 'speak out.' You forgot that one is a piece of a Jew" (ibid.: 29). The literal translation of the Yiddish idiom "piece of a Jew" does not convey its broader sense, as in "one is only human," but Cahan does provide some explanation, "hinting at the orthodox custom which enjoins a child of Israel from being the messenger of sad tidings" (ibid.). When Yekl grieves for his father, the memory of him is intertwined with Hebrew liturgy as he recalls his father chanting Sabbath prayers: "And it was evening and it was morning, the sixth day. And the heavens and earth were finished" (ibid.: 30). In short, despite the bravado and manly self-image Jake derives from both dancing and plain speaking, Cahan uses the written word, or lack of it, to diminish Jake's power. Here Jake is dwarfed by the Old World of Hebrew textuality.

The last page of *Yekl* is uncharacteristically devoid of all speech, accents, idioms, or puns. The last speech in dialect is uttered by the busybody Mrs. Kavarsky, reminding Gitl of her good fortune in landing a second husband who is "ejecate" as a lawyer. Jake, who has the last perspective but not the last word, is absolutely silent in the streetcar on the way to the mayor's office for his civil marriage ceremony. Despite the proximity of Mamie and her sexual allure—"he was tempted to catch her in his arms"—

he imagines his own future as "dark and impenetrable." He fantasizes a triumphant and vengeful return to his apartment, "declaring his authority as husband, father, and lord of the house" and ejecting Bernstein who has displaced him (ibid.: 89). Jake gradually senses that "[i]nstead of a conqueror, he had emerged from the rabbi's house the victim of an ignominious defeat." What is at stake is his masculinity, not his love of family or traditional Jewish life. From the garrulous authoritative man on the first page with "legs wide apart, his bulky round head aslant, and one of his bared arms akimbo," speaking English with the equivalent of an Irish brogue, Jake has become a silent figure swept reluctantly along in a moving car, wishing to prolong indefinitely the pause at each stop. Jake's last appearance is marked by bodily sensation and the absence of speech. He does not have time to "relish" his freedom or "taste" his liberty, and the narrator suggests that if he had not felt such an ignominious defeat, Mamie might have "appeared to him the *embodiment* of his future happiness" (emphasis added). Instead, he is carried along by the streetcar, and as it "resumed its progress, the violent lurch it gave was accompanied by a corresponding sensation in his heart" (ibid.). No more plain speaking for Jake, but for Cahan, this closing scene of Jake's unsuccessful assimilation, failed marriage, violent disappointment, and silence helped place his work thematically in the plain speaking realism of the period and earned him Howells's praise. Cahan performed as ethnic writer just as Howells had intended him to do; he became the American writer mediating Jake's world for his English readers. With the publication of *Yekl*, Cahan himself was "ejecate" enough to assimilate into the American literary scene.

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