

USA: Identities, Cultures, and Politics in National, Transnational and Global Perspectives

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Diasporic Identities: Multilingual Biographies in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*

Henry Roth's autobiographical novel *Call It Sleep* (1934) tells the story of a young boy's migration from an Eastern European Jewish village to New York City. The novel opens in "May of the year 1907, the year that was destined to bring the greatest number of immigrants to the shores of the United States" (Roth 1977, 9). The Jewish diaspora to the USA is thus framed from the very beginning within the larger context of global migration. In any case, of the almost one million three hundred thousand immigrants from Eastern Europe who arrived in the United States in 1907, 150,000 (11.5 percent) were Jewish. Roth and his mother formed part of the massive influx that boosted the Jewish population of New York sixteen-fold in thirty years, from 80,000 in 1880 to 1,250,000 in 1910. In 1918, 10 percent of all Jews in the world lived in New York.

This explains why the image of Manhattan's Lower East Side as the Jerusalem of the American Diaspora is, in Hasia Diner's words, "the central metaphor of American Jewish memory" (Diner 2000, 37), even if the district came gradually to lose part of its centripetal attraction for Jewish immigrants in favor of other New York City areas.¹ But from the very beginning the novel states clearly that the Jewish diaspora is not the only American diaspora: Ellis Island is thronged "by hundreds upon hundreds of foreigners, natives from almost every land in the world, the jowled close-cropped Teuton, the full-bearded Russian, the scraggly-whiskered Jew, and among them Slovak peasants with docile faces, smooth-cheeked and swarthy Armenians, pimply Greeks, Danes with wrinkled eyelids" (Roth 1977, 9). One may note that here the "natives from every part of the world" are actually represented by a synecdochic choice of European peoples, identified by way of the most stereotypical physical traits an Anglo-American observer might use in order to pinpoint their "already known" difference, a list of bodily features that accommodates them in a manageable map of "not too alien" otherness. Nonetheless, the varieties of human experiences and of languages, as the next-to-last chapter shows in an explosively virtuosistic *tour de force* represented in the novel

undermine any attempt to reduce *Call It Sleep* to a sort of celebration of the linguistic strategies David Schearl learns to use to survive in the New World chaos and Henry Roth exploits so as to be recognized by the literary American establishment as a legitimate modernist writer. Rather than a defensive closure against a Babel-like confusion of unknown and threatening tongues, what David Schearl's progress through the crowded and noisy Lower Manhattan streets finally comes to signify when he almost commits suicide is a monumental negotiation of different languages and cultures that almost miraculously manage to communicate one with the other without renouncing any of their distinctive idiosyncracies. But this is only the final result of his peregrination through the complex web of New World languages (and cultures), caught as he is "between crumbling Old World values and an accommodation not yet formed" (Pinsker 1992, 12).

As a matter of fact, David Schearl's experience in the new land (where he arrives when he is 2) is structured according to a pattern of tensions between the different languages he gradually encounters and the only language he knows before leaving Europe, Yiddish. As the novel almost didactically shows (as do many "language biographies" of Jewish immigrants to America),² this pattern is modelled according to a tripartite process, commonly found in modern immigrant fiction. The first reaction the immigrant has when facing the "quintessentially modern sense of dislocation and alienation"—typically "a crucial theme in immigrant fiction" (Barnard 2005, 49)—is a defensive retreat into a cultural space where only the mother tongue is spoken: in the novel, this is *literally* a *mother's* tongue, because Yiddish is the only language David's mother speaks to him, and the place she speaks it is the protective womb-like home to which David repeatedly flies to escape the threatening English-speaking outside world, the world of the streets; on the other hand, the novel hints that this protection is only provisional, and may even cause an identity regression.³

The second stage is that of the necessary acculturation to the second language, the language that dominates the new world (but not its only language): it is a world represented through an imagery (and a sound-track: "this must be the noisiest novel ever written," in Walter Allen's words, quoted in the title of Stephen J. Adams's essay; see Adams 1989) that stresses the frantic incomprehensibility of the landscape of modernity. But as David begins to learn some English, this world also starts opening up new opportunities, new paths he may travel to create his own identity, and to avoid his father's fits of rage, caused by his conviction that David is not his son. At this stage, David's father, Albert, comes to represent the alienated state of the immigrant who is able neither to maintain his original cultural identity nor to acculturate to the society of immigration (he always fights with his colleagues at work):

it is a state David fears may become also his own, but a paradoxical solution is offered through Albert's decision to send his son to the *cheder*, the Hebrew religious school, "to make sure he'll become something of a Jew" (Roth 1977, 207). The third stage the return to one's linguistic and cultural roots, even those the subject does not know he has is mirrored in David's learning classic Hebrew and Aramaic at the *cheder*, the symbolic place where the educational system of the American Jews attempts to ensure the transmission of traditional knowledge:⁴ even if he does not understand most of what he is forced to learn by heart of the Scriptures, the myths of cultural identity he is exposed to light up new fascinations and desires. David is particularly struck by the story of Isaiah, whose lips are touched by an angel with a burning coal so that he may be cleansed and gain the power to hear the voice of God and speak with Him.

This myth of empowerment through language becomes so important to David that, when a violent fight between his parents breaks out, he runs to the trolley rail and drops a metal dipper on the electrified tracks in an attempt to evoke the same flame that allowed Isaiah to become a prophet. The result is apparently the opposite: David falls almost senseless to the ground, and his return to the language and culture myths of his "origins" seems to produce only the soundless stasis of a regression to a pre-natal state as he is brought back to the womb-home to lay in bed, where he drifts towards what we may call "sleep." But David's act of (almost) self-sacrifice also manages to create a bond of communication among all the ethnic communities peopling the Lower East Side, as all converge to the site of the accident and, at least momentarily, overcome their differences and even hostilities in order to help the injured boy (as his parents do also):

The street paused. Eyes, a myriad of eyes, gay or sunken, rheumy, yellow or clear, slant, blood-shot, hard, boozy or bright, swerved from their tasks, their play, from faces, newspapers, dishes, cards, seidels, valves, sewing machines, swerved, and converged. While at the foot of Tenth Street, a quaking splendour dissolved the cobbles, the grimy structures, bleary stables, the dump-heap, river and sky into a single cymbal-clash of light. Between the livid jaws of the rail, the dipper twisted and bounced, consumed in roaring radiance, candescent—

...

"Holy Mother O' God! Look! Will yiz!"

"Wot?"

"There's a guy layin' there! Burrhnin'!"

"Naw! Where!"

"Gawd damn the winder!"

"It's on Tent' Street! Look!"

...

"Git a cop!"

"An embellance—go cull-oy!"

"Don't touch 'im!"
 "Bambino! Madre mia!"
 "Mary. It's jus' a kid!"
 "Helftz! Helftz! Helftz Yeedin! Rotivit!"
 . . .
 "Mimi! He's awright! He's awright!"
 "Yeh?"
 "Yea!"
 "No kiddin'! No kiddin'!"
 "Yeh!"
 "Yuh!"
 "Yeh!"
 "Oi, Gott sei dank!"
 (Roth 1977, 417-419, 430)

Elèna Mortara has already underscored how this scene dramatizes a sort of metaphorical translation of all the hyphenated Americans into a new entity, a varied but finally single-minded microcosm of Americans, without the need to be further specified (see Mortara 2006). This *reductio ad unum*, besides, occurs thanks to the near-sacrifice of a "son" attended to by a venerated mother and by a father who's not so certain that he *is* his father. The obvious analogy David=Jesus Christ reflects the transformation of the boy's cultural environment, triggered by the symbolic electric (g)rail, as his old Jewish identity seems to give way to a new, Christian one.

Jeffrey Folks (1999) has claimed that *Call It Sleep* is not so much multilingual—as Hana Wirth-Nesher (1995), among others, insists⁵—as it is monocultural, because the many diverse languages and dialects represented in the novel are not given the equal status to the "dominant" language that many contemporary postcolonial texts manage to allow. According to Folks, code-switching here functions as a marker of Roth's own modernist alienation from the raw speech of the masses, which is contained, in the 21st chapter, by the poetic-like paragraphs in italics, written in an elegant, Eliot-like, accentless English, such as the following:

(As if on hinges, blank, enormous
 mirrors arose, swung slowly upward
 face to face. Within the facing
 glass, vast panels deployed, lifted a
 steady wink of opaque pages until
 an endless corridor dwindles into
night.) (Roth 1977, 425)

These paragraphs should convey David's perception of what's happening around him, but the language used here is not the one we are accustomed to when reading David's emotional reactions to the most relevant events in the novel: this is not the phrasing a dizzy 8-year boy might use, but a sophisticated

rendering of those emotions, much later recollected (we do not know how much in tranquillity) and reorganized by an adult aspiring to compete with the major modernist poets. What the reader should note, however, is that in the visual structure of this chapter the parentheses do not enclose David's original experience of courting death and the cacophonous alternation of voices from the street commenting on it, but the very reconstruction of that experience. The multifarious languages clashing and merging remain on the page as they are, faithfully reproduced with no attempt to reduce them to some sort of "unified" structure—not even the orchestra-like harmonization of dozens of different cultural expressions that Horace Kallen compared to/contrasted with Israel Zangwill's homogenizing crucible in his 1915 essay "Democracy Versus the Melting Pot." Even the disposition of the dialogues on the page hints at an irredeemable resistance to orderly arrangement, building at best a reproduction of another favorite image of Kallen's, that of a "national mosaic of ethnic and religious groups" (Shapiro 1992, 158). This may well be a supreme instance of that "exploded form" that for James M. Mellard (even if he does not cite Roth in his book) is the distinctive trait of the modernist novel, whose authors were "forced to identify 'authority' their textual validations and determinations—elsewhere than in the traditional figural, emblematic monisms upon which the genre had been based" (Mellard 1980, 15-16); or it may also be an "attempt to escape the limitations of individual forms" that, according to Maurice Beebe, "has been a dominant feature of the entire Modernist movement" (Beebe 1974, 1072).

Roth's poetic intersections may well be markers of his distance from that Babel-like world, his modernist alienation from it, but it is *that* Babel that saves his protagonist, and it is the literary representation of all those not-yet-fully-American, still confusing and confused transnational identities that will save Roth himself from anonymity—not his copycatting Eliot. That in subsequent decades Roth suffered from the worst case of writer's block in modern American literature (it came to an end only decades later), may be the result not only of the ideological ostracism from the political Left because his novel was not "socialist" enough, but also of Roth's distancing from the polyphonic vitality of the Lower East Side and of his choosing the isolated citadel of modernist elitism: when Cinzia Schiavini says that *Call It Sleep* is a sort of staging of the death of the author in the traditional sense, she stresses that Roth is here discarding the role of the writer who represents reality at safe distance (see Schiavini 1998). And here is the reason for the paradox Mario Materassi recognizes: one of the most important novels of the 20th century, and an absent author (Materassi 2004, 21). Absent, almost dead, because his own linguistic biography comes to a halt when David's does: ultimately both remain silent (we may as well call theirs a sleep),

while the plurivocal kaleidoscope of the streets of New York continues to turn and resonate.

Before the “almost dying/sleeping” (and Hamlet’s ghost clearly hovers here) of the novel’s author and of its protagonist, David’s trajectory from Eastern Europe through the various New York spaces he has come to inhabit closely resembles that of virtually every contemporary individual who, according to Madan Sarup’s reflections on “Home and Identity,” passes “a long string of widely divergent social worlds. At any single moment of their life, individuals inhabit simultaneously several such divergent worlds. The result is that they are ‘uprooted’ from each and not ‘at home’ in any” (Sarup 1994, 102). That in David’s alienation Roth projects his own—not so much that of his childhood as the one he will soon oppressively feel in failing to be either a successful proletarian novelist or a high modernist, and in his dismissal of a Jewish identity not substituted by any WASP one—is made evident in a letter written in 1968 to Byron Franzen, when he confesses that the East Side depicted in *Call It Sleep* is much more nightmarish than it actually was when he lived there as a child: the novel’s main setting is

East Harlem impinged upon an inoffensive ghetto, when in fact the East Side was really quite cosy, quite snug and homogeneous, while a barbarous, goyish, Irish-infested, Irish-plagued and benighted Harlem, where I spent most of my youth, impinged upon the East Side, where I spent only a few years of earlist [*sic*] childhood, and thereby distorted an essentially benign environment, violated it gratuitously, disfigured it into a new grim vision recognizable to neither Jew nor gentile, with the result that neither, in the vernacular, bought it. (Roth 1968)⁶

Nonetheless, until his final drift into inarticulateness, David’s linguistic biography might have come to stand, at least at a symbolic level, for a possibly different outcome of a process that could otherwise have led to a linguistic and cultural entrenchment, somehow replicating the corresponding defensive strategies of many immigrant diasporas. The novel suggests instead the possibility of a cross-linguistic and transcultural dialogue reached through the valorization of the specificities of each cultural and linguistic heritage. The standard two-way back-and-forth (better, forth-and-back) movement of the diasporas (spatially, from the place of origin to the place of immigration/exile; temporally, from the present time of the “new” world back to the past of the “original” linguistic and cultural identity),⁷ which may beget the static worship of a seemingly immovable tradition, gives way to a plurality of lines of movement through the many frontiers that separate the New York immigrant communities, and that are celebrated by the novel itself as a linguistic and cultural object. In some way, the consequences of David’s near-sacrifice in the name of a totally fideistic trust in the word of an unintelligible God confirm the view of the Orthodox Rabbi Bernard Drachman, who more or

less at the same time professed to subscribe to a “harmonious combination of Orthodox Judaism and Americanism” (qtd. in Kraut 1998, 31) and what is more American than the coming together of people from all corners of the world toward a central “melting rod” (if not pot)? Rather than isolating him from the boiling mixture of early 20th-century New York ethnic communities, David’s attempt to become something like a “real” Jew projects him into the very heart of American multicultural society, on a trajectory that American Jewish intellectuals such as Randolph Bourne and Horace Kallen were trying to trace in studying “the anomalous condition of the Jew in a cosmopolitan nation,” finally arriving at the conclusion that “Jewish heritage” could be satisfactorily reconciled “with American citizenship” (Whitfield 1999, 15). This is not to say that the ending of *Call It Sleep* partakes of the same quasi-utopian atmosphere of Hutchins Hapgood’s romanticizing *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902), where we read that the “picturesque” ghetto may give the young Jew the possibility of becoming “an integral part of American life without losing the seriousness of nature developed by Hebraic tradition and education” (Hapgood 1967, 34). David’s predicament is much less straightforward, and the “turbulence of migration” (I borrow the expression from Nikos Papastergiadis) he experiences may rather foreshadow newer forms of belonging that “are rarely the mere duplication of traditional forms, or the blind adoption of modern practices” (Papastergiadis 2000, 20).

Thirty years after the personal experiences which gave Henry Roth the material for his novel, these multiple languages and cultures—not only those of the Jewish diaspora—are translated into *Call It Sleep* without losing their peculiarities, and cooperate in weaving a complex web of interrelationships that mobilizes the concept of Jewish identity as a monolithic entity,⁸ because David’s (and Roth’s, and maybe the reader’s) identity is shown as patterned by the exchange with, and contamination by, the many other identities he has encountered. It was the isolation from this network of experiences, of linguistic and cultural expressions, that probably led Henry Roth to retreat to a sort of solitary and muted exile from the world, just as he was incapable of fully playing the role of modernist writer, of entering that “process of role-playing experimenting with diverse styles while rapidly changing styles and voices,” which “is an essential part of Modernism” (Schwartz 1997, 181), because he distanced himself from those many styles and voices, and did not make them his own.⁹ But in the meantime, *Call It Sleep* was diasporically disseminating his New Babel of words everywhere.

Notes

¹ “In 1892, 75 percent of New York Jews lived on the Lower East Side, a number that fell to 50 percent in 1903 and to 25 percent by 1916” (Wenger 2007, 94).

² The concept of “language biography” is the very heart of many recent reflections on migration and identity, and on their interaction with multilingualism. See Zarate, Lévy, and Kramsch 2008.

³ As a matter of course, this picture is the one the novel attempts to draw, not necessarily always succeeding in doing so, especially as regards the narrative function of David’s mother, Genya, whose figure is much more complex than the role this tripartite model would allow her to play. In the traditional “attantial” narrative pattern developed by Greimas, Genya would play a double function, as “helper” in protecting Henry from the dangers represented by the streets and his father, and as “opponent” in thwarting his attempts to break free by overtly facing them. But Genya would deserve a deeper analysis, to free her too from the bondage of the closed and oppressive domestic space Roth tries to lock her in. She might also come out as an instance of that “inner subjectivity” recent feminist theorists have retrieved in many immigrant women, who did “not necessarily view their situation [of unpaid domestic workers] as oppressive” and who managed to “forge multiple and complex identities” (Brettell 2000, 111). Besides, Genya’s dialogues with her sister Bertha, mainly in Polish (a tongue David does not understand), hint at a multilinguistic biography that is as important as the one David is creating at the *cheder*, because they give him some obscure clue about an alternative history of himself—something he “creatively” manipulates to invent a family romance in which he is the son of a Catholic musician (his mother’s would-be lover in an aborted affair back in Europe).

⁴ The rabbi teaching at the *cheder* David attends is evidently a conservative Orthodox, and not a member of the most liberal Reform movement. David’s family is part of the wave of East European Jewish immigrants who “did overturn the Reform majority in America,” and by 1910 “90 percent of approximately 2,000 synagogues in the United States identified as Orthodox” (Wenger 2007, 109).

⁵ In a most recent essay, Wirth-Nesher presents *Call It Sleep* as an exemplary instance of literary multilingualism, because it “encompasses all of the aspects of multilingual writing . . . : dialect, reproduction of ‘foreign’ languages, internal translation [most of the dialogues we read in English are actually spoken in Yiddish] and untranslatability, cultural literacy through non-English triggers, interlingual puns, liturgy, sacred and secular language, linguistic home and exile” (Wirth-Nesher 2003, 122). For her more general reflections on multilingualism in Jewish American literature, see Wirth-Nesher 2006.

⁶ “For all its wretched poverty, the neighborhood that Roth remembered was a lively community of Eastern European immigrants who could now live without fear of anti-Semitism, because they rarely saw a Gentile, more rarely still an anti-Jewish bigot” (Kellman 2005, 31).

⁷ The first two common features Robin Cohen individuates in all diasporas are: “Dispersal from an original homeland,” and “a collective memory and myth about the homeland” (Cohen 2008, 26).

⁸ David Biale bluntly states that to historicize Jewish culture is to recognize that “the difference between ‘Jew’ and ‘goy’ is no longer ontological,” and that the “relationship of Jewish culture to its surroundings was, and is, dynamic and permeable” (Biale 1994, 44-45).

⁹ On the other hand, this attitude could also be read as the manifestation of a sort of respect towards the multi-faceted linguistic and cultural world of the Lower East Side, or at least of the imagined Lower East Side of *Call It Sleep*, that Roth does not want to inappropriately appropriate, dispossessing the immigrants of their own “styles and voices”—something Eliot or Pound were much less scrupulous about.

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