

CHAPTER 1

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## Accent Marks: Writing and Pronouncing Jewish America

PRONOUNCING AMERICA, WRITING JEWISH: ABRAHAM CAHAN,  
DELMORE SCHWARTZ, GRACE PALEY, BERNARD MALAMUD

Far beyond the lights of Jersey,  
Jerusalem still beckons us, in tongues.

—Linda Pastan, “Passover” (1971)

Contrary to some stereotypical misunderstanding, there is no  
New Jersey accent.

—Philip Roth “Interview” (2002)

FOR DECADES, a New York–based radio station whose multilingual broadcasts served the needs of immigrant communities would identify itself in the following words: “This is WEVD, the station that speaks *your* language.” For most of the Jewish listeners, this meant Yiddish. During the first half of the twentieth century, Yiddish fueled the immigrant and second generation community, with daily newspapers, theaters, novels, poetry, folksongs, and radio programs such as those on WEVD. All of this has been well documented, and all of this is history. In recent years, New York City subways have displayed bold posters of the American flag in the shape of an Aleph (first letter of the Hebrew alphabet), sporting a banner with the words “Read Hebrew America.” By dialing a simple toll-free number, 1-800-444-HEBRE(W), anyone can acquire information at any time about free classes in “the language of our people” (see Figure 1). But what does “speaking your language” mean in these two advertisements, or in American Jewish culture more generally over the past century? In one case, Yiddish is a sign of the Old World, of an immigrant community tuning in to WEVD as a form of nostalgia. In the other, Hebrew is a sign of an even older identity, not of family history but of ancient history, not of relatives but of ancestors. One is listening, the other is reading; one is remembering, the other is re-enacting; one is “Yiddishkeit,” the other is Judaism. WEVD caters to an audience for whom Yiddish is palpably present; “Read Hebrew” addresses a public for whom Hebrew is conspicuously absent. One community’s linguistic home is still Yiddish, the other’s home is English, and only a moral or ideological imperative—“Read Hebrew America”—proposes to alter that.

Nowadays, the primary language of American Jewry is neither Yiddish nor Hebrew.<sup>1</sup> Despite impressive bodies of literature in both of these languages produced in the United States, the language of American Jewry has become

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Figure 1. National Jewish Outreach Program's "Read Hebrew America" logo.

English, so much so that Cynthia Ozick has at one time suggested that English be referred to as the New Yiddish.<sup>2</sup> Still, it would be misleading to talk about American Jewry as entirely monolingual. Jewish American literature offers testimony of multilingual awareness not only among immigrant writers where we would expect this to be the case but also among their descendants who have retained attachments to languages other than English, at times despite their meager knowledge of them. In fact, the mere sound of the language or the sight of a letter from the Hebrew alphabet has often been sufficient to trigger powerful feelings of belonging or alienation. The works that I will be discussing in this book are captivating not necessarily because the authors have mastered more than one language but because they are negotiating between languages that they evade, repress, transgress, mourn, resist, deny, translate, romanticize, or reify. They are works of American literature with a Jewish accent.

A short excerpt from Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* illustrates how both Yiddish and Hebrew leave their traces in Jewish American writing. Two small boys are accusing a third of having committed a double sin by tearing a page of a Yiddish newspaper for use as toilet paper. "So w'y is id a double sin?" he asks. "'cause it's Shabis,' one of the boys calls out, 'An dat's one sin. Yuh can't tear on Shabis. And because it's a Jewish noospaper wid Jewish on id, dat's two sins. Dere!' 'Yes', the other chimed in. 'You'd a only god one sin if you tord a Englitch noospaper.'" Roth renders Yiddish accent in carefully designed phonetic transcription where English orthography and Yiddish sound intersect to produce interlingual puns that comment on this scene of transgression, as in "noospaper," "god," "tord" (close to "turd"), and "Englitch." Since phonetic transcription is always a matter of what we see as much as what we hear, and always a matter of artistic choice rather than some illusory accuracy, the Yiddish accent marks in these expressions gesture both toward the English words that we read and the Hebrew alphabet without whose presence this passage would make no sense. Insofar as the commandment to rest on the Sabbath day has been interpreted in traditional Judaism as avoiding any labor that parallels God's labor of creating the world, namely altering the state of matter, tearing a sheet of paper violates "shabis," the Sabbath. The second sin, however, is the one that invokes one of the special features of Hebrew, namely the sacredness of the alphabet. Although the boys are obviously talking about a Yiddish newspaper, the Hebrew letters always have the potential of being combined into God's name, the sacred tetragrammaton, and therefore they must not be defaced or desecrated. The linguistic story of Jewish American writing has been in large part a passage out of Yiddish, the language of immigrants, and a passage into Hebrew, the language of religious rites of passage so formative in Jewish identity.<sup>4</sup> As the child of immigrants and as modernist American writer, Roth is poised between these two, as exemplified in this passage. On one hand, Yiddish-inflected speech affords him an opportunity for both social realism and artistic word play, while on the other hand, it gives him a venue

for commenting on the holy or liturgical dimension of Hebrew, a continuous feature of Jewish culture on either side of the Atlantic.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the very word “Englitch” testifies to the Yiddish components in American English, as “glitch” is now standard usage for a slip, lapse, or malfunction.<sup>6</sup> Jewish American writing is marked by numerous linguistic slips and lapses such as Roth’s, traces of Yiddish and Hebrew in English.

Despite this compact illustration of my subject and despite the echo of Roth’s novel in my own title, I am not claiming that his work is representative in the sense that all Jewish American writers treat these languages uniformly. On the contrary, I am arguing that while the linguistic heritage for the majority of Jewish writers in English has been Yiddish and Hebrew, they have negotiated these languages in diverse ways. Representation of accented speech, for example, has ranged from the strident Yiddish American dialect in Abraham Cahan’s work to accented speech restricted to non-Jewish American characters in Saul Bellow’s novels. And the spectrum is as wide for Hebraic and liturgical inscriptions as well, from the blasphemy of Henry Roth to the reverence of Cynthia Ozick. The two New Jersey epigraphs to this chapter from contemporary writers attest to the hold of Hebrew and Yiddish on the imaginations of Jewish American authors. Linda Pastan begins her poem “Passover” with “I set my table with metaphor” and then surveys the display of Jewish ceremonial dishes—“Down the long table, past fresh shoots of a root / they have been hacking at for centuries, / you hold up the unleavened bread—a baked scroll / whose wavy lines are indecipherable.”<sup>7</sup> Each item of food on the poet’s Passover table signifies more than its traditional role according to the Haggadah, the narrative and ritual of the *seder*, such as the root that symbolizes the bitterness of slavery (*maror*) or the unleavened bread that symbolizes the haste of the divine deliverance from bondage (*matzah*). For Pastan, the root that has been hacked at for centuries is also the tenacity of the Jewish people to survive persecution, while the serrated lines across the *matzah* appear as indecipherable Hebrew script. The inseparability of the ritualistic items and the language of their origin, of what is eaten and what is spoken, awakens a longing in her “this one night a year” for a distant origin, where “far beyond the lights of Jersey / Jerusalem still beckons, in tongues.”<sup>8</sup> In contrast to this exilic yearning for the ancient mother tongue, Hebrew, Philip Roth shakes off any vestige of immigrant Yiddish by insisting that New Jersey is a miraculous terrain of accent-less speech—“there is no New Jersey accent”—by which he means that he does not speak like a Jew. In a recent interview, he admits that “there is a New York accent,” but “there was only one language in my neighborhood, American English.”<sup>9</sup> Roth’s repeated disavowal of accent marks in his speech leaves its trace on his writing, as I will discuss in this introduction and in the final chapter. His linguistic situation is proof enough that not knowing a language is not an indicator of its influence, since it may be harder to abandon what cannot be grasped. As a second generation American, Roth “never

learned Yiddish,” and as a result, communication with his grandmother was confined to “the language of emotion, which is powerful but not very informative.” As for Hebrew, “I ceased being smart in Hebrew school.” Given that he found himself “dumb” with respect to both the passage away from Yiddish and the rite of passage toward Hebrew, it is not surprising that muteness, stammering, and accent will haunt his writing, not because he has no command of these languages but because he is disturbed by the notion that he should know them.

Those writers whose works reveal traces of Yiddish and Hebrew (or Aramaic), whether they are immigrant or native-born Americans, have either strongly identified with, even celebrated, this continuity in their writings, or they have kept their distance by ironic treatment of characters’ speech or by self-conscious declarations of English exclusivity. My contention is that for many Jewish American writers subsequent to the immigrant generation, Hebrew and Yiddish are sources of self-expression and identity even if the authors cannot “remember” them in the sense of ever having possessed them as a means of communication. Their understanding of what these languages signify is always the result, borrowing from Werner Sollors, of both descent, a continuous cultural legacy, and consent, an embrace of American English that also structures their sense of those Jewish languages and accents. Their remembering, therefore, is not the result of an essential Jewishness that harkens back to some racial memory but the result of socialization where practices, expectations, and assumptions about the entanglement of language and identity linger in their consciousness. Immigrant authors and their literary descendants will either weave these languages into their English writing as they emphasize the particular, which is the case for most of the writers in *Call It English*, or they will profess their forgetting in their insistence on the universal, as in the case of Mary Antin and Philip Roth.<sup>10</sup>

“ONE LANGUAGE HAS NEVER BEEN ENOUGH FOR THE JEWISH PEOPLE”:  
SHMUEL NIGER (1941)

Knowledge of more than one language has always characterized Jewish civilization, whether the Jews were dispersed among the nations or residing in their homeland. In Warsaw at the turn of the century, a Jew might have spoken Yiddish at home, prayed and studied holy books in the Beit Midrash in Hebrew and Aramaic, transacted business in Polish, and read world literature in Russian or in German. In Alexandria in the same period, a Jew might have spoken French at home, prayed and studied in Hebrew and Aramaic, read a Ladino newspaper (also known as Judeo-Spanish or Judezmo), and conducted his professional life in Arabic. Even the shtetl dweller with little formal secular education, such as Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye, negotiated between the

*mame-loshen* (mother tongue) of domestic and worldly Yiddish and *loshn-koydesh*, the holy tongue of Hebrew-Aramaic. By necessity, he would also have acquired enough Ukrainian to secure his income as a dairyman. European Jewish culture was constituted of the rich symbiosis of these languages, of their complementary and hierarchical relation to each other. Insofar as Hebrew tended to define the sphere of prayer, ritual, study, and law, it occupied a “masculine” position in diasporic Jewish culture; insofar as Yiddish was generally confined to the more mundane spheres of the home and the marketplace, it was often defined as a “feminine” world.<sup>11</sup> But there were many exceptions to this polarization, particularly in the emergence of a flourishing and wide-ranging modernist Yiddish literature whose themes and readership cut across gender lines. 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.”<sup>12</sup>

Before Shmuel Niger made the case for bilingualism as a constant feature of Jewish writing—“one language has never been enough for the Jewish people”—in his Yiddish *Bilingualism in the History of Jewish Literature*, published in America in 1941, Baal-Makhshoves had already made this claim in eastern Europe at the turn of the century. As early as 1918, he observed that the mark of Jewish literature had always been its bilingualism.<sup>13</sup> Although he was taking this position within the ideological wars of the Czernowitz conference and the antagonism between Hebrew and Yiddish,<sup>14</sup> he traced the bilingual status of Jewish literature back to the Bible. In every text that is part of the Jewish tradition, Baal-Makhshoves wrote, there existed implicitly or explicitly another language, whether it be Chaldean in the Book of Daniel, Aramaic in the Pentateuch and the prayer book, Arabic in medieval Jewish philosophical writings, and, in his own day, 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. “We have two languages and a dozen echoes from other foreign languages, but we have only *one* literature.”<sup>15</sup> 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 so-called monolingual prose. “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?”<sup>16</sup>

Since Baal-Makhshoves and Niger singled out multilingualism as a prominent feature of Jewish literature, scholars and critics have continued to highlight it in their various studies of Jewish writing. As Ruth Wisse has observed, “the politically anomalous Jews generated a multilingual literature” in their refusal “to make language synonymous with national identity” and “in their

corresponding eagerness to master coterritorial cultures.”<sup>17</sup> Bilingual and multilingual poetics has been at the center of literary scholarship of modern Hebrew and Yiddish writing, exemplified in the work of Benjamin Harshav, Yael Feldman, Dan Miron, and Gershon Shaked, among others.<sup>18</sup> European Jewish immigrants brought this multilingual legacy with them to the New World, where their encounter with American English was bound to alter their attitudes toward and their practice of these tongues. Immigration to America dramatically altered this traditional need for bilingualism: separation of church and state on one hand and the melting pot ideology on the other made Jewish affiliation a matter of individual conscience, and held out the promise of acculturation and assimilation. Immigrants fervently believed that English was the ticket to successful Americanization, and therefore becoming a “naturalized” citizen meant first and foremost a linguistic transformation. In Mary Antin’s triumphant rhetoric, “I thought it miracle enough that I, Mashke, the granddaughter of Raphael the Russian . . . should dream my dreams in English phrases.”<sup>19</sup> Several decades later Cynthia Ozick noted, “Since the coming forth from Egypt five millennia ago, mine is the first generation to think and speak and write wholly in English.”<sup>20</sup> The English language that Jewish immigrants were eagerly adopting as their own, however, was more elastic, more open to other languages, than those that Jews had encountered in Europe. Although Webster’s strategy for a standard Federal English failed, his concept that American English differed from its parent English survived and gained momentum. Twain’s reply to the Englishman who praised him for his command of English illustrates the point: “I said I was obliged to him for his compliment, since I knew he meant it for one, but that I was not fairly entitled to it, for I didn’t speak English at all,—I only spoke American.”<sup>21</sup> One could argue that all of American literature has been hyphenated since its earliest days, that the languages and voices of the “other” have made their way continuously into American English due to its porous boundaries, as we have seen with the Yiddish word “glitch.” When Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* wants to know why a Frenchman, if he is a man, “doan . . . talk like a man?”—namely, English—he is expressing sentiments about the universality of homo sapiens from his position as a slave, while simultaneously he is being critiqued for not understanding that no one can occupy a position outside of cultural difference in the name of some transparent natural (and national) language. An emphasis on the democratic value of speech in Twain, Whitman, and Emerson, coupled with resistance to one uniform language, enabled Jewish Americans to shape English as well as to be shaped by it.<sup>22</sup> As a result, the age-old Jewish multilingual tradition in its encounter with the openness of the American language has generated a singular literary and cultural dynamic that distinguishes it from the literature of other ethnic groups in the United States; this is the story and poetic that I will be unfolding in this book.<sup>23</sup>

YIDDISH—THE PASSAGE OUT

“Shpeak Jewish, pleash!”

—*Yekl*, (1896)

“‘Say something, speak *English*,’ he pleaded.”

—“Eli, the Fanatic” (1959)

Whereas Hebrew usually makes its appearance in Jewish American literature as writing in the form of scripture, liturgy, and a vast repertoire of hermeneutic texts, Yiddish is the language of speech.<sup>24</sup> Vocalizing Hebrew is an issue only insofar as it concerns Judaism the religion, whereas speech in social interaction is reserved for *mamaloshn*, literally “mother tongue,” synonymous with Yiddish. As Max Weinreich has observed, “Yiddish is the spoken language . . . but Hebrew is the language for recording.”<sup>25</sup> The history of Yiddish as a component of English writing in America roughly spans the two quotations above, from the immigrant writer Abraham Cahan, for whom English was an acquired language, to the third generation Jewish writer, Philip Roth, for whom Yiddish is foreign. Caught up in the spirit of American local color writing and in his commitment to realism as a tool of social reform, Cahan composed *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896), in which sweatshop worker Yekl renames himself Jake, divorces his greenhorn wife Gitl for the more Americanized Mamie, and boasts of his newly acquired heavily accented English, which, according to the narrator, is at best not much better than Irish brogue. For his debut as an American writer, a little more than a decade after his immigration from Russia, Cahan had his characters speak standard English to represent Yiddish and dialect to represent their version of English. When Mamie bursts into his tenement flat and, in the presence of Gitl, accuses him of deceit for having played the bachelor until the unexpected arrival of his wife and son, Jake takes one look at Gitl’s uncomprehending face and implores Mamie to “‘Shpeak Jewish, pleashe!’”<sup>26</sup> More than a half century later, in 1959, Philip Roth published his first collection of short stories, *Goodbye, Columbus*, in which a suburban Jewish lawyer represents his community in its attempt to evict ultra-Orthodox Jewish Holocaust survivors from their pastoral retreat, fearful that the presence of traditional Jews will jeopardize their recent hard-earned tolerance from the Gentiles. Exasperated by their unwillingness to Americanize, Eli grabs hold of the mute refugee whose medieval garb has become the focus of the community’s rage and who is the sole survivor of his family. Eli has no common language with this shadowy and haunting figure, yet he wants desperately to communicate with him. “‘Please . . . please,’ Eli said, but he did not know what to do. ‘Say something, speak *English*,’ he pleaded.”<sup>27</sup>

These two scenes frame one version of the story of Jewish American literature in terms of the rapid move from Yiddish to English. First, the Yiddish writer whose character is aware that speaking English is an act of severance that he is not yet ready to undertake, an abandoning of a mother tongue, and two generations later an English writer, the grandchild of immigrants, who has no other language but English, which is inadequate for communication with that remnant of his people who survived the unspeakable pain (in any language) of the Holocaust. Albeit, this would be somewhat of an oversimplification, as Cahan went on to write another novel in English in which mastering the English language is the main character's enduring passion, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, and in recent years one of the most acclaimed Broadway plays by a third generation Jewish playwright, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, featured songs and chants in both Hebrew and Yiddish. Yet these two quotations can serve as a broad contour of the evolving Jewish accent in American writing, from the immigrants' love of Yiddish yet ardent submission to English, to the monolingual grandchild dependent on English translation for access to Jewish experience that crosses temporal or national boundaries.

From the turn of the century up to the Second World War, the bulk of Jewish American literature was written by immigrants or the children of immigrants for whom Yiddish was their mother tongue, and English an acquired language and their passport to acculturation. In works by authors such as Abraham Cahan, Mary Antin, Anzia Yezierska, and Henry Roth, the writer would often weave Yiddish or Hebrew words into the novel accompanied by a variety of strategies for translating the phrases into English for American readers. As the drive to assimilate was paramount, writers withheld nothing from their American audiences, translating not only the words but also the rituals and customs into equivalences that their Gentile readers could immediately grasp. Unlike the highlighting of foreignness and difference that characterizes some contemporary works that I will discuss later, accessibility was crucial for immigrant writers, and poetic strategies had to be found to make the Old World accessible to the New. For this reason, it is startling to find the occasional passage where the author stubbornly refuses to translate in order not to risk his or her full acceptance into American society. In her reminiscences about her various names and nicknames as a girl in the Pale, Antin wrote in *The Promised Land*, "A variety of nicknames, mostly suggested by my physical peculiarities, were bestowed on me from time to time by my fond or foolish relatives. My uncle Berl, for example, gave me the name of 'Zukrochene Flum,' which I am not going to translate because it is not complimentary."<sup>28</sup> In this disarming defense of obscurity, Antin can underscore the authenticity of her autobiography by revealing some token Yiddish along with her coy vanity.

For immigrant writers, English language acquisition often became a passion, expressing itself in vivid scenes and even as major themes of their works. In

the novels of Cahan and Yeziarska, seasoned English speakers take on the sensual charm of Henry Higgins in romantic scenes that revolve around diction. In Cahan's novel *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Levinsky's affair with Dora is characterized by her fierce desire for English refinement and by their mutual striving for linguistic perfection.

Sometimes, when I mispronounced an English word with which she happened to be familiar, or uttered an English phrase in my Talmudic singsong, she would mock me gloatingly. On one such occasion I felt the sting of her triumph so keenly that I hastened to lower her crest by pointing out that she had said 'nice' where 'nicely' was in order.<sup>29</sup>

Dora is the nurturing Jewish mother in every respect but one: her merciless exploitation of her daughter as English tutor for herself. When Lucy pleads to be relieved of her reading lesson, her mother's obsession takes over. Dora commands "Read!" and then "she went on, with grim composure, hitting her on the shoulder. 'I don't want to! I want to go down-stairs,' Lucy sobbed, defiantly. 'Read!' And once more she hit her."<sup>30</sup> Insofar as Dora's body, acculturated in Yiddish during her formative years in Russia, poses an insurmountable obstacle to her correct pronunciation of English, she punishes her daughter's American body, the object of her envy.

Even in a novel as conflicted about Americanization as Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers*, in which the college-educated heroine eventually marries the boy next door from the Old World, and their home is overshadowed by her patriarchal father's chants in Hebrew, the courtship scene intertwines desire for English and erotic desire as the body is roused to produce consonants without debasing traces of other languages. At the very moment that the Yiddish-speaking immigrant girl-turned-English teacher shamefully slips back into the vernacular in the classroom—"The birds sing-gg"—prince charming and future husband enters in the form of Hugo Seelig, principal and landsman, in time to rescue the damsel in distress. "The next moment he was close beside me, the tips of his cool fingers on my throat. 'Keep those muscles still until you have stopped. Now say it again,' he commanded. And I turned pupil myself and pronounced the word correctly."<sup>31</sup>

For these characters hungrily aspiring to pass as Americans linguistically, no amount of verbal calisthenics could make their tongues perform English without some trace of their native language. On the one hand, this was a universal condition acknowledged by diction manuals of the period. "Language is the product not of man's mental faculties only, but of his physical organism as well," wrote Clara Rogers in 1915, "Later in life man is bound by this physical condition."<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, their European experience had taught them that their specific Yiddish accent was heard by Gentiles as a sign of their racial difference. As Sander Gilman has documented, Yiddish was regarded as a sin-

ful, mangled, and corrupt form of German, an Enlightenment allegation from which Jews themselves were not immune, given Moses Mendelssohn's denunciation of the language associated with the degenerate East.<sup>33</sup> "There is a streak of sadness in the blood of my race," writes Levinsky, at the beginning of the novel, "Very likely it is of Oriental origin" (4). His first intimation of this melancholy streak is the sound of his mother's devotions in the "singsong" of her benediction over the Sabbath candles or her murmurings in the synagogue. His entry into the world of Talmud study as a child in the Old World is also a musical endeavor, as he is paired with Reb Sender whose "warm mellow basso . . . won my heart from the first." Sender's "singsong" encapsulates for him the "extremely important part that Talmud studies have played in the spiritual life of the race." In retrospect, Levinsky admits that his Talmud studies, "in the peculiar Talmud singsong," left "a trace of which still persists in my intonation even when I talk of cloaks and bank accounts and in English" (28). We might conclude from such statements that Cahan, through Levinsky, is positing a theory of the "soul of Jew folks," a racial memory carried by song. But these Jewish melodies, both his mother's and Sender's, cannot be extricated from the Hebrew written texts that are being sung, from the Sabbath devotions and the Talmud pages.<sup>34</sup>

Yet this is exactly what Levinsky will try to do, and what Cahan will treat ironically and critically. He will try to separate inflection, what he hears as the melody of Jewishness in his soul conveyed in his swaying torso and gesticulating hands, from diction, the Hebrew and Yiddish words that stand in the way of his pronunciation of English. His aim throughout all of his adult life in America will be to spiritualize the singsong of his mother, so that he is free to perform English well enough socially so as not to be detected as a Jew. At first his despair about pronouncing English consonants leads him to observe that English was "the language of a people afflicted with defective organs of speech," precisely the verdict that Europeans had rendered about Jews during the nineteenth century, namely that "there is a closely linked tradition of hearing the Jews's language as marked by the corruption of being a Jew."<sup>35</sup> "Some English words inspired me with hatred," he declared, "As though they were obnoxious living things" (133). Eventually, however, he reaches the opposite bleak conclusion: "That I was not born in America was something like a physical defect that asserted itself in many disagreeable ways—a physical defect which, alas! No surgeon in the world was capable of removing" (291).<sup>36</sup> All he can hope for is some amelioration of his speech and behavior so that his Jewish presence becomes less obtrusive. Pronunciation alone cannot conceal his ethnicity, for pitch, volume, and gesticulation are all telling signs of his foreignness. His trial by fire will be the dinner table, where Gentile middle-class table manners require soft tones and immobile limbs. Although I will be discussing the connections among etiquette, diction, ingestion, and religious and ethnic identity

in the chapter devoted to Mary Antin's work, I would like to illustrate this concern of immigrants in two short scenes in Cahan's novel: his rehearsal of speech and etiquette and his test among his business peers. Because Dora is "feverishly ambitious to bring up her children in the 'real American style,'" Levinsky can practice table manners as well as pronunciation in her home.

"Don't reach out for the herring, Lucy!" she would say sternly. "How many times must I tell you about it? What do you say?"

"Pass me the herring, mamma, please."

The herring is passed with what Dora regards as a lady-like gesture.

"Thank you, ma'am," says Lucy.

"There is another way," Dora might add in a case of this kind. "Instead of saying 'Pass me the herring or the butter,' you can say—What is it Lucy?"

"May I trouble you for the herring, mother?" (254)

Never has the lowly eastern European herring been enveloped by such lofty speech, an irony that is not lost on Levinsky, who will later seek out a culinary tutor so that he can read American menus.

His ultimate trial takes place in the dining car of a westbound train with other businessmen. The books in his handbag ("always some volume of Spencer, Emerson, or Schopenhauer [in an English translation]") cannot quell his fears about etiquette, primarily gesticulation and, ironically, volume. Aware that "it was 'aristocratic American' food, that I was in the company of well-dressed American Gentiles, eating and conversing with them, a nobleman among noblemen. I throbbed with love for America. 'Don't be excited,' I was saying to myself, 'Speak in a calm, low voice, as these Americans do. And for goodness' sake, don't gesticulate!" (329). The effect of the white table linen, mahogany walls, and wine temporarily lull him into a self-laudatory rhetorical question: "Can it be that I am I?" But in the smoking room after dinner his fears resurface when he suspects that "the three Gentiles were tired of me" (330). With hindsight he chastises himself for violating decorum: "Had I talked too much?" Having gained temporary control of his gesticulating hands, he still could not restrain his speech. The Jewish voice—its volume, tone, and sheer propensity to speak—seems congenial. In light of the persistence of this Jewish voice, his awkwardly worded "Can it be that I am I?" is more incredulous than victorious and more ambiguous than resolute. Can the same "I" that possesses and is possessed by that Jewish voice also be an Emersonian American, whose speech transcends the social limits of his recent immigration? Insofar as Levinsky questions what constitutes his individual "I", he is Emersonian; insofar as he is asking this question at a moment in which he is mimicking the behavior and articulation of others, he is violating Emerson. The fact that his literal cultural baggage includes Emerson as well as European thinkers (Spencer and Schopenhauer) attests to his molding of his behavior and speech to the "necessity" of Americanization. Yet surely his awk-

ward English phrase bears the trace of the Hebrew unsayable “I” in a slightly defective English version?—“I am that I am,” the collective Hebrew counternarrative to his English individualism. On the last page, both his admiration for a paragon of American success and his reaffirmation of his “genuine” self are linked to voice and song, the former “the Russian Jew who holds the foremost place among American song-writers and whose soulful compositions are sung in almost every English-speaking house” (Irving Berlin), and the latter his younger self “swinging over a Talmud volume” in the singsong of Jewish study. For Levinsky, Berlin retains a musical Jewish soul that does not impede his verbal performance of Americanness, as opposed to the music of his own Jewishness, forever linked to the words and texts of his primary languages, forever impediments to his speech, and thus to his transformation into an American. By portraying Levinsky as wracked by self-doubt for preferring his business success over intellectual ambitions that would not necessarily have required abandoning his Jewish languages (the peak of literary achievement in this novel is represented by a Hebrew poet in America), Cahan the socialist and Yiddish man of letters keeps his language-obsessed character at arm’s length.

#### HEBREW—RITES OF PASSAGE

“Is there no blessing before reading Hebrew?”

—Charles Reznikoff (1927)

In Leon Wieseltier’s recent scholarly elegy for his father, *Kaddish*, he recalls his rabbi asking him to help two guests in his congregation who had come to recite the Kaddish but were not conversant in Jewish practice. “As I watched the brothers struggle with the transliterated prayer, I admired them. The sounds they uttered made no sense to them. But there was so much fidelity, so much humility, in their gibberish.”<sup>37</sup> “Fidelity to gibberish” is an odd way of characterizing Kaddish observance, and I will admit that this excerpt is an odd way to introduce the subject of Hebrew in Jewish American writing because the Kaddish itself is an Aramaic prayer, whose transliterated text would also have replaced the Hebrew letters with Roman type. Yet what I find pertinent in this scene is Wieseltier’s drawing our attention to the way the Kaddish must have sounded to these worshippers’ ears as the brothers recite what they cannot understand and can pronounce only haltingly. Why this stubborn and somehow admirable insistence on mouthing what is incomprehensible and in some cases even unpronounceable?<sup>38</sup> The ubiquitous Kaddish in Jewish American literature serves as an emblem of the persistent trace of Hebrew in that writing, which reflects both the legacy of Jewish multilingualism and the particular needs of Jewish Americans for linguistic markers of identity.

Insofar as Jews in the United States constitute an ethnic identity, their ethnicity cannot be traced back to one country of origin, nor even to one language coinciding with one territory. For the most part, ethnic identity in the United States has been associated with some form of linguistic nationality or region, turning Sicilians and Tuscans into Italians, and Prussians, Bavarians, and Austrians into Germans. In recent years, race has superceded language, resulting in categories of ethnic identity that parallel anachronistic racial paradigms blending Chinese and Japanese into Asian Americans; South Africans and Haitians into African Americans; Irish, English, Germans, and Jews into Euro-Americans.<sup>39</sup> Forged in response to social and political constellations in the United States, such paradigms have been inadequate for many groups. But for Jews, from the outset, the languages and texts that they brought with them to the United States from their geographic countries of origin were not the same as those of their Gentile counterparts from the same region. Jews from Lithuania did not consider themselves to be Lithuanians (nor did Lithuanians consider them compatriots). The masses of Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants, primarily from eastern Europe, located their collective identity in their Jewishness, which was also the source of their linguistic identity, comprised of Yiddish, Hebrew, and Aramaic. This meant that the linguistic and literary legacy that Jews brought to the United States was transnational.

The relative insignificance of the country of emigration for Jewish immigrants has underscored the centrality of Hebrew textuality as itself constituting a Jewish homeland.<sup>40</sup> For the “people of the book,” the male rite of passage to adulthood, for example, has always been public performance of Hebrew literacy that entails vocal, hermeneutic, and ceremonial skills, the bar (male) and bat (female) mitzvah. Acquiring rudimentary Hebrew literacy to enable participation in other rites of passage, such as weddings and funerals, and observance of holy days, has been an inherent feature of Jewish experience regardless of geographical location. The place of Hebrew in Jewish communal life highlights another crucial feature distinguishing Jewish ethnic identity from other ethnicities in the United States, namely its religious dimension. For Jews, forgetting language has been intertwined with losing faith; performing language has signaled religious affiliation. This link between language and religion has found expression at all levels of Jewish American culture, from the erudite artistry of Karl Shapiro’s poetry and Cynthia Ozick’s prose to popular Hollywood films. Indeed, the very first talking movie in the United States, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), dramatizes fundamental and minimal Jewish identity as performing the Aramaic Kol Nidrei prayer on Yom Kippur.<sup>41</sup>

That the ancient Hebrew language is the one shared by Jews across historical, national, and geographic borders has unique implications for Jewish Americans insofar as America’s dominant national narrative (and rhetoric) is Protestant. On one hand, entering into Puritan discourse of America as the new Promised Land superceding the Old Testament meant abandoning a basic

tenet of their faith, a messianic return to the biblical Promised Land for which there is no substitute. Insofar as the Puritans deemed themselves to be the new Children of Israel, crossing the waters of the Atlantic to establish a city on the hill as the new Jerusalem, they made immigration to the United States a part of scriptural history.<sup>42</sup> For Christian immigrants, this was a boon. For Jewish immigrants, it was a threat. On the other hand, Puritan affinity with the Old Testament and Puritan preference for Hebrew over Latin, the language of Catholicism, placed Jews in a privileged position in America, as progenitors of the founding fathers. If they regarded Hebrew as a sacred language, then Jewish identity and practice could be compatible with the American spirit.<sup>43</sup> In either case, Hebrew as the language of the Jews has played a more central and problematic role in their acculturation to America than have the languages of many other ethnic groups due to this religious factor.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, the concept of a language of “home” in Jewish American writing also bears the imprint of the centrality of “exile” in Jewish civilization. Since the expulsion from Judea to Babylon in the sixth century B.C.E., Babylon has been the trope of longing for the lost home of Zion and for the Hebrew language, the name itself signifying confusion of tongues, the fall into a linguistic Babel of languages—“How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Psalm 137). Thus, the return “home” to the Promised Land has always meant a return to Hebrew. Yet if America were to be regarded as the new Promised Land, this would challenge the notion that Jews were still in exile, and the necessity of Hebrew literacy; indeed, Mary Antin in her autobiography *The Promised Land* declared that English had replaced Hebrew as a sacred tongue.<sup>45</sup> In subsequent generations, when immigration shifted from individual experience to collective memory for native-born Americans, and when English became a birthright, American Jews began to revise their relationship to Hebrew. Increasingly, they found themselves in the paradoxical situation of acknowledging a language of home that seemed more foreign than familiar, of affirming the primacy of Hebrew as an “original” language while simultaneously experiencing its texts largely in translation into their native language, English. Whereas the fall into language and the social formation of the self for American Jews have taken place in English, the ethnic and religious identities that America utilizes to map its citizenry have been partly derived from identification with a Hebrew alphabet that is as foreign as it is “home.” Consequently, American Jews have often found themselves in exile from their supposed language of home.

These transnational, liturgical, and exilic features of American Jews’ languages of origin are highlighted dramatically by their foreign visual image, by the very letters of the alphabet. Although Jews have not been the only minority in the United States whose language is not composed of Roman letters, their linguistic practice has been exceptional in that knowledge of the Hebrew alphabet has remained a dominant and crucial feature of their ethnic and

religious identity, attributable to the diglossic tradition of assigning one language for domestic purposes (Yiddish or Ladino in the Old World) and another for religious practice (Hebrew regardless of location). Moreover, acquiring even the most rudimentary Hebrew has also meant encountering taboos about both speaking and writing a sacred tongue, as we have seen in the passage from *Call It Sleep*. In other words, faithfulness to a transcendent God requires vigilance in both writing and speaking through prohibitions against defacing the material page that bears God's name. In subsequent chapters, I will be discussing how immigrant as well as native-born Jewish American authors have experimented with the sacredness and mystery of Hebrew in a great variety of ways, from the mystical to the transgressive. Furthermore, when these authors have imported Hebrew into their English writing, they have had to make decisions about whether to translate into English, to transliterate into the Roman alphabet, or to rupture the English typeface with foreign Hebrew characters.

The Hebrew alphabet, whether actually reproduced on the page or invoked as a shadowy counterpoint to English, has played a significant role in Jewish American writing. In Judaic hermeneutics, the material dimension of language, the letters themselves, have always been resonant signifiers, requiring close attention to their shape, frequency, and vocalization.<sup>46</sup> Some writers have aimed to transfer this mystical spirit of Hebrew letters into English writing, which is far more than a linguistic challenge because it raises questions about the transition from sacred text to secular literature. Cynthia Ozick, for example, clears space on one of the pages of *Puttermesser Papers* in order to reproduce God's name in Hebrew typeface alongside the English prose, a linguistic rupture that reenacts the rupture in the story itself of the sudden mysterious appearance of a female golem.<sup>47</sup> In his discussion of German Jewish writing, Robert Alter remarked, "The historical attachment of Jews to the stubborn particularism of their own graphic system is mirrored in their practice of clinging to Hebrew script even when they converted one of the surrounding languages into a distinctive Jewish language, as they did with Yiddish in Central and Eastern Europe." These "strange forbidding square letters," writes Alter, go "against the grain of all European systems, from right to left" and thereby provide antithetical cultural alternatives for writers such as Walter Benjamin, Gershom Sholem, and Franz Kafka.<sup>48</sup> This is equally true for many Jewish American writers. From Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) where the character perceives of himself as "Oriental" and "Semitic" to Aryeh Lev Stollman's *The Far Euphrates* (1997) where Jewish literacy instills yearning for a non-European cradle, Hebrew has served as a marker of pre-European and non-Western origins.

Since consciousness of Hebrew has played such a central role for American Jews, it is not surprising that learning, or forgetting, Hebrew, is a recurring motif in Jewish American writing. In Antin's autobiography, where she de-

clares that her passage from Czarist Russia to America was a rebirth, she recounts an episode from her childhood that prefigures her linguistic and cultural journey away from Hebrew. Stealing her sister's Russian primer, and furtively studying the Cyrillic alphabet, Antin observed that the first word that she ever wrote in a non-Hebrew alphabet was *BOG*, the Russian word for God, a word whose Hebrew equivalent she would have been prohibited from writing on ordinary paper. In a textual enactment of the return of the repressed letters, Antin scribbled the Hebrew alphabet from right to left on the back of the manuscript page next to this one. In *Call It Sleep*, a portrait of the Jewish artist as a young boy whose epiphany about God's presence in the light between car tracks is inspired by his reading of Hebrew texts, six-year-old David Schearl is singled out for praise at his first Hebrew lesson.

[The rabbi] drew David's tense shoulder toward the table, and picking up the new stick, pointed to a large hieroglyph at the top of the page. "This is called Komitz. You see? Komitz. And this is an Aleph. Now, whenever one sees a Komitz under an aleph, one says, Aw . . . And this . . . is called Bais, and a Komitz under a Bais—Baw! Say it! Komitz-Bais-Baw!"

After David has begun to read passages from the Pentateuch, he associates what is gibberish to his *ears* with what is nonsensical prohibition to his *mind*: "First you read, Adonoi elahenoo abababa, and then you say, And Moses said you musn't, and then you read some more abababa, and then you say, mustn't eat in the traife butcher store."<sup>49</sup> Like the immigrant writers who, one generation earlier, devoted pages of their fictions to correct pronunciation of English, often linking speech and food through table manners and etiquette, Roth also associates pronunciation and orality—but through acquiring the sound of the Hebrew alphabet in a recitation that slides from Adonoi (my Lord) to aba, the childish word for father, to abababa—infantile sounds devoid of signification (if that is *ever* possible in Hebrew). In this sequence, Hebrew, the sacred Ur language of home, regresses and finally disintegrates into its antithetical babble (Babel), the language of exile.

Some authors, like Roth's contemporary the poet Louis Zukovsky, encode Hebrew lessons into their writings, as in this line from his "Poem beginning 'The'": "A stove burns like a full moon in a desert night. / Un in hoyze is kalt." Just as Henry Roth addresses a divided audience, those who can identify "aba" as father and those who cannot, Zukovsky offers a very limited explanatory note that merely translates the Yiddish literally—"and it's cold in the house" and indicates that the phrase comes from a "Jewish folk song." But the complex relationship between the lines becomes apparent only if the reader associates the Yiddish phrase with the folksong "Oyfn Pripitchek," which describes schoolchildren huddled around a flaming hearth in a snowy clime ("in shtib iz heis"—it's warm in the room) as they learn the Hebrew alphabet, "Komitz Aleph Aw," the letters from Zukovsky's eastern "desert night."<sup>50</sup>

For the children of immigrants, acquiring English literacy often meant abandoning Hebrew, sometimes transgressively, as in Henry Roth's fiction, other times elegiacally, as in Charles Reznikoff's poetry. The child of immigrants, Reznikoff would struggle with his generation's forgetting: "How difficult for me is Hebrew," he wrote in 1927, "even the Hebrew for *mother*, for *bread*, for *sun* is foreign," even the words that signify primal bonds and basic sustenance.<sup>51</sup> For Roth as for Reznikoff, Hebrew typeface is both familiar and foreign; what is reduced to infantile bilabials for Roth (abababa), remains incantatory for Reznikoff. "I have learnt the Hebrew blessing before eating bread / is there no blessing before reading Hebrew?"<sup>52</sup>

Acutely aware of linguistic disinheritance, Reznikoff in "Early History of a Writer" revisits the scene of his grandfather blessing him as he departed for school out West: "he had been expecting me, it seemed—/stretched out his hands and blessed me in a loud voice: / in Hebrew, of course, and I did not know what he was saying." When the old man bursts into tears, the poet assumes that parting itself cannot be the only reason:

Perhaps, because, in spite of all the learning I had acquired in high school,  
I knew not a word of the sacred text of the Torah  
and was going out into the world  
with none of the accumulated wisdom of my people to guide me,  
with no prayers with which to talk to the God of my people,  
a soul—  
for it is not easy to be a Jew or, perhaps, a man—  
doomed by his ignorance to stumble and blunder.<sup>53</sup>

After the Holocaust, for many Jewish American writers Hebrew letters became icons of Jewish religious and cultural tenacity, exemplified by these fervent lines in Karl Shapiro's poem "The Alphabet": "The letters of the Jews as strict as flames / Or little terrible flowers lean / Stubbornly upwards through the perfect ages, / Singing through solid stone the sacred names."<sup>54</sup>

#### NATIVE-BORN WRITERS

"Still, though English is my everything, now and then I feel cramped by it."

—Cynthia Ozick (1976)

Whether those writers who were the children of immigrants retained an affectionate attachment for Yiddish or whether they treated it with disdain or indifference, English meant more to them than the simple fact that it was their native language; it was their temple of culture—in Ozick's words, "my everything."<sup>55</sup> Henry Roth recalled the thrill of reading Joyce's *Ulysses* when it was

a modernist cult book, banned in the United States, and Saul Bellow with equal thrill recalled his clandestine reading of the King James Bible, a fact that he was certain should never be revealed to his parents. Bellow and Isaac Rosenfeld composed a Yiddish pastiche of Eliot's "Prufrock" that both sabotaged the voice of "high culture" and patronized the Yiddish that seemed too folksy to be a purveyor of modernism.<sup>56</sup> Louis Zukovsky's "Poem beginning 'The,'" with its collage of citations and reference to "Oyfn Pripitchek" was also a response to that high priest of English modernism, T. S. Eliot, in the form of a Jewish version of *The Waste Land*. Whereas immigrant writers had been caught up with the problem of accent, the lingering evidence of language acquisition in their formative years (whether they actually wrote in dialect or not), the children of immigrants forged their own distinctive voices by inscribing traces of accented speech into their writing as well. As Murray Baumgarten has observed about the writings of Henry Roth and Alfred Kazin, "If these works are written in English, it is a language with Yiddish lurking behind every Anglo-Saxon character."<sup>57</sup> Although Kazin was a native-born American, he recalls that when it came to English, "we were expected to show it off like a new pair of shoes." For Kazin, this was an ordeal because he was a "stammerer" sent to a speech clinic in East New York, "where I sat in a circle of lispers and cleft palates and foreign accents holding a mirror before my lips and rolling difficult sounds over and over." At home he would practice enunciation, ceaselessly "pacing the roof with pebbles in my mouth, as I had read Demosthenes had done to cure himself of stammering," hoping that the Hellenic orator would displace the Hebraic stammerer.<sup>58</sup>

To be a first generation American writer of Yiddish-speaking parents often meant deriving vitality from the immigrant generation, while also cultivating the stance of the alienated intellectual, as documented by Kazin, Irving Howe, Delmore Schwartz, Isaac Rosenfeld, and Saul Bellow, to name only a few.<sup>59</sup> Making an artistic virtue out of a sociohistorical necessity, Jewish American writers of this generation would wear their alienation as a cultural badge of honor, as a sign of their ripeness to join the ranks of modernist authors. Rosenfeld articulated this attitude most forcefully in his essay "The Situation of the Jewish Writer," written during the Second World War:

As a member of an internationally insecure group he has grown personally acquainted with some of the fundamental themes of insecurity that run through modern literature (the one international banking system the Jews actually control). Alienation puts him in touch with his own past traditions, the history of the Diaspora; with the present predicament of almost all intellectuals and, for all one knows, with the future conditions of civilized humanity.<sup>60</sup>

Rosenfeld's contemporary Delmore Schwartz treated this romantic alienation ironically in his story "America! America!" in which Shenandoah Fish (an unlikely name that aims for gentility by yoking native American landscape

with a common Jewish name and food), having just returned from his sojourn as an expatriate writer in Paris, spends his idle mornings listening to his mother tell the story of their friends the Baumann family while she goes about her household tasks. The Baumanns represent two generations of Americanization, and the bohemian Shenandoah is amused and disdainful of their family melodrama, the successful insurance salesman father and his self-indulgent and ineffectual children. What interests him most, however, is “his mother’s fine memory for the speech other people used.”<sup>61</sup> English is his mother’s and the senior Baumann’s second language, and therefore it is laboriously idiomatic: the salesman *drops in* to visit his clients, or his daughter Martha is so frustrated that “she *took it out* upon the piano”; Mrs. Baumann “spoke of herself as having a new *fad*”; the Baumann business became a *going concern*; Shenandoah’s father had been in business *for himself*; Dick Baumann left his job because he did not like *the class of people* with whom he had to work; Sidney Baumann showed a sensitivity to *the finer things of life*, but when criticized *stopped at nothing*; Mrs. Baumann would *go crazy* without her *hobby* of knitting in the morning; and Mrs. Fish, summing up the saga of the failures of the Baumann children, observed “that this was a *cut-rate cut-throat world*, an expression which was her version of the maxim *dog eat dog*.” Schwartz italicizes these words and their numerous counterparts to draw attention to Shenandoah’s discriminating and patronizing ear, attuned as he is to mundane, cliché-ridden speech. Even when Mrs. Fish herself aims to rise above the cliché “dog eat dog,” her replacement “cut-throat world” signifies the parameters of her stale English. Shenandoah, however, is sufficiently self-aware to admit to himself that “he was sick of the mood in which he had listened, the irony and the contempt which had taken hold of each new event. He had listened from such a distance that what he saw was an outline, a caricature, and an abstraction” (32). Schwartz turns the alienated writer’s ironic treatment of petit bourgeois, Jewish immigrant speech into a marker of self-contempt and self-ridicule. Shenandoah realizes that “nothing in his own experience was comparable to the great displacement of body and mind which their coming to America must have been.” As a result, the modernist irony that has characterized his representation of their speech is now redirected against himself. “He thought that his own life invited the same irony.” Just as the Baumanns cannot be aware of how Mrs. Fish has been portraying their language, and just as Mrs. Fish cannot be aware of how Shenandoah mocks the banality of *her* language, most piquantly when she attempts to be original, so too Shenandoah cannot be aware of how others, such as his creator Delmore Schwartz, mock *his* language and world. “‘What will I seem to my children?’ he said to himself. ‘What is it that I do not see now in myself?’”

Schwartz’s prose exemplifies Rosenfeld’s claim for his generation that the alienation from language that was the signature of modern writing coincided with the alienation of the Jew, manifested in “America! America!” by the way

that social and class marginality shades into existential alienation. Schwartz's self-consciousness about his parents' English, filtered through Shenandoah's artistic snobbery and social anxiety, demonstrates that the first generation's preoccupation with correct English pronunciation translates into continuing sensitivity about accent among their children, but in a broader sense. Schwartz's prose turns lower-middle-class immigrant speech into an excruciating display of linguistic limits—social, psychological, and poetic.

For readers who were savoring the flavor of Yiddish just as it was fading from their childhood memories, Leo Rosten's best-selling *The Joys of Yiddish* exemplified this convergence of Yiddish and American English in a comic and celebratory mode.<sup>62</sup> All of the words and phrases that are defined in this compendium of Jewish history and cultural lore appear in transliteration with pronunciation aids drawn from American culture, thereby using American English to mediate lost familiarity with Yiddish, and investing familiar English with a Yiddish inflection. The word "Haggadah," for example, is "pronounced *ha-GOD-da*, to rhyme with the way an Englishman pronounces 'Nevada,'" so that the humor is directed at the affectation of the foreigner, but in an amusing turnaround, this foreigner is an Englishman, the very standard of "genteel" American pronunciation. The Hebrew word for the Garden of Eden, "Gan Eden," also accesses British high culture in its gloss: "Pronounced *gon AY-din*, to rhyme with 'wan maiden.'" The dominant mode for pronunciation markers is colloquial American English, which conflates Yiddish with homespun colloquial usage so that the Yiddish word for son-in-law, "eidem," rhymes with "raid 'em," the Hebrew "balbatem" for "masters of the house" rhymes with "Moll got him," bar mitzvah with "car hits ya," and the golem of folklore with "dole 'em."

The code switching and interlingual word play that marked immigrant writing in English would make its presence felt in the works of the next native-born generation of writers as well. Grace Paley and Bernard Malamud have been particularly inventive in their representation of voice in Jewish writing, through estrangement achieved by cross linguistic and cross-cultural strategies, Jewish and American.

"TWO EARS, ONE FOR LITERATURE, ONE FOR HOME, ARE USEFUL FOR WRITERS":  
GRACE PALEY (1994)

Paley grew up in the Bronx in a family where both Yiddish and Russian were spoken, "the home language with its Russian and Yiddish accents, a language my early characters knew well" (x).<sup>63</sup> The title of one of her first and finest stories, "The Loudest Voice,"<sup>64</sup> refers both to the Jewish voice as heard by Gentile "genteel" ears, and to an attribute that, in certain situations, can be an asset in America's competitive meritocracy. As opposed to Mary Antin's studied prose aimed at linguistic passing, Paley's impersonations of WASP speech

in the dialogue of the grammar school teachers, Mr. Hilton and Miss Glacé—"my dear, dear child"—are displaced by a bold new American English and a new reading of Protestant America's public culture. Narrated by the daughter of immigrants, Shirley Abramowitz recalls her New York childhood in a neighborhood where a grocer named Bialik, the most revered of modern Hebrew poets, lectures Mrs. Abramowitz on childrearing in the New World—"people should not be afraid of their children." Whereas Shirley's loud voice has alarmed Mr. Bialik, her father Misha dotes on his daughter's loudness, a sure sign for him of her self-confidence in their new country. Shirley's mother shares Mr. Bialik's concern about loud voices, but she is outnumbered by her husband and daughter: ". . . if you say to her or her father 'Ssh,' they say, 'In the grave it will be quiet.'" Mrs. Abramowitz's Yiddish accent is conveyed by transposed syntax and her unease among Gentiles by her objection to her daughter's noisiness, both vestiges of her former life in Russia. In contrast, her husband's remark indicates his faith in America, where silence is not required to insure his child's safety. The plot vindicates him, because Shirley's loud voice qualifies her for the most coveted role in the Christmas pageant, the voice of Christ. In a parody of the Nativity in which "Celia Kornbluh lay in the straw with Cindy Lou, her favorite doll," the children of Jewish immigrants, coached by their Gentile teachers, dramatize nearly the complete gospel, from nativity to crucifixion, with one crucial deviation: "the soldiers who were sheiks grabbed poor Marty to pin him up to die, but he wrenched free, turned again to the audience, and spread his arms aloft to show despair." Marty refuses to be crucified, and therefore cannot be resurrected. Instead, he gestures melodramatically as if on a vaudeville stage, with Shirley's booming voice delivering the final words of the script: "the rest is silence, but as everyone in this room, in this city—in this world—now knows, I shall have life eternal." The extension of the Christmas pageant to the Crucifixion, normally performed only on Easter, serves as a compressed lesson on the New Testament to accelerate the immigrant children's Americanization. The zany finale featuring Christ wresting himself free of his captors rewrites the Gospels into a Hollywood script with requisite happy ending, omitting the act that marked the Jews as Christ killers. Moreover, the "famous moment" of Judas's betrayal—in Shirley's words, "the terrible deceit of Abie Stock"—is performed by a boy whose very name encapsulates the line of descent of "the stock of Abraham" that Christianity professed to transcend. Judas and Jesus, *both* descendants of "the stock of Abraham," now melt into the stock of the new American, with a reminder that Gentiles have tended to see the Jew as the shopkeeper "Abie" with his "stock." Shirley's mother concludes that Christmas, after all, is a Christian commodity: "Christmas . . . the whole piece of goods . . . they own it." But not in America, Paley suggests, where her loud Jewish voice feels absolutely entitled to English and can make its own claims on the national language and culture.

Paley's English story illustrates not only traces of the immigrant generation's Yiddish but also continued traces of accent in the writing of native-born Americans, through syntax, tone, volume, and register. "The Loudest Voice" hones in on the most highly charged event for Jewish children in Christian culture, Christmas, and reads it from a newly secured Jewish perspective in which the life of Christ is secularized—"It was a long story and it was a sad story"—and Judaized by stopping short of the Resurrection. Whereas knowledge of the Gospels is essential to understanding Paley's subversive rewriting, knowledge of Jewish religious practice is also required to understand that Shirley's recitation of "Hear, O Israel," the monotheistic credo in the final lines of the story, would not be performed kneeling at her bedside, nor by making "a little church of my hands." Whereas immigrant authors were likely to explain Jewish words and practices, subsequent generations assume their American birthright and their community's "dialect," beliefs, and practices as constituent of American culture. Brashly secular, Paley Judaizes the Gospels because for her they play no part in the America that rewards her for her loud voice. In fact, Shirley's feisty voice is her trademark Americanism, and it is powerful enough to take the sting out of the visual signs of Christmas in public space. With wry condescension, she pities the lone Christmas tree in her Jewish neighborhood, tossing it "a kiss of tolerance. Poor thing, it was a stranger in Egypt" (60).

Through the drama and mockery of Shirley Abramowitz's voice, Paley seems to be translating that ubiquitous "Ach" in her parents' conversation into American English: "Ach, Misha, your idealism is going away," is Mrs. Abramowitz's accusing response to her husband's rationale of the Christmas pageant. When Shirley's rehearsals keep her from her household chores, her father's temper also rises, "Ach, Clara . . . what does she do there until six o'clock?" (58). And when the other Jewish parents worry about the injustice of Christian children receiving relatively small parts in a Christmas performance, Clara comes to the Gentile teacher's defense, "Ach, what could Mr. Hilton do? They got very small voices; after all, why should they holler? The English language they know from the beginning by heart." A non-English sound, an interjection that marks impatience and at times exasperation, "Ach" is the remainder of the Yiddish speech that the written page cannot convey, it is the metonym for her parents' accent as both speech and attitude.<sup>65</sup> More than a mere expletive, "Ach" is also a sign of linguistic difference emptied of all signification, a fitting ethnic marker in a story that takes an ethnographic interest in both Jewish and Christian texts and practices. Shirley's father's explanation of why Christmas should not be threatening to his family provides the anthropological perspective that underlies Paley's invocation of other languages: "We learn from reading this is a holiday from pagan times also, candles, lights, even Chanukah. . . . So if they think it's a private holiday, they're only ignorant, not patriotic" (59). Like Misha, Paley is

neither elegiac about Jewish tradition, nor is she apologetic about Jewish cultural expression. Like the story “The Loudest Voice,” the gruff foreign sound “ach” disrupts decorum and insists on being heard.

“YIDDISH?” “I EXPRESS MYSELF BEST IN ENGLISH.” “LET IT BE ENGLISH THEN”:<sup>66</sup>  
BERNARD MALAMUD, “THE LAST MOHICAN” (1958)

Appropriating English Gentile literature through parody has been a characteristic strategy of first generation American writers, from the Yiddish version of Prufrock to the Jewish version of the Nativity. In Bernard Malamud’s “The Jewbird,” the Jewish voice is given another twist, both as speech and as treatment of American literature. In this story “a skinny black-type longbeaked bird” flies into Harry Cohen’s apartment on First Avenue, perches on the top of the kitchen door, flaps his bedraggled wings, and caws hoarsely, “Gevalt, a pogrom!”<sup>67</sup> “It’s a talking bird,” observes Edie Cohen. “In Jewish,” adds her son Maurie. Invoking Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Raven,” Malamud’s “Jewbird” parodies Poe’s noble fowl with his mournful lament—“spoke the raven ‘Nevermore!’”—by substituting a lowly crow named Schwartz. At first the family identifies him as a *dybbuk*, a familiar Jewish cultural trope of a wandering soul that takes possession of a living body (and also the title of a popular Yiddish play by S. Ansky). A sharp-tongued bird critical of the Cohen family’s Americanization, he embodies several Jewish types whose numbers were dwindling in the America of the 1960s: Schwartz calls himself “an old radical,” one of the last of the old time communists, but he reads the *Jewish Morning Journal*, an antisocialist paper; furthermore, he begins *dovening*, rocking back and forth as if he were a black frocked pious Jew from the shtetl. His other habits, from playing chess and listening to the violin to eating herring with “schnapps” are familiar traits of Jewish refugees from eastern Europe. In short, Schwartz is a composite Old World Jew. Like the raven, or like Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener,” Schwartz becomes an immovable squatter, until Cohen, in a fit of rage, whirls the bird around his head and “flings him into the night.” But before he suffers that ignominious fate, Schwartz speaks to the Cohen family in English peppered with Yiddish, and in comical one liners reminiscent of borscht belt stand-up comedy.

Since Harry kills Schwartz on the day after his own mother’s death and minutes after his son leaves for a violin lesson, the murder of the Jewbird coincides with Cohen’s indifference to Jewish tradition, evident by choosing not to observe the seven days of mourning for the death of a parent.<sup>68</sup> Malamud’s parody is double-edged, pointed in two directions culturally, for Schwartz is not only an ignoble version of “The Raven” but also a parody of the fowl in the *kapara* ritual before Yom Kippur, in which the whirling of a cock around

the head of a penitent displaces his sins onto the sacrificial bird. Schwartz attempts to defend himself by pinching Cohen's nose in his beak until he cries out in pain and "pulled his nose free." Writing in the postwar period of upward social mobility for American Jews, Malamud creates, in the figure of Schwartz, a trope for the eastern European culture that was annihilated in the Holocaust and that was also rejected by the children of immigrants. For self-hating Harry Cohen, despite the priestly lineage of his surname, the crow is an obstacle to his Americanization, the fantastic ghost of his immigrant mother. Schwartz's tenacity in latching onto Cohen's nose with his own beak is a reminder that Cohen has little chance of passing as a Gentile, the word "Jewbird" echoing the anti-Semitic "Jewboy" if pronounced in New York "dialect" (Jewboyd).<sup>69</sup> Searching for the creature after the winter snows have melted, mother and child discover the skeleton, its wings broken, neck twisted, and eyes plucked clean. "Who did it to you, Mr. Schwartz?" Maurie wept. 'Anti-Semeets,' Edie admits, imitating the bird's Yiddish accent and world view declared in his first words to them after alighting on the windowsill, "Gevalt, a pogrom!" For the reader, the accusation of anti-Semitism is targeted ironically at Harry, but the mutilation of the bird's carcass is obviously not all Harry's doing. There must be others, "Anti-Semeets," intent on harming him as well.

Schwartz, which means "black" in Yiddish, looms on the windowsill, the dark shadow of the Jewish past that Harry Cohen violently evicts from his home. Like "The Raven," it is a story of mourning, but in a different key. In "The Jewbird" Poe's raven metamorphoses into a Yiddish-speaking refugee victimized by an assimilating Jewish American, and the story's fantastic plot and vaudevillian tone barely mask the nervous laughter of the American Jewish writer only beginning to come to terms with the Holocaust in his art. Written in the 1960s, "The Jewbird" also needs to be read against the backdrop of America's race riots and the tensions between blacks and Jews in that period. Insofar as "Schwartz" is the derogatory Yiddish term Jews used for blacks, Jews are implicated in American racism, intent on being perceived as white in America's binary racial politics. Insofar as Jim Crow laws and minstrel crows were at the center of that same white supremacy that labeled Jews as racially other, Jews identified with African American oppression.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, the crow "Schwartz" conflates the two demeaning and emasculating terms: "Jewboy" and "black boy."<sup>71</sup> This entangling of Jewish American with African American identity is a recurring theme in Malamud's works, such as "Angel Levine," where a black man proves his Jewish identity by his knowledge of liturgical Hebrew, and *The Tenants*, where Jews and blacks are locked into a death dance. When Schwartz lists the many kinds of "Anti-Semeets" who make a practice of harassing Jewbirds, he says that "once in awhile some crows will take your eyes out." To Edie's response, "But aren't you a crow?" he is quick to deny any resemblance. "Me? I'm a Jewbird."

By attributing the harm inflicted on the Jewbird to Schwartz's Yiddish-inflected accusation, "Anti-Semeets," Edie may be reassuring herself and her child that anti-Semitism is a European malady, and that Schwartz's alighting on the window to escape a pogrom could only be a reference to his European past. Yet the mutilated carcass of the bird on the American sidewalk may indeed be proof that "Anti-Semeets" endanger the Jew in the New World as well, and are to be found among both those who police Jim Crow laws and those who suffer from them. By impersonating Schwartz's English, with the accent on the racial designation of Jews as Semites, Edie both empathizes with and distances herself from the Jewbird, a fantastic breed that parodies a raven and disavows descent from crows.

"TALKING A DEAD LANGUAGE, THAT MAKES SENSE?": PHILIP ROTH, "ELI, THE FANATIC" (1959)

By midcentury, when Paley and Malamud wrote these New York stories, the transformation of Jewish civilization into Judaism, the third great religion in America alongside Protestantism and Catholicism, was already taking place.<sup>72</sup> Native-born Jewish Americans eager to "make it" in America left urban immigrant neighborhoods where Yiddish co-existed along with English for suburbia, where Jewish identity meant religious affiliation marked by liturgical Hebrew. As a religion, Judaism became a private matter, and the Enlightenment paradigm of Jew at home and citizen in the street took root in America just as the Nazi genocide of the Jews had already eradicated it in Europe. In the 1950s, Jews could carve out a comfortable place for themselves in the American landscape as white European children of immigrants who practiced the religion of Judaism. One or two generations removed from the Yiddish and Hebrew of the Old World, these suburbanites would discover in their encounter with refugees from Europe that the language barrier was a symptom of a conceptual barrier that mere translation could not bridge. One of the first authors to paint this new milieu was Philip Roth in his landmark collection, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), particularly in the story "Eli, the Fanatic," published the same year as Paley's "The Loudest Voice."<sup>73</sup>

Alarmed at the arrival of a group of religious Holocaust survivors who have moved into the pastoral suburb of Woodenton, the resident Jewish community designates Eli Peck to be their representative in conveying their concerns to the refugees—namely, that zoning regulations do not permit a yeshiva on the premises. To be more specific, Peck has been asked to negotiate with Leo Tzoref, the ultra-orthodox head of what he terms an "orphanage"—eighteen war orphans and another adult refugee who calls attention to himself by walking through the modern American suburb in his black caftan and sidelocks, mutely submitting shopping lists for the "home." As Woodenton has only re-

cently admitted Jews to its manicured lawns and split-level homes, this American-born generation is intent on remaining there. As Artie Berg tells Eli, “If I want to live in Brownsville, Eli, I’ll live in Brownsville.” Others in the community are more graphic—they fear that the neighborhood will be overrun: “It’s going to be a hundred little kids with little yarmulka’s chanting their Hebrew lessons on Coach House Road, and then it’s not going to strike you as funny.” From Hebrew lessons it is only a short step to what Woodenton’s Jews consider intermarriage: “Next thing they’ll be after our daughters.” So intent on demonizing this threat to their American pastoral, they insinuate that the yeshiva may be indulging in more than merely “hocus-pocus abracadabra stuff”—“I’d really like to find out what is going on up there.”<sup>74</sup>

In the wake of the Holocaust, this American Jewish community has no compunctions about putting the blame for anti-Semitism on the victims themselves: “There’s going to be no pogroms in Woodenton, ’cause there’s no fanatics, no crazy people.” In the course of Eli’s negotiations with Tzoref, he is convinced not only of the refugees’ right to remain in Woodenton but also of his own moral obligation to empathize with the survivors’ sufferings and to perpetuate the civilization that has nearly been extinguished. This comes about mainly in his interactions with a third character, the mute “greenie,” as he is called by the suburbanites, whose obtrusive traditional garb has become the trigger of the community’s distress and insecurity, resulting in their demand that he adopt an “American” dress code. Only after Eli contributes his own impeccable designer clothing as a remedy does he realize that what the survivor had in mind was an *exchange*, not a gift that requires renunciation of a way of life. When Eli dons the black clothing of his double, including the hat, “for the first time in his life he *smelled* the color of blackness.” And when he decides to pass this blackness on to his newborn son, entering the maternity ward in his full religious garb, his community brands him a fanatic, and the medical staff treats him as insane. Although he asserts his right to greet his newborn as he sees fit—“*I’m the father!*”—the doctor administers a tranquilizer that “calmed his soul, but did not touch down where the blackness had reached” (216).

Eli discovers that he has no common language with the refugees in more ways than one, as Tzoref assumes untranslatability between European and American Jewish experience. In order to impress upon Eli the unreasonableness of the community’s demand that the greenie divest himself of his worn out European suit, the yeshiva’s headmaster resorts to linguistic barriers as an analogue for the incapacity to empathize with another’s pain. “But I tell you he has nothing. *Nothing*. You have that word in English? *Nicht? Gornisht?*” (191). Although Eli insists that “we have the word,” he still misses Tzoref’s point when he interprets *gornisht* in purely economic terms. Unable to comprehend that the suit has become a signifier of the family, community, and language that he has lost and is therefore irreplaceable, Eli suggests, “We’ll buy him one!” Following a similar line of reasoning—“The suit the gentleman

wears is all he's got"—Tzoref asks Eli if "You have the word 'suffer' in English?" (192). Written a little more than a decade after the documentary footage from the Holocaust reached the American Jewish community, the story depicts Eli's efforts to find a common language with his double, a language of pain that has not been part of the American Jewish experience. His identification with the greenie begins with body language, with Eli's imitating the mute refugee's breast beating accompanied by moans. When Eli begins to beat his right fist against his chest, "What hurt buzzed down. It stung and stung inside him, and in turn the moan sharpened" (203). On the day that his son is born, Eli dons the black trousers, jacket, and vest that the refugee deposited on his doorstep in exchange for his modern suit, and proceeds to address the garage attendant, his suburban neighbors, and other passersby with "Sholom" (208).<sup>75</sup>

Never more than a cipher of "blackness" that conflates orthodox Judaism with a history of persecution, the greenie serves as Eli's "other," the foreign European double whose experience he cannot simulate, imagine, or comprehend, and as a sign of Jewishness whose affirmation by Eli persuades his fellow American Jews that he is a "fanatic." In this story, ignorance of Jewish languages carries over to the cognitive and emotional barrier between these communities in that no language is adequate to convey the greenie's anguish. In a scene reminiscent of Beckett's tramps, Eli and the greenie face off, each in the other's clothing, with drops of white paint splattered on them both as the greenie flails his paintbrush in panic at Eli's approach. Whitewashing a pillar of the controversial Woodenton yeshiva, a commentary on the community's whitewash of its past and mimicry of small town America à la Tom Sawyer, the greenie flings his hands over his face in an automatic gesture of self-defense at Eli's well-intentioned gesture to button down the collar of what was formerly his shirt. Each of Eli's solicitous moves toward the other trigger increasingly violent responses until both figures are splattered in white. Eli keeps insisting that "I only want to talk," adding in desperation, "Please . . . please . . . Say something, speak *English*." When he realizes that the greenie is still shielding his face and that speaking English is impossible, Eli is willing to settle for mere recognition of his presence, "Please, just *look* at me." Eli's last resort is to "speak as gently as he knew how," repeating, almost singing, the English word "please" over and over again "as if it were some sacred word." Reducing English to mere empathic sound or prayer, Eli wrests the greenie's hands from his face, insisting on recognition.

To compensate for the lack of a common language with the mute nameless victim, Eli vows to bequeath Jewishness to his newborn American son. Conflating ultra-orthodox Jewish practice and Holocaust survival, Roth leaves Jewish Americans with only two overdetermined untenable options—literal-minded, monolingual suburbanites who have lost the hermeneutics of Jewish culture altogether, or worshippers at the shrine of victimization ex-

pressed through nonverbal simulated pain. Eli's response to the silent visage of the survivor as Other is to hasten to the hospital to pass on the "blackness" conveyed to him in those two white droplets on the greenie's cheeks. His lapse into a language he does not know by greeting his American Jewish neighbor with "Sholom," and his choice of Haredi<sup>76</sup> garb are read by his neighbors as signs of mental breakdown. Eli is given a sedative by white-smocked doctors who repeat America's quintessential mantra, "okay," until it becomes nothing more than empty sound, "Okay, rabbi. Okay okay okay okay okay okay. . . . Okay Okay everything's going to be okay." His last thought before slipping into the forgetfulness induced by the tranquilizer is that the blackness he has vowed to safeguard for generations is too deep to be affected by the sedative. But he has been silenced by his community—Jews and Gentiles alike. All that is left of Jewish language in this story is "gornisht" (nothing), an acknowledgment of a chasm between two branches of the Jewish people, because Roth has staked all of Jewish identity on vicarious pain.

Each of these stories published in midcentury negotiates more than one language, but with diverse strategies and for different ends. In Paley's "The Loudest Voice," the American-born speaker retains the transposed syntax, vocal markers, and literary allusions of the immigrant generation to showcase the new ethnic American voice coming into its own with such verve that it rewrites the foundational sacred story of Christendom. Through Shirley Abramovitz, Paley parodies Mr. Hilton's genteel American English, displacing it with an assertive Jewish tone. Yiddish, along with Russian, Polish, Hebrew ("Hear, O Israel"), and English, make up the linguistic and cultural environment of America. So secure is Shirley in English that her Americanization lies not in her rejection of these languages, but rather in embracing and bending them for her own purposes. In "The Jewbird," Malamud also translates a canonical story into Jewish in his rewriting of "The Raven," yet with a fundamental difference. His immigrant is a refugee cast out of an American Jewish home. The European Jewish past that alights on the windowsill is so alien to these American-born Jews that it takes the form of a fantastic creature. The lingering effects of diction and pronunciation in Malamud's prose are linked to Jews as victims of persecution at the hands of "anti-Semets" (who may also come from their own ranks), and to the "Jewboyd" that refers both to the mistreatment of Jews in America as well their mistreatment of "Schwartz," black boys. For Philip Roth, the inaccessibility of the languages and the experiences of European Jewry for American Jews raises questions about the nature of the bonds between these communities, as Tzoref insists, "Aach! You are us, we are you!" Eli's inability to understand any language other than English, and in particular any language that will give him access to the Jewish past, may account for his particular brand of fanaticism that can see no difference between Jewish religious culture and Jewish suffering, between Judaism and Holocaust commemoration.

“IT’S EVEN A QUESTION WHETHER GOD HIMSELF CAN MAKE OUT THE TEXT OF MY YIDDISH POEM”: JACQUELINE OSHEROW (1996)

Jewish American writers since the Holocaust have had to contend with dramatic reversals of the fate of their community’s languages—the rehabilitation of the ancient language of Hebrew in the state of Israel and the annihilation of the remaining Yiddish speaking community in Europe. Although the liturgical role of Hebrew continues to play an important role in Jewish American writing, occasionally an Israeli character’s intonation will be a jolting reminder that Hebrew as a spoken language also manifests itself as accent in English. “Little girl, which languages you are speaking?” asks Amnon, the Israeli drama counselor at a Jewish summer camp because he needs a camper who knows some Yiddish to perform in a play that takes place in the Warsaw ghetto. “‘Look here, *Miriam*,’ he would say, pronouncing her name the Hebrew way, with the accent on the last syllable. ‘Look here, *Miriam*, say me what’s wrong.’ ‘Nothing,’ she said. ‘Everything’s great.’ ‘Why you are saying me ‘Nothing’ when I see you are crying—have been crying?’” As *Miriam* had not expected summer camp to be a rehearsal of her life at home, where her refugee parents tell sad stories about the war in Europe all year long, she is not pleased about her part in the play, even if she is the only child to survive—a girl in braids singing a Yiddish song under the spotlight as the curtain drops. “But what can I do?” Amnon replies, “I am not choosing, it’s not my play, it’s not my language.” In Johanna Kaplan’s extraordinary story “Sour or Suntanned, It Makes No Difference,”<sup>77</sup> the Israeli character is portrayed as just another foreigner from the Old Country, a man with an accent who stands in the way of a child’s Americanization because he is associated with a Jewish experience that has the odor of death. Contemporary Hebrew speakers in Jewish American writing pose new questions about the diaspora Jew’s relation to his ancient homeland as a modern nation state, and about the role of Hebrew for American Jewish identity.

As for Yiddish, “Of what other language can it be said that it died a sudden and definite death, in a given decade, on a given piece of soil?” thinks Edelshtein (in Yiddish) in Ozick’s story “Envy; or, Yiddish in America.”<sup>78</sup> Consequently, attitudes toward Yiddish in the Jewish American community have shifted away from comical belittling, as was often the case among second generation writers, toward romanticizing, even sanctifying, the language. Jacqueline Osherow’s poem “Ch’vil Schreibn a Poem auf Yiddish” (translated in the poem’s opening line) treats Yiddish as the language of martyrs and hence purified by fire.

I want to write a poem in Yiddish  
And not any poem, but the poem  
I am longing to write,

A poem so Yiddish, it would not  
Be possible to translate.

According to Osherow, “it’s not the sort of poem / that relies on such trivialities, as, / for example, my knowing how to speak / its language—though, who knows? / Maybe I understand it perfectly; / maybe, in Yiddish, things aren’t any clearer / than the mumbling of rain on cast off leaves . . .” Osherow’s Yiddish poem “exists in no realm at all / unless the dead still manage to dream dreams.”<sup>79</sup>

In other words, devoid of speakers, Yiddish has become a reified icon, a disembodied spirit, a language without speech, and therefore without content, without accent, and without sound. Her English poem can only gesture toward an untranslatable and unutterable poem, akin to the Hebrew name of God. In Osherow’s imagination, Yiddish is a signifier of longing for an unattainable purity, the longing itself expressed in the phonetic twilight zone of transliteration—where the sound of Yiddish transcribed into the Roman alphabet of English is alien to *both* languages. “Ch’vil Schreiben a Poem auf Yiddish” is a paradoxical title—written by an admitted non-Yiddish speaker, it requires an English reader to mouth the words of a language that has become tragically disembodied, and through that enunciation of Yiddish sounds made possible by romanization, Osherow breathes life into that dead language. In this poem, the merger of Yiddish sound and English art take the place of Hebrew prayer, reversing the roles of Hebrew and Yiddish. “It’s even a question whether God himself can make out the text of my Yiddish poem.” His omniscience and omnipotence called into question by the Holocaust, “God” himself is not righteous enough to read this ineffable Yiddish poem.<sup>80</sup>

The title of the poem encapsulates the fate of Yiddish, for Osherow has transliterated *spoken* Yiddish by her use of “ch’vil,” rather than “Ikh vil” (although Yiddish poets would have also used the contraction) thereby affirming Yiddish as the language of lost speakers. Moreover, her use of the English “Poem” rather than the Yiddish “*lied*,” and her Germanic “auf” rather than “oyf” or “of” enact the gap between her good intentions and her Yiddish literacy. The literary endeavor of writing literature in Yiddish is conveyed in the English “Poem,” but the essence of the poem that cannot be expressed in writing is the speech community of “Ch’vil,” the colloquial contraction being the last trace of that community that the American poet desires to memorialize, “Ch’vil—I want.”

It is hard to imagine what Abraham Cahan would have made of this elegiac poem written by the descendant of Yiddish immigrants after the disappearance of Yiddish as a literary language. Let us turn now to that period in American literary history when Yiddish writing was brimming with Americanisms, when American English was just being introduced to a Yiddish accent, and when Cahan made his debut writing prose that we have come to call English.