

THE CURSE OF BABEL IN IMMIGRANT NEW YORK: HENRY ROTH'S *CALL IT SLEEP* (1934)

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The particular effects, values, and meanings of the works of writers like Heine, Babel, and Henry Roth, are due to the fact that their writings derive from and embody a dual yet intertwined linguistic and cultural allegiance.” (Murray Baumgarten, *City Scriptures*)

(Resumen)

El presente artículo explora las implicaciones de la diversidad lingüística en la obra de Henry Roth *Call It Sleep* (1934), celebrada por la crítica como una de las novelas más ‘sonoras’ del periodo modernista angloamericano, a la que se añade excepcionalmente su condición como novela de inmigración judía en la tradición de Cahan y Yeziarska. Uno de los aspectos fundamentales de *Call It Sleep* lo constituye precisamente la situación de encrucijada lingüística entre inglés, yiddish, polaco y hebreo, en la que se encuentra el protagonista David Schearl. El artículo analiza las oscilaciones entre diferentes niveles de realidad y de lenguas que se producen como consecuencia de la limitada percepción del personaje, cuya conciencia des/orienta al lector a través de un complejo entramado narrativo tan heteroglósico como diverso. En último término, el artículo interpreta la confusión babélica como símbolo de la experiencia traumática del protagonista, en el contexto de la novela de inmigración de Roth.

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Call It Sleep, published “against the grain” at the height of the Depression (1934), and for a very long time, Henry Roth’s only novel¹ is one of those rare masterpieces in modern American literature in its blending of an ethnic immigrant context (Jewish American) with a Modernist outlook. Reminiscent of James Joyce’s early novel, *Call It Sleep* would be fully a *Bildungsroman* if not for the fact that Roth does not proceed beyond the limits of childhood in his (misleadingly autobiographical) interior portrayal of David Schearl. The novel spans approximately two years in the boy’s life (ages five-six to eight), and concludes with David’s reflection that the violent and traumatic epiphanies he has undergone, real or imagined, mark the end of a stage in his life which “one might as well call... sleep” (441). Thus the novel remains, so to speak, “A portrait of the artist as a child.” Astonishingly, this portrait would be eventually recovered and continued by a sequence of four novels which appeared in the 1990s—the *Mercy of a Rude Stream* saga—where a more

1. *Call It Sleep* appeared in a very inconvenient context. It immediately encountered the hostile criticism of an anonymous reviewer of *New Masses* (actually its editor, Michael Gold, author of the weaker *Jews Without Money*, 1930) who denounced it for not adhering to the “proletarian novel” model, in vogue between 1930 and 1935 (Chametzky 50). This early reception largely determined Roth’s prolonged writer’s block: the critical rediscovery of *Call It Sleep* after 1964 led him to write again.

real autobiography is recast and recovered by an artist 40 years older, whose creative strengths are very different from those providing the raw, almost primal, energy of *Call It Sleep*.

Among the various significant features which inscribe this novel within the Joycean framework, there is one which has been highlighted by critics as particularly relevant: its *sonorous* qualities, in the broadest sense of the term. The titles of certain critical readings bear witness to this: critic Stephen Adams labelled *Call It Sleep* “The Noisiest Novel Ever Written”, in an essay dealing with the novel’s “soundscape” which touches upon the various audial motifs of the novel, taken to an extreme in the polyphonic, onomatopoeic chapter “The Rail:”

Khír-r-r-r-f! S-s-s-s-.

“I hoid ‘im!”

“Yeah!”

“He’s meckin’ him t’breed!”

“See? Gits the air in ‘im.”

Khír-r-r-r-f! S-s-s-s-.

“Looks like he’s gone, do. W’ere de hell’s dat ambillance?”

“Vee culled it a’reddy, Ufficeh!”

“Arh!”

“Rap ‘im on de feet arficer, I woiked in a power—”

Khír-r-r-r-f! S-s-s-s-.

“Anybody know ‘im? Any o’ youz know dis kid?”

The inner and the craning semi-circle muttered blankly. The policeman rested his ear against the child’s back.

“Looks like he’s done fer, butchuh can’t tell—”

Khír-r-r-r-f! S-s-s-s-.

“He sez he’s dead, Mary.”

“Dead!”

“Oy! Toit!”

“Gott sei donk, id’s nod mine Elix—”

Khír-r-r-r-f! S-s-s-s-.

“Sit im helfin vie a toitin bankis.” (423-424)

The novel is rich in similar, if not so radical, audial passages, to be read as if ‘heard’ in the reader’s brain. One of the particularly significant instances of the phonic qualities in *Call It Sleep* is the juxtaposition of languages and language registers that lies at the core of the boy’s quest to understand his identity as an immigrant of Jewish Polish ancestry growing up in New York’s Lower East Side: “the internal struggle for self-definition is enacted in the novel as a *kulturkampf*, a battleground of languages” (Wirth-Nesher 7). At a merely typographical level, the novel contains occasional short exchanges in transcribed Yiddish and various passages in transcribed Hebrew, mostly located in *Book III* and related to David’s *Torah* recitations at the *cheder*, in the context of Roth’s satire of an old-fashioned rabbinical education. But more significant is the fact that David’s stream of consciousness, which threads the whole novel, is conveyed in an English which is itself a “transcription” of his source language: “although the book is written in English, it is experienced by the reader as if it were a translation, for David’s main actions and thoughts

are experienced in Yiddish. Yet this ‘original’ source language is almost entirely absent....” (Wirth-Nesher 7-8). For the English *and* Yiddish speaking reader, as opposed to the ‘English only’ speaking reader (my case), this contributes to a deepening in the levels of understanding, not only in connection with the recognition of specific lexical items (an issue I will approach shortly) but also regarding the broader aspects of speech patterns, syntax and grammar, which the former kind of reader will fully recognize as Yiddish transferred into English.

However, any reader sensitive to language can understand that Roth translates David’s dialogues in Yiddish with his mother Genya (a ‘greenhorn’ who speaks no English) into a formally rhetorical English designed to echo the speech patterns of Yiddish: “Roth’s general form of narration is derived from Abraham Cahan’s choice to represent the Jewish immigrants’ Yiddish as good English –for Roth a highly stylized language– and their English as broken English, full of Yiddishisms.” (Sollors 131)

Roth’s choice results in the irony that both the language of these dialogues (Genya-David) and of David’s thoughts remain more accessible to general readers than the actual English utterances, which Roth renders as a tough American English street slang interspersed with Yiddish terms and transcribed according to a Yiddish-English phonetics. Consider these two typical exchanges of David’s, with his peers and with his mother:

David hesitated. “I godduh waid
hea till duh wissle blows.”

“W’a wissle?”

“By the feactory. All togedder.”

“So?”

“So den I c’n go opstai’s.”

(22)

“Mama!” he called out.

“What is it, my son?”

“Are you going to—to sleep inside?”

“Oh, no. Of course not! I’m just
straightening my hair a little.”

“Are you coming in here soon?”

“Why yes. Is there anything you want?”

(64)

As the quoted texts show, the representational strategies for these dialogues are entirely different. The exchange on the left simply follows the familiar pattern (also frequently employed, for example, in dialogue between African-American characters) of phonetically transcribing the English speech of Jewish immigrants. But the exchange on the right draws on patterns, syntax and word order which are most obviously not standard American English and within which even the non-Yiddish speaking reader like myself, can almost guess at the original language: expressions like “my son”, “a little”, “Why yes” (instead of, for example, “honey”/“sweetheart”, “a bit”, “sure”) evoke a highly formal language, of heavy Germanic influence, that often stresses lexical items in sentence-final position.

In the passages in which the household world of David’s mother Genya and the street world outside come in contact, Roth subtly underscores the change from Yiddish to English by changing the linguistic register from the standardized (translated) English to marked immigrant American slang. Consider the following exchange:

“I’ve only been there once,” [Genya] said apologetically. And to
Yussie, “Tell your mother I can’t come up just now.”

"She's waiting for you," he answered without stirring. "She's got a new dress to show you."

"Not now."

"I ain' goin' op," Yussie switched into English as if to avoid any further discussion. "I'm gonna stay hea." And apparently satisfied that his mission had been performed, he approached the uneasy David who was still seated beside the stove. "See wot I got—a bow 'n' arrer." (81)

This passage is of further interest as an introduction to a crucial aspect of *Call It Sleep* I want to highlight in this article, the characters' use of language(s) to hinder communication and understanding rather than to favour these. Here Yussie, the son of immigrant neighbours of the Schearls, also Jews, intuitively "switches into English" in order to avoid involvement in the developing tension between Genya and her authoritarian husband. English remains inaccessible to Genya, much in the same way as Polish remains inaccessible to David, or just as Hebrew remains inaccessible to the students at the *cheder*.

As critics have noted, the placing of David's receptivity at intersecting tongues, one of which is only partially (or not at all) understood, largely determines the complex and imaginative understanding of his world, spatially and chronologically built around three separate environments: the present lower East Side neighborhood around his home, depicted in *Book I* and throughout the novel; the familial past of the old country Austrian *shtetl*, portrayed primarily in *Book II* through Genya and Bertha's conversations, and the more remote past of Jewish tradition, ritual and culture, depicted in *Book III* through David's attendance to *cheder*. Hana Wirth-Nesher has noted (*Afterword* 445) that David's position "in-between languages" is to some extent illustrative of what Mijail Bakhtin termed the inner dialogic nature of the novel, the notion that within the novelistic genre exist a variety of languages which "conceptualiz[e] the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own subjects, meanings and values" (Bakhtin 292). However, Bahktin conceptualizes language in ideological rather than in purely linguistic terms, i.e. he posits the existence of a variety of "languages" within a unitary linguistic system, each specifically related to a social, cultural or ideological *stratum*. The dialogic nature of *Call It Sleep*, although assessable in Bahktinian terms, explicitly relates the "particular verbal-ideological linguistic belief system" (Bahktin 312) to the occurrence of a specific language. In Roth's novel heteroglossia is materialized in the juxtaposition of pairs of languages and is the very principle underlying David's operating consciousness in his attempts to cross the thresholds of understanding between English and Yiddish, Yiddish and Polish, or Hebrew and Yiddish. Of added interest is the fact that in relation to the *reader's understanding*, this "dialogic relationship" is actualized by the deliberate contrast between the formal English-instead-of-Yiddish and the original American English street slang.

A very relevant linguistic issue in *Call It Sleep* is that of the limited comprehension of language and its constituent lexical items in relation to the protagonist's 'mapping' of the world: this is, of course, one of the features that marks this work as a modernist novel. In Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, the reader is initially thrust into the demanding text of 'Benjy's Section' which requires an awareness that what we are reading is limited by the linguistic and conceptual boundaries of Benjy, a retarded rural southern male. Although David Schearl is, in most respects, the antithesis of Benjy (imaginative,

intelligent, raised in a changing, urban, immigrant milieu) it is interesting to note how at certain points in the novel, his conceptualizations become tantalizingly problematic for the non-Yiddish-speaking reader “immersed” in David’s consciousness. Consider the following humorous passage, which shows David’s amusement at his Aunt Bertha’s mordant irony on words and meanings:

“In Veljish,” she continued, “they say that ‘kockin’ will clear the brow of pain. But here in America—didn’t he call it that? ‘Kockin’?—will clear the mouth of pain.”

His father’s newspaper rustled warningly.

“Cocaine?” said her sister hastily.

“Oh, is that how you say it?”

‘Kockin,’ as David had learned long ago, was a Yiddish word meaning to sit on the toilet.

“And another thing,” his aunt indulged in a sly laugh. “I am going to lose six teeth. And of the six teeth, three he called ‘mollehs’. Now isn’t this a miracle? He’s going to take away a ‘molleh’ and then he’s going to make me ‘molleh’.”

David didn’t know what ‘molleh’ might mean in English. He did know that ‘molleh’ in Yiddish had something to do with circumcision. Aunt Bertha was being reckless to-night . . . (160)

The passage is significant in two ways: the first pun serves to fully contextualize Bertha in ideological and cultural terms, as the epitome of the Yiddish-speaking *shtetl* folk-tradition which is distinctively Jewish. Her amusement at the dentist’s use of the word “cocaine” —phonetically akin to ‘kockin’—is related to “Yiddish folklore’s obsession with problems of the digestive tract” (Harshav 94). But more importantly, Bertha’s second joke misguides David’s understanding of her attitude (as ‘reckless’) *because* he is unable to fully grasp the humorous nuances of the play on words. And so am I, as a non-Yiddish-speaking reader of the text: the general reader can understand that “molar” is a medical term beyond David’s English, but s/he cannot understand that Bertha’s use of “molleh” is not, as David thinks, actually linked to circumcision, thus missing the fact that the play-on-words is not sexual at all. In an illuminating discussion of language mediation in the novel, Werner Sollors has paid specific attention to this passage:

Irit Manskleid-Makowsky pointed out that although the American reader [ie, the Anglophone reader] is not excluded from this passage, since his experience partly resembles that of David, the reader who knows Yiddish reaches an additional level of understanding, since the English equivalent of “molleh” (“molar”) is here juxtaposed with the Yiddish term “moil,” denoting “a mouth” or “complete, full.” By pulling her tooth, Dr. Goldberg would make Bertha whole [. . .] [David’s] misunderstanding of “molleh” as a reference to the “mohil” who performs circumcisions [Hebrew, *mohel*] confers on this unexplained passage a triple level of meanings... (131)

Sollors is highlighting examples of how language mediation (or its lack) conditions the comprehension of certain passages in the novel, especially for non-Yiddish-

speaking readers: Bertha's irony obviously makes more sense when understood in the sense of "achieving wholeness by losing a tooth." Equally relevant to this discussion is the fact that David's misunderstanding of Bertha's second pun is largely related to his being placed at a further linguistic intersection, this time between Yiddish and Hebrew, and thus, that his multilingualism may function as much to favour understanding as to actually obstruct or misguide it.

Although Bertha's conversation above is trivial to David's formation, at other points in the novel Roth stresses the boy's anxiety at being placed at intersections between a known and an unknown language, without involving the reader's own linguistic competence in these. The most significant scene is that of David's eavesdropping on his mother's and aunt's conversation regarding Genya's past gentile lover in Austria (195-204). This is a key issue in the novel, since it is the germ of Albert Schearl's hostility toward his wife and unacknowledged hatred toward his son, whom he suspects of not being his own, given the circumstances of the hasty marriage to Genya. The following extract from the extended dialogue, which takes place in a mixture of Polish and Yiddish, has been quoted at length in order to highlight David's anxieties as the secret of his mother's past moves intermittently between the revelatory nature of Yiddish and the incomprehensible nature of Polish:

"And he seized my hand." *A whole sentence emerged*. Aunt Bertha [. . .] now beat the air angrily with her fists. "Even if he was educated," she exclaimed heatedly, "and even if he was an organist, he was a goy! And right then and there you should have sent him looking for his teeth!"

"Hush!" she said warningly and *again blotted out import under a screen of Polish*.

A little ashamed of himself, but secretly gratified nevertheless, David looked vacantly away. Here at last was something to brood on, perhaps even to worry a meaning out of, certainly to remember. A goy, Aunt Bertha had said, an 'orghaneest'. What was an 'orghaneest'? [. . .] And why did Aunt Bertha say hit him? Because he was a goy? She didn't like goyim. But mama? She did. Wonder? Who was he?

He turned to regard his mother. *When would another phrase break from that alien thicket?* He waited impatiently, mind beating the covers . . . Nothing . . . *Like a fabric the unknown speech flowed on rifeless, opaque, until—*

"Bah!" Aunt Bertha sheared in with contempt. "All these rogues have tongues on castors!"

"My fault as well!" protested his mother, reverting to Yiddish in forgetful haste. "Toward May I grew so, I spent the whole day waiting for a half hour at twilight [. . .] You don't know how mad I was—" [. . .] "You recall the priest and the banners and the funeral procession that went through the town? Ludwig was always in the train, chanting the services. I could watch him then as he went by, follow with the others a little ways, stare at him unafraid, Love—"

With the same suddenness as before, meaning scaled the horizon to another idiomi, leaving David stranded on a sounding but empty shore. Words here and there, phrases shimmering like distant sails tantalized him, but never drew near.

He writhed inwardly at his own impotence. (196-7, all italics mine)

Roth's mastery in this scene, which continues throughout several pages, lies in the visually symbolic way in which he describes David's becoming aware of his entries into and exits from the world of meaning, and in his feelings of tortured expectation that the dialogue return to Yiddish from the impenetrable Polish his mother uses as a precaution against her child's understanding.

Leslie Fiedler has commented that "what especially obsesses [Roth] are the negative aspects of that heteroglossia" (Fiedler 21) and there is, indeed, ample evidence of this in the novel. Genya is excluded from the New World beyond her family because she hardly speaks English;² similarly, David is excluded from a significant part of his heritage because he knows no Polish; the *cheder* scenes illustrate Roth's satire of the rabbi teaching the Jewish holy texts as recited incantations ("let them flow from your lips like a torrent," 229) and orally translating them into Yiddish "without stuttering." (232): Hebrew and Aramaic thus largely remain an alien chant for the *cheder* students. In this respect, it is particularly significant that the only multilingual speaker in *Call It Sleep*, Albert Schearl, should also be the most verbally (and otherwise) aggressive character, one whose use of language is almost exclusively limited to abusing his family and confronting his work partners. Albert Schearl, although fluent in Yiddish, Polish and English, never actually achieves "communication"—in the primal, etymological sense of the term as 'communion'—in any of these languages: the unremitting evilness of a character who is the only polyglot in the novel seems to mark him as the ultimate symbol that Roth's underlying vision in *Call It Sleep* draws on the biblical curse of Babel.

It is of further significance that the novel's climax (chapter XXI, *Book IV*, 409-431) which narrates the near-fatal electrocution of David, should be narrated through a gradual multiplication of sounds and voices, first two, and then several: Roth brings David to the scene of the accident by alternating his agitated stream-of-consciousness (typographically *italicized*) with the 'outer voices' of several workers and operators in the neighborhood. David's agitation, occupying the entire drift of his stream-of-consciousness at this point, is related to a fervent desire to "seek Purification" from his recent involvement with Leo, the Christian boy who has taken advantage of him in order to sexually harass his (David's) cousin Stella. The central trauma in David's mind is not just what he believes is his share of guilt in this episode, but above all, his incapacity to communicate these events—which he intuitively feels are of too great an evil—to his mother, his sole *confidante* throughout the novel.³ This incommunication-related guilt is also linked in his mind to the Biblical image that haunts him since *Book III*, Isaiah's purification by the burning coal on his lips. David has imaginatively fused allegory—Isaiah's redemption from *sinful acts of speech*—with reality—his own *unpurified speechlessness*—as the dialogic relationship

2. Genya's mispronunciation of their address adds to David's traumas in *Book I*: when he gets lost in a gentile neighborhood, the pedestrians who try to help him cannot make out that his utterance "Boddeh Stritt" (echoing his mother's) is actually *Barhdee Street*, and not *Potter Street* (Roth 97-101).

3. As L.S. Dembo has noted, Genya is not reciprocating in this aspect: "although [David's] mother overwhelms him with love and protection, she does not always satisfy his inquisitiveness. He needs what Buber might call a partner-in-dialogue; what he finds is isolation and the constant fear his lack of knowledge brings to him." (78)

moves beyond the realm of Babel and into the ultimate dilemma in the child's struggle for self-definition: speech versus silence.

As critics have noted, the near fatal accident heralds a rite of passage and a symbolic rebirth, marking the end of a period—childhood or innocence—which is summed up by David's "one might as well call it sleep" (441, last page), and which presumably encompasses the whole body of experiences—real and imagined—he has undergone in the novel. But David's change seems already patent in his reawakening from the electric shock: in the section of the chapter immediately following this, David's stream-of-consciousness is, literally, a regaining of consciousness, which is juxtaposed to the external cacophony of surrounding anonymous immigrants in a *crescendo* where his inner voice gradually displaces and outgrows the frantic voices of the others. Leslie Fiedler has noted how this emerging voice seems to already embody—within the very fictional boundaries of the novel—the transformation of the *young man* David into the *artist* Roth:

as he struggles back to full consciousness, a new voice speaking in a new tongue, elegantly phrased and cadenced, begins to cut through the inchoate uproar of the new Babel. Italicized and enclosed in noncommittal parentheses, the provenance of that voice seems uncertain, but clearly it is the voice of the adult who will someday be able to write a prophetic book much like the one we are reading. Disconcertingly, however, that new holy language by which the confusion of tongues will be at long last resolved, turns out to be much like the transatlantic *goyish* English of the elite High Modernists. (23)

Ironically, Roth would publish nothing of consequence for sixty years, thus re-enacting David's predicament of speechlessness toward the conclusion of *Call It Sleep*. After what is probably the longest writer's block in the history of American letters, Roth's own reawakening would come in the seventies, stimulated by the critics' rediscovery, in the sixties, of the unjustly forgotten 1934 novel, and its ensuing re-editions. Only then, and throughout the last twenty years of his life, Roth returned passionately to writing. The result was the *Mercy of a Rude Stream* four-volume saga (1994-1998), a post-modern work in which the narrative splits into the two voices of Roth as old-man-author versus Roth as young-artist-character. The latter voice carries on the interrupted *Bildungsroman* of David Schearl, now as Ira Stigman, into the years of adolescence and manhood, while the former voice dwells on the dismal present of ageing and the misery of the lost years not writing. The enigmatic Henry Roth, whose *Call It Sleep* was unique in dialogizing Modernism with Jewish-American writing, now bridges the gap between Modernism and Postmodernism, and in doing so, achieves at last his long-awaited artistic redemption.

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