

Abraham Cahan, A Neglected Realist

JOAN ZLOTNICK

Although Mencken considered *The Rise of David Levinsky* "one of the best American novels ever written," although Howells called *Yekl* "magnificent," Abraham Cahan remains one of the most neglected of American authors. Only one of his English novels has had a recent reprint, there is no complete edition of his English short stories, and there is only one—outdated and generally unavailable—bibliography at the Archives of Franz Kursky and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Only two volumes of Cahan's five-volume autobiography, *Bleter fun mayn lebn*, have been translated, and, although biographical chapters appear in books by Melech Epstein and Abraham Goldberg and there is a short unpublished and unsigned biographical sketch among the Kursky papers, to date there has been only one full-length study of Cahan's life. He is discussed in few literary histories, and critical studies of his fiction are scarce. If he is remembered at all, it is as editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward* and as leader of the Social Democratic Party rather than as a fiction writer of considerable talent.¹

Dr. Zlotnick received her doctorate from New York University in 1969, and has been teaching English at Brooklyn College since 1965. Articles written by her have appeared in *Markham Review*.

¹ H. L. Mencken, "A Tribute to Abraham Cahan on His Sixtieth Birthday," *Jewish Daily Forward*, June 7, 1942, p. 20; Rudolf and Clara Kirk, "Abraham Cahan and William Dean Howells: The Story of a Friendship," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, LII (September, 1962), 32 (subsequent references to this article will appear parenthetically in my text). In 1960, Harper and Brothers reprinted *The Rise of David Levinsky* with an excellent introduction by John Higham. *Abraham Cahan Bibliography* (New York, 1941) was compiled by E. H. Jeshurin, a close friend of Cahan's. The Kursky Archives is at 25 East 78th Street, the YIVO at 1048 Fifth Avenue, both in New York City. Melech Epstein, *Profiles of Eleven* (Detroit, 1965), pp. 76–109; Abraham Goldberg, *Pioneers and Builders: Biographical Studies and Essays* (New York, 1943), pp. 284–330. Theodore

THE DEADLY SILENCE

The purpose of this study will be to explore some facets of Cahan's realism in selected fictional studies of the Jewish immigrant in America. We must understand at the outset that Cahan triumphs as a realist every time a reader finds truth on his pages, even though the reader may never have heard the chant of the *lamdan* (talmudic scholar) bent over his *Gemara* (commentary on the Mishnah) or attended a Passover *seder* (feast commemorating the delivery of the Jews from slavery in Egypt), or witnessed the terrifying process whereby assimilation becomes alienation.

Indeed, Cahan was faithful to reality as he saw it, and what is more, succeeded in convincing at least some non-Jewish readers that his ghetto, with its Yekls and Gitls, really existed. He was a literary realist in other ways as well. He modified the convention of happy endings and poetic justice. He created complex characters, heroes not wholly admirable and villains not without charm. He employed the international theme, expressed an interest in social and political issues, and experimented with point of view as well as vernacular, colloquial, and dialectal speech. He focused upon commonplace characters in a contemporary setting, and his tone was frequently comic.

Cahan's fiction, essentially comic in spirit although sometimes tragic in implication, is peopled by characters of humble birth. Many are poor peddlers or factory workers. Reb Eliezar is an old Jew behind a cigar stand on New York's Lower East Side; "A Sweat-Shop Romance" describes the courtship and marriage of Beile, a finisher in the shop of Leizer Lipman. Yekl is an operator in a cloak factory, and David Levinsky, a hungry orphan from Antomir, begins his life in America selling pins and buttons to ghetto housewives.

Pollack has written a Columbia University dissertation (1959) entitled "The Solitary Clarinetist: A Critical Biography of Abraham Cahan, 1860-1917." *The Education of Abraham Cahan*, translated by Leon Stein, Abraham P. Conan, and Lynn Davison (Philadelphia, 1969), renders into English the first two volumes of Cahan's *Bleter*.

Not only are Cahan's heroes commonplace people, but often they are scoundrels. Yekl, an immigrant who wants above all to be a "Yankee," changes his name to Jake and squanders his wife's passage money in dance-halls; pretending to be single, he flirts with the vulgar, Americanized Mamies. When Gitl finally arrives in America, "slovenly dressed in a brown jacket of grotesque cut . . . her hair concealed under a voluminous wig of pitch-black hue,"² Yekl feels only repulsion, and considers himself a martyr, forced to live with a "dowdyish little greenhorn" (p. 75). His martyrdom, however, is short-lived, for he abandons the faithful and loving Gitl with a selfish cry:

I am an *American feller*, a Yankee—that's what I am. What punishment is due me, then, if I can not stand a shnooza like her. It is *nu ushed*; I cannot live with her, even if she stand with one foot on heaven and one foot on earth. (p. 149)

His tone objective, Cahan never tells us that Yekl is a scoundrel, but permits his character to reveal himself through dialogue and action. He is aware of the complexity of human nature and makes his characters sympathetic and even attractive despite their human failings and immoral behavior. We feel sorry for Yekl, who is, after all, America's victim. We even pity David Levinsky, who is more of a villain than Yekl.

Molded by the hunger, poverty, and persecution of his fatherless youth, so conditioned to be dissatisfied that dissatisfaction becomes an organic habit,³ Levinsky is never able to enjoy the riches he earns in America. Although he destroys temples, first the temple of Jehovah and later the City College (which Cahan describes as another kind of temple), although he rejects the teachings of the Holy Bible

² In this citation, which appears in the 1896 New York edition of *Yekl* (all subsequent references will be to this edition and appear parenthetically in my text), Cahan is experimenting with point of view, describing Gitl as she appears to her disillusioned husband. Later (1917) he will write a novel—*David Levinsky*—in the first person.

³ This observation was made by Isaac Rosenfeld in *An Age of Enormity: Life and Writings in the 40's and 50's* (Cleveland, 1962), pp. 273–381.

and dedicates himself to the principles of Spencer and Darwin, although he lies, cheats, steals, and seduces the wife of his best friend, we are moved by his realization that he has lived the wrong kind of life. Levinsky, who should have been a scholar instead of a business magnate, is, for all his riches, emotionally bankrupt:

I am lonely. Amid the pandemonium of my six-hundred sewing machines and the jingle of the gold which they pour into my lap I feel the deadly silence of solitude. . . . I go to the opera, to the theatres, to the concerts, and never alone. There are merry suppers, and some orgies in which I take part, but when I go home I suffer a gnawing aftermath of loneliness and desolation. . . . There are moments when I regret my whole career, when my very success seems to be a mistake.⁴

Yekl and Levinsky are just two of Cahan's heroes victimized by America. Indeed, Cahan's recurrent theme appears to be the making of the American and the high price it exacts: the loss of piety, creativity, love, and ultimately the self. From economic, sociological, and psychological viewpoints, Cahan explores the immigrant's experience and probes his inner conflicts. Frequently there lurks the memory of what was, and Europe comes to represent the intellectual, the spiritual, and the creative landscape, whereas America is at best the scene of economic success. Cahan, like Henry James and William Dean Howells, was writing "international" fiction.

In Europe David Levinsky had been a talmudic scholar; in America he is a business magnate who yearns for his old life and deplures his success. Tzinchadzi, his name changed to Jones, a prosperous, fat, and beardless merchant, also realizes that unhappiness is a byproduct of wealth. Romance has gone from his life. He has even stopped yearning for his birthplace and the girl he loved, and, ironically, this is the source of his greatest misery: "I have money and I have friends, but you want to know whether I am happy; and that I am not, sir. Why? Because I yearn neither for my country, nor for Zelaya, nor for anything else."

⁴ Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (New York, 1960), p. 526. All subsequent references to the novel (originally published in 1917) will be to this 1960 edition and will appear parenthetically in my text.



Saul Raskin, artist

*Reproduced from The Mirrors of the East Side,
by Jacob Magidoff*

Abraham Cahan
A keen sense of human sympathy

WHEN THE SHOFAR BLOWS

Economic success does not, however, torment all of Cahan's immigrants: some are poor and cold and hungry. Reb Eliezar, who in Russia was a *sofer* (scribe of Old Testament parchment scrolls), complains from behind his cigar stand: "I sit freezing like a dog from six in the morning to eleven in the night . . . and what do I get for my pains? When I make five dollars I call it an extra good week." What is more painful than economic privation is America's mockery of his artistic talent: he is told that the lions he draws look like potatoes and that machine work is preferred.⁵

Although Cahan played an important role in Americanizing his Jewish readers and recognized the necessity and value of assimilation, he felt nostalgia for the Old World. This is apparent in so comic a story as "The Imported Bridegroom," which describes Asriel Stroon's return to his birthplace and his "purchase" of Shaya, a talmudic genius, for "thirty-thousand rubles and life-long board, lodging, and bath money, and stocking darning, and cigarettes, and matches, and mustard and soap."⁶ He brings Shaya to America to marry his modern and free-thinking daughter Flora. Shaya becomes an *apikoros* (an atheist) and wins Flora's love, but, for all the humor, there is pathos as the old and the sacred give way to the new and the crass.

In "The Russian Jew in America," there is a lyrical celebration of Old World Judaism and a more obvious expression of Cahan's lingering love for the uniqueness of his people's tradition:

Between the walls of the synagogue, on the top floor of some ramshackle tenement house, they sing beautiful melodies, some of them composed in the caves and forests of Spain, and these and the sighs and sobs of the Days of Awe, the thrill that passes through the heartbroken taileth-covered congregation when the shoffar blows, the mirth which fills the house of God and the tenement homes upon the Rejoicing of the Law . . .

⁵ Cahan, "Tzinchadzi of the Catskills," *Atlantic Monthly*, LXXVIII (August, 1901), 226; Cahan, "Reb Eliezar's Christmas," *Scribners*, XXVI (December, 1899), 663.

⁶ Cahan, *The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto* (New York, 1898), pp. 37-38. All subsequent references to stories from this collection will appear parenthetically in my text under the abbreviated title, *Stories*.

the mysterious light of the Chanucvah candles . . . the joys and kingly solemnities of Passover—all these pervade the atmosphere of the ghetto with a beauty and charm. . . .⁷

Indeed, at the turn of the century most Jewish immigrants were living in a ghetto, and Cahan draws a vivid picture of the contemporary scene. Consider the following description of Leizer Lipman's "cockroach" tailorshop:

. . . bundles of cloth, cut to be made into coats, littered the floor, lay in chaotic piles by one of the walls, cumbered Mrs. Lipman's kitchen table and one or two chairs, and formed, in a corner, an improvised bed. . . . dangling against the door or scattered among the bundles, there were kitchen utensils, dirty linen, Lipman's velvet skull-cap, hats, shoes, shears, cotton-spools, and whatnot. (*Stories*, p. 166)

Although the divorce scene in *Yekl* and the synagogue scenes in "The Daughter of Reb Avrom Leib" are impressive, perhaps Cahan's most memorable description is that of the talmudic scholars in "The Imported Bridegroom,"

some humming to their musty folios melodiously; others smiling and murmuring to them, like a fond mother to her babe; still others wailing or grumbling or expostulating with their books, or slapping them and yelling for delight, or roaring like a lion in a cage. (*Stories*, p. 93)

To recapitulate: Cahan presents a vivid picture of life as he, the factory worker, teacher, labor organizer, newspaper editor, and socialist party leader, saw it lived on the Lower East Side of New York City. There are boarders and *shadchonim* (matchmakers) and assimilated men deserting their old-fashioned wives.⁸ There are night schools and coffeehouses, socialists and *sheitels* (wigs worn by pious matrons), the garment industry and the *borscht belt* (resort area in the Catskill Mountains frequented by Jews). But, most im-

⁷ Cahan, "The Russian Jew In America," *Atlantic Monthly*, LXXII (July, 1898), 138-39.

⁸ Melech Epstein, *Profiles of Eleven*, p. 76, explains:

Yekls deserting their Gitls were not uncommon in the immigration. Thrown into the fast pace of the big city, the Yekls became involved with other women, deserting their wives who, in many instances, had been the choice of their parents. The philanthropists had to form a desertion bureau to seek out such husbands and compel them to support their children.

portant, there are real human emotions and dilemmas which transcend time, place, and religion. There is, for example, the young woman in "A Sweat-Shop Romance," wondering if she is in love because "she never feels anything melting, nor can she help disliking certain things about Heyman" whose smile "sometimes appears fulsome" (*Stories*, p. 177). There is a bride hoping that the gifts will cover the cost of an elaborate wedding ("A Ghetto Wedding"), a young man dreaming about kissing a girl ("A Sweat-Shop Romance"), an impoverished old man struggling with his conscience about whether or not to keep a "tainted" twenty dollar bill ("Reb Eliezar's Christmas"). These people need not have been Jewish immigrants living on New York's Lower East Side at the turn of the century, but, in conformity with the literary principles held by Cahan, they were.

THE PROLETARIAN PREACHER

In 1896 Cahan told Dexter Marshall: "I have always written exclusively of life as I see it. . . . There are enough picturesque features in the life of my people to furnish stories without end" (Kirk, 50-51). On another occasion he told the readers of the *Forward* that under their tenement roofs they could find "the very stuff of which great literature can be made." His main criticism of Gorky was that "his tales do not ring true," and he preferred Chekhov, whose stories he translated and published in the *Arbeiterzeitung*. He admired the "sincere and truth-loving nature" of Howells (Kirk, 55) and made Theodore Dreiser a favorite novelist of the Jews before he was accepted by American critics.⁹ He published in the *Forward* many articles about Hart Crane, Sinclair Lewis, Somerset Maugham, and of course Howells.

For Cahan, as for Howells, the truth in literature meant faithful rather than conventionally happy endings, and it meant a concern

⁹ Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews 1870-1914* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), p. 31; Cahan, "The Mantle of Tolstoy," *Bookman*, XVI (December, 1902), 331. The source of my information on his regard for Dreiser is an untitled, unsigned, unpaginated manuscript in the Kursky archives.

with social issues. Indeed, publishers objected to *Yekl* because it ended with a divorce; *David Levinsky* is about a frustrated rather than a fulfilled love, about a disappointed bachelor with sad memories and a broken engagement; Tzinchadzi never marries his beloved Zelaya; the guests, too poor to bring presents and too proud to come without them, do not attend the ghetto wedding, and later some hoodlums throw a vegetable at “the sheeny fella and his bride” (*Stories*, p. 254). There are, however, some more hopeful endings: in life, some things do turn out better than others. So, in “A Sweat-Shop Romance,” David marries Beile and romance appears to triumph in the sweatshop.

But life will be hard for Beile and David; work is scarce, hours are long, and employers are callous. Although Cahan generally sees marriage as something positive, a striving towards unity and a weapon against alienation, it cannot do away with the real—and hard—facts of life. There is frequently economic and sometimes even emotional privation in marriage, as in the case of Sophie Leib, who marries the physically repulsive Aaron Zalken, who “works his lips like a duck.”¹⁰ She marries him not out of love, but out of loneliness, despair, and guilt; he is the only man who cherishes the memory of her beloved father.

I said earlier that social commentary was an element of Cahan’s realism. In “The Mantle of Tolstoy,” he argues that the novelist must deal with social inequity. This is not surprising if we remember that Cahan was a political activist who edited and wrote a chapter for *Hear the Other Side: A Symposium of Democratic Socialist Opinion*, urging the acceptance of socialism, “the kind that stresses liberty, democracy, and a keen sense of human sympathy, the credo of which is the antithesis of dictatorship and its twin brother terrorism.” He also wrote an introduction to *Socialism, Fascism, and Communism*, a collection of essays arguing the socialist position, and editorials for the Leftist *Workman’s Advocate*. Even earlier in his newspaper career he was writing social satires in the *Arbeiterzeitung*, which he signed “der Proletarisher Maggid” (the proletarian

¹⁰ Cahan, “The Daughter of Reb Avrom Leib,” *Cosmopolitan*, XXIV (May, 1960), 56. Subsequent references to this story will appear parenthetically in my text.

preacher). In the *Zeitgeist* he published a word by word translation of the first chapter of *Das Kapital*.¹¹

Under his editorship the *Forward* became the organ of the Social Democratic Party, and Cahan, who in 1882 had delivered the first socialist speech in Yiddish—in a ballroom behind a German saloon—went on to become the foremost speaker for the cause. In the Kursky archives there are transcripts of impassioned speeches, some untitled and undated, which Cahan delivered at Madison Square Garden: some praise the German Republic, in which “there was not a vestige of political inequality” and the New Deal, which he called “one of the glorious reforms in the history of the republic”; others damn Hitler and his “unparalleled reign of terror.”

Despite Cahan’s objective tone and his reluctance to pass moral judgments on his characters, these political and social convictions are manifest in his fiction. *The White Terror and the Red* (1905), a novel about the Russian underground, traces the steps by which Prince Pavel Boulatoff is converted from loyalism to nihilism. *Raphael Naarizoch*, a Yiddish novel published in 1907, is about a Russian immigrant who becomes a socialist. The ghetto stories which describe the squalor of the sweatshops and the poverty of the working class are a measure of Cahan’s disillusionment with laissez-faire capitalism. The moral and intellectual hero of *David Levinsky*, a book which describes the process whereby the making of a capitalist becomes the undoing of a man, is the socialist poet Tevkin.

In this context it is well to remember that Cahan’s admiration for Howells was based partly on his recognition of him as a fellow-socialist. As the Kirks explain, “Howells’ answers to the troublesome questions of society—strikes, money, education, work, leisure, and so on—made many of his generation dub him a socialist.”

IN FINE FEATHER

Cahan and Howells were alike in another respect: both experimented with the vernacular in an attempt to write dialogue appro-

¹¹ My reference is to p. 7 of *Hear the Other Side* (New York, 1934). *Socialism, Fascism, and Communism*, edited by Joseph Shapless and David Shub, was also published in 1934.

priate to their characters. Cahan seized brilliantly upon the speech rhythms and idioms of his people. Untranslated words such as *treife* (nonkosher food) and *kaddish* (the mourner's prayer) take their colorful places next to Yiddish expressions translated into English. Fiddlesticks, for example, is rendered as "the kernel of a hollow nut" (*Stories*, p. 8), and Mr. Stroon says: "I am as full of sins as a watermelon is of seeds" (*Stories*, p. 10). Reb Avrom Leib, despairing because his sons have become Americanized, cries: "I am a hen breeding duck's eggs" (p. 55). His daughter Sophie, in a moment of contrition, tells Zalken: "I love you as I do the eyes in my head" (p. 58).

Cahan is particularly successful in rendering the vow and the curse.¹² Mr. Stroon happily greets his old friend: "Shmulke, Angel of Death, an inflammation into your bones" (*Stories*, p. 21). Yekl, who has just described how he and a "Christian feller" lived together like brothers, proclaims: "May I be unable to move from this spot if we did not" (p. 3). Throughout Cahan's fiction, characters like Mrs. Kavarsky cry, "the black year take it" (*Yekl*, p. 59), and in the typical Jewish fashion express affection by inversion: "Believe me, you are a lump of hunchback" (*Yekl*, p. 142).

Speech rhythms are often recognizable as Talmudic singsong. Consider the following passage from *David Levinsky*:¹³

In the first place, ↑ I don't want Mr. Chaiken ↑ to leave the Manheimers—
↓ not yet. All I want him to do is to attend our shop evenings. λ Don't be
uneasy: ↑ the Manheimers won't get wind of it. λ Leave that to me. λ (p.
204)

And there is, of course, the Yiddish dialect which plays so prominent a role in *Yekl*.

In general, Cahan's prose is clear and simple, short sentences often piling upon one another to create an effect of choppiness. I would not go so far as to agree with H. L. Mencken, who says that the language is "full of notable subtleties. The right word is always

¹² See Theodore Reik's *Jewish Wit* (New York, 1962) for an illuminating discussion of the Jewish comic curse.

¹³ I have used arrows to indicate pauses and intonation. The upward pointing arrow indicates a pause with a rising pitch, the downward pointing arrow a pause with a falling pitch.

in the right place; there is none of the dull obviousness that marks so much of American fiction." Cahan did write some brilliant passages, but there are frequent lapses into awkwardness and cliché. In a book like *David Levinsky*, however, it is not always possible to distinguish author from speaker, and one cannot readily determine if these lapses are deliberate. Is it David Levinsky rather than Cahan who likes to say "I was in fine feather"? Are the clichés "my heart in my mouth" (p. 70) and "I was on pins and needles" (p. 225) Cahan's tools for characterizing Levinsky? The language of *Yekl*, a book written in the third person, suggests that cliché is a part of Cahan's style: Bernstein "looked daggers at his meal" (p. 97), and Yekl "felt between the devil and the deep sea" (p. 172).¹⁴

The fact remains that many of Cahan's contemporaries, although American-born, used many more clichés and, on the whole, wrote far less effectively. As Howells understood very well, Cahan—whom he called "a new star of realism" (Kirk, 51)—had an advantage over most authors insofar as he was able to draw upon Russian, Jewish, and American sources. Beginning with the Russian literary principle of fidelity to fact, relying upon his knowledge of the Jewish psyche and the Diaspora experience, using the myth of the American millionaire who cannot find happiness, he wrote *The Rise of David Levinsky*. If he had written only that novel, students of American literature should have taken notice. But although he has written a considerable amount of good fiction, critics and public alike have neglected Cahan and have refused to give him a place next to Howells, Crane, Dreiser, and the other respected realists of his time.

The outlook for the future is, however, good. A short while ago Garrett Press published *The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto*. Recently a number of critical essays on Cahan have appeared in journals specializing in American literature. Several new books dealing with the Lower East Side at the turn of the century contain considerable material on Cahan. And

¹⁴ Mencken, "Tribute to . . . Cahan," *Forward*, June 7, 1942, p. 20. Since Cahan uses the phrase "fine feather" so often in *David Levinsky*, I am not citing a specific page reference.

the recent translation of parts of the Cahan autobiography brings with it the promise that before long the entire five-volume series will be translated.

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