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HOMELESSNESS IN ABRAHAM CAHAN'S FICTION

A Thesis

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The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Martha Anne Collins

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APPROVAL SHEET

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For
My Grandmothers: Helen Ewing
and
Sue Collins

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ABSTRACT

Abraham Cahan (1860-1951), an influential journalist (in Yiddish and English), socialist, and intellectual, remains particularly well-regarded as a skilled chronicler of life in New York's Lower East Side during the early twentieth century. Yet Cahan writes not just as an advocate of the Jews or as a social historian; he writes as a skilled literary artist. His two works of fiction in English, The Rise of David Levinsky and "Yekl" and "The Imported Bridegroom" and Other Stories of Yiddish New York, present characters who are unable to connect with society around them. Though many of his characters are literal orphans, many more are figurative orphans--feeling unguided, unloved, and unfulfilled.

Cahan's fiction offers solutions to the characters' inability to thrive. To those characters whose unrootedness is caused by their immigrant status, those greenhorns who are unsettled by the "otherness" of their new surroundings, Cahan presents the acquisition of the English language as one way to become rooted. To those characters whose homelessness is more of a malaise of spirit, Cahan's fiction offers no certain formula for success. It does, however, present various possibilities such as community offerings, religious faith, love, and even an accepting attitude as possible steps on the road to fulfillment and stability.

HOMELESSNESS IN ABRAHAM CAHAN'S FICTION

That Abraham Cahan's two major works of fiction written in English capture the spirit of Lower East Side New York and of the immigrants who lived there in the early twentieth century there is no doubt. Some critics place Cahan's collection of short stories, "Yekl" and "The Imported Bridegroom" and Other Stories of Yiddish New York, and his novel, The Rise of David Levinsky, squarely in the genre of immigrant fiction, seeing Cahan's role as more of a social historian than a literary artist. Bernard G. Richards, in his introduction to the short stories, calls Cahan a "Ghetto Storyteller" whose "excursions into English were essentially diversions."¹ Saying that Cahan wrote social history in the "guise of fiction," John Higham in his introduction to the novel agrees with William Dean Howells's pronouncement that Cahan created the first authentic immigrant novel.² The tendency to read Cahan's works only in terms of what they teach of the immigrant experience, however, wrongly limits their scope. Thus when Higham says that "David Levinsky was not a universal or a wholly representative figure" (vi), he denies the novel's more far-reaching appeal.

Cahan is not just one of the "spokesmen and advocates" for the Jewish immigrant that Richards describes in his introduction (Y iii). Cahan's two English works speak to a

greater audience than just the Jewish immigrant, and his works address a broader theme than just the immigrant experience. The theme of homelessness binds his disparate fictional characters.

Cahan's immigrant status qualifies him to explore the theme of homelessness. Writing in his autobiography forty years after immigrating, Cahan still remembers the "physical agony, the loneliness" of his early days in America (Educ. 242). And Cahan's role as a leading socialist warrants his interest in the homelessness theme. Of course, the immigrant who feels homeless is more receptive to the socialist message that Cahan vows to spread: "It is my duty to spread socialist propaganda wherever I can" (Educ. 301). And Cahan, the socialist, seems to resist feeling too settled in his new county. At the same time that he acknowledges "America's freedom," Cahan also reminds himself that "all this is a capitalist prison" (Educ. 228).

Yet, the theme of homelessness has less to do with Cahan's socialist convictions and more to do with his literary goals. Saying that "essentially Cahan's impulse to write was always a didactic one," Ronald Sanders confuses the two roles (Downtown Jews 193). Yiddish, not English, is the language of instruction for Cahan. Sam Girgus notes that "indeed, Cahan the Yiddish Journalist and socialist leader at times seems to be a different person from the

Cahan who wrote fiction . . . in English" (New Covenant 68).³

A feeling of unrootedness, an inability to connect to society around them, is the common denominator of characters in Cahan's fiction who are otherwise vastly different in terms of monetary success, education, family structure, and religious faith. Cahan's fiction does not provide sure solutions to overcome his characters' "metaphysical homelessness,"⁴ although several possibilities are set forth to combat varying degrees of unrootedness. Some of his characters become more rooted in response to these communal offerings, some never overcome isolation.

There is no indication that Cahan blames America for the characters' corruption (David Levinsky) or for their demoralization (Yekl, Flora, Rouvke, Boris, and others). Whereas the anarchists and socialists who were Cahan's contemporaries claimed that "there was no more freedom in America than in Russia," Cahan defended America, saying that "in America there was no Czar, there were no gendarmes, no political spies" (Educ. 282). Cahan was wary of the American Dream's grand promises, yet at the same time he was unable to deny America's opportunities for fulfillment.

On the most basic level, one cause of Cahan's characters' unrootedness is their immigrant status. Learning the language of their adopted country (a process painstakingly outlined in Cahan's work) enables them to feel

more connected than the non-English speaking immigrants. And speaking English provides his characters with the skills and the self-confidence to succeed. However, not all causes of unrootedness are as easy to relieve. Of more universal interest are those characters who feel orphaned, victimized, unloved, unsatisfied, and those who feel victimized by circumstances. For this group Cahan's fiction presents foundation-providing options including cultural activities and institutions, religious faith, political activism, and even an accepting attitude (as in the case of Asriel Stroon in "The Imported Bridegroom").

The majority of Cahan's characters are first-generation immigrants (Flora of "The Imported Bridegroom" is the rare exception) so their unrootedness is literal: They have left behind the old world in search of the new. Hindering the characters' adaptation to America is the "exaggerated hope" they have in the country even before reaching its shores (Ainsa 53). David Levinsky's head swims with great expectations of "fantastic experiences" and "marvelous transformations" when he thinks of his soon-to-be-adopted homeland (L 61). Shaya, the imported bridegroom from the story of the same name, envisions a paradise of uninterrupted freedom "where, ensconced behind luxuriant foliage, the righteous . . . were nodding and swaying over gold-bound tomes of the Talmud" (Y 119).

Disappointment greets many of Cahan's immigrants; no reality can match their expectations. For example, Levinsky's vision of a mythic America fades as the American immigration officers treat him rudely. Levinsky compares the officers' behavior to the Cossacks: "These unfriendly voices flavored all America with a spirit of icy hospitality that sent a chill through my very soul" (L 89).

Disheartened by his first day on American soil, Levinsky bemoans his state: "America did seem to be the most cruel place on earth" (L 97). Exacerbating the immigrants' feelings of upheaval is the question of how to feel at home in a place so foreign, in a place that offers wretched living conditions, financial poverty, and no guarantee of work. Some of Cahan's sweatshop workers leave work one afternoon "overjoyed by the certainty of employment for at least another day or two" (Y 8).

Upon coming to America, Cahan's characters realize that the "New World" is vastly different from their home. Fernando Ainsa, in his "Utopia, Promised Lands, Immigration and Exile," describes the unsettling reality some immigrants find after trying to settle in their new country: They find "a different language, different laws, different customs, a different culture, a different climate, other dimensions, other inhabitants" (56). Different customs overwhelm Gitl on her first few moments on American soil. Not only is her husband Jake clean shaven, but he violates the holy day by

handling coin and riding in a car. Then he informs her that in America women wear neither wigs nor kerchiefs. Jake's only response to Gitl's shock is, "Here everything is so different" (Y 37). This "otherness" is one source of agitation for Cahan's immigrants.

For those characters who are unsettled by the "otherness" of their new surroundings, Cahan presents the acquisition of the English language as one way to become rooted. Language is one stabilizing feature in Cahan's fiction; English, especially for the immigrant, is the language of capitalism, civility, authority, respectability, and above all, of belonging. English exists for the immigrant as more than a method of communication; it is "the gateway of the modern spirit" (Rischin 151). As it appears in Cahan's works, the acquisition of language is a crucial stepping-stone on the path to integration.

Cahan's characters realize the obstacle that their native language presents. Shaya, the imported bridegroom, quickly realizes that his inability to speak English "was the one great impediment that seemed to stand between him and the enchanted new world" (Y 138). Rouvke, from "A Providential Match," knows that his goals of becoming a shopkeeper will never be met until he learns English--and he thinks that speaking English will not hurt his chances with the ladies, the kind of ladies who have "nothing but sneers for a gentleman who does not know how to read a newspaper"

(Y 169). Rouvke even has hopes that through reading he can somehow improve his physical appearance: "Rouvke enrolled in a public evening school for immigrants, and when he had achieved the wisdom of piecing together the letters in 'cat,' 'rat,' 'mat,' of the First Reader, he one afternoon bought a newspaper, and applied himself to looking for an advertisement of some physician who would undertake to remove the footprints of smallpox" (Y 169). David Levinsky's approach is methodical. He begins his English studies by listing English words and phrases that previous Russian immigrants had incorporated into their adulterated Yiddish. He explains how he would write "the English words in Hebrew characters from my landlady's diction, so that 'nevermind,' for example became 'nevermine'" (L 104). Levinsky's primitive method gets results; after one month of studying, Levinsky knows more English than Russian.

Cahan's presentation of dialect allows the reader to chart the characters' lingual progress.⁵ In Cahan's two English works, his characters generally speak Yiddish; what we read is an English "translation." But it is immediately recognizable when the characters speak English by the preponderance of v, f, and d consonant sounds and oi vowel sounds. In English Fanny (from "Yekl") says, "Vy, today is Vensday" (Y 33). The dance instructor from the same story guides "Von, two, tree! Leeft you' feet! Don' so Kvick--sloy, sloy! Von, two, tree" (Y 33). Small talk

fills the dance hall, "Vot you stand like dot? You vont to loin dance? . . . Is it hot anawff for you? (Y 37).

Words and short Americanisms common in Cahan's work are (with corresponding English): "an' dot'sh ull" (and that's all), "you can betch you' botsh" (you can bet your boots), "feller" (fellow), "Is dot sho?" (Is that so?), "Never min" (Never mind), "Dot'sha a' kin'a man I am" (that's the kind of man I am), "ejecate" (educated), and "pon my vord" (upon my word). Underlying even the most basic English phrase or sentence is an unspoken pride in a new country and a new language.

Cahan finds the language-learning process "inspiring," noting there is "nothing worthier of the student of immigration than the sight of a gray-haired tailor, a patriarch in appearance, coming after a hard day's work at a sweat-shop, to spell cat, mat, rat, and to grapple with the difficulties of 'th' and 'w'." In the same article, Cahan pridefully separates the Russian Jew from the "illiterate class" and places him, instead, "among the most ambitious and the quickest to learn both the written and the spoken language of the adopted country, and among the easiest to be assimilated" ("Russian Jew" 131). A transformation occurs as the immigrant becomes bilingual; the immigrants' new world seems less foreign.

So, on one level, Cahan's characters' feelings of homelessness result from their transplanted state. On this

level, the English language provides some roots. But many of his characters experience feelings of homelessness on several levels: many are orphans, some suffer from loneliness resulting from their inability to find a mate, others feel victimized by circumstances and unable to shape their own future. This "metaphysical homelessness" is not as easy to relieve.

Most of Cahan's main characters lack parental support. The list of characters who are orphans includes: David Levinsky, who loses his mother early in the narrative;⁶ Jake ("Yekl"), who learns of his father's death in a letter from Russia; Asriel Stroon and Shaya ("The Imported Bridegroom"), and Goldy and Nathan ("A Ghetto Wedding"), who are all orphaned before the course of their narratives. Others are not explicitly labeled orphans by Cahan, yet they suffer the same feelings of loneliness and lack of security as the literal orphans. Flora in "The Imported Bridegroom" is the rare character in Cahan's fiction who enjoys close and constant parental guidance. Her mother died when Flora was a baby, but Asriel Stroon, her father, loves her and provides for her emotional and physical needs. Yet even she is not exempt from feeling overwhelmed and at the mercy of her future.

Loneliness is one trait of the orphan. Loneliness for Cahan's characters is more than solitude or lack of physical contact--it is a "metaphysical homelessness," a deep

yearning for connection. Ralph Harper, creator of the term, explains that "a natural orphan is not the most solitary of human beings; the metaphysical homeless is more desolate" (qtd in Mishra 16). David Levinsky, always unable to connect, never able to find emotional security, admits "I am lonely." His wealth offers no consolation: "Amid the pandemonium of my six hundred sewing-machines and the jingle of gold which they pour into my lap I feel the deadly silence of solitude." His home at the end of the day provides more "loneliness and desolation" (L 526). Part of this loneliness is a longing for a home. Hanele, Rouvke's "Providential Match," finds herself "homesick after the rest of the world" (Y 182). Cahan's characters always feel displaced. In America Asriel Stroon "yearns and pines" for Pravly, his birthplace (Y 99); but once in Pravly, Stroon is homesick for America.

For Cahan's immigrants, homelessness might lose its sting if it were not accompanied by the inability to find love or a fulfilling relationship. Bonnie Lyons notes how Levinsky is unsuccessful in his attempts to find "any lasting or satisfying connection between sex, love, and marriage" (90). His three failed relationships--including an affair with a married woman and a broken engagement--are chronicled in the novel. Like Levinsky, Rouvke Arbel seems remarkably well-adjusted to America. He is a faithful Jew and is financially secure (though not in the same league as

Levinsky) after working his way up the ladder from a handkerchief peddler to a custom peddler with his own business card. All Rouvke's life lacks is the "feminine element" (Y 165). His bad luck with the "yoong laddas" seems to be changing when the matchmaker assures him that Hanele, his old employer's daughter, agrees to be his wife. However, Rouvke's fragile and mending self-esteem is dashed when Hanele steps off the ship on the arm of another man. He is further humiliated by an onlooker who calls Rouvke a monkey and threatens to punch him in the nose. And in a less tragic example, Heyman, from "A Sweatshop Romance," is so feeble and meek that his proposal to Beile "lay on the tip of his tongue" where it remained because he lacked the strength to unburden himself (Y 195). As love is withheld from Cahan's homeless, yet another provider of refuge disappears.

But perhaps the most debilitating aspect of "metaphysical homelessness," even more debilitating than the feeling of loneliness and the inability to find love, is the feeling of lack of control over one's own destiny. Again and again, Cahan's characters feel victimized by outside forces. Goldy, from "A Ghetto Wedding" initially cares more about what people think than what she thinks. She refuses to marry Nathan in a "slipshod manner" fearing "universal ridicule" (Y 226). So, instead, they sink into debt planning a wedding they cannot begin to afford. In "The

Imported Bridegroom" Stroon feels "an overpowering sense of defeat" when he learns the bridegroom he imported is an appikoros (Y 151).

Flora, Jake, and Boris virtually deliver their future to an external force. Cahan titles one story "Circumstances" and creates Boris, a main character, as one who feels victimized. Instead of assuming responsibility for his actions, he tells his wife to "Cry to our circumstances, not to me. Circumstances, circumstances" (Y 210). Ultimately, he is defeated by his own fatigue. He expends more energy blaming his circumstances than he does trying to change them. He loses his wife to their boarder--a hard-working medical student who came to America having even less money and education than Boris. Flora, from "The Imported Bridegroom," and Jake, from "Yekl," both feel excluded from their futures. Flora grooms Shaya to become educated and even encourages him to sneak to the library behind Stroon's back. She creates a monster: soon philosophy books interest Shaya more than Flora does. On the day they legally become husband and wife, Flora finds him in an attic discussing books. The scene devastates her: A nightmare of desolation and jealousy choked her-- jealousy of the Scotchman's book, of the Little-Russian shirt, of the empty tea-glasses . . . of the whole excited crowd, and of Shaya's entire future, from which she seemed excluded. (Y 162)

In the same way, Jake leaves his wife and places his future in Mamie's hands; Mamie has the savings so she sets the agenda. Jake willingly acquiesces. He admits it is easier "to be relieved from all initiative" and to "let himself be led by her in whatever direction she chose" (Y 82). Jake cannot rouse himself from his inactivity to provide for his son: "His heart bled at the thought of having to part with Joey. But somehow the courage failed him" (Y 81). Cahan aptly titles the chapter where Jake wins Mamie "The Defeated Victor." Jake, Flora, and Boris forsake their own destiny and are thus defeated.

When faced with the overwhelming forces of "metaphysical homelessness," Cahan's characters' first tendency is to admit defeat. But Cahan's fiction provides other alternatives which involve his characters in their surroundings. Cahan is not so naive as to believe that a night at a dance hall, or a semester of school, will metamorphose a floundering immigrant into a well-adjusted and deeply rooted American, but he does present these diversions as a small comfort and a stabilizing force. Most important, these activities and institutions offer a link to the community, a link Cahan values greatly.

With the wide selection of cultural activities and institutions available, involvement and participation of some form depends neither on the immigrants' intellectual capabilities, nor on their social status. Cahan views

participation in these activities not as a luxury, but as an important factor in deepening their connections to their new home and fellow immigrants. A list of some of the diversions and organizations found in Cahan's fiction shows their democratic appeal. The list includes: the synagogue; the theater, both Yiddish and American; the Yiddish press; political parties, mainly socialistic; dance halls; schools; cafes; labor unions; and the community of readers of Yiddish literature.

Cahan's commitment to a Jewish-influenced community shaped by common goals and shaped by a common culture evidences itself in his own dedication to the Yiddish press, socialism, and literature. Bonnie Lyons comments that "Cahan's own rich, full life in America is in fact almost a paradigm of the American immigrant dream" (89). He sees that in the process of creating a community, the immigrant's sense of self-worth cannot help but grow, as does a feeling of responsibility to something larger than the self. David Levinsky's merely peripheral association with the cultural, political, and religious offerings of the Lower East Side goes far in explaining his lack of connection to his past or future. For Levinsky, selfish motives prompt philanthropic concern. For example, he donates twenty-five dollars to Anna, whom he wants to impress, for a socialist ball he would never consider attending (L 476).

Cahan's fiction also portrays the synagogue as a way for his characters to feel rooted. For the pious and non-pious Jewish immigrant alike, the synagogue provides a bond to a common history and common struggle. Cahan, himself non-orthodox, avoids allying himself too closely with either the pious or non-pious. One finds in Cahan's fiction an accepting attitude towards all degrees of piety.

Basically, the synagogue offers two distinct choices. Charles Liebman identifies them: religious and communal (21). The synagogue in its religious capacity offers religious education, a place for prayer and a sanctuary for worship. But the synagogue's other capacity as a community support system must not be underestimated. Cahan, in an essay, describes its many functions: "The orthodox synagogue is not merely a house of prayer; it is an intellectual center, a mutual aid society, a founding of self-denying altruism, and a literary club, no less than a place of worship" ("Russian Jew" 138). Although personally more attracted by its communal functions, Cahan respects all its contributions.⁷

Cahan in no way belittles spiritual sustenance--many of his characters receive genuine comfort from their devout religiosity. For example, Rouvke from "A Providential Match" faithfully "puts on his phylacteries and prays in his room every morning on weekdays" (Y 164) and Nathan and Goldy's wedding ceremony in "A Ghetto Wedding" adheres to

Orthodox custom. Religious faith sustains Stroon, in "The Imported Bridegroom," when all else fails. Cahan exhibits a non-judgmental attitude towards those who find such comfort through the continuity of religious tradition. He tenderly portrays Tevkin, in The Rise of David Levinsky, as he becomes more interested in Judaism. Tevkin explains away his celebration of religious holidays as a reflection of his devotion to Zionism, more of a "national custom" than "religious ceremony" (L 493). He rightly feels his observance of the holidays is a bond to all living Jews and to past generations (L 495).

Throughout Cahan's fiction are references to intellectual and social offerings available to all immigrants. Some of Cahan's characters participate, but many (most notably David Levinsky) never do. These offerings serve to make displaced persons feel more rooted to society around them.

The prevailing image in David Levinsky's eponymous novel is of an outsider looking in. Extra-vocational activities hold little interest for him, whereas Jake in "Yekl" eases the monotony of labor by spending as much time as he can at a dance hall. In Cahan's fiction, there are many dance halls on the Lower East Side where patrons learn to dance and, equally important, socialize and practice English. In Jake's favorite dance hall, Cahan explains how "English was the official language . . . it was broken and

pronounced in as many different ways as there were Yiddish dialects represented in that institution" (Y 17). Levinsky acknowledges that "good music had become all but part of the daily life of the Jewish tenement population" (L 391), but he remains unaffected by its presence. When making a favorable impression on Miss Tevkin matters most to him, at a dance in a Catskill resort, Levinsky is reduced to being a wall-flower instead of a participant. When a young lady asks why he is not dancing, he curtly replies, "I never cared to learn it" (L 431).

Not to place undo emphasis on dancing, Cahan's fiction illustrates other opportunities for merriment, intellectual stimulation, or just camaraderie, which David Levinsky rejects. Other immigrants in Cahan's fiction form their own recreational organizations. Dalsky, from "Circumstances," is a clear example of one not content with spending all waking hours working or sitting around a dingy apartment. In the evenings, after a busy day of work and school, he attends lectures and frequents the college and Russian Students' Club. Friendships formed there enrich his life. Boris and Tanya seem content to stay home on New Year's Eve, but Dalsky celebrates with friends at Stern's New Year's gathering, and even participates in the evening's entertainment. Is it any wonder that Tanya falls in love with Dalsky when all Boris, her husband, does is rail against "circumstances"?

Levinsky's preoccupation with business advancement and his lack of interest in social matters renders him always apart from the Lower East Side community. The Yiddish press, whose core purpose is educating and informing the Jewish masses, reviles Levinsky for employing men on non-union terms, and encouraging them to work "from sunrise til long after sunset" (L 272). Instead of feeling shame, he feels flattered: "for, behold! the same organ assailed the Vanderbilts, the Goulds, the Rothschilds, and by calling me a 'fleecer of Labor' it placed me in their class" (L 273). Of course, this is mere delusion on his part. Levinsky does not even realize his isolation.

By resisting sustained participation in social, political, and religious activities, Levinsky cuts himself off from the best his community offers. He is chronically adrift. In the same way, Boris from "Circumstances" wrongly views cultural diversions that shift his attention away from his livelihood as a "luxury" and he instructs his wife: "We must send all literature and magazines and gush about Russia to the deuce. . . . People who hang about pawn shops have no right to 'interesting points' and Guy de Maupassant" (Y 208). By barring outside interests he makes his already unhappy life unbearable. In the same way, paralyzed into inactivity by loneliness, their unloved state, and circumstances they feel are beyond their control, many of

Cahan's characters never overcome their "metaphysical homelessness."

Cahan's characters who ultimately overcome the symptoms of homelessness are the ones who take control of circumstances. Bonnie Lyons notices that Cahan rewards those characters who "sustain themselves through religious faith, political activity, art, workers' associations, family and social ties" (89). For example: In "Circumstances," Dalsky's beginnings are more humble than Boris', but after just two years in America he is able to "pay his first year's tuition and to meet all the other bills of his humble, but well-ordered and, to him gratifying living" (Y 214). And there is David in "A Sweatshop Romance" who succeeds where Heyman fails due to his "quiet persistency and suppressed fervor" (Y 201). The marriage bond provides stability for Nathan and Goldy in "A Ghetto Wedding" only when Goldy realizes the futility of tears; she asks "what's the use of crying?" (Y 229). Asriel Stroon of "The Imported Bridegroom" truly prevails. He decides to marry Tamara and end his days "serving God in the Holy Land" (Y 157). His accepting attitude is his greatest asset. At one point Stroon is inconsolable with rage and grief. But he reaches a turning point when he says, "I cannot change the world" (Y 157). He learns the accepting attitude from a Rabbi who "would hail the severest blows of fate with the words: "And this, too, is for the best" (Y 157).

Cahan's characters' homelessness is not just a Jewish problem. Its symptoms are common to modern man: the feeling of being a stranger in a strange land, feeling lonely, unloved, and helpless to shape events. As A.K. Mishra finds in his study of Loneliness in Modern American Fiction, the "metaphysically homeless" character does not exist "in a complete vacuum with nothing to guide, support and reassure him. The values are there. It is up to the individual to surmount his loneliness by embracing these" (21).

Notes

¹Abraham Cahan, "Yekl" and "The Imported Bridegroom" and Other Stories of Yiddish New York, intro. Bernard G. Richards (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1970) vi, viii. Subsequent references for all of the stories included in the volume are cited in the text as Y.

²Abraham Cahan, The Rise of David Levinsky (New York: Harper & Row, 1960) viii, ix. Subsequent references are cited in the text as L.

³Cahan recognizes early in his career that neither English nor Russian are the languages that would most effectively teach the newcomers about life in America. In his Yiddish writing he embraces the role of teacher. He writes stories, articles and even a "Dear Abby" kind of advice column called "Bintel Briefs" for the Yiddish-reading immigrant masses. Through Yiddish Cahan connects with the often green Russian Jew, and as Zanger points out, is able to "proseletyze successfully for social change" (Pilpul 284). It is not the role of teacher or master to which Cahan aspired in his English works. Yekl was written at the behest of Howells; and David Levinsky was printed first as an installment piece for McClure's magazine. In these two works Cahan sought realistically and faithfully to fictionalize the immigrant experience in a way that would prove interesting to an English-reading audience. Cahan states in his autobiography, "I was concerned with the relationship between literature and social problems" (Educ. 404).

⁴Ralph Harper, The Seventh Solitude (Maryland: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1964) 16, qtd in Ajit Kumar Mishra, Loneliness in Modern American Fiction (Delhi: Authors Guild Publications, 1984) 16.

⁵There are, of course, stages to acquiring proficiency in a language. William Labov's outline of the process appears in Roger Shuy, ed. Social Dialects and Language Learning (Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1964). Labov's article "Stages in the Acquisition of Standard English" is directed especially to children and how they learn, but it applies to immigrants equally well. The stages, in order, are: "The Basic Grammar," or the ability to communicate basic needs on a basic level; "The Vernacular," or learning "the local dialect in a form consistent with that of his immediate group of friends and associates; Social Perception," or being still confined to one's own vernacular, but being

aware of dialects, vernaculars of others; "Stylistic Variation," or learning to modify speech to socially prestigious vernacular, "The Consistent Standard," or "the ability to be able to switch to a consistent style of speech and maintain that style with reasonable consistency"; and finally, "Full Range," or mastery (91-92). Cahan's fiction presents characters who exist on every level of language proficiency--some never moving beyond the first stage of communication, with only David Levinsky reaching the mastery stage.

⁶Bonnie Lyons, "David Levinsky: Modern Man as Orphan," Tulane Studies in English 23: 85 - 93. Lyons' article explores "Levinsky's orphaned state: As a man without parents (literally), home, God, or any satisfactory center to give meaning to his life.

⁷As explained by Arthur Liebman, Jews and the Left (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1979) 336. "In the pages of the Forward, Jewish faith and religious customs were . . . treated with respect. Anti-religious socialists and anarchists were publicly admonished, even in the Forward's earliest years to refrain from attacking Judaism." He continues, "Cahan and other socialists as well were concerned about not placing themselves and their cause at odds with the Jewish religion as the Jewish anarchists had so clumsily done."

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