

# ETHNICITY AND SOME OTHER ASPECTS OF HENRY ROTH'S *CALL IT SLEEP*

STANISLAV KOLÁŘ  
UNIVERSITY OF OSTRAVA, CZECH REPUBLIC

## ABSTRACT

The essay on Henry Roth's novel *Call It Sleep* views ethnicity and cultural diversity as very significant sources of the novel's dynamism. It focuses on Roth's depiction of ethnic diversity in an American urban ghetto, represented particularly by New York's Lower East Side. A detailed analysis of the novel's Prologue draws on the fact that it predetermines the nature of the author's novel, which is seen especially as a story of redemption. Special attention is paid to language as an important agent of expression of cultural plurality and to the confrontation of different religions. The essay also attempts to interpret several central symbols that relate to the protagonist's life and to the past of his family.

## KEYWORDS

twentieth-century American novel; Jewish American fiction; ethnicity; Jewish immigration; New York; Lower East Side; modernism; Henry Roth

Originally I intended to name my essay on Henry Roth's novel *Call It Sleep* "The Novel That Calls for Awakening." However, I realized that this pun on the title would not be appropriate for several reasons. It is true that after its first publication in 1934, in the middle of the Depression years, the novel was almost forgotten and Henry Roth seemed to sink into oblivion. Yet thirty years later, in 1964, the novel miraculously awoke from its deep sleep when it was published in a new paperback edition.<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact, this resurrection was not that startling because there were always literary critics who were fully aware of the book's artistic qualities and regarded the lack of attention paid to Henry Roth as undeserved. No wonder that Alfred Kazin and Leslie Fiedler ranked *Call It Sleep* among the most neglected novels.<sup>2</sup> Today Roth's novel, together with Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), is viewed as a classic of Jewish American literature. Moreover, it has been translated into numerous foreign languages. Perhaps my original title would be suited to the situation in the Czech Republic, since for many Czech readers Jewish American literature is confined to the quartet of well-known

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1. It is no coincidence that the novel was reprinted in the 1960s, a decade marked by growing interest in ethnicity in the United States. In fact, a paperback edition of *Call It Sleep* was reissued as early as 1960, but the real revival of this novel was triggered by the 1964 edition.
  2. See Walter Allen, afterword to *Call It Sleep*, by Henry Roth (New York: Avon Books, 1964), 442-47.

writers—Isaac Bashevis Singer, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth. For those readers for whom Jewish American literature starts after World War II, Henry Roth is an obscure name; in addition, his novel still awaits translation into Czech.<sup>3</sup>

*Call It Sleep* is an ethnic chronicle of the life of Jewish immigrants in the New World, predominantly seen from the perspective of a small boy, David Shearl. As Sanford Pinsker put it, “If Cahan saw the Lower East Side through a wide lens, Roth narrowed his vision to the dreams and nightmares of an individual child.”<sup>4</sup> The poverty of the Lower East Side ghetto is not the only urban setting of the novel, as its first part takes place in Bronzeville.<sup>5</sup> Through the eyes of the oversensitive child between the ages of six and nine we follow his initiation to an unknown and rather terrifying territory where “lost, bewildered, friendless . . . David scuttles through the streets of the Lower East Side like a frightened little animal lost in a jungle inhabited by the larger carnivores.”<sup>6</sup> His lostness differs from that of the characters of Singer’s stories set in America, as the terror of the new environment is magnified by David’s age and his artistic imagination. He becomes alienated from the world that “had been created without thought of him.”<sup>7</sup>

The hostile reception of the immigrant boy and his mother in the “Promised Land” is already foreshadowed in the Prologue, which narrates the arrival of David and his mother Genya at Ellis Island, where they are to meet Albert, Genya’s husband.<sup>8</sup> The year is 1907, the period of one of the biggest waves of immigration to America. Although David and Genya do not look like typical “greenhorns” and their appearance is unremarkable (except for David’s outlandish straw hat), their reunion with Albert is odd and draws the attention of others.<sup>9</sup> What is unusual is the cold welcome extended by Albert to his family members, whom he has not seen for a long time. Roth’s diction when depicting Albert’s behavior is ominous: this character is seen as “the man staring with aloof, offended eyes at the water,” as a man with a “grim smouldering face” whose “voice [is] dangerous” or “harsh” and whose “wrathful glare” frightens the small boy. The vocabulary associated with Genya’s husband is telling and includes such expressions as “contempt,” “grunted,” “rebuke,” “snapped,” “ignoring,” “frowned,” “morosely,” “snarl” etc. (CIS 11–15). The direct reason for his anger is Genya’s failure to recognize him (because of his

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3. Only a short extract from this novel was published in Czech translation in the periodical *Spektrum*, no. 33 (1981): 30–31.

4. Sanford Pinsker, *Jewish-American Fiction, 1917–1987* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 8.

5. Bronzeville corresponds to Brownsville, a section of Brooklyn.

6. Walter Allen, afterword to *Call It Sleep*, 444.

7. Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (1934; New York: Avon Books, 1964), 17. Hereafter cited in text as CIS.

8. Unlike the majority of Roth’s novel, the Prologue is narrated from an omniscient point of view.

9. David’s straw hat irritates Albert so much that he throws it into the sea.

Americanized appearance); however, the reader soon realizes that Albert's ire is aimed particularly at the child. His utterance "He's [David] the cause of all this trouble anyway" (CIS 15) adumbrates Albert's extraordinarily brutal treatment of the child throughout the novel, the result of his doubts about the son's biological paternity and of his uncertain social position in America.

The ominous nature of the adoptive country is suggested not only by Albert's threatening behavior but also by the description of the place where the immigrants arrive. Roth piles up rather dismal images of the New World that are in contrast to the notion of America as Eden or Eldorado. Similarly to Cahan's protagonist David Levinsky who, despite his initial elation after his arrival in New York, registered "the hostile glamour of America"<sup>10</sup> and the unfriendly behavior of the immigration officers in Castle Garden, and expressed his loneliness "in the midst of a jungle,"<sup>11</sup> Roth pictures the landscape of the new country in a dismal tone. The steamer's whistle is heard as a "hoarse warning" (CIS 9) and immigrants are delivered "from the stench and throb of the steerage to the stench and the throb of New York tenements" (CIS 9). The newcomers can see "the low drab Jersey coast-line" (CIS 14) and "grimy cupolas and towering square walls of the city [that] loomed up" (CIS 16). The Prologue closes with a description of the steamer, whose motion to the dock is conveyed as reluctant. We can perceive it as an exact metaphor of Genya's feelings of uncertainty before her arrival in America.

Underscoring the unkind reception of the immigrants in the American part of the Diaspora, Roth devotes a part of the Prologue to a description of the Statue of Liberty. This "Mother of Exiles," if I can allude to the famous poem by Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus," is presented gloomily.<sup>12</sup> Her features are "charred with shadow, her depths exhausted" (CIS 14). In contrast to Lazarus's poem, Roth's Statue of Liberty is associated with darkness, that darkness against which David must struggle in his quest for a new identity throughout the book. The statue's "spikes of darkness" and "the blackened hilt of a broken sword" (CIS 14) look sinister, as if they anticipated David's future in the new land.<sup>13</sup>

10. Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917; New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 87.

11. Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, 90.

12. In my course on Jewish American Literature, I teach the Prologue of Henry Roth's novel in connection with Emma Lazarus's poem in order to contrast the imagery of two literary texts that both relate to the Statue of Liberty. While Lazarus's celebratory sonnet links this essential symbol of the United States with light, Roth portrays the Statue unconventionally, emphasizing its dark silhouette. The contrast between light and darkness pervades the whole of Roth's novel.

13. In the fourth part of the novel, entitled "The Rail," Henry Roth returns to the motif of the Statue of Liberty. Here he imbues this symbol with an ironic meaning: "[Y]ou can go all the way up inside her for twenty-five cents. For only twenty-five cents, mind you! Every American man, woman and child ought to go up inside her, it's a thrilling experience" (CIS 415). It is obvious that the American icon is diminished here. Materassi sees in it "a phallic pun." Mario Materassi, "Shifting Urbanscape: Roth's 'Private' New York," in *New Essays on Call It Sleep*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 50.

This dreariness is in contradiction to the introductory motto of Roth's novel, which refers to America as the "Golden Land" (CIS 9). This association with gold implies the fulfillment of the American dream.<sup>14</sup> In Roth's novel the designation acquires an ironic meaning. It contrasts the myth of America with the depressing reality of the Schearl family. "And this is the Golden Land" (CIS 11), says Genya spontaneously, as if she could not believe that what she was seeing was America. In fact, irony appears in the very first sentence of the Prologue when we learn that Genya and her son reached the American continent in a steamer named the Peter Stuyvesant. It bears the name of the Dutch governor "who attempted to prohibit the immigration of the 'deceitful race' of Jews to New Amsterdam in 1654."<sup>15</sup> By the choice of the name Roth underscores the status of the newcomers, whose position as welcome immigrants is a mere illusion.

As has already been stated, *Call It Sleep* is an ethnic novel with its focus on Jewish immigrant life in the American urban ghetto, represented particularly by the Lower East Side. However, from the very beginning Roth presents America in its ethnic diversity. In the Prologue the narrator registers immigrants of various nationalities aboard the steamer, ranging from Russians, Jews, and Slovaks to Armenians, Greeks, and Danes. He notices the variety of their clothes and costumes, which can be understood as a synecdoche for the colorfulness of the New World, so characteristic of Roth's novel. To underscore the peculiarity of the Schearl family reunion, he describes the typical habits of several national/ethnic groups in meeting scenes—of Italians, Swedes, Jews, Poles, and the English. Roth's depiction of the strange meeting of Albert with Genya and David in the Prologue makes the reader suspect that something is wrong in the Schearl family. Its mystery is gradually revealed in the subsequent four parts of the novel.

The character that pieces the puzzle together from its fragments is David. The main source of danger for him is his father, despotic beyond compare. David is terrified by his father's mere presence and he counts the so-called "red days" in the calendar, that is, Sundays, when Albert is at home. He fully realizes the extent of his alienation from his father when walking with him in the city for the first time:

As far back as he could remember, this was the first time that he had ever gone anywhere alone with his father, already he felt desolated, stirred with dismal forebodings, longing desperately for his mother. His father was so silent and so remote that he felt as though he were alone even at his side. What if his father should abandon him, leave him in some lonely street. The thought sent shudders of horror through his body. (CIS 24)

Because of his choleric nature Albert has no friends in America. The only person who often visits him is his employer Luter; however, this friendship is only simulated, as the real reason for Luter's visits is his sexual attraction

14. It is worth noting that the Chinese called America the Gold Mountain.

15. Werner Sollors, "A World Somewhere, Somewhere Else.' Language, Nostalgic Mournfulness, and Urban Immigrant Family Romance in *Call It Sleep*," in *New Essays on Call It Sleep*, 139.

to Genya. Because of his quick-tempered behavior Albert also easily loses jobs and becomes unemployed. Actually, the above-quoted passage has an interesting—and for the son, terrifying—point; we find out that the main purpose of David's trip was his visit to Albert's employer, to whom the boy is sent to retrieve his father's personal belongings and to collect money that the company owes to him. From the employer David learns that his father nearly killed a man with a hammer after a quarrel. Despite their distance, Albert and David have one feature in common: both of them are extremely lonely in America.

By contrast, Genya represents a kind of retreat, the only island of safety for David. Many critics have interpreted David's dependence on his mother and his relationship with his father in Freudian terms and attributed oedipal features to it.<sup>16</sup> It is true that this dependence is almost pathological; however, it compensates for the frustration in his relationship with his father, who projects his own social failures onto his son. Roth portrays Genya in the Yiddish literary tradition of a protective *mama* who guards David against all the dangers of the surrounding world.

Besides Albert, the ghetto itself poses a threat to David. The boy is exposed to various kinds of danger, embodied by individual people but also represented by inanimate objects. This combination creates a strange mosaic that achieves poetic qualities, so characteristic of Roth's novel. The author systematically builds up an atmosphere of menace that is omnipresent, regardless of whether the boy is in the streets of the Lower East Side or in the tenement house where he lives. One of the numerous traumas he has to face in the new environment is connected with sexuality. His innocence is shattered when the neighbors' daughter Annie forces David "to play bad," a children's sexual game that disgusts him. For the same reason he treats Luter as his enemy because he subconsciously becomes aware of the sexual flavor of the guest's visits. Already at his early age he links sexuality with sin and betrayal. Danger constantly awaits David in the streets, where he experiences unpleasant moments, including being bullied by a group of boys.

There is another place that plays an important role in the structure of Roth's text. It is a cellar which becomes one of the central symbols of the novel. The fact that "Cellar" is the title of the book's first part points to its significance. In Harap's view, "[t]he dark cellar of his [David's] tenement, with his fantasy of rats and the unknown symbolizes his terror."<sup>17</sup> David associates the darkness of the cellar in his tenement house with death and sexuality. This association is evoked by his personal experience; death is connected with his memory of the horrifying moments when he observes the black hearses

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16. Allen Guttman labeled *Call It Sleep* "the most Freudian of the great American novels." Allen Guttman, *The Jewish Writer in America: Assimilation and the Crisis of Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 50.

17. Louis Harap, *Creative Awakening: The Jewish Presence in Twentieth-century American Literature, 1900–1940s* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 113.

and people wearing black clothes at a funeral, and sexuality is related to the darkness of a closet where Annie precociously initiated David into sex.

Roth pictures the city from David's perspective as a strange, barely comprehensible organism that terrifies him. According to Materassi, "like most metropolitan settings in twentieth-century literature, Henry Roth's New York is a place of division and isolation."<sup>18</sup> In the first part of the novel, the boy's feeling of uprootedness is best expressed in the episode in which David literally loses his way. After an incident with other children he finds himself in a district far from his neighborhood, and he does not know his way back home. Eventually he helplessly bursts into tears and even though passers-by are trying to help him, their good intentions come to nothing because the boy mispronounces the name of the street where he lives. This feeling of uprootedness is not, however, limited only to the immigrant child. In conversation with Luter, David's mother expresses a similar experience:

"But here I am. I know there is a church on a certain street to my left, the vegetable market is to my right, behind me are the railroad tracks and the broken rocks, and before me, a few blocks away is a certain store window that has a kind of white-wash on it—and faces in the white-wash, the kind children draw. Within this pale is my America, and if I ventured further I should be lost. In fact," she laughed, "were they even to wash that window, I might never find my way home." (CIS 33)

What is noticeable is the word "pale," suggesting that Genya lives in a new form of confinement, even though her confinement in America is incomparable with that in the old land because this time it is self-imposed.<sup>19</sup>

The problem of the Schearl family is that it lives in America in *galut*—in exile. Unlike many other emigrants who left their country for economic, religious or political reasons, Albert and Genya came to America to escape from their past. More precisely, they were forced to leave Austria—Genya because of her love affair with a *goy*, the church organist Ludwig, which resulted in something of a family scandal, and Albert because of his responsibility for the tragic death of his father. Albert's father was gored by a bull, but his life could have been saved if Albert had helped him. Albert, however, made no attempt to help, in retribution for his father's despotic behavior (as we can see in his relationship with David, the family history repeats itself).

In spite of the traumatic experiences of David's parents in Europe, they often return to the land of their birth in their memories and do not perceive America as their home. On the contrary, their adoptive country is an alien land for them. They are unable to rid themselves of their nostalgic approach to their homeland, associated with the rural landscape that forms a counterpoint with their bleak urban present, scarred by industrialization.

18. Materassi, "Shifting Urbanscape," 31.

19. The Pale of Settlement was a restricted area in Russia where Jews were allowed to live. They did not have the same rights as Russian citizens and thus they were not permitted (with some exceptions) to leave the Pale; this was only allowed under certain conditions that were determined by law.

Their nostalgic attitude toward their old country is illustrated by the purchase of two artifacts for the decoration of their apartment—artifacts that are to remind them of their past. Albert's icon, a wooden plaque with bull's horns, reminds him of his childhood and youth spent on a farm in the Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia. A picture of a cornfield with tiny blue flowers is painfully dear to Genya since it relates to her gentile lover Ludwig, whom she saw for the last time in a similar field with blue cornflowers. Both artifacts serve not only as mere decorations, but also connect Albert and Genya with Tysmenicz and Veljish, their birthplaces. Roth presents them as objects veiled with the family secret. David feels that uncovering this secret means finding the key to the truth about his family's past, the truth about himself, his identity he is so painfully searching for in America. He wants to know because "[n]ot knowing became almost unbearable" (CIS 197). And even the reader guesses that the artifacts might explain the strange relationships within the Schearl family, especially between David and his tyrannical father. To be sure, both decorative objects suggest the most traumatic events in the parents' personal history. The bull's horns mounted on the plaque evoke Albert's guilt for his father's death, a death that can be defined almost as a parricide. But horns themselves are also associated with cuckoldry,<sup>20</sup> which is both Albert's nightmare and simultaneously, in his strange marriage, his obsession. His uncertainty about David's paternity is expressed in the episode in which he introduces his family to Luter during the boarder's first visit to their home. Pointing to David, he says: "And that over there . . . is what will pray for me after my death" (CIS 29). Though it is usually the son who is supposed to say *kaddish* after a parent's death, notice that Albert avoids saying the word "son" and uses the rather derogatory expression (in this social context) "that over there."

The picture of a cornfield is of even greater importance.<sup>21</sup> For David's mother it is a painful reminder of her disappointment in love, as Ludwig abandoned her to enter into a pragmatic marriage with a wealthy older woman, although it was Genya whom he loved. Hidden in the green field, she observed a cart with Ludwig and his betrothed heading to Vienna for their wedding. In Sollors's view "Genya has substituted an image of beauty for an experience of pain and loss and she repeats the substitution when she buys the picture."<sup>22</sup> Her story reveals that even after several years of living in America her love romance still hurts, as she has lost the man for whom she was willing to sacrifice everything, even her family.

Considering Jewish American culture, Elaine M. Kauvar states that "[a]rriving in this country [the USA], Jews wanted to become Americans as soon as possible, so they embraced America wholeheartedly and succumbed to

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20. See Sollors, "A World Somewhere," 147.

21. The significance of this key image is reflected in the title of the novel's second part—"The Picture."

22. Sollors, "A World Somewhere," 149.

the lure of American culture.”<sup>23</sup> Ethnic literatures confirm that the pressures to assimilate are immense, but this is not the case with the Schearl family. Genya in particular remains immune to the assimilative allurements of America and gives preference to her enclosed world. The language barrier (her English is very poor), together with her household duties and the need to look after her small child, condemn her to isolation. Separated from others, estranged from her husband, her life is restricted to the microcosm of the Schearls’ apartment, mostly their kitchen. She is like a prisoner, yet she does not protest and passively accepts all the burdens of her life. Even if Luter offers the Schearls an alternative to their gray life, regularly inviting them to the Yiddish theater, Genya does not show any interest. In this respect Albert is more open to the possibilities of the American lifestyle, but his assimilation is hampered by his personality, in particular by his rudeness and irascibility.

In Roth’s novel there is another important character, Genya’s sister Bertha, who comes to America later. She is the exact opposite of Genya. She is eager to adopt the American mode of life, in other words to become Americanized. Unlike her modest, meek sister, Bertha is energetic, very impulsive and at times sarcastic, which is the cause of the conflicts between her and Albert. In her case it is possible to speak of “push and pull factors”; she willingly left her country and in America she shows much enthusiasm for everything new. She does not want to stay on the periphery of the nation, which she desires to embrace with great fervor.<sup>24</sup> Understandably her view of America and her motherland—for which she finds only words of contempt—differ entirely from the views of Genya and Albert. In one dialog with her sister, Bertha confronts both countries: “True I work like a horse and I stink like one with my own sweat. But there’s life here [in America], isn’t there? There’s a stir here always. Listen! The street! The cars! High laughter! Ha, good! Veljish was still as a fart in company. Who could endure it? Trees! Fields! Again trees! Who can talk to trees? Here at least I can find other pastimes than sliding down the gable on a roof!” (CIS 153).

Roth reflects the ambivalence of immigrants’ attitude to their homeland by recording a range of different opinions, mostly in conversations that take place in the Schearls’ apartment. For example, Luter remembers his native place in a different (nostalgic) way:

“Each one remembers what appealed to him, and I remember the peasant wenches. Weren’t they a striking lot, in their tight checked vests and their dozen petticoats? . . . One never sees the like here. It’s a scanty soil from what one sees of it in Brooklyn and its women are spare. But in Sorvik they grew like oaks. They had blonde hair, their eyes blazed. And when they smiled with their white teeth and blue eyes, who could resist them? It was enough to set your blood on fire.” (CIS 43)

23. Elaine M. Kauvar, “Introduction: Some Reflections on Contemporary American Jewish Culture,” *Contemporary Literature* 34 (Fall 1993): 338.

24. In this respect she resembles the Jewish American immigrant writer Mary Antin, who expressed her enthusiasm about America in her autobiography *The Promised Land* (1912). On the other hand, Bertha is critical of some negative aspects of American life.

Ethnic diversity, only briefly sketched out in the Prologue, completely disappears in the text of the first part of the novel. This is not because of the ethnically homogeneous setting but because Roth concentrates here on the depiction of Jewish immigrant life in its self-sustained community. The relative compactness of this “urban *shtetl*,” where Jews are in everyday contact with their culture and speak in their own language, may be comfortable, but it is also treacherous. When David gets lost and steps outside the borders of his familiar territory, he becomes helpless because he is not able to spell the English name of the street where he resides. The focus of the remaining three parts of the novel is also the Jewish world; however, Roth also introduces characters from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. This coincides with the Schearls’ move to the Lower East Side, where David meets street urchins of various national origins, though he mostly plays with Jewish boys. Tracing the protagonist’s experiences in the ghetto, the reader registers a Chinese laundryman, a Hungarian janitor, a black stable-boy, an Armenian peddler or an insensitive Italian street-cleaner who desecrates a Jewish boys’ ritual, the burning of *hamez* (removal of leavening) in the morning of the first Passover day.<sup>25</sup> David’s neighborhood also includes a strong Irish and Italian community. Roth’s novel indicates that the interaction among various ethnic communities is rather problematic, burdened with many stereotyped prejudices, which is reflected in vocabulary (derogative “sheenies” or “kikes” for Jews, “wops” for Italians, “micks” for the Irish).

It could be argued that one of the most important agents of the expression of cultural plurality in Roth’s novel is the language itself. This is especially evident in Chapter XXI of the final part of the book. This chapter contains the climactic scene, David’s electrical burn from the short circuit on the rail, which causes him to lose consciousness. Here Roth presents a medley of disparate voices or, in Leslie Fiedler’s words, a “cacophony of confused tongues,”<sup>26</sup> partly commenting on the accident, partly expressing the inner thoughts elicited by the personal experience of the speakers. Emotional outcries are mostly rendered in Yiddish but also in the dialects of immigrants’ native languages. In the montage of these voices we can even hear an exclamation in Italian. Hana Wirth-Nesher claims that

[h]ere social and spatial boundaries are transcended as a mass of individuals from diverse backgrounds fear and grieve for the prostrate child on the city street. With a minimum of omniscient narration, Roth uses two alternating modes in this climactic scene—reported speech of witnesses to David’s suffering, before, during, and after the event and italicized sections which are psycho-narration, rendering David’s perception in formal and self-consciously poetic language. The former are multi-lingual and multi-dialectal; the latter are self-conscious literary English.<sup>27</sup>

25. On the eve of Passover (*Pesach*), the festival commemorating the deliverance of Jews from their bondage in Egypt, everything containing leavening must be removed.

26. Leslie Fiedler, “The Many Myths of Henry Roth,” in *New Essays on Call It Sleep*, 22.

27. Hana Wirth-Nesher, “Between Mother Tongue and Native Language: Multilingualism in Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*,” *Prooftexts* 10 (1990): 307.

*Call It Sleep* is a multilingual novel; the main languages Roth uses in his book are English, Yiddish, and Yinglish, which is Yiddishized English. Yinglish is used in the conversation among immigrant children in the ghetto streets. As the protagonist of the novel lives in a Yiddish-speaking area, the dominant language is Yiddish. With regard to the reader, Yiddish is, however, rendered in its English "translation." As Wirth-Nesher points out, "[i]t is a book written in the English language but experienced by the reader as if it were a translation, for David's main actions and thoughts are experienced in Yiddish."<sup>28</sup> In order to make the reader realize that the discourses are held in Yiddish, Roth defamiliarizes the English language. For this purpose he uses various strategies, ranging from the employment of Yiddish idioms in an exact translation into English to the use of unusual syntactic structures and non-standard grammar forms. Here are a few examples: "I'm gonna tell my modder on you" (CIS 86), "I am losted" (CIS 97), "Nothing fulfills itself with me" (CIS 136), "my modder's kinerry flied away" (CIS 292), "[h]ad it been your own flesh and blood, you would have been there in a wink, no?" (CIS 381), "[y]ou would have asked me, what?" (CIS 390). Only occasionally does Roth insert into his text Yiddish words without any translation or introduce direct speech, explicitly stating that it was said in Yiddish. The effect of the perception of the English text as if it were written in Yiddish is also achieved by various allusions to Jewish culture.

Apart from the employment of the above-mentioned languages, Roth uses Hebrew and Aramaic and the languages of the immigrants according to their nationalities. Hebrew and Aramaic, as sacred languages, appear in the passages set in the *cheder* that David started to attend. The languages are linked with David's initiation into Jewish culture and with his fervent desire to be cleansed of his sins. Like the other boys he only memorizes the texts written in these languages, which are as incomprehensible and even mysterious to him as Polish, the language to which his mother and aunt Bertha switch whenever they want to conceal from David the intimate matters from the family's past. Accordingly, David hates the Polish language, for it represents an obstacle on his path to a full knowledge of his family history. Considering the multilingual nature of Roth's novel, we can agree with Wirth-Nesher's statement that "*Call It Sleep* is a classic example of a work in which several cultures interact linguistically, thematically, and symbolically, and it is also an interesting case of ethnic literature, the Jewish-American novel."<sup>29</sup>

The cultural diversity of Roth's novel is reinforced by the author's confrontation of the Jewish and Christian religions. In the course of the book, David becomes a kind of religious hybrid, connecting Christian (English) and Jewish (non-English) cultures. Although his parents are not particularly observant Jews, Albert decides to enroll David in the *cheder* "to learn what it

28. Wirth-Nesher, "Between Mother Tongue," 301.

29. Wirth-Nesher, "Between Mother Tongue," 297.

means to be a Jew” (*CIS* 210). David proves to be a very gifted and perceptive pupil but a religious school, represented by the frustrated and stern rabbi Yidel Pankower, is hardly satisfactory for the inquisitive child. Roth pictures the decline of Judaism in America, depicting the pupils in the *cheder* as ignorant and unconcerned children who are interested more in skates or kites than in religion. “And God? Forgotten, forgotten wholly,” Reb Pankower ruminates, when thinking about the prospects of “[t]his sidewalk-and-gutter generation” (*CIS* 374). An undesirable impact of materialistic America on Judaism is symbolically illustrated in the episode depicting the burning of *hamez*. David is looking for a place where he can burn the leavened bread (it is symbolic that he finds this place near a junk heap) because Jewish boys do not allow him to put it into their fire if he does not pay them money to do so. More importantly, coming across three gentile hoodlums who threaten him, David denies his Jewish identity, claiming that he is Hungarian.

Unlike his parents, David is compliant with assimilation. It is symptomatic that the first person whom he wants to befriend in his rather unsociable life is a *goy*, the Polish boy Leo Dugowka, who “represents Americanization and assimilation.”<sup>30</sup> For David, Leo embodies freedom unbound by parental restrictions (he does not have a father). He admires Leo’s independence and lack of constraints, multiplied by his ownership of roller skates which give him freedom of movement and longed-for speed. David yearns for friendship with him, even if Leo overtly shows his feelings of superiority and does not hide his prejudices against other ethnic groups, including Jews.<sup>31</sup> What attracts David most are the objects of Catholic worship in Leo’s house. He is mesmerized by a crucifix and a rosary and longs to own them. To get a rosary, he fulfills Leo’s wish “to play bad” with his step-cousin, and he arranges their date even though he is aware of his unclean conduct. The rosary plays a key role in one of the most important scenes of the novel; after the revelation of David’s acting as “procurer” for Leo, he is severely whipped by his father and during this violent punishment the rosary accidentally falls out of his pocket in front of the stunned family. Albert takes it as a confirmation of his fixed idea (and obsession) that David is an illegitimate child, an embodiment of Genya’s past sin with the gentile organist Ludwig. For him, David is a consummation of the family curse.

Jewish mythology knows three basic types of stories—stories of creation, stories of revelation, and stories of redemption.<sup>32</sup> David’s story is especially a story of redemption. The protagonist feels guilty for betraying Jews and thus he wants to purify himself. On the spiritual level, he finds inspiration for purification in the sacred texts with which he is acquainted in the *cheder*

30. Dorothy Seidman Bilik, *Immigrant-Survivors: Post-Holocaust Consciousness in Recent Jewish American Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), 26.

31. Leo horrifies David when he tells him about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and calls Jews “Chris’-killers” (*CIS* 323).

32. See Steven Kepnes, *Jewish Liturgical Reasoning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 81.

before Passover, particularly in the biblical story of Isaiah, who had his unclean lips cleansed by fiery coal to become worthy of speaking to God.<sup>33</sup> He also connects his cleansing with light, which drives him to his almost fatal deed when he thrusts a milk dipper into a crack between the streetcar tracks. The enormous electric shock nearly kills David, but its power is redemptive; even in his state which might be called sleep, he gains a feeling of victory over his shaken father, who seems to accept him as his own son. At the same time it is a victory over the fear and guilt that “are the major components of his experience.”<sup>34</sup> The electric light is identified with the cleansing effect of the coal on Isaiah’s lips.

The artistic power of the final part of Roth’s novel lies not only in modernist techniques in the mold of James Joyce, as many critics have pointed out, but also in the amalgamation of various cultures which converge at the point of David’s purgation, of “sin melted into light” (CIS 248). It is the triumph of light over the darkness that used to frighten the small boy for such a long time. The encounter between Jewish and Christian culture is complete: the protagonist, nurtured by the texts from the Torah and the *Haggadah*,<sup>35</sup> becomes the self-sacrificing Jesus Christ. “Christ, it’s a kid!” (CIS 420), reacts one of the onlookers, witnessing to David’s suffering. Receiving the electric shock, David is depicted as an “outstretched figure in the heart of the light” (CIS 421). The word “kid” points to the Jewish tradition and echoes the *Haggadah*, containing the line, “One kid, one only kid . . .” (CIS 233), where the kid symbolizes an innocent victim—in a broader context, the oppressed Jewish nation. Obviously, in Roth’s novel, the word “kid” refers to David. Hana Wirth-Nesher is right when she claims that “the cry ‘Christ, it’s a kid!’ serves as an intersection of competing narratives, of Passover and Easter, of Judaism and Christianity.”<sup>36</sup>

Undoubtedly, ethnic and cultural diversity are important sources of the novel’s dynamism. However, they are not the only sources; *Call It Sleep* is a very complex book, “inclusive rather than exclusive, therefore succeeding in accounting for more than just one of the textual levels.”<sup>37</sup> Depending on which aspect is emphasized, Roth’s novel can be approached as a *Bildungsroman*, a proletarian novel of social protest, a psychological novel, and also an immigrant novel or ethnic chronicle. Be that as it may, it is evident that *Call It Sleep* is one of the most distinguished works of Jewish American fiction before World War II, and should not be overlooked.

33. Hence the third part of Roth’s novel is called “The Coal.”

34. Tom Samet, “Henry Roth’s Bull Story: Guilt and Betrayal in *Call It Sleep*,” *Studies in the Novel* 7 (1975): 572.

35. The *Haggadah* (also Had Gadya) is an Aramaic song, chanted or recited in the first two evenings of Passover. Its text resembles a nursery rhyme.

36. Hana Wirth-Nesher, “Traces of the Past: Multilingual Jewish American Writing,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, ed. Michael P. Kramer and Hana Wirth-Nesher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 124.

37. Materassi, “Shifting Urbanscape,” 40.

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## ADDRESS

Stanislav Kolář  
Department of English and American Studies  
Faculty of Arts  
University of Ostrava  
Dvořákova 7  
701 03 Ostrava 1  
Czech Republic  
stanislav.kolar@osu.cz

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