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PROCESSING “ALPHABET CITY” IN ABRAHAM CAHAN’S *YEKL: A TALE OF THE NEW YORK GHETTO* (1896)

If his Russian was music, his English was murder. He had enormous difficulty (“dzeefeecooltsee” in Pninian English) with depalatization, never managing to remove the extra Russian moisture from t’s and d’s before the vowels he so quaintly softened. [...] Long o’s inevitably became short ones: his “no” sounded positively Italian, and this was accentuated by his trick of triplicating the simple negative.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin*

In the quote taken from Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pnin*, the Russian-American writer measures – on linguistic and phonological parameters – the ability of his semi-autobiographical protagonist to behave correctly in the adopted homeland. The short excerpt is stylistically tantamount, but at the same time momentous in the history of American ‘ethnic’ literature, with reference to the literary experiment Abraham Cahan (1860-1951) performed in his novella *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896). This short book mirrors an eminently transitional socio-cultural framework through the representation of a peculiar descriptive element: the immigrant’s linguistic identity in trans-Atlantic dimension. The contact between the writer’s sharp view and what he actually saw generated a book deeply influenced by the illustration of imperfection in his protagonists’ speech. Manhattan’s Lower East Side Jewish neighborhood – the ghetto Cahan wanted to describe and possibly explain to the American audience – was inhabited by immigrants whose mother-tongue, to quote Vladimir Nabokov’s citation pointed out above, sounded like “music”, but whose English represented alphabetical “murder”. Cahan’s novella is set in the critical time of mass immigration, when a couple of millions of eastern ashkenazic Jews left eastern Europe and settled in the United States (Geipel 3). The disruption of narrative language, which mirrors in almost naturalist fashion first generation immigrants’ obvious failure to use the language of mainstream society, constitutes as I see it one of the primary critical keys to understand the text. By means of a highly sophisticated articulation of racialized dialogue, Cahan fictionalizes a series of socio-cultural issues: the settlement of an eastern European community in New York City, the linguistic configuration of the Lower East Side at that time, and in general the ways in which the United States *inform* and *deform* immigrants’ attitudes towards life in an alien society. Narrative language in *Yekl* – far from playing the simple role of a means to constitute a literary form – should therefore be understood as an explanation for the eternal transformational practices that influence the evolution of ideology and society, especially in the multiple socio-cultural contexts that have shaped (and are still shaping) the United States – a complex issue which has recently been investigated most interestingly by Roberto Cagliero and Anna Belladelli (2013).

Abraham Cahan was one of the key figures that determined the Jewish *Zeitgeist* in the United States. Through his work he decisively contributed to the molding of Jewish life in the American socio-cultural arena, rounding off the sharper corners of eastern ashkenazic culture and adapting them to the cultural mosaic of the United States during the years of mass immigration – from the 1880s to 1924 (the year the Johnson-Reed Act severely restricted immigration towards the US). Cahan was himself an émigré: he came to New York hailing from Podberezhye, a Lithuanian *shtetl*, in 1882. As a journalist, editor and writer, he interpreted an utterly representative function in America’s hyphenated social reality, emerging as the intellectual leader of his community and almost metonymic middleman between the claims and expectations of his people and the responses offered by the American cultural scheme. Cahan was a socialist; he organized the first Jewish Trade Union in America among garment workers, but he also taught English to immigrants in evening schools, immediately realizing the impossibility of altering the pre-existent social texture of the United States and the necessity to efficiently interact with it.

Cahan’s intellectual activity essentially displayed on two distinctive platforms, journalism on the one hand and narrative prose on the other, both carrying equal eloquence in English and in Yiddish. He contributed articles to the *Workmen’s Advocate* and the *Commercial Advertiser* in English and to the *Arbeter Tseitung* and *Di Tsukunft* in Yiddish; in 1897 he founded the *Jewish Daily Forward* or *Forverts*, which he edited – almost without interruptions –

until 1946. By 1891 he began publishing short stories, first in Yiddish – “Mottke Arbel and his Romance” – then in English, “A Providential Match” (1895). In the meantime, in 1892, Cahan made acquaintance with William Dean Howells, who championed his writings and fostered his introduction to the American literary scene. Cahan’s best known book is *The Rise of David Levinsky*, published in 1917; the novella *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*, published in 1896, is his first longer piece of writing and the most meaningful in the perspective of what I will try to demonstrate here.

Abraham Cahan was a man who productively exploited the existential suspension among his own ambivalences: he was both Jewish spokesman and American reformer, both American writer and journalist and Yiddish pamphleteer, both labor tribune and newspaper magnate (Rischin 73). He was a figure who contained within himself the archetype of what Irving Howe, paraphrasing the Jewish historian Gershom Scholem, some time ago called the “plastic hours” of transformation: “those critical moments when the mounds of historical inertia melt away and a path is cleared for possibility” (Howe I). Cahan interpreted his very moment in history as one of deep reflection and necessary action, circling around the question of the social emancipation of Yiddish speaking eastern European Ashkenazic Jews after their settlement in the US. His conclusion comprised the realization that, to be successful inside the social texture of the United States, Jews had to fully take on English as their means of communication, yet in a way as to allow the adoption of English to carefully keep pace with a coherent cultivation of the communities’ original, ‘pre-transitional’, cultural and – more specifically to our case – linguistic identity. Indeed, since the writer’s ultimate purpose was to portray the reality of New York City’s Jewish neighborhood as trustworthily as possible, what emerges from the novella’s critical analysis of language and dialogue is not so much the static idea of linguistic accustomization accomplished by the minority group, as **i.** the dynamics that influence the stages of the transformative process and **ii.** the way this same process produces a stylistic paradigm efficiently explaining the liminal and trans-Atlantic dimension of Jewish-American identity *tout court*.

In this perspective Cahan’s work surfaces as one interesting catalyst for the description, within the general scheme of the nation’s compositeness, of a significant Jewish-American sub-group, featuring facets both of successful integration in the socio-cultural texture of its adopted homeland, and of a pervasive cultivation of its own cultural idiosyncrasies, among which language carries out a fundamental function. *Yekl*, which substantially represents only a very limited segment in the whole economy of Cahan’s opus, in my opinion – just because it contains this extremely restrained dialectics between pure linguistic assimilation on the one hand, and, on the other, the negotiation of a complex Jewish sensibility within the general American social platform – also provides evidence of the fact that Jewish-American fiction, which in a certain sense originated from this brief and condensed piece of literature on immigration, as a matter of fact does not exhaust its afflatus simply in the depiction of the immigrant experience and “the overly facile celebration of assimilation” – which has traditionally constituted the customary key of interpretation for Cahan’s work (Fine 18).

Even though Cahan had very plainly understood that cultural – as well as national – naturalization for Jewish immigrants in the United States was inescapable (and, by the way, promised to exert positive effects on the social platform in a relatively short time), with this work he also elaborated a clear sense of how complex a policy the tensional dialectics produced between mainstream society and the subordinate ethnic group, and how much of the contention was being performed on the linguistic level. Language in Cahan’s design is a key to interpret processes of socio-cultural – read, verbal – transformation in migrational contexts; a phenomenological trigger that mirrors the constitution of the Jewish people’s expressive resources in an adopted country. To adequately assess the transparent substance of Cahan’s work, it therefore appears appropriate to critically investigate the rendering of dialect on the page, i.e. its language and its style, in a way as to highlight the peculiar two-way interferential mechanism that shapes the novella’s superficial linguistic texture.

The communicative subtext of Cahan’s work draws a metalinguistic parabola that incorporates (American-) English, Yiddish and, paradoxically, a transmogrified version of *mame loshn*. Cahan knew the issue he was handling so well that he successfully, and in advance, depicted the development of Jewish English, a variety of American English that interpreters now fully recognize in the international cultural arena as an expressive trigger for modern Jewish identity in the whole economy of the nation’s hyphenated reality[1]. In this sense *Yekl* convincingly takes its place among the first books written in the US to exploit the polyfunctional potentialities of the Jewish people’s complex linguistic identity, and by the way succeeds in doing so in an aesthetically remarkable form.

Cahan clearly realized the expressive conflict inherent in the multifaceted transitional dynamics that marked his time;

direct speech and intra-ethnic communication among Jewish immigrants in his narrative fluctuate between i. the use of a language spoken in a homeland (the Eastern European Pale of Settlement? The Levantine Promised Land?) that nineteenth century eastern Ashkenazic Jews could not easily (or explicitly did not want to) associate with concrete territorial boundaries, and ii. an ardent desire to learn the 'fashionable' language of modernity spoken in the United States. Being a minor ethnic group, Jewish immigrants were definitely induced to linguistically comply with the conventional American-English model. At the same time, however, the Jewish sub-group, as caught by the author in its critical moment of *transatlantic transplantation* (like any other group monitored in shifting settlement situations) presented heterogeneous cultural positions, that in general came out as extremely articulate behavioral patterns and textures.

Cahan's novella can therefore be read as a key that contributes to our understanding of the subtle dynamics that underlie this very process: single ethnic minority groups, far from letting their identity melt in the notorious metaphoric cauldron, negotiate the terms of their cultural resilience, in order to adjust them to the *ever-shifting* contours of an *ever-changing* socio-cultural mosaic. It is an attempt at the composition of American identity politics, in a global framework dominated by progressive transitional schemes. In this sense *Yekl* might be interpreted as a work that artfully processes place through language. In the book the author builds up an "Alphabet City", or – to put it in an ethnically more evocative form – an *alef-beis shtetl*. Cahan himself labels New York's Lower East Side as "[the Jew's] Promised Land of today; [...] a seething human sea fed by streams, streamlets, and rills of immigration flowing from all the Yiddish-speaking centers of Europe" (Cahan 1970: 13-14).

As a Jew, as a paradigmatic (and non-religious) representative of the quintessential nomadic people, that historically has experienced the constant shifting of its communicative means, Cahan had it clear in his mind that, when Jews adopt a new language, they do so productively. Passing through the ages and crossing many different territories in Asia, Africa, Europe, in North and South America, Jews necessarily had to meet co-territorial non-Jewish neighbors on common linguistic ground. Yet, there is one cultural feature that has strongly connoted Jewish interactional politics throughout; a mark that distinguishes Jewish linguistic identity *vis-à-vis*, for example, the coinage of global pidgin languages (which in general are developed by contamination to meet mere commercial purposes): linguistic productivity in Jewish contexts cultivates and optimizes the unvarying presence at its core of *loshn-koydesh* – the sacred language of the Bible, i.e. the expressive backbone for the community's consistent endurance during its century-long Diaspora. It is not my intention here to explore such a complex field as Bible philology; however, what I do wish to emphasize is that, in Diaspora, Jews mourned the loss of their geographical homeland, but at the same time succeeded in re-modulating it on a different level, on an imaginative surface grounded on textual, verbal, foundations[2].

In his novella Abraham Cahan successfully interprets this extremely sophisticated sense of homeland restructured in the conscience of its displaced inhabitants according to linguistic parameters. Cahan coherently follows his own agenda, which comprises the use of a mixed language:

"Remember now! If you *deshepoitn* me this time, well! look at me! I should think I was no Gentile woman either. I am as pious as you *anyhull*, and come from no mean family, either. You know I hate to boast; but my father – peace be upon him ! – was fit to be a rabbi. *Vell*, and yet I am not afraid to go with my own hair. May no greater sins be committed! Then it would be *never min'* enough. Plenty of time for putting on the patch (meaning the wig) when I get old; but as long as I am young, I am young *an' dots ull!* It can not be helped; when one lives in an *edzecate* country, one must live like *edzecate peoples*."

"Do you think my *kshpenshesh* are larger now?"

"*All right!*" Jake bethought himself. "Charge him ten *shent* for each spoonful. Mr. Bernstein, you shall be kind enough to be the *bookkeeper*. But if you don't pay, Chollie, I'll get out a *tzommes* (summons) from court." (Cahan 1970: 57, 59, 46)

The implicit language the characters in the book speak is Yiddish, which the author automatically translates into English, because he obviously wishes to break through the American literary scene. Yet, on a purely narratological level, as readers and *a fortiori* as interpreters, we have to constantly bear in mind that dialogue in this mono-ethnic novella is ideally performed in a language that should be labeled 'other', 'different' or just plainly 'foreign'. Cahan, on the surface of clean, comprehensive English (that paradoxically symbolizes the immigrant's unflinching use of the mother-tongue), inserts occurrences of broken, disharmonious English, which are graphically signaled by the use of italics, and that in turn represent an almost iconographic depiction of the immigrant's awkwardness in an alien place.

The speakers' voices in these excerpts are manifestly dissonant; they disturb the readers because, in order to decipher the words they are reading, they need to tarry on them, to carefully gauge their shape, and to finally ponder their semantic consistency.

This dialogic element, that apparently overloads the text with gratuitous complexities and seems to damage the process of its semantic fruition, constitutes indeed the crucial stylistic juncture in Cahan's novella. It is here that *Yekl* emerges as a distinctly Jewish novel, at least in the sense exposed, for example, by David Roskies, who has isolated the distinguishing features that shape modern Jewish literature and culture: i.e., on the one hand – for what relates to form – adaptability and the dialectic of tradition and revolution, and on the other – most interestingly for our concerns – bilingualism (Roskies 233-235), which is captured here in a moment of critical alteration. Precisely at this conjectural point Cahan's book processes a place and a homeland for Jewish immigrants, grounded on their sense of linguistic belonging and synchronic existence inside disrupted (by Diaspora, by forced mass immigration, or – tragically and by osmosis – by Auschwitz) territorial frames of reference. *Yekl* should therefore be understood in terms of a literary surface featuring more than just plot and dialogue; it surfaces as an extremely refined mechanism of socio-cultural transformational practices, in which distinct languages are combined in order to produce a polyfunctional linguistic template. Just confront what Shimon Susholtz has to say about the language Jews speak in Anglophone contexts; writing his essay in English and acknowledging that “nowadays [...] in the home and in the street, in *shul*, in yeshiva, and in the *shtiebl*, English is the reigning language”[3] (Susholtz 220), he provocatively asks “Who needs Yiddish?”. Yet, at the same time, the critic adduces a significant proposition, in which he explicitly highlights the alphabetical dimension that shapes Jewish communal identity according to expressive patterns. The essence of “[post]-Churban Yiddishkeit», i.e. of post-holocaust Jewish existence, is carved in a resilient network made up of interlaced knots and the unvarying presence at its core of Yiddish and those who perceive its residual cultural impact. In this perspective, Yiddish transcends its purely communicative component and appears almost literally as a means to translate an absent spatial entity (the Jewish homeland) into a link with its memory, which in turn materialized to represent «the collective soul of the people”:

Yiddish is a link in space, connecting lands and continents. There are Jews living all over the face of the globe and, for the most part, they are of one tongue: Yiddish. The idea of *achdus*, of *kol Yisroel chaverim* – unity and true brotherhood – is a most exalted one; but without the ability of two Jews to *talk* to each other, it remains an idea, whereas it could and should be a living, breathing fact. [Yiddish] is also a link in time, between generations. Thank G–d, we still have in our midst the remnants of pre-*Churban Yiddishkeit* [...]. Again, for the most part their tongue is Yiddish. [...] On a deeper level, Yiddish is a powerful chain linking the *neshama* of the individual to the *neshama* of *Klal Yisroel* [...]. The collective soul of a people shows its face in figures of speech. (Susholtz 220)

In Susholtz's words, Yiddish links Jews in time and in space, but above all it links the soul, the *neshama*, of the individual to the soul of the community, “the *neshama* of *Klal Yisroel*”. Israel is not simply a piece of land; to Jews it also represents a promise, an image, a symbol, a sign, a text. Today it is a place that is materially inhabited by a political entity, the Israelis. Yet, prior to 1948 Israel constituted the quintessence of the “imagined community”, to quote Benedict Anderson's well-known definition[4], a community that was nourished by displaced Jews, who shared a common idea of the nation, grounded on comradeship (Susholtz's *achdus*), but also on their intellectual activity, on their reading the Books, their commenting on the Books, their commenting on the commentaries. Before being constituted as a nation in modern, western fashion, Israel has been processed by lucubrations and infinite ruminations; words were used to replace the material nation in its function to generate and reinforce Jewish identity.

From the standpoint of my argument, *Yekl* represents the ideal instrument to assess Jews' critical, dislocating and dynamic sense of liminality in the space of history. The key Cahan employs to construe space – or place – in these peculiarly Jewish terms, i.e. in terms of dynamic *re*-territorialization and textual (or verbal) settlement, is dialogue: dialogue conceptualizes “place” in the characters' speech and adds distinguishing speculative markers to its definition. At the same time, language is not simply a means to describe homeland; language *develops into* homeland – homeland is relocated on linguistic premises. Each time Cahan proceeds to map his characters onto the imaginative surface of the book, he ideally connotes the streets they stride and the buildings they frequent linguistically; he constantly calls forth the polyphonic dimension of the book's milieu, which translates into images of an overcrowded (almost smelly) neighborhood:

[Yekl] had to pick and nudge his way through dense swarms of bedraggled half-naked humanity; past

garbage barrels rearing their overflowing contents in sickening piles, and lining the streets in malicious suggestion of rows of trees; underneath tiers and tiers of fire escapes, barricaded and festooned with mattresses, pillows, and featherbeds not yet gathered in for the night. The pent-in sultry atmosphere was laden with nausea and pierced with a discordant and, as it were, plaintive buzz. [...]

Suffolk Street is in the very thick of the battle for breath. For it lies in the heart of that part of the East Side which has within the last two or three decades become the Ghetto of the American metropolis, and, indeed, the metropolis of the Ghettos of the world. It is one of the most densely populated spots on the face of the earth – a seething human sea fed by streams, streamlets, and rills of immigration flowing from all the Yiddish-speaking centers of Europe. [...] You find there Jews speaking all sorts of subdialects of the same jargon, thrown pell-mell into one social caldron – a human hodgepodge with its component parts changed but not yet fused into one homogeneous whole. And so the “stoops,” sidewalks, and pavements of Suffolk Street were thronged with panting, chattering, or frisking multitudes. (Cahan 1970: 13-14)

Cahan firmly believed in the power belonging to literary realism and its procedures to faithfully represent the world; yet, precisely because he was such a scrupulous realist, he also understood that dialogue is the one element that is practically impossible to isolate from the street and to reproduce in textual settings, without losing its distinctive flavor in the process of modal transposition (from the acoustic articulation of “sound” to the graphic representation of “word”). In a sense, therefore, Cahan’s narrative position appears equivalent to Mikhail Bakhtin’s theoretic vision: language cannot simply stand for a means to constitute the novel as a form, but also has to symbolize the eternal transformational practices of ideological, social and dialogical forces that immediately (i.e. without any mediation) describe the pulsating dynamism that shapes our life. This dynamic drive in turn generates sets of fragmented languages, which live in constant yet productive conflict with one another. As put by Bakhtin himself: “novel dialogue is determined by the very socio-ideological evolution of languages and society. [T]he primary stylistic project of the novel as a genre is to create images of languages”. This “socio-ideological evolution of [images of] languages”, this “contradictory, multi-speeched and heterogenous” dialogue of different but convergent times set in different but convergent backgrounds (Bakhtin 365-366) is established on a differential balancing of coexisting speech codes. More than a simple and faithful (and impossible) reflection of sociolinguistic realities, images of languages in this perspective constitute the mark of well crafted representations of the spoken word in narrative prose. Cahan in *Yekl* employs images of languages precisely as expounded by Bakhtin and succeeds in matching socio-ideological frameworks on the one hand and aestheticized (not necessarily representational) manifestations of language in literary form on the other. Besides he also makes them convincingly interact on the narratological level, and this is how he builds up a solid and compelling episode of cultural history.

Yekl is set in a time and in a space which trace a paradigm for the peculiar nineteenth to twentieth century immigrant situation. Yekl Podkovnik, a Jew who settled to New York hailing from a fictional town in Northwestern Russia called Povodye, is the eponymous protagonist of the narrative. He leaves Europe eager to become a “regular American *feller*, a *Yankee*”, and not to remain an awkward “greenhorn”; this is how Yekl himself puts it: “Once I live in America, I want to know that I live in America. *Dot’sh a kin’ a man I am!* One must not be a greenhorn” (Cahan 1970: 70, 5). In the new world Yekl takes over a new name, Jake, which is also the unequivocal figure of a process that is very self-consciously performed by the character in his adopted country. The firm willingness Jake-Yekl manifests to leave his past and Eastern Europe, with all its poverty and backwardness, radically behind himself, is expressed throughout the novella by his determined desire to unconditionally embrace America and American values. In this perspective, Jake holds the sweatshop in which he works and the tenement building in which he lives simply as stages in an evolutionary process, that in the end will sanction his new name and make a successful *Yankee* out of him.

However, throughout the novella Jake’s behavior is regularly portrayed as whimsical and unpredictable and reflects itself in the brokenness of his speech. These elements point at his untimely assimilation to the American way of life, and Cahan ruthlessly exposes Jake’s immaturity through his confrontation with an opposite set of characters: mainly Jake’s fellow sweatshop operative Bernstein on the one hand, and his only apparently submissive wife Gitl on the other. These two characters counterpoint Jake’s fervor and eagerness with their sober willpower face to face America’s challenges, a moderation which indicates their determination to carefully mediate only the positive and *potential* virtues of the new world with an insightful and reflective respect for their original culture.

Gitl scans this kind of feeling in negative; she appeases her husband’s attitudes, but not without noticing some of its

absurdities, as for example the unbearable transformation her name undergoes, from “Gitl” – her native name; to “Gertie” – the nominal symbol of imposed Americanization; to “Goitie” – a word that ironically is, in the author’s words, “phonetically akin to Yiddish for Gentile”, i.e. “Goy” (Cahan 1970: 41). As suggested by Pascal Fischer, this example of linguistic distortion indirectly hints at a notable interpretative key for the novella’s plot: Yekl’s intimate desire to desert Gitl for a non-Jewish wife – the strongly assimilated Jewish woman Mamie, whose manners and language are very «goy-like» (Fischer 247). Yet still more interesting in the perspective of the trans-Atlantic processing of place and language in Cahan’s work is the structural explanation for the substitution of the monophthong [ɜ:] in “Gɜ:rtie” with [ɔɪ] in “Goitie”. Eastern ashkenazic immigrants of Cahan’s time (as Cahan himself) have in all likelihood learned English making use of dictionaries; Alexander Harkavy’s *Jewish-English Pocket Dictionary* (1898) surely constituted in this perspective one handy instrument; to confirm that the author was evidently aware of the vocabulary’s popularity among Jewish immigrants, it has to be mentioned that in 1907 it was offered as a premium to new subscribers of Cahan’s *Jewish Daily Forward* (Marovitz 57). Harkavy used to transcribe the English combination [ɜ:] with the following Jewish letters, <ר׳>, which in turn – according to the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research – can be transcribed back into English as <oy>/[ɔɪ] (Fischer 246).

Bernstein on the other hand is explicitly depicted by Cahan as Jake’s antagonist. In the first pages of the novella the author stages an intense dialectic strife between the two characters, in which both surface as strategic directories that establish narrative balance for the rest of the book. In one of the first scenes presented, the author significantly sets Yekl “in the middle of the overcrowded stuffy [cloak shop]”. The character virtually and physically projects his *Gestalt* onto his fellow workers. He stands with his “legs wide apart” and his “arms akimbo”; his voice, “deep and [...] harsh”, contributes to the mystique he means to exert over his colleagues, as much as the peculiar language he speaks, a “Yiddish copiously spiced with mutilated English”, which Jake perceives as a mark of modernity, to be adopted straight away in the new world, and to market among his fellows. Bernstein, on the other hand, is described in first place as “a rabbinical-looking man, [...], intent upon an English newspaper [...]; showing a dyspeptic face fringed with a thin growth of dark beard [and consulting a] cumbrous dictionary on his knees”. Cahan is describing here a contrasting type with respect to Yekl-Jake: the Jewish immigrant who does not dissimulate his cultural roots, his rabbinical appearance, his beard, his erudition (and also some ostensible aloofness). These attributes contrast patently with Jake’s idea of prompt modernization and Americanization; his celebrations of the nation’s prominence draw on arguments which he adduces from the sports-scene: answering the query of one of his fellows, he explains a number of boxing-rules [“Jake’s answer to the question carried him into a minute exposition of ‘right-handers,’ ‘left-handers,’ ‘sending to sleep,’ ‘first blood,’ and other commodities of the fistic business”]. At the same time, he teases Bernstein because he always sees him “learning, learning and learning”, yet never really speaking English. Bernstein, on his part, mocks Jake, astutely unmasking the blatant flaws contained in his poses, which he perceives as grotesque and implicitly debunk Jake’s exalted depiction of America: “He thinks that *shaving* one’s mustache makes a Yankee!”; and “[A]re there no other Christians than *fighters* in America? Why don’t you look for the educated ones?”. Furthermore, Bernstein – contemplating Yekl’s admiration for baseball players’ ballistic capacities – deliberately elaborates a mangled version of the “pitcher” and the “catcher”; in the process he produces a surprisingly witty pun, that can only be fully appreciated once its extensive multi-linguistic gamut is properly assessed: “For my part, your pitzers and catzers may all lie in the earth. A nice entertainment, indeed! Just like little children – playing ball! And yet people say America is a *smart* country. I don’t see it” (Cahan 1970: 1-7). *Pitzers* and *catzers* in Bernsteins’s tirade do not directly refer to baseball players – i.e. the “pitcher” and the “catcher” – but hint at the Americanized versions of the Yiddish words for “little children” and “gluttons”: *pitsl* and *chazer* (Steinmetz 2002: 82, 71). Finally, as an ultimate resort to humiliate his antagonist, Jake calls forth a scenario that he supposes might definitely daunt Bernstein, and that significantly comprises a recognition of *aleph-beis shtetl*’s sheltering perimeter; as a matter of fact, Jake accuses Bernstein of being “a bedraggled *greenhorn*, afraid to budge out of Heshter Shtreet” (Cahan 1970: 6).

All the quotes mentioned above contain one common denominator: the author’s awareness that the diegetic conflict he is staging on the page is ultimately performed on a linguistic arena, which in turn flawlessly corresponds to a specific cityscape. Jake warps his name and submits his original identity to the mainstream; he wants to appear as American as he can be, but every moment he tries to adopt an American turn of phrase, he only succeeds in distorting the American-English language he so intensely strives for. His wife Gitl on the other hand doesn’t talk much the whole book along, it is Jake who constantly pressurizes her into improving her English; indeed, at one dialogic point in the novella he asks her to use the word *dinner* instead of *varimess*, and then window instead of *fentzter*. It is

Cahan himself, inside his narrative, who equips the reader in both cases with linguistic explanations in form of i. endnote or ii. metalinguistic annotation:

- i. "You must be hungry?" he asked. "Not at all! Where do you eat your *varimess**?" "Don't say *varimess*," he corrected her complaisantly; "here it's called *dinner*." [*Yiddish for dinner];
- ii. "Veen–neev–veenda," she at last uttered exultantly. The evening before she had happened to call it *fentzter*, in spite of Jake's repeated corrections. (Cahan 1970: 38, 41)

Bernstein on his part, by virtue of the solid substantiality of his character, easily withstands his opponents' provocations, and by the end of the story declares his final success over Jake – and the attitudes he epitomizes – being chosen by Gitl to marry her after she divorces Yekl.

Making language perform as an active narrative catalyst in the novella is one of Cahan's main artistic achievements: he narrowly surveys the urban environment that surrounds him, the New York Ghetto; he fathoms the streets of Manhattan's Lower East Side with keen eyes, attentively listening to the sounds it produces and to the voices its inhabitants utter. As a writer, Cahan attempts to crystallize the constant polyphonic backing he perceives around him, an almost undistinguished and monotonous substratum composed of "panting and chattering", but which he in the end succeeds in fracturing and making intelligible; the result is some kind of weird, regionally mispronounced, English:

And so the "stoops," sidewalks, and pavements of Suffolk Street were thronged with panting, chattering, or frisking multitudes. In one spot the scene received a kind of weird picturesqueness from children dancing on the pavement to the strident music hurled out into the tumultuous din from a row of the open and brightly illuminated windows of what appeared to be a new tenement house. [...] English was the official language of the academy, where it was broken and mispronounced in as many different ways as there were Yiddish dialects represented in that institution. (Cahan 1970: 14, 17)

But words cannot simply be transposed, taken from the mouth of the people and glued onto the page by the writer. Even though practically in all his writings Cahan pursued one coherent objective – i.e. the customization of the newly immigrated eastern ashkenazic Jews to the American socio-cultural standard – he also acknowledged the limits of his intellectual undertaking. Not so much as a cultural leader of his people but as a writer who was laboriously trying to make himself noticed in the literary scene of his adopted country, Cahan was able to exploit the subordination of his action *vis-à-vis* the conventional consistency of the word, especially inside the United States' complex multicultural arena. It is exactly at this argumentative juncture that the vision Cahan expressed in his novella converges on Bakhtin's proposition which I mentioned before (§ 3) and may now well be elaborated one step further. The highest accomplishment for a realist in an attempt to modally transliterate discourse from the oral platform to the written one is, not so much the true and faithful reproduction of life, but the *reproduction* of a "structured stylistic system», creating images of languages, representative and pulsating fragments of reality, «a dialogue that is forever dying, living, being born" (Bakhtin 300, 366). The notion of an original and multifaceted expressive key as narratological device allows us through Cahan's *Yekl* to successfully trace the trajectories of Jewish-American adaptational dynamics in American Babel.

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[1] Cf. Gold, Lewandowski, Ozick, Steinmetz (1981), Tannen, Waxman. See also my own article "Jewish English: Re-Territorializing Yiddishland in the United States".

[2] In the year 70 of the common era, the Temple of Jerusalem fell to the Roman army; the element that succeeded in balancing the disintegration of concrete territorial frames of reference for the Jewish nation was the closure and canonization of the Bible, the book that until that moment had constituted a kind of progressive "log book" for the Jewish people's history, and whose features were now being solidified and fractured in overlapping commentaries. Cf. Harshav 11.

[3] "Shtiebl": from Yiddish, literally 'small room', the word designates a small Hasidic synagogue and house of study; "shul": synagogue, Jewish house of worship; "yeshiva": orthodox school or institution devoted to Talmudic studies that prepares students for the rabbinate; cf. Steinmetz 2005: 62, 157, 175.

[4] According to the British historian, a nation is always an "imagined community": *imagined* «because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion»; *community* «because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship». Cf. Anderson 224.