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Introduction

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IN 1966 Henry Roth published a story in *The New Yorker* entitled "The Surveyor." An American tourist is apprehended by the police in Seville for conducting surveying operations at a public thoroughfare without a permit and for suspiciously laying a wreath at the site later that day. "What is this surveying about?" asks the policeman before bringing him to the local precinct. "Well," answers the tourist, "I tried to locate a place of some sentimental value to myself."[1] A state attorney dismisses the charges when he suspects that the wreath marked the site where heretics found guilty by the Inquisition were burned to death, among them "relapsed *conversos,* those Catholics who secretly clung to their Judaic faith."[2] Startled to find that the state attorney shares this knowledge, the tourist turns interrogator, "Why is everyone ignorant of it but you?" "There may have been personal reasons," the Spaniard replies, and reveals that his family had the strange habit of lighting a candle on Friday night. Each insists on the personal, private nature of his knowledge; yet each shares a collective memory that sets him apart from the mainstream community. Where exactly is this place, this site of sentimental value not easily recognized by others? This is the question raised by both this story and Roth's monumental novel, *Call It Sleep*.

In February of 1992, at the age of 86, Henry Roth completed the manuscript of a second book, more than sixty years after the completion of *Call It Sleep*. Towering over his desk in his living room in Albuquerque, New Mexico, is a many times enlarged photograph of New York's Lower East Side at the turn of the

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century, and on his desk is a copy of the daily newspaper delivered to his door, *The Jerusalem Post.* The small wooden bookcase across from the desk holds dozens of copies of *Call It Sleep,* in a great many languages. The space of Roth's private world contains artifacts that point to worlds elsewhere: to a Yiddish world of New York's Jewish immigrant neighborhoods, now relegated to history – "Who would have believed," says Roth, "that I would have seen Yiddish disappear in one lifetime?"[3], to a Hebrew world in Israel that has a hold on Roth's memory and imagination but is inaccessible to him as a means of communication; to a literary world where he is read internationally in translation as a representative Jewish, American, and modernist writer. Places and languages to which he has no access haunt and captivate him, just as they define the space inhabited by his character David Schearl in *Call It Sleep.*

The publication history of this remarkable novel is itself a dramatic story that uncannily plays out the motif of inaccessibility so evident in his fiction. Published in 1934, at the height of the Depression, the book was acclaimed as a great contribution to American literature. John Chamberlain in *The New York Times* wrote, "Mr. Roth has done for the East Side what James T. Farrell is doing for the Chicago Irish. . . . The final chapters in the book have been compared to the Nighttown episodes of Joyce's *Ulysses;* the comparison is apt."[4] Edwin Seaver of the *New York Sun* called him "a brilliant disciple of James Joyce,"[5] and Alfred Hayes observed "There has appeared in America no novel to rival the veracity of this childhood. It is as honest as Dreiser's *Dawn,* but far more sensitive. . . . It is as brilliant as Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist,* but with a wider scope, a richer emotion, a deeper realism."[6] Kenneth Burke found in *Call It Sleep* the same pattern of magic traced by Frazer in *The Golden Bough:* "The great virtue of Roth's book, to my way of thinking, was in the fluent and civilized way in which he found, on our city streets, the new equivalents of the ancient jungle."[7] In the Sunday *New York Herald-Tribune Book Review,* Fred T. Marsh claimed that *Call It Sleep* was "the most compelling and moving, the most accurate and profound study of an American slum childhood that has yet appeared in this day. . . . Henry Roth has achieved the detach-

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ment and universality of the artist."[8] And then, as Harold Ribalow noted, "*Call It Sleep* vanished, and so did its author."[9]

For almost twenty-five years the novel was out of print, passed from hand to hand among a cult of devoted readers who searched for battered copies of it in secondhand bookshops. Inaccessible, marginal, nearly forgotten. Its revival is by now a legend in American literary history. For the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Phi Beta Kappa journal, *The American Scholar*, the editors ran a special feature entitled "The Most Neglected Books of the Past 25 Years." The only title to be mentioned more than once was *Call It Sleep*, cited by both Alfred Kazin and Leslie Fiedler. In Kazin's words, "if you imagine the patient sensibility of Wordsworth and the unselfconscious honesty of Dreiser brought to the shock of his [Roth's] environment upon the senses, you may have some inkling of the slowness, the patience and the strange inner serenity of this book – as of something won, very far deep within, against the conventional cruelties of modern city life."[10] Fiedler was as lavish with his praise, "For sheer virtuosity, *Call It Sleep* is hard to best; no one has ever distilled such poetry and wit from the counterpoint between the maimed English and the subtle Yiddish of the immigrant. No one has reproduced so sensitively the terror of family life in the imagination of a child caught between two cultures. To let another year go without reprinting it would be unforgiveable."[11]

It made a miraculous comeback. Harold Ribalow negotiated a reissuance of the novel in 1960, with a critical introduction by Maxwell Geismar. Four years later Peter Mayer, who had been introduced to the out-of-print book by a New York cabbie, used his tiny budget at Avon where he had just landed a publishing job to purchase the rights and reissue it in paperback. It sold a million copies. *Call It Sleep* became the first paperback edition of a work ever to be reviewed on the front page of *The New York Times Book Review*, where Irving Howe called it "one of the few genuinely distinguished novels written by a 20th-century American."[12] A book that had become inaccessible except to a coterie of admirers was transformed overnight into more than a best-seller – "*Call It Sleep* has become a classic," observed the novelist William Styron, "it's embedded, a landmark in our literature."[13]

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Its first accolades linked it either with high experimental modernism in the context of Joyce, Eliot, and Frazer or with the American naturalism of Dreiser and Farrell, as a powerful exposé of slum life. The generation that attended its rebirth underscored these earlier judgments but also added another dimension to its reception – its Jewishness. Themselves the children of immigrants, Irving Howe, Leslie Fiedler, and Alfred Kazin were all moved by the novel as a document of cultural passage, the one that they had made from Eastern European Yiddish-speaking homes to the American university and the last stronghold of Protestant culture, the Department of English. Fiedler designated *Call It Sleep* a "*specifically* Jewish book, the best single book by a Jew about Jewishness written by an American certainly through the thirties and perhaps ever."[14] For Kazin it is "the most profound novel of Jewish life that I have ever read by an American."[15] Irving Howe acknowledged that although "structured according to the narrative strategies of modernism . . . Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* draws its substance, the whole unfolding of socioethnic detail, from the Jewish immigrant experience."[16] A whole new generation of readers seized upon the book as quintessentially representative of Jewish-American literature.

The ever-increasing interest in *Call It Sleep* throughout the 1960s and 1970s coincided with a rise in ethnicity studies, with the ideological shift from the melting pot to what we have come to call multiculturalism. Along with the book's impeccable credentials as a modernist masterpiece it now acquired the added dimension of ethnic chronicle. As a new wave of university students two generations removed from immigration participated in a nationwide search for national roots beyond the Atlantic, *Call It Sleep* became a staple of Jewish literature and Jewish studies curricula.[17]

The life of the author of *Call It Sleep* is no less dramatic than the story of its reception. Roth was two when his parents immigrated to the United States from the Austro-Hungarian province of Galitzia to join masses of Eastern European Jewish immigrants on New York's Lower East Side. In 1914 the family moved to Harlem, away from what he remembered as a homogeneous, protected Jewish environment, and he was suddenly "plunged

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into an Irish Catholic neighborhood."[18] By 1925 he was a student at City College reading English (and Irish) modernist literature while still living in his Yiddish-speaking Harlem home. Two years later he met Eda Lou Walton, a New York University literature instructor and poet who transformed his life by encouraging him to write. In her Greenwich Village apartment he composed *Call It Sleep* on university examination booklets, completing a whole booklet in pencil every day. She also introduced him to *Ulysses*, which she had smuggled into the country from France; reading Joyce taught Roth "that I could talk about urban squalor and develop it into a work of art."[19] But despite the security that saw him through the writing of a successful first novel, Roth was uneasy about his relationship with Walton and the Bohemian Village life she represented. The comforts he had been enjoying as a young writer at a time when other artists and Americans generally were enduring the hunger and despair of the Depression years brought with them a guilty conscience. His growing commitment to Communism, moreover, made him acutely sensitive to rebukes such as that of the anonymous *New Masses* reviewer who bemoaned the fact that "so many young writers drawn from the proletariat can make no better use of their working class experience than as material for introspective, febrile novels."[20]

In a futile attempt to integrate his moral and political commitments with his artistic ambitions, he embarked on a novel commissioned by Maxwell Perkins of Scribner's about a midwestern factory worker which he abandoned despite Perkins' encouragement. What followed was Roth's legendary writer's block, a sixty-year spell of silence broken only in 1994 with the publication of *A Star Shines Over Mt. Morris Park* and *A Diving Rock on the Hudson,* the first two volumes of a multivolume autobiographical fiction entitled *Mercy of a Rude Stream.*[21] In those sixty years he worked as a precision tool grinder, an attendant at a psychiatric hospital, a Latin tutor, and a waterfowl breeder on a farm which he and his wife, Muriel Parker, purchased in Maine. During the McCarthy years, he burned his journals and other literary papers that might have contained incriminating information about himself and his friends. When *Call It Sleep* was reissued in paperback

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by Avon in 1964, reporters flocked to his Maine farm seeking out the reclusive writer. They published photographs that fed the legend of a curmudgeon in the snow, a nonentity thrust into a literary limelight that he eyed with a mixture of humility and cynicism. Book sales enabled the Roths to sell their farm and retire to a mobile home park in Albuquerque where he began to work on *Mercy of a Rude Stream,* originally intended for posthumous publication.

From the Yiddish world of his parents' home and the Lower East Side, Roth became Americanized first through the slang of street urchins who taunted him for being Jewish and then through the cadences of English literature. The raw material for his first novel is the world from which he felt he had escaped; the treatment of that material is a dazzling display of modernist techniques, gleaned from Joyce and Eliot among others. Roth admitted that he had begun the book as an autobiography but that it sprouted fictional possibilities that he first resisted and to which he eventually succumbed. Despite the indictment of the book by the reviewer in *New Masses,* it is partly naturalistic, reproducing with excruciating detail the grit of the slum streets, the charred metal of the Statue of Liberty, the dialect of the immigrant poor, the foods, smells, and noises of the Lower East Side. Almost every reader has commented on the work's cacophony, or as Stephen Adams has aptly put it, "The Noisiest Novel Ever Written."[22] But like the naturalism of Joyce, the sounds and objects in Roth's universe all have symbolic resonances. The coarse dialogues of bar talk, for example, take on symbolic dimensions, such as these remarks over poker: "Dare's a star fer yeh! Watch it! T'ree kings I god. Dey come on huzzbeck! Yee! Hee! Hee! Mary! Nawthin' to do but wait fer day light and go home. To a red cock crowin'."[23] Not only do sexual and Christian religious connotations merge in this discourse, but the speech also refers to Emma Lazarus' poem "The Crowing of the Red Cock," a survey of the persecution of Jews throughout Western civilization. These few words, then, drift away from their naturalistic environment to a textual play that signals both Christian and Jewish culture simultaneously, and that draws attention to itself as art.

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The child protagonist David Schearl has been identified by readers as the young artist, Henry Roth, attempting to wend his way between the Scylla of his father's wrath and the Charybdis of the slum streets. Narrated almost exclusively from his perspective, it is an account of a child's gradual and dim awareness of his parents' ordeal as immigrants and of the dark history which dogs their attempts to begin a new life in the Goldineh Medina, the Golden Land of America. The reader knows that both parents have been guilty of sins which have made them pariahs in the old country: the father for having been complicitous in patricide and the mother for having consummated her love for a gentile who abandoned her. By transgressing the authority of the father and of the community, they have been thrust into their marriage as a form of penance.

The shadow cast over this story is the father's suspicion that the child is not his, which motivates his callousness and the child's uncanny defense against an accusation of which he is ignorant: He fabricates an alternative past for himself, one in which his father is the Christian organist who signifies a romantic gentile world both seductive and treacherous. Brutalized by his father and nurtured to the point of suffocation by his mother, David seeks a power greater than that of his parents for protection and solace. Inspired by the text of Isaiah read to him in his *cheder* class and stunned by the sparks between the trolley car tracks, he thrusts his father's milk ladle into the cracks between the rails, nearly electrocuting himself. He survives, buoyed up by the crowds of immigrants who witness his near death, to see his Thorlike father chastened and resigned to his paternity precisely when the child appears to have freed himself from its stranglehold. His biological paternity palls beside the suggestion that the young man has been reborn as an American who can assume an English voice and a gentile past. This is the covenant of America. Or so it seems.

The internal struggle for self-definition is enacted in the novel as a *kulturkampf*, a battleground of languages. Although the book is written in English, it is experienced by the reader as if it were a translation, for David's main actions and thoughts are experienced in Yiddish. Yet this "original" source language is

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almost entirely absent, occasionally reproduced in transliteration or alluded to as the language of dialogue. Throughout the work David is in the process of constructing a self out of the languages that make up his world. First and foremost there is Yiddish, the language of home and the mother tongue, associated with his own nurturing mother and the Yiddish neighborhood of the Lower East Side. The formidable rival to that language is English, represented in the novel by the street lingo of immigrant dialects but also by the self-consciously literary passages that testify to the presence of a mind schooled in Anglo-American civilization. Also looming as a powerful linguistic force in the book is Hebrew, counterpoint to the mother tongue as it represents the Law of the Father in the words of the Biblical prophets and the liturgy of Jewish ceremony. Hebrew and its partner in ritual, Aramaic, function in the novel as the repository of the Divine, associated with paternal power. The role of Polish is strangely a silent mirror image of English, for it is an inaccessible language for David, the vehicle for conveying secrets between adults that contain within them the key to his parents' past and to the circumstances of his own origins. He can overhear his mother and aunt conversing in Polish about their girlhood and the Old Country, but he can only guess at the meaning and those guesses are born of his own desires. Polish is as inaccessible to David and to the reader as English is inaccessible to his mother. In each case, it is a language of assimilation into a majority non-Jewish culture, away from Yiddish, which was central to Eastern European Jewish life and marginal in both Poland and America.[24]

David's consciousness is divided among these languages, and the competing claims for his allegiance emerge from Henry Roth's location at the nexus of competing cultures. At first the polarities seem self-evident: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish function as Jewish languages and English and Polish as gentile ones. The ability to understand a language is not always commensurate with the power it wields over its listeners. Hebrew, despite its being a "foreign" language for David, is the unchallenged "home" language as the holy tongue uniting Jews historically and geographically. Furthermore, Hebrew and Aramaic are

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linked to texts, namely the Book of Isaiah and the Passover Haggadah recounting the story of the Exodus from Egypt, the liberation from slavery, that signify Jewish civilization, whereas intertextual references in English are drawn from nursery rhymes, folklore, and secular literature. It might seem that this novel charts the course of assimilation from a clearly defined ethnic parent culture to a clearly recognizable Anglo-American identity, from the mother tongue Yiddish and the father tongue Hebrew to the adopted tongue English. But it is not that simple.

Yiddish is associated with his mother, but it is the language of the father as well. And although Hebrew signifies the language of Judaism and thus serves to reinforce his ties to his family, it is represented in the King James translation, evoking Christian Western culture as much as it does Jewish civilization. In fact, the passage from Isaiah Roth cites is read in Christian hermeneutics as a prophecy of the coming of Christ, just as the Chad Godya song, with its link to the sacrificial lamb and the Passover seder, signifies both Jewish and Christian traditions. Furthermore, the lyrical and symbolic resonances of the Biblical text, with its metaphorical angel coal in contrast to the literal coal of his cellar, captivate David's imagination and mark a turning point in his movement away from his parents and toward his development as an artist. The Book of Isaiah functions, therefore, as both a movement toward and away from his Jewish heritage. Aramaic serves as yet another instance of how tidy oppositions of Jewish and gentile worlds are challenged by this novel. In one sense, the Aramaic stanzas from the Chad Godya, by virtue of their being embedded in a Jewish ritual, have become Judaized through context. But Aramaic was an official language in the Persian Empire and served to some extent as a lingua franca among peoples, much as English has in this century. Aramaic is also an important influence as a second language in the Bible. What may serve in this novel as an authentic Jewish medium is thus also a classic example of the bilingualism and biculturalism that has characterized Jewish civilization over the ages.[25]

As an immigrant writer who made the dramatic journey from a Yiddish tenement home to a Greenwich Village literary world,

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Roth himself is situated between languages. Bound to Yiddish emotionally, he is also estranged from it intellectually, having never achieved genuine literacy in that language and having never read Yiddish literature. Yet despite mastery of and inventiveness in his nearly native English, he is estranged from it emotionally, for it has remained in his mind the repository of the Christian world. Evident in Roth's novel is not only the importance of language in the construction of David's self, but also the unstable referent of the different languages that make up his world. The non-English and therefore "ethnic" components of his identity spring not from inherent characteristics, but arise interactively, in the context of the other culture. To discuss *Call It Sleep* as an ethnic novel can be constructive, then, if we discard the notion that ethnicity provides an essential and stable identity in confrontation with a monolithic mainstream culture. Instead, ethnicity itself may be a type of invention, as Werner Sollors has argued so persuasively in his studies on ethnicity in American culture.[26] In Homi Bhabha's terms, "The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation."[27]

David Schearl's Jewish identity may be comprised of pre-given texts, languages, and rituals, but it is activated by its dialogue with aspects of American culture in a given time and place. His hybrid Jewish-American identity, therefore, is forged in the clash of languages and dialects coursing through his consciousness in the book's climactic chapters. It is located in an in-between zone, interstices that are both Henry Roth's individual artistic space and the communal space of a particular generation in Jewish-American culture. "He might as well call it sleep." The evocative opening sentence of the book's last paragraph, thus moves into another indeterminate space, between waking and sleeping, that signifies the indeterminate cultural spaces David inhabits so uneasily. The long series of synecdoches that follows intensifies the problem of representativeness that is the novel's signature.

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