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““G-e-e-e o-o-o d-e-e-e-e-!’ The Voice Spelt Out”: (Anti-) Assimilation and Language(s) in Henry Roth’s
Call It Sleep”

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“English,” “english” and “Hebrew”: Roth’s “slips”

Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep* is a particular example of minor literature written in America. Exploring Franz Kafka’s work, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari define minor literature as “that which a minority constructs within a major [i.e. dominant] language.” Published in 1934 and reissued in 1960,¹ Roth’s novel is a fictional autobiography centring on a young boy, David Schearl, who arrives in America during the massive wave of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe to America at the turn of the twentieth century. Set in New York’s Lower East Side, the book depicts David’s process of assimilation, in which he gradually abandons his Jewish languages (mainly Yiddish and Hebrew) and acquires English. In terms of Mary Waters and Thomas Jemenz’s four benchmark model for measuring the assimilation of European immigrants in the United States, David’s Americanization is assessed by the third aspect, namely “language attainment,” which is the ability to speak English and the loss of the individual’s mother tongue.²

Yet *Call It Sleep* is not only minor literature due to its use of minor languages, such as Yiddish and Hebrew; it is minor literature because it marks Roth’s Jewish identity within and in spite of his Americanization. According to Deleuze and Guttari, minor literature involves “the use of a major language and culture that subverts it from within” (17). One of the main characteristics of minor literature is deterritorialization of the language in which the text is constituted, which results in the estrangement of the text from its own linguistic matrix³.

In their study on post-colonial texts, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin differentiate “english,” the language used by the colonized, from “English”, the language of the colonizers (38-39). Ashcroft et al. investigate the “english” language of these texts and show how it is used in order to challenge “English” and undermine common Eurocentric cultural assumptions “on which the text of the English canon are based” (48). Ashcroft and his colleagues argue that glossing, bilingual writing, non-translated words,

¹After its publication at the height of the Depression, *Call It Sleep* received high critical acclaim, yet “vanished and so did its author” (Ribalow, xiv). Even though over the years critics such as Alfred Kazin and Leslie Friedler remembered the book and wrote about it favourably, it was only in 1960 that the book was reissued and has become a world favorite, with millions of copies in print.

²Waters and Jemenz’s model consists of the following points of measurement: socio economic status, spatial concentration, language attainment and intermarriage (105-125).

³It has been argued that Jewish American literature is not minor literature in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms mainly due to the openness of American English to other ethnic languages such as Yiddish. However, when I use Deleuze and Guattari’s model I refer to Hebrew, as will be shown in this paper.
fusion and intersection of languages, among others, function as strategies of appropriation of “English” and the re-placement of it by “english” (59-77).

The concepts of “english” and “English” correspond with the terms “minor” and “major” language discussed above. “English” can be perceived as a “major language” since it represents the hegemonic language. Undermining the dominant language within which it operates, “english” serves as a “minor language.” These concepts are linked to the discourse on American dialect literature. Gavin Jones notes that the purpose of dialect literature is to overturn the belief that dialect functions solely as a confirmation of cultural hegemony (8). Jones examines “the dents and penetrations in the hegemonic armour of the dominant language, whose untroubled absoluteness is perhaps too easily assumed”(12). In view of Jones’ analysis, we may say that dialect literature is related to “english” whereas American English refers to “English.”

The intersection of “english” and “English” is a particular example of Bakhtin’s “heteroglossia.” Bakhtin defines the modern novel as a diversity of speech types and languages, in which any single language is stratified into social dialects, characteristic group behaviour, generic, political and authoritative languages, to name only a few (262). “These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances, this movement of the theme through different languages,” serve as the basic characterisation of the novel. However, Bakhtin clarifies, these languages “do not exclude each other but rather intersect with each other in many different ways,” (292) so they “may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically” (292). The way in which “english” intersects “English” in Call It Sleep is the story I will discuss in this paper.

I suggest that if we examine the concepts of “english” and “English” we will see that they reflect Sigmund Freud’s concepts of the ego ideal and repression. According to Freud, the ego ideal includes the subject’s cultural and ethical ideals: “The ego ideal has a social side; it is also the common ideal of a family, a class or a nation” (“Narcissism”101). These ideals are approved of by parents and authority figures. Once the subject’s libidinal impulses come into conflict with such ideals, the impulses are censored and repressed, i.e. rendered unconscious. However, Freud clarifies, not all repressions succeed. When a repression fails it becomes a symptom and it surfaces in one’s language, mainly in the form of speech errors, which are not accidental. These errors are commonly referred to as “slips of the tongue”, 
which are closely akin to “slips of the pen.” Examples of such spoken and written slips are wordplay and puns or any deviations from the apparently intended form of an utterance. This shows that writing, due to the autonomy of the word, reveals that which is repressed.

In other words, there is a tension between the ego ideal (social/political) and the individual’s libidinal impulses (the subject), which is embodied in the subject’s “speech errors.” This tension is analogous to the tension between “english” and “English” discussed earlier. Established and confirmed by the hegemonic authority, “English” indicates the proper way to speak and behave in a given culture and thus corresponds with the ego ideal. In contrast, “english” refers to the repressed desires (of the individual) that come into conflict with “English” and surface as appropriation/replacement of “English” by “english” (“slips of the pen”). As a form of appropriation/replacement, “slips of the pen” extend to narrative strategies, translation and bilingual writing.

If we apply Freud’s terms to Call It Sleep, David’s acquisition of English reflects the rules and norms for “good” assimilation at the time in which Call It Sleep is set and is thus connected with Roth’s ego ideal, as defined by the culture of his time. The novel depicts a period in which foreign languages were considered to have a disastrous effect on American English. Many critics have noted the “problem” of language purity, in which numerous manuals on correct diction were published in order to remedy, or “purify,” the “corrupted” and “polluted” ethnic traces (“phonetic decay”) found in the immigrants’ use of English. In his lecture to the graduating class at Bryn Mawer College in 1935, Henry James made it clear that “our admirable English tradition” was being mutilated in the mouths of immigrants. Seen by many as threatening the homogenous linguistic America, these “contaminated tongues,” were to be replaced by pure, standard English.

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4 Quoted in Jacques Derrida, Writing 290. See also Freud, “Slips” 103-128.
5 For example, in “Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis” (also known as the “Rat Man”), Freud’s analysand has an obsessive fantasy about rats eating their way into the anus of his father and his lover. Since the German word for marriage “Heiraten” contains the word “rat” (“Ratten” in German), Freud connects the theme of rats with the analysand’s father complex and the notion of marriage and children. This connection is emphasised by the link between “rats” and the famous fairytale of the rat catcher (“Ratfaenger”), which involves the departure or death of the children of a town called Hamelin.
6 It is important to note that writing is also a way out by which the demands of the ego ideal can be met without involving repression. Freud maintains that sublimation is the productive process of turning the libido into socially useful achievements, mainly art, without giving one’s life over to the process of repression. It is finding a place in the social world for that which would otherwise be repressed. Thus, writing has a unique role; it simultaneously uncovers and avoids repression. In this way, “speech errors” are both the symptom and the cure (“Narcissism” 95).
7 Gavin Jones 10. See also the introduction, chapter one “Contaminated Tongues” and chapter three, “Language, Gender, and Disease.”
8 Quoted in Hana Wirth Nesher, Call 57-58.
Small wonder that Roth stresses his protagonist’s acquisition of English, when handbooks asserted that many Americans “who have had the privilege of a liberal education and gentle breeding have, within the last decade, become painfully conscious of certain defects of voice and accent among their associates, which are disturbing to their sense of fitness. This may have come about through a more frequent intercourse with people of other nationalities, who do not share with them these peculiarities.”

Roth recognizes America’s perception of pure English as a standard for himself and submits to the claims handbooks make on him. Since the ego ideal is the conditioning factor for repression, we may extrapolate that Roth’s repressed desires are expressed in the novel by “slips of the pen”. These “slips” indicate Roth’s libidinal impulses, which conflict with America’s attentiveness to diction. The way in which Roth’s writing embodies the tension between Roth’s/America’s ideal of linguistic assimilation and Roth’s resistance to this view can be better understood in light of deconstructionist theories and the sociolinguistic context of Jewish civilisation.

Freud’s notion of “slips of the pen” is connected with Ronald Barthe’s perception of the “death of the author”. In similar to Freud, who reveals the autonomy of the word, Barth maintains that language writes itself. The author is merely a “scriptor” who produces the text but does not and cannot explain it, since “it is language which speaks.” To write is “to reach the point where only language acts, ‘performs,’ and not ‘me’ [the author]” (143). As meaning lies exclusively in language itself and its impressions on the reader, a text does not have a single meaning, but rather can be interpreted in multiple ways. It follows that it is impossible to get hold of one, or any, truth. Jacque Derrida broadens Barth’s assumption when he introduces his idea of “différance.” Derrida claims that meaning is suspended, or, “deferred” to another place. He explains that words and signs can never fully summon forth what they mean, but can only be defined in terms of their difference from other words. Thus, meaning

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9 Clara Katherine Rogers 15.
10 It is interesting to note that in 1994, after sixty years of writer’s block, Roth published an autobiographical novel in which his alter ego, Ira Stigman, confesses that he long ago indulged in incest with his sister. In interviews following the publication of this novel, Roth verified that he had an incestuous relationship with his sister. Ever since, critics have attributed Roth’s writer’s block to his dark secret. Any reader would not fail to notice the almost incestuous relationship between David and his mother and the sexual scenes in Call It Sleep, in which children “play bad” (Call it Sleep, 53, 356). This emphasises how the writing of Call It Sleep is an act of sublimation, in which Roth transforms his incestuous impulses into a work of art. Taking place during his early teens, Roth’s incestuous coupling with his sister is clearly connected with the Jewish background he tried to forget by assimilating. Thus, the tension between Roth’s incestuous impulses and Roth’s ego ideal (incest as a social taboo) and the relation of this tension to the theme of assimilation in the book deserve treatment. However, for the purpose of my paper I focus only on Roth’s ego ideal of linguistic transformation.
11 Derrida plays on the fact that the French neologism “différence” means both “to differ” and “to defer.” He intentionally misspells the “e” in “différence” and writes “a” instead (“différance”), although the two words are identically pronounced. He does so in order to emphasise that these words can be distinguished in writing, rather
is forever postponed through an endless chain of signifiers. There is never a moment when meaning is complete. Instead, there is a web of language with no centre of reference. With respect to *Call It Sleep*, we shall see that the elusiveness of the totality of meaning is enhanced since the book partakes in more than one language.

David speaks Yiddish at home, “broken” English on the street and learns Hebrew in *cheder*, the Jewish classroom. David’s multilingualism has been a dominant aspect in Jewish literature and culture. Scholars and literary critics such as Baal Makhshoves, Shmuel Niger, Itamar Even Zohar and Benjamin Harshav have explored the centrality of bilingualism and diglossia in Jewish culture. According to Joshua Fishman, bilingualism is an *individual* use of two or more different languages. Diglossia, however, is the different social functions two languages or more have within a single language *community* (52-54). When we discuss *Call It Sleep*, Yiddish functions as “mother tongue” (“mama-loshn”) since it is used in the domestic sphere. In contrast, Hebrew is viewed as “father tongue” (“loshn-koydesh”) due to its bookish and liturgical performance. English is the language of communication (outside domesticity), (non-Jewish) education and trade.

Henri Gobard proposes a similar, yet slightly different, model of Diglossia: maternal language, also known as vernacular or territorial language (David’s Yiddish); an urban, governmental language used for business, commerce and bureaucracy which entails deterritorialisation (the English David adopts); referential language, the language of literature which necessitates a cultural reterritorialisation (Yiddish/Hebrew in place of literature); mythic language, signifying a religious or spiritual reterritorialisation (the Hebrew/Aramaic David learns in *heder*). The focal point of this paper will be the way Hebrew reterritorialises David’s deterritorialised (English) Jewish identity.

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12 As early as 1918 Baal Makhshoves claimed that “Bilingualism accompanied the Jews even in ancient times, even when they had their own land, and they were not as yet wanderers as they are now.” Baal Makhshoves [Israel Isidore Elyashev], “Tsvey shprakhen: eyn eyntsiker literature,” translated by Hana Wirth-Nesher as “One Literature in Two Languages,” *What is Jewish Literature?* 74. Similarly, Shmuel Niger stated that “one language has never been enough for the Jewish people” (11). See also Even-Zohar “The Nature and Functionalisation of the Language of Literature under Diglossia”[Hebrew] and Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry*.

13 Fishman is basing his study on the work of Charles Ferguson “Diglossia.”

14 These specific functions are restricted to Ashkenazic Jewry only. See Max Weinrich, 14.

15 Quoted in Delueze and Guattari 23.
Written in the Roman alphabet and including transcriptions of complete Hebrew (and Aramaic) verses as well as a few Yiddish words, *Call It Sleep* conveys the multilingual and multicultural world of Jewish reality. However, Roth neither translates these languages into English nor does he provide his readers with a glossary. This means that knowledge of languages and cultures other than English (especially Hebrew and the first Testament) is a prerequisite for the understanding of the novel and particularly of David’s assimilation, which is achieved linguistically. In other words, what is unique about the novel is that instead of a web of language we have a web of languages. Thus, (one) meaning can never be achieved not only due to the decentred net of signifiers of a single language (English) but also as a result of the interweaving of this net with other nets (Hebrew, Aramaic, Yiddish). This implies that each signifier in the book is understood in relation to other signifiers within its own language and in relation to the signifiers found in the different languages that participate in the book.

The net of languages in the novel is perhaps best demonstrated by the title of the book “Call It Sleep.” The Hebrew for “call” is “qra,”16 which, in turn, also means the imperative “read.” The noun “sleep” means in Hebrew “sheyna.”17 The verb “to sleep” is “lishon.”18 This verb is similar in pronunciation and writing to the noun “lashon,”19 which is the metonymy for language. Thus, in Hebrew, “call it” may mean “read it.” Written in the imperative, “read it” addresses the reader and instructs him/her how to read the book. “Sleep” provides the answer: “read it language” (lishon/ lashon), i.e. read it as a language. Since it is a Hebrew translation, it may be suggested that “language” here refers to Hebrew. In other words, the title can be read as “read it (as) Hebrew.” The title embodies the unique interaction of English and Hebrew in *Call It Sleep* and instructs us to read David’s linguistic assimilation in particular and the book in general with Hebrew in mind.20

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16 In Hebrew: קורא

Due to lack of equivalence between the English and Hebrew alphabets, conflicting systems of transliterations often appear, especially since certain words tend to associate with traditional transliterations. For instance, the Hebrew letter “het” may be transliterated into the English “h” (as in “Hanukkah”) and the English “ch” (as in the proper name “Chayyin”). Thus, in order to avoid inconsistency all Hebrew words appearing in this paper are transcribed into English according to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) for Hebrew. Nevertheless, in order to make this study as accessible and readable as possible and in order to coincide with Roth’s transliterations, in some words (such as cheder, chumash, chametz, matzohs) I used the traditional transliterations. Additionally, in order to clarify and simplify my analysis, in some cases I use the IPA standard set of phonetic symbols for English.

17 In Hebrew: שינה

18 In Hebrew: לישון

19 In Hebrew: לשון

20 Since by the time of writing *Call It Sleep* Roth’s Hebrew was restricted to cheder, all the Hebrew words and roots referred to in this paper appear in the bible and/or in other seminal Jewish texts learned in the Jewish classroom, such as Talmud and Mishna.
Many critics have stressed the linguistic aspect of assimilation and displacement, derived from the tie between language, identity, culture and place. Identity is often perceived as mainly a linguistic construction.\(^1\) Magda Stroinka emphasises that “language is so closely intertwined with all aspects of our identity” (97) that “whenever we move to a new territory, physically or emotionally, we carry with us the baggage of experience that is stored in a form of sensory and verbal memories” such as “images, feelings, voices and words” (95).

Examining the formation of a national identity, Ruth Wodak, Rudolf De Cillia, Martin Reisigl and Karin Liebhart term strategies of assimilation as aiming *linguistically* to create homogeneity whereas strategies of dissimilation aim to create linguistic heterogeneity (33)\(^2\).

Having immigrated from Poland to Canada, Eva Hoffman comments at an interview that “the main impact of immigration for me was my sense of the enormous importance of language.”\(^3\) Since “language is not only something that we use instrumentally, but it is something that truly shapes our perceptions of the world,”\(^4\) exile for Hoffman meant that the “signifier has become severed from the signified” (106).

Since the publication of *Call It Sleep*, critics have attempted to classify the book, establishing certain trends in the criticism of the novel. It has been regarded as “the most distinguished single proletarian novel,”\(^5\) a Freudian case study,\(^6\) a modernist work with clear influences of James Joyce and T.S Eliot among others.\(^7\) Classification also characterises the

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\(^1\) See for instance, Paul V. Kroskrity, 106. For a further discussion of identity as a linguistic phenomenon see Earl Joseph and John Edwards. Edwards aims at presenting non-solely language-centered analysis.

\(^2\) As Wodak et al. clarify, although they focus on Austria, their research is not restricted to it (2).

\(^3\) Harry Kreisler. Interview with Eva Hoffman. <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people/Hoffman/hoffman-con2.html>

\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) Walter B. Rideout. “The Radical” 186. Partly as a result of Roth’s portrayal of slum life and partly due to Roth’s involvement with the Communist party, many critics read *Call It Sleep* as an example of the proletarian novel of the thirties. However, after the publication of the book, an anonymous review in *New Masses* attacked *Call It Sleep* for not being proletarian enough (February 12 1935:27). In a conversation with William Freedman, Roth said: “it’s certainly not a proletarian novel. Probably Mark Gold’s *Jews Without Money* is a proletarian novel” (152). See also Rideout (1959), Keneth Ledbetter, the responses by Greenwood, Burke and Seaver, the review by Gollomb, Klein (193-195), Dickstein (79-80) and Harris (86-90). Roth’s comments on certain themes of the book often contribute to the conflicting views proposed by critics.

\(^6\) David’s hatred of his father and almost incestuous relationship with his mother, the phallic connotation of the milk ladle he throws into the cracks between the rails and the function of the cellar as the unconscious have been part of a general consensus in which *Call It Sleep* has been read according to Freudian concepts and references. In 1965, Roth told Jane Howard: “I don’t know much about Freud and I never did...If I’d known about things like Oedipus complexes I probably never would have written that book at all. I’d have said, ‘Shucks, why bother? Sounds just like a case history.’” (76). In 1972, however, Roth told William Freedman: Of course, I knew about Freud, but I only had a smattering of it. I knew only what almost everyone knew of Freud, and that wasn’t a great deal...I guess I must occasionally have thought about things in Freudian terms, but I wouldn’t say I was following Freud” (Freedman, “Conversation,”155).

\(^7\) John Chamberlain in *The New York times* wrote: “The final chapters in the book have been compared to the Nighttown episodes of Joyce’s *Ulysses*; the comparison is apt.” (Ribalow, Introduction to *Call It Sleep*, xiii). Edwin Seaver in the *New York Sun* called Roth “a brilliant discipline of James Joyce” (ibid, xiv). Alfred Hayes
assessment of David’s social, cultural and religious identity, yet with clear division between the “Jewish” and the “American/Christian.” On the one hand, the novel has been hailed as the great representative work of Jewish-American literature, a “specifically Jewish book, the best single book by a Jew about Jewishness written by an American” (Fiedler, “Jew” 38 ), whose materials are unquestionably “those of the [Jewish] education novel” (Sherman,84). On the other hand, critics such as Helge Norman Nilssen have read Call It Sleep as a bildungsroman describing “a subtle reorientation from isolation to community” through which David develops “attitudes that are American and Emmersonian.”

Gordon Poole takes a more extreme position when he explains that “the novel’s progressive abandonments of Judaism reaches almost anti-Semitic overtone.” Intermediating between these conflicting views, Sam. B. Girgus claims that Call It Sleep “functions as a paradigmatic, Jewish novel of initiation” with David emerging “as a new American consciousness, a prophetic Jewish ‘kup’ dramatizing in modern setting the cultural democracy and pluralism of the American idea” (96).

Referring to Birgus’ position, Mario Materassi, in a collection of essays dedicated to Roth’s hybrid status, suggests that “the nature of Roth’s novel calls for an integration of all the critical instruments hitherto employed in its analysis” (36). Such a view is expressed by Werner Sollors in his concept of “ethnic modernism.” Since ethnicity itself may be a type of invention, social articulation of difference which is forged in the clash with American culture, “an ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation” (Bhabha,2 ), Sollors perceives Call It Sleep as representative of second-generation immigrant literature, in which Roth’s Jewish childhood merges with American modernism to “render a powerful and haunting bilateral descent.

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noted that “it is as brilliant as Joyce’s The Portrait of the artist, but with a wider scope, a richer emotion, a deeper realism.” (Burke, 21). For Roth and Joyce (as well as T.S. Eliot) see Bonnie Lyons (Henry Roth, 117-123), Ferraro “Ethnicity,” Brian McHale, Robert Alter, 34-36 and Rachel Rubinsteim. Karen Lawrence and Mark Schoening discuss the book’s modernism. Eda Lou Walton, a New York university lecturer with whom Roth had an affair and who encouraged and supported Roth in the years of writing Call It Sleep, introduced Roth to Ulysses after smuggling the book from France. Roth commented that reading Joyce taught him that “I could talk about urban squalor and develop it into a work of art” (unpublished interview with Hana Wirth Nesher, February 1992). In “Itinerant Ithacan” (Shifting Landscape, 197-199) Roth refers specifically to the process of reading Ulysses.

28 In an interview with David Bronsen, Roth said “I do not regard Call It Sleep as primarily a novel of Jewish life” (269).
29 For the book’s Jewishness, see also Harold Ribalow, M. Thomas Inge (45-50) and Sanford Pinsker (148-58).
30 Quoted in Materassi, 38.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 See Werner Sollors, Beyond Ethnicity and The Invention of Ethnicity.
myth” (164). Addressing the question of David’s Americanization in a book that “challenges the very notion of typicality,” Hana Wirth-Nesher, in her introduction to the collection of essays mentioned above, notes in that the novel is not a simple case of assimilation, since “tidy oppositions of Jewish and gentile worlds are challenged by this novel” (ibid, 9). In her afterword to the book, Wirth-Nesher shows how for Roth, assimilation entails Christianisation. In similar to other critics, Wirth-Nesher concedes that by the end of *Call It Sleep*, David becomes a Christ symbol; however, this is only because Roth is writing in a language steeped in a non-Jewish tradition. Intellectually alienated from Yiddish and Hebrew and emotionally estranged from English, his native language, David is bound “to live a life in translation, alienated from the culture of his language” (460). Additionally, Wirth-Nesher’s recent study on the many languages used in *Call It Sleep* offers a reading of the book as a repository of language play used by Roth as “an artistic arena in which speech and writing from two very different traditions would intersect in order to produce an original work of art and a clear space for himself alongside Joyce and Conrad” (*Call*, 98).

This framework offers a useful context for a discussion of Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*. In what follows, I would like to extend Wirth Nesher’s argument in order to account for certain other elements in the novel. I will reveal Roth’s “slips of the pen” (“english”) and demonstrate how English, Hebrew and the particular interplay between them is used in the book in order to *undermine* David’s Americanization. My focus is not so much on what the text means as how it means. It is not my aim to present a clear, uncontradictory analysis of *Call It Sleep*; given my deconstructive standpoint, this is neither possible nor desirable. Rather, I seek to show the breaks and shifts in the text and therefore to prove that the book might be more ambiguous and disunified than it has been acknowledged.

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34 Werner Sollors, “World.” For Sollors’ concept of “ethnic modernism” in general, see *Ethnic Modernism*.
35 “Wirth-Nesher, “Introduction” 10. Sarah Kerman claims that the essays in the collection fail to demonstrate the way in which *Call It Sleep* challenges typicality. Instead, they use categories such as Jew/immigrant/modernist, thus illustrating how the book transcends specific categories. See Kerman, 67, 2n. Using the paradigm of proletarian fiction, Kerman argues that *Call It Sleep* focuses on the individual experience rather than the general/political, thus simultaneously promoting and refusing generalization.
36 William Freedman focuses on the religious theme and the myths of redemption and rebirth developed in *Call It Sleep*, identifying David as Christ because he pursues a “quest for redemption, salvation, and the blazing light of God,” which produces a “symbolic tale of ecumenical reconciliation wherein the Son...achieves... rebirth and the acceptance of the pacified Father” (“Mystical” 27). Lyn Altenbernd suggests that the book depicts the birth and childhood of a New-World Messiah whose story is a version of the birth-of-a-hero myth dealt with by Otto Rank in *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (based on Freud’s “family Romance”) and by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Chapter four in this paper deals with the theme of redemption found in the book.
Assimilation via Linguistic Change: Constructing the Symbol

The theme of assimilation in *Call It Sleep* is demonstrated via David’s gradual rejection of the languages comprising his Jewish identity, namely Yiddish and Hebrew, and, simultaneously, by his acquisition of proper English. At the beginning of the book, David speaks pure Yiddish and has hardly any command of English. At the end of part one, however, his mother observes: “Your Yiddish is more than one-half English now. I’m being left behind.”

By referring to the notion in America that pure English diction was being contaminated by the “impure” languages of the immigrant at the time in which *Call It Sleep* is set, this chapter will introduce key terms, major images and motives in the book, and demonstrate the way in which Roth simultaneously establishes and invalidates the biblical narrative of Isaiah the Prophet as a symbol of David’s assimilation.

**“Phonetic Decay”: Isaiah and the Symbol of Purification**

The story of Isaiah the Prophet is a key in revealing the way in which Roth challenges David’s rejection of his Jewish languages. While learning Hebrew in cheder, David is captured by the image of Isaiah the Prophet when the story is first told to him by Reb Yiddel, the melamed (teacher). In the following classroom scene, it is important to note that the reader is provided only with Reb Yiddel’s paraphrased version of the Book of Isaiah and never a direct translation:

> ‘Now I’ll tell you [Mendel, David's friend in the cheder class] a little of what you read, then what it means… in the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw God. And God was sitting on his throne, high in heaven and in his temple…around him stood the angels, God’s blessed angels. And they cried: Kadosh! Kadosh – Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! And the temple rang and quivered with the sound of their voices… and angels there were and he saw ‘em… but Isaiah saw the Almighty in His majesty and His terrible light – Woe me! he cried, what shall I do! I am lost! … I, common man, have seen the almighty, I, unclean one have seen him! Behold, my lips are unclean and I live in a land unclean… but just as Isaiah let out his cry – I am unclean – one of the angels flew to the altar and with tongs drew out fiery coal… and with that coal, down he flew to Isaiah and with that coal touched his lips – Here! … you are clean! And the instant that coal touched Isaiah’s lips, then he heard God’s own voice say, whom shall I send? Who will go for us? And Isaiah spoke and –’ (226-227).

When David listens to this translation, he connects the light of God, who uses the coal to “clean” Isaiah’s sinful lips, with the electric light he sees at the car-track, in the scene where the gentile urchins force him to throw the zinc sword into the cracks between the rails. When David asks Genya, his mother, who God is, Genya answers: God is “brighter than the

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37 Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* 120. Further page numbers will be cited in the text.
38 For a discussion of Roth’s inconsistent translation methods and the unstable linguistic situation often directed at Yiddish-English puns, see Werner Sollors, “A World” 127-135. Naomi Diamant, reading *Call It Sleep* as a semiotic *bildungsroman*, in which David learns to decode and encode in his environment, discusses three linguistic universes in the novel: authorial, narrative and experiential (336-355).
day is brighter than the night” (241).39 After the car-track scene, David runs to the cheder, where he sees Reb Yiddel. Inspired by his mother’s description of God as light, David explains to the rabbi that he “saw a coal like – like Isaiah’… ‘where the car-tracks run I saw it. On tenth Street’” (257).40 From the moment David saw the light, the desire to see “God’s bright light” haunts him, until finally, towards the end of the novel, he thrusts his father’s milk dipper into the rails and nearly electrocutes himself, in order to fulfill it: “Where there’s light in the crack, /yuh dared me. Now! Now I gotta/... In the crack/ remember. In the crack be born” (411).41

As the high point in David’s acquisition of English, his semiconscious state, with its Joycean epiphanies and stream of consciousness, is written in proper English in the form of prose poems and is reminiscent of the tradition of English and European literature.42 This marks David’s shift from Yiddish/Hebrew to English. In this scene, David’s Jewish identity dies and he is reborn as an English speaker (“In the crack be born”).43 It is my contention that the narrative of the Prophet is tied in with America’s discourse on assimilation. Sin and purification are dominant symbols in Call it Sleep, which Roth himself has commented on: “I wanted this purification. It was a necessary symbol.”44 I suggest that if we consider the historical and social context of the time in which the book takes place, we will see that Isaiah’s “unclean lips” stand for David’s “unclean immigrant languages.”

America’s attentiveness to diction discussed earlier is linked to the biblical narrative of Isaiah by Roth in the book. The inclusion of Isaiah story echoes the sociolinguistic view that foreign languages were polluting English, where the coal in the biblical narrative is to Isaiah as standard English is to the “polluted” and “contaminated” tongues in Call It Sleep. The

39It is also important to note that the English in the book is in fact a translation from Yiddish: “And this is the Golden Land. She [Genya] spoke in Yiddish”(11). Additionally, the Jewish immigrant’s Yiddish in the book is represented as good, highly stylised, “Shakespearean” English, as in Albert’s warning: “I am pleading with you as with death!”(157). Robert Alter finds Melvillean, Joycean and Faulknernian tones in such English (33-37). In contrast, the characters’ English is represented as broken English, “Yiddish-English.” However, Irving Howe suggests that once the English translations are translated back into Yiddish, they cease being poetic and become idiomatic. By writing a book in one language, Howe claims, Roth expects “that some readers will be able to hear it in another (588).
40 Naomi Sokolof explains that “since no single word in David’s vocabulary can sufficiently express the vision he has had,” the excerpt from Isaiah is used by David as “a kind of verbal reallocating of perceptions” (329).
41 David’s thoughts in chapter xxi are written in italics.
43 Wirth-Nesher, City 153.
44 John Friedman, 32.
Hebrew word for lip is safə, which also means language. In this manner, Isaiah’s “unclean lips” stand as a symbol for David’s foreign languages. Gavin Jones notes that “polluted” ethnic traces were contributing to the “blasphemous degeneration of [the] city” (10), since they were “registers of, even explanations for, social corruption” (67). This claim shows how people thought that the introduction of linguistic “impurities” was responsible for social decay. This is sinful, since blasphemy implies sin. We can extrapolate that the reverse must be true: linguistic purity is aligned with what is morally good.

The use of foreign language is therefore a sinful act, since it alters the English language and leads to the corruption of society. Because foreign languages are sinful, they are polluted. Similarly, Isaiah’s lips are unclean because he has committed a sin: he has seen God. The connection between what is unclean, or dirty, and sin is emphasized in Reb Yiddel’s explanation of the verses. In the paraphrase, Isaiah cries: “‘My lips are unclean and I live in a land unclean’” (227). The Rabbi elaborates that the land was unclean because “‘the Jews at that time were sinful – ’” (227). When David listens to the Rabbi’s explanation, he continues to connect the sins (uncleanness) of Isaiah/the Jews with dirt: “– Clean? Light? Wonder if – ? Wish I could ask him why the Jews were dirty. What did they do?” (227). Considering America’s discourse on linguistic purification, the answer to David’s question is that the Jews were dirty simply because they spoke.

“Fckenbestit,” “Sit Shit!”: Linguistic Transgression

The link between dirt, sin and language is pointed to by David’s linguistic transgression. While listening to the biblical narrative of the Prophet, David reflects on Isaiah’s “sitting on a chair” (230). After making the realization that Isaiah has “got chairs, so he can sit,” David associates the word “sit” with “shit”: “Gee! Sit Shit! Sh! Please God, I didn’t mean it! Please God, somebody else said it! Please – ” (230). David links “shit” to “sit” because these words are similar in writing and pronunciation, and, in doing so, he commits a sin. However, another word play is implied here. “Shit” means “ḥaria” in Hebrew, with ḥr.y as a root. “Ḥr.y” is also the root of the verb “harah,” which, in turn, mainly refers to God’s

\[\text{שהמה}\]

45 In Hebrew: ְשֶׁמֶש

46 The Hebrew roots usually consist of three letters, which are separated by periods. Since “ḥary” (in plural: “ḥarihem”) is euphemism (for “shit”) and thus appears in its written form only, it is hard to trace its exact pronunciation as well as its root. According to the Academy of the Hebrew Language, “ḥary” is most likely constituted of the verb h.r.y or h.r.a, the latter being the root of the word “hara,” which means shit. In Hebrew: ְהָרָיהָ רָוִיתָש
anger about the Israelites who commit sins. Additionally, “ḥarah,” also means burning. David’s word play (shit/ḥarah/anger/sin/burning) refers back to the Jews’ “sinful” pronunciation in need of purification.

Haunted by the notion of his “sinful” Jewish diction, David commits the same sin twice. While in Cheder, David reflects: “He [Isaiah] said dirty words, I bet. Shit, pee, fuckenbestit – Stop! You’re saying it yourself. It’s a sin again! That’s why he – Gee! I didn’t mean it!” (231). By calling a sin, David defines the word “shit” as dirty. Yet David’s transgression is more complex and can be understood via bilingual pun only. Among David’s “dirty words” (shit, pee, fuck) is the word “tit” (fuckenbestit), which refers to a woman’s breast. In Hebrew, a breast means “shad.”

By associating God (shaday) with tits (shad), David sins. Based on all of these examples, we can conclude that David’s electrocution is the expression of his desire to purify the pronunciation of his unclean languages.

This is also signified by the word “angel,” as I will demonstrate by taking a look at the Hebrew translation. First, one of the Hebrew words for angel is “seraf,” which is constituted of the Hebrew verb “s.r.f,”51 which, in turn, means to burn. In English, “seraf” is written as “seraph.”52 In the novel, “seraf” appears in its plural form, serafim: “Beshnas mos hamelech Uziyahu vawere es adonoi yoshav al kesai rum venesaw, vshulav malaim es hahahol. Serafim omdim memal lo shash kanowfayim, sash kanowfayim lawehhad, beshtayim yahase fanav uvishtayim yahase reglov uvishtayim yofaif” (255, my emphasis). The Hebrew “serafim” and the English “seraphim” consist of the singular “seraf”/“seraph” plus the Hebrew male plural suffix -im. When this suffix follows the letter “h” in the English singular “serah,” the

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47 In Hebrew: דרי.
Evidence for the connection between the two words – “הרי” (shit) and “הרוח” (anger) – is the modern Hebrew word for “shit”: “הרה,” which is sometimes (incorrectly) written as “הרוח.” “Hara” is written with the letter “alef”(a) in the end instead of the letter “yod” (y) most likely due to the influence of the Arabic language: خُرِء (ח’ר) " Parentheses to indicate "cherem", "cheri", "cheres", "cheres", "cheres", "cheres", "cheres" (ק+ח) " תרש" תרשה תרחא "Chere

48 In Hebrew: שד.

49 In Hebrew: שדי.

50 The Hebrew suffix “yod” indicates possession.

51 In Hebrew: סֹעַרְפ.

52 In English, the pronunciation of the letter “f” is equated with the pronunciation of the letters “ph,” as in the words “telephone” and “father.” Thus, the Hebrew “seraf” equates the English “seraph.”

53 In English: “In the year that king Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly” (Isaiah 6:1-3).
result is the pronoun “him.” In this light, seraphim (serap -him) suggests its own meaning within the biblical narrative. When the angel puts the coal on Isaiah’s lips, he burns (soreph) h-im.55

Secondly, shortly before David electrocutes himself, Reb Yiddel names him “a seraph among Esau’s goyi” (387). When David electrocutes himself he parallels not only Isaiah but also the angel, who performs the act of burning in the biblical narrative. Thus, when the Rabbi names David “a seraph,” he foreshadows David’s electrocution. Finally, a reference to the word “angel” appears during David’s semiconscious state. While David is unconscious, the following words appear: “Jangle! Angle! Angle! Angle!” (429). “Jangle” refers to the sound of metal hitting metal. David electrocutes himself by throwing a metal (the milk handle) into a metal (the rails). The word “angle” is repeated three times, calling to mind the repetition of the word “holy” (in Hebrew: קדוש) in the Isaiah story: “Kadosh! Kadosh! Kadosh!” (226). “Angle” is similar in writing and pronunciation to “angel.” This leads to a reading of “angle” as indicative of God’s angel and the jangle in relation to the act of electrocution (metal).

The “Purifying Fire”

The connection between fire (the act of purifying/burning) and language (David’s lips) also strengthens the reading of the biblical narrative as symbolic of David’s assimilation. Fire sometimes stands in for David’s words. For example, in the scene where he listens to a group of girls chanting, we are told: “Within him a voice spoke with no words but with the shift of slow flame” (23). Symbolizing passion, fire is also used in order to describe language, as in the expression “fiery speech.” When Genya describes Bertha’s rapid and passionate acquisition of English, she uses images of fire and smoke: “– What a smoke comes out of her [Bertha’s] mouth” (335). David’s burning desire to purify his Jewish languages and speak English is achieved by in the act of literally burning his lips.

In addition, depictions of burning candles, stoves, coals, embers and food, are often repeated in the book. Genya frequently states that she still has “the [Sabbath] candles to light”

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54 The Hebrew letter “pe” is the equivalent for the English letters “f/ph.” “Pe” is also equated with the pronunciation of the English letter “p” and the only way to differentiate “p” from “f/ph” is through the Hebrew vocalisation. This means that the form “s.r.ph/f” is a transcription of the Hebrew original whereas the “s.r.p.” is a transliteration. In this way, “serap” can be read in Hebrew as “seraphf.”

55 This reading is also evident in Roth’s “serafim.” In English, “im” (the Hebrew suffix) is the weak form (colloquialism) of the pronoun “him.” See <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/him_1>
When she lights them, it is described in detail: “The match rasped on the sandpaper, flared up… One by one she lit the candles. The flame crept tipsily up the wick, steadied, mellowed the steadfast brass below, glowed… Twilight vanished, the kitchen gleamed…” (71). We are often told that Genya “lifted the stove lid, threw a shovelful of coal into the red pit” (119), or “crouched before the stove, shook down the dull embers behind the grate” (55). When helping the old woman in the street to light her stove, David “struck a match, turned on the gas and lit it” (238). When David’s friends light a stove in the street, this is also described at length: “A rusty toy stove and pale yellow flames creeping out of it. Smoke spouted from all the cracks. The small oven door, also full of smoke, was open… One blew intently at the flame… The stove smoked lustily, growing redder and redder” (264). Finally, wishing to burn the Passover chametz, David, like other Jews who “had kindled a small fire” (242), “fetched out bone of his matches, scraped it against a cobble and shielding its flame touched it to the bits of paper under the kindling. A live, golden flame awoke; wood and cardboard caught, and in a few minutes the whole tinder mound was ablaze” (246). Fascinated by the fire, David “crouched down beside the fire and watched the first tiny beads of flame run up the raveled threads of the rag that bound feather and spoon together” (246).

However, it is not just any fire that pervades the book but rather a purifying one in particular. The Sabbath candles represent holiness and purity and mark the difference between the sacred and the sinful. Thus, the lighting of the candles marks the difference between the sacred and the sinful. The dichotomy of labor and Sabbath, sinful and pure, is also evident in the purifying effect that the Sabbath candles have. Once the candles have been lighted in the book, the “day that had begun in labor and disquiet, blossomed now in candlelight and Sabbath,” indicating the “hour of tawny beatitude” (71). The old woman David comes across

56 The Sabbath candles (are at least) two candles which are lit at the beginning of Sabbath on Friday evening (usually a few minutes prior to sunset) and put out the day after, when the Sabbath ends on Saturday evening after the appearance of three stars in the sky.

57 Chametz is any leavened product that is forbidden to be consumed during Passover. It is customary to burn the chametz before Passover.

58 In Exodus, God marks the Sabbath day as holy: “For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them and rested on the seventh day; wherefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it” (20:7). It follows that the day on which God rested from his “labors” is sacred whereas the weekdays on which God created the world are sinful. This is exemplified by the Hebrew word for weekday “ḥol,” which in turn means profane. Additionally, after the Sabbath ends, the Havdala ceremony is performed in order to distinguish the holy Sabbath from the profane weekdays: “Blessed art thou, God, our Lord, King of the Universe, Who distinguishes Holiness from profanity, Light from dark, Israel from the nations, The seventh day from the six workdays. Blessed art thou, God, Who distinguishes holiness from profanity.” See Siddur, Amidah, evening prayer service (Arvit). In Hebrew: בְּרוּסָה
in the street asks him to light the gas stove for her since she has already lighted the holy Sabbath candles, and is thus prohibited by Jewish law from lighting any other fire. She explains to David that, as opposed to her, he is “not old enough to sin” (237). In other words, when David lights the stove, he prevents the old woman from committing a sin and, therefore, maintains her current level of purity.

Additionally, the burning of the Passover chametz is an act of purification, while, according to Jewish law, not burning the chametz is a sin. This notion is expressed in the book four times. For instance, afraid that the street cleaner might throw away the non-burnt chametz, David’s Jewish neighbors warn the cleaner: “Hey mister! Don’t push id! Id’s a sin” (243). David is eager to burn the chametz since “one had to burn it or one would sin” (244). Having troubles finding a place to light the fire, David is afraid of losing the chametz, knowing that “that would be a sin” (245) and that “he’d have to burn it or get a sin” (245).

As we shall see, the burning of the chametz is indicative of David’s assimilation. In the morning of the first Passover night, David is sent by his parents to burn the leavened bread. On his way down to the street, David “paused a while and watched the Hungarian janitor polish one of the brass banisters in front of the house. It had a corrupt odor, brass, as of something rotting away, and yet where the sun struck the burnished metal, it splintered into brilliant yellow light. Decay. Radiance. Funny” (242). The words “corrupt,” “decay” and the “rotting” odor refer back to our discussion about America’s discourse on sin and the purification of the “phonetic decay.” In this passage, the words “brilliance,” “radiance” and “light” point to God’s “bright light.” The word “burnished” contains the word “burn,” which ties the burning of the chametz in with the burning of David’s languages. The burning of the chametz is an act of purification, just as the burning of David’s lips is.

This reading is stressed by the river bank scene. When he can find no other place to burn the chametz, David goes to the river, and, after he burns it, he daydreams of a light “Brighter than Day” (248). This calls to mind Genya’s depiction of God as a light brighter than day (241), which David links to Isaiah’s coal. As he burns the chametz, David asks: “See God, I was good?...Was good, wasn’t I?” (246). Confirmation that the burning of the chametz makes David good, i.e. purifies him, comes during his reverie, in which he sees light “Brighter than day…Brighter…Sin melted into light…” (248). Preceding the “bright light” of
God/the coal, the “melted” sin refers both to the burning of the chametz and of David’s Jewish languages.

The symbolism of the purifying fire is enhanced by the connection between food and fire. The stove of David’s friends is lit in order to make “Pop-cunn!” (264) and the stove of the old woman is used to warm food during the Sabbath. As discussed, the Sabbath candles point to the idea of purification connected with fire in the book. When Genya lights these candles, they glow on the Sabbath bread59: “The flame …glowed on each knot of the crisp golden braid of the bread on the napkin” (71). Additionally, once the “sinful” chametz has been burnt, it becomes pure. As such, it is equated with the matzohs, the unleavened bread a Jew is allowed to eat during Passover without committing a sin. When the Hungarian Janitor sees David with the chametz he mistakes it for the matzohs: Matziss, huh?”, “Dun boin frun’ dis house” (242). Leo, David’s gentile friend, connects the matzohs with matches: “watchu call ‘em, matziz-matches –” (320). Since matzohs signify that which is pure, i.e purified/burnt chametz, the wordplay “matziz-matches” is indicative of the connection between Jewish food and the purifying fire.

Chametz and matzohs are tied with non-kosher and kosher food respectively. Signifying what one must not eat, chametz is also called non-kosher food. Matzos, by contrast, are considered kosher. David describes non-kosher food as “chickens without feathers” (226). The difference between non-kosher and kosher food is that the former is sinful while the latter is pure. This allows us to deduce that, by negation, if non-kosher food is like chickens without feathers, then kosher food is like chickens with feathers.

When David burns the chametz (non-kosher food), kosher food (feathers) resurface. While preparing the chametz for burning, David’s father sweeps up the unleavened bread with “a feather” (242). Later on, the Hungarian janitor’s eyes “lighted on the spoon and feathers in David’s hand” (242). While burning the chametz, David “crouched down beside the fire and watched the first tiny beads of flame run up the raveled threads of rag that bound feather and spoon together” (246).

The appearance of kosher food is emphasized by the word “cucka.” David recalls the kosher chicken market to which he went with his mother, “where all the chickens ran around

59 The Sabbath bread is eaten on Sabbath and holidays (apart from Passover).
– cuckacucka – when did I say? Cucka” (226). During his reverie on the river bank, the memory of the kosher food resurfaces: “Sin melted into light...Uh chug chug, ug chug! – Cucka cucka... Is a chicken...” (248). However, the “chickens” (“cucka”) also stand for “sinful” food. When recalling how he went with his mother to kosher chicken market, David also remembers how his mother, against God’s instructions, “mixed up the meat-knives with the milk-knives. It’s a sin...” (226). It is exactly when David purifies his Jewish languages that both kosher food and non-kosher food reemerge.

In describing non-kosher food, David depicts the “big brown bags hang down from the hooks. Ham” (227). The Hebrew translation of the word “ham” is “hot.” Since fire is hot, this points even more sharply to the link between fire (the Hebrew “hot”) and food (the English “ham”). Additionally, David reflects on the notion of non-kosher food (ham) while reading Hebrew transcriptions. In fact, transcribed Hebrew words are intertwined with his thoughts on the particular food: “Peeuh! Goyim eat everything...Veeshma es kol adonoi es mi eschlach” (226). The Hebrew verse means “and I listen to God’s voice.” In the novel, Hebrew is depicted as “God’s tongue.” On his first day in cheder David listens intently to the sound of Hebrew: “God’s tongue, the rabbi had said. If you knew it, then you could talk to God” (213). This means that God speaks in Hebrew. Language and food are related because people use their mouths to speak as well as to eat. When Roth entwines “God’s voice” with “Goyim eat everything” (ham), this establishes a further link between food, fire and David’s Jewish languages.

**Deconstructing the Symbol**

That the symbol of the purification of Isaiah’s lips stands for David’s wish to “purify” his impure languages and assimilate is clear enough. However, does the purification succeed? Does *Call It Sleep* tell only one story of assimilation which results in the clear loss of David’s Jewish languages and his acquisition of English? In order to answer these questions, we first need to examine David’s act of burning very carefully.

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60 Roth built up free association very carefully. For example, in his manuscript he wrote “Possibility of linking pincers (or tongs) with sugar cubes and eternity. (unnumbered pink booklet, item 45) and “get colloquial thought in during David’s interlude on David’s part instead of translated speech”. All references to Roth’s manuscript are from the Berg Rare Book Collection at the New York Public Library. In addition, Eda Lou Walton, Roth’s university teacher, mentor and lover, writes about this method of free associations in *The City Day*, 27.

61 In Hebrew: לוח
Icy Lips, Frozen Fingers and Wet Toes: David’s Act of Burning?

In contrast to the notion of burnt lips, David’s lips appear to be wet and cool. The novel opens with David’s repeated request for a glass of cool water. Standing before the kitchen sink, David tells his mother: “Mama, I want a drink” (17). Eager to drink the water and thus wet his lips, David reiterates his demand: “‘I want a drink, mama,’” he repeated” (18). Genya realizes David’s wish to cool his lips (rather than burn them). She waits “for the water to cool” and reminds David that his lips “must always be cool as the water that wet them” (18).

When David cools his lips, he does not burn/purify them. Since water puts out fire, by wetting his lips David symbolically puts out the purifying fire. This is emphasized by the following link between the act of drinking and the act of speaking. After David drinks the glass of water, he asks his mother: “Why can’t I talk with my mouth in the water?” (18). David’s wish to talk while having his lips in the water symbolizes his will not to burn his lips and not to purify his Jewish languages. This reading is enhanced by the description of the water David drinks. When Genya turned the tap on, “the water spouted noisily down” (18). Here, “noise” refers to an unwanted or unpleasant sound. In this manner, the “noisy” water points to America’s perception of David’s Jewish pronunciation as an unwanted “phonetic decay.”

In response, Genya explains to David that if he talked with his mouth in the water, “no one would hear you” (18). This clarification can be interpreted in two ways. The first interpretation is with reference to the unintelligible or “mutilated” English David will speak if he does not purify his Jewish languages. If he speaks in “impure” English, no one will be able to hear or understand him. The second interpretation points to the low status of the non-assimilated immigrant. If David does not purify his Jewish languages, he will remain part of an ethnic minority. As such, his voice/language will not be heard, i.e. it will be ignored by American hegemony.

David’s wish to wet his lips also criticizes America’s act of purification. Standing before the kitchen sink, yet unable to reach the faucets due to his height, “David again became aware that this world had been created without a thought of him” (17). Incapable of cooling his lips, yet willing to, David disapproves of the act of assimilation that “has been created
without a thought of him.” Being only a child in a world in which America purifies his impure Jewish languages without considering his will, David is unable to resist the purification, just as he is unable to reach the faucets. However, he is able to express his desire to do so.

The intensity of David’s desire to resist or stop his assimilation is signified by his frozen lips. After David drinks the cool water, his mother asks him “whom will you refresh with the icy lips the water lent you?” (18, my emphasis). The water does not only wet David’s lips; it also freezes them. In response to Genya’s question, David promises his mother that he will keep his lips icy, assuring her that “sometimes I am going to eat some ice” (18). Depicted as wet, cool and icy, David’s lips appear to be anything but burning. Since David’s acquisition of English is gradual, his desire to wet his lips is not surprising, as it is depicted at the beginning of the novel. It is in his final transformation that we will expect David's “icy lips” to be burnt and “cleansed.” However, this is not the case.

As the object leading to the symbolic burning of David’s lips/electrocution, the dipper parallels the angel’s coal. Since the coal is burning, it seems obvious that David’s fingers holding the dipper should be characterized by motifs of fire as well. Yet David’s fingers are described as “clammy” and “frozen.” When David wishes to thrust the dipper’s scoop, we are told that his “clammy fingers traced the sharp edge of the dippers’ scoop” (411). As David touches the dipper, his damp fingers freeze: “He stood as still and rigid as if frozen to the wall, frozen fingers/clutching the dipper” (412).

The contrast between David’s icy fingers and the burning coal foreshadows the failure of the act of purification. We shall see that, touched by David, the burning coal does not burn at all. While unconscious, David observes an ember: “One ember fanned…dulling…uncertain” (424, my emphasis). An “ember” is a piece of coal which continues to burn even after there are no flames. An accurate translation of the Hebrew verses from Isaiah would be that the angel held an ember, rather than a coal. Here, the verb “to fan” means to blow air at a fire to make it burn more strongly. Given the intensity of the fire (“fanned”), it might seem as though the ember David sees during his transformation stands for the angel’s coal and burns his Jewish languages. However, is it certain that David undergoes a linguistic change, or is it, as is implied, “uncertain?” Which uncertainty is hinted at here?

62 In Hebrew: רצפתם
In order to answer these questions, we first have to understand the image of the ember. The ember David sees is also portrayed as being “like the red pupil of the eye of darkness” (424). When compared to an eye, the ember is connected with sight and perception. “To perceive” can also mean to have a certain perspective on something, a point of view or opinion. In his study on assimilation, Ronald Taft makes the distinction between two main categories of perception: the internal and the external. The internal perception refers to the way the immigrant perceives his assimilation. The external one, on the other hand, indicates the way people view the assimilated immigrant. Taft compares the migrant’s internal, often imagined, complex of knowledge, attitudes, identity, etc., with the external reality and explains that assimilation necessitates a correspondence between inner and external views. In other words, “[a] person is marginal if self-identity is not confirmed by the external group.”

If we apply this to the discussion of David’s linguistic purification, the external perception would be the way other people perceive David’s assimilation. The internal one would refer to the way in which David himself perceives it. According to this reasoning, David would only be considered as an American when the external group perceives him that way and when he perceives himself that way. This duality of perceptions is also evident in the depiction of the ember as an “eye.” This word refers to the bodily organ through which one sees other people/objects. However, when it is pronounced, it is also equivalent to the vocalization of the pronoun “I,” which refers to the self. We will see that there is a discrepancy between David’s self-perception regarding the act of purification and the external confirmation of this act.

The previous portrayal of the ember as “uncertain” is followed by the following description: “One ember/flowered, one ember in a mirr/or” (430). Positioned in a mirror, the ember is again linked to the two perceptions discussed earlier. A mirror reflects one’s external and visual image. Yet it is also traditionally believed to reflect parts of the soul. The word “mirror” is written as “mirr/or,” which signifies the clash between the two perceptions. By splitting this word in two, Roth anticipates the lack of correspondence

63 Rudmin, F. W., <http://orpc.iaccp.org>. Taft proposes a comprehensive model of seven stages of social assimilation, from stage one “cultural learning” to stage seven “congruence.” Stage five and six refer to the internal and external perception (141-156).
64 See Richard Webster 169.
65 Roth was very much aware of his method of word cutting. According to his manuscript, Roth wrote sequential prose sections which he cut up and inserted into each other. (booklet 59).
between the inner process David might perceive himself to have undergone and the (in)visibility of that process to the outside world.

When David finally touches the coal, it neither scorches David nor leaves any visual mark: "Nothingness beatified reached out his hands. Not cold/the ember was. Not scorching (430). This indicates that the burning of David’s lips cannot be shown to the outside. As far as the external group is concerned, David has not been assimilated. The answer to the questions of uncertainty now becomes clear: David’s linguistic change is uncertain because David is still considered to be marginal by others.

This is emphasised by the fact that the process visible to the outside is one of dirtying, rather than burning. Before David touches the ember, he puts his hand on his lips: “David touched his lips. The soot/ came off his hand. Unclean” (426). Soot is the black powder produced when substances such as coal are burnt. In the passage above, the soot is seen on David’s hands. In this manner, the soot (angel’s coal) may be taken as a signifier of the visibility of David’s purification. Yet the soot/purification is depicted as unclean rather than clean, which implies that what is visible is the failure of David’s purification and not its success.

That David has not been assimilated is also evident in the image of the “brand on water.” David’s electrocution is depicted as a “thin scream” that “fell like/a brand on water, his-s-s-s-s-ed” (419). A “brand” is also a piece of burning wood used to give light. Just like the ember, the brand glows. When water touches the brand, it puts it out. This image is connected with David’s change of pronunciation. First, it refers to sound (“thin scream”). Secondly, this image is vocalized by the word “his-s-s-s-s-ed”. The word “his-s-s-s-s-ed” depicts the sound produced when a brand is put on water. By making the sound into a graphic image, Roth calls attention to the onomatopoeia for artistic effect. However, there is more to it. The word “his-s-s-s-s-ed” can be read as “hi-sed”, i.e., the words “he said”. This strengthens the linguistic aspect connected with the image of the brand, since it is not just any sound that is hinted at here, but one of an articulated language (“he said”). By tying in David’s transformation with a brand that is put out by water and thus no longer burns, Roth points to the unproductiveness of his protagonist’s transformation.
This is already apparent in David’s daydream on the river bank. As illustrated, this scene symbolises David’s assimilation. Thus, it is not surprising that David’s electrocution is set on the river bank: “The river wind blew straight and salt between a flume of houses. He swung sharply into it, entered the river block, dimlit, vacant” (408). However, before David imagines “God’s light,” he gazes at the river: “A plain, flawless, sheer as foil to the serried margins. His eyes dazzled. Fire on the water. White. His lids grew heavy. In the water she said. White. Brighter than Day. Brighter” (246). The fire, about which David daydreams, is on water. This implies that the fire will not last long and will eventually be put out by the water. The words “eyes” and “lids” are connected with sight and as such, linked to the two perceptions central to David’s assimilation discussed earlier: the external and the internal. When depicted in the river bank scene, these words refer to the inability to see things: the eyes are “dazzling” and the lids “grow heavy”. In other words, there is a lack of perception which is related to David’s Americanization. This is emphasized by the “serried margins”. The word “margin” refers to an outer part. “Marginal” can also describe someone who has not been assimilated. Therefore, we can draw the following conclusion: David’s reverie on the river bank is indicative of his marginality.

The unsuccessfulness of David’s assimilation is also marked by his repeated attempt at inserting the dipper into the rails. Before David manages to put the scoop into the cracks, he tries two times. The first time the scoop does not reach the slots: “The dull gleaming dipper’s/ scoop stuck out from between the rails/ leaning sideways” (414). David succeeds the second time: “Power!/ Power like a paw, titanic power/ ripped through the earth and slammed/against his body and shackled him/ where he stood” (419). Although David’s second attempt does not fail, I will show that, paradoxically, Roth nonetheless hints at its failure. In what follows, I would like to take a closer look at both David’s attempts.

David’s second attempt does not happen as quickly and easily as it might seem. When David is about to insert the scoop, he is interrupted by a sound coming from the river: “He drew/ back, straightened. Carefully bal-/anced on his left, advance-/ed his right foot-Crritlkt! /-What? He stared at the river, sprang away/from the rail and dove into the sha-/dows/ The river? That sound! That sound/ had come from there” (417). In other words, a “sound” (which, at this stage, may be read with reference to David’s Jewish pronunciation/sound) coming from the river (the symbol of David’s unsuccessful transformation) serves as an obstacle to David’s second attempt. Additionally, having inserted the scoop for the first time,
David runs. Yet “no light overtook him, /no blaze of intolerable flame. Only/ in his ears, the hollow click of iron lingered. Hollow, vain” (414). The failure is described here in terms of “hollowness,” “vainness” and “emptiness.” These terms are repeated in the second attempt. From the moment David hears a sound coming from the river until the moment when he finally inserts the scoop, words such as “nothing” and “empty” pervade his attempt. Not surprisingly, these words are intertwined with a detailed description of the river:

“All his senses/ stretched toward the dock, grappled with/ the hush and the shadow. Empty...?...Yes...empty. Only his hollow nos/- trills sifted out the stir in the/ quiet; The wandering river-wind seamed/ with thin scent of salt...decay, flecked with clinging coal-tar-/ Crrrilkt!... Nothing... A barge on a slack hawser or/ a gunwale against the dock chirping/ because a/...boat was passing.../Or a door tittering to and fro in the wind./...Nothing. He crept back. (417-418, my emphasis)"

One could argue that the “emptiness” depicted here refers to the fact that no one is passing and that David, who draws back to the shadows because he hears a sound coming from the river, can now go back safely to the rails. However, these words characterize David’s (failed) first attempt. These terms are also connected with the descriptions of the river (wind, boat), which is a symbol of David’s failed transformation. Therefore, it is clear that the words “empty”, “hollow” and “nothing” in fact refer to David’s ineffective assimilation.

This is stressed by the connection between the word “nothing” and David’s Jewish languages. When David daydreams on the river bank he sees “sparse teeth that gnawed upon a lip” (246). The words “teeth” and “lip” are part of the mouth, the organ used in order to articulate sound and in particular, language. Since David’s reverie signifies the failure of his transformation, the teeth and lips he sees can be read as indicative of his non-purified Jewish languages. Significantly, it is the sound of these “teeth”/ impure languages that David hears just before he inserts the scoop for the second time. Hiding in the shadows, David hears: “Crrrilkt! / - It’s- Oh- It’s – It’s! Papa. Nearly/ like. It’s- nearly like his teeth. Nothing...A barge on a slack hawser or/ a gunwale against the dock chirping” (418). Here, the word “teeth” precedes the word “nothing.” This ties the two words together and implies that, as far as David’s purification is concerned, nothing has happened: his Jewish languages (teeth) have not been purified.

The word “nothing” appears during David’s climactic transformation. Shortly before David regains consciousness, we are told: “(...And now the seed/ of nothing, and nebulous nothing, and / nothing. And he was not...the voice still lashed the nothingness/ that was,
denying its oblivion...And nothingness/ whimpered being dislodged from night,/ and would have hidden again...” (429-430, my emphasis). In other words, it is towards the end of his conversion that the same “nothingness” dominating David’s first and second (failed) attempts reappears.

It could be claimed that the “nothingness” depicted during David’s transformation indicates his symbolic Jewish death (“And he was not”). The description of David changing form preceding the portrayal of the “nothingness” emphasizes this notion: “Each step he took, he shrank, grew smaller/ with the unseen panels, the graduate / vise descending, passed from stage/ to dwindling stage, dwindling. At each step shed the husks of being,/ and himself tapering always downward/ in the funnel of the light” (429). A simultaneous reference to David’s physical death underlines this reading. While David changes form, someone in the crowd asks: “Zee dead?” (429).

However, before it is implied that David might be dead, someone in the crowd exclaims: “Knocked him cold!” (429). The notion of cold is linked to death: when someone dies his body turns cold. Yet in accordance with Isaiah’s purifying coal, David’s Jewish death should be marked by burning, rather than coldness. In other words, Roth employs the symbol of David’s physical death (cold) to subvert the notion of David’s symbolic Jewish death (hot). In this way, the “nothingness” connected with David’s moments of rebirth points to the fact that nothing has happened, i.e. no assimilation has taken place.

Since the act of thrusting the scoop is an act of burning and not an act of wetting or freezing, it is no wonder that the first try fails. Yet we shall see that although in the second attempt the dipper is not held by wet fingers, it is held by wet toes. While sitting at the end of the dock and gazing at the “fire on the water” in the river scene, David is unaware that his feet have been covered by water: “A tremor shook him from head to foot so violently that his ears whirred and rang. His eyes bulged, staring. What? Water! Down below! He flung himself back against the mooring post” (248). I would like to examine the role of David’s feet in his second attempt in order to show its connection to David’s wet feet portrayed above.

After his first failure, David tries to touch the dipper with his fingers. However, due to the “gap between his finger and the scoop” (417), he uses his toe: “And his toe crooked into/the dipper as into a stirrup. It / grated, stirred, slid, and-“(418). Since the toe is a part of
the foot, the connection between David’s toe and his foot is clear. However, it is the link between David’s wet feet depicted in the river bank scene and the toe in the second attempt that is in need of clarification. When David is about to hold the dipper with his toe, we are given a detailed account of his actions: “He stole up to the dipper warily, on tip-toe, warily, glancing over his shoulders, on tip-toe, over serried cobbles, cautious as though his own tread might shake the slanting handle loose from its perch beneath the ground.” (416). The word “tiptoe” is written as “tip-toe” and is repeated. This calls our attention to the particular body part described. “To tread” can also mean to put your foot on something or to press something down with your foot. Additionally, the verb is connected to water in the sense of “treading water,” meaning to keep afloat in water. In this way, David’s “tread” links his feet to water. The word “serried” ties in David’s (wet) feet with the feet that got wet from the river. As we saw, while sitting on the bank David daydreams about “a plain, flawless, sheer as foil to the serried margins” (234, my emphasis). As we already know, in the river scene the word “margins” refers to David’s marginality in America. Thus, the link between David’s (wet) feet depicted in David’s second attempt and the word “serried” (margins) may be seen as also pointing to the unsuccessfulness of this attempt. David’s wet toes hint at the failure of the second attempt, just as his clammy fingers foreshadow the unsuccessfulness of his first attempt.

The Non-Burning Fire

David’s futile purification is also indicated in the image of the fire that does not burn. Reflecting on the process of fire, David wonders “what makes it burns?” (119). Genya answers that “one lights it-with a match” (119). Challenging her explanation, David remarks that “Water doesn’t burn when you throw a match in a puddle” (120). The “match in a puddle” refers to a fire that is put out by water. As such, it echoes the notion of the “brand/fire on water” invalidating David’s Americanization discussed earlier.

After his comment on the “match in a puddle,” David asks his mother whether there is “always-something burning-when it’s light-like that!” (120). Genya explains that when she was a girl, “the goyim built an ‘altar’” (120), because “two peasants saw a light among the trees-yet nothing burning” (120). David asks his mother if holy means “a light and nothing burned” (120) and Genya explains the reason why the goyim connect fire that does
not burn with holiness, namely “because Moses too saw a tree on fire that didn’t burn. And there the ground was also holy” (120).66

The image of the fire that does not burn is connected with the symbolic figure of Isaiah. The words “light,” “holy” and “altar” used to construct the image appear in Reb Yiddel’s translation of the narrative of Isaiah. Once Isaiah sees “the Almighty in His majesty and His terrible light,” the angels cry “Kadosh! Kadosh! Kadosh!,” which means “Holy! Holy! Holy!” As Isaiah cries “I am unclean,” “one of the angels” flies to the “altar” in order to take the coal (226). By linking the figure of Isaiah to an image of a fire that does not burn, Roth continues to mark David’s purification as futile.

This is underlined by the link between the symbol and the Hebrew word for “ember.” After the goyim approached the woods looking for the candle light, “they found nothing, heard nothing, only the sound of the woods” (121). The word “woods” contains the word “ood” (ʊd), which is the Hebrew word for “ember/coal.”67 This word reappears in David’s final transformation: “G-by-e. Mis-s-s-s-le. M-s-ter. Hi-i-i-i. Wo-o-o-d” (425). The word “wood” is divided into syllables: “wo-o-o-d,” which draws attention to the Hebrew “ood.” This passage is similar to the passage with the long drawn “Hi-i-i-i” discussed earlier. In both passages letters are drawn out. Both passages emphasize the vowel “i” and the consonant “s”. When one reads the words “Missle” and “Misster,” one has to make a hissing sound (“isss”). This allows us to draw the following conclusion: “Mis-s-s-s-le. M-s-ter. Hi-i-i-i” onomatopoeically inscribes the sound of the ember being put out (“hissed”).68 If we follow this reasoning, the “sound of the woods” refers to the sound of David’s Jewish languages (the Hebrew ood/ember) once they have been symbolically put on water, that is, once they have been put out by water.

66 According to Exodus 3:1-21, God appears in a bush that is on fire but not consumed by the flames, and calls Moses to take the Israelites out of Egypt.
67 In Hebrew: תר
68 Walter Benjamin claimed that in order to reveal the story of the defeated (minority) rather than the winners (majority), history should be symbolically read backwards, as if brushing “against the grain” (259). If we apply Benjamin’s argument to the sentence above and read the words “Mis-s-s-s-le. M-s-ter. Hi-i-i-i” backwards, i.e. change the order of the words so that the last word would be the first (Hi-i-i-i’, M-s-ter’), “Mis-s-s-s-le”) we will arrive at a conclusion similar to the one drawn above. When the pronunciation of the word “Hi-i-i-i” is followed by the sound of the letter “s” repeated in the words “M-s-ter,” and “Mis-s-s-s-le” the result is the word “Hi-i-i-s-s-s-s-s.” This word echoes the pronunciation of the word signifying the sound of the brand on water: “his-s-s-s.” For a further discussion on Benjamin’s famous metaphor, see Moses Stephane 5-17.
The S-word and the Tong(ue)s: the Angel’s Coal

After his reverie on the river bank, David faces a group of gentile kids who threaten to hurt him unless he throws the zinc sword into the rails. Frightened and helpless, David does as he is told: “He stepped back. From open fingers, the blade plunged into darkness…The street quaked and roared, and like a tortured thing, the sheet zinc sword, leapt, writhing, fell back, consumed with radiance” (253). As illustrated, David connects the electric power produced by the sword with Isaiah’s coal. This parallel leads to the reading of the kids’ promise to David that “Id ain’ gonna hoitcha. Ye’ll see all de movies in de woil!” and “all de angels” (252) with reference to the biblical angel.

Further evidence support this reading. When David is about to throw the sword into the rails, we are given a detailed depiction of the sword: “The point of the sheet-zinc sword wavered before him, clicked on the stone as he fumbled, then finding the slot at last, rasped part way down the wide grinning lips like a tongue in an iron mouth” (253). By depicting the sword waverin’g down “the wide grinning lips,” Roth echoes the purifying coal of the angel that was put on Isaiah’s lips. The description of the sword “like a tongue” continues to establish this interpretation. According to the biblical narrative, the angel uses tongs in order to hold the burning coal. Reb Yiddel translates: “One of the angels flew to the altar and with tongs drew out a fiery coal. Understand? With tongs” (227). The word “tongue” is similar in sound as well as in writing to the word “tongs.” Given this resemblance and considering that the sword stands for the angel’s coal, a link between the tongs that hold God’s coal and the sword (God’s tongue) is permissible.

However, Roth simultaneously uses the symbol of the tongs to subvert David’s assimilation. The tongs first appear during a conversation between David and Genya about death. “What do they [people] do when they die?” (68), David asks his mother. Genya answers: “They are cold; they are still. They shut their eyes in sleep eternal years” (69). When David proceeds to ask “what are eternal years?” (69), Genya, who is unable to the answer, “lifted out the tongs, carefully pinched a cube of sugar, and held it up before his eyes. This is how wide my brain can stret/…tween the softly glowing tongs. “So/ wide we stretch no further-“ (428).
After Genya demonstrates her inability to grasp the notion of “eternal years” via the image of the tongs, she tells David: “Would you ask me to pick up a frozen sea with these narrow things? Not even the ice man could do it” (69). The words “ice” and “frozen” refer back to David’s frozen/icy lips, as previously discussed. In having Genya say these words, Roth links the tongs to the act of freezing, rather than burning. This is also evident in David’s final transformation. While David is about to insert the dipper, a voice in the crowd refers to a fire followed by “ice-tongs”: “I went to bed a’ suckin’ of it. By Gawed it hed no call t’ be burnin’…Wuz to be-Meerschaum, genuwine. Thankee I said. Thankee Miz Taylor. And I stood on the Back-stairs with the ice-tongs” (416, my emphasis). The words “burnin’” and “tongs” locate the given sentences in the discourse of purification. “Meerschaum” is the soft white mineral suggestive of sea-foam. This refers back to the notion of “frozen sea” Genya mentions and leads to the reading of the “ice-tongs” as connected with the motif of ice/freezing.

Likewise the tongs, the sword too confirms yet at the same time subverts David’s Americanization. The “sword” contains the word “word.” In this light, the word “s-word” signifies its function: it purifies David’s words. This is emphasized by the Hebrew word for “sword,” which is “ḥerev,” constituted of the verb ḥ.r.v, which means to demolish. According to this reasoning, the function of the sword as used in Call It Sleep signifies its meaning: it “kills” David’s Jewish languages. However, we shall see that the sword is anything but destructive.

The Statue of Liberty and the Broken S-word

The sword is first depicted as part of the Statue of Liberty in the prologue, where references to the symbol of Isaiah are already given. After Albert rebukes Genya for forgetting David’s birth certificate in Galicia, he comments: “A fine taste of what lies before me!” He turned his back on her and leaned morosely against the rail. ‘A fine taste!’ They were silent. On the dock below, the brown hawsers had been slipped over the mooring posts” (14). Here, “taste” refers to a short experience. However, “taste” also means flavour and as such, is connected with the mouth. Similarly, the word “slipped” contains the word “lip.” Although the word “rail” here means a horizontal bar, it can also refer to the metal bar fixed to the ground on which trains travel. The notion of metal is emphasised by the word “hawsers.” The colour “brown” means in Hebrew “ḥum.” When written, “ḥum” is identical to the word

69 In Hebrew: ה.ר.ו.
“ḥom,” which means “heat.” If we follow this reading, we will see that the description given above anticipates David’s purification, in which he burns (brown/ḥum/hom) his lips (taste, slipped) by throwing a metal (the milk scoop) into the rails (rail, hawsers).

The statue is located on Ellis Island and welcomes the immigrants upon arrival in America. The sonnet “The New Colossus,” by Emma Lazarus, is inscribed on its pedestal:

With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Gloows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

The motives of fire (flame, torch, lighting) correspond with the narrative of Isaiah. Additionally, the torch of “the mother of exiles” is described as a “beacon-hand.” The word “beacon” is similar in pronunciation and writing to the word “bacon,” which, in turn, refers to non-kosher food. This calls to mind Roth’s word play of “ham” demonstrated earlier. The allusion to Lazarus’s “beacon” is also pointed to by the title of Roth’s work following Call It Sleep: “If We Had Bacon.” By writing “ham/hot,” Roth may have played on Lazarus’s “beacon/bacon-hand,” thus connecting the sonnet with David’s assimilation all the more. Thus, it is no wonder that the statue resurfaces during David’s electrocution. Just before

70Roth added the prologue only after finishing the novel, since he felt “the need to introduce it, to put it into historical context, and in a formal sense to prepare for the ending…in its externalized treatment, the prologue prepares for the externalization of the climax” (Freedman, “Conversation,” 156).

71Lazarus’ sonnet has had a great impact on the reception of the statue as welcoming the immigrants. The Author John T. Cunningham noted that the “Statue of Liberty was not conceived and sculpted as a symbol of immigration, but it quickly became so as immigrant ships passed under the statue. However, it was Lazarus’s poem that permanently stamped on Miss Liberty the role of unofficial greeter of incoming immigrants” (47). Similarly, Paul Auster claimed that “Bartholdi’s gigantic effigy was originally intended as a monument to the principles of international republicanism, “The New Colossus’ reinvented the statue’s purpose, turning Liberty into a welcoming mother, a symbol of hope to the outcasts and downtrodden of the world” (508).

72 Consisting of three short chapters, “If We Had Bacon” centers on Walter Loem, who steals what seems a slab of bacon but turns out to be a white pine board. Unfortunately, Roth never completed the work. See Bonnie Lyons, “After” 610-612.

73 Shira Wollosky reads Lazarus’s “Mighty woman with a torch” with reference to the biblical narrative of Deborah the Prophetess, named “eshet lapidot,” the wife of Lapidoth, which also translates as “woman of the torch” (114). It is my contention that this reading is also evident in the very word “’eshet” (the wife of), which, in turn, contains the word “esh,” which means fire. The Hebrew root of the proper name “Deborah” is d.b.r, which, in turn, is also the root of the verb “to talk” (“ledaber”). In the sonnet, the “mother of exiles” (Deborah) “cries with silent lips.” This notion of talking (“cries”) involved with non-talking (“silent lips”) signifies David’s transformation, in which he leaves his Jewish languages behind, i.e. stops talking in them and acquires English. In Hebrew: כל臾Ordinal.
David inserts the dipper into the rails, a reference to the statue is made by someone in the crowd: “Over a statue of. A jerkin’. Cod. Clang! Clang! Oy! Machine! Liberty! Revold! Redeem!” (419). When connected, the words “statue of” and “Liberty” are clearly indicative of the “Statue of Liberty.”

The depiction of the statue in the prologue echoes the one of the sword: “And before them, rising on her high pedestal from the scaling swarmy brilliance of sunlit water to the west, Liberty…her masses ironed to one single plane” (14). The verb “ironed” here means flattened. “Iron” also refers to the silver-colored metal. This allows for a connection between the “ironed masses” of the statue and the depiction of the rails as an “iron mouth” (253) into which the sword is later thrust. While David is unconscious, the crowd around him suggests that the cause for his electrocution was his stumbling on the iron:

‘Hey, Meester, maybe he fell on id-
- De iron-’
‘Sure, dot’s righd!’ (424)

The word “iron” is written in a separated sentence and thereby calls attention to itself. As the reader knows, David’s electrocution is caused by the thrusting of the dipper into the rails. Thus, the suggestion that David fell on to the iron is false. This is emphasized by the comment “sure, dot’s righd!” which must be read ironically. The reader knows that the suggested explanation is not right. Just as it is not true that David has been assimilated, it is not true that he fell on “De iron.”

That the word “iron” indicates that David’s assimilation has been in vain is also evident in the image of the statue as hollow. During the electrocution, two women in the crowd discuss the statue: “And do you know, you 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. The Statue of Liberty is- ”(415). Additionally, at the beginning of their conversation, one of the women tells her friend about her abortion: “I borreed it- it wuzn’t much. She called herself a mid-wife. I went by m-meself” (415). By ending her pregnancy, the woman has “emptied” her womb, which is now “hollow” just like the statue. This notion of emptiness refers back to the “nothingness” in connection with David’s attempts at assimilation demonstrated previously: “In his ears, the hollow click of iron/lingered. Hollow, vain.” (414).
Finally, the torch of the statue is portrayed as a sword, yet a broken one: “Shadow flattened the torch she bore to a black cross against flawless light- the blackened hilt of a broken sword” (14). The demolishing sword that “breaks” David’s Jewish languages, itself, is broken. The insertion of the dipper into the rails is described in a similar fashion: “And now the wavering point/of the dippers handle found the long,/ dark, grinning lips, scraped, and/ like a sword in a scabbard- ” (413). Inside a scabbard, a sword is not dangerous; it is harmless. By figuratively describing David’s electrocution by means of a sword that cannot damage rather than by a dangerous one, Roth reveals David’s purification as ineffective.

**Eating (Kosher food), not Eating (non-kosher food); speaking (Hebrew), not-speaking (English): Junction**

If we examine the notions of kosher and non-kosher food, leavened and unleavened bread discussed previously, we will see that they also question the success of David’s assimilation. In their examination into the exact nature of the connection between speaking and eating, language and food, Delueze and Guatari note that “rich or poor, each language always implies a deterritorialization of the mouth, the tongue, and the teeth.” They go on to explain that “the mouth, tongue, and teeth find their primitive territoriality in food. In giving themselves over to articulation of sounds, the mouth, tongue and teeth deterritorialized” (19). Thus, “there is a certain disjunction between eating and speaking” (19-20). In other words, our mouths were first for eating and later for speaking. Therefore, every time the mouth opens itself up to language, a processs of deterritorialisation takes place, because speaking “occupied” the same territory as eating. Since to speak “is to fast” (20), the connection between food and language is one of inversion. Any act of speaking points to the incapability of eating (the non-eating) just as any depiction of food and eating is in fact indicative of the inability to speak (the non-speaking).

74 Many critics have noted the unusual tarnish description of Lady Liberty. Interestingly, Franz Kafka deforms the Statue in a similar way (Sollors 140). For references to Kafka see Hamilton Holt xx-xxi.
75 The sexual connotations of this sin are reinforced by the Latin for “scabbard”: “vagina.” See Altenbernd, 681.
76 By “language,” Delueze and Guatari are referring both to a written and a spoken language, since “writing goes further in transforming words into things capable of competing with food.” (20).
77 It is important to note that this deterritorialisation is not only historical, i.e. it did not only happen in moments in history when human beings acquired spoken language, but rather is something that occurs every single time when one speaks or eats.
This disjunction is apparent more than once in Call It Sleep. For example, it is apparent when David reflects on the purpose of the reading in the chumash: “Why do you have to read chumish? No fun…First you read Adonoi elahenoo abababa, and then you say, And Moses said you mustn’t, and then you read some more abababa and then you say, mustn’t eat in the traife [non-kosher] butcher shop” (226). By having David link the reading in the chumash, which is an act of speaking (“and then you say”), to the non-eating of the non-kosher food (“mustn’t eat traife”), Roth expresses the disjunction between language (reading and speaking) and food.

This disjunction is not only evident in the inversed connection between speaking and non-eating but also in the reversed link between eating, or kosher food, and non-speaking. While burning the “feathers” (kosher food, purified chametz), David uses blasphemous language: “Gee, how feathers stink! No, they don’t! It’s holy and he’s looking. Feathers don’t stink! No!” (246). Since kosher food signifies what one must eat, it stands for eating. David’s transgressive words symbolize the unspeakable and the non-spoken, in the sense that blasphemy must never be pronounced. In accordance with this reasoning, when David interprets his “impure” language (“stink”) as transgression, this is indicative of the reversed relation between eating and non-speaking.

This relation is emphasized by David’s previous linguistic transgression (“shit”). As I have already demonstrated, David commits a sin by using the blasphemous word “shit” when thinking of the holy Isaiah. It is important to note that this occurs while reading the Four Questions of Passover. These questions are designed to explain the uniqueness of the holiday, which is, according to the answer given by the Hebrew verses in the book, its special food, the matzohs. In other words, David transgresses in a scene in which notion of kosher food is pervasive. After he makes his mouth “dirty” by associating “sit” with “shit,” David wonders what did Isaiah say that “made his mouth dirty” (231, my emphasis). That is, David asks what lead to the notion of Isaiah’s non-speaking (the not-to-be pronounced blasphemous words). David’s explanation is interrupted by the Hebrew verses elaborating on the kosher food of Passover: “Real dirty, so he’d know it was? Maybe –‘Shebechol haleylos

78 Chumash is the Five Books of Moses, also known as the Pentateuch or Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.
79 The four Questions are in fact a repetition of one question: “What has changed this night [Passover evening] from all other nights?.”
80 This is the first of the four answers explaining the exclusivity of Passover: the different food, the bitter herb that is customary eaten (maror), the special way in which the vegetables are eaten (dipped) and finally, the fact that on Passover Eve all people in the room dine reclining.
onu ochlim’ – ”(231). The intertwining of this verse with David’s question leads to a reading whereby the Hebrew words provide the answer to the question: the reason for Isaiah’s transgression (the non-spoken) is kosher food.

In order to apply these disjunctions to the symbol of David’s purification, it is first necessary to define the terms speaking (chumash), non-speaking (blasphemous words) and both kosher and non-kosher food as are presented in the book. Speaking indicates David’s Jewish languages, since the chumash (which signifies David’s speaking) is written and read in Hebrew and translated in cheder into Yiddish. In contrast, David’s blasphemous words signify the language an observant Jew must never pronounce i.e. the language of the non-Jew, the non-Jewish language, and as such, English. Symbolising the food of the Other, of the non-(observant) Jew, non-kosher food also represents the language of the Other, that is, English. Conversely, kosher food signifies Jewish food and the Jewish languages.

David’s assimilation consists of the disjunctions discussed above. The acquisition of English (non-kosher food, blasphemous words/non-eating, non-speaking) seems to be bound up with the loss of his Jewish languages (chumash, kosher food/ speaking, eating). However, it is exactly this notion of the “either Jewish languages or English” that Roth subverts. Since the disjunction between English and David’s Jewish languages signifies David’s purification, it is the junction between the two that would signify the non-purification. Kosher food is constantly paired with non-kosher food in the novel. The Sabbath bread signifies what is pure and kosher (Sabbath), but when eaten during Passover, it also stands for the non-kosher, i.e. chameitz. Similarly, the chameitz is mistaken for matzoh and the kosher chickens (“cucka”) are coupled with a “non-kosher” sin.

This is also evident in Reb Yiddel’s thoughts on food and language. For instance, the rabbi reflects on his daughter’s double notion of “traife.” Although she said “it’s kosher” (375), the meat at stake was, in fact, non-kosher. Just as kosher food turns into non-kosher food, the act of reading turns into an act of non-reading. The rabbi recalls the stutter of his pupils rather than their reading: “Not one has he taught to utter three words one upon the other without fumbling. Not one could speak the tongue without a snuffle or a snort “(376). Reb

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81 The Hebrew verse means “every night we [observant Jews] eat” and is followed by the explanation that every night Jews eat both chameitz and matzohs. However, during Passover, Jews eat only matzohs. These unexplained verses, as well as other unexplained multilingualism in Call It Sleep connect the book to immigrant literature and to modern poetry, such as the works of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. See McMillian 114-116.
Yiddel notes that although Reb Scholim, his colleague, came to his cheder to “review learning,” what actually took place was “a long procession of numbskulls, stutters, louts half blind” (375).82

By marrying reading to non-reading and kosher food/Jewish languages to non-kosher food/English, burning to freezing, destroying to impotency, Roth undermines David’s purification. He employs a clear method in order to subvert his protagonist’s Americanization. He constructs an image of assimilation, but this very symbol is immediately subject to deconstruction. In doing so, Roth “doubles” David’s story: there is an explicit story and implicit story; a surface story and an under-the-surface story; the story in which David assimilates and the story that subverts that story. It is David’s “double story” that I would like to discuss in this paper.

I will demonstrate Roth’s method in the following chapters. Chapter two shows the way in which David’s dreams about assimilation are contrasted with his reality whereas chapter three investigates the way Roth deconstructs the colour coding of light (David’s Americanisation) and darkness (David’s Jewish identity) when he presents David’s assimilation as superstitious. Chapters four focuses on Albert, David’s father, and demonstrate how he confirms, yet at the same time undermines, David’s transformation. However, since the figure of Albert is ambiguous, complex and may represent more than one symbol, the first part of this chapter focuses on Albert as signifying Americanism while the second part investigates Albert as symbolic of Hebrew and David’s Jewishness. This part also analyses David’s assimilation in terms of home (Albert’s paternity) and exile (David’s “orphanhood”). In this closing section, Albert is viewed as the father whose disownment of David as his son at the end of the book, rather than acknowledgement, indicates that David is still an “orphan,” i.e. he has not been assimilated and is therefore in the state of exile in America.

When David is unable to reach the faucets at the beginning of the book, he asks his mother: “When am I going to be big enough?”(18). Genya assures him that “there will come a time”(18). As illustrated, David’s inability to reach the faucets indicates his incapability of resisting the process of assimilation. Thus, when David asks when he will be big enough, it is as if he asked: “when will I be big enough to resist America’s purification?” As many critics

82 In similar to a few other critics, Kazin “The Art” 17 finds Reb Yiddel’s portrayal “Dickensian.”
have argued, David is on his way to becoming the artist who will write *Call It Sleep* at the end of the book. Yet in spite of this, David writes it in a way that *opposes* his transformation. The time Genya spoke of has come.
“One Might As Well Call It Sleep”: Dreams versus Reality

Major features in *Call It Sleep* are David’s many dreams, daydreams, reveries, semi-conscious states and “sleeping,” which all signify the dream about assimilation. This chapter will focus on two of David’s dreams (the eating of the red ball and the boy with the balloon) and examine their relation to the crucial food scene with Leo, David’s gentile friend. It will also show how Roth contrasts David’s dreams with reality and how these dreams are presented as nightmares, dreams turned “bad.”

The Food Scene: Non-Kosher Food, Christ, and the Rosary

The food scene is a key scene to understanding the true nature of David’s dreams. In this scene, David visits Leo in his apartment, where he is exposed to three Christian symbols: non-kosher food, the picture of Christ and the rosary. Leo explains to David that gentiles, who are not restricted by the laws concerning kosher food, can eat “anyt’ing we wants” and “wot’s good” (320). By contrast, Jews “can’t eat nutt’n” (320). In other words, Leo associates non-kosher food (gentiles) with eating whereas kosher food (Jews) is related to non-eating. This association is globally apparent throughout *Call It Sleep* as David neither eats nor drinks. He often dines “listlessly and without relish” (57). On another occasion, he pecks at his food since “his appetite has vanished” (268). David refuses his mother’s repeated pleads to finish his food and to “drink the rest of your milk” (268). He also declines his aunt’s offer to have “a liddle suddah vuddeh” (309) and takes the candies she hands him only to give them to Leo later on. While watching the way Leo “hopped up with alacrity” upon seeing the sweets, David regretted that “he had not accepted the other tid-bits his aunt offered him” (318).

As opposed to David, Leo the goy is a passionate eater. Leo tells David that he “et ev’y kind of bread dey is,” “Aitalian bread-sticks, Dutch pumennickel, Jew rye –” (320) and then asks David: “ever eat real spigeddi?” (320). Leo enlightens his Jewish friend: “De wops eat it like pitaters. An’ boy aint it good!” (320). Rubbing his belly, Leo concludes that he “could eat a whole playful by meself” (320-321) and recalls the days when “‘Lily Aglorini usetuh bring in a big dishful fuh me and de ol’ lady” (320).

Because it is associated with non-kosher food, Leo’s eating functions as a Christian symbol. Thus, it is appropriate that David comes across the picture of Christ while Leo eats.

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1 Sollors “World” 181, 81n. suggests that Leo Dugovka (Leo Du) is an anagram for Eda Lou Walton (Eda Lou).
While Leo ferrets among the dishes,” David reflects that a “certain picture at the shadowy corner at the further end of the room” (319) makes the difference between “goyish kitchens” and “Jewish ones” (319). Unable to see the picture clearly, David keeps staring at it while Leo continues talking about food, until the two activities—David’s reflections and Leo’s talking—become indistinguishable: “– A man, What? Can’t be [David’s thoughts]. ‘An’ I [Leo] et ev’y kind o’ bread dey is’” (320).

Leo’s passion for and obsession with eating is paralleled with David’s fascination with the picture of Christ. In spite of his efforts, David cannot stop looking at the picture. It is as if Leo’s freedom to “eat w’en I wants tuh” (319) is inversely related to David’s compulsion to look at the photo, although he does not want to. “Don’t look any more, that’s all” (322), David keeps telling himself, “– don’t, don’t ask him!” (321), yet it is in vain: “Terrific desire seemed to sicken him. He must ask! He must ask!” (324).

This leads to the juxtaposition of Leo’s act of eating and the discourse on Christianity. With each bite Leo takes, David is provided with another piece of information about the Christian picture. Leo encourages David to look at the photo when he starts eating: “‘Well, go on!’ the crab crunched under exasperated teeth. ‘Take a good look at it, will yuh!’” (322). As he continues to devour, Leo invites David to ask him about the picture: “‘Naw!’ And a second crab. ‘Ast me!’” (322). While taking “another piece of bread” (323), Leo starts to answer David’s questions. As Leo heads for dessert, he signals to David that their conversation is about to end. He ignores any further questions about Jesus while licking “his fingers” and reaching “for the candy. ‘Ummm! Ammonds! Oh boy, bet I could put about ten o’ dese in me mout’ at once’” (323). The discourse on the figure of Christ ends when Leo finishes eating.

Later on, David offers Leo food in return for his scapular, providing further evidence that these two discourses (Christianity and food) are closely related. During their conversation about Christ, David asks Leo to give him his amulet. Leo refuses, explaining that “‘dey’re fer Cat’licks’” (324). The word “Catholic” is written as “Cat’licks.” As such, it contains the word “lick,” which is connected with Leo’s eating, since, when Leo reached out his hand to take David’s pear, he “licked his lips” (338). By writing “Cat’licks,” Roth emphasises the link between Catholics/Christians and the act of eating. David’s response confirms this link. After listening to Leo’s explanation about scapulars and “Cat’licks,” David tries to persuade Leo to give him the Christian item by promising him food: “I c’n giv yuh lodda cakes an’ canny”
It seems that Christianity and food are so entangled that David also perceives the picture of Jesus in terms of food. He mistakes Jesus’ crown for a dish: “W’y is dat dish on his head busted over dere?” (323). Guffawing “through a mouthful of food” (323), Leo answers: “Dat ain’a dish, dat’s his crown o’ t’orns” (323).

This is underlined by a reference to Genya’s former Christian lover, the church organist. David overhears a conversation between his mother and his aunt, Bertha, about a Christian organist with whom his mother had an affair in Austria before she married Albert, David’s father. This leads David to invent a new Christian identity, “kill” his mother and replace his father with the gentile his mother once loved. When David tries not to talk about the picture of Christ, he finds “a convenient switch” (321), yet one that is unconsciously related to the same thing he tries to avoid. Instead of asking Leo about the photo, he enquires about the organist: “w’ad’s a orr-a orrghaneest?” (321). Leo, whose discourse on eating was previously interrupted by the discourse on Christ, gets angry and asks: “Who waz talkin’ about choich?” (321). Apologising, David answers “nobody!” and quickly switches back to food by saying “Spigeddeh you said”(321). The picture of the cornflowers stresses the connection between food (corn) and Christianity. Shortly after she tells Bertha about her affair with the goy, Genya buys a picture of cornflowers. She explains to David that this photo reminds her of “Austria and my home” (172). David perceives this picture with reference to Europe and the organist. When he tells Reb Yiddel about his “real” father, he explains that his mother met the organ-player “where corn was grow- growing. She said. Where corn was” (370).

David also identifies the picture of the cornflowers with the picture of Christ he sees in Leo’s house. While listening to Leo’s discourse on the “Aitalian spigeddi,” David draws a parallel between the two photos:

“We [Leo and his mother] use tuh live nex’ door to de Algorini’s – dey was Aitalian –’
– aike my [David’s] picture too – in my house – with the flowers” (320).

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2 Leslie Fiedler and Ruth Wisse note that the relationship between Leo and David parallels the relationship between Genya and Ludwig, the Christian organist. See Fiedler “Myths” 26, and Wisse 67.
3 As many critics have noted, it is hard not to think of Freud’s “family romance” when examining David’s fantasy of being an adopted child. In an interview with Bonnie Lyons, Roth referred to his childhood while using Freudian terms: “I so continually monopolised my mother’s affection that I regarded myself as the one only child around – with the exception of my father. My sister was his favourite. That I would say is a thumbnail sketch – with all its Freudian meanings” (“Henry” 159). Alessandra Contenti argues that the resemblance of the family triangle in Call It Sleep to Freud’s “family romance” indicates that most likely Roth was not familiar with Freud when writing the book since he would probably have avoided such parallelism. (Quoted in Materassi “Rothiana,” 106-107).
4 The cornflowers call to mind the burning stove David’s neighbors used to make “pop-cunn” (264) discussed in the previous chapter.
The act of “nailing” emphasises this association. In order to hang the picture she bought, Genya looks for “a nail, nail” (172). While watching his mother, David reflects that he “had hardly seen his mother so animated” (172). Genya’s repetition of the word “a nail, nail” draws our attention to it. When David sees the picture of Christ, he asks Leo: “‘He’s [Jesus] a’ways wit’ nails, ain’t he?’” (323). In other words, the word “nail” calls to mind the crucified Jesus, whose body was nailed to the cross. Moreover, once it is nailed to the wall, the cornflower picture becomes “lofty.” Gazing up “at the picture she had just hung” (172), Genya observes that “‘it’s a bit lofty even for a corn but it will do’” (172, my emphasis). This is an allusion to Jesus, whose crucifixion “elevated” him and transformed him into the “lofty” and immortal son of God.

The Red Ball/Balloon: Dreaming about Linguistic Assimilation

After he was promised the rosary in return for helping Leo to seduce Esther, his step-cousin, David dreams of it. When David recalls the wooden box in which the rosary was kept, he also remembers “that funny dream I had when he [Leo] gave it [the rosary] to me” (330). In the dream, Leo and David are on the roof “with a ladder” (330). While Leo “climbs up on the sun,” a “Round ball, Round ball shining –” (330) suddenly appears. I will take a closer look at this dream in order to show how it is connected with David’s Americanization. The word “ladder” is associated in the book with Christ. When Genya is about to “nail” the picture of the cornflowers, she looks also for “a ladder, ladder, ladder” (172). The notion associated with both the ladder and roof, namely a high place, also consists of an upward movement. This is symbolic of David’s transformation: when he abandons his (low) Jewish languages and acquires (high) English, he climbs up the social and linguistic ladder. In addition, the “glowing sun” and the “shining Round ball” symbolise Christ. The adjectives “glowing” and “shining” echo the “gold figure” of Christ dangling from the rosary. “Sun” is also similar in pronunciation to the word “son.” “Sun” can also refer to Sol, the mythological Sun God. This refers to Jesus, who is, according to Christian doctrine, the son of God.

That David’s dream indicates his assimilation is also apparent in its connection with non-kosher food. In the dream, David eats the “round ball” (330). A rosary is constituted of small beads, i.e. small round balls. Given that the dream is about the rosary and considering that the rosary is part of the food scene, we may conclude that when David eats the ball, this

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5 Alfred Kazin notes that David flees the frightening transposition of sexual taboos into religious taboos (xix).
6 As many critics have noted, the colour gold appears more than once in the book. For instance: the policeman in the scene in which David gets lost wears a “gold badge” (101), the “golden lolling” (262) and the dentist, doctor Goldberg (i.e. gold mountain). Sollors, “World” 168 22n., refers to Chinese immigrant visions of the United States as “gold mountain” after 1836 in Xiao-Huang Yin 19-21.
signifies his desire to “eat” the rosary, that is, to eat non-kosher food and to assimilate. After eating the Christian item, David describes its taste as “better than sponge cake” (330). The word “cake” is already tied in with a Christian sacramental. As demonstrated, when David tries to convince Leo to give him his amulet, he promises him “lodda cakes” (324). In this way, the word “better” now becomes clearer. Although Leo declines David’s offer, he later on assures him that he will hand him a rosary on the condition that David help him to seduce his cousin. After David fulfils this role, he receives the rosary. By having David describe the eating of the round ball (rosary) as “better than sponge cakes” (Leo’s amulet), Roth indicates that the rosary is “better” than the amulet because, unlike the amulet, David does get it.

The prevailing image of doubleness in David’s dream points to David’s American rebirth. The sun is traditionally visualised as a shining round ball. This leads to the reading of the “glowing sun” and the “shining round ball” as a double image. The words “round ball” also imply twoness. A ball is a round object. Thus, the description of the ball as round (“round ball”) is redundant. This repetition also draws our attention to the round shape. The round “ball” that is eaten calls to mind the belly of a pregnant woman. This belly (ball) “doubles” the woman and turns her into two, the mother and the foetus. The eating of the ball too reminds us of a baby that feeds inside the womb. This image appears during David’s electrocution. While David is about to thrust the dipper into the rails, two women, Mary and Mimi, are having a conversation about Mary’s pregnancy: “Bawl? Say, did I bawl? Wot else’d a kid’ve done w’en her mont’ly don’ show up?” (415). The word “bawl” is similar in pronunciation to the word “ball.” This ties Mary’s pregnancy to David’s dream (the round ball). Additionally, while David is unconscious, the following comment is made: “Can’t, he sez, I got a tin-belly” (418). Since “tin” can refer to a container, it is plausible that “tin-belly” describes a round belly, such as a belly of a pregnant woman. That “tin” is also a metal points even more sharply to the image of pregnancy: when David throws the dipper into the rails (metal/tin), he is reborn (belly) as an American.

The incident with the boy and the balloons underlines David’s rebirth. After David tells Reb Yiddel about his “Christian” father, he heads towards his house. As he is about to go up the stairs, he sees a boy holding “in his hands the torn tissue of a burst red balloon which he sucked and twisted into tiny crimson bubbles” (379). Nipping at the spheres, the boy asks David: “Yuh see how I ead ‘em? One bite” (379). This scene parallels David’s dream about

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7 Eventually, Mary tells Mimi that she had an abortion. The way in which this fact undermines David’s assimilation is investigated later on in this chapter.
the eaten rosary. Both scenes are depicted as a dream. Fascinated by the boy, David “stared at him unseeingly. In the trance that locked his mind only one sensation guttered with a bare significance” (379). A trance is a state similar to a dream. When one falls into a trance, one is not completely conscious, just like the mind is unconscious when one dreams. Being similar in shape to the “Round ball,” the balloons and bubbles signify the image of the pregnant woman and David’s future rebirth. When put in the mouth of the boy, “the stretched red rubber... was twisted, revealed” (379). Made of rubber, a balloon is an elastic substance able to _change_ form. This quality is stressed by the verbs “stretched” and “twisted.” In this way, the word “revealed” refers to David’s symbolic change of form: it “reveals” his passage from a “Jewish” culture into an American one. Having examined some dreams in _Call It Sleep_, let us now turn to the waking experience. What happens in reality? In order to answer this question we first have to go back to the food scene that was discussed earlier.

### David’s Reality: “Popping” his Dream

Leo convinces David to eat some Christian “bread an’ budder” (320) since it is only “American bread” (320) and therefore cannot be considered non-kosher food. Yet according to Jewish law, gentile butter is _certainly_ non-kosher and David knows it. As illustrated in the previous chapter, David is aware that when his mother occasionally mixed up “the meat knives with the milk-knives. It’s a sin...” (226). Additionally, bread is a Christian symbol. At the Last Supper, Jesus broke bread, gave it to his disciples and said “This is my body given for you” (_Luke_, 22: 19). One of the most salient Catholic sacraments is the Eucharist. During a mass, Catholics are obliged to eat bread which symbolises the body of Jesus. This ceremony signifies the sanctified point of contact between the believers and Jesus. Thus, when David eats the bread and butter, this is symbolic of his Christianisation. David’s comment on the food he eats emphasises this notion. After tasting it, David reflects that unlike his mother’s bread, it “had a pliant yielding skin, thin as the thriftiest potato paring or the strip one unwound from a paper lead-pencil. And the butter – he tasted it – salt! He had never eaten salt

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8The laws of non-kosher food are numerous and complex and depend on how pious one is. Leo thinks that such bread is kosher since it involves neither the mixture of milk and meat nor meat such as pork. However, this perception is relative; while Orthodox Jews would consider this bread non-kosher, secular Jews (who nonetheless eat kosher food) and the less observant among the National Zionist stream would most likely treat it as kosher.

9According to the _Shulchan Aruch_, meat and milk (or derivatives) cannot be mixed, which also means that they cannot be served or cooked using the same utensils or even stored together (Yoreh De’a 87). Utensils used for non-kosher food become non-kosher and make kosher food prepared with them non-kosher. Certain foods, such as butter and, according to some, even bread, must have been prepared in whole or in part by Jews. See Yoreh De’a 112, 115. The laws about butter are stricter than the ones about bread since it is a dairy product. For instance, only secular Jews would consider this butter as kosher. For National-Zionist and Orthodox this “gentile butter” would probably be non-kosher.
butter before. However, pulpy and briny though the first mouthful was, there was nothing actually repulsive about it” (320). The word “pencil” connects the bread with language. The word “pulpy” contains the word “pulp,” which in turn constitutes the word “pulpit.” Roth’s word choice of “pulpy” and “pencil” then, stresses the symbolic function of the bread scene.

However, the issue is made more complicated by the fact that non-kosher food is more than a mere marker of what Jews are prohibited to eat. It is a symbol of the inability to assimilate, of the reluctance of the body to digest. It is physical disinclination often depicted within Jewish American literature as rebelling against the mind and as stronger than it. In her famous autobiography, which was perceived as the document of assimilation, of stepping out of the Old Testament into the new and being “made over,” Mary Antin, a Jewish American authoress writing at the time when Call It Sleep is set, describes the way her body refuses to eat non-kosher food in spite of her being “absolutely different than the person whose story I have to tell” (1).10 Antin describes the dinner in her gentile teacher’s house, recalling that all went well until non-kosher food was passed: “Some mischievous instinct told me that it was ham-forbidden food; and I, the liberal, the free, was afraid to touch it!” (196). Shocked at her physical reaction, Antin “ate, but only a newly abnegated Jew can understand with what squirming, what protesting of the inner man, what exquisite abhorrence of myself” (196). Later on, Antin confesses that “to eat in defence of principles was not so easy as to talk” (196). The same is true for David, for whom it is easy to dream about eating non-kosher food, but for whom non-kosher food is difficult to swallow in reality.

David’s symbolic eating of Christ’s body is undermined by the image of cannibalism. The ceremony of the Eucharist is cannibalistic in the sense that a human body (Christ’s) is eaten by humans (Christ’s followers). Nowadays, cannibalism is mostly perceived by western civilised societies as uncivilised and immoral. This is underlined by David’s disgust at and refusal to eat the non-kosher crabs Leo offers him. Although David declares that there is nothing repulsive about Leo’s butter, he is aghast at the mere sight of the crabs to the extent that “his stomach shrank” (319). In spite of his willingness to eat the bread and butter, David declines Leo’s offer, explaining that “Naa! Jews can’t” (320). Showing David how one eats them (“jist bite into ‘em, see?”), Leo “snapped off a scarlet claw” (320) and sucked “at a crushed red pincer” (320) while “the crab shell cut a red arc” (321). The red colour

10Ellery Sedgwick, 65. For an account of the reception of the book see the introduction to the Penguin edition by Werner Sollors.
characterising the crabs connects them with the red ball/balloon David dreams about. The depiction of Leo “biting,” “sucking,” “crushing” and “snapping off” the crabs rather than using a knife and fork portrays his eating as uncivilised. Additionally, Leo “picked up one of the monsters” (320). By depicting non-kosher food (crabs) as monstrous its being eaten (David’s process of assimilation) as uncivilised, Roth presents the process of David’s assimilation as hideous.

In this way, the taste of the butter as “pulpy” now becomes clearer. “Pulpy” contains the word “pulp,” which can also refer to books that are of low quality in the way they are produced and in what they contain (i.e. pulp fiction). The notion of books points to the aspect of language. However, this process is described as pulp. By having David use this word, Roth criticises the act of purification, in which the only way for David to “produce”, i.e. to acquire English, is by losing his Jewish languages.

David’s dream about eating non-kosher food is contrasted with his reality. On the one hand, he eats the bread and butter and is Christianised. At the same time, however, Roth subverts this process of Americanisation, revealing the immoral, uncivilised aspect inherent in it, as if paralleling the religious prohibition against eating non-kosher food with the moral prohibition against eating humans. This is emphasised by the popping of the red balloon/ball about which David dreams. Eventually, the balloon was “hollowed into a small antre in his mouth, was engulfed, twisted, revealed...Pop!” (379). This is indicative of Roth’s “popping” and “hollowing” David’s dream to assimilate. In this way, the words “revealed” and “engulfed” reveal that David’s dream “covers” his reality.

This notion of two stories, of dream and reality, is also evident in David’s double answer to Leo. When Leo picks up the crabs, he tells David “‘Lucky I ain’ a Jew’” (320). On the surface, David agrees: “‘No’, David agreed vaguely” (320). But a dream is one thing and reality is another. Though seeming to agree with Leo, David actually disagrees: “But for the first time since he had met Leo he rejoiced in his own tenets” (320). Reb Yiddel was right saying that “what enters the mouth, there you must betray no trust” (375). Yet one must betray no trust neither in what enters the mouth (David’s eating non-kosher food), nor in what leaves it (David’s agreement with Leo). One must also betray no trust in dreams by mistaking them for reality. In what follows, I would like to show how Roth systematically “pops” all of David’s dreams.
David’s Many Dreams about Linguistic Purification

David dreams and sleeps more than once in the novel. Chapter VII opens with the notion of a trancelike state: “When David awoke the next morning, it seemed to him that he had been lying in bed a long while with eyes open but without knowing who or where he was” (56). While staring at the falling snow, he almost falls asleep again: “David stared awhile at the sinking patterns of the flakes... their monotonous descent gave him an odd feeling of being lifted higher and higher... he shut his eyes” (56). A bit later, Genya reminds David about the dream he had the previous night: “A woman with a child turned loathsome, a crowd of people following a black-bird” (57).

In addition, David also daydreams. “Brooding, engrossed in his thoughts” (22), David listens to the chanting of a small group of girls, until “filled with a warm, nostalgic mournfulness, he shut his eyes. Fragments of forgotten rivers floated under the lids, dusty roads, fathomless curve of trees... A world somewhere, somewhere else” (23). David also daydreams while on the river bank: “Minutes passed while he stared. The brilliance was hypnotic. He could not take his eyes away. In the molten sheen memories and objects overlapped... he stared as if out of a dream” (248).

Just like the dreams about the red ball and the red balloons, David’s daydreams also signify his assimilation. The connection between David’s reverie on the river bank and David’s Americanization has already been referred to in the previous chapter. It is the way in which the dream about the black bird and the wheel daydream (the chanting girls) are related to David’s transformation that is need of clarification. The black bird of which David dreams at the beginning of the book turns into a golden one at the end of the novel. During his climactic transformation David watches how “the man in the wires stirred. The/Wires twanged brightly. The blithe and golden cloud of birds filled the/sky” (426). The colour gold echoes the images of the “glowing sun/shining ball/gold figure of Christ” known to us from the dreams about the ball/balloons. The process of goldening signifies David’s purification, in which the dirty and the corrupted (“black”) turns into the pure (“golden”).

The chanting girls daydream is characterised by a “yellow wheel.” The sound of a “bright yellow gear” (19), “the little wheel” (22) Yussie, David’s neighbour, gives David leads to his daydream: “Engrossed in the rhythmic, accurate teeth of the yellow cog in his hand, whirling restlessly without motion” (22). The words “sound” and “teeth” are connected
with the articulation of a language. Yellow, as opposed to green, is the colour signifying assimilation in the book. Genya tells Bertha: “It appears to me that you will grow from green to yellow in this land before I do” (153). In another instance, Genya informs David about Bertha’s future husband: “You’ll have an American uncle then. A yellow one. Did you ever think of that? (173). The yellow cog resurfaces during David’s semiconscious state: “He turned to flee, seized a wagon wheel to climb upon it. There were no spokes-only cogs like a clock-wheel. He screamed again, beat the yellow disk with his fists” (426-427). The paradoxical depiction of the wheel “whirling restlessly without motion” (22) also calls to mind the characterisation of David as writhing “without motion in the clutch of a fatal glory” (419) while transforming and the description of the ember (purifying coal), which appears during David’s electrocution: “One ember...swimming without motion (430).

The fact that David’s dreams and daydreams signify his dream about assimilation is emphasised by David’s semi-electrocution, in which he passes out and transforms, since a dream and unconsciousness are closely related. Small wonder that David’s electrocution is also described as the state of a sleep. When David is about to insert the dipper, we are told that “For all/ his peering, listening, starting, he/ was blind as a sleep-walker” (413). Additionally, according to the doctor who treated David after his electrocution, David’s unconscious state lasts longer than it should have. The doctor fails to see “why he was out so long anyway” (433). This draws our attention to David’s dreamlike state and the notion of dreaming that is so dominant in the book. This state that also ends the book.

*Call It Sleep* ends with David’s sleeping and with a detailed explanation of what this state of sleeping is. The first account refers to light/fire:

He might as well call it sleep. It was only toward sleep that every wink of the eyelids could strike a spark into the cloudy tender tinder of the dark, kindle out shadowy corners of the bedroom such myriad and such vivid jets of images – of the glint on tilted beards, of the uneven shine on roller skates, of the dry light on grey stone stoops, of the tapering glitter of rails, of the oily sheen on the night-smooth rivers, of the glow on thin blonde hair, red faces. (441)

The images of “glint,” “shine,” “light,” “glitter” and “glow” must be read with reference to the golden/yellow sun/birds/wheel/ball of all David’s other dreams/daydreams. The reference to an image instructs us to read this whole passage, or David’s final dream, as an image, or even a symbol.

The second account is related to different sounds and voices, reassembled by the power of a dream:
He might as well call it sleep. It was only toward sleep that ears had the power to cull again and reassemble the shrill cry, the hoarse voice, the scream of fear, the bells, the thick-breathing, the roar of crowds all sounds that lay fermenting in the vats of silence and the past. (441)\(^{11}\)

This description is symbolic of David’s Americanisation, since “reassemble” means here to join together separated parts, i.e. David’s fragmented English language. The words “silence” and “past” stress this symbolism. “Past” points to David’s Jewish past, which was believed to have fragmented the pure English. It is also this past that, once purified, has been silenced, abandoned and lost.

A final explanation of David’s sleep concerns the street. In order to examine the account that is provided in the book, understanding of the street as a symbol is necessary. The street signifies David’s acquisition of the English language. As opposed to his home, where Yiddish is spoken, the street is the sphere of English. A few pages into the first chapter we are told that “in the street David spoke English” (21). At the beginning of the book, David spends most of his time at home with his mother. Luter, Albert’s friend, remarks that he “has never seen a child cling so to his mother” (41). Gradually, David spends more and more time outdoors, feeling “secure at home – and in the street –” (262). In the end, the street becomes safer than home, as it is to the street that David runs to escape from his violent father and it is there where he nearly electrocutes himself and transforms: “The street. The street. He dared to breathe. And stumbled to the sidewalk and stood there, stood there” (403).\(^{12}\)

Now we can analyse the third account of David’s sleep:

It was only toward sleep one knew himself still lying on the cobbles, felt the cobbles under him, and over him and scudding ever toward him like a black foam, the perpetual blur of shod and running feet, the broken shoes, new shoes, stubby, pointed, caked, polished, bunion, pavement-beveled, lumpish, under skirts, under trousers, shoes, over one and through one, and feel them all and feel, not pain, not terror, but strangest triumph, strangest acquiescence (441).\(^{13}\)

The word “cobbles” is repeated twice, calling attention to it. While unconscious, David sees the cobbles: “The cobbles stretched away. Stretched away” (426). The word

\(^{11}\) Stephan Adams has called *Call It Sleep* “The Noisiest Novel Ever Written.” Adams’ discusses the way in which sound symbols signify David’s revelation at the end of the book.

\(^{12}\) Mario Materassi 42-60 demonstrates how Roth’s homogenous Jewish community of the Lower East Side diverges from maps and social accounts of New York at the time in which the novel is set. In an interview with David Bronsen, Roth stated that *Call It Sleep* “violates the truth about what the East Side was then” and described it as a “montage of milieus” (267–268). For a discussion of the many street voices in *Call It Sleep* as indicating Roth’s model of democracy see Kremena Todorava.

\(^{13}\) Theresa Mooney 16 reads this paragraph as indicating a subconscious state analogous to physical sleep. The reference to eyes and ears calls to mind the words of the seraph to Isaiah: “Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert; and be healed” (6:10) as well as “Shirat Haazinn” (Give ear) from Deuteronomy 32 that Roth transcribes into Hebrew in the novel. See Irit Manskleid –Makowsky, 90.
“stretched” links the cobbles with the “stretched red Balloon” about which David dreams. The detailed depiction of the different shoes (broken, new, stubby, pointed, caked, polished etc.) draws attention to the role played by shoes in the novel. I would like now to examine this role.

The book opens with David’s request for his calendar leaves, which mark his birthday and are stored in a shoe box. When he accidentally comes across the shoe box, Luter “thumbed the leaves (black, black, black, red, black, black) held up a thin sheaf, and with puckered lips, stared at the date as though something far more intricate and absorbing than the mere figures were depicted there” (37). The next thing that happens is that Luter visits Genya while she is alone in the house, a visit whose purpose is unknown to the reader. What follows from this is the end of the friendship between Luter and Albert and the disappearance of Luter from the book. The issue of David’s age is already insinuated in the prologue. When instructed by Albert to lie about David’s age in order to save the half fare, Genya fails since the doctors estimates David to be older than he really is rather than younger. The importance of the shoe box in relation to David’s newfound American identity becomes clear only later on. When he hears David’s new invented origins, Albert is convinced of what he has always suspected: David was born too early to be his son.

The shoe box also leads to David’s desire to leave his mother’s kitchen and to go down to the street. After her conversation with Luter, Genya’s “drawn, distracted face was too much for him [David] to bear” (127). Thus, in an effort to avoid being with his mother, David reverses his usual behaviour and, instead of postponing his going down to the street, he postpones his being in the house: “this afternoon it was he who ate so rapidly in order to be ready to go down sooner, and it was his mother who sought to delay him” (129).

The shoe box resurfaces during David’s electrocution. While unconscious, David sees “a shoe box full/ of calendar leaves, ‘the red day must/come’.../Which lapsed into a wooden box with/ a sliding cover like the chalk-boxes” (428). The wooden box into which the shoe box is transformed is the one containing the rosary Leo gives David. David’s story about shoes, the street and burning stresses the relation of the show box to David’s Americanization. When his mother begs him to tell her something that happened in the street (to which now he eagerly goes), David recalls a man who “was making a sidewalk” (129) and “when the man wasn’t looking... a boy stepped on it... and made a hole with his shoe” (129). David repeats
the fact that a hole has been made in the shoe: “But he made that hole. And there’s a hole now. You can see the little red iron on his shoe – in front. It made a hole too! And it made a cigarette in it already” (130). The odd repetition of the odd incident about the sidewalk and the burnt shoe, told in the context of David’s movement towards the street, is not a coincidence. We will see that this incident is tightly connected with David’s linguistic change.

Once he receives the rosary in return for helping Leo to seduce Esther, David runs to cheder, where “he would only listen, only forget” (359). Here, forgetting is linked to sound (listening) just as purification is tied with diction. In the following scene, Benny, David’s classmate, brings cigarettes to cheder. While looking at the cigarettes, David “was glad to be among them! To forget!” (360). As Benny struck “the match on the stone between his legs, applied it to one end of the reed, meanwhile sucking at the other” (361), “David forgot” (361). In other words, the lighting of the cigarette signifies that David forgot his Jewish past. The burning cigarette also echoes the cigarette that made the hole in the shoe in the story David tells his mother. Furthermore, as a result of his electrocution, David’s “shoes wuz boined in front” (433). This identifies David with the boy in the street, who burns his “shoe – in front” (130). The image of the shoes then, entangles David’s final dream (“it was only towards sleep... broken shoes, new shoes, stubby, pointed...”) with his assimilation.

That David’s sleep and many dreams all signify his dream to purify his Jewish languages is clear enough. Yet once again we find ourselves asking, what happens in reality? What happens when David “wakes up” from his dreams? What wakes him up and into what reality does he wake up?

“He Was Locked in Nightmare”: David’s Bad Dreams

In all of David’s dreams discussed above, it is a “whistle” that ends the dream and that awakens David. While picking up the wheel at the end of his daydream about the chanting girls, David wonders when “would the whistle blow. It took long today” (23). As he envisions a light “brighter than day” on the river bank, David daydreams until a man in a “black tugboat” whistles and wakes him up: “The man whistled again. Shrill from mobile lips, grinned, spat, and ‘Wake up, Kid!’” (248). David’s “waking up” from his electrocution is also marked by a repeated and italicised pleading for the man in the tugboat to whistle: “(Whistle, 14

14 It is important to note that whereas Judaism emphasizes the importance of remembrance (of Jewish history/religion), American thinkers such as Ralf Waldo Emerson stress the need to forget one’s past. See Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 17-30.
mister! WHISTLE!” (431). The “whistle” also related to the dreams about the birds. Sitting in the park and about to daydream, “David’s body seemed to grow less his own, his limbs so light and rare, his legs drifted over the pavement with a tranquil, feathery ease” (260). David is woken up by the sound of the birds, which he mistakes for a whistle: “E-e-e. Twee-twee-twee. Tweet! Tweet! Cheep! Eet! R-rawk Gee! Whistle. Thought it was that man. In the tugboat. In the shirt. Whistling. Only birds... on the fire escape. Whistle” (260). Finally, David pleads for the man to whistle and wake him up from his semiconscious state towards the end of the book: “(Mister! Whistle! Whistle! Whistle!/ Whistle, Mister! Yellow birds!” (428).

Repeated, italicised and evident in all of David’s dreams and daydreams, a whistle seems to be the agent awakening David from his dreams into reality. Thus, a clear notion of the nature of the “whistle” and an understanding of what it stands for would enable us to understand David’s reality. In other words, if the “whistle” signifies David’s assimilation, David’s reality will coincide with his dream; if, however, the whistle undermines David’s transformation, the dream will be contrasted with David’s reality.

The whistle of the man in a tugboat refers back to the whistle of the boat on which David and Genya arrive in America. The prologue opens and ends with a description of the “small white steamer” (9), “her whistle,” bellowing “its hoarse warning” (9). The boat does not only frame the prologue but also dominates it, rolling “slightly on the water beside the stone quay” (9), the gulls wheeling before her prow, which rises with a “slight creaking cry from the green water” (14). Images of “boats” and “floating” are connected with clear symbols of David’s assimilation. The act of lighting the cigarette in cheder (“forgetting”) is depicted using the simile of a boat. Just before the kids are about to strike the match, David’s classmate informs the others: “Like a steamboat it’s gonna give” (361). Staring at the falling snow, David “went floating until he was giddy. He shut his eyes” (56). David’s daydream about the chanting girls is described as an act of floating on a river: “He shut his eyes. Fragments of forgotten rivers floated under the lids” (23). Additionally, in Hebrew “wheel” means “galgal,” which is constituted of the word “gal,” which, in turn, means a “wave.” This leads to the reading of the “yellow wheel” David dreams of with reference to water/boats.

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15 The boat is named “Peter Stuyvesant,” probably after the anti-Semitic Dutch Governor who sought to prohibit the immigration of Jews to New Amsterdam in 1654 (Sollors “World” 138). For the governor, see Selzer, 10. For a detailed analysis of the prologue see Ferraro (“Passage”94-100) and Immel 270-287.

16 In Hebrew: גלגל.
At the end of the prologue, while on the boat, Genya asks Albert (in Yiddish) where they are headed to. Albert answers: “Bronzenville” (16). Clearly, “Bronzenville” is Albert’s Yiddish for “Brownsville,” a residency in New York. Derived from the French for “town” (“ville), “-ville” is usually used in English as suffix for places (as in “Greenville”). “Ville” is related to the English (and French) word “village.” A village, i.e. the country, plays an important role in the book. It is where Genya had the affair with the Christian organist and where Albert watched his father struggle to death with a bull, yet did nothing to help him. Both incidents are symbolised by two pictures in David’s apartment: the picture of the cornflowers Genya buys and the plaque with bull’s horns Albert purchases (298). As Werner Sollors notes, Roth fictionalizes David as a “nostalgic” city boy who mistakes the corn for flowers (Call It Sleep 172) and the bull for a cow (ibid, 298). Roth, as a second-generation immigrant urban writer disconnected from a rural life that he heard about from his parents in fragmentary reverberation, becomes interested in the country as an abstraction and is so receptive to the “mythical method” in art permitting artists to substitute their lost family past by reading general anthropological folkways and incorporating them into their own experience.

However, the “country” has another symbolic function in the novel. In Hebrew, “village” means “kfar.” The word “kfar” shares a similar root with the verb “kiper” and when written, “kfar” and “kiper” are identical and can be distinguished by vocalization only. The verb “kiper” means to atone for sins. This alludes to Christ as a symbol of David’s assimilation: via his death, Christ atones for the sins of humanity just as David’s death atones for and purifies his “sinful” Jewish languages. Moreover, the root of the Hebrew “kfar” also functions as the root for “kafar,” which means to deny a religion (when written, “kfar” and “kafar” are identical). By abandoning his Jewish languages, David “denies” Judaism, his culture and past.

That Roth may have had the word “village” in mind when locating the family in “Brownsville” is also evident in his original plan to incorporate his life in Greenwich Village.

19 In Hebrew: כפר
20 The Hebrew letter “pe” is the equivalent for the English letters “f/ph/p” and the only way to differentiate “p” from “fph” is through the Hebrew vocalisation. This means that the form “k.f.r.” is a transcription of the Hebrew original whereas the “k.p.r” is a transliteration. In this way, “kfar” can be read in Hebrew as “kiper.”
21 Wirth-Nesher notes the ironic contrast between “the golden land” and “Bronzeville” (bronze). “Between” 303.
where he lived with Eda Lou Walton while writing *Call It Sleep*. According to Roth, the “very original conception of the book was to include my entire trajectory – from ghetto child to Greenwich Village but finally I decided to leave David at his childhood” (Mackowsky 114).

As opposed to the Lower East Side, Greenwich Village clearly represents the world of art into which David/Roth has been assimilated.

The boat in the prologue reappears during David’s electrocution. When David is about to insert the scoop, a boat is passing: “A barge on a slack hawser or/ a gunwale against the dock chirping/ because a/boat was passing” (418). Additionally, when a doctor arrives at the electrocution scene, we are told that the crowd around David “split like water before a paw, reformed in the wake” (429). This depiction refers back to the “white steamer” bringing David to New York: “Behind the ship the white wake that stretched to Ellis Island grew longer, raveling wanly into melon-green” (14). The tugboat also resurfaces during David’s semiconscious state: “A man in a tugboat, hair under/arm-pits, hung from the pole among the/wires, his white undershirt glittering/he grinned and whistled and with every/note yellow birds flew to the roof” (425).\(^{22}\)

The wakening whistle may be taken as a signifier of the correspondence between David’s dream to assimilate and his reality. However, there is more to it. When Genya sends David down to the street, she reminds him: “not too far. And remember if I don’t call you, wait until the whistle blows” (20). Here the whistle indicates David’s return home (Jewish languages) and ends his staying in the street (English). As opposed to the previous notion of the whistle as a marker of assimilation, the whistle, in this case where there is a factory nearby, now points to David’s Jewish languages. In this way, the dream of transformation turns into a nightmare.

Unable to find his way back home, David is lost. None of the passers-by is able to help him since he is incapable of pronouncing the name of his street (“Barhdee”) correctly. Instead, he pronounces: “Boddeh Stritt” (97). While looking for his home and staring at the houses around him, David daydreams again: “A moment longer he stared... with stiff, tranced

\(^{22}\) As many critics have noted, the man in the wires/tugboat dissolves into Christ (“guts like a chicken, open” 321) at the climactic chapter: “The man in the wires withered and/ groaned, his slimy, purple chicken/- guts slipped through his fingers” (426). In addition, Adams 57 suggests that it has been argued that the man who whistles is connected with another Christian symbol David discovers during the food scene with Leo: Genya’s former gentile lover. When David asks Leo what “a orr- a Orrghaneest” is (321), Leo answers that “‘dey Looks like pinaers, on’y dey w’stles – up on top, see? God long pipes an’ t’ings” (321).
body, he groped blindly toward the vague outline of a railing before a basement” (98-99). Horrified, David feels the streets wheeling, “turning under his feet, though never a house changed place – backward to forward, side to side – a sly, inexorable carousel” (97). Just as the yellow wheel that swirls “restlessly without motion” (the dream about the chanting girls), or the ember that “swims without motion” (David’s electrocution), the carousel in David’s current trance turns “though never a house changed a place.”

Roth’s word choice of “Barhdee” street too links the scene above to David’s dreams. “Barhdee” contains the word “bar,” which, in turn, means pure and clean in Hebrew. By pronouncing “Boddeh” instead of the English “Barhdee” (pure), David defiles the pure English language and “dirties” it. In “Barhdee,” “bar” is followed by the English letter “h” (“Barh”). In Hebrew, “barh” may be read as the verb b.r.h, constituting the verb “lehavrot,” which means to eat. This reading is enhanced by the fact that “bar” is the Hebrew for grain. This emphasises the connection between the scene above (Barhdee), the theme of purification (“bar”/pure) and David’s wish to become an American (“barh”/food/eating). Yet something else happens here.

David tries to locate his home by following the whistle of the factory: “Whistles? He raised his head. Factory whistles! The others? None! Too far!” (104). He waits for the whistle to “wake up” his mother and make her realise that he is missing: “But she heard them – she heard the other whistles that he couldn’t hear. The whistles he heard in the summer time. She heard them now. Maybe she looked out of the window – now – this moment! Looked down into the street, up and down the street, searched, called” (104). By “waking up” his mother, the whistle would also “wake up” David from his trance, since, hearing the whistles “he couldn’t hear,” his mother would eventually find him, as indeed happens. However, just as Roth inverts the symbol of the whistle and presents it here as a marker of home, so does he invert the notion of a dream by turning it into a nightmare: “He was locked in nightmare, and no one would ever wake him again” (99).²⁵

²³In Hebrew: רד
²⁴In his manuscript notebooks, Roth jotted down a few possible names for David’s street: Baraday, Bar, Bah, Bod, Boday and Body street. Having experimented with these names, Roth eventually chose “Barhday,” which shows that Roth’s word choice was no coincidence.
²⁵The notions of a nightmare and whistle call to mind one of the most famous quotes from Ulysses: “History, Stephen Said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake. From the play field the boys raised a shout. A whirring whistle: goal” (27).
The notion of an “abhorrent dream” is already presaged in David’s first dream. When David dreams about the black bird he also dreams about “a woman with a child turned loathsome” (57). The woman and child call to mind the image of pregnancy signifying David’s assimilation in terms of “twoness,” of David being reborn as an American. “A woman with a child” is also a symbol of the Madona, representing Mary and the infant Jesus. However, in the dream this image is “turned loathsome.” By depicting David’s rebirth as repugnant, Roth disapproves of the process of assimilation and presents it as a nightmare, a repulsive dream.

Roth is critical of the act of purification also when he has Mary, the pregnant woman, get an abortion: “She called herself a mmid-wife. I went by m-meself” (415). By having Mary end her pregnancy, Roth “kills” David’ newfound American identity. The “Barhdee” episode also points to Roth’s criticism. “Bar” also means “son,” which is a synonym for child or kid. After David has been taken to a police station, two policemen comment on David’s mispronunciation: “you were just kiddin’ us, weren’t ya? (101). The word “kiddin” is written in a way that leads to its reading as “kid in.” This refers to the image of pregnancy, in which a woman has a “kid in” her womb. However, just after David wakes up from his “final dream” (electrocution), the crowd exclaims: “No kiddin! No kiddin!” (431, my emphasis). Having ended her pregnancy, Mary has no kid in her belly.

Roth also “kills” the “golden birds.” In addition to the dreams discussed so far, David dreams of his father’s hammer: he “brooded about it till it entered his sleep, till he no longer could tell where his father was flesh and where dream...I saw my father lift a hammer; he was standing on a high roof of darkness, and below him were faces uplifted, so many, they stretched like white cobbles to the end of the world” (28). The notion of a high roof calls to mind the (social) ladder in David’s dream of the red ball and the “loftiness” of the cornflower (and Christ’s) picture. The verb “stretched” and the “cobbles” refers back to the “stretched cobbles” and the “stretched red balloon” about which David dreams. Not surprisingly, the hammer reappears during the electrocution: “From roof-top to roof-top, over streets, over alley ways, over areas and lots, his father soared with a feathery ease. “Unh!” (A hammer! A hammer! He snarled/ brandished it, it snapped like a whip...(Around him now, the cobbles stretched/ away. Stretched away in the swirling dark like the faces of a multitude aghast/ and frozen” (426). However, once Albert’s hammer appears, the golden birds disappear: “(A

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26 The role of Albert in the book is discussed extensively in the closing chapter.
hammer! A hammer! He snarled/ brandished it, it snapped like a whip/ The birds vanished. Horror thickened/ the air)” (426). The verb “to vanish” means to disappear or to cease to exist. Therefore, one can say that by “vanishing” the birds the hammer is really “killing” them.

Eliminating the birds and turning the pregnant woman into a barren one, Roth implies that David’s assimilation is dead-ended: the beginning (Jewish identity) is also the end (no American identity). That David dreams about round objects points even more sharply to this reading, for what is a (yellow) wheel, or a (red) ball/balloon, if not a circular object in which the movement upwards (Americanism) is also the movements downwards? The descriptions of the wheel “whirling restlessly without motion” (22), the ember “swimming without motion” (430) and David writhing “without motion in the clutch of a fatal glory” (419) all relate to a movement which is also a non-movement. In other words, David’s movement towards Americanism is also his movement towards Judaism. The circular aspect of David’s assimilation is already presaged in the river bank reverie: “Sin melted into light... Uh chug chug chug, ug chug! [...] Uh chug ug ch ch ch” (248). In Hebrew, “chug” (“hug”) means to move in circles.27 David’s assimilation is not a linear process; when he climbs up the social ladder he is doomed to climb down back to his Jewish background.

In this light, “Brownsville” may be read differently. It is not Judaism that Roth denies (kofer) but rather the act of purification. This shift from dreams to unwanted nightmares is foreshadowed in the passage in which David cannot find his way home. One of the passersby interprets David’s pronunciation of “Boddeh” street as “Potter Street” (99). In Hebrew, “potter” is “kadar,”28 which also means to become gloomy, sad or depressed. According to this logic, “Potter Street” hints at the sinister aspect found in David’s dreams.

The notion of a dreadful nightmare is apparent in the screams characterising David’s dreams. When Genya reminds David of his dream about the woman with a child, she recalls: “But my, how you screamed!” (57). David screams also throughout his final dream, i.e. electrocution: “A thin scream wobbled through the spirals of oblivion” (419); “He screamed again” (426); “He screamed” (428). In addition, while dreaming about the “loathsome” woman with a child, David seems to have kicked the table. His mother asks him: “why did you kick the table so?” to which he replies: ‘I don’t know’” (57). Remarkably, while

27 In Hebrew: להזג
28 In Hebrew: קדר
unconscious, David “kicked–once” (419). It is no wonder that the prologue ends with the boat “drifting slowly and with cancelled momentum as if reluctant” (16, my emphasis). The dream about assimilation is one that David is reluctant to have. Thus, the depiction of the whistle of the boat as “bellowing its hoarse warning” (19) may be read with regards to Roth warning us that things are not as they appear to be in the book. Dreams are not reality and the wish to assimilate turns out to be a repulsive nightmare.

The last provocative line in the book now becomes clearer: “One might as well call it sleep” (441). Indicating doubt, the modal verb “might” relates to the act of calling, or defining. “Sleep” is a signifier of David’s dream about assimilation. In other words, the very last sentence, which is also the title of the book (Call It Sleep), emphases the doubt related to defining David’s dreams in the novel. One might as well call dreams reality and one might as well call David American; nevertheless, reality shows that it is otherwise. Angry at the passerby who tricked him into the police station in the scene in which he gets lost, David realises: “Trust nothing. Trust nothing. Trust nothing. Wherever you look, never believe. Whatever anything was or did or said, it pretended. Never believe” (102). In the next chapter we will see how Roth instructs us to “never believe” David’s assimilation when he continues to hint at the circularity characterising David’s assimilation (swinging doors, the metaphor of sowing/harvesting), and connects his protagonist’s identity change with fantasy, magic and superstition.

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29 The quote from Ulysses mentioned previously also involves a “kick”: …A whirring whistle: goal. What if the nightmare gave you a back kick?” (27).

30 Critics have long examined the last paragraph in the book and the ambiguous “it” in “Call It Sleep.” In addition the common reading of “it” as a redemption of sorts (the next chapter elaborates on this interpretation), both Ita Sheres and James Berman refer to it as “a turning point from which it is impossible to withdraw” (Sheres, 77), “a point at which looking forward is more important than looking back (Berman 60). While Eda Lou Walton wrote that the “it” indicates that David conquers his environment (583), Gert Buellence claims that it is “a textbook example of an imaginary resolution” (7). Similarly, Wayne Lesser argues that the word “it” refers to the movement from metaphor to irony to synecdoche, expressing “an old faith in the possibilities of language” (174). For a discussion of these interpretations see Sollors “World” 156. Buellence’s reading corresponds with Roth’s own comment that the phrase “call it sleep” refers to “an artistic accession or an assumption into artistry” (in Lyons, 167). By contrast, Gary Epstein suggests that the title, as well as the final paragraph, implies creative “death” (42-43 ). Roth himself testifies the ambiguity of this phrase when in his conversation with Freedman he notes that the “it” is “the end of that kind of creative line” (155).
“The Magic in the Word”: David’s “Dark Side” and the Deconstruction of the Colour Code

It has been long argued that *Call It Sleep* is a religious book about redemption, mystical revelation and reconciliation, whose symbolic structure is the all-prevailing dichotomy between light and darkness, good and evil.¹ This view was divided between those who claimed, like Sam B. Gigurs, that “David’s awakening marks his resurrection as a Jew from a living death” (107) and those who focused on David’s Christian redemption. Mary Edrich Reddening integrates these clashing views when she identifies “an extensive system of pagan and folk myths” that “does not deny the presence of Hebraic sacred themes” (180).² In this chapter, I wish to add to Reddening’s argument. As Bonnie Lyons notes, darkness is associated in the novel with the cellar in David’s building, while light is connected with the street and the roof.³ In what follows, I will first establish a few further links: the relation of light to David’s American rebirth and the connection between the cellar and David’s ignorance/Jewishness. In this way, David’s movement from darkness to light will be examined as symbolic of his movement from Judaism to Americanism. Second, I will demonstrate how Roth deconstructs the colour coding when he pairs darkness with light, Jewishness with Americanism, implies that David’s “dark side” continues to haunt him even after he has been assimilated and presents David’s transformation as superstitious, irrational and magical (in sense of an unreal) phenomenon.

“Swinging Doors:” Light (“or”) Darkness

The cellar (door) is connected with darkness, Jewishness and David’s blindness. About to walk up to his apartment yet terrified of “the darkness, the door, the darkness” (62), David “paused and stared rigidly at the cellar door. It bulged with darkness” (20). Shortly

¹ Leslie Fiedler, recognizing the book’s appeal before its comeback in 1960, declared: “Roth’s book aspires not to sociology but to theology; it is finally and astonishingly a religious book” (“Neglected Masterpiece, 105). This position was confirmed when a letter from Roth was quoted in the introduction to the 1960 edition of *Call It Sleep*: “There is one thing I love above all others, and that is redemption…”(Harold U. Ribalow, xix). Since then, critics such as James Ferguson (211), Leslie Field (22), Sidney knowels (393), Tom Samet (569), Allen Guttman (50-55), Maxwell Geismar (xxxvi-xiv) and especially William Freedman (“Mystical”, 27-30) and Bonnie Lyons (*Henry Roth*, 107-110, “Symbolic,” 202) have emphasized the religious theme of the book and its writing as an act of mystical experience for Roth. In an interview with Jane Howard, Roth stated: “I finished it [Call It Sleep] when I was 27 ... and for the 3/2 years up till then I was in a sort of general mystical state. I had a sense about the unifying force of some power I neither knew nor had to bother to know. It was part of having been an Orthodox Jew. I wasn't formally religious anymore, but still the Hebrew uprightness of that orthodoxy was diffused in me. I could see a gleam wherever I looked.” (76).

² For the critical reception of the book see Materassi 38-39 and Debra Young, 62-71.

³ Bonnie Lyons, “The Symbolic” 186-203.
before he regains consciousness, David sees a “coal! in a cellar” which “made the darkness dark because/ the dark had culled its radiance for that jewel. Zwank!” (430). The word “jewel” contains the word “Jew.” In this manner, the darkness of the cellar is linked to Jews. The cellar door is also associated with David’s inability to see: David “sprang to the cellar door and pulled it open –darkness like cataract, inexhaustible monstrous” (91). Here, “cataract” refers to a disease affecting the eye and one’s sight. It follows that the act of opening the cellar door (and going into the cellar) blinds David.

In contrast, once David goes out of the cellar, he exclaims: “Light! Light in the streets! Could see now” (93). Yet what is it that David “could see”? In order to answer this question I will analyze appearances of sight (and blindness) before and after David’s electrocution. Just before David inserts the scoop, we are told that he was “blind like a sleep-walker” (413). Since the eyes of sleep walkers are open, we may interpret David’s blindness as not only physical but also mental, indicating that David is unaware of his action.

s. What happens after the electrocution? The last paragraph in the book provides the answer:

It was only toward sleep that every wink of the eyelids could strike a spark into the cloudy tinder of the dark, kindle out of shadowy candles of the bedroom such myriad and such vivid jets of images – of the glint on tilted beards, of the uneven shine on roller skates, of the dry light on grey stone stoops, of the tapering glitter of rails, of the oily sheen on the night-smooth rivers, of the glow on thin blond hair, red faces, of the glow on the outstretched, open palms of legions upon legions of hands hurtling toward him...he shut his eyes (441).

The book ends with eyes “kindling” images. Since an “image” can mean a picture which is also mental, the sight hinted at here too is not only related to the eye as a physical organ but also reflects a vision or some kind of understanding. This is emphasised by the very verb “to see,” which also means “to understand.” The fact that David shuts his eyes in the end stresses this reading, since it implies that David’s ability to see the images does not depend on whether his eyes are open. The notion of sleep refers back to David’s blindness before the electrocution (“blind like a sleep walker”) and leads to the juxtaposition of the two

4This paragraph in particular has been read as indicating that David has undergone a redemptive experience. Whereas some call it “a vision that unifies his [David’s] fragmented world” (Walter Allen 447), “a psychic rebirth” (Saperstein 47), hope (Ferraro 121), peace (Walden 272) and the end to David’s difference and to his conflicts (Forgue), others refer to it as a fuller vision, an individual creative act (Immel 333) that makes “beauty out of the ugliness of David’s world” (Freedman 155), “oblivion, a perfect silence or nothingness - a mystic place beyond the concrete realities” (Chametzkey 124). Sollors 156 discusses these readings. However, at the end of his essay, Ita Sheres notes that the “concluding ‘sleep’ episode is the most disturbing to the notion of redemption,” since “how can one equate redemption with sleep?” (77). Similarly, a few critics have claimed that the “search for an apocalypse is ironic and doomed” (Syrkin, 91), since it consists of images of betrayal rather than salvation (Samet, 570). Gary Epstein emphasizes these arguments: “Even logic would reveal to anyone who spends a moment of serious thought on the subject that touching the third rail of a trolley track, is, in fact, nothing at all like a mystical experience”(38).
passages. While in the first paragraph David’s eyes are open yet he is mentally blind, in the last paragraph David’s eyes are shut but he is nonetheless able to (spiritually/mentally) see images. In other words, as opposed to his blindness before his transformation, via the electrocution David has gained awareness or some internal sight. Thus, David’s comment: “Light! Light in the streets! Could see now” (93) may be read as indicating that he “has seen the light,” i.e. he has discovered some truth. In short, David’s movement from the darkness of the cellar to the light of the street at the beginning of the book (“could see now”) is symbolic of his movement from blindness/ignorance to spiritual understanding at the end of the book.

However, the question posed earlier remains partially open: what is the nature of David’s revelation? The image of the door points at a possible answer. While in the cellar, David “clawed his way up the gritty stairs, fumbled screaming for the doorknob. He found it, burst out with a sob of deliverance and flung himself at the light of the doorway” (92). “To deliver” also means to give birth. In this manner, the depiction of David bursting out with a sob is symbolic of a baby crying once it is delivered. The doorknob (handle) which David turns points to the milk handle he will eventually throw into the cracks between the rails and “be born” (411). Yet in what way is David born? Trying to avoid looking at the cellar, David “jumped from the last steps and raced through the narrow hallway to the light of the street. Flying through the doorway was like butting a wave. A dazzling breaker of sunlight burst over his head, swamped him in reeling blur of brilliance” (20). The act of going through the doorway is depicted while using the simile of water (“wave,” “swamped”). As discussed in the previous chapter, David’s assimilation is described in a similar fashion: David “went floating until he was giddy. He shut his eyes” (56); “He shut his eyes. Fragments of forgotten rivers floated under the lids” (23). The expression “he shut his eyes” continues to connect the water/door with David’s spiritual understanding in the last paragraph of the novel (It was only towards sleep...he shut his eyes” 441). Now we can answer the question: David’s revelation at the end of the book is symbolic of his Americanization.

However, this is not that simple. As opposed to two different colours (light and dark) and two cultures (Jewish and American), there are no two doors through which David goes into the light and into the darkness. Rather, as we saw, there is one (cellar) door which is opened from two different directions: into the cellar and out of the cellar. This is emphasised by the description of David’s movement into the dark cellar as “cataract” (91). “Cataract” can also mean water fall. As illustrated, David’s movement into the light is also characterized by
water imagery. Thus, “cataract” implies that the two movements – into the light and into darkness – are like two sides of the same coin. This is apparent in the reappearance of the door during the electrocution: “[...] a door tittering to and fro in the wind” (418); “The shrivelled coal heaver leaned unsteadily from between the swinging door” (420). The image of a door tittering to and fro suggests a door constantly moving in one and then in the opposite direction. Similarly, a swinging door can swing open in both directions. These images call to mind the “reeling blur of brilliance” swamping David once he opens the cellar door to the street, since to “real” means to walk while moving from side to side. In other words, David’s movement from Judaism towards Americanism is not one sided; rather, it is two sided.

This duality is also evident in the following appearance of the door: “The doors of a hallway slowly opened/ Buoyed up by the dark, a coffin drifted/ out, floated down the stoop, and while/ confetti rained upon it, bulged and /billowed” (426). The darkness and the verb “bulged” call to mind the cellar door, which “bulged with darkness” (20). Thrown at ceremonies such as weddings, the word “confetti” clearly indicates new life and new beginnings (rebirth). Here, “buoyed” means encouraged. However, “buoyed” also means to prevent something or someone from sinking. The verbs “drifted,” “floated,” and “rained” can also refer to water, thus pointing to the images of water connected with both directions of the doors.

The Hebrew translation also shows that the “door” expresses two images. In Hebrew, “door” means “delet.” The notion of the swinging doors allows us to read “delet” in both directions: from the beginning (the letter “d”) to the last letter “t” (“delet”) and backwards, from the last letter “t” to the first letter “d” (“teled”). The verb “teled” means to give birth. This corresponds with the description of David opening the cellar door as an act of deliverance. Additionally, “door” contains the English “or,” which, in turn, can refer to the impossibility of having two things together (either-or). This seems to contradict the notion of duality characterising David’s Americanisation. However, “or” is also used to show that a word or phrase means the same as another word or phrase. It is also used to connect different possibilities as in the following description of the “tittering” door discussed above: “A barge

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5Fiedler argues that the family conflict in Call It Sleep signifies the bipolar opposition of Ying and Yang, light and dark, roof and cellar, male and female represented by the two pictures hang on the walls in David’s apartment: a field of cornflowers and ox horns on a plaque (“Myth” 27).

6In Hebrew: delet.

7In Hebrew: teled.
on a stack hawser/ or a gunwale against the dock chirping/because a / boat was passing./ Papa
like nearly./ Or a door tittering to and fro (418, emphasis mine).

Moreover, in Hebrew, “or” means light. Throughout David’s semiconscious state, the
word “or” appears. I will list a few examples: it is contained (twice) in the word “horror”
(441, 426); “mirror” (which appears twice on page 427 and once on page 428); “Horry op!
Horry op” (415). Additionally, the word “door” is pronounced as if it were written as “dor”
(dɔːr). References to “dor” are given during the electrocution. For instance: “dormant” (418);
corridor (427). The description of the corridor embodies the double representation of the
doors: “an endless corridor dwindled into/night” (427). “Corridor” signifies both the
“door/dor” and the Hebrew “or/light.” Here, the corridor (or/light) dwindles into night. When
David sits in the cellars, the darkness is described as night: “Darkness all about him now,
entire and fathomless night” (92). This points to the way in which “corridor” consists of both
light and dark.

The deconstruction of the colour code is also apparent in David’s attempt at
overcoming his fear of the cellar. In one instance, no neighbour is in sight and David realises
that he must pass the cellar and climb up the stairs alone. Thus, he decides to “make a noise”
(62) in order to master his terror. The “noise” is an American patriotic song he learned at
school:

“My country ’tis of dee!” He began running. The cellar door. Louder. “Sweet land of liberty”, he
shrilled, and whirled toward the stairs. Of dee I sing. His voice rose in a shriek. His feet pounded on
the stair. At his back, the monstrous horde of fear. Land where our foders died! The landing; he dove
for the door, flinging himself upon it- threw it open, slammed it shut, and stood there panting in terror
(62).

“My Country ‘Tis of Thee” connects the symbols of light and darkness with the theme
of Americanization. The song expresses nationalism, loyalty and love for America as one’s
native land. When David calls America “my country” he identifies himself as an American
and it is only when David perceives himself as such that he manages to climb up the stairs and
move symbolically from darkness (cellar) into light (Americanism). This is stressed by Genya
when she exclaims “Come here. You’re white!” (62, my emphasis) once David reaches the
apartment.

However, “My Country” also challenges David’s symbolic movement. When David
reaches the landing, we are told that he “dove for the door,” “threw it open” “slammed it shut” and “stood there in panting terror” (92). Here, “dove” means that David moved very
quickly. “Dove” also means jumping into or moving under water. That David “whirled toward the stairs” echoes the description of David going “floating until he was giddy,” thus pointing even more sharply to the water images discussed earlier. David’s double movement (throwing the door open and slumming it shut) calls to mind the swinging doors. Finally, the word “terror” (or/light) strengthens David’s new “white” colour (“you’re white!”), but also points to “or” (door/dor/corridor) signifying David’s newfound identity not in terms of either/or but as Jewish and American.

Superstitious Decay: Black magic and the Evil Eye

The motifs of light and darkness also reveal Roth’s criticism of America’s act of assimilation. When David is forced to go into the cellar, he is petrified: “Darkness all about him now, entire and fathomless night. No single ray threaded it, no flake of light drifted through. From the impenetrable depths below, the dull marshy stench of superstitious decay uncurled against his nostrils” (92). The words “stench” and “decay” are part of America’s discourse of purification, in which David’s Jewish languages are perceived as dirty and contaminated and referred to as a “phonetic decay.” However, the decay is described here as “superstitious.” This implies that America’s attentiveness to the immigrants’ speech is not based on human reasoning or scientific knowledge; instead, it is connected with ideas supernatural in origin.

This is stressed by the portrayal of the act of electrocution as unreal. In chapter one I illustrated how the scene in which David throws the zinc sword into the rails parallels David’s electrocution at the end of the book. The gentile kids David faces at the car track ask David: “C’mon! Yuh wanna see some magic?” (250). Additionally, when the kids go to “take a piss” (251), an unpleasant smell fills the air: “From somewhere in the filth and ruin, the stench of mouldering flesh fouled the nostrils” (252). The stench that “fouled the nostrils” echoes the “marshy stench” that uncurls against David’s nostrils when he is in the cellar. This is underlined by the word “mouldering.” To moulder can mean to decay slowly. This links the stench in the sword scene with the “superstitious decay” in the cellar scene and leads to the reading of the notion of magic as an illusory phenomenon.

Additionally, superstition also characterises David’s revelation discussed earlier. On one occasion, Genya tells David: “The way you watch me,” she said with a laugh, ‘makes me feel as if I were performing black magic. It’s only dishes I’m washing” (38). Genya connects
David’s gaze with black magic. Since we already know that physical sight symbolises mental sight in the book, Genya’s link invalidates David’s “American vision.” Nathan, Bertha’s husband, provides further evidence. When Genya tells Nathan David’s age, Nathan comments: “He’s well grown, no evil eye!” (184). By having Nathan and Genya associate David and his sight with evil demons, Roth presents his protagonist’s transformation as superstitious.

**Sowing Eye: Darkness H(a)unting Light**

Yet in what way is David’s assimilation superstitious? After his mother promises to stay in the doorway so that he will not be afraid to pass the cellar, David walks down the stairs and crosses the hallway into the street. “His heart quickening in his bosom,” David “sprang from the steps, three at a time, more than he had ever tried before, stumbled to his knees, dropping his strap of books, but the next moment shot to his feet again, and sped like a hunted thing to the pale light of the doorway” (58). The image of David “springing,” “stumbling” and “speeding” like a “hunted thing” resembles the image of a hunted animal or person trying to escape. The word “shot” points even more sharply to this image, since it calls to mind the action of firing a weapon at an animal while hunting. Thus, when David “shot to his feet” he was symbolically shot down.

David’s assimilation and his passage from darkness into light (his movement into the street) are compared with being hunted. This can be interpreted as a criticism of America: David, the immigrant, is treated as a hunted animal and forced by America to transform. Yet there is more to it. Via the image of the roof, we shall see that this metaphor also refers to the darkness haunting and following David, even when he has already moved into the light.

As opposed to the cellar, David connects the roof with light:

He stared in breathless irresolution from his own door-way to the roof-door overhead. The clean, untrodden flight of stairs that led up, beckoned even as they forbade; temptingly the light swarmed down through the glass of the roof-housing, silent, untenanted light; evoking in his mind and superimposing an image of the snow he had once vaulted into... Here was a better haven., a more durable purity. (295-296)

However, a few lines into the page, we are told something “a little bit” different:

... the eye sowed it with linty darkness, sowed it with spores and ripples of shadow drifting. (– even up here dark follows, but only a little bit) And to the west, the blinding whorl of the sun, the disk and trumpet, triple-trumpet blaring light. He blinked, drooped his eyes and looked about him. Quiet. Odour of ashes, the cold subterranean breath of chimneys. (– Even up here cellar follows, but only a little bit). (296)

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8 In order to ward off demons, it is customary for Ashkenazic Jewry to add “no evil eye” when they praise or compliment someone.
The sentence “(- even up here dark follows, but only a little bit)” is a repetition of the sentence “(- even up here cellar follows, but only a little bit”). These sentences are similar both in form and in content. Both are written in parenthesis and begin with a dash. As we know, for David, the word darkness is a synonym for the word cellar. By substitution, the two sentences are completely identical. The mere fact that the sentence “darkness follows but only a little bit” is repeated twice indicates that the appearance of darkness within the light is anything but “a little bit.” It seems that even up on the roof, under the “purity of heavens,” David keeps seeing darkness, in spite of the light surrounding him. Darkness haunts David; it does not let go of him.9

Moreover, the “dark eye” following into the light also undermines David’s “vision” at the end of the book discussed earlier: “It was only toward sleep that every wink of the eyelids could strike a spark into the cloudy tinder of the dark, kindle out of shadowy candles of the bedroom such myriad and such vivid jets of images(441). In similar to the “wink” in the ending passage, in the episode on the roof David “blinks.” The image of David drooping his eyes while on the roof calls to mind David’s “shut eyes” at the end of the book. Additionally, right after drooping the eyes David “looked about him.” This also refers to David’s vision, in which he sees images while having his eyes closed, and leads us to read David’s eyesight in the roof scene as not only physical.10 Yet whereas in the last paragraph light is connected with David’s vision, here the light blinds David: “And to the west, the blinding whorl of the sun”(296). Instead of “vivid jets of images” David sees “ashes” and “chimneys,” i.e. death and darkness.

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9This is emphasised by the following description of the roof as comprised of both sides – the dark and the light: “And about were roof-tops, tarred and red and sunlit and red... Sunlight on brow and far off plating the sides of spires and water-towers and chimney pots and the golden cliffs of the street. To the east the bridges, fragile in powdery light” (296). The golden colour, the sunlit/sunlight and the “powdery light” signify the motif of light. In contrast, the “tarred” roof-tops are connected with darkness. Similarly, the “chimney pots” signify the “ashes” traditionally associated with death and darkness. This contrast is stressed by the word “sides,” which describes the “spires” viewed from the roof. Looking at the “sides of spires,” David views the two sides of his assimilation: the light and the dark, the American and the Jewish. That David’s Jewish past continues to haunt him is also apparent in the identification of the roof as the cellar. David is afraid of going up to the roof, just as he is afraid of going down into the cellar. After he opens the door to the roof, David fights his fear: “(– Go back! Run! No! Won’t! G’wan, make a noise! Who cares? G’wan coward!)” (296). David’s desire to run is reminiscent of his desire not to go into the cellar: “The door...No! No! Not there! No...Must...No! No!...Run out...No” (91). At the same time, his wish to “make a noise” in order to overcome his fear of the roof reminds the reader of the scene in which David makes a noise and sings “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” when passing the cellar: “Make a noise. Noise...He advanced. What? Noise. Any” (62).

10After the account of eyes, references to sound are made in the last paragraph: “It was only toward sleep that ears had power to cull again and reassemble the shrill cry, the hoarse voice, the scream of fear, the bells, the thick-breathing…” (441). Likewise is the case with the roof scene:”the disk and trumpet, triple-trumpet blaring light”(296).
This is also evident in the metaphor of the “sowing eye.” “To sow” can mean to put seeds in the ground so that crops will grow. This verb is often used to describe the inability to escape one’s past in the sense that what is sown today is that which will be harvested in the future.11 “Sowing” also reflects continuity and persistence: the seed will keep on growing until it is ready to be collected. This is reflected in the words “ripples” and “spores,” where “a ripple” is a sound or feeling that spreads and gradually increases and “spores” refers to a reproductive cell. Both words point to continuation and increase. The verb “to drift” describes an uncontrollable movement. David’s comments about the eye that “sowed it with linty darkness, sowed it with spores and ripples of shadow drifting” now becomes clearer. It is indicative of David’s inability to escape his past. Just like the seed, his Jewish past is persistent. It keeps growing, gradually spreading, reproducing itself and increasing uncontrollably.

The Gilded Land

The reappearance of David’s past reveals the inability of the act of purification to truly “erase” David’s Jewishness. In this respect, the process of assimilation is presented as a trick, “magic,” something which seems real but is not. The deconstruction of the colour code and the superstitious aspect characterising David’s Americanisation is best demonstrated by the image of the jewellery. While a doctor tries to bring David back to consciousness, David sees a coal:

>“(In a cellar is)
>Dragged [the doctor] the shoes off,
>(Coal! In a cellar is)
>Tore the stocking down, re –
>(Coal! And it was brighter than the
>Path of lightning and milder than pearl,)
>vealing a white puffy ring about the ankle” (930).

David’s burnt ankle marks his electrocution and thus his assimilation. The burn is also depicted as a “white puffy ring.” The colour white (and the “brightness”/“lightning”) points even more sharply to David’s Americanisation. Here, a “ring” refers to a circular shape. However, “ring” also means a circular piece of jewellery. This ties the pearl (“coal! And it was... milder than pearl”), which is also a piece of jewellery, to David’s identity change. Yet how “valuable” is the jewellery hinted at here? Is it, i.e. David’s assimilation, “genuine”? In order to answer this question I will examine appearances of jewellery in relation to Bertha and David.

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11 The metaphor of the seed was particularly used by Thomas Carlyle in order to depict the inevitability and the consequences of the French revolution (389). Inspired by Carlyle, Charles Dickens adopts this view in his novel about the Revolution A Tale of Two Cities. See Ewald Mengel’s study on Dickens’ book.
The words “shoes,” “ankles” and “pearl” link the passage about the coal to a passage about Bertha, David’s aunt: “Her legs landed into her shoes without benefit of ankles. No matter what she wore, no matter how new or clean, she always managed to look untidy. ‘Pearl and cloth of gold would stink on me,’ she confessed” (146). Both passages involve jewellery (pearl, gold) and shoes: while, in the first passage, the doctor takes David’s shoes off, here we are informed about the way Bertha puts her shoes on.

The connection between David, Bertha, jewellery and shoes is continued to be established in the book. For instance, Genya ironically depicts David’s collected items of “whatever striking odds and ends” (35) he finds in the street as “his gems” (35). The association of David’s collection with (cheap) jewellery is emphasised by the sentence preceding the description of the collection: “Trinkets held in the mortar of desire, the fancy a trowel, the whim in the builder” (35). Like David’s cheap, “worn and old” (35) “gems”, trinkets are cheap jewellery of low quality. The description of the “trinkets” surfaces later on in the book, when David goes to visit Bertha. He recognises Kane street, where Bertha lives, by the “gilded mortar and pestle above a certain drugstore window” (308). Even though in the first quote (“mortar of desire”) “mortar” refers to paste used when building walls whereas “mortar” in the second one (“mortar and pestle”) is in place of a bowel, the repetition of “mortar” calls attention to the relation of the two sentences. As cheap jewellery, trinkets can be gilded. This too links the “gilded mortar” to the “trinkets in the mortar.” Additionally, David depicts his items as “worn shoe-soles” (35). This emphasises the link between his collection and the passages above about shoes (taking them off/putting them on), jewellery (pearl and gold) and Bertha.

In similar to David, Bertha too is associated with items of low quality. In one instance, Bertha comes home after buying “half the country’s goods!” (156). “‘Blessed is this golden land,’ she let herself be carried away by enthusiasm. ‘Such beautiful things to wear!’” (156). The notion of gold (“golden land”) and clothing refers back to Bertha’s previous comment about “pearl and cloth of gold” symbolising David’s assimilation (white ring). Additionally, David perceives his trinkets as “very thin dimes” (35). The rosary is depicted in a similar

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12 Roth stated that he split his mother into two—the “good” Genya and the “bad” Bertha: “Actually, my own mother was the source of both of these contrasting female figures. I abstracted one side of my mother, rounded it out and created an aunt who in most respects is the antithesis to David Scherar’s mother” (Bronsen 268). Sollors suggests that the figure of Genya is based on Eda Lou Walton as well, which creates a mother-lover image (162-163).

13 The previous chapter also refers to shoes as symbolic of David’s Americanization.
fashion: “At the floor of the vast pit of silence glimmered the round light, pulsed and
glimmered like a coin” (354). A rosary is a jewel in the sense that it can be made of precious
stones or substances such as gold and silver, may be worn on the neck as a necklace and
appears in the form of a ring as well. It follows that both David’s “gems” (dimes/coin/rosary)
and Bertha’s clothing (gold/jewellery) are signifiers of David’s Americanisation.

However, Bertha’s “golden apparel” turns out to be “a parcel of rags” (156). Bertha
herself is described as a “vulgar” and “raw jade” (151, 188). It seems that Bertha, likewise
David (trinkets), is related to cheap, non-golden and non-precious jewellery. No wonder that
“pearl and cloth of gold would stink” on her. By connecting the notion of non-golden
jewellery (“gilded trinkets”) with David’s assimilation, Roth implies that David’s
Americanisation (“golden land”) is gilded, i.e. it only looks like gold.14 This is emphasised by
the word “mortar” (“trinkets held in the mortar of desire, fancy a trowel”). As a mixture of
sand, water and cement, mortar is used to cover holes in walls. Thus, “mortar” stresses the
fact that David’s Americanisation is just a cover story and nothing more.

The “gilded” motif is embodied in the Hebrew word for coal in the narrative of Isaiah:
“ritspah.” This word contains the Hebrew consonants “tsadi” (“ts”), “pe” (“p”) and “he”
(“h”). These consonants constitute the verb ts.p.h (tsipah), which means to cover something,
mainly in gold.15 This verb also means to anticipate (tsafah) and to expect (tsipah) and when
written, these verbs are identical and can be distinguished via vocalisation only. According to
this reading, the reader expects David’s assimilation to be a cover since the very word coal
“foreshadows” that when David burns his lips, he just gilds (metsapeh) them.

The feature of something that appears to be real but is not calls to mind the notions
of magic and superstition invalidating David’s transformation. Bertha’s confession that “pearl
and a cloth of gold would stink” on her calls to mind the “stench of superstitious decay”
discussed earlier. In addition, having bought her cheap “parcel of rags,” Bertha asks Genya:
“But isn’t it a miracle? Twenty cents and I can wear what only a baroness in Austria could
wear” (157). Bertha associates her “gilded” purchases with magic. Similarly, so does David. 
When David meditates about his “trinkets,” he thinks of a fairytale: “Like Puss in Boots. But

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14 The expression “The Golden Land” appears a few times in the book, especially in the prologue: “I pray thee as
no questions/this is that Golden Land” (9). Whereas Wirth Nesher reads this expression with reference to a
Yiddish poem (City Codes 178), Sollors, “World,” 130, observes that the “golden land” resonates with the
image of the New World as Eldorado and with Emma Lazarus’ “golden door.”
15 In Hebrew: ציפה צפ צפה.
if the mouse changed back into an ogre inside the puss – just before he died – I’m a mouse – an ogre! – Then poor Puss would have swelled and swelled” (36).\textsuperscript{16}

This is stressed by a further reference to fantasy. The depiction of David’s “gems” opens with “trinkets held in the mortar of desire, the fancy a trowel, the whim the builder. A wall, a tower, stout, secure, incredible, immuring the spirit from the flight of arrows, the mind, experience, shearing the flow of time as a rock shears water. The minutes skirted by, unknown” (35). Here, fancy may refer to something desirable. However, “fancy” also means imagination. This is emphasised by the “tower” and “arrows,” which are dominant features in most fairy tales (“Rapunzel”, “Robin hood”). The “unknown minutes” echo tales, which are not restricted to a specific year or even a century, as they usually open with “once upon a time” and end with “and they lived happily ever after.” Likewise, the “sheared flow of time” points to fantasy stories, in which time is “sheared” and characters sleep for one hundred years. The word “fancy” can also mean something that is very expensive (fancy hotel). Since trinkets are showy ornaments which only look expensive but in fact are anything but fancy, the sentence “trinkets held in the mortar of desire, the fancy a trowel” may be understood ironically, indicating the notion of deception characterising David’s identity change. Just like magic, David’s trinkets/jewellery look real – but they are not.

It is evident that David’s transformation is unreal also in the Hebrew translation. After the scene in which Genya hangs the picture of the cornflowers on the wall, David goes down to the street, heading towards the Chinese launderette: “And he drifted on toward the corner drug-store, glanced at the red and green mysterious fluid in the glass vases and turned light. But was wondering. He sifted the mind’s trinkets, searching for one elusive. Was wondering. Birds? Not birds” (174). This passage is connected with magic in more than one way. First, it refers to the word “trinkets.” Here, “wondering” is related to David’s wish to know the “secrets” which he partially overheard his mother and Bertha talk about. However, “wonder” also means something which causes amazement, a marvel. Additionally, this scene takes place at the corner drug-store. “Drugs” in Hebrew means “

\textit{samim}. \textsuperscript{17} This word is

\textsuperscript{16} Additionally, David’s reverie on the river bank is also associated with fairytales: “Sin melted into light…Uh chug chug, ug chug, ug chug! […] Uh chug ug ch ch ch” (248). In Hebrew, when written, the word “ug” is identical to the word “og,” which, in turn, refers to a large person, i.e. ogre. Wirth Nesher suggests that allusions to English sources such as fairy tales, street chants, or songs, are always experienced as foreign and are always ironic” (“Between” 452). Sollors notes that the use of aesthetic childhood materials in \textit{Ulysses} provided a model for Roth’s use of fairy tales and nursery rhymes. See “World” 172 41n.

\textsuperscript{17} In the \textit{Mishna}, “samim” means medicine. See \textit{Mishna}, Yoma, 5:6.
contained in the Hebrew word for magic: “qsamim.” Drugs (especially chemical ones) are related to the unreal in the sense that they present a different reality than the one we usually see. This connection is underlined by the depiction of the red and green fluid (drugs) as “mysterious.” Meaning that which is unknown and has not been explained, the word “mysterious” points to magic, which is, in its use in fairy tales for instance, a phenomenon our mind cannot explain or understand.

Significantly, the drug-store reappears in the book in connection with David’s assimilation and the notion of magic. For example, it is referred to in the passage where David goes to visit Bertha discussed earlier: “gilded mortar and pestle above a certain drugstore window” (308). As demonstrated, the symbol of the “gilded mortar” indicates that David’s Americanisation took place on the surface only. By connecting the drug-store (magic) with this symbol, Roth expresses the deceptive element found in his protagonist’s transformation. The drug-store is also part of the scene in which David discovers his reflection in the shop windows:


We shall see that this passage bears strong similarity to the scene in which David looks for the rosary in the cellar.

“I Am”: the Lost Rosary and “Miss Oozer”

Before elaborating on the similarity between the two scenes, I will first take a close look at the passage in which David searches the rosary. In return for helping him seduce Esther, David’s cousin, Leo (the gentile) promises David a rosary (328). This scene takes place in the cellar under Bertha’s candy-store. Surrounded by the darkness of the cellar, David loses the Christian item. After the rosary “would not reappear” (355) David decides: “I’m gonna get it,” almost audibly, ‘I am!’” (354). A bit later, he reiterates his decision: “I am” (354). Here, the word “I am” is part of the future form “I am going to.” This word is repeated and italicised in a way that attention is drawn to it. This allows one to analyse it not as part of the future form, i.e. to examine it as the form of to be. “I am” also means “I exist.” The appearance of this word after the rosary is lost and before David searches for it indicates the

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18 In Hebrew: סמים קסמים

In Hebrew:
symbolic meaning of this scene: it determines the way David will exist, i.e. live. If David finds the rosary, he will live as Christian/American. If he does not, he will remain in the darkness, i.e. he will not be assimilated and will exist as a Jew.

This symbolism is stressed by the parallel between the way David searches for the rosary and the scene in which he electrocutes himself. After David loses the Christian item, he “sought the depths, strangling. Then darkness, swirling and savage, caught him up like a wind of stone, pitched him spinning among palpable drum-beats, engulfed him in a brawling welter of ruined shapes – that parted – and he plunged down a wailing fathomless shaft. A streak of flame – and screaming nothingness” (354). The word “plunged” points to the plunge of the dipper David thrusts into the rails causing his electrocution: “And now the wavering point/ of the dipper’s handle found the long,/ dark, grinning lips, scraped, and.../ Plunged! And he was running! Running!” (413-414). The “streak of flame” symbolises the flame bursting out as a result of David’s electrocution: “A blast, a siren of light/ within him, rending, quaking, fusing his/ brain and blood to a fountain of flame” (419). The words “spinning” and “engulfed” point to the ember which “spun like a pinwheel...engulfed the margin like a stain” (424). The “swirling darkness” is repeated in the electrocution scene: “Around him now, the cobbles stretched/ away. Stretched away in the swirling/ dark” (426). The “fathomless shaft” into which David plunges indicates the fathomless darkness characterising David’s transformation: “Down into darkness/ darkness that tunnelled the heart of /darkness, darkness fathomless” (429). The “screaming” echoes the scream referred to in David’s semiconscious state: “A thin scream wobbled through the spirals of oblivion” (419). Finally, the “nothingness” is equated with the notion of “nothingness” portraying David’s purification: “And now the seed/ of nothing, and nebulous nothing, and/ nothing .... the voice still lashed the nothingness/ that was, denying its oblivion...And nothingness/ whimpered being dislodged from night...Nothingness beati-/ fied reached out its hands” (429-430).

In order to find out in what way David lives, as a Jew or as an American, we need to discover whether he finds the lost rosary. After his search, David reflects: “Lost it... (Leaden- slow his thought) Lost it... Gone. Gone...” (355). This is obvious: David does not find the rosary. A few lines later, however, we are told something completely different. When David hears Polly approaching the cellar, he “stuffed the beads in his pocket” (355). At this stage the reader is confused: if David lost the rosary, how can he put it in his pocket? It seems that there is a discrepancy between the sentence indicating the loss of the rosary and the one referring to
its being found. It is exactly this inconsistency that makes us question whether David really finds the Christian symbol.

When the rosary falls into the darkness of the cellar, it is described as follows: “Past drifting bubbles of grey and icy needles of grey, below a mousetrap, a cogwheel, below a step and a dwarf with a sack upon his back, past trampled snow and glass doors shutting... sank the beads, gold figure on the cross swinging slowly, revolving, sank into massive gloom” (354). The word “dwarf” can mean a little man with magical powers in stories for children. Thus, the depiction of the rosary sinking “below the dwarf with a sack upon his back” can be read as taken from a fairytale. This is emphasised by the word “glass.” Glass as substance is a common feature in folk tales, particularly in the form of a looking glass and glass coffins.19 The reference to magic, i.e. David’s assimilation as an illusion, is stressed by the word “past,” which is repeated twice: “past drifting bubbles and “past trampled snow.”20 In the description of the rosary sinking, “past” means a position that is further than a particular point. But “past” can also refer to a period before the present time. When considering the symbolism in this scene, Roth’s word choice of “past” in place of position allows one to connect it with “past” in the sense that before assimilating, David had a Jewish past. Characterising the way the rosary falls into the darkness and lost by “past,” Roth hints at the way David’s Jewish past is not lost.21

This is stressed by the connection between the rosary and the superstitious symbol of the Mezuzah. In spite of rabbinic efforts to make it an exclusively religious symbol, the Mezuzah retained its original function as an amulet to ward off demons.22 This is underlined by Leo’s comment on the name “Mezuzah”: “Oh! Izzat wotchuh call em? Miss oozer?” (306). The word “oozer” contains the word “”ozer”, which is pronounced as the word “helping” in

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19 For a discussion of the roles of the magic looking glass and the enchanted and enchanting glass coffin in “Snow White” see Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar 291-297.
20 The words “bubbles” (air ball filled with liquid), “drifting” (in place of water) and “trampled snow” (ice) connect the cellar with water. Interestingly, the depiction of the cellar in David’s building as “superstitious decay” also refers to water/snow: “Darkness all about him now, entire and fathomless night. No single ray threaded it, no flake of light drifted through. From the impenetrable depths below, the dull marshy stench of superstitious decay uncurled against his nostrils”(92). “Drift” can mean a pile of snow formed by the wind. The word flake is also used to describe snow (a flake of snow). This also leads to invalidation of the rosary scene.
21 Clearly, the mere fact that David’s transformation (light) is set in the cellar (dark) is indicative of the two colours portraying his process of assimilation. This is emphasised by the contrast between the black beads of the rosary and the golden cross dangling from it: “There...lay the black beads – the gold cross framed in the glimmering, wan glaze” (402).
22 See Joshua Trachtenberg 146.
By having Leo call the Mezuzah “miss oozer,” Roth emphasises the superstitious aspect of the symbol: it helps protect one’s house from the evil eye.

After Leo names the Jewish symbol “Miss oozer,” he recalls that “Me ol’ lady tore one o’ dem off de door w’en we moved in, and I busted it, an’ cheez! It wuz all full o’ Chiness on liddle terlit paper” (306). After meeting Leo for the first time, David goes to his aunt Bertha hoping that she has some skates he can borrow. Naively thinking that if he accompanies Esther to the toilet she will give him the skates, David agrees to go with her. To his horror, he finds out that the lavatory is in the cellar (313). When Leo discovers that David was in the toilet with Esther and that she let him see “De crack” (326), he convinces David to help him “play bad” with his cousin in the same cellar where the toilet is by offering him the rosary. In other words, the notion of toilet connects the Mezuzah with the rosary.

Linked to the rosary, the Mezuzah associates the Christian item with superstition. Additionally, the toilet scene with Esther is characterised by dirt, darkness, and urine. When Bertha asks David to tell Polly and Esther to clean the kitchen, she calls her step daughters “mouldering hussies” (309). Entering his step cousins’ room, David exclaims: “Gee! Dirty!...The clinging stench of dried urine. Lit by a small window that gave upon the squalid grey bricks of an airshaft, the room was gloomy” (311). The “stench” and the “darkness” of the room echo the “superstitious stench” of the cellar discussed earlier. The notion of “dried urine” and the depiction of the sisters as “mouldering” reminds us of the “mouldering decay” of urine in the sword scene.

The following depictions stress Roth’s disapproval. About to go to the toilet with Esther, David “hurried across the threshold to Esther’s side” (313). As we know, the toilet scene eventually leads David to the rosary. In this way, when David hurries across the threshold this is symbolic of his crossing from Judaism to Americanism, with the Christian cross clearly in mind. However, when the two sisters fight over cleaning the kitchen, Polly warns Esther, who stands up on the bed next to her: “Don’t cross over me. Id’s hard luck” (311). Polly is referring to the superstitious belief that if one is being crossed over, bad luck will follow. In other words, Polly’s warning ties David’s entrance into American society (crossing) in with folklore and superstition.

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23 When written, the vocal “oo” (u) is identical to “o” in Hebrew and the two can be distinguished by vowalization only. The pronunciation of the Hebrew letters “alef” and “ayin” is also identical.
The metaphor of the seed points to this notion. When Bertha asks David to deliver her message to the girls, she explains: “Perhaps you’ll shame the sows into rising” (310). The noun “sow” refers to an adult female pig. “To sow” can mean to put seeds in the ground so that plants will grow. As we saw, the metaphor of sowing reveals that David cannot escape his past. Rather, it comes back and haunts him. A similar wordplay is found in the Hebrew translation. A female pig means in Hebrew “ḥazira.” The root of this word is ḥ.z.r, which is the same root constituting the verb “ḥazar,” which, in turn, means to repeat or return. By having Bertha use the word “sow,” Roth connects “sows” in place of pig (ḥazira) with “sow” in the sense of sowing (ḥazar/to return). This is emphasised by the word “rising.” To rise can mean to move up. It also means to increase. Bertha’s explanation about shaming the sows “into rising” hints at the fact that David’s past does not disappear in spite of America’s efforts to erase it. Rather, it “rises.”

Now we can compare the scene in which David discovers his reflection in the shop windows with the rosary scene. As in the cellar scene, in the window scene we also have light (“only his own face met him, pale oval”) and darkness (“dark eyes”), (a looking) glass (“carry-yes-carry a looking glass”) and the formation of David’s identity, evident in the repetition of “Here I am! Here I am” and David’s “mirror stage.” Additionally, in the window scene David is “hiding,” just as he is hiding in the niche between the bins in the cellar (351-352). In these two scenes a notion of illusion, or an image of something rather than the real thing, prevails. David sees the rosary glimmering on the cellar floor yet it “was gone” and would not reappear just like he sees his reflection in the windows but “can see and ain’t.” Thus, it is not surprising that it is in the window of the drug-store that David observes his reflection. The “enemas, ointment-jars, green globes of the drug-store” which David sees along with his reflection echo the “red and green mysterious fluid in the glass vases” of the drug-store investigated earlier.

The drug-store is also apparent in David’s electrocution. While David is unconscious, three comments are made in the crowded: “‘Jesus! Take ‘im to a drug-store.’ ‘Naa, woik on ‘im right here. I woiked in a power house!’ ‘Do sompt’n! Do sompt’n!’” (422). The words

24 Although pronounced differently, “to sow” and a “sow” are identical when written.
25 In Hebrew: חזרה
26 In Hebrew: ר.ז.חזרה
27 According to Jacques Lacan, a mirror stage is the point at which an infant discovers his reflection in the mirror and which is essential to the development of one’s selfhood (Scott 12-30). It seems that the scene in which David discovers his reflection in the shop windows is reminiscent of Lacan’s theory.
“Jesus” and “power” (which here refers to electric power) stress the symbolism of this scene as signifying David’s Americanisation. The word “something” (sompt’n) is pronounced as “ˈsʌm.” In this way, “som” (“sam”) is similar in pronunciation to the Hebrew “sam,” which means a drug. In addition, the word “power” is related to magic, which, in turn, is the use of special powers. In other words, at the heart of the symbol of David’s transformation (Jesus, electrocution, semiconscious thoughts) Roth hints at the deception characterising David’s assimilation.

“Iyin,” Coins and “Mejick”

In addition to a Christian sacramental, a rosary means a garden of roses. During the electrocution, a rose appears: “As in the pit of the west, the last/ smudge of rose, staining the stem of / the trembling, jagged/ chalice of the night-taught stone with/ the lees of day” (418). I will analyse this passage in detail. The word “pit” links this passage to the paragraph about the rosary in the cellar scene: “At the floor of the past pit of silence glimmered the round light, pulsed and glimmered like a coin” (354, my emphasis). This is stressed by the word “chalice,” which is a large cup for drinking often used in Christian ceremonies. In magic, chalice functions as a cup representing the element of water. This relates the “chalice” to illusion. Similarly, “poisoned chalice” describes something which seems very good at first, but which in fact harms the one receiving it, thus pointing even more sharply to the aspect of deception. That a stone (“night-taught stone”) is also jewellery links this paragraph to the “gilded trinkets” and emphasises the element of pretence found in David’s transformation. This is also evident in the word “pit,” which can indicate extremely low quality (trinkets). Finally, both “stone” and “pit” also mean a seed, which calls to mind the image of sowing and the reappearance of David’s past.

A similar method connecting the rosary with deception is performed earlier in the book. In one instance, David’s neighbours observe something which looks like a coin on the ground of the cellar floor: “ [...] A something silver glimmering on the grimy cellar floor.

28 In The Golden Bough, a book whose influence on Call It Sleep is highly evident (Lyons, 1976, 119, Burke and Redding ), Sir James George Frazer makes an analogy between the “sacred and tabooed persons” and electric charge: “The sacred man is charged just as a Leyden jar is charged with electricity; and exactly as the electricity in the jar can be discharged by contact with a good conductor, so the holiness or magical virtue in the man can be discharged and drained away by contact with the earth, which on this theory serves as an excellent conductor for the magical fluid” (581, my emphasis).

29 Interestingly, sam/medicine appears at the end of the electrocution and towards the end of the book. The intern uses ammonia to wake up David. Although ammonia is not a drug, it is nonetheless used by the intern as medicine. Additionally, the book ends with Albert going to get the medicine the intern wrote down to smear on David’s foot (440).
Little by little, the gleam settled into the round, smudged surface of a coin” (270). This description is almost identical to the depiction of the rosary as a coin in the cellar scene with Leo and Esther: “At the floor of the vast pit of silence glimmered the round light, pulsed and glimmered like a coin” (354). In both passages, an object (which looks like a coin) glimmers on a cellar floor. Additionally, in the scene with David’s neighbours, the kids are described as “fishing” the coin (270). Likewise, looking for the rosary, David “fished” (354). As a pictogram of Christ in Greek, a fish is printed on the box in which the rosary was kept: “But it couldn’t be a chalk box, for David had just enough time to glimpse the word God printed in bold, black letters – though curiously enough the letters were printed right above a large, black fish” (327). The centrality of the image of the fish is evident in David’s obsession with it. After he was promised the rosary, David reflects about it: “But that fish, why was that fish?” (330). Lastly, the fish reappears during the electrocution scene: “...a wooden box with/a sliding cover like the chalk-boxes/in school, whereon a fiery figure/sat astride a fish” (428).

The image of the fish then, continues to link the coin scene to the rosary in the cellar scene. And just as the rosary is associated with magic, pretence and illusion, so does the coin the kids are fishing. While waiting at the entrance to the cellar, David’s neighbors discuss what they would buy if they had the coin: “While kushy fished the rest hitched their tongues in tow of their imagination” (271). The word “imagination” connects the coin with fantasy. This connection is emphasized by one of the kids offering to go to “duh movies” (271), since a film, like a story, involves imagination and often creates images which only look real. The notion of pretence is intensified when the kids explain that you can go to the movies without paying, if “yuh jos’ make believe yuh lookn’ on duh pickchiss outside. An’ w’en dat ticket-chopper ain’ lookin’ – zoo! Yuh go in” (272). By having David’s neighbor fantasize about deceiving when going to the movies, Roth cleverly points to the deception connected with the coin/rosary/ David’s assimilation. “Make belief w’at I had a nickel” (272), one of the neighbours announces. This is stressed by the mere fact that the object in the cellar turns out to be something else than a coin: “An’ maybe id ain’ even a nickel,’ he [Izzy, one of the boys] added waspishly” (272, my emphasis). The adverb “waspishly” contains the word “wasp.” When capitalised, “WASP” means a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant American who is part of the hegemony establishing the discourse on purification and the part of which David wishes to become by assimilating. This enhances the reading of the coins as indicating that
David has not been transformed. *Maybe* the item in the cellar is not even a coin just as *maybe* David has been assimilated; *maybe*.

The association of the coin with the “evil eye” also makes us doubt David’s Americanisation. As discussed previously, the relation of David’s assimilation, signified by his ability to physically (and spiritually) see the light (of America) to black magic/the evil eye presents David’s transformation as superstitious. A similar method is employed in the scene with David’s neighbours. When David first sees the boys kneeling on the iron grate over the cellar, we are told that “all eyes riveted on something beneath” (270). The word “eye” is repeated later on: “eyes again glued to the coin on the cellar floor” (272). The link between the coin and eyes is underlined by the Hebrew translation. A few scenes later on, when David finds out that the object on the cellar floor was not a real coin, he asks Izzy: “W’a wuz id?” (291). The boy answers: “W’a? De nickel? Iyin, like I said” (291). In order to unpack the unintelligible “Iyin” I will look at both Hebrew and English. “Iyin” (‘aɪ.ɪn) is the Hebrew for an eye. When pronounced (‘aɪ.ɪn), “Iyin” is almost identical to the pronunciation of the English word “eying” (‘aɪ.ɪŋ). When the boys try to fish the coin, a few of them suggest “spitting down at the coin to clean it” (272) so it will be easier to distinguish the coin from the dirt and darkness of the cellar. A few lines into the page, after Izzy doubts whether the coin is “even a nickel” (272), Kushy, the boy fishing the coin, threatens him: “I’ll spid in yer eye in a minute” (272). The act of spitting has been long performed as protection against evil demons. Kushy’s threat to *spit* in the *eye* of Izzy because the boy suggests that the item is *not* a coin reveals that David’s assimilation is superstitious and nothing more. In this way, “Iyin” may be read as an abusive form of “lying,” which emphasises the reading of David’s assimilation as untrue and unreal.

That location of the coin/rosary on the cellar floor strengthens this interpretation. The Hebrew word for floor is *ritspah*, which, in turn, is also the Hebrew for the angel’s coal in the

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30 Richard Webster 242.
31 “Iyin” also means “nothing” in Hebrew. This calls to mind the “scream of nothingness” characterizing the rosary in the sense that nothing has happened, i.e. no assimilation has taken place. In Hebrew: יין
32 That David’s assimilation is unreal is also evident in the paragraph ending the book. As discussed, this paragraph opens with an account of eyes: “It was only toward sleep that every wink of the eyelid...could...kindle...such myriad and such vivid jets of images” (441). As a literary term, the word “images” connect the notion of eyes with fiction. “A jet” can also refer to a black mineral used in the jewellery industry. As illustrated, David’s trinkets (“gems”) are described in the book as a coin, thus identified with the rosary. In short, the description of eyes as kindling “vivid jets of images” points to the fictitious element inherent in David’s transformation.
biblical narrative of Isaiah. As demonstrated, *ritspah* embodies the gilded, i.e. not real aspect of David’s assimilation. When David crosses the threshold to Esther’s side, this means that he crosses the floor of the entrance. The Hebrew translation (gilded) emphasises the deception associated with the rosary and suggests that David’s crossing is not what it seems.

Coins continue to reveal the illusory aspect inherent in David’s assimilation. An old Jewish woman asks David to kindle her stove since she has already lighted the holy Sabbath candles and is thus prohibited by Jewish law from lighting any other fire. In return for his help, the old woman rewards David with a penny. In similar to the coin/rosary on the cellar floor, the penny (which is a coin) is “fished out” by David (238). The symbol of the fish is emphasized by the “odor of fish. Stagnancy” (238) filling the kitchen. Referring to an unpleasant smell, the word “stagnancy” connects this scene with the “stench” and superstitious decay discussed earlier. In addition, after the woman approaches David, he reflects: “There was something terrifying and dreamlike about it all. The gingerbread boys the old witch baked” (237). Likewise the “trinkets” paragraph, this scene too is connected with a fairytale. Additionally, a penny is the lowest amount of money. This also links this paragraph to David’s (gilded) trinkets, which are very cheap jewellery, and emphasises David’s assimilation in terms of two stories, golden and gilded.

The ambiguity inherent in David’s Americanization is apparent in a further reference to coins and magic. Having eavesdropped on his mother and Bertha’s conversation about Genya’s former Christian lover, David understands that he has to explain his presence in the front room once the conversation is over. Thus, he pretends to be fascinated by a “trick” performed in the street. He explains to his mother: “That boy? He has a green stocking hat. He burned a doll and he made “mejick.” And now he’s got a piece of iron” (206) which “glittered [glitters] like a bit of metal” (206). A coin is usually made of metal. The verb “glittered” calls to mind the rosary in the cellar which “glimmered like a coin” (354). Used in the saying “all that glitters is not gold,” “glitter” also expresses something which seems to be good on the surface but when you look at it more closely might not be.

When David goes back home after the scene in which he gets lost and is taken to a police station, he assures his anxious mother: “‘No, I can walk, Mama! I can walk, Mama! Mama! Mama!’ The magic in the word seemed inexhaustible” (107). The word “magic” calls to mind David’s mispronounced “mejic.” Thus, although the magic word David refers to is
“Mama,” the notion of magic dominating the book allows us to read “the magic in the word” with reference to David’s assimilation, in which his incorrect pronunciation of words (mejic) is to be corrected, as superstition. In the next chapter we will see how Roth keeps presenting David’s assimilation as fictitious, a mere tale, via the symbol of Albert, David’s father.
Turning the Purifier into the Purified: Albert and the Reversal of Roles

Throughout *Call It Sleep*, Albert Schearl, David’s father, signifies the American and the non-Jew: he wears “American” clothes, speaks English outside of the home and eats non-kosher food. In what follows, I will first show how Roth constructs the figure of Albert as the symbol of David’s assimilation. Secondly, I will demonstrate how Roth simultaneously uses this symbol to undermine David’s Americanization and to present it as mere pretence: a “sickening” and “damaging” lie; crazy and inhuman; an act imposed on David rather than one voluntarily and willingly chosen by him.

**Albert as the symbol of David’s linguistic assimilation**

The first depiction of Albert in the prologue provides us with a detailed description of Albert’s American clothes. Described as “the ordinary clothes the ordinary New Yorker wore in that period” (10), Albert’s clothes are “sober and doll. A black derby accentuated the sharpness and sedentary pallor of his face; a jacket, loose on his tall spare frame, buttoned up in a V close to the throat; and above the V a tightly knotted black tie was mounted in the groove of a high starched collar” (10).

American ready-made clothing played an important role in the process of assimilation. According to Katherine Stubbs, American clothing massively produced in sweatshops functioned as the “testimony of an immigrant’s new American status, the external proof of economic and cultural viability” (157). In this view, Albert’s American “sober and doll” clothes would have been perceived by European immigrants as an ethnic marker and would have been attributed an almost magical transformative power. Thus, the detailed

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1 The role of clothing in the process of Americanization was part of an economic discourse within which learning to consume was believed to be as important a step as the acquisition of the English language. Since East European immigrants were the ones labouring in sweatshops, they were expected to be both the producers and consumers of clothing. See Katrina Irving’s study. For a further discussion on the significance of ready-made clothing in Jewish immigrants’ lives see Elahi Babak, *The Fabric* and Sydney Stahl Weinberg, who examines readymade clothing mainly as a point of conflict between immigrant daughters and their parents.

2 Henry Ford’s well known ceremony for the graduates of his English school exemplifies this transformative power of ready-made American clothing. John Higham describes the ceremony: “The students acted out a pantomime which admirably symbolized the spirit of the enterprise. In this performance a great melting pot (labelled as such) occupied the middle of the stage. A long column of immigrant students descended into the pot from backstage, clad in outlandish garb and flaunting signs proclaiming their fatherlands. Simultaneously from either side of the pot another stream of men emerged, each prosperously dressed in identical suits of clothes and each carrying a little American flag” (248). Central to this pageant is the adoption of new clothes which performs a ritual erasure of the immigrant’s past.
description of Albert’s American “black derby”, “loose jacket” and “black tie” emphasizes his new American status from the very outset of the book.

Since Albert is characterized by American clothes, it is no wonder that he is also characterized by the street, as the latter, as I have already discussed in chapter two, signifies English. Throughout the book, it seems that Albert is unable to work indoors. Constantly losing his jobs as a printer and having the press almost cut off his finger, Albert decides that “whatever work I do hereafter, it’s going to be outdoors…But outdoors always…” (137). Albert finds a job as a milkman and finally manages to keep this job. Given Albert’s lack of social skills and his statement that “I have no fortune with men” (137), it seems that his decision to work outdoors stems from his wish to be “alone if I can” (137). However, there is more to it.

Considering Albert’s new American status, Albert’s wish to work in the street also reflects his wish to become an American by acquiring English. Thus, it is not surprising that Albert’s “milk tray” appears during David’s final transformation. While unconscious, David heard that the “milk tray jangled. Leaping he/ neared. From roof-top to roof-top/over streets, over alley ways ,over/areas and lots, his father soared with/a feathery ease” (426). The description of Albert soaring “over streets” and “over alley ways” connects the milk tray with the street. Indeed, what is riding a milk wagon and commanding the horse if not symbolically reigning over the street, that is, having command of the English language? What is delivering milk and riding from corner to corner, alley to alley, area to area, knowing the shape and structure of all streets in the city if not symbolic of acquiring English, knowing its different grammar, forms and structures?

Looking like the “ordinary New Yorker”, Albert also strives to eat like one. Telling Genya about the first time he spoke in English, Albert recalls how he used to sit in beer saloons and “listen to the others- In beer saloons they speak loudly. And one day I grew bold enough to answer one who was drunk. And he thought I was too. Then I knew I had made a beginning” (336). Genya suspects that while sitting in American beer saloons Albert ate non-kosher food. She says ironically: “Good kosher food they gave you” (336). Albert confirms this suspicion: “When you spend fifteen cents a day to keep the breath in your body, you get over asking if the rabbi’s blessed your meat” (336).
We shall see that looking, speaking and eating like a non-Jew, Albert does not allow David to dress, speak or eat like a Jew. Before we are given a detailed description of Albert’s American clothes, we are told about Albert’s appearance: “There was very little that was unusual” (10), as he “had evidently spent some time in America and was now bringing his wife and child over from the other side” (10). Albert’s American clothes were usual, according to period Jewish American immigrants’ literature.

A common element found in Jewish American writing set at the turn of the twentieth century is a focus on clothing as a cultural identifier. Different and sometimes opposing ethnic backgrounds are often signified by a difference in clothing, leading to polarizations between East European vs. Anglo-Saxon or Jewish vs. American. In general, the different clothing worn by the Jewish husband and wife symbolise these opposing backgrounds.

Arriving earlier in America and striving for assimilation, the husband is characterised by “American clothes” and a shaved beard. However, arriving later on with the children, the wife is typically characterised by “European” and “Jewish clothes.” This marked contrast between the New World (the husband’s American clothes) and the Old World (the wife’s Jewish clothes) is mostly evident on the wife’s arrival at Elis Island. Meeting his family after spending some time in America, the assimilated husband is disgusted at the Jewish markers of his family and tries to alter or destroy them. Meanwhile, the wife is shocked at her husband’s non-Jewish appearance and his shaved beard. This is the case in Abraham Cahan’s Yekl: A Tale of a New York Ghetto as well as in Roth’s Call It Sleep, yet, as we will see, with a slight difference.

“Jake”⁴, the Jewish Americanised protagonist of Cahan’s novel, who “was freshly shaven and clipped, smartly dressed in his best clothes and ball shoes” (33), is about to meet his wife and child on Elis Island after spending a few years in the States. He is aghast at the “Jewish” sight of Gitl, his wife: “his heart sunk at the sight of his wife’s uncouth and un-American appearance. She was slovenly dressed in a brown jacket and skirt of grotesque cut, and her hair was concealed under a voluminous wig of a pitch-black hue” (34)⁵. Shocked by

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³By “American clothes” I refer to the ready-made, identical clothing produced in sweatshops. In contrast, “Jewish clothes” consisted of outlandish, hand-made garments. The Jewish female immigrant also wore wigs.
⁴ “Jake” is the way “Yekl”, Cahan’s protagonist, calls himself.
⁵ According to Jewish Law, Orthodox Jewish women have to cover their hair either by wearing a wig, hat, or handkerchief as part of the modesty standard called Tzniut. The source of this law and its application to either
Jake’s shaved beard (“Oi a lamentation upon me! He shaves his beard!”6), Gitl is forced by Jake to take off her “Jewish” wig and to replace it by a more “subtle” Jewish marker, that is, a handkerchief7: “All the while the operation lasted he [Jake] stood with his gaze on the floor, gnashing his teeth with disgust and shame” (37).

Similarly, Genya is so shocked by Albert’s non-Jewish appearance that she does not even recognise him. She exclaims: “You look so lean, Albert, so haggard. And your mustache- you’ve shaved” (11)8. Marking Albert’s American clothes as well as Genya’s shock at his non-Jewish appearance, Roth places the two within the discourse on clothing/appearance and ethnicity, where Albert signifies “America” and Genya signifies the non-American, the Jew. However, while Gitl is marked by her Jewish clothing, Genya, unusually for this archetype, is marked by her American ones.

As opposed to Jake, Albert sends his wife American clothes before she arrives in America. Genya’s clothes “were American- a black skirt, a white-shirt waist and a black jacket. Obviously her husband had either taken the precaution of sending them to her while she was still in Europe or had brought them with him to Ellis Island where she had slipped them on before she left” (10). By wearing American clothes, Genya is excluded from the discourse on clothing and ethnicity and her role in it as the Jew. Yet Genya is precluded from this discourse only for David to be included in it. Having Albert send clothes for his wife only while forgetting to send some for his child, Roth establishes David as the “East European” Jew.

Unlike Genya, David wears foreign clothes: “Only the small child in her arms wore a distinctly foreign costume, an impression one got chiefly from the odd, outlandish, blue straw hat on his head with its polka/dot ribbons of the same colour dangling over each shoulder” (10). David’s hat signifies his (as well as his mother’s) non-American background: “Except for this hat, had the three newcomers been in a crowd, no one probably, could have singled out the woman and child as newly arrived immigrants” (10).

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6 “Yekl”, p. 36.
7 Although Orthodox Rabbis debate whether the wig, made of human hair, is modest enough, it is still worn by Ultra Orthodox women such as National Haredi, while the hat and the handkerchief are usually worn by less Orthodox ones.
8 In spite of the similarities between Cahan’s Yekl and Roth’s novel, there are also some differences. For the purpose of my paper I focus on the two arrival scenes and the way they are painted.
David’s hat stands for Gitl’s wig. First, both the hat and the wig mark the non-American background of David and Gitl. Secondly, according to Jewish tradition, a hat, or likewise a handkerchief, can substitute for the wig as a covering for the hair of married Jewish women. We have seen that following her husband’s orders, Gitl replaces her wig with a handkerchief. David’s hat has clearly the same function as Gitl’s wig: both symbolise similar Jewish clothing contrasted with American one. Thirdly, both the hat and the wig disgust the American husband/father. Echoing Jake’s disgust at and shame for Gitl’s wig, Albert is appalled by David’s hat. After sarcastically asking Genya “where did you find that crown” (14), Albert exclaims: “Can’t you see that those idiots lying back there are watching us already? They’re mocking us! What will the others do on the train? He looks like a clown in it!” (15). Finally, both the hat and the wig are taken off by Albert and Jake respectively. Perceiving David’s hat as a marker of his being a non-American, an immigrant and a Jew, and alert to his own American clothes, Albert is also attentive to non-American ones. After telling his wife to “take that straw gear off his head” (15), Albert throws away David’s hat, just like Jake forces Gitl to take off her wig: “His long fingers scooped the hat from the child’s head. The next instant it was sailing over the ship’s side to the green waters below” (15).

The Hebrew translation also points to the function of David’s hat as indicating David’s Jewish identity. “kov’a” is the Hebrew for hat. In the bible, “kov’a” is written as “gov’a,” meaning a helmet or a metal head cover (the pronunciation of “k” and “q” is identical in Hebrew). “Qov’a” is constituted of the same consonants as the verb “qove’a” (q.v. ‘a), which, in turn, means to determine. David’s hat then, declares his Jewishness.

However, if the hat marks David’s Jewish identity, what does it mean when it is thrown away? In order to answer this question, we need to take a closer look at when the hat is thrown away and by whom. The fact that David’s Jewish hat is thrown away at the beginning of the book could be interpreted as foreshadowing David’s future assimilation, in which he is symbolically stripped of his Jewish markers at the end of the book. The mere fact

9 According to Jewish law, not only women are obliged to cover their hair but also men, although for slightly different reasons. Either by wearing a hat or a skullcap, Jewish males are instructed to cover their heads “in order that the fear of heaven may be upon you” (Talmud, Shabbt, 156b). Signifying the fact that the Divine Presence is always above, a hat is perceived as one of the most seminal Jewish markers in Jewish tradition and religion (Kidushin, 31.a). According to the Shulhan Aruch (codification of Jewish law), Jewish men are required to cover their heads and should not walk more than four cubits (unit of length) bareheaded, since covering one’s head is described as “honouring God” (Orach Chaim, 2:6). Modifying the ruling of the Shulhan Aruch, the Mishna Berurah adds the requirement that a head covering must be worn even when traversing less than four cubits and even when one is simply standing still, whether indoors or outside (2:6).
10 In Hebrew: כובע
11 In Hebrew: קובע
that it is the newly assimilated Albert who throws away David’s hat marks Albert’s wish to assimilate David. Already wearing, talking, and eating like an American, Albert, just like America, also strives for assimilation. The answer to the question now becomes clear: David’s hat being thrown away at the beginning of the book points to his transformation and to Albert’s/America’s desire to Americanize him. This is also evident in the fact that it is Albert’s milk dipper that David throws into the cracks between the rails. Signifying his new job in the street, the milk dipper symbolizes Albert’s new American status. By throwing away his father’s American symbol at the end of the book, David mirrors his father, who throws away David’s Jewish symbol at the beginning of the book. We will see that, standing for America, Albert wishes to throw away not only David’s hat but all of David’s Jewish markers.

Albert does not allow David to wear his Jewish hat, nor does he allow David to speak Yiddish, one of the languages of the Jew. After being fired, Albert sends David to pick up his clothes and money from his previous workplace. When David begins to “repeat his [Albert’s] instructions in Yiddish”, Albert interrupts him, instructing him to “say it in English, you fool!” (25).

In addition, throughout Call It Sleep, Albert constantly sends David to the street and it is in this street that he “leaves” David in the end. Unable to stay in the house while his father is there, David is “forced” by his father’s mere presence to leave his home, where he can speak in Yiddish, and go down to the street, where he can only be understood in English: “He! See him! No! No! Go Down! Quick, before he comes! (289). David is also afraid of his father abandoning him in the street: “What if his father should abandon him, leave him in some lonely street. The thought sent shudders of horror through his body” (24). In order to escape his father’s whip, David has no other choice but to run to the street: “Run! Run Down! Run! Run!” (402). He is unable to return home because he will be whipped to death by Albert.

Albert also forces David to eat. After hearing from his wife that David “has eaten very little today”(73), Albert asserts that “well, he’ll eat now” (73). Albert then proceeds to threaten David: “Swill your soup like a man, or I’ll ladle you out something else instead” (74).

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12 As discussed in the introductory chapter, David’s Jewish languages consist of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish. Interestingly, Albert does not forbid David to speak Hebrew and Aramaic. In fact, he even initiates David’s acquisition of these languages in cheder. Albert’s connection with Hebrew will be dealt with later on in this chapter.
and warns him to “take heed!” (74). Albert eventually asks David severely: “Are you going to eat?” (74). Not daring to refuse, “David picked up the spoon and forcing himself, ate” (74). Albert associates David’s lack of appetite with staying at home. He asks: “Is it any wonder he [David] won’t eat. He moulders in the house all day!” (77). Since at home David speaks only Yiddish, his eating indicates his movement outwards to the street, where he speaks English.

It could be argued that Albert successfully manages to assimilate David. By the end of the book David’s Jewish clothing has been thrown away, he speaks in English, goes down to the street and eats when he is told to. However, it is the way in which Albert tries to assimilate David and the way in which David reacts to this attempt at assimilation that indicate precisely the opposite: his non-assimilation and the undermining of the very nature of this assimilation.

**Only Make-Belief: David’s Assimilation as a “Strange Tale”**

Albert tries to assimilate David by force. Ordering Genya to take off David’s hat (“will you take that off when I-“), Albert also commands David to speak in English and threatens to beat David unless he eats the soup. Finally, Albert obliges David to go down to the street by nearly whipping him to death. That is, it is not David who throws away his hat nor is it David who chooses to speak in English, eat the soup, or go down to the street. Leaving David no other choice but death, David is forced to go to the street and to “die” linguistically, ironically replacing a physical death with a linguistic one. This marks David’s helplessness and his inability to resist the pressure imposed on him. Unable to refuse, yet unwilling to obey, David does not want to go down to the street to meet his father after picking up his belongings. Forced to “go down” and report to his father on his meeting with his father’s former colleagues, David hesitates, yet has no choice: “But he must go down; he must meet him; it would be worse for him if he remained on the stair any longer. He didn’t want to go but he had to” (27). Certainly, remaining on the stairs would be worse for David; if he stayed on it any longer he would indeed die, just as if he stayed in his house while being beaten to death by his father.

The way David obeys his father’s orders reveals his disobeying them. Asked by his father whether his former colleagues said anything about him, David lies: “No, Papa’, he answered hurriedly. ‘Nothing, Papa’” (28). Not having convinced Albert entirely, David “knew that while his father’s eyes rested upon him he must look frank, he must look wide-
eyed, simple” (28, my emphasis). By looking “frank”, “wide-eyed”, and “simple,” David knows how to lie to his father without giving away the lie.

David’s knowledge of lying is already apparent in the Hebrew translation of David’s name. The name “David” consists of two syllables: “Da” and “vid.” The pronunciation of the first syllable “da” equivalents the pronunciation of the imperative of “know” in Hebrew. This wordplay is evident in Call It Sleep. When Roth writes about Genya calling David from the window, he does not write David’s name as usual (“David”) but as follows: “Da-a-a-vid! Da-a-a-vid! (264). By dividing David’s name into syllables, Roth draws our attention to the first syllable “Da” and thus to the Hebrew meaning of it.

The significance of this syllable is emphasised in the book. After his mother calls him home, David reflects that “that was strange. She almost never called him from the window” (264). The singularity of this act calls attention to the name “Da-a-a-vid” and stresses the importance of its divided form. Moreover, Genya calls David home only to tell him that he is to join his father on the milk wagon. As we know, Albert’s milk wagon is indicative of Albert’s new American identity. This ties in the name “Da-a-a-vid” with David’s assimilation and points to David’s knowledge of lying about it. This is also noticeable in David’s own comment on knowing how to turn something (truth) into something else (lie): “You had to know everything and suddenly what you knew became something else” (138, my emphasis).

David also knows how to lie to his father about speaking in English. As we have seen, Albert sends David to pick up his belongings and forces him to repeat his instructions in English. David convinces Albert that he knows what he is to do: “When he had satisfied his father that he knew them [the instructions], he was sent in” (25, my emphasis). The verb “to satisfy” may mean to make someone believe that something is true. Therefore, by “satisfying” his father, David may only make his father believe that he is fluent in English.

David tells many other lies throughout the book. He hides his food in his pockets, pretending to have eaten it because he “was hungry” (290). While trying to avoid meeting Leo in the street, David lies to his mother and tells her that a boy named Kushy bullies him. After

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13 The pronunciation of the Hebrew letter “alef” is almost identical to the pronunciation of the Hebrew letter “ayin.”

In Hebrew: דוע
making his mother believe his lie, David also makes his father believe it. When Albert hears about the boy who bullies his son, he does not rebuke David but rather takes his part: “-Took my part. Gee!...She told him and he knows I lied and he took my part. What did I- fooled him maybe?” (334). After having been nearly electrocuted and having his foot burnt, David lies to his mother when she asks him if he is in pain: “‘N-no, he lied’” (437). Additionally, David eavesdrops on his mother and his aunt’s conversation about Genya’s former Christian lover. When confronted by his mother, David pretends not to have listened: “Pretend he had just been looking out all this time, that he hadn’t heard” (205). Finally, after lying so often, it is towards the end of the book that David tells his biggest lie. Telling Reb Yiddel that his mother is in fact his aunt and his father is a Christian organist, David lies about his Jewish origins.

   It is his father, the symbol of his assimilation, that David deceives. Unlike his mother or even Reb Yiddel, Albert believes David’s lies. Treating David’s new origins as “the wandering of a child” (381), a “jest”, “a tale of a- of a hunter and a wild bear!” (387), both Genya and (eventually) Reb Yiddel are not fooled by David’s “strange tale” (387). Albert, however, is deceived by it. Asking Genya “whose is he? The one you are holding in your arms? (391), Albert provides the answer: “An organist somewhere”(401).

   As opposed to Albert, Genya does not believe her son’s lies. Before lying about Kushy, the boy bullying him, David lies to his mother about the fact that nothing prevents him from going down to the street. Genya knows that David is lying again when he says that he does not want to go down because he does not like his neighbours. She asks him: “Now, what’s the trouble? What is it?” (331). As David keeps lying, answering that “nothing’s the matter” (331), Genya insists: “I know there is” (331). In other words, we are told that Genya knows when David lies and in spite of his efforts to make her believe him, she does not. Thus, when David lies about Kushy, although Genya pretends to believe him eventually, the reader is nonetheless instructed to doubt her belief in the lie.

   That Genya knows when David lies is also apparent at the end of the book, just after David’s electrocution. After asking David if his foot hurts, Genya wants to know: “what made you do it?” (437). David answers: “I don’t know, mama” (437). David’s answer is followed by the assertion that “the answer was true” (437). Given that this true answer is preceded by a false one (David’s lie about the pain in his foot) and considering David’s many lies throughout the book, it might be suggested that despite the declaration of David’s sudden
honesty, David’s answer is anything but true. Genya’s neighbour, who sits next to Genya, tells her with “grating, provocative pity”: “Poor Mrs. Schearl! Why ask him? Don’t you know?” (437, my emphasis). Alluding to Genya’s knowledge of her son’s lies, the neighbour emphasises the fact that once again, David is lying, and that once again, Genya knows it.

It is evident that Genya “knows” when David is lying when she asks him an ironic question in the scene where Natahn, Bertha’s American fiancé, is about to pay the Schearls a visit. In this scene, David is not excited about Bertha’s future assimilated husband and Genya reproaches him for this when she comments: “You’ll have an American uncle then. A yellow one. Did you ever think of that? Of course not! Ach, you!” (173). When David remains silent, wondering “why that should excite anyone” (173), Genya tells him: “I really believe...that you think of nothing. Now honest, isn’t that so? ...You see, you hear, you remember, but when will you know?”(173). I would like to examine this question in more detail.

David’s lack of interest in his new American uncle indicates his lack of interest in assimilation. Thus, it is exactly when David does not pretend to be involved in his purification that Genya refers to his lack of knowledge. Given that Genya knows that David already knows how to lie, it is obvious that Genya’s question “when will you know?” is ironic and is meant to emphasise David’s knowledge of lying rather than his lack of knowledge. In other words, it is when David does not lie about his assimilation that Genya reminds him of his lies. From this perspective, Genya’s sarcastic declarations of honesty (“I really believe”, “Now, honest”) indicate that she means the very opposite of what she says: she is hinting at David’s reception. Moreover, after being asked this question, David reminds himself that “she was only joking” (173). By having David perceive Genya’s question as a joke, Roth strengthens the notion that Genya does not really mean what she says. That is, Genya does not mean that David does not know how to lie but rather that he does.

David’s response emphasises the true nature of Genya’s question. Eventually, David answers: “I am going down” (173). At this stage we are aware of the fact that going down to the street signifies David’s Americanisation and that Genya knows that David constantly lies about it. This means that David’s answer and his mother’s true question coincide: they are both concerned with David being untruthful regarding his purification and Genya’s knowledge of it. Therefore, it is as if David meant to answer: “We both know that I already know how to lie. I’ll try to keep up this charade a little bit better in the future!”
Genya’s question seems to be a warning to David that he sometimes lets the mask slip, and that he needs to be more careful, especially around Albert.

Lying about his assimilation, David obeys his father’s orders while subversively disobeying them, thus employing a clear method of hiding (lying) which in fact reveals to us more than it conceals. Hiding the food and only pretending to have eaten it, David conceals, yet also reveals, his real desire not to purify his Jewish languages. In what follows, I would like to take a close look at the exact way David eats the soup his father forces him to eat in order to demonstrate Roth’s process of concealing and revealing, obeying and disobeying.

**Not Eating the Soup: Staining the Purified, Purifying the Stained**

Compelled by his father to “eat now” (73), David “picked up the spoon and forcing himself, ate” (73). Yet in what way exactly does he eat? What does the way in which he eats conceal as well as reveal? When Albert realises that David is not about to come in and eat with them, he calls him to do so with the “dangerous accent of annoyance” (73, my emphasis). The word “accent” has two meanings: tone, or air, and the particular way in which one pronounces words. Thus, the word choice of “accent” in place of “tone” allows one to connect it with “accent” in the sense that one has a certain accent when speaking in a specific language. By playing on this duality of meaning, Roth links Albert’s “accent of annoyance” (“tone”) with David’s assimilation, in which his Jewish pronunciation, or accent, is to be purified.

However, Albert’s “accent” is also perceived as “dangerous.” As we have seen, “danger” is already a state with which David is familiar in connection with his father earlier in the book: the danger that would await him if he stayed on the stair any longer and failed to report to his father on his former colleagues. In other words, Albert’s “dangerous accent of annoyance” informs David about the forthcoming obligation to assimilate and the danger awaiting him once he refuses, by not eating. And just as David only pretends to give his father a true account of what was said about him by his colleagues, so does he only pretend to truly eat the soup.

David eats the soup in such a way that, paradoxically, marks the non-eating of it. After dipping the spoon into the soup, David lifts it to his lips. Yet “instead of reaching his mouth, the spoon reached only his chin, struck against the hollow under his lower lip, scalded
it, fell from his nerveless fingers into the plate” (73). Eating the soup while not eating it, David spills the soup all over and stains his clothes: “A red fountain splashed out in all directions, staining his blouse, staining the white table cloth. With a feeling of terror David watched the crimson splotches on the cloth widen till they met each other” (73).

David’s pretense of eating the soup (spilling) is linked to his Americanization. The “red fountain” characterising the soup is identified with the “fountain of flame” depicted during David’s final transformation: “A blast, a siren of light/within him , rending quaking, fusing his brain and blood to a fountain of flame-“ (419). Before directing the spoon at his chin, David “dipped the spoon into the shimmering red liquid” (73, my emphasis). The verb “to dip” means to put something into a liquid. This connects it with the noun “dipper”, which is a ladle used for dipping. By dipping the spoon into the red soup, then, David parallels the act of thrusting the dipper into the rails. However, in what way is the purification mere pretence? Based on the connection between clothes, ethnicity and language, we will see that instead of purifying his Jewish languages, David symbolically stains them.

Pretending to eat, David stains his clothes: “A red fountain splashed out in all directions, staining his blouse, staining the white table cloth” (73). I have already demonstrated how David’s clothes signify his being a Jew while Albert’s clothes indicate his being an American. Jacques Derrida’s link between clothes and language strengthens the notion that clothes also signify language, namely David’s Jewish language(s) and Albert’s English. Derrida notes that the word “text” is derived from the Latin textus, meaning “cloth” (tissu), and from texere, meaning to “weave.” The textile, i.e. the interweaving of each sign with another sign, “is the text produced only in the transformation of another text” (Positions 26).

14 Considering the linguistic characteristic of clothes, the “accentuating” quality of Albert’s clothes depicted in the prologue now becomes clearer. Described as ordinary American clothes, Albert’s black derby “accentuated the sharpness and sedentary pallor of his face” (10, my emphasis). The word “accentuated” contains the word “accent” and emphasises the link between clothes and language: Accentuating his face, Albert’s clothes also “accentuate” his English pronunciation.

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14 In her work on Mary Antin’s The Promised Land Babak Elahi notes that Antin’s movement toward text and literacy is juxtaposed with her sister’s movement toward textile (labor in sweatshop) in order to give meaning to their assimilation into industrial America. See Elahi, “The Heavy.”
When David *stains* his clothes he in fact stains, or dirties, his *Jewish languages*. In having David do so, Roth reverses the roles and turns the act of purification into an act of staining. David also dirties “the white table cloth” (73). Part of Genya’s kitchen and the domestic sphere, the “table cloth” is linked to Yiddish. However, the cloth is *white*. The whiteness of the cloth signifies the “white washing,” purifying or cleaning, of David’s Yiddish/Jewish languages. It also represents Albert’s/ America’s desire is to “whiten” David, assimilate him and turn him into a “white” member of society. By staining both “white America” (the purifier) and Yiddish/Jewish languages (the purified), Roth inverts the roles and turns the purifier and the purified into the sinner or the stained one. Challenging the concepts of the “clean” and the “dirty”, Roth undermines the notion of a purifier, pure and stained.

Roth reveals the *pretence* of having clear knowledge and a clear definition of clean and dirty, pure and impure when in fact such knowledge is impossible. Yet if this is the pretence, then what is the *real story*? In other words, what is the true nature of David’s Americanization? As we shall see, the pretence of eating the soup also presents David’s linguistic purification as harmful, nauseating, insane and brutal.

**Turning the Sick Patient into the Healthy Doctor and the Healthy Doctor into the Sick (and Violent) Patient**

In order to understand the way in which Roth presents David’s linguistic purification as damaging, we first need to examine the second passage dealing with David’s pretence of eating the soup. David’s staining of his clothes/Jewish languages resurfaces during his final transformation: “*Like the red pupil of the eye of darkness, the ember/dilated, spun like a pinwheel, expanding, expanding/ till at the very core, a white flaw rent the scarlet/tissue and spread, engulfed the margin like a stain*” (425). We will see that the two “staining scenes”-the soup scene and the one taking place during David’s final transformation- are closely connected, although they also slightly differ.

The link between David’s staining of his clothes in the soup scene and the “spinning pinwheel” in the electrocution scene is striking. The verb “to spin” has a few meanings. It can mean to change form or ideas. It can also mean to spin a story. These two meanings link the “spinning pinwheel” to transformation and to language (story). In this view, the “spinning pinwheel” signifies David’s linguistic transformation, just as the scene in which
David’s stains his clothes does. “To spin” can also mean to spin a thread. This ties in the “spinning pinwheel” with clothing.\footnote{It is interesting that the method of spinning and needlecraft was linked to the Old-World, while industry signified the new one. Consequentially, assimilation was seen as part of a historical movement from craft to industry and from hand to mass production. In this way, immigrants working in sweatshops could see their work as part of a material historical narrative. See Jane Addams 173.} Lastly, both descriptions refer to a process of staining which involves white (“white flaw”, “white table cloth”) and red colours (“crimson”, “scarlet”).

In spite of the similarities, the two depictions differ on one point. As opposed to the first description of staining (the soup scene), in which the white cloth is reddened, or stained, by the “crimson splotches”, in the second description (David’s unconscious thoughts) the scarlet tissue (cloth) is whitened, as it is stained by a “white flaw”. As we have seen, the soup scene is used by Roth to invert the roles of the purifier (white) and the purified (stained). From this perspective, the “spinning” of the pinwheel indeed means telling a yarn or a tale: the tale about David’s purification of his stained Jewish languages results in his acquisition of pure (or is it stained now?) English. However, it could be argued that in the second description Roth confirms the act of purification as he whitens the stained (scarlet tissue). Yet there is more to it.

Whitening the scarlet tissue, “the white flaw rent the scarlet/tissue and spread, engulfed the margin like a stain-“ (425, my emphasis). A “stain” can also mean “damage”. By depicting the act of whitening as damage, Roth stresses the harm done to the immigrant once his languages have been purified and lost. In doing so, Roth criticises the act of purification and undermines the (American) perception of it as improvement, correction, or even a remedy. Moreover, Roth also presents David’s assimilation as the opposite of a remedy, since the eating of the soup also sickens David: “The very thought of eating sickened him”(73). Nevertheless, David is compelled to eat and is “almost on the verge of a nausea” when he “picked up the spoon and ate”(74). Directing the spoon at his chin rather than at his mouth, David in fact remedies the sickness caused by the act of eating.

The images of “sickness”, “nausea” and “remedy” are located in the American discourse on purification, in which the link between linguistic deviation and physical and mental disease was seen as more than a mere metaphor. Major studies of phonetics at the time in which Call it Sleep takes place connected dialectical accents with actual, medical speech dysfunctions. Principals of Speech and Dictionary of Sounds, for example, perceived
“calvicular and unhealthy respiration” as the cause for “Alphabetic Mispronunciation” (17, 25). Similarly, the critic John Bechtel noted that slang, “like chicken-pox or measles, [is] very catching, and just as inevitable in its run” (13). Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. claimed that the immigrants’ use of “cheap generic terms” is “at once a sign and a cause of mental atrophy” (275). Since it is the act of eating that sickens and nauseates David, and it is David who, by avoiding eating, remedies his illness, the soup scene reverses the roles of sickness and remedy and presents the act of purification (the eating of the soup) as sickening, rather than vice versa.

The sickening characteristic of David’s assimilation is also evident in the depiction of Albert as mentally ill. Signifying America, Albert is depicted throughout the book by everyone who knows him as either “crazy” or “mad.” When collecting his father’s belongings and money, Mr. Lobe, Albert’s former employer, tells David that he did not get the chance to tell his father that “he’s crazy” (25). Similarly, Marge, Albert’s former colleague, refers to the need to “put some sense into his [Albert’s] mind” (26). Albert is also perceived as mad by the members of his family. Watching Albert thrashes David, both Bertha and Nathan, her husband, agree that “he’s mad!” (401). Finally, even Genya, his wife, draws the same conclusion: “I’ve thought you strange, Albert, and even mad, but that was pride and that made you pitiful. But now I see you’re quite, quite mad!” (391).

Albert’s madness ridicules America’s concept of assimilation. By turning the healthy doctor (America’s notion of pure diction) into the sick patient and the sick patient (David’s decayed Jewish languages) into the doctor, as David’s act of spilling the soup is an act of remedy, of avoiding sickness, Roth reverses the roles of doctor and patient. From this perspective, the depiction of Jake throwing away Gitl’s wig, or Albert throwing away David’s hat, as an “operation” (“all the while the operation lasted he stood with a gaze on the floor”) is no coincidence; yet it is exactly this operation that Roth undermines. Throwing away David’s hat and forcing him to eat the soup, Albert symbolically operates on or tries to remedy David’s illness. However, depicted as ill, it is Albert who is need of operation and, by spilling the soup, it is David who is in place of the doctor.

David’s assimilation is also depicted as a violent act. Albert’s brutal hands are extensively stressed in Call It Sleep. Albert’s former colleague describes “de rail he [Albert] twisted wid his hands” (26). Albert’s hands also whip and strike the two men stealing his milk: “Suddenly with a sharp crack the whip snapped. His father flung it aside... he drew up
his fist, clenched it like a sledge, and grunting with the effort, crashed it down on his neck” (281). In similar to the act of eating, this scene has a sickening effect on David: “It sickened David watching” (281). Albert’s “sick” violence is not only physical but also verbal, thus stressing the link, or to be more accurate, the identification of Albert’s sick and crazy violence with David’s identity change all the more. Throughout the book, Albert addresses Bertha as a “vile slut” (157) and “treacherous cow” (398). Albert also verbally abuses both Genya and David. Wishing “a plague on you both” (80), Albert asks Genya whether she has “any understanding, any knowledge of how to bring up a child?” (80). Albert constantly humiliates and criticises David as well. Informing David that he is “lame as a Turk” (73), Albert makes it clear to David that he is useless: “he [David] has a downright gift for stumbling into every black moment of the year” (80). The link between Albert’s violence and death is stressed throughout Call It Sleep. About to violently tear Bertha’s clothes, Albert advances on his sister-in-law, warning her that he is “pleading with you as with Death!” (157). The capitalised word “Death” draws our attention and marks Albert’s violence as deadly. We are told that this warning about the deadly nature of Albert’s brutality is given every time his aggression is evoked: “He always said that [“Death”] at moments of intense anger” (157). Albert’s deadly violence is also linked to parricide. When Albert watches his own father struggle to death with a bull attacking him, he does nothing to help him. By being passive, Albert is guilty of killing his father. In addition, Albert is depicted as if he were about to kill his son. “’Hurry!’, Bertha tells Genya, warning her that Albert, who is whipping David, “will slay him” and “trample on him as he let his father be trampled on” (402).

Albert’s deadly violence towards his father and son emphasises David’s linguistic change in which America “kills” David’s Jewish languages. For what is meant here by the killing of one’s own blood and family if not the killing of one’s own identity and one’s own languages? Albert also “kills” Bertha’s foetus. Being flung “viciously aside” (398), Bertha, who is pregnant, blames Albert for killing her baby: “He threw me! And me with a child in my belly. Monster! Mad dog! It’s not drawers you’ve ripped this time. It’s a child you’ve destroyed! On your head my miscarriage” (399). The death of Bertha’s foetus is described as an act performed by a monster. This stresses the monstrous and vicious killing of David’s Jewish languages that is so inherent in David’s linguistic purification. Moreover, it also marks

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16 Sollors notes that Albert is both strong and weak (“World” 144).
the absurdity of it, as indeed, what kind of a person would kill his own father, his own son, and the foetus of his sister-in-law? To use Bertha’s use, what kind of an act of assimilation would entail the “the destroying of a child”? The answer is very clear: a monstrous and an inhuman one.

Albert is also depicted as a “wild beast,” i.e. an animal. Dragging “savagely” at the left rein, “jaws working in fury, eyes blazing” (280), Albert looks for the two men stealing his milk. His “demonic rage” (158), in which “he thrust his jaw forward” (80), portrays him as a “savage” and “ungovernable beast” (158, 398). It is no wonder that, when trying to prevent Albert from hitting her husband, Bertha describes Albert’s violent hands as paws: “Wild beast take your paws off!” (397).

David’s electrocution is also described as inhuman. After David thrusts the dipper, a “fire” bursts out: “Power! Power like a paw, titanic power...Power! The hawk of radiance raking with him/talons of fire, battering his skull with/ a beak of fire, braying his body with /pinions of intolerable light” (419, my emphasis). Roth’s choice of diction, here borrowed from the animal kingdom (paw, hawk, talons, beak, pinions), is critical of the killing of David’s Jewish languages, as it presents the process as an inhuman, “animal” act. The description of the angels in the Isaiah narrative emphasises their inhumanity: “Serafim omdim memal lo shash kanowfayim, shash kanowfayim lawehhad, beshtayim yahase fanav uvishtayim yahase ragloy uvishtayim yofai” (255).17 These non-translated verses refer to the angels as creatures with six wings: two wings cover their face, two wings cover their legs and two are used to fly.18 Additionally, in his manuscript, Roth changed his transcription of the biblical Hebrew word for “coal”: “retzpah,” to “retzpaw.”19 This is no coincidence; “retzpaw,” the coal the angel (inhuman creature) touches, contains the word “paw.” By changing the letter “h” to the letter ”w,” Roth hints at the brutal aspect characterising his protagonist’s transformation.20 No wonder that David describes Christ with reference to an animal: “Guts like a chicken, open. And he’s holding them” (321).

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17 In English: “Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew (6:3). In the Hebrew original, “six wings” is repeated (“each had six wings six wings”), thus emphasizing the animal like aspect characterizing David’s assimilation.

18 In his loose paraphrase, Reb Yiddel only mentions that the angels “fly” ( ).

19 In Hebrew: סרגים

20 Remarkably, David’s reverie on the river bank (the symbol of David’s assimilation) is also connected with animals: “Sin melted into light...Uh chug chug, ug chug! – Cucka cucka...Is a chicken... Uh chug ug ch ch ch – Tew weet!” (248). As we know from other instances, “tew weet” refers to the sound a young bird makes (“tweet”): “E-e-e. Twee-twee-twee. Tweet! Tweet! Cheep! Eet! R-rawk Gee! Whistle. Thought it was that man. In the tugboat. In the shirt. Whistling. Only birds. Canary“ (260); “A parrot and a canary. Awk! Awk! the first
Pretending to assimilate and be reborn as an American, David constantly tells a lie which reveals more than it conceals. Roth suggests to us that David’s American rebirth is just a lie, a “strange tale” (387), a “jest” (388), as both Genya and Reb Yiddel see through David’s story about his new origins. When Albert asks David about his former colleagues, David dares not to tell the truth, just as he dares not to tell the truth about *not* speaking in English and *not* purifying his Jewish languages. David deceives but in such a way that reveals the fact that he is lying. When David is confronted with the “strange tale” he told about his parents, he says: “I was just making believe! I was just making believe!” (387). This reveals both his lies and the truth behind them.

“G-e-e-e o-o-o d-e-e-e-e!” The Voice Spelt Out: (Non-) Questioned Jewish Identity

In the previous section, I demonstrated how Albert signifies English and non-Jewishness. In what follows, I would like to illustrate how the figure of Albert points to, while at the same time undermines, David’s assimilation from two different perspectives. The first perspective involves the connection between Albert, Hebrew and David’s Jewishness, while the second concerns the link between Albert and David’s notion of home (assimilation) and exile (alienation).

It may seem that David's Jewish identity is challenged throughout *Call It Sleep*. For instance, scared of the gentile kids he meets at the car-track, David protests: “I ain’ nod a Jew!” (250). Later on, while in *cheder*, he tells Reb Yidel about his “real” father – his mother’s former Christian lover. In response, the rabbi wonders: “Is he truly a Jew, this David?” (376). When the old Jewish woman looks for a Sabbath goy to kindle her stove, she is uncertain about David’s background. She asks David: “‘Are you a Jew?’” (237).

Albert questions his son’s identity especially. In my introductory chapter, I noted that Hebrew was perceived as a father tongue. According to this reasoning, Albert stands for Hebrew. Thus, it is no wonder that it is Albert who demands that David will learn the ancient language. He instructs Genya to “find a *cheder* for him [David] and a rabbi who isn’t too exorbitant,” since it “won’t hurt him to learn what it means to be a Jew” (210). Albert connects Jewishness with the knowledge of Hebrew. So does Reb Yiddel. When the boys in cried. Eeetee-tee-tweet!” (174). This is another way in which David’s Americanization (signified by the reverie) is presented as inhuman (chicken, birds).
cluded fail to read the Hebrew verses, the rabbi comments: “none strives to be a Jew any more” (232). Even though Albert declares himself “little enough a Jew myself,” he wishes that his son will not be “an utter pagan” (210) and is horrified at the possibility of David being “a goy’s get” (403) when he hears about David’s “Christian father.” Immediately after Albert is informed about David’s “gentile origins,” he requires his wife to tell him “whose is he? The one you’re holding in your arms! Ha? How should he be named?” (391).

Albert’s question is directed at David’s undetermined identity in more than one way. When Albert asks what name David should have, he is referring to the surname. Since the surname traditionally points to paternity, Albert means to ask whether David should have his surname or that of the organist. In this way, it is as though Albert were asking “what father should David have – a gentile or a Jew?” The word “father” is associated in both English and Hebrew with “God our Father.” The Hebrew word for “name” is “shem,”21 which is part of the word God in Hebrew: “hashem.”22 This means that when Albert asks “what father/name should David have,” he is also asking “what God should he have,” i.e. “to which religion should he belong – Christianity or Judaism?” This, in turn, is stressed by the fact that the quarrel is about whose son David is – the Christian organist’s or Albert the Jew’s. The words “son” and “God” allow us to read Albert’s question with reference to Christ, the son of God, which strengthens the interpretation that the question challenges David’s Jewish identity.

Additionally, while unconscious, David hears his father say: “You!” Above the whine of the / whirling hammer, his father’s voice thundered. ‘You!’ ” (427). As a figment of David’s imagination, Albert addresses David by the pronoun “you” rather than by the name “David” or any other name that would identify him biologically (as his son), religiously or culturally (Jewish/Christian). At this stage, the reader may become attuned to the following question: who is the anonymous “you?”

In order to answer this question I will focus on the passages following the “you.” After he is addressed by his father, David peers into mirrors: “David wept, approached the glass, /peered in” (427). Traditionally known for reflecting both external appearance and the soul, a mirror shows or uncovers one’s “real” reflection. Thus, it is appropriate that the identification of David as “you” is followed by a scene with such imagery. If, in calling David “you,” Albert is asking “who are you – a Jew or an American,” then by peering into the mirrors,

21 In Hebrew: שם.
22 In Hebrew: השם. “Hashem” means in English “The Name.”
David is trying to find the answer, i.e. he is seeking to uncover his identity. This is stressed by the way the mirrors are described. Just before Albert calls to David, the mirrors appear: “As if on hinges, blank, enormous/mirrors rose, swung slowly upward/face to face. Within the facing/glass, vast panels deployed, lifted a steady wink of opaque pages, until / an endless corridor dwindled into/ night” (427).

The mirrors are positioned “face to face”, i.e. against each other. “To deploy” can also mean to move soldiers to a place where they can be used. In this way, the mirrors are militarized. Not only are they positioned against each other; they also face each other as though they were about to engage in war. The word “opaque” ties the mirrors to David’s transformation because this word is frequently used to describe writing or speech that is difficult to understand. Since David has difficulty speaking at times, we can understand this as referring back to America’s discourse on assimilation, in which the immigrant’s accent is perceived as mutilating the English language, thus making it unintelligible. In this manner, when placed “face to face,” the mirrors are symbolic of the struggle between David’s two “faces”: the Jewish and the American.

When David peers into the mirrors, he sees the “cheder wall”: “Not himself was there,/not even in the last and least of/the infinite mirrors, but the cheder/wall, the cheder/Wall sunlit, white-washed” (427). The Hebrew word “cheder” refers, more specifically, to a Jewish classroom, where Jewish boys learn Hebrew. More generally, however, it simply means “room”, i.e. an inner place. In Hebrew, “cheder” is constituted of the verb “ḥ.d.r,” which means to go deeply into something. This emphasizes the symbolism in this scene: by peering into the mirrors David “ḥoder,” i.e. he goes deep, into his inner-self.

The word “Wall” is capitalized. When capitalized, “Wall” refers to the Western Wall, the remnant of the wall that surrounded the Jewish temple, and which is located in the old city of Jerusalem. A further description of the “wall” stresses this link: “And the wall dwindled/ and was a square of pavement with a foot-/print in it- half green, half black, / ‘I too have trodden there.’ And / shrank within the mirror, and the/ cake of ice melted in the panel be/yond. ‘Eternal years,’ the voice / wailed, ‘Not even he.’ ” (427). The Western Wall consists of large, square bricks of limestone. As such, it strongly resembles a pavement. For centuries,

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23 At the beginning of the book David gets lost because he is unable to pronounce the name of his street correctly (97-99).
24 In Hebrew: ר.ד.ר
the Wall has served as a site for pilgrimage. Keeping this in mind, we can see how the verb “to tread” and the word “footprint” refer to the treading of the pilgrims and the marks made by their feet respectively. The word “print” is related to language and leads to the reading of the “footprint” as indicative of the slips of paper containing prayers placed into the crevices of the Wall by pilgrims. Finally, the voice heard within the mirrors “wailed,” which points even more sharply to the Western Wall, which is also called the “Wailing Wall.”

Lastly, the wall is “white-washed,” which points to the fact that David has been “whitened/Americanized.” In this respect, “Wall” may be read with reference to the structure that divides things – which strengthens the notion of David’s divided identity (the two faces in the mirror). When transliterated into Hebrew, the English verb “to divide” is almost identical to the name “David” and one can distinguish the two words via vocalisation only. The mirrors also reflect a Christian item: the box containing the rosary, which Leo gave to David: a “dusty wooden box, which he [Leo] dropped on the table as he climbed down. In shape it resembled the chalk boxes in school and even had the same kind of sliding cover” (327). After David sees the Wall, the rosary box appears: “wooden box with/ a sliding cover like the chalk-boxes/ in school, whereon a fiery figure/ sat astride a fish. ‘G-e-e-e o-o-o- d-e-e-e-e!’/ The voice spelled out” (428).

The word “G-e-e-e o-o-o- d-e-e-e-e” is comprised of three parts: “G-e-e-e”, “o-o-o” and “d-e-e-e-e”. When the spelling (G, O, D) is assembled into a word, the result is the English word “God.” As I have already illustrated, when Albert asks Genya what name David should have, it is as if he were asking what God he should have. When we consider the references to Christ and David’s Americanization in this scene, it seems clear that we may interpret the English word “God” as the answer to this question: David should have a Christian God.

However, another interpretation is possible. If we approach the word “G-e-e-e o-o-o- d-e-e-e-e” as if it were an unknown English word, how would it be pronounced? When the letter “G” is preceded by the letter “e,” it is generally pronounced as the letter “J.” In this way, “G-e-e-e” may be read as “dʒe.” If, at the same time, the letter “o” is doubled, it is

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25 This is especially since the vocal “i” may be written with or without the letter “yod.”
26 See Hana Wirth Nesher, “Christ! It’s a Kid”, Call 97.
27 See for instance, the word “general.”
pronounced as “ʊ.” When we combine everything, and the words “G-e-e-e” (“dʒe”) and “o-o-o” (“ʊ”) are followed by the word “d-e-e-e” (the letter “D”/diː), the result is “dʒeʊdiː.” In Hebrew, the English letter “J” is often equated with the Hebrew letter “Yod” (“jōd”). This leads to the reading of “dʒeʊdiː” as “jeʊdiː,” which, in turn, resembles the Hebrew word “jehʊdiː,” which means Jewish.

The answer to Albert’s question now becomes clearer: the name David should have is Jewish. In the gaps between Christian symbols, English letters and English typeface, Roth hints at a significant Hebrew word. The letters comprising David’s world may be English and may be imbued with Christianity, but their sound is nonetheless Jewish. Moreover, right after the appearance of the mirrors, an identification of David as a Jew is made by the crowd: “‘Unh! Looks Jewish t’ me’” (427).

This is also evident in the scene with the urchins at the car-track. Afraid that his being circumcised will reveal his Jewish identity, David refuses to urinate with the gentile kids: “‘Ye see,’” Weasel pointed triumphantly at the shrinking David. ‘I tol’ yuh he ain’ w’ite. W’y don’tchiz piss?’” (251). “Circumcision” in Hebrew is called “brit-mila.” While “brit” refers to a “covenant,” “Mila” is a “word.” In this way, David’s Jewishness (Hebrew) is not only spelled (G-e-e-o-o-d-e-e) and identified by the crowd; it is also inscribed onto his body, where it will stay forever. It is a signifier that David will not be able to purify simply by acquiring English.

A reference to the circumcision as a (Hebrew) word is already given in the book. After two months learning Hebrew in cheder, David reflects:

Spring had come and with the milder weather, a sense of wary contentment, a curious pause in himself as though he were waiting for some sign, some seal that would forever relieve him of watchfulness and forever insures his wellbeing. Sometimes he thought he had already beheld the sign – he went to cheder; he often went to the synagogue on Saturdays; he could utter God’s syllables glibly. But he wasn’t quite sure. Perhaps the sign would be revealed when he finally learned to translate Hebrew (221).

28 As in the word “good.”
29 See for example the proper name “Jonathan,” which is pronounced in Hebrew as “Yonathan.” The pronunciation of the Hebrew letter “yod” is equivalent to the pronunciation of the English letter “y.”
31 In a conversation with David Bronsen Roth suggested that David’s fear of revealing his Jewish identity was influenced by the rise of anti-Semitism and Hitler. See Bronsen, 267-268. Werner Sollors notes that Roth’s suggestion to consider the historical context at the time he wrote Call it sleep corresponds with Georg Lukacs, The Historical Novel and Nathan Glazer’s attempt at historicizing discussions about immigrant generations. See Sollors, p. 162-163. For Nathan Glazer see Peter Kivisto and Dag Blanck, 104-112.
32 In Hebrew: ברית-ميلות.
David connects the sign he is waiting for with the understanding of Hebrew. The Hebrew word for “sign” is “ot,” which is also a letter (the set of symbols used to write and articulate language). This links the “sign” with circumcision: both refer to a word (“mila”). This connection is emphasized by the word “seal,” for what is the circumcision if not a Jewish seal on the body? Finally, the notion of “forever” points to the seal between the Jews and God (i.e. the covenant as a formal binding contract), since Genesis makes it clear that God’s “covenant shall be in your [the offspring of Abraham] flesh for an everlasting covenant” (17:14).

This is stressed by the word “Jerusalem.” In addition to identifying David as a Jew, the crowd identifies him as “map o’ Jerusalem, all right” (427). “Jerusalem” is a compound of the root y.r.sh, which means “heritage” (yerusha). In this way, when David is identified with Jerusalem, this is an acknowledgment of his Jewish heritage. Additionally, “map of Jerusalem” is written as “map o’ Jerusalem.” It can be argued that by writing “o,”” Roth is simply employing a colloquial writing style. However, this is not necessarily the case. In Jewish tradition, “o’ Jerusalem” calls to mind the well-known expression “O Jerusalem” in Psalm 137: “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its cunning/ let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I remember thee not; if I set not Jerusalem above my chiefest joy” (137: 6, emphasis mine). Additionally, the word “right” can also refer to direction. Thus, a connection between “right” in the sense of “all right” (the crowd’s expression) and “right” in place of direction (right hand in the Psalm) is permissible.

Finally, according to Jewish tradition, King David composed the Psalms. When David reads Hebrew in cheder, the rabbi connects him with the great king: “a cherished seedling of Judah” (366). This is stressed by the rabbi’s remark about David’s singing. After listening to David reading the verses in Isaiah, Reb Schulim comments: “That young voice pipes to my heart” (367). “To pipe” can also mean to sing in a high voice. In this way, the rabbi depicts David as a musician. This parallels the description of King David as a singer and instrumentalist. Various verses in the Old Testament portray the beloved king as “Israel’s singer of songs,” who founded the Temple singing and soothed Saul by playing the harp.

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33 In Hebrew: אות
34 In Hebrew: יריעה
35 This is mainly because seventy-three Psalms contain the name David.
36 King David is associated with the tribe of Judah, from which he came.
37 2 Samuel, 23:1
Luter, Albert’s friend, comments that David’s hands are “like those of a prince’s” (41). Similarly, when David first arrives in America, Albert describes his hat as a “crown” (14). Even though Albert’s remark is ironic, it nonetheless links David to King David.

Psalm 137 refers to the Babylonian exile, in which the Jews were expelled from Jerusalem after the destruction of the second temple. Whereas Babylon is exile, Jerusalem is equated with home: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we set down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion” (137: 5). These verses indicate the need to remember home (Jerusalem) and not forget its heritage while in exile. “Jerusalem” is also a compound of the root “sh.l.m,” which means wholeness and completeness (shalem). In this manner, the word Jerusalem is indicative of David’s will not to “cut” out and give up on his Jewish identity, but rather remain a “whole” and “complete” Jew. This leads to a different reading of the opacity connected with the mirrors earlier (“opaque pages”). “Opaque” can also refer to something which is blocked. We may interpret that David’s Jewishness is immune to the process of assimilation. In this case, “wall” may be read with reference to the structure preventing someone or something from going through.

Yet the Hebrew word for Jerusalem is “yerushalayim.” The “-ayim” is the Hebrew dual suffix, as best exemplified in the word “shnayim,” which, in turn, means two. In this light, the name “yerushalayim” points to David’s wish to have two “faces” - Jewish and American, rather than one. By identifying David with Jerusalem, Roth suggests a third, in-between zone of identity, the one of both home and exile; Jewish heritage and American/Christian culture. Roth criticizes the American binary oppositions of either home or exile, Jewish languages or English, and aspires to show an assimilation that will not entail the loss of David’s Jewish languages. On the contrary, he wishes to combine both English and Hebrew/Yiddish. In addition, “shalem” also means peace and harmony. In this manner, David desires to be at peace with his two “faces” and not have an identity struggle.

This is underlined by the scene in which David gets lost. While in the police station, David imagines that his mother must be looking for him: “Maybe she looked out of the

38 1 Samuel 16: 17-23.
39 Nehemiah 12: 24, 36, 45-46.
40 In Hebrew: שָׁמַיִם
41 In Hebrew: שלם
42 See for instance the word “yad,” which means a hand, and the word “yadayim,” meaning two hands.
43 In Hebrew: יָדָיוֹת
window – now – this moment! Looked down into the street, up and down the street, searched, called. There he was – outside – on the curb. Be two Davids, be two! One here, one outside on the curb” (104). David wishes to become two (“shnayim”): the David near his house (home) and the David who is far away from home (exile).

Psalm 137 stresses this duality. In addition to contrasting Babylon and Jerusalem, these particular verses investigate the ambivalence of exile: “For there our captors asked us for songs/ our tormentors demanded songs of joy/ they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’/ How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?” (137: 3-4). When asked by the Babylonians to make music, the exiles refuse, since the holy songs of God can only be sung at home. However, although they refuse to sing, the Israelites do nevertheless “sing” in the sense that they use the very state of exile in order to produce art, since the Psalms themselves are a collection of poems.

By presenting exile as a source of creation, Psalm destabilizes the notion of home (creativity) and exile (non-creativity). In his examination of the relationship between Babylon and Jerusalem (Judah) in the book of Jeremiah, John Hill claims that in contrast to the conventional understanding of Babylon as opposed to Jerusalem, the two are equated. “Babylon is home” (205), concludes Hill. Similarly, Homi Bhabah blurs the binary opposition between the two concepts by introducing a third term: “unhomeliness.” Referring to borders and barriers “which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory” and thus become prisons (“The Mind” 54), Edward Said reverses the hierarchical order by privileging exile over home.

“My Sawn”: A Stranger within His Own Home

The ways in which the notions of home and exile challenge David’s assimilation are manifold. In the previous sections, I focused on David’s movement away from his home and to the street (electrocution) as symbolic of his assimilation. In contrast to the earlier

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44 According to Bhabha, “to be unhomely is not to be homeless” (9) but rather is used to mark the sense of displacement the exile feels within home. See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.
45 It is important to note that unlike in this essay, in “Reflections on Exile” Said criticizes the modern notion in which exile is viewed by critics and artists as a source of creativity and art, and stresses the lost and unsurmounted sorrow inherent in exile. For a further discussion of the inverted perceptions of both exile and home in modern culture and the criticism of it, see Eva Hoffman, “Nomads” 42. It is also evident that Roth questions the concepts of home and exile if we examine the image of the melted ice. When David peers into the mirrors, he also sees that “the cake of ice melted in the panel beyond” (427). As demonstrated in the first chapter, ice and water, as opposed to the notion of burning, symbolize the failure of David’s assimilation. However, in this passage, the ice melts and turns into water. In other words, the image of the “melted ice” refers to both fire/burning and ice/water. By melting the ice, Roth “melts” the binary opposition of home (non burnt/icy Jewish languages) versus exile (English, i.e. burnt Jewish languages).
chapters in *Call It Sleep*, we will see how, in this latter part of the book, the process is reversed and David’s return home may be examined as signifying his Americanization. Throughout the book, David is alienated by his father, who at one point, disavows his paternity: “That’s hers [David's mother’s]! Her spawn! Mark me! Hers!.. “His and hers! But not mine!” (401). In having David invent new parents, Roth turns the familiar into the unfamiliar, home into non-home. Estranged and no longer feeling “home” when home, David eventually runs away from home, only to electrocute himself.

After his electrocution, David returns home, where he is acknowledged by his father:

“‘Yes. Yes,’ his father was answering the policeman, ‘My sawn. Mine. Yes’” (437). Edward Said defines exile as “a spiritually orphaned and alienated state—the sorrow of estrangement.” Since he is no longer an orphan, it follows that David’s “return home” signifies the end of his exile: he finally feels at home in America. However, does David really “return home?” Does his father truly acknowledge him? Can the “unhealable rift forced between the self and its true home,” to use Said’s words, ever be healed?

In order to answer these questions I will go back to the scene at the beginning of the book in which David gets lost. As demonstrated, David is unable to pronounce the name of his street (“Barhdee”) correctly due to his Jewish accent. Instead, he pronounces it: “Boddeh Stritt” (97). A possible interpretation of David’s mispronunciation would point to his estranged and exiled state: David cannot say where he lives because he does not want to go home. This is emphasized by the name “Barhdee.” The Hebrew letter “ḥet” is often transliterated into the English letter “h,” as in the word “Hanukkah.” Thus, when the Hebrew word “bar” is followed by the English “h,” the result is the Hebrew word “baraḥ,” which, in turn, means to run away. In this way, this scene parallels the final episode in the book, in which David runs away from home and nearly electrocutes himself to death at the car-track. However, the two “running away” scenes also differ. As opposed to David’s inability to pronounce his address at the beginning of the book, it seems that at the end of the book he is able to say the name of his street clearly. After his electrocution, the intern asks David: “‘Say, w’ere d’yu live? Huh? Yuh wanna go home, dontchuh?’ ‘N-nint Street.’ He quavered.

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46 “Reflections” 137.
47 Ibid.
48 Roth’s choice of the name “Barhdee” in particular was discussed in chapter three. See p. in this paper.
49 In Hebrew: ברח
“S-sebm fawdynine” (432). The answer to the intern’s question is: yes, now David wants to go home.

Yet David stutters when he utters “n-nint” and “s-sebm”. As in his essay with Fellix Guatari, Gilles Delueze describes the process of stuttering in language as “inventing a minor use of the major language” (109). Similarly, Gavin Jones shows how major studies of phonetics “tended to link dialectal accents with actual, medical speech disturbances” (69). When regarded as trauma, stuttering, according to Marc Shell, “pertains to the problem of the unspeakable or what remains unspoken” (3-4). David seems to be unable to talk in the novel. Told by Leo to “c’mon over” and “give us a hand” (302), instead of answering, David just shakes his head (302). Realising David’s inability to talk, Leo asks him “wottsa madder, can’tcha talk?” (303). Still not able to utter a word, David uses his head and fingers: “Nodding vigorously, David pointed down to the roof at his feet” (302). David’s use of his body rather than words is emphasised by the “Boddeh” scene. After he has been taken to a police station, the policeman mistakes “Boddeh” for “Body Street” (101). This too links David’s accent/stutter (“Boddeh”) to a non-oral communication (body).

David is also warned not to speak about the issue of his (questioned) origins. After Luter, Albert’s friend, visits Genya, she tells David: “‘We won’t even tell father he came, will we?’” (46). The reader is lead to believe that Luter’s visit revolves around the issue of David’s age, which proves, in Albert’s mind, that David is not his son. Once hearing David’s story about his invented parents, Reb Yiddel, who believes it at first, makes it very clear to David: “‘Say nothing – nothing to anyone! Understand? Not a word.’” (370).

After Albert warns David not to say a word about the violent episode between him and the two thieves (another prohibition on speaking), David goes to the Jewish classroom, where Reb Yiddel orders him to read some Hebrew verses. However, in spite of his efforts, David is unable to:


The first Hebrew verse David reads means “listen, O heavens, and I will speak, hear, O earth, the words of my mouth.”

50 Deuteronomy 32.1
the mirrors scene reflecting David’s undetermined identity. The “two bodies” “grappling”
calls to mind the two “faces” (Jewish and American) in the mirrors. The word “deployed”
appears in both scenes. Thus, it is no small wonder that when he reads this Hebrew verse,
David stutters. His stammer reveals the unspoken element connected with his identity. It
seems that the Hebrew verse indicates that David himself has something to say about this
issue. It is as if, by saying “listen, O heavens, and I will speak, hear, O earth, the words of my
mouth,” David is about to speak all he was warned not to say, i.e. all that remains unspoken
about his questioned identity. Yet instead of telling, he stutters.

What is it that remains “stuttered,” i.e. unspoken, with reference to David’s identity?
After David pronounces his address correctly, he is brought back home, where Albert
confirms his paternity. I would like to take a closer look at Albert’s acknowledgement in
order to answer the question posed above. When Albert tells the policeman David’s age, he
mawnt’” (437). That Albert stammers when giving David’s age undermines his statement that
David is his son. This is emphasised by the fact that Albert has already lied about David’s
real age before. When David is first brought to America, Albert tells Genya to say that David
is younger than he is to save the half fare. The prologue depicts at length Albert’s argument
with his wife: “Didn’t I write you to say seventeen months because it would save the half
fare! Didn’t you hear me inside when I told them?” (12). It seems that Albert is in the habit of
lying about his son’s age. This is hinted at by Albert’s comment at the end of the quarrel with
Genya: “A fine taste of what lies before me!”(14). Here, “to lie” refers to Albert’s future life
in America now that Genya and David have joined him. However, “to lie” also means to
speak falsely. Albert’s comment then, underlines the untruth connected with David’s age
Even David himself lies about his age. When David first meets Leo, he tells him that he is
“goin’ on eleb’n” (307) while he is in fact eight years old.

Moreover, instead of saying “my son” Albert says “my sawn,” a word whose writing
is similar to the word “spawn.” Calling to mind Albert’s previous disownment of David (“he
is not my spawn”), it seems that the “sawn” indicates Albert’s current recognition all the
more. However, “sawn” also calls to mind the verb “to saw,” which, in turn, can mean to cut.

Lyn Altenbernd notes that After Albert’s eloquent Yiddish, this halting language testifies to his reduced
condition (684). In Altenbernd’s conversation with Henry Roth, the author agreed that the doubts about David’s
In a way, by stuttering, Albert “cuts” David from his family. Rejected by his father, David remains an orphan.

Although David is denied by his father in the private sphere, he is openly accepted by him in the wider public sphere. We may recall how earlier, Albert had disowned David as his son when he said to Genya, Bertha, and Nathan that David is not his. However, Albert acknowledges David as his son to the policeman, a figure of authority, but also an outsider from the public domain: “In the kitchen, he [David] could hear the policeman interrogating his father, and his father answering in a dazed, unsteady voice” (437). It is important to note that neither Bertha nor Nathan are even present during this scene. Genya is with David in his room and is absent from the living room conversation that takes place between Albert and the policeman. By acknowledging David as his son to a foreigner [who stands as a representative of American hegemony] and only in the absence of the rest of the family, Albert’s acknowledgement is invalidated. Therefore, what remains unspoken about David’s assimilation is that his return home is nothing but pretence. On the surface, i.e. as it might appear to the outsider, it seems that David is no longer estranged and orphaned: he has been accepted by his father and returned home. Underneath, however, we see that David has not been assimilated and that the rift between David and his home is one that cannot be healed. The end of the book reveals David’s reality: as a Jewish immigrant in America, David is destined to live the life of a stranger within his own home. He will never feel at home in America.

Among the different Jewish languages used in Call It Sleep, the Hebrew language stands out as revealing David’s alienation and undermining his assimilation. The singularity of Hebrew, the implications of its particular role as an indelible signifier of Jewish identity immune to the process of assimilation and the question whether this role of Hebrew characterizes Roth’s novel only or rather is a common feature in Jewish American literature are beyond the scope of this paper and invite further research.

“To be rooted,’ Simmon Weil said a generation ago, ‘is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.”52 Roth wanted to become an American and forget his origins but was unable to. In 1963, Roth stated that the best thing Jews could do

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52 Quoted in Said, “Reflection” 146.
would be “orienting themselves toward ceasing to be Jews.” A decade later, however, he recanted his statement and admitted that like so many first generation American Jewish youth, I had already come to dissociate from family, Judaism, the whole thing- and to embrace the American scene, the American attitudes, but I couldn't bridge my background. I was able to speak glibly enough at the cocktail party level, but as far as digesting what was going on, especially in the literary world, it just didn't sink in. My whole orientation was to try to understand my own childhood, my own background.  

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53 Lyons, “Henry” 172.
54 Ibid, 161-162.
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Abstract

A lot has been written about Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*. It has been hailed as a proletarian novel, a Freudian case study, a modernist work with clear influences of James Joyce and T. S. Eliot among others, a “specifically Jewish” book, “essentially American,” a particular example of “ethnic modernism” and a novel that challenges typicality. Above all, *Call It Sleep* is a book about languages: English, Yiddish, Hebrew and Aramaic. Recently, research examining the interrelations between the many languages found in the book as an artistic arena establishing Roth as a representative modernist writer has been carried out. However, detailed investigation focusing on the unique interplay between English and Hebrew in relation to the theme of linguistic assimilation characterising the book has hardly been conducted. By carefully analysing language(s), etymology and translation, this study demonstrates how English and Hebrew are used in the novel to undermine the child protagonist’s process of Americanization. Thus, this research focuses not as much on what the text means as how it means. This examination is an enquiry into the larger issue of the way in which “language writes itself” and it may help us understand the unique role of Hebrew as an indelible signifier of Jewish identity immune to the process of acculturation forged in the clash with the English language in *Call It Sleep* in particular and Jewish American literature in general.
Abstract


Darüber hinaus ist Call It Sleep ein Buch über Sprachen: Englisch, Jiddisch, Hebräisch und Aramäisch. Kürzlich wurde eine Studie über die Beziehung der vielen, im Buch verwendeten Sprachen, durchgeführt, die Roth als Repräsentant der Moderne darstellt. Das Thema der linguistischen Assimilation charakterisiert das Buch aber genauere Untersuchungen, die sich auf die einzigartige Interaktion zwischen dem Englischen und dem Hebräischen bezüglich dieses Themas beziehen wurden bisher noch nicht durchgeführt. Bei sorgfältiger Untersuchung von Sprache(n), Wortursprung und Übersetzung zeigt die Studie, wie das Englische und das Hebräische in der Novelle verwendet werden, um die Amerikanisierung des jungen Protagonisten zu unterwandern. Diese Studie konzentriert sich nicht so sehr darauf, was der Text aussagt, sondern wie er es aussagt.

Diese Untersuchung ist eine Recherche ins Innere des Überbegriffs „wie Sprache sich selbst schreibt“, und Sie kann uns die besondere Rolle des Hebräischen als etwas untrennbar Verbundenes mit der jüdischen Identität erklären, unveränderbar im Prozess der kulturellen Anpassung, die beim Zusammenprall mit der englischen Sprache in Call It Sleep – und in Jüdisch Amerikanischer Literatur generell entsteht.
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Other language(s)
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Self-assessment

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