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Old World Dreams and Promised Land Nightmares in Early 20th Century Jewish-American Immigrant Narratives

The origin of the concept of the American Dream[1] is attributed to James Truslow Adams, whose *The Epic of America* (1931) was the publication that launched the popularity of the phrase. Adams referred to a dream of a better, happier, and richer life, which should be attainable for all people, and, in his view, America was the place which offers such an opportunity:

> That dream of the land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. [...] It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position (415).

The time of the Great Depression, when the phrase was popularized, added another, rather different, dimension to its meaning:[2]

> what was lost in the Depression was the old idea – and faith – that America was a land of infinite possibilities, that hard work, honesty and determination could be enough, that the surrounding economic system was not stronger than the willpower and fortitude of individuals, and that there was still something left to dream about in America (Vincent 2005: 86).

Adams' rhetoric offered intellectual encouragement to all who doubted the American future by stressing the importance of transcendental thinking, which went beyond the immediacy of materialism in search of a life full of value and meaning.

As a matter of fact, the basic notions enshrined in the definition of the American Dream can be traced back to the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the U.S. Constitution (1787) together with the successive amendments, whose origins, in turn, hail back to the values brought to the American continent by its first colonists. In a sermon on the "Model of Christian Charity" (1630), John Winthrop preached a significant aspect of the vision which was projected by the founding fathers, that America was to be a city on a hill. The Puritan rules of piety, hard work, humility, frugality and trust in one's potential greatly influenced, first, the colonial, and later, the civic, character of the country. Horatio Alger's serialized novel *Ragged Dick* (1868) features a protagonist who

[1] The phrase was in fact coined by Walter Lippmann in his work *Drift and Mastery* (1914), but it entered common use with J.T. Adams.

[2] For further discussion see J. Cullen, *The American Dream: a Short Story of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*, New York 2003.

undergoes a transformation from a New York City orphan to a wealthy man. The popularity of the serialization was indebted to the employment of the rags-to-riches rhetoric, which is consistent with the ideological foundations of the American Dream. The story of a poor boy who becomes rich through honesty, hard work and determination resonates with the widespread conviction that America is a place where everybody has a chance. Correspondingly, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1791) had popularized analogous virtues, whose societal adoption and endorsement gave rise to the formation of the American middle classes. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. used the dream metaphor in his famous "I have a dream" speech (1963), in which he gave Americans an ideological roadmap for the future. American history shows that, in spite of the passage of time, the concept does not lose its viability, but can accommodate the challenges of modern society. Thus, the idea of the American Dream is embedded in the very foundations of the United States, the more so that the country is bound together not by a common ethnicity or culture – except for the Native Americans it is a country of immigrants – but by the acceptance of a common ideal.

In the collective mind, the concept of the American Dream is a complex set of beliefs associated with material affluence, religious tolerance, freedom of thought, and an unrestrained opportunity for self-development, which are achieved by means of hard work, honesty, and perseverance. However, through the lens of turn-of-the-century East European immigration to America, the definition acquires a specific acuteness. The destitution and hopelessness of *shtetl* life, the numerous occurrences of religious intolerance, and the political and social exclusion of the Jews from the societies in which they were domiciled were responsible for the immense impact which the tales of an American Promised Land had on Jewish people. The hope and expectations induced by the emergence of new possibilities, which offered, however illusory, an alternative to their difficulties, attest to the viability of the concept in a Jewish immigrant context. My discussion intends to examine how early twentieth-century Jewish immigrant narratives accommodate the concept of the American Dream both by means of a discursive response to and a representation of its feasibility. The choice of the early twentieth-century texts by such authors as Mary Antin, Anzia Yezierska, Abraham Cahan, and Michael Gold does not imply that these ideas had not been present in earlier Jewish fiction, but the time in which the largest number of Jewish immigrants came to American shores bears a unique and long-lasting influence on the future of Jews in the United States. Moreover, twentieth-century American Jews had more literary spokespeople than any other ethnic group. In spite of the fact that on their publication most of these texts were denounced as typical representations of ethnic realism, contemporary criticism re-examines them, not only putting emphasis on their informative and artistic value but recognizing them as forerunners of the Jewish-American literary tradition.

The Origins of the American Dream in Europe

The life of East European Jews was difficult in many respects: the lack of citizenship rights meant that they were denied the privileges that the native inhabitants enjoyed, confinement to the borders delineated by the Jewish Pale of Settlement forbade them

from seeking opportunities outside the designated area, and a vicious circle of scarce employment prospects, along with overwhelming poverty, made everyday life extremely hard. The anti-Semitic policies of Tsarist Russia and the teachings of the church fueled the peasants' hatred of Jews and culminated in "peasant massacres of Jews throughout the region of the Pale" (Sowell 79). So strong was the oppressed Jews' desire for a better life in America that they replaced a religious wish with a secular one: they wished one another not "'May we be next year in Jerusalem' but 'Next year – in America!'" (Antin 1912: 101).

Mary Antin, in her fictional autobiography *The Promised Land* (1912), describes the reasons for her father's decision to leave the Pale: his poor health followed by her mother's sickness result in the bankruptcy of the family business, and their ensuing part-time jobs fail to cover the family's expenses, so they have to live on borrowed money. "It was the last chance for all of us," (101) the narrator explains the gravity and hopelessness of their situation. Antin's autobiographical narrative claims that it is not only poverty and religious intolerance which compel people to leave home and travel into the unknown, although these are considered to be the primary reasons for the mass departure of East European Jews. The decision also has ideological implications: "I know the day when 'America' […] lodged in my brain, to become the centre of all my dreams and speculations" (101). The narrator presents the experience of immigration as both a secular and a spiritual journey: "There was an elation, a hint of triumph. […] My father was inspired by a vision. He saw something – he promised us something. It was this 'America.' And 'America' became my dream" (102). The other members of the family also partake of the adventurous spirit: "So at last I was going to America! Really, really going, at last! The boundaries burst. The arch of heaven soared. A million suns shone out of every star. The winds rushed in from outer space, roaring in my ears, 'America! America!'" (115) The long-awaited news is a harbinger of a change in life comparable to a revelation, and therefore the narrator uses religious rhetoric. Likewise, for Cahan's protagonist arriving at an American port evokes a religious experience: "[America] unfolded itself like a divine revelation" so, "[i]n [his] ecstasy [he] could not help thinking of Psalm 104" (Cahan 1917/2002: 59). The elevated tone adds an aura of importance, a quality lacking in the lives of the underprivileged minority, both to the journey and to the travelers. The author's strategy is to mitigate the traumatic experience of immigration by assigning to it a spiritual dimension, which resonates with biblical allusions to the Jewish Promised Land, on the one hand, and provides Jewish immigrants with spiritual encouragement in the daily struggle for survival on the other. The Atlantic journey is seen in terms of a divine plan, which echoes the rhetoric of the Pilgrim Fathers and, similarly, serves to legitimize the Jewish immigrants' desire to commit their future to America.

Antin's father, who went ahead to set up an American home, had "to borrow the money to a German port, whence he was forwarded to Boston, with a host of others, at the expense of an emigrant aid society"[3] (Antin 1912: 101). It was common practice to

[3] For example, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society has been assisting Jewish immigrants and refugees since 1881. They provided meals, transportation, jobs, and temporary lodgings for the new arrivals. In 1904 the Society established a bureau on Ellis Island facilitating the immigrants' legal entry and offering immediate help. The bureau provided translation services, guided immigrants through medical screening, argued before the Board of Special Enquiry to prevent deportation, lent needy Jews the $25 landing fee, and obtained bonds

rely on Jewish philanthropic organizations, relatives or borrowed money in securing the fare for the passage, which was beyond the reach of poor Jews. The money usually sufficed to pay the travel expenses for only one member of the family, who, then, worked hard to earn enough to send for the rest of the family. However, life in America was not easy and "[i]t was plain, from my father's letters, that he was scarcely able to support himself in America, and that there was no immediate prospect of our joining him" (104).

Before the rest of Antin's family could embark on the Atlantic journey, the only means of communication they had were the father's letters. For Jews living in a *shtetl*, letters from those who had already left for the New World were the primary source of information about America. The greenhorns were eager to send home good news about their successes, often accompanied by a recently taken photograph, in which they could be seen wearing newly purchased, machine-made, American clothes and shoes, and noticeably rid of side curls – the markers of their disengagement from the penury of the Old World and the harbingers of American prosperity. "Those letters typically reported new immigrants' wealth, possessions, fine clothing, and extraordinary opportunities" (Prell 1999: 62), however distant the truth was from the brutal reality of the ghetto. They were read not only by the addressees, but by the whole community, who discussed and commented on the news. Mary Antin presents the didactic value of such letters, which (mis)informed and educated the Jewish community about the intricacies of the Promised Land:

> In America, [her father] wrote, it was no disgrace to work at a trade. Workmen and capitalists were equal. The employer addressed the employee as you, not, familiarly, as thou. The cobbler and the teacher had the same title, "Mister." And all the children, boys and girls, Jews and Gentiles, went to school! Education would be ours for the asking, and economic independence also, as soon as we were prepared (Antin 1912: 106).

Thus, America is contrasted with Eastern Europe and portrayed as a country of social and economic equality with unhindered access to free education, regardless of the pupil's sex, and as a land of religious tolerance and business opportunities for hardworking entrepreneurs. Typical letters reveal the differences in accommodation arrangements: "Featherbeds are scarce in America. In America they sleep on hard mattresses, even in winter" (116), and inform their recipients about the American fascination with utility; hence "[father] wanted Fetchke and me to be taught some trade; so my sister was apprenticed to a dressmaker and I to a milliner" (106). Even the fact that after years of hard work father still has "to borrow every cent of the money for [the family's] third-class passage" (115) does not weaken his firm belief in the American promise: "[u]nited in America, there were ten chances of our getting to our feet again to one chance in our scattered, aimless state" (115); and he goes on to write about "a business in view which he could carry on all the better for having the family with him" (115). Antin's narrative presents America not as a geographical location but as a state of mind characterized by an unfailing belief in the opportunities of the Promised Land, which, her protagonist claims, has the power to transform grief over a failure into hope vested in yet another chance.

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for others guaranteeing their employable status. For more information visit the web page <http://www.hias.org/en/pages/the-early-years>. Retrieved 9 September 2010.

Departure was a social occasion for the whole Jewish community:

> Friends and foes, distant relatives and new acquaintances, young and old, wise and foolish, debtors and creditors, and mere neighbors, – from every quarter of the city, from both sides of the Dvina, from over the Polota, from nowhere, – a steady stream of them poured into our street, both day and night, till the hour of our departure (116).

They wanted to see the tickets, enquired about the costs, worried about the availability of kosher food onboard the ship, gave advice on how to handle money: "Mother mustn't carry her money in a pocketbook. She must sew it into the lining of her jacket. The policemen in Castle Garden[4] take all their money from the passengers as they land, unless the travelers deny having any" (116). As they were not the first to make the crossing, neighbors "rehearsed my mother in long messages for their friends in America, praying that she deliver them promptly on her arrival, and without fail, and might God bless her for her kindness, and she must be sure and write them how she found their friends" (116). Becoming communal celebrities, the seafarers were envied and treated with respect: "Half of Polotzk was at my uncle's gate in the morning, to conduct us to the railway station, and the other half was already there before we arrived" (119). In anticipation of the journey, the narrator describes the conflicting thoughts simmering in her mind – hope dwarfed by uncertainty – and the feeling of nostalgia for the familial world, accompanied by the fear of the unknown. Their journey started when the idea was conceived so mentally they were already on the road, shifting the attention between here and there. An immigrant departure would also draw attention to the agony of those who were worried about missing relatives:

> sent one letter, how he arrived in Castle Garden, […] how they bought him an American suit, […] – wrote how his relative promised him a position in his business – a clothing merchant is he – makes gold – and since then not a postal card, not a word, just as if he had vanished, as if the earth had swallowed him (117).

The author illustrates that the experience of immigration not only affects those who depart but also those who stay behind; the negative aspects of immigration are the breaking off of family ties, the dissolution of families, and the constant longing for loved ones.

Anzia Yezierska, in her story "The Miracle," uses the medium of a letter to convey the budding of immigrant desires in young Jewish *shtetl* girls. A letter, which comes from America, is read in front of the townspeople: "America is a lover's land. In America millionaires fall in love with the poorest girls. Matchmakers are out of style, and a girl can get herself married to a man without the worries for a dowry" (51). The message attenuates the value of traditional Judaism by promoting independence of mind for girls and praising the freedom of choice. Two important elements of the Jewish traditional concept of marriage are no longer necessary to secure a match in America. First, the profession of matchmaker, since young women are no longer confined within the walls of their homes, but are allowed to meet other young people in a public place, be it a street, a workshop, or at evening classes. The accessibility of multiple social contacts offers opportunities for peer interaction, thereby allowing a girl to become an agent of her own

[4] Castle Clinton, also referred to as Castle Garden, became America's first immigrant receiving station in 1855. It was closed in 1890 and succeeded by Ellis Island, which was opened in 1892.

fate. The second element is connected with the economic situation of the girl's family: when poverty prevented the collection of a dowry, the selection of suitors was drastically limited, leaving the girl with few alternatives, as her only traditional Jewish option of adult life was through marriage. However, marriage American style rids poor families of the dowry problem, thus opening the gates to wider choice, based on criteria other than material. Finally, American marriage, in addition to the relatively free selection of a spouse, carries an additional promise to young Jewish girls, mainly the privilege of financial leisure, which is represented by the figure of an "American millionaire," who is so rich that he can afford to marry only for love. As a girl usually has nothing more to offer than her youth and innocence, the fairytale-like image of American marriage assures her that this is enough; the only thing she needs to do is to go to America.

A similar idea of the happiness, which is attained through American-style marriage, is provided by "Fanny Edelman, an immigrant from Galicia, [who] recounted in her 1961 autobiography that marriage was her primary motivation to leave Europe" (Prell 58). Orthodox Jewish fathers chose husbands for their daughters according to their own criteria, among which the question of dowry was central, especially when the family was poor and had nothing to offer potential suitors. An obedient Jewish daughter had no say in the choice of her husband, and was totally dependent on her father's will. Love and personal happiness were alien concepts among Orthodox Jewish families as marriage, whose main purpose was to secure the continuation of the Jewish race, was treated in terms of a person's duty towards the community. Consequently, to young Jewish girls, America appeared as a place where they could escape their father's tyrannical rule and be able to marry for love. Independence of opinion and freedom of choice were revolutionary concepts in young Jewish, female minds, which were nourished by life stories written in letters coming from America.

Pure envy could also be a motivating factor in starting an Atlantic journey, as in the case of Michael Gold's character in *Jews Without Money* (1930). The protagonist's father recalls his reasons for immigration: "Why did I choose to come to America?" […] It was because of envy of my dirty thief of a cousin" (100). His cousin, Sam Kravitz, had gone to America two years before, and during this time letters were coming to the *shtetl*, "which were read throughout [their] village," and in which the greenhorn paid tribute to the American Dream; Sam "already owned his own factory for making suspenders" (100), and his looks changed considerably: "he no longer wore a fur cap, a long Jewish coat and peasant boots" but "a fine gentleman's suit, a white collar like a doctor, store shoes and a beautiful round fun-hat called a derby" (100), the ostensible signs of his Americanization. The whole Jewish community marveled at the change, which made a "beggarly cobbler's son" look "so fat and rich" (100), a transformation possible only in the American wonderland. While the whole family was proud of Sam's American success, the protagonist's father realized that he "was better than him in every way," and started to wonder how much he would achieve, should he decide to go. The mixture of human envy and curiosity at a rare opportunity to change his gruesome life, which is there waiting to be taken, prompts his decision to leave Romanian destitute for the promise of America. Especially, since in his case, the idea of grand American opportunity is not seen in terms of a dream or wishful thinking, but is palpable and verified by living proof in the form of his cousin's letters and photographs.

For Eastern European Jews the American Dream started at home with the stories, letters and photographs of those who had already left. The bizarre accounts of the American Promised Land tended to begin with "the stories of Cortes and Pizarro in the sixteenth century, confirmed by the successes of some Russian immigrants" (Cahan 65). They were later reiterated throughout the community: "In America [they] believed, people dug under the streets and found gold anywhere. In America, the poorest ragpicker lived better than a Roumanian millionaire. In America, people did little work, but had fun all day" (Gold 102). America is continually portrayed as a place of eternal summer: "the new golden country, where milk and honey flow free in the streets" (Yezierska 9). The newly arrived immigrants perpetuated the myth through epistolary narratives, which had little basis in reality but lured others with their sense of wonder. The fact is that the journey from the rural and poverty-ridden Eastern European *shtetl* to modern and industrial America must have been culture shock for illiterate and backward peasants, hence simple signs of urban modernity were taken for examples of American riches: "Not a single poor man or woman was there; every one was rich" (Gold 102). Tangentially, Levinsky's first contact with the streets feeds him with images of American wealth: the pedestrians had "more self-confidence and energy, larger ambitions and wider scopes," they "were better dressed" (Cahan 63), an evicted family's furniture in the Old World "would be a sign of prosperity" (65). Put another way, the change of perspective results in a different frame of reference; hence it is only with experience that the immigrants discover the reality behind the dream. Although Cahan's protagonist admits that "[m]any of the letters that came from the United States […] contained a warning not to imagine that America was a 'land of gold' and that treasure might be had in the streets of New York for the picking," he simultaneously explains that "these warnings only had the effect of lending vividness to [his] image of an American street as a thoroughfare strewn with nuggets of the precious metal" (65). However, unrealistic the representations of the American Dream were, they nourished the immigrants' imagination by offering something to look forward to and a hope that one day their lives would also change for the better.

The Dream Comes True in the Promised Land

Once in America, education was one of the most viable ways for an immigrant girl to become "a person." As state education in Russia was based on quotas, which vastly limited the number of Jewish students, religious lessons in Judaism were the only available teaching instruction in a *shtetl*. In traditional Jewish communities such training was only intended for the boys, whereas

> [a] girl was "finished" when she could read her prayers in Hebrew, following the meaning by the aid of the Yiddish translation especially prepared for women. If she could sign her name in Russian, do a little figuring, and write a letter in Yiddish to the parents of her betrothed, she was called wohl gelehrent – well educated (Antin 81).

Antin's protagonist recollects how her application to become a city pupil was refused because the authorities were "unwilling to appropriate money for the tuition of a Jewish child" (88), thus leaving an enthusiastic girl "without teacher or book just when [her]

mind was most active. [She] was left without food just when the hunger of growth was creeping up" (88). The Jewish girl's classroom was her mother's kitchen, as the main role in her life was to become a wife and a mother. This "medieval position of women" (81) is contrasted with the opportunity for free, secular education in America, for boys and girls alike; a chance which opens the door to the pursuit of numerous opportunities. The availability of education changes the position of young immigrant women, who can learn skills which will enable them to become financially independent. In consequence, schooling was one of the most important agents of immigrants' assimilation, especially in the case of females.

In *Bread Givers* (1925), Anzia Yezierska tells the story of a poor Jewish immigrant girl who works her way up the educational ladder and becomes a teacher. Sara Smolinsky's hope is to "get to the educated world, where only the thoughts you give count, and not how you look" (183), and that is why she tailors her whole life to pursue her "dream of going to college" (184), even if her decision involves severing family ties and rejecting her Jewish heritage. The desire for knowledge, traditionally essential for male disciples of Judaism, becomes her obsession: "Wherever I went, in the street, in the subway, by day and by night, I had always before my eyes a vision of myself in college, mingling every day with the inspired minds of great professors and educated higher-ups" (184). Education contains the potential to provide her with the means to escape the bondage of the Orthodox household, which would deny her independence of opinion and condemn her to a miserable fate like that of her mother spent between pregnancies, excruciating housework and caring for a husband, while compelling her to suffer the debilitating constraints of ghetto life. Sara in contrast yearns to live the life of the American middle classes.

When Sara finally graduates, she alters her life to suit her becoming "a person." On her way back from college, she has a dinner consisting of "chops and spinach and salad" instead of "herring and pickle over dried bread" (237). On her return to New York, she goes to a department store where "for the first time in [her] life [she] asked for the best, not the cheapest" (239); she purchases new clothes – "hat, coat, shoes, the whole outfit, even the handkerchief" (240) – and carries "a brand-new leather satchel" (237). Then, with the aid of a real-estate officer, she selects "a sunny, airy room," which has nothing in common with the damp, dark, and dirty basement hole she used to rent. Her choice of furniture is simple: "a table, a bed, a bureau, a few comfortable chairs" so as not obstruct the "airy emptiness" (240). A shopping experience, during which she can appreciate the acquisitive power of money and enjoy the pleasure of financial security, fills Sara with "a triumphant sense of power" (241). She celebrates her newly attained independence: "I loved the bright dishes from which I ate, I loved the shining pots and pans in which I cooked my food" (241), and feels happy when her American Dream finally comes true. However, Sara's road to American success is paved with disappointment as well as satisfaction; when she eagerly leaves her ethnic ghetto nest, she does not acknowledge the existence of the social divisions in American society, yet her encounter with the white, American college students makes her understand that the transformation from a working-class Jewish girl into a middle-class Jewish-American teacher is not a smooth process, as it involves the acceptance of both sides of the hyphen. Yezierska's protagonist's pursuit of education leaves her suspended between two worlds: no longer a Jewish

ghetto girl, but not entirely a middle-class American. At the end of the story, when the excitement connected with buying material goods evaporates, instead of basking in her success, she feels alienated.

Immigrant men could pursue education along with female students, but, they had a different degree of access to American society, potentially more significant by virtue of being associated with male hierarchical dominance – an involvement in business ventures. The popular notion of the American Dream is associated with material gain and a rise from the poverty of the old world to the affluence of the new one. Abrahan Cahan, in his novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), portrays a protagonist whose story replicates the immigrant myth of the rise from rags to riches. Levinsky comes to America with a few dollars and no connections, but by means of hard work, shrewdness, and sheer luck, he manages to accumulate a fortune. His story follows a Jewish immigrant route via the Lower East Side sweatshops and small factories, to big-time business ventures. Success in business is an important factor which bolsters the Jewish entrepreneur's assimilation and acculturation. The status of ownership advances his social mobility by shifting his position from a marginal one – that of a ghetto immigrant – to one equivalent with the American mainstream. A sense of authority, which comes with the power derived from the cultural significance of possession and decision making, grants ethnic-minority men the confidence to parley with native-born Americans. At the same time, this type of relationship reinforces white, male dominance in American society, leaving women outside the sphere of social management: men enjoy the hegemonic position of producers, whereas women are confined to the subordinate role of consumers: "Immigrant women, with middle-class aspirations, learned to Americanize by learning to consume, financed by a husband who embraced the American work ethic" (Prell 93). Thus, during their acculturation, immigrant men internalized and reiterated the gender divisions emblematic of early twentieth-century American society.

Marriage, preferably to an assimilated Jew or an American Gentile, was a significant achievement on the road to American success. For young Jewish girls matrimony was not only a way to escape the Orthodoxy of the traditional home and the limitations which came from living in the Diaspora, but it carried broader social consequences: it was synonymous with accelerated Americanization and social advancement. Although the institution of the matchmaker became devalued in the New World, their services were still sought after; however, what changed were their selection criteria for suitable candidates: "they often supported a set of values consistent with life in the United States, for example, creating matches based on wealth rather than traditional status" (Prell 65). Marriage to an American husband enabled an immigrant wife to leave the social margin and enter the mainstream, an act which involved a disengagement from the Jewish heritage in order to embrace the American desire for freedom and opportunities. However, if a girl insisted on marrying a Jew, she would not only fulfill her filial obligations and endorse traditional Jewish values but would be making a statement of resistance against the pressures of assimilation. Riv-Ellen Prell notes a number of conflicting motives which drove Jewish immigrant men and women to marriage: "Men needed resources [e.g. one's own business] to succeed, and marriage threatened to distract those funds. Women needed marriage to stop working and join the middle class" (Prell 110). Working-class young men came to associate marriage with the demise of their economic opportunities and

the beginning of a burdensome life, whereas married women needed financial means to satisfy their aspirations for a middle-class home.

The desire to marry outside the ethnic ghetto was so strong that it yielded a powerful stereotype of "the Eager Young Jewish Woman in Search of Marriage" who "was a favorite subject of popular culture throughout the century's first decades because she captured the hopes of Americanization as well as its folly and pain" (Prell 59). There were twofold consequences of such an approach to marriage, as it was not only immigrant women who benefited from the scheme: "the dominant American culture was similarly focused on marriage as an image of 'amalgamation,' a common word of the era for the fusion of different peoples into one nation" (Prell 60). From the American standpoint, marriage was regarded as a smaller-scale variety of the American Crucible, the assimilative concept publicized by Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot* (1911). Through the imitation of Anglo-Saxon marriage conventions, immigrant behavior was channeled in such a way as to emulate the middle-class pattern: "Marriage meant that women would, by contrast with those in East Europe, leave the public sphere by giving up jobs and returning home to create a proper domestic world" (Prell 85). Hence, matrimony became an instrument of social coercion in immigrants' progress towards Americanization, a strategy which not only facilitated their acculturation but made sure that it happened along the desirable lines of the hegemonic social order. As much as Zangwill's play advocates a marriage between a Jew and a Gentile woman as a visionary future of America, it also signals the problems which may hinder such a relationship. In the popular imagination, an inter-ethnic marriage in which divided loyalties are superseded by national pride is a viable route to the unification and consolidation of American society. However, the idea of inter-ethnicity was limited to white ethnics, a fact that excluded colored groups, such as African Americans, Chinese, and Native Americans, from the equation. Marriage within the "white" category, in which East European immigrants and Jews were included, was also a means to perpetuate the prevailing social pattern, which reinforced white dominance in a time of changing social patterns caused by the mass immigration of the turn of the century.

At the beginning of the 20th century the American economy relied on immigrant labor, so finding a job was usually what newcomers did immediately after arrival. This was not difficult as they were absorbed into a Jewish ghetto, a tightly knit community of relatives, friends, and neighbors. The moment Cahan's protagonist leaves the Immigrant Station, he is accosted by a cloak contractor whose "presence in the neighborhood of Castle Garden was anything but a matter of chance. He came there quite often, in fact, his purpose being to angle for cheap labor among the newly arrived immigrants" (Cahan 62). "Cockroach businesses," which were typical of the New York Lower East Side, accommodated the multitudes of men and women who arrived daily on American shores. Having a job was important for many reasons: it not only allowed the workers and their families to survive, but it was usually the immigrant's first contact with American reality. Anzia Yezierska's novel *Bread Givers* shows how wage-earning Jewish girls become the sole "bread winners" of a family; their mother is burdened by another baby, and their father is following the traditional path of a Talmud scholar, which means devoting all his time to reading holy books. The author illustrates how the experience of immigration alters the structure of a traditional Jewish family. The waves of immigration changed the

social fabric of American cities and prompted the development of urban culture: "City streets were alive with young men and women in pairs and groups drinking sodas in new shops, attending movies, meeting at dance-halls, and walking in parks" (Prell 66). Hard-working immigrant workers enjoyed the privilege of independence which money afforded, especially as they could socialize in ways which were denied them in the *shtetl*. Work outside the Jewish household provided young girls with the opportunity to see the world of "the other half," and to practice English – the language of the American streets – thus facilitating their acculturation.

In spite of the typically difficult beginnings of newcomers, Jewish immigrant narratives provide literary examples of protagonists who manage to combat the obstacles of everyday life and see their American Dream come true. Whether it is a college diploma, a flourishing business, a satisfying job, a happy marriage, or material affluence, they came to enjoy the different representations of American success. Yet, the most cherished of all was "the dream of being able to grow to one's fullest development, unhindered by the barriers erected in older or different civilizations" (Vincent 82). America offered Jewish immigrants civil rights, religious tolerance, and ample opportunities, together with the message that it was up to them whether they took up the challenge or not. Those who did testified to the necessity of hard work and perseverance, as well as in some cases to the painful realization that the American Dream may also be a lie.

The American Dream Turns into a Nightmare

Thousands of East European immigrants of Jewish origin reached the American shores between the 1880s and 1924, when the system of quotas curtailed the flow of immigration from this part of the world. Whether they came alone or to join their families, they would start American life in a Jewish ghetto. Once the initial amazement at the city's modernity lessened, they came to realize the gloomy reality of ghetto life. In *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (1890), Jacob Riis describes the New York Jewish ghetto on the Lower East Side. His work consists of a text which is illustrated with photographs; the invention of the flashlight made it possible to penetrate and expose to public scrutiny the dark and previously inaccessible quarters of tenement buildings. Riis's account reveals the deplorable conditions of the overcrowded tenement houses: dirt, filth, disease, hunger and overwhelming poverty. The tenants are portrayed wearing dirty rags, sleeping next to each other on the bare floor for lack of furniture, undernourished and mentally challenged; characteristics, which, it was claimed, were responsible for their moral decay. According to the public opinion, the squalid living and working conditions in the ghetto were responsible for the high rate of crime in the area, arguments which were adopted by nativist groups arguing for immigrant exclusion from American society. However, Riis exposed the appalling poverty of the congested and unsanitary tenement houses in order not to condemn and denigrate their denizens, but to arouse the sympathy of the American public, which, he hoped, would result in support for progressive reform.

Jacob Riis portrayed the Jewish ghetto through the eyes of a visitor, whereas Michael Gold's semi-autobiographical novel *Jews Without Money* (1930) paints a picture of the

Lower East Side from the inside; the narrator is a young Jewish boy who is growing up in a tenement. The change of perspective results in a view, which fuses the narrative with personal nostalgia, although the poverty, hunger and destitution remain the same. The Jewish ghetto is presented as a dangerous place where shootings in the street are commonplace – "It was discussed for some minutes, then forgotten" (24) – where "there were hundreds of prostitutes on [the] street" (14), as well as "pimps, gamblers, and red-nosed bums; peanut politicians, pugilists in sweaters" (13). The streets are noisy with "howling pushcart peddlers. Women screamed, dogs barked and copulated. Babies cried" (13). The Lower East Side simmers with "[e]xcitement, dirt, fighting, chaos!" (14). Life in the cramped tenements affords no privacy and involves "mixing up with the tragedies and cockroaches of one's neighbors" (30). The local "pattern of American success" (29) is Harry the Pimp, a wealthy and influential capitalist, who likes to "look upon himself as a kind of philanthropic business man. Strangely enough, there were others who regarded him the same" (28). Harry "saves" desperate girls from the gutter by cleaning, clothing, and feeding them; then, he teaches them "manners" and sends them into the streets. In his opinion, he "makes something out of them," (28) and he prides himself on never beating his women. Harry is satisfied with his life and maintains that "America is a wonderful country […] One can make much money here" (29). The other ghetto hero is a merciless gangster, Louis One Eye, whose "remaining eye had become fierce and large. It was black, and from it poured hate, lust, scorn and suspicion, as from a deadly headlight to shrivel the world" (129). The narrator explains that Louis was not born an "evil rattlesnake" (129), but that it was exclusion from ghetto life and the oppression of the State that had crippled the boy: "the State 'reformed' him by carefully teaching him to be a criminal" (128). Gold's novel abounds in poignant descriptions of the penury of the Jewish ghetto and dramatic accounts of its denizens' daily struggle for survival. The author elucidates how the appalling poverty and deprivation of life in the ghetto disempower the working class, making them victims of manipulation at the hands of American capitalists: "America is so rich and fat, because it has eaten the tragedy of millions of immigrants" (41); the narrator accuses the repressive economic and social system of excluding the underprivileged from equal participation in American society.

A similar picture is revealed in *Bread Givers*, which tells the story of Sara Smolinsky's family, who "live in the dirt and trouble" (Yezierska 4) of the Jewish ghetto, "fighting…for the bite in the mouth" (21), and constantly worrying how to pay the rent. Sara's first independent lodging is "a dark hole on the ground floor, opening into the narrow shaft," with a window "thick with black dust," and a "bed [which] see-sawed on its broken feet […] the mattress full of lumps, and the sheets shreds and patches" (158). The lack of light and fresh air, unsanitary conditions and unbearable congestion define tenement life. There is "famine-squeezed emptiness in [people's] eyes" (141), which comes with the repetitive experiences of weariness and hunger: "the starvation of days and weeks began tearing and dragging down my last strength" (166–167), recalls the protagonist. In winter it becomes so cold that "even the gas froze" (170), and Sara has to "hunt through ash cans for unburned pieces of coal, and search through empty lots for pieces of wood" (7). The appalling poverty and insatiable hunger depicted in Yezierska's narrative become synonymous with ghetto life. The Smolinsky family is representative of an ethnic minority whose underprivileged status condemns them to life on the margins

of society. For white, middle-class Americans, the Lower East Side was an alien and exotic place, which few risked entering. Yezierska's protagonist's successful struggle to become "a person" is intended to inform the American public that poverty and deprivation are not equivalent with moral and intellectual decay.

The collapse of the American Dream is usually signaled by a decline in material rewards, as they are probably the first to be noticed, but a protagonist's failure to establish an insightful relationship may also be viewed in a similar way. The romantic ideas of love in the Promised Land, which were perpetuated by immigrant letters and rumors, find their counter-image in the person of Abraham Cahan's protagonist David Levinsky. Levinsky longs for an ideal of perfect love with an assimilated Jewess, a thought which had impregnated his imagination back in Russia, a match to crown his own Americanization. However, his spectacular success as a clothes manufacturer is overshadowed by the destitution of his personal life, and old age finds him alone, without family or friends: "I cannot forget the days of my misery. I cannot escape from my old self. My past and my present do not comport well. David, the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher's Synagogue, seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well-known cloak-manufacturer" (Cahan 372). Destined by his mother's expectations to become a Talmud scholar, the *shtetl* model of a male career, Levinsky achieves success as a capitalist entrepreneur, thereby accomplishing a calculable feature of the American Dream. The protagonist's substitution of the essential values pertaining to the two worlds – that of traditional Judaism and that of American capitalism – leads him to abandon his Jewish heritage in order to embrace the American immigrant dream. However, the shift comes at a price since, on the way, his identity fragments. Levinsky's lifelong and futile pursuit of love renders him unhappy and unfulfilled; the closest he can get to love is to buy a moment of intimacy. Cahan's novel argues that American success entails an inevitable loss, which in Levinsky's case results in the experience of unquenchable loneliness. No material gains or financial rewards can dispel the shadow of failure which permeates Levinsky's life.

Mary Antin in *The Promised Land* shows a protagonist whose successful "rebirth" as an American cuts her off from her Jewish past, to which she never returns. In this way, the author promotes the strategy of an immigrant's complete transformation, which brings neither doubt nor regret in its wake. While Antin focuses on assimilation as a smooth and uncomplicated process, which yields a new identity, Anzia Yezierska, in *Bread Givers*, presents Sara Smolinsky as an example of a successful immigrant whose success comes at a price, which, in her case, is a feeling of alienation from her Jewish, ancestral heritage. In order to pursue her dream of education, Sara must escape the restraints of her Orthodox home and start an independent life, first within the ghetto boundaries, and later in an American college. While a physically exhausting job provides her with the means of survival, and subsequent steps in the didactic process promise social and material ascent, the protagonist is left alone to cope with the demands of her chosen life. A partial reconciliation with her father comes only at the end of the story, when Sara realizes that one cannot escape one's past: "I felt the shadow still there, over me. It wasn't just my father, but the generation who made my father whose weight was still upon me" (Yezierska 297). The author's discursive solution is contrary to Antin's idea of a total makeover, and puts forward the construction of a hybrid identity, which would conflate Jewish tradition

with the demands of modernity, as well as memories of the past with the present reality. "Yezierska's dream was to find a way of returning to her roots in a reaffirmation of self" (Shapiro 88); hence Sara's problematic reconciliation with her father. Yezierska's narrative acknowledges the claim that an immigrant identity, by virtue of being subjected to the experience of displacement and the need to accommodate the ensuing changes, is a work in progress, not a rigid structure. The dialogic nature of immigrant identity results in the protagonist's feelings of restlessness and insecurity, and thus whatever triumphs her life boasts, she always feels that there is still something missing, an absence which prevents her full happiness.

The testimony of early immigrant narratives, not only of Jewish origin, demonstrates how the promise of the American dream may turn into a nightmare. The preconceived notions of an idealized American life, often based on dubious grounds, fail when confronted by the brutal reality. As the newcomers discover the truth behind the myth, the experience instills a painful lesson in humility. Whether it is the Jewish ghetto reality permeated by the misery and suffering of the oppressed, an immigrant identity torn between the loyalties of the ancestral past and the hopes vested in America as a land of opportunity, or an unquenchable, spiritual desert that pervades the mind of a successful, immigrant businessman, the multifarious representations of the demise of the American Dream have nevertheless had but little effect on the enduring viability of the concept.

By way of conclusion, Jewish-American immigrant narratives supply a varied context, in which the concept of the American Dream's limitless possibilities finds its realizations. The Jewish immigrants' "decision to leave […] was not based on the known reality of a largely unknown continent [but] it resulted from an idyllic vision that had been nurtured by the tales and narratives of the discoverers, the ecstatic reports of numerous travelers, and their own compulsive need of a utopian alternative to their present distressing predicament" (Vincent 82). Even though for many immigrants America delivered its promise, they were often left "with the ever present sense of being torn between one's birthplace and adoptive home; the nagging feeling that somehow one is not wholly present in either location" (Cavalcanti, Schleef 12). The massive, East European immigration to America at the turn of the century created ethnic, urban ghettos, a milieu which, ironically, testified to the subversion of the American Dream: it turned out that one might be honest and hardworking, and still the American Dream's rewards stayed out of one's reach. As the dominant rhetoric reiterated the slogan that success is a matter of an individual's will, the resulting feelings of frustration at one's own deficiencies, a loss of self-esteem, in one's own eyes and in the eyes of the American public, rendered an immigrant personality additionally alienated by the merciless demands of the American Dream. Significantly, both the predictable representations of the Dream and those of its degeneration into nightmare coexisted, demonstrating the dynamics of the concept; hence the literature of the period furnishes both positive and negative portrayals alike.

The endurance of the myth of the American Dream in the contemporary context serves as proof of its universality, as its set of beliefs was also projected onto the world and filtrated by a great diversity of communities. While the concept is by no means dead, the contemporary reading of the myth has more to do with its economic aspect than its religious or political implications and is connected with the United States status as a superpower. Its constant appeal to excluded groups worldwide and its lasting influence

on the immigrant imagination results from its ability to accommodate sundry visions, which are easily adjustable to different ethnic and religious groups. In a discussion on Jewish immigrant narratives from the turn of the century, one may conclude that in terms of the Dream's appeal little has changed as people still respond to its allure, a fact which is demonstrated by the numbers of people attempting to enter the American Promised Land by legal or illegal means.

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