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# The Confluence of Ethnic Voices in Urban America

**Abstract:** The essay first considers the fundamental demographic changes in North America through the arrival of thousands of immigrants from Europe who transformed the urban landscape of the US in the second half of the nineteenth century, which led to the development of ethnic ghettos, inhabited, *inter alia*, by Irish, Jewish, and Italian immigrants. This process provides the social and political contexts for two ambitious modernist novels from the interwar years which capture the arrival of these ethnic groups, the nativist opposition to their presence, and the tensions arising between them in urban America. The challenging experiences of the very large cast in the inclusive urban panorama in John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* and the narrower segment of the Lower East Side intensely perceived by the sensitive young protagonist until his culminating ordeal in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* are rendered in narratives which combine many ethnic voices. Their juxtaposition, achieved through an innovative cross-cutting technique, memorably captures the confluence of human accents produced by formerly marginalized or ignored newcomers to the US.

**Keywords:** melting pot, cultural pluralism, montage, John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer*, Henry Roth, *Call it Sleep*, phonetic transcription, urban novel in the US, metropolis and ethnic ghettos, immigration and nativist opposition

One major concern of prominent scholars in comparative literature studies has been the wish to remove obstacles to the recognition of the literary potential and poetic power of formerly marginalized or unknown cultures in the global sphere. Scholars and critics have addressed the question "what is world literature?" (Damrosch 2003) and have debated its implications.[1] They have also tried to provide guides and anthologies which reserve space for the manifestations of cultures outside Europe, which for several centuries has fulfilled a hegemonic role, though some of its outstanding minds spoke of the universality of the poetic spirit and suggested ways to avoid a Eurocentric bias. Despite the reflections of J. G. Herder and J. W. Goethe, the domination of the languages of the cultures of Europe – including the US, which in its primarily anglophone literary output is an integral part of the hegemonic North Atlantic culture – is apparent in the *de facto* control of the book

1 See also Damrosch (2009); Dimock and Buell (2007).


https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110645033-008

market and the frequency with which texts in the major European languages are translated and internationally disseminated.

Yet the initial shift and first steps in the process of opening up the narrowly circumscribed circle of canonical European texts may be seen in the early refutation of a notorious quip by a British essayist concerning the emerging literature of anglophone America. In 1819, Sidney Smith posed the rhetorical question in the *Edinburgh Review*: "Who in the four corners of the world reads an American book?" Washington Irving's *Sketch Book* a few months later proved him wrong, as this book, published on both sides of the Atlantic, was read widely and taken up by translators, for instance, in Germany. While the following decades saw a rapidly growing interest in the young republic, which appealed to many who were dissatisfied with the social and economic conditions in Europe and settled in the New World, the revision of earlier reservations concerning the literary output of North America took much longer. The reflections of some anglophone authors, for instance of an expatriate such as Henry James, reveal some obstacles on this path. But by the end of World War I, one hundred years after Smith's dismissive comment, a significant change could not be overlooked, namely that a number of American fiction writers caught the attention of readers worldwide. This development prompted a shift of focus in the public, which was mirrored in the award of major prizes, including the Nobel Prize in literature, to writers from the US. After Sinclair Lewis became a Nobel Prize laureate in 1930, Eugene O'Neill, Pearl Buck, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and then various ethnic writers such as Saul Bellow, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Toni Morrison received this high accolade. The fictional worlds which the new American authors, who prepared the way for this recognition after World War I, presented in their texts also included the voices of recent immigrants from less appreciated ethnic groups and countries who had arrived on the shores of the US. Their inclusion in urban fiction composed in the 1920s and 1930s was the result of demographic factors and of literary developments which had their origin and context in the radical transformation of American society in the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century.

Waves of immigrants had arrived in the western hemisphere and had contributed to the rapid growth of cities and the formation of ethnic neighbourhoods, the increasingly overcrowded ghettos housing new arrivals from eastern and southern Europe. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, many German immigrants had arrived and settled, preferably both in the cities on the Atlantic seaboard and in the Midwest, and the failed revolution of 1848 had brought up to another 700,000 of them to America. The Irish famine of the late 1840s had similarly motivated the journey of hundreds of thousands of Irish individuals to the US, where they were apparently less welcome than the Germans. This massive influx to urban

locations removed any chance that Thomas Jefferson's vision of an agrarian America, "a country of husbandmen," and a society free of the corruptions of urban life, would be feasible. But the eulogy of America as an asylum for those exploited in Europe, permitting them to live peacefully side-by-side in a country that gave them a chance to earn their living, provided in Michel-Guillaume-Jean de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1981 [1782]), clearly anticipated the magnetic attraction in the late nineteenth century for those trying to find shelter and better prospects for their lives – and realizing the mythical success story of "from rags to riches."

The arrival of hundreds of thousands of east European Jews fleeing the pogroms in Tsarist Russia after 1882, of course, quickly changed the urban environments, and the waves of immigration from Italy and the Balkans ultimately transformed the American urban landscape in the following decades. The seemingly unlimited supply of immigrants for the labour force was a significant factor in the rapid process of industrialization, with increased productivity, in the wake of the Civil War and in the rise of the US, led by several of the "robber barons," to a leading position among the imperial powers. The downside of this evolution was the growth of overcrowded ghettos with serious health problems for those toiling in sweatshops, and a spate of labour disputes with violent confrontations between employees and employers. The warnings by social reformers, who documented the unbearable exploitation of underpaid workers and their miserable existence in unhygienic dumbbell apartments,[2] began to impress upon fiction writers associated with the concept of "moral realism" the need to confront these issues. And a number of writers developed empathy with those deprived of the necessities of life, and eventually gave them a voice.

This process was facilitated by a parallel social and literary development. The swift transformation of American society after the Civil War seems to have triggered the inclination – and even the need – to depict more stable conditions and social realities ostensibly retained in rural areas, and a nostalgia for former customs. It gave rise to the so-called local-colour movement, which on US soil engendered several distinct manifestations, representing the peculiarities of different regions of the country.[3] In the representation of everyday life in the regions, the local-colour movement admitted the use of the vernacular, the regional idioms,

**2** See Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (1909 [ca. 1890]), or Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* (1932 [1879]) on the wide gap between the rich and the have-nots.

**3** The nostalgic representation of the antebellum in the American South with an emphasis on the alleged good qualities of plantation society led the way (Thomas Nelson Page, *In Old Virginia*; 1887), but the depiction of the lot of individuals in rural New England (Mary W. Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett) similarly appealed to a large readership. The rendition of the experiences of pio-

and thus paved the way for the inclusion of other voices – including those of the growing number of immigrants from various parts of Europe.

Among the prominent "moral realists," William Dean Howells had been greatly affected by the disappointing trends in society and politics, which prompted his shift towards the ideas of "social realism," manifest in his critical panorama of urban life with its conflicts in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890). This urban novel depicts the vitality but also the grave social problems of late nineteenth-century America, which are illustrated, for instance, by the visit Howells's alter ego Basil March pays to the miserable lodgings of the old radical German intellectual Lindau, who later loses his life as a sympathetic bystander in a violent labour dispute. It was also Howells who encouraged and supported ethnic writers, enabling, for instance, Abraham Cahan to publish the account of the serious problems of acculturation faced by members of his own ethnic and cultural group, the Jews from Tsarist Russia, in *Yekl*: *A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896) and in other stories capturing the challenges and temptations for new immigrants to abandon the restrictions of an orthodox code of behaviour. Cahan, who as a journalist and longtime editor of *The Jewish Forward*, an important ethnic newspaper which contributed significantly to the integration of the hundreds of thousands of Ashkenazi Jews into American society, was also to illustrate the chances and the costs of this process in a quasi-autobiographical novel entitled *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1966 [1917]).[4]

His desired goal of attending an American college eludes him, as does the satisfaction yearned for by the central character of another important urban novel, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1970 [1900]), whose earlier failure to get a job in Chicago after an illness was due not least to the seemingly endless supply of immigrants for the labour market. It had caused unemployment and a decrease in wages, which fuelled the criticism of the growing number of nativists who resented the arrival of up to 1.3 million migrants per year. This was the number of immigrants in 1907, the peak year, who largely came through Ellis Island, which had replaced Castle Garden in 1892 as the point of arrival for processing millions

neers and adventurers in the Far West, where the frontier was gradually being closed (see fiction by Bret Harte and Mark Twain) and the narratives of the plight of the farmers in the hard-hit Midwest, which had little to do with bucolic pleasures (see the stories by Hamlin Garland), equally left their mark on the imagination of contemporary readers. See also Rhode (1975).

**4** It relates the material success of a former religious student who, having emigrated from Lithuania to New York, manages to become a millionaire in the textile business, but who continues to reflect on his frustrated desire to achieve a secularized version of his religious calling by attending an American college. On the career and the motivations of its author, see Chametzky (1977).

of newcomers. The agitation of the nativists for a cap on the admission of foreigners, documented in the work of the Dillingham Commission (1907–1911) and increased during World War I, when a wave of patriotism branded all hyphenated Americans as suspect, finally led to the adoption of the Quota Laws of 1921 and 1924. They suspended for the next two decades the alternative option of the continued admission of immigrants, earlier deemed feasible in the confident belief that the country could absorb and integrate the many immigrants seeking a new home in the US.[5]

The idea of a fusion of the new arrivals of various ethnic and cultural strains had been memorably presented in a play by the British dramatist of Jewish descent Israel Zangwill, which had been successfully staged in 1908, entitled *The Melting Pot* (Zangwill 1925 [1908/1909]). It had celebrated America as "God's Crucible." This concept had found many advocates, with the title of the play as a term quickly entering everyday speech. But it also provoked vehement criticism by some spokesmen of ethnic groups, who argued for the retention of ethnic identities and the preservation of their heritage and of distinct voices. One of them, Horace M. Kallen, in a series of articles published under the title "Democracy vs. the Melting Pot" in 1915 (the argument is elaborated in Kallen 1924), promoted a concept which anticipated the notion of "cultural pluralism." It was to re-emerge in the 1950s, and resembles ideas which the debates on "multiculturalism" made familiar in the US in the following decades through various images, such as the "salad bowl."

These early debates and the documentation of nightmarish conditions experienced by immigrant labour, and the adoption and application of the Quota Laws to ensure a limitation on the influx of foreigners, provide the political and social context for the two texts with which this essay is concerned: first with John Dos Passos's novel *Manhattan Transfer* (1953 [1925]) and second with Henry Roth's novel *Call It Sleep* (1977 [1934]).

As a major text and one of "the great urban classics" (Bradbury 1984, 82), *Manhattan Transfer* has been the subject of many analyses and has elicited diverse responses and appreciations. J. P. Sartre (1938) spoke of the book as "an authorless novel" with "characterless characters" (1938; quoted following Bradbury 1984, 83), while Bradbury described it as a "real breakthrough to modern style" (1984, 82). Its documentary nature has been stressed, and its presentation of a "comprehensive mosaic" is related by critics and scholars to the naturalistic impetus but also to new artistic conceptions, turning the "collectivist novel" into an artefact shaped by cubism (Hurm 1991, 226–237). The book strikingly documents and visualizes the me-

**5** On the development of immigration and attitudes in the US, see Higham (1981 [1955]).

tropolis, which had undergone a dramatic transformation. Among the more than 120 named characters in this remarkable synoptic novel (Schmidt von Bardeleben 1967, 45), which offers a kaleidoscopic panorama of the city, are representatives of many ethnic groups, and their voices can be distinctly heard. Figures from more than a dozen nations and ethnic groups appear or are referred to in the depiction of Manhattan and the adjacent boroughs of the metropolis, and the different accents of quite a few are rendered in phonetic orthography.

But the novel also expresses the fears, anxieties, and annoyance of the "natives," the nativists, a sizeable segment of American society. They are, *inter alia*, reflected in an episode in which the reservations of long-standing citizens concerning the increasing presence and power of the Jews and the Irish in the metropolis are articulated in conversations, such as the following statement by Jefferson Merivale, the uncle of one of the main characters, Jimmy Herf, about the transformation of New York: "City's overrun with kikes and low Irish ... In ten years a Christian won't be able to make a living ... these dirty kikes and shanty Irish that we make voters before they can even talk English" (Dos Passos 1953 [1925], 101–102). There can be no doubt that people of many backgrounds populate *Manhattan Transfer*, with immigrant Jews, Irish, Germans, Italians, and francophones playing a significant role in several strands of the action. They reappear quite frequently in the text, which seems to document the development of the multifaceted city from 1897 to about 1924. The fact that more than half of the population of the city was foreign-born and many of them – perhaps two million people – were "crammed" into the limited space of Manhattan island, and often living in overcrowded tenements on the Lower East Side, is reflected in the transcription of the different languages spoken in the heterogeneous urban space (Hurm 1991, 213–217). The author, himself the illegitimate son of a Portuguese immigrant who, as the lawyer for a corporation, had acquired wealth as a self-made man, represented their voices in his novel, his third published work of long fiction.

The continuing attraction of the metropolis is evident from the outset in the various arrivals which occur in the first of the three sections of the novel: Bud Korpenning, a boy from the country, comes on a ferry; Jimmy Herf in a boat (from Europe?) with his sickly mother; and two "foreigners," a cabin and a mess boy, Congo Jake and Emile, arrive on another ship – all full of expectations and hope for a glorious future (Dos Passos 1953 [1925], 3–5, 66–71, 20–21). They expect the realization of their dreams, which the two debate in their dialect, when they enter the country through its major port, through which millions of immigrants had already come. The fact that these hopes are frustrated in the majority of cases, most dramatically in the fate of Bud, who after a series of defeats finally, as early as the end of the first section of the novel, commits suicide by jumping from

Brooklyn Bridge, conveys a pessimistic outlook (124–126). At the end of the novel, Jimmy Herf decides to turn his back on the metropolis, which has defeated so many in the collectivist novel (402–404). Through the depiction of the dismal failure of characters who flounder and go under as victims of the brutal forces at work in the city, a bleak vision of human loss and of the destructive power of the urban environment is mediated. This mood is enhanced by the presence of figures prophesying doom.

But the many instances of defeat and scenes of ugliness, death, and destruction are juxtaposed with signs of vitality manifesting a remarkable energy inherent in the cityscape. This is seen not least in the depiction of the skyscrapers, which at that time began to dot the skyline of Manhattan. There were more than four hundred high-rises in Manhattan in 1920, and hundreds more were under construction (Hurm 1991, 217). And it is certainly the visual quality of the urban environment to which John Dos Passos, himself a talented draughtsman with a keen sense of colour, who temporarily thought that he might make a career as a painter,[6] responds with fascination, and which he captures vividly in this novel. The skyscrapers also achieve a symbolic function in the text, which transmits a certain vigour and a baffling energy in the metropolis, which some critics have regarded as the true protagonist of the book.

The ceaseless motion of urban traffic, the geographical mobility of a number of important characters who appear as social transients, and the movement of the various means of transportation from which passengers view the panorama reflect the kinetic power manifest in the urban world. Ellen Thatcher's ride in the bus down Fifth Avenue on a Sunday afternoon provides ample evidence of the author's capturing of this dimension of the city, its various sounds and smells: "She climbed up onto a Washington Square bus. Sunday afternoon Fifth Avenue filed by rosily dustily jerkily …" (Dos Passos 1953 [1925], 137–138).

But the primary aesthetic innovation of the novel, for which it is famous, is its narrative technique, its composition as a collage of segments and fragments. The book is made up of countless scenes and episodes involving scores of individuals, seemingly arbitrarily put together, ostensibly without transitions.

In this context, it is very instructive to study the genesis of this novel, feasible since the deposition of its drafts at the University of Virginia in the 1970s.[7] The researcher in the Alderman Library is intrigued by the evidence that the author

**6** See Ludington (1980, 101–102) on Dos Passos taking a drawing course in Spain as early as 1916, and his regular painting in Greenwich Village in 1922 and 1923 (222–223). See "Processional," the cover of Freudenberg and Fake (1975).

**7** John Dos Passos Estate. John Dos Passos Collection 5950. Boxes 24–25. University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

began the novel in a fairly conventional way, composing drafts in exercise books, which follow the fortunes of a number of characters in traditional fashion. It was only during the genesis of the novel that Dos Passos evolved the method of cutting up the narrative strands which focus on several major characters, and of intercalating them, thus achieving the effect of a montage. It compels the reader to assemble the puzzle of segments of the life stories of the more important figures.

The researcher thus finds, for instance, an exercise book with the title "The Book of the Milkman." It contains a narrative presenting the beginning of the story of Gus McNiel, an Irishman, who delivers milk on the West Side of Manhattan early in the morning. He confesses to the barman in the saloon he enters: "Boy, I got a thoist on me" (Dos Passos 1953 [1925], 46). After having his beer, he dreamingly reflects in the appropriate idiom on the possible realization of his hope to move westward and acquire land for himself and his young wife, whose charm is praised by the barman. Gus then anticipates a conversation with her about this project: "Look here Nellie, you wouldn't moind moving West would yez?" (47). While he is daydreaming, he fails to notice an approaching train and soon afterwards has an accident on a level crossing "with a freight train backing down on Eleventh Ave" (50). The report of this accident provides the first promising case for a professional, whom one would nowadays call an ambulance-chaser, the young lawyer George Baldwin. He profits greatly from the ensuing damages suit against the railroad and begins his rise towards prominence.

The cutting technique used in the novel represents a significant innovation in the depiction of a metropolis in fiction. Critics have looked for earlier instances of the application of such a method, and have referred to the inclusion of unconnected short scenes in books on World War I in which a montage-like technique is used, and to its employment in experimental poetry – one recalls T. S. Eliot's use of this technique – and in drama. Observers have also related this practice to its application in films. They have alluded to Eisenstein's *Panzerkreuzer Potemkin*, also produced in 1925, though the primacy of Dos Passos is apparent, as his encounter with the film directors Pudovkin and Eisenstein occurred only during his journey to Soviet Russia in 1928.[8]

While the author in *Manhattan Transfer* renders the conversations of Gus, the Irish American figure, and other recurring and named immigrant characters in their specific variants of the vernacular, there are also scenes in which unnamed immigrant figures appear, as in the concluding segment of the first chapter of section 1 of the novel.

**8** See Ludington (1980, 270). Christian Mair (1985, 62, 237) refers to Holger Klein's discovery of relevant techniques in texts from the Great War.

> A small bearded bandylegged man in a derby walked up Allen Street, up the sunstriped tunnel hung with skyblue and smokedsalmon and mustardyellow quilts littered with second hand gingerbread-colored furniture. He walked with his cold hands clasped over the tails of his frockcoat, picking his way among packing boxes and scuttling children. [...] At a yellow-painted drugstore at the corner of Canal, he stopped and stared abstractedly at a face on a green advertising card. It was a highbrowed cleanshaven distinguished face with arched eyebrows and a bushy moustache, the face of a man who had money in the bank [...] [he] looked for a long time into the dollarproud eyes of King C. Gillette. (Dos Passos 1953 [1925], 10–11)

The "bearded bandylegged man" is then observed as he enters his dumbbell apartment on the Lower East Side, and, following his scrutiny of the advertisement, "he clipped the long brown locks of his beard. Then he started shaving very carefully with a new nicklebright safety razor" and began trimming his moustache. The effect of this operation, prompted by the impression of "the dollarproud eyes of King C. Gillette," and the "dollarbland smile" with which he faces his returning family, shocks his wife and daughters. Their eyes "were popping out of their heads. 'Mommer ... it's popper,' the biggest one yelled," while his wife laments the transformation of the father, who has thus abandoned the outward signs of his heritage, assimilating himself to the appearance of the society in the host country. "'Oyoy! Oyoy!' she moaned rocking back and forth" (11).

As it is centred on Manhattan, it is no surprise that the beginning of the movement of upper-middle-class members to suburbia, which was gradually taking place, is not represented in this synoptic novel.[9] But the residences of the affluent on Park Avenue are included, such as, for instance, that of Congo, whose broad foreign accent is exactly transcribed. After serving in the war and having returned with an artificial limb, he becomes a successful bootlegger during Prohibition, and, under the name of Armand Duval, has become a millionaire and resides among the wealthy (382–384).

Among the major characters of the novel, several do not represent new immigrant groups, for instance, Jimmy Herf and Ellen Thatcher, who becomes a successful actress and later marries but eventually divorces Jimmy. An episode

**9** Hurm (1991) criticizes this omission, but also notices the absence of ethnic working class communities in the novel (esp. 223–225). But in depicting the precarious existence of individuals such as Anna Cohen, who toils in a sweatshop and near the end of the book loses the only capital she has, her youthful appearance, in a fire (Dos Passos 1953 [1925], 398), Dos Passos's panorama is more inclusive than Hurm grants in his study.

linked to Ellen's birth in the first section of the novel[10] deserves comment as it may shed light on the perception of specific groups of immigrants in the aftermath of World War I. Here the author arranges for an encounter between Ed Thatcher, just as he is leaving the hospital ward where his wife Susie has been suffering from post-natal depression, and a jubilant father of German American origin. "The chubby man turned on him, delight bubbling through his thick voice. 'Congradulade me, congradulade me; mein vife has giben birth to a poy'" (7–8). He suggests to Thatcher that they drink a glass of Kulmbacher beer to celebrate the births of their children, but then he leaves the saloon and Thatcher has to foot the bill for both of them.

In the course of the revision from draft 1 to draft 2, and then to the published version, the characterization of this man, a printer from Frankfurt, who was first called Silverman, then Zilch, and eventually Markus Antonius Zucher, is "sharpened." His foreign accent and hybrid diction are increasingly stressed in the narrative. His suggestion to Thatcher is made more explicit in the final version, underlining his straightforward invitation extended to Mr Thatcher: "Vill yous allow me sir to invite you to drink a congradulation drink mit me?" (8). In the conversation, the stout German also describes his goal, and proudly announces the name of his newborn son: "A man vat is ambeetious must take chances. Ambeetions is vat I came here from Frankfort mit at the age of tvelf years, und now that I haf a son to vork for ... Ach, his name shall be Vilhelm after the mighty Kaiser" (10).[11] Considering the disastrous reputation Wilhelm had after the campaign of George Creel's Committee on Public Information, the deception of the weak Ed Thatcher by the bossy foreigner seems to be in line with the dramatically deteriorating image of the Germans in the course of the Great War and its aftermath.[12] It seems to the attentive reader indirectly to mark a regression of the author to a position he had avoided in his two earlier war novels (*One Man's Initiation* and *Three Soldiers*; Dos Passos 1920 [1917], 1921). In these narratives, he had distanced himself from cliché-ridden stereotypes of the Germans, but in this passage of *Manhattan Transfer* he adopted a practice he otherwise eschewed when allowing numerous foreign voices to make themselves heard in the collectivist novel.

**10** Das Passos drafted this narrative in a notebook apparently acquired in Italy in the Comune di S. Gimignano.

**11** See my essay based on research with the John Dos Passos papers in Charlottesville in 1979, originally published in German in 1987, reprinted in Zacharasiewicz (2010, 219–221). Lois Hughson (1976) had anticipated my discovery of Dos Passos's cutting up of straightforward narrative strands.

**12** See Zacharasiewicz (2007, 80–89).

In the dubious conduct of many middle-class individuals with long-established entitlement to citizenship, Dos Passos exposes the decline of morals, a deplorable fact the author does not explicate to the reader by authorial intrusions. He can allow it to sink in through the juxtaposition of scenes from various walks of life and the extensive use of metaphors of fire, the deluge, and the symbolic evocation of other catastrophes. Recurrent images of the city associated with powerful mechanical objects such as a steamroller, and repeated allusions to urban locations referred to in the Bible as scenes of destruction – Nineveh, Babylon, Sodom and Gomorrah – and the description of life-threatening events – fires and conflagrations killing or maiming individuals – produce a negative atmosphere. It is enhanced by the voice of prophets of doom. An awareness of the pervasive corruption leads to the final decision of Jimmy Herf to turn his back on the metropolis which has defeated so many in this book.

After his breakthrough with *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos expanded the scope of the fictional rendition of his country in further books. He later combined them into a trilogy entitled *U.S.A.*, which exposes the corruption of the original utopian vision prevalent in the country as a whole and not only in the metropolis. Taking his narrative experimentation further, Dos Passos offers a combination of four components in his chronicle of the US from 1900 to the 1930s: the narratives with the life stories of a number of fictional characters, and separately factual biographies of actual public figures; in the "Newsreel" sections, a collage of headlines and popular songs is given; and in the passages labelled "Camera Eye" (a misleading term), the subjective impressions of a very sensitive figure are provided – with his special sense for colours and his painterly talent, this is fairly obviously an alter ego of the author.

The new introduction composed by Dos Passos for the trilogy in 1938 focuses on a solitary young man who walks through the cities, eager to register everything, "with greedy eyes" and "greedy ears" (Dos Passos 1996 [1938], 1). He captures the most significant material in every corner of the country, from Seattle to San Diego, and from New Orleans to the Quinnipiac, with his survey culminating in the authorial assertion that "mostly U.S.A. is the speech of the people" (Dos Passos 1996 [1938], 3). This confluence of the voices of the people is mediated in the daring combination of the four strategies mentioned before, while the pessimistic account of the wholesale disappointment of original hopes and of widespread corruption through material success and the disintegration of society is conveyed through formal experiments first begun in *Manhattan Transfer*.

In the following years, John Dos Passos dissociated himself from the ideology of the radical Left, and in the opening volume of another trilogy[13] he rendered the insight of a formerly naive young Communist who realizes that he has been betrayed by the Party. Dos Passos's relatively early break with the Party was not followed by other writers who were preoccupied with the indigence of so many workers and the severe problems faced by new arrivals in the overcrowded American cities.[14] This was also true of Henry Roth, who struggled with the ideological burden he had embraced to the detriment of his creative energy, which seems to have paralysed him after his first major achievement as a writer.

The ideology of proletarian writers was a major factor in his life, but his first – and for more than half a century his only published – novel *Call it Sleep* (published in December 1934) does not reflect this orientation. In *Call it Sleep*, which comprises four books with all together fifty-six chapters, Roth captures the multilingual character of the metropolis as perceived by one young boy. His thoughts and feelings bear witness to the deep desire for some higher order and purity in a bleak world that is beset by numerous problems and infested with conflict and violence. The novel depicts the reality of immigrant lives in Greater New York – first in Brownsville (now Eastern Brooklyn), then on the Lower East Side of Manhattan – and includes the tensions between ethnic groups, also stressing the borders between the various ethnic neighbourhoods. But the novel does not present a full panorama of the metropolis. In contrast to the inclusiveness of the dramatis personae from many ethnic groups in Dos Passos's novel with its combination of numerous distinct perspectives, Roth's novel provides the limited perspective of one individual who grows up in these surroundings. Only in two chapters of the book does it go beyond the boy's perceptions, introducing inside views of other characters, for instance that of Reb Yidel Pankower. The novel also covers only less than three years, and not a quarter of a century as John Dos Passos's collectivist novel does. Yet it employs other methods to evoke a sense of the multicultural and multilingual character of the city. Its author originally intended, as Werner Sollors highlights in his illuminating long essay on the novel, which also draws on a multiplicity of pertinent studies, to describe the "entire

**13** *Adventures of a Young Man* (Dos Passos 1939) was the first book of the trilogy later entitled *District of Columbia* and completed in 1952.

**14** With the end of the boom years and the advent of the Great Depression, Marxist ideas shaped many narrative texts labelled proletarian literature. Michael Gold's *Jews without Money* (1984 [1930]) also captures the conflicts between various ethnic groups in urban settings. The same is true of James Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy (1938 [1932–1935]), which captures the drab and claustrophobic background of lower-middle-class quarters on the South Side of Chicago and includes street fights between individuals from different ethnic gangs.

trajectory" of the central figure from "ghetto child to Greenwich village," important stages also in the author's own life (Sollors 1996, 158).[15]

In the "Prologue," an omniscient narrator introduces the immigrant Jewish family in May 1907, the year when immigration to the US peaked, and relates how they are reunited at Ellis Island, where the father meets them. The remaining chapters convey in detail the impressions of his young son, David Schearl. Albert Schearl preceded his wife and his son as an emigrant from Galicia, and has partly assimilated during his residence in "the golden land" (according to a commonplace, the US in Jewish discourse). He has shaved his beard and is thus not immediately recognized by his wife, which provokes his anger, fed also by the clumsiness and conspicuous appearance of his wife Genya and their little son when they arrive in New York. A brief reference in their dialogue, rendered in the text in English, shows that it takes place in Yiddish: "'And this is the Golden Land.' She spoke in Yiddish" (Roth 1977 [1934], 11). Their halting conversation ends with her timid question: "'Gehen vir voinen du? In New York?' 'Nein. Bronzeville. Ich hud dir schoin geschriben'" (16).[16]

The reader gradually becomes aware of the fact that everything that follows and is experienced by David is transliterated from Yiddish, the language used in the home of the Schearls. It is there that the boy, who from the outset fears his irascible, embittered father and clings to his gentle mother, converses with her, primarily in the kitchen. While their communication in their small apartment is constantly in Yiddish, which is otherwise rendered in standard English, David among the children in the street employs the dialect of the New York district in which they live. Repeatedly the narrative voice indicates such shifts in the language used. Some words and phrases from Yiddish selectively inserted in the English text, which is in accordance with the language norms, remind the reader of this fact and confirm the sense of the transmission of conversation and thoughts in another language. In some communications, for instance those with David's aunt Bertha, broken English is used. Repeatedly, the co-presence of the two languages causes misunderstandings, as interlingual homophones confuse the boy, who misconstrues, for instance, a reference to a religious "altar" as an allusion to "an old man," its Yiddish homophone; a number of similar comical effects are thus achieved.[17]

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**15** After the rediscovery of his complex novel, a first study on the forgotten author was published by Bonnie Lyons (1976).

**16** This prologue was written only after Roth had finished book 4 of the novel, and seems to intertextually relate to the opening of Abraham Cahan's *Yekl.* See Sollors (1996, 140), with reference to Roth's interview conducted by William Freedman, published in 1975, and Ferraro (1993, 95–97).

**17** See Wirth-Nesher (1991); Sollors (1996, 131–137) focuses on the range of languages used in the book.

The events of the novel, which take place over less than three years, from the time that the boy gradually approaches his sixth birthday onwards to the age of eight, are rendered as they are perceived by the boy. Trying to preserve his intimacy with his mother, he watches with great unease intruders and threats to the very precarious peace in his home. Such a menace is Joe Luter,[18] a fellow-countryman of the boy's father Albert, who pretends friendship with Albert but is clearly immediately erotically attracted to the mild wife of his difficult, choleric fellow-worker in the printer's shop.

The impressions and emotions of the very perceptive boy, who is endowed with a very lively imagination, are largely mediated through "figural narration" (for the term, see Stanzel 1987 [1984]), with extensive use of "free indirect discourse," or, to put it in the terms coined by Dorrit Cohn (1978), through "narrated monologue." But at times, the boy's reactions are also mediated through "psychonarration," as his complex feelings are at times expressed with the help of phrases beyond his capacity, vocabulary, and comprehension. This is especially true of the final sequence (Roth 1977 [1934], 407–430), a tour de force in which poetic language is used to render the dramatic scene when David electrocutes himself by placing his father's zinc milk ladle in a crack in the trolley-car tracks. It is significant that this passage is juxtaposed – as will be demonstrated in detail later – with a collage of voices in several tongues, Yiddish, German, Irish, and Italian. This fusion of languages reflects the excited reaction of the largely anonymous urban immigrants who have noted the electric discharge and "fear and grieve" for the child who has fallen unconscious onto the cobblestones.

The consistency with which, in the bulk of the novel, Roth keeps to the perspective of the boy, who as a solitary child is initiated into the brutal reality of urban life and is full of anxieties and fears, makes the novel a remarkable achievement in the realm of high modernist fiction. Critics have naturally linked Roth's novel to James Joyce's *Ulysses*; Roth's extended reading of Joyce in the home of his mentor and sometime lover Eda Lou Walton inspired him, as did his reading of T. S. Eliot's poetry. Roth's autobiographical piece of 1977, "Itinerant Ithacan," demonstrates this protracted process of inspiration.[19]

**18** Some critics have read David's unease, and especially his conflicted relationship with his father, in terms of an Oedipal family romance, though Roth had only a very limited knowledge of Freud's theory at the time. Ferraro (1993, 88, 102–103) has argued that Roth's Freudianism derived from Eugene O'Neill, whose play *The Great God Brown* (1936 [1926]) Roth had seen and whose psychodrama of father-mother-son families had a significant impact on him, which he indirectly admitted.

**19** See Roth (1987, 197–199, 210), and the discussion below. One might also include John Dos Passos's novel in the genealogy of this rendition of urban voices and sounds.

David is highly alert to the use and effect of language, which strongly affects him. He listens attentively to the idiom of people whom he encounters or observes, and the author transcribes their diverse utterances. Long quotes from overheard dialogues of and with outsiders augment the boy's individual perceptions, some of them quite disconcerting, for outside their apartment in the Jewish quarter, David also gets into various scrapes, which cause intense emotions and even give him nightmares.

It is in this district that he panics after some unfortunate minor incident and runs away from the scene of a quarrel between boys in which he hit and hurt another boy. It is there that the polyglot environment of the metropolis is brought home to him as people whom he asks for help cannot understand his plea: "'I – I'm losted,' he sobbed, finding his breath at last, 'Aaa! I'm losted.' [...] 'Don't you know where you live?' [...] 'A hunner 'n' twenny six Boddeh Stritt'" (Roth 1977 [1934], 98). When he is taken to a police station by an old lady, the Irish American cops have difficulties in grasping the address he gives them but pronounced differently ("Boddeh Street," "Barhdee St."; 99). They cannot identify his address either, but try to console him with a gift: "'We'll get ye yer mother an' yer chawklit cake too!' [...] 'Mama!' He moaned. 'Mama! Mama!'" (102). "'But look what oiv got fer ye.' [...] 'How does that suit ye?' He began crying again. 'Hey–! Arrh, yer a quair one! Here I've gone an' got ye chawklit cake – in a beer saloon of all the damn places – an' gotten ye apples, and there y'are cryin all over the precinct!'" (103). David there painfully and desperately experiences his inability to communicate when he has thus moved outside the circumference of his ethnic neighbourhood. He suffers until his beloved mother's arrival in the police station sets his fears at rest.

The machinations of such a plotter as Joe Luter, who after getting Albert to the Jewish theatre and thus away from his home, resents Genya Schearl's avoidance of his attentions, eventually provoke Albert's fury in the printing shop. This disappointment results in Albert's final renunciation of his job as a printer, leading to his adoption of the role of a milkman. These events disconcert the boy and pose additional problems for him when his parents move to the crowded ethnic ghetto on the Lower East Side. It is there that David is later compelled to assist his father by protecting the load of milk bottles against theft, something he fails to do, which prompts a violent confrontation of his father with the thieves and threats of punishment for the boy (273–279). It is also in this district that the boy has frightening encounters with boys from other ethnic communities which aggravate his problems.[20]

**20** In this context Mario Materassi, Roth's Italian translator and a productive scholar in his own right, has argued that Henry Roth must have compounded two time levels of his own experience

In *Call It Sleep*, the boy's range of experiences has meanwhile been further extended when his Aunt Bertha temporarily moves into their apartment on the Lower East Side, from where she takes the boy on several outings (145–147). But the presence of his aunt, who provokes the fury of the irascible Albert Schearl with indiscreet and rash comments, has a much more important consequence. It later offers an opportunity for David to eavesdrop on a tense conversation between his aunt and his mother about the reasons for her marrying the difficult and unromantic Albert Schearl, even though she had been an avid reader of (German) romances (161–163, 190–202).

The code-switching to a language the boy does not understand puzzles him while he senses the tension and strain of his beloved mother:

> 'Listen to me, Bertha,' his mother said in a suddenly strained voice [...] 'Do you really want to hear?' [...] when she spoke again her words had fused into that alien, aggravating tongue that David could never fathom [...] 'Hush!' she said warningly and again blotted out import under a screen of Polish ... (192–193)

The boy's fragmentary perception of the extended conversation between mother and aunt, partly in Yiddish and partly in Polish, to him "an alien, aggravating language," reveals to him the passionate love affair of his mother as the young Genya Krollman with a "Christian organist" in her Galician village: "A goy, Aunt Bertha had said, an 'orghaneest,' What was an 'orghaneest'?" (194).

This affair ended tragically as the organist married a rich older woman and not his true love. Genya's deep humiliation and severe treatment by her parents, especially her father, an orthodox Jewish rabbi, led to her swift acceptance of so incompatible a partner as Albert Schearl. David's imagination dwells upon this story, which is enhanced through Genya's nostalgic acquisition of a painting with blue cornflowers which hangs on the wall of their apartment, and the story haunts him. Later he transforms it into a dramatic narrative of his own illegitimacy, which before the final crisis shocks the Jewish rabbi, Reb Yidel Pankower, at the heder to which David is sent a little later.

It is the language of the Hebrew Bible which impresses him most after he has begun attending this school (book 3, "The Coal"). His awareness of the religious sphere, its rituals and regulations, affects him, and the recital of a passage from

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when describing the life of his alter ego. He suggests that the author must have transferred various disturbing encounters with other ethnicities in East Harlem, where his family moved from the Lower East Side, to this milieu in Lower Manhattan. The young Henry Roth had been relocated from a fairly homogeneous Jewish quarter to a neighbourhood that was primarily Irish American. This move overshadows the experience of Ira Stigman, the protagonist of the tetralogy entitled *Mercy of a Rude Stream* (Roth 1994, 1995, 1996, 1998), which was completed and published after a long silence, lasting half a century, after his first novel.

the Prophet Isaiah in Hebrew about the cleansing of the Prophet's lips with a burning coal, explained by the rabbi in Yiddish and rendered in literal English, moves him deeply.

> 'Now!' resumed the rabbi. [...] 'But when Isaiah saw the Almighty in His majesty, and His terrible light – woe me! he cried, What shall I do! I am lost!' [...]
>
> 'But just when Isaiah let out this cry – I am unclean – one of the angels flew to the altar and with tongs drew out a fiery coal. Understand? With tongs. And with that coal, down he flew to Isaiah and with the coal touched his lips – Here!' The rabbi's fingers stabbed the air. 'You are clean!' (224)

Through the words of the prophets, the holy text sinks in and evokes in David images of purification, the cleansing of the Prophet for which he himself yearns in the bleak, dirty, and vulgar world of the ethnic ghetto. This desire increases especially following his guilt when he has acted like a naive procurer for his new Polish American friend Leo, who was eager to "play bad" with David's new cousins, the step-daughters of Aunt Bertha.

Before this dramatic complication, David becomes a witness in the ghetto to various confrontations between adults, for instance between an Italian American street cleaner and a Jewish American butcher. The latter intervenes when the street cleaner has swept away the fire Jewish boys have lit to burn their ritual material after Passover – the chumitz – and has mixed it with muck and horse dung.

> 'Wadda you wa-an?' the street cleaner stopped angrily [...] 'You no tella me waddaduh push! I cleanuh dis street. Dey no makuh duh fiuh hea!' His intricate gestures jig-sawed space.
>
> 'No? I ken't tell you, ha? Verstinkeneh Goy!' The butcher planted himself directly before the mound upon the shovel. 'Now moof!' [...]
>
> 'You vanna push me?' he [the butcher] roared. 'I'll zebreak you het.'
>
> 'Vai a fanculo te!' The sweeper threw down the shovel. 'Come on! Jew bast!' (240–241)

David registers the Yiddish phrases of the angry butcher and the Italian expletives of the street cleaner in which the fury of the antagonists in the confrontation is expressed. Fleeing from the scene of this conflict, David walks towards the docks on the East River. There he is exposed to the guile of street urchins of another ethnic group, who might have beaten him up for his crossing the borders of his ethnic neighbourhood. But, conscious of his predicament, he denies that he is one of the "sheenies" [Jews] (246). They spare him and instead show him "magic," make him drop a sheet-zinc sword on the live electric wire under the tracks of the trolley and thus cause a strong electric discharge: "terrific light bellowed out of iron lips" (249). This incident, of course, makes him associate his reading of a passage in the Prophet Isaiah with the world of technology and gives him an idea when his personal problems culminate.

The final crisis – in the long penultimate chapter 21 of book 4 of *Call It Sleep* (407–430) – is prepared and then brought about by the encounter of the solitary David yearning for companionship outside his home with the slightly older Leo Dugovka. This precocious Catholic Polish American boy is a semi-orphan who is self-confident and free from any restrictions (297–302). David is eager to cultivate cross-ethnic friendship with Leo, who carelessly plays with a kite on the roofs and possesses skates that David yearns to possess. In exchange for various gifts – eventually also a damaged rosary – and other promises, David falls into the trap of arranging a meeting of Leo with the two teenage daughters of Aunt Bertha's widowed partner, with one of whom Leo actually "plays bad" (353). This intrigue, which naturally infuriates Aunt Bertha's husband when the other girl informs their step-mother, causes an extremely dangerous situation and literally triggers a paroxysm in Albert Schearl. He had already been infuriated by the visit of the confused Rabbi Yidel Pankower, who wanted to get to the truth about the strange rambling fantasy of the boy about his being the illegitimate son of a Christian "organist" (384–385). Following the accusation by Bertha's husband that David was responsible for the molestation of his daughter Esther by Leo, and David's confession of his involvement in the intrigue, Albert Schearl's fury knows no bounds (391–398). He violently beats David, who also drops the cross of the rosary given him by Leo, and thus furnishes his father with further evidence of his apostasy, and seemingly of his illegitimacy. Albert might have killed David if his mother and Aunt Bertha had not restrained and prevented Albert from executing his announced wish.

David makes his escape from Albert's fury onto the streets. After discovering the zinc milk ladle of his father, and intensely aware of the crude and ugly world which is also manifest in the savage and tough language full of obscenities he overhears in his temporary shelter, he rushes to the tram tracks in the desire to purify himself and the world of the guilt and dross he has become aware of (406). He has come to associate the electric charge with the God of the prophets and expects cleansing power from this brilliant arc of light.

In the culminating episode, David puts the zinc ladle into the crack in the car tracks and onto the live electric wire, and causes a violent electric discharge which throws him unconscious upon the cobblestones. His thoughts when losing consciousness through his self-electrocution are captured in poetic language rich in associations with religious ritual and medieval legends.

*Power!*
*Power like a paw, titanic power,*
*ripped through the earth and slammed*
*against his body and shackled him*

*where he stood. Power! Incredible,*
*barbaric power! A blast, siren of light*
*within him, rending, quaking, fusing his*
*brain and blood to a fountain of flame,*
*vast rockets in a searing spray! Power!*
*The hawk of radiance raking him with*
*talons of fire, battering his skull with*
*a beak of fire, braying his body with*
*pinions of intolerable light. And he*
*writhed without motion in the clutch of*
*a fatal glory, and his brain swelled*
*and dilated till it dwarfed the galaxies*
*in a bubble of refulgence – Recoiled, the*
*last screaming nerve clawing for survival.*
*He kicked – once. Terrific rams of dark-*
*ness collided; out of their shock space*
*toppled into havoc. A thin scream wobbled*
*through the spirals of oblivion, fell like*
*a brand on water, his-s-s-s-s-ed –*

(417)

Yet, as was hinted before, this experience verbalized in elevated language is juxtaposed with the confluence of multiple voices. They had been introduced prior to the accident, setting side-by-side "down-and-dirty street witticisms and a surreal, blasphemous spirituality" (Ferraro 1993, 114) in the depiction of a bar with its barflies and prostitutes. Now the verbal reactions of many people alarmed by the discharge and soon aware of the victim of this event, the seemingly lifeless body of the child, are rendered in dramatic detail. The reader is bombarded with a sequence of utterances, some tough and vulgar, but then with increasingly mild and concerned voices of immigrants from various countries: voices shouting in Yiddish, Italian, German, or in Irish dialect, calling for help.

'Christ, it's a kid!'
'Yea!'
'Don't touch 'im!' 'Who's got a stick!'
'A stick!' 'A stick, fer Jesus sake!'
'Mike! The shovel! Where's yer fuck'n' shov-'
'Back in Call-'
'Oy sis a kind –'
'Get Pete's crutch! Hey Pete!'
'Aaa! Who touched yer hump, yuh gimpty fu-'
'Do sompt'n! Meester! Meester!'
'Yuh crummy bastard, I saw yuh sneakin' –' The hunchback whirled, swung away on his crutches. 'Fuck yiz!'

'Oy! Oy vai! Oy vai! Oy vai!'
'Git a cop!'
'An embillance – go cull-oy!'
'Don't touch 'im!'
'Bambino! Madre mia!'
'Mary. It's jus' a kid!'
'Helftz! Helftz! Helftz Yeedin! Rotivit!'
(418–419)

In this densely and dynamic polyethnic panorama of excited humanity from many walks of life, echoes of episodes set in an urban scene in James Joyce's *Ulysses* are unmistakable. Henry Roth's autobiographical pieces from 1977 and the following years, especially "Itinerant Ithacan," reveal the personal inspiration the young prospective author found through the reading of "the alchemy of language that transmuted the sludge ["that diurnal Dublin grubbiness"] into something noble" in this modernist masterpiece. He had this opportunity while sharing for several years in Greenwich Village the home, life, and love of a bohemian academic from New York University: Eda Lou Walton, to whom he then also dedicated his novel.[21] Immersing himself in the reading of Joyce's novel, whose earlier *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* had, no doubt, also kindled his imagination when offering his narrative investigation of young David's gradual perception of the complex world through the various epiphanies that he experiences, he learnt how to "transmut[e] meanness into literature" (Roth 1987, 198–199). And Roth's reminiscence also pays tribute to another classic of modernist literature which similarly stimulated the imagination of the student as he was "conning" [a deliberate archaism – studying attentively] T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* while sensing the multiple noises – "the normal drone of the city" just outside the tiny apartment in the Village (Roth 1987, 197).

It is remarkable in this context that a study of the manuscript held in the New York Public Library, and made up of blue and pink examination booklets of New York University, reveals that Roth when drafting his novel had not used from the outset the montage technique which the reader also encounters in T. S. Eliot's avant-garde poetry. Just like John Dos Passos in his composition of *Manhattan Transfer*, Roth "wrote sequential prose sections that he then cut up and inserted into each other,"[22] a practice which has reminded critics of film editing, but which associates him closely both with Eliot and Dos Passos.

**21** See Roth (1987, 192–220, esp. 197–199).

**22** See the evidence provided by Sollors (1996, 177), who pays tribute to Thomas Ferraro's "illuminating analysis of Roth's crosscutting technique" in a long chapter of his *Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth Century America* (1993, 113–118). Sollors (1996, 128, 132, 166,

In this dramatic scene in the penultimate chapter of Roth's novel, the largely unnamed bystanders include two customers in the saloon, a trolley-car motorman and streetcar passengers, prostitutes, peddlers, and Salvation Army singers. They express their deep concern at the accident and try to take emergency measures; their voices eventually register the survival – or perhaps the resurrection – of the victim of the electrocution, who has been pushed off the tracks with a broom and later regains consciousness. Again, the processes in his waking consciousness are expressed through "psycho-narration" (Cohn's term) with allusions to religious ritual and medieval legends (Roth 1977 [1934], 423–428).

David thus gradually comes to after a policeman has intervened and given first aid, and then an ambulance arrives, and it is found that only one of David's shoes has been burned by the strong discharge. The boy can give the address of his home and is taken there, to his over-anxious and then jubilant mother, and the now remorseful father (433–439). While his recent powerful experience still shapes David's thoughts and memories, he sinks into the sleep referred to in the title of the novel. The phrase has been variously interpreted by many academic readers, who have offered more than a dozen different interpretations of its import, and the passage has rightly been called "a masterpiece at sustaining ambiguity" (Sollors 1996, 156). But it seems safe to claim that the general direction is towards a temporary resolution of the serious problems of David's nuclear family.

Thus, the novel of the painful growth of a young, extremely sensitive immigrant boy, who has suffered intensely because of his father's problematic character and the vulgar and crude urges in his environment, seems to end on a fairly positive note. Some critics[23] have even seen in David's individual passion, survival, and spiritual rebirth a type of Christ, and in the urban novel with its multilingual and multicultural features a merging of "Yiddish/Hebrew/Jewish" and "English/Christian" traditions.

We have thus noted that Roth chose a procedure very different from John Dos Passos in his experimental novel when he adopted the perspective of one young boy to capture the quality of the life of immigrants in the overcrowded

176–180) utilized Irit Manskleid-Makowsky's analysis (1978) of the "little studied manuscript of the novel."

**23** Cf. Wirth-Nesher (1991). She points out that the kid, whose well-being the assembled immigrants in the penultimate chapter of the novel hope for, may be linked to the (animal) kid that is sacrificed in the Passover celebration. It is chanted about in the song (a kind of nursery rhyme) recited in the other holy tongue encountered, Aramaic, in the heder David attends. This kid was killed to mark the door jambs of the Israelites, who would thus be spared by the "angel of death," which the Almighty finally destroyed. The suffering of the boy would thus appear as a kind of sacrifice, redeeming the past sins of his parents.

ghettos of the metropolis. But both authors show in their fiction that they were able to watch and listen carefully to the voices of the various ethnic groups to which their own backgrounds linked them. Like his compatriot, who was ten years older, Roth succumbed to the appeal of radical political ideas. But in contrast to Dos Passos, he felt bound by the tenets of the Communist party after his first novel, *Call It Sleep*. The highly critical reception of his book by Party ideologues may have contributed to his writer's block, his inability over fifty years to complete another book in which to capture the voices perceived in his urban childhood, youth, and literary apprenticeship. It was only in the 1980s that he was persuaded by a European visitor – the Italian scholar and translator Mario Materassi – to collect diverse pieces in *Shifting Landscapes: A Composite* and then begin to revise the massive material he had composed over the decades about another alter ego of his, called Ira Stigman. This eventually filled four volumes, published before his death and posthumously under the titles *Mercy of a Rude Stream: A Star Shines over Mt. Morris Park* (1994), *A Diving Rock on the Hudson* (1995), *From Bondage* (1996), and *Requiem for Harlem* (1998).

John Dos Passos, in contrast, had been prolific after his break with the radical Left, but both his and Henry Roth's reputations as very important fiction writers in the modernist mode rest on their earlier achievements when they – in contrasting ways – captured the confluence of ethnic voices in urban America in the innovative narratives of *Manhattan Transfer* and *U.S.A.*, and *Call It Sleep*, respectively. They seem to have anticipated contemporary trends towards a crossing of boundaries through the inclusion in their ambitious modernist fiction of verbal cultures formerly marginalized or looked-down-upon, and thus might be regarded as harbingers of future attempts to broaden the literary canon to attain a global dimension.

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