

# **The Picaresque Adventure of the Jewish Immigrant: Aspects of the Picaresque Plot in Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky***

Sara Martín Alegre  
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona  
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[Sara.Martin@uab.cat](mailto:Sara.Martin@uab.cat)

## I

In 1882 the Lower East Side of New York received a Lithuanian-born Jew, son of a poor teacher of Hebrew, who in time became one of the most prominent members in the cultural milieu of the Jewish immigrant community. As an editor of the most important Yiddish paper in the world, *The Jewish Daily Forward* (1902-1950), Abraham Cahan became a seminal mind in the industrious Jewish section of New York, tutoring from his newspaper those Jews—torn between an exacting obedience to ancient Jewish traditions and the new, lay demands of their American environment—walking on their way to achieving an adequate balance between Jewishness and the American way of life<sup>1</sup>. Although better known today by his journalistic activity than by his fiction, Cahan published several novels under the steady encouragement of W.D. Howells, the most influential American man of letters of the turn of the century. Cahan's literary career—spanning from 1896, the year when he published *Yekl*, to 1917 when he published *The Rise of David Levinsky*, his last novel—articulated for the first time in American fiction the experience of the European Jewish immigrant in the U.S.A., thus pioneering the splendid rise of 20th C Jewish-American Literature.

*The Rise of David Levinsky* centres on the life and experiences of 45-year-old David Levinsky, a Russian-born, Yiddish-speaking Orthodox Jew, who in 1885 migrates to the United States in search for better education opportunities to end up

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1 The general information about Cahan's career has been taken from David Engel (1979).

paradoxically, 25 years after his landing day, as a leading Americanised businessman in the fast-growing Jewish New York community. The similarity in the lives of author and character—both Jews who lived through the brutality of the Russian pogroms of the 1880s and found in the U.S.A. the scenery for success in the midst of the massive immigration of Eastern European Jews—might lead to misreading the novel as Cahan's own autobiography of the successful immigrant. Actually, one of the most puzzling aspects of Cahan's work is that, being himself a reputed socialist and union activist, he chose for his protagonist an archetypical businessman. The treatment Cahan gave to Levinsky raises the main problems of interpretation of the novel, since, far from being dismissed as a heartless capitalistic ogre, David Levinsky becomes in Cahan's hand a parable of modern man, empty at heart, God-forsaken and, despite his material success, alone in the midst of human turmoil.

## II

Writing about Cahan's novel, Richard J. Fein remarks that "*The Rise of David Levinsky* is a typical American book in which the principal character explains his own life—how he became himself"<sup>2</sup>. If we substitute "typical American book" for "typical Spanish picaresque novel" the essence of Fein's definition of this Jewish-American novel would remain unaltered, which, of course, suggests a strong bond linking the picaresque novel with the rising 19th century American novel, and both with the new American Jewish fiction. Cahan's novel, this early example of intercultural marriage between the American novel and the Jewish view of the world, is interesting as an instance of the birth of a new American-Jewish literary tradition that has radically transformed the panorama of American fiction, not less than as an instance of the process through which American cultural forms have assimilated foreign cultural contents. However, his text transcends the narrow definition of Yiddish-rooted, American-Jewish fiction to become fully integrated in Fein's "continuum of American culture" precisely because Cahan writes about the very American figure of the

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2 Richard J. Fein, "*The Rise of David Levinsky* and the Migrant Self" in *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, vol. II, no. 1, Spring 1976, p. 1.

successful self-made man, derived from the interpretation of the American dream by writers like Dreiser, Norris, Crane and Howells, the latter being a direct, fundamental influence on Abraham Cahan. Moreover, *The Rise of David Levinsky* manages not only to perfectly blend the American and the Jewish traditions into a new cultural product but also to link the new world of rising Jewish immigrants with the old, Spanish world of the picaresque novel. The key to this brilliant use of Spanish picaresque plot conventions to tell the traditionally American story of a rising businessman who is intellectually rooted in his own European, Yiddish background is, specifically, the presentation of David Levinsky as the epitome of the American self-made man, a character who is nothing but the American incarnation of the old Spanish rogue. This accounts for the suitability of the picaresque autobiographical form to Fein's definition of a "typical American book", and also explains why a Yiddish-speaking immigrant like Cahan was able to enlarge the cultural scope of American fiction assimilating the essentially foreign, European Jewish culture to a typically American fictional tradition.

Since the Spanish picaresque novel dealt with the final ascent of the outsider to the fringes of respectable society, the picaresque plot lends itself perfectly to narrating the assimilation of the Jewish immigrants to the marginal world of the Jewish community in America. David Levinsky and the Spanish Lazarillo de Tormes share with the American self-made man a basic skill for survival and a talent for climbing up the social ladder by loosening their moral commitments. Naturally, what distinguishes them is the standard of success they set before them and the final adequacy of that standard and of themselves to their new environment. Fundamentally, the difference between Lazarillo and David Levinsky is that the former achieves a certain satisfaction because he does not dare—or need—ask himself whether he is happy or not, leaving his new position literally unquestioned, whereas the latter destroys the joy of his amazing financial success by answering the same question with a candid "no". Four centuries later the rogue reappears still successful and alone, though in our modern times his loneliness outweighs his success. Personal happiness seems to have been out of Lazarillo's expectations about his own life while in David's case it has become the main shadow darkening his material prosperity.

Cahan's main concern lies the loss of Jewishness which the immigrant Jew undergoes in order to become fully integrated into the American world. For Cahan, no Jew should find in full Americanization a useful, satisfactory substitute for being a Jew, that is, for drawing nourishment from a religious, cultural and family ritualistic tradition, much more meaningful than anything America could offer. The implied criticism of America in the book points in the direction of the absolute spiritual vacuity at the bottom of the American dream, an spiritual dearth to which the immigrant Jew is irretrievably condemned if he destroys his Jewish past for the hope of an American future.

Significantly, in this case the author himself may draw from his own picaresque adventure of rise into Yiddish and American intellectual life—his own odyssey to keep Jewishness and Americanness together—to understand the development of his protagonist; as an outsider using his personal brain-power to climb up the social ladder and become respectable, Cahan shares with his character David Levinsky being the heir of the picaresque hero. The brooding of David Levinsky on the continuity of the self appear as something more than good psychological, though literary, insights: they seem to underline the basic preoccupation shared by author and protagonist and, incidentally, explain the reason why David is not condemned outright in the novel. Both protagonist and author are struggling in an alien environment to keep together their own identity, the only remaining tie with their European pasts.

The opening words of the book reveal both the thematic core of the novel and the picaresque quality of Levinsky's life:

Sometimes, when I think of my past in a superficial, casual way, the metamorphosis I have gone through strikes me as nothing short of a miracle. I was born and reared in the lowest depths of poverty and I arrived in America—in 1885—with four cents in my pocket. I am now worth more than two million dollars and recognized as one of the two leading men in the cloak-and-suit trade in the United States. And yet when I take a look at my inner identity it impresses me as being the same as it was forty or thirty years ago. My present station, power, the amount of worldly happiness at my command, and the rest of it, seem to be devoid of significance.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky*. (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1960), p. 3.

It is easy to see that the basic picaresque convention of the adult hero's retelling of his own story of rise in society—in Fein's words, of "how he became himself"—is faithfully obeyed in this novel. Besides, the motivation behind the rogue's first person narrative is also the striking contrast between past poverty and present wealth against past spiritual richness and present spiritual dearth. However, the evident satisfaction shown by the boasting of economic fortune cannot conceal a profound dissatisfaction in Levinsky, a craving for "significance". For one thing, Levinsky's purpose in telling his story is far from Lazarillo's in an important aspect: David doesn't aim at justifying himself in his fall into amorality. The reader may feel baffled by David's outspoken discussion of his barely legal business methods but David candidly exposes and acknowledges his own amorality in the belief that it has been instrumental in his rise, and, hence, nothing to be ashamed of. What David Levinsky has to justify is his willing abandonment of intellectual life, of education, for the jungle-like life of the business world; this is, indeed, the sore point in Cahan and Levinsky's view of the Jew's process of Americanization.

The whole picaresque structure of the book is defined by this antagonism between intellectual success and financial success. David's backward glance into his past springs from the need to impose on the reader his own view that his collaboration in the rise of the Russian Jewish cloak-and-suit business in the U.S.A. is as valuable as the intellectual achievement of a college educated man. However, Cahan implies that David's boastful confession of wealth is enough to condemn him in the eyes of educated readers for whom business is morally reprobable and intellectually empty. What is distressing is that, although Cahan links the loneliness of Levinsky's life, his many emotional failures with women, his loss of faith in God, with his renunciation of education and his acceptance of business, the truth is that Levinsky's disorientation in the modern world of America and the death of his soul are a familiar experience in the lives of educated people and seem to define the essence of 20th century man, even beyond the boundaries of the American dream.

Bonnie Lyons also sees the picaresque element in Levinsky's transition towards the new world and its consequences: "Levinsky sees his immigration as a picaresque journey toward new experiences, adventure, personal freedom, possibility. What he finds is that while this new experience is more exciting and complex than the narrow, closed world of Antomir, it is empty, valueless, and he remains in every sense an orphan"<sup>4</sup>. In her view, the different aspects of the novel are "subsumed in a more universal theme: modern man as spiritual 'orphan' in search of his parents, of legitimate authority"<sup>5</sup>. Naturally, it is easy to see that Lyons's modern man, her label for David Levinsky, is very close to Lazarillo, simply because both must construct their own experience from scratch, without guiding parentage or tradition in a world that is changing even faster than they do.

While, traditionally, in the picaresque novel the hero goes through a painful second birth to a ruthless life of deceit, David Levinsky actually undergoes a twin second birth. The memory of his landing day is thus recalled by him:

The immigrant's arrival in his new home is like a second birth to him. Imagine a new-born babe in possession of a fully developed intellect. Would it ever forget his entry into the world? Neither does the immigrant forget his entry into a country which is, to him, a new world in the profoundest sense of the term and in which he expects to pass the rest of his life. (p.87)

However, in spite of being an entry into a new life this is not the picaresque second birth by which Lazarillo learns to be on his guard for ever after against the tricks his masters practice on him. Such second birth occurs earlier in David's life when, at 18, he loses his mother killed by a Gentile mob when she tries to retaliate for the abuse poured by the Russian Gentiles of Antomir on her Talmudic student son. Levinsky, already fatherless since he was three and sheltered in excess by his mother who wants to make of him a 'fine Jew' (i.e. an educated Jew), moves to America to get rid of the state of spiritual numbness her mother's death has left him in. Subserviently, he spends the rest of his adventure trying to find a surrogate mother in his women friends

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4 Bonnie Lyons, "David Levinsky: Modern Man as Orphan" in *Tulane Studies in English*, vol. 23, 1978, p. 89.

5 Lyons, p. 85.

and a surrogate father in his men friends. Interestingly, his fall into disbelief, prompted by the revelation of his friend and fellow Talmudic student Naphtali that religion is meaningless and Talmudic education mock erudition, occurs close to the loss of his mother, so that he is left, in terms of emotional nourishment, utterly alone:

My interest in the matter (religion) was not keen, however, and soon it died down altogether. Nothing really interested me except the fact that I had not enough to eat, that mother was no more, that I was all alone in the world. The shock of the catastrophe had produced a striking effect on me. My incessant broodings, and the corroding sense of my great irreparable loss and of my desolation had made a nerveless, listless wreck of me, a mere shadow of my former self. (p. 56)

Indeed, his second birth can be said to be a process rather than a single experience which begins with David as a mother-loving, Orthodox Russian Jew aiming at becoming a learned rabbi and ends with David as a lovesick, countryless, miscreant orphan aiming at unknown adventure in the U.S.A. All the same, her mother's martyrdom does much more for him than awakening him to a lonely adult life. As the son of a Jewish victim, he is pitied and fed by other Jews in Antomir and even in New York, where sympathy for him leads a Mr. Even to clothe and feed him in order to get him started in America.

The picaresque journey of David Levinsky has a multi-layered structure, for the passage from Russian Antomir to American New York is not immediately followed by further travelling until David becomes firmly established as a salesman, a few years after his arrival. As a matter of fact, David's frequent change of residence in New York is in itself a picaresque journey, involving ill-timed, abortive love affairs with two of his matronly land-ladies, meeting his main business benefactor—a son of another landlady—and even seducing his best friend's wife while boarding in their home. The constant search for a home with a presiding mother-figure and his lasting sense of homelessness mark the episodes of his emotional failure; it is significant that he ends up living in an expensive hotel—a depersonalized home and a typical American institution—and feebly trying to become involved in a new love affair with a Gentile woman.

The second picaresque journey of David Levinsky in America is delineated by his activity as a travelling salesman. His travels furnish the only case in the book in which his Americanized Jewish identity is openly ridiculed and made the butt of another salesman's jokes. The episode is typically roguish, since Loeb, the joking salesman who is also a Jew—something that stings David even more than his cruel witticisms—and a more successful businessman than David ends up as David's employee, after David outwits him by copying his suits and making a success of the copy. On the whole, David sees in the road the true America and regards his travels above his New York life:

The road was a great school of business and life to me. I visited scores of cities. I met hundreds of human types. I saw much of the United States. Every time I returned home I felt as though, in comparison with the places which I had just visited, New York was not an American city at all, and as though my last trip had greatly added to the 'real American' quality in me. (p. 325)

Unlike his restless, failed wanderings in search of a home and a surrogate mother as wife, his journey into the male heart of America, symbolized by the many businessmen he meets, is quite a success, possibly because he restricts his search for a father figure to the Jewish community. It is precisely his acceptance into the commercial circuit of the U.S.A. what defines his idea of America; nonetheless, although, Levinsky is always constant in his fascination for America he is, at heart, very uncertain of his position in a land of Gentiles. His celebration of triumph when dining with some American Gentiles is enthusiastic enough: "But I was aware that it was 'aristocratic American' food, that I was in the company of well-dressed American Gentiles, eating and conversing with them, a nobleman among noblemen. I throbbed with love for America" (p. 329). However, Cahan's irony is seen in that American businessmen turn out to be not very noble, at least to their workers' eyes, David is often cowed by arrogant waiters in expensive restaurants even when he can afford the most expensive, fashionable places and he never really breaks out of the upper-class circle of the Jewish community.

The failure of love is an essential aspect in the acquisition of knowledge by this modern rogue. Each failed love episode repeats the picaresque pattern of encounter,

traumatic experience, rejection, spiritual loss and final redoubled loneliness. Again, the distinction between the chain of episodes involving men and those involving women must be noted. David obtains help and knowledge from male acquaintances with no damage at all to his personal integrity; on the other hand, the knowledge he acquires from his love affairs is painfully gained and leaves him longing, almost panting, for what he cannot attain, namely, a home and a family. Arguably, the conflict surfaces not between him and the environment but between him and his past, and women increase the depth of his conflict because he demands from them a healing of the pain caused by the loss of the mother, something his women won't or can't accept. Yet, while David's choice of male acquaintances always results in his own or their mutual profit since they offer positive help—money, clothes, business tips, friendship—David's choice of women friends is always wrong, so that often he seems to be barring himself for ever access to his own happiness. His love for his mother and his distrust of sex— forbidden for an Orthodox Jew outside marriage—make him sharply separate love from sex in his relationship with women; the most transparent instance is the episode in which he confesses to having sexual fantasies involving the married woman he loves while making love to an expensive prostitute. His emotional life is, indirectly, directed towards 'forbidden' women: he loves first a Russian, divorced young woman—Matilda—who is as free from his Orthodox quibbles as to make David's love look touchingly ridiculous; then he falls in love with Dora, a married woman and mother, herself an immigrant, who won't sacrifice her family for him and, lastly, he is infatuated with Anna Tevkin, a young socialist and intellectual for whom David's business life is repulsive. In any case, when he is offered the choice of a proper girl—proper in social terms—he can never overcome his longing for true love and falls again and again back on his loneliness.

The disintegration of reality presented in the novel by the pushing forces of Russian anti-Semitism in the 1880s that lead David to abandon his homeland for an unknown America, also result in a disintegration of David's morality, since the American capitalistic working ethos and David's social Darwinism take the place of Orthodox Jewish ideology in David's beliefs. Cahan's main thesis is that man is

inescapably thrown back upon his own resources by uncontrolled historical forces that shape his private life and his personal view of the world. In all, by joining a new historical reality that was on the making—that of the booming U.S.A. of the turn of the century—David's confidence in an indefinite possibility of success is boosted. The problematic of the novel are not related with the adaptation of the individual to his new environment, for David's is a well-managed, even relished, affair. It is the parallel loss of God and mother what remains unsolved in David's life since the family-centred religion of love with which he substitutes God and the sacralization of education with which he sanctifies the memory of his mother also fail. Interestingly, David's belief in God is lost in Europe not in America and David's first hopes of marrying are also lost in Russia, so that, by the time he reaches America, the only real value left for him is education, an idea originated in his mother and stressed by Matilda. Unlike Lazarillo, when David sets off on his picaresque journey he knows what he is aiming at; what is more doubtful is whether David himself believes in his target. His tragedy and its irony is that he chooses the wrong place to fulfill his dream of cultural elevation, for the U.S.A. had less to offer at the turn of the century, in terms of intellectual life, than old Europe, something Henry James knew very well. In spite of this mistake he does become a success in the essentially American business world—a world to which he conforms better than to the world of college education, even in spite of himself—to an extent that makes Lazarillo's success look pitiable indeed. The fact that David is aware of the contradiction makes his eager grasp of soul-brutalizing business even more intricate:

On the one hand, I had a notion that to 'become American' was the only tangible form of becoming a man of culture (for did I not regard the most refined and learned European as a 'greenhorn?'); on the other hand, the impression was deep in me that American education was a cheap machine-made product. (p. 167).

A college diploma is for David "a certificate of moral as well as intellectual aristocracy" and college "the synagogue of my new life" (both p. 169), but the spell of moral and intellectual achievement is broken when he is "hypnotized" by the idea of becoming

rich, a "great, daring game of life" (p. 189). This is indeed, the moment when he becomes American and breaks away from his past. Whether the seeds for this rupture had been sowed in Russia is ambiguous, but the moment David spends the money he has earned by manual work to put himself through college in setting up his own business, he is lost to the Jewish essence of life.

It is also evident that he betrays his mother's confidence in him as a prospective scholar and that the betrayal is the more dishonourable because it is willing and because the reason his mother died for was to protect his identity as a Talmudic student. While Lazarillo's trust is repeatedly put to test until he learns to distrust, David is trusted by instinct by everybody (as Mr Nodelman, his main business promoter puts it, he has a "credit face") but disappoints the expectations of spiritual growth others put in him. Matilda, his first love, gives him the money for his journey to the U.S.A. under his promise of becoming an educated man outside the narrow limits of Talmudic scholarly life. The episode exposes David as the typical rogue in that he deceives himself into expectations of marriage to solve his physical hunger and is crudely awoken to the reality of his own foolishness; the point is, of course, that in the long run, Matilda turns out to be the essential benefactress of his life and that by breaking his promise David also betrays her. Few scenes are cruder in the life of this modern rogue than his reencounter with his former muse in New York, where she is campaigning with her husband for funds for the Russian socialists, when David turns up to greet her in the middle of a workers' meeting dressed in a mink coat to show off his success in America. Needless to say, if in his guise as a Talmudic student David was pitiable to Matilda, as the new rising capitalist he is loathsome to her. Her rebuke shows him, in typical picaresque fashion of sudden self-consciousness, how far, how low he has fallen from her expectancies of cultural fulfillment.

David Levinsky's first reciprocated love is Dora Margolis, the wife of his business associate Max Margolis. Their love affair is the clearest breach of trust carried out by David and the grossest instance of his picaresque amorality. David succeeds in cunningly inviting himself as a boarder to the Margolis' home and, though sincerely in love, he lusts even more after Dora's moral fall than after his personal satisfaction.

Dora conquers David's heart because she is a mother, presiding the home where he boards and acting towards him as a foster mother. Education is, again, a main issue. Part of their mutual admiration is conditioned because Dora respects David's intellectual skills, acquired through his Talmudic education, and because David reciprocates in appreciating Dora's feverish passion to educate herself through her children. One of the bitterest ironies of the book is that Dora, who is decided to educate her daughter for the girl to become a happy wife such as Dora is not, sacrifices her love for David for the sake of the children only to find that, in the end, her daughter marries a much older man purely for his money and David never becomes the brilliant intellectual she expected him to become. This plot twist is doubly ironical because by the time Dora meets David—years after Dora ended their love affair—to tell him about the failure of her life as wife and mother, David is courting a girl the age of Dora's daughter.

Just like Lazarillo, David tries to marry for money at the beginning of his business career, but, unlike him, David cannot overcome his physical dislike of the girl in question, Gussie, a work-mate who clearly reads in David's face his true intentions. Later, the successful rogue, dissatisfied with his piling fortune, seeks in marriage the solution to his empty life:

I had no creed. I knew of no ideals. The only thing I believed in was the cold, drab theory of the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest. This could not satisfy a heart that was hungry for enthusiasm and affection, so dreams of family life became my religion. Self-sacrificing devotion to one's family was the only kind of altruism and idealism I did not flout. (p. 380)

When he finally meets the girl of his dreams, the virginal, mildly intellectual and socialist, Anna Tevkin, he speaks of her as his religion. Naturally, as it is bound to happen, when the rogue wants to transcend his moral emptiness and puts so much emphasis on love as the only panacea for his metaphysical sickness, he only succeeds in making a fool of himself and in disparaging the merit of his material accomplishment, which in David's case is high. Anna Tevkin's rejection is the harshest blow David ever receives, the one that definitively unbalances his search for happiness.

By the time David meets Anna, he is engaged to be married to Fanny, the daughter of an Orthodox Jew rabbi, who seems to exemplify the possibility of true Jewish life in America. David is attracted as much by the father as by the daughter: by him, as a surrogate father, by her, as a good home maker, by both as the Jewish roots of his future American life. For Levinsky "Marrying into a well-to-do orthodox family meant respectability and solidity. It implied law and order, the antithesis of anarchism, socialism, trade-unionism, strikes" (p. 379). Obviously the weight of loneliness and homesickness is so heavy in the forty-year-old David that he is ready to believe in such a fallacy as the power of family life to keep the amorality of his daily business life at bay. What makes him back out of the marriage to Fanny is Anna Tevkin, or, in his own words, "a feeling of self-pity and yearning" (p. 447) that love, money or culture can never heal, accompanied by the notion that he deserves much more than such a colourless girl as Fanny. David wrongly applies his standard of business success to his private life and when Anna makes him see that money is not the key to a woman's heart, he simply cannot understand his failure.

The episode dealing with Anna Tevkin is emblematic of David's erratic emotional life. Apart from her physical appeal and her youth, Anna is attractive to David's eyes as the daughter of a Russian-born, Hebrew poet whose main work was a series of love letters to the father of his beloved that won him the girl and lasting literary reputation. To David, Anna is a heroine of romance, and he attempts winning the daughter through the father just as the poet Tevkin did. Again with fine irony, Cahan makes Tevkin an ill-adapted immigrant and a minor businessman who, though very fond of David, cannot convince his daughter Anna of her suitor's merits and even involves him in ruinous real estate dealings.

Accepted into the literary, artistic and socialist circle of the family—Cahan's Lower East Side own intellectual world—as the father's friend, Levinsky realizes with dismay that he is nothing but a "money bag" to be squeezed by the Tevkin girls for their various radical, cultural projects. Because his money is unclean for Anna and he has nothing spiritually worth to win her, the girl finally rejects him. The revelation that for all his riches, the great David Levinsky is nothing to a working-class girl, galls David

and pushes him to frenzied business activity. By the end of his story David Levinsky is not very far from Simon Rosedale, the prosperous Jew who tries to buy Lily Bart for a wife to consolidate his acceptance into New York high society in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905). In all, Levinsky is possibly closer to his fictional heir, Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), since both wrongly believe that money is enough to buy love and are thoroughly defeated by worlds they crave for, though do not totally understand, no matter whether they are the select set of the Buchanans or the independent intellectual group of the Tevkins.

### III

Telling his story from the pinnacle of economical success—far above Lazarillo's ignominious position—Levinsky concludes: "Sometimes when I am alone in my beautiful apartments, brooding over these things and nursing my loneliness, I say to myself: "There are cases when success is a tragedy" (p. 529) But is his own case one of these? The fact is that Lazarillo and David Levinsky use a great deal of self-pity in their narratives to manipulate the reader into compassion for them. The reader's compassion is likely to lessen the enormity of the rogues' moral faults, but that would perhaps be in direct contradiction to the alleged moralizing purpose of the novelist. This moralizing purpose is, to say the least, vague.

In the case of Lazarillo, the reader must judge the protagonist by weighing honourable but literally starving poverty against dishonourable moderate prosperity and, in all literalness, the pangs of hunger will be considered more painful to bear than moral scruples. The mastery of the anonymous author of Lazarillo consists in making us accept the evidence that life is hardly an honourable business, against our expectations of his work offering an exemplary rebuke of picaresque life. The case of Abraham Cahan and David Levinsky is complex to judge. In his "Introduction" to the novel, John Higham remarks that:

Until recently, the situation of the American Jew did not encourage a widely sympathetic reading of David Levinsky. A mass exodus of Eastern European Jews from the immigrant ghettos of the big cities was under way by the time Cahan

wrote. In escaping from confinement and foreignness, millions of Jews collided against rising barriers of discrimination. They were, therefore, defensive about the color and flavour of the Ghetto. Under these circumstances, David Levinsky's dispassionate self-examination was an embarrassment. Instead of seeing the nuances and varieties of character that Cahan had painted, instead of appreciating his implicit criticism of American business life, uneasy readers thought he had perversely documented all the anti-Semitic stereotypes. (p. xi)

This opposition to Cahan's work is rooted in the concept of marginality. Lazarillo acknowledges his marginality in society by living in a dishonourable position in 16th century Spain, a time when honour was regarded as the main value, above the realities of economic welfare, as can be seen in many other Spanish literary works of the time and, within Lazarillo itself, in the episode of the impoverished Squire. However, Lazarillo is not marginal in the same way that, for instance, a converted Jew would have been in 16th century Spain. Some critics have argued the possibility of the anonymous Spanish author being in fact a Jew, which would explain his hazardous view of life, his strong sense of marginality and his anonymity. This possibility would nicely link Lazarillo with David Levinsky as products created by men belonging to the same marginal community living in different times in countries that may reluctantly accept them or manifestly reject them. Apart from the convenience of such theory, the fact remains that marginality is an issue in the picaresque novel, but, whereas in Lazarillo de Tormes it is solved in terms of society tolerating the dishonourable individual, in David Levinsky the problem remains unsolved because it involves the individual's simultaneous place in two communities—the Gentile and the Jewish—and the marginality of the Jewish community within the U.S.A.

Understandably, European-born Jews living in the U.S.A. felt outraged by Levinsky because they rightly felt that Gentiles would ascribe his negative characteristics to the whole Jewish community. The book was specifically addressed to American Gentiles, otherwise it would not have contained extensive, though elementary, information about Jewish life (including, among other things, a description of the Talmud). Abraham Cahan, writing at a time when the Jewish American community was far from being consolidated as an integral part of the American nation was accused of committing the sin writers belonging to minorities often commit: that

of not being a propagandist. In the same way, women writers presenting submissive women characters in romances are rejected for conforming to a masculine view of the world. Cahan chose to go against the grain and let the reader judge David Levinsky—which, in all probability, accounts for the choice of a first person narrative—in an effort to make the picaresque adventure of the Jewish immigrant as culturally relevant for the American reader as, for instance, the picaresque adventure told by his friend, W.D. Howells in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885).

In *The Rise of David Levinsky* the picaresque hero abandons a country—the 1880s Russia of the pogroms—where his community is not only marginal but also in danger of physical extermination, an experience that he suffers in his own flesh and through the death of his mother. He flees to America, where he never ceases being a member of the Jewish community, which is tolerated but hardly integrated. After reading Henry James's observations in his return to the U.S.A. after twenty years of life in Europe on the immigrants' invasion of his homeland, the truth that surfaces is that marginality must have been very hard to overcome for American Jews, especially for those born in Europe. However, nobody can say that a man worth two million dollars in 1910—Levinsky's case—is a marginal man. Moreover, if this man's activities have a direct relevance in the process of economical change and social transformation of his adoptive country—David's formidable task consists in collaborating in the creation of a whole new industry that dressed lower middle-class American women in cheap, ready-made clothes—marginality seems even more out of the question. The tension of the book is built along other lines. David, who actually remains a marginal man for the Gentiles, remains also marginal within the educated section of the Jewish community. Cahan implies that David is stranded in no man's land because he is suspended between the American Gentile world and the European Jewish traditional Orthodoxy. This is why, in spite of being successful, the modern rogue is a failure, for the social class that would accept him is still on the making. In a sense, Levinsky himself pioneers with his ascend the creation of a new, lay, Americanized, upper Jewish class.

In all, no alternative seems available and this is Cahan's main ambiguity. Family life turns out to be hellish in Dora Margolis's case, Tevkin is a fossilized remain of a

Hebrew culture that is out of place in America, Anna Tevkin finally marries a high-school teacher and possibly faces a life of relative poverty. No other character in the book seems to offer a meaningful example of what life should be, except, perhaps, Matilda, campaigning with her husband for socialist revolution. For all his envy of artistic or intellectual achievement, Levinsky realizes that artists and even educated men like his doctor friend Jack Mindels depend on his patronage, so that, he somehow, ends up renewing his regret for having forsaken education but emphasizing the intellectual daring of his business life, his contribution to American life and the power he commands. David's kind rules the world and for all the alleged spiritual emptiness of the American dream he may point to the possibility that the people who live out their romantic idea of fulfillment through culture are the truly marginal ones.

Cahan's denunciation of the likes of David Levinsky is double-edged, for success prompts sympathy from the reader and Levinsky's distressing loneliness is paradoxically shared by most educated people in the Western world. The threat implied in the rise of many David Levinskys to the seats of power—the government of the hardly educated by the half-educated—must have seemed enormous to Cahan. This might account for the absolute absence of comedy in the book, written in a style that is furthest from the buoyant, sparkling language of *Lazarillo*. Cahan's earnestness is a measure of how well he understood the relative values of marginality and of how the picaresque hero becomes in his American dream world a figure to fear.

The almost total disappearance of the Yiddish language in the life of the Jewish community in the U.S.A—Cahan and most Jewish European immigrants' mother tongue and the language of his newspaper—would certainly have made Abraham Cahan reflect on his role as pioneer of the Jewish American literature in English. The heritage he has left has directly spurred the integration of Jewish intellectuals in the American cultural life against the survival of the original Yiddish culture. Cahan's own picaresque adventure as a Jewish immigrant also ended in an ambiguous position. Just like David Levinsky, he may be said to have bridged the gap between the Gentile and the Jewish community and to have achieved success in his field. For him as for Levinsky, Talmudic erudition was a relic of the European past and the way towards integration lay in

adopting American cultural forms. David Levinsky took up American business procedures and contributed to developing them with as much—or as little—morality as any American Gentile; there lay his picaresque success. On the other hand, Cahan adopted American cultural conventions, namely, the novel of the American dream with its picaresque plot, thus adding to American fiction the invaluable contribution of the European Jews; there, too, lay his real-life picaresque success. Deciding which contribution is more valuable to American national life and more disruptive for the Yiddish, American Jewish world remains an open question, as open as whether Cahan was actually speaking about his own loneliness through the mouth of his picaresque hero, David Levinsky.

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