

CHAPTER 1

The Halo of Higher Learning in the Work of Abraham Cahan

At the turn of the twentieth century, religious study continued to hold a special place for Jewish immigrants, in some ways especially for those who no longer studied the Talmud. In “Talmudism at the Brooklyn Bridge,” a piece published in the *Commercial Advertiser* in 1900, Abraham Cahan reports on a conversation with a Jewish American physician who characterizes the Talmud as “the soul of a whole people.” He shares the following parable with Cahan:

Says the fool to the fish he has caught: “I hate thee; I shall not let thee breathe the air which my privileged lungs enjoy. Thou shalt be drowned.” And the fish heaves a sigh of relief, breathes freely in the living waters and is happy. The Gentiles barred our ancestors out of their tournaments, of their orgies, did they? No harm done, my friend. The fish was not thrown out of the air. It was only into the stream of fresh water. Neither were the Jews driven from anything. They were driven into the synagogues, the synagogues which were their libraries, their intellectual and emotional exchanges, the distilleries—not of brandy, for they were kept out of those places where one may learn to drink it—but of the lofty spirit, of the noble enthusiasms where are the real hallmark of Judaism. (Rischin 54)

The physician’s story reveals how, barred by social barriers, Jews placed their desire for a more expansive, unrestricted identity onto education.

Cahan represented, promoted, and critiqued Jewish Americans’ engagement with education in his various professional roles. As editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward* for nearly fifty years, Cahan affirmed the value

of learning for Jewish Americans. In a lead editorial in the *Forward* published in 1902, Cahan points to the sacrifices of immigrant parents for their children's education as "one of the finest qualities of the Jewish people" and avows "our love for education, for intellectual effort" (qtd. in Sanders 260). While Cahan's education of Jewish immigrants, most notably through the *Forward's* popular *Bintel Brief* (Bundle of Letters) advice column, included such practical matters as how to use a handkerchief or a thermometer, he also enlightened his readers with knowledge that was beyond the reach of their everyday experience. Cahan strove to educate his Yiddish-speaking readership about such writers as Leo Tolstoy, William Dean Howells, Stephen Crane, Sinclair Lewis, and Somerset Maugham. Indeed, Theodore Dreiser "was recognized among Yiddish readers [of the *Forward*] as a novelist of great power long before he was accepted among American critics ("Abraham Cahan: A Biographical Sketch" 7). As editor, Cahan furthered the education of his readers, providing practical information and boosting appreciation of art and literature, and moreover, encouraging readers to make education a valued priority.

A 1907 letter to the *Bintel Brief* from "A Worried Reader" describes a Jewish American immigrant's visit to her parents' home town in Poland. There she meets an educated, charming man to whom she becomes engaged. When she returns to America with the bridegroom, her family and friends are put off by his greenhorn qualities and the writer herself feels her love fading. The editorial response—and Cahan was notorious for his personal involvement in all aspects of the newspaper—encourages the correspondent to maintain the engagement: "We can assure the writer that her bridegroom will learn English quickly. He will know American history and literature as well as her friends do, and he is a better American than they" (Metzger 70). The reply clearly connects the fiancé's worth to his ability to be educated. In another letter from the same year, a fourteen-year-old asks if she should drop out of school to help support her parents, who are facing hard times but want her to continue her education. The editor's response is direct: "The advice to the girl is that she should obey her parents and further her education, because in that way she will be able to give them greater satisfaction than if she went to work" (71). Here education is linked to basic family happiness.

The *Forward's* support of education was not without qualification or wariness. In a 1909 letter, a twenty-year-old woman writes to explain that she has fallen in love with a young man who seeks to become a doctor, a process that will take seven years for him to complete. Her parents have

proposed another match for her and her friends have discouraged the young woman from becoming too tied down by a supporting role. The editors' response, while conceding the possibility of overgeneralization, states starkly, "After years of study such young students fall out of love with the girls who have helped them. A graduate doctor doesn't marry a toilworn old maid. She has worked her fingers to the bone and exhausted herself to help him become 'Sir Doctor.' All that can be said of him when he leaves her is 'You should be ashamed of yourself, Sir Doctor'" (91–92). The editors' response attacks status-driven and morally compromised pursuits of education.

Cahan did not merely promote the value of learning but also offered a critical perspective on what he saw as intellectually deadening teaching practices in American education. In his autobiography *The Education of Abraham Cahan* (1905), he scorns superficial pedagogy and the uninspired nature of American night schools.¹ Cahan disdains rote memorization and "mechanical assignments" (*Education* 73). For Cahan, a good teacher "leads in developing the students' curiosity and understanding. When teaching and reading reflect an inspiring and dedicated teacher, an assignment is neither boring nor a compulsory duty; it becomes a fountainhead of enjoyment and progress" (*Education* 114). As an instructor at an American night school, a position he held for eleven years (Rischin 11), Cahan demonstrates contempt for his school's preoccupation with orderly records rather than with good teaching by deliberately failing to take the roll in a class of exhausted, hardworking adults who understandably cannot attend regularly (379).

Cahan's fiction is more concerned with the psychological and social functions of education than in affirming Jews as the "people of the book," documenting school conditions, or critiquing teaching methods. Two of Cahan's most well-known works, "The Imported Bridegroom" (1898) and *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), while underscoring Jewish American veneration of higher education, portray the difficulty of finding intellectual or spiritual sanctuary within an American culture of competition and self-fashioning. Asriel Stroon, the recently retired property owner of the "The Imported Bridegroom" and David Levinsky, the up-from-the-ghetto cloak manufacturer of *The Rise of David Levinsky* idealize education as transformative and empowering. Asriel and Levinsky are drawn to an ethereal vision of learning—what Levinsky refers to as "the halo of higher education" (215). They are less interested in actually studying texts, attending classes, or earning degrees than they are in an ill-defined

“life of intellectual pursuits” (*Levinsky* 150). Asriel and Levinsky employ their real or imagined connection to scholarship or the highly educated as a way to transcend the emptiness of a life circumscribed by ambition and possessiveness. In the end, however, their preoccupation with education painfully accentuates their desperation and persistent sense of exile. In these fictional narratives, Cahan sets moral integrity in opposition to personal ambition. This opposition was less absolute in reality. The principle of *Takhlis* from Eastern European Yiddish culture emphasized the importance of living with a sense of valued purpose, an idea that justified the deprivations and loneliness of scholarly life. In America, as Dash Moore comments, “Goal-oriented Jewish immigrants kept the principle of *Takhlis* but discarded the old values of eastern Europe and adopted new ones such as wealth-without-learning or secular-status-without-Jewish-knowledge” (92). This idea applies to Cahan’s Asriel and Levinsky, but these characters temper the crudeness of their pursuits by superficially venerating the spiritual power of education. The devaluation of education is also explored in Cahan’s less-known story “Circumstances” (1898) as well as his novella *Yekl, A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896), texts that reveal how education in America can undermine loving relationships and moral integrity.

In “The Imported Bridegroom,” the three central characters each embrace learning for distinct, though not mutually exclusive, reasons. For Asriel, education is a commodity that signifies both his financial power and his virtue. As the former owner of “a flour store, two bakeries and some real estate” (24), Asriel has devoted much of his energy to business, but at fifty-eight and retired, he fears death and is overwhelmed by a sense of his own sinfulness. During his working years, Asriel never went to synagogue on weekdays and slept through Sabbath services, but now attends regularly, despite the fact that he does not understand the Hebrew prayers. Asriel, we learn, has not yet safeguarded “a share in the World-to-Come” (24). The monetary language is ironically appropriate here because, by associating himself with the aura of religious scholarship, Asriel aspires to accrue cultural capital. Searching for a richer sense of self, Asriel returns to his native Polish village and deploys his wealth in an attempt to secure the spiritual fulfillment he seeks. Asriel goes back to Pravly to recover the Jewishness that he may never have deeply possessed in the first place. By not only financially supporting a Talmudic scholar but also proffering his daughter to him, Asriel can attain protection for his soul that might otherwise be “left utterly exposed to the flames

of Sheol [the underworld]" (24). As stated in a Talmudic tractate: "[T]o give shelter to a scholar bent upon sacred studies, and to sustain him from your estates, is like offering sacrifices to God" ("Imported Bridegroom" 37).² The prodigy, Shaya, has an exchange value that gains Asriel both an honorable marriage for his daughter Flora and self-sanctification.

Although Asriel's longings may be heartfelt, the story portrays him overcome by his competitive, business-oriented nature, which significantly degrades his veneration of Jewish scholarship.³ Soon after entering the Pravly synagogue of his youth, Asriel engages in a bidding war for the honor of reading from the third section of the weekly Torah portion. He blurts out impulsively, "Let the sections be auctioned off!" (32). Asriel's closest competitor, Reb Lippe, is really no match for him: "I am willing to pay a hundred, two hundred, five hundred [rubles]. I can buy up all Pravly, Reb Lippe, his gold lace and all, and sell him at a loss, too!" (34). Asriel soon stumbles into another clash of purses (37), this time to secure possession of Shaya for his daughter. When Reb Lippe tells Asriel to cherish his newly won prodigy, he replies "gleefully," "You bet I will" (44). Asriel here conveys as much opportunism and self-importance as he does a sense of a sacred obligation. Rather than demonstrating reverence for learning, he has acquired an idol of his own acquisitiveness and greed.

By importing a living symbol of Jewish learning, Asriel compensates for his own education, which had been cut short: "[I]n his boyhood, he had scarcely gone through the Pentateuch when he was set to work by his father's side, flax heckling" (25). While to Asriel Hebrew words remain a "conglomeration of incomprehensible sounds," (22), Shaya is hyperliterate: "[H]e was said to have two thousand Talmudic folios literally at his fingers' end" (31). Not only does Asriel's limited knowledge of Hebrew cut him off from the full richness of Jewish tradition, but his immigrant English also disempowers him. For example, although Asriel commands Flora authoritatively in Yiddish, his thick-accented English spoken in public makes him seem suddenly unsophisticated, uneducated, even childish: "Dis a choych?" he asks someone, failing to recognize the library in front of him (76). This moment also underscores the fact that the prodigy, who frequents the library, is rapidly advancing his education by mastering English, thus further isolating Asriel. The retired businessman is imbued with what Hanna Wirth-Nesher calls the "exilic features of American Jews' languages of origins" (15). His disparate identity is spread across the four languages (Yiddish, English, Hebrew, and Polish) he speaks with varying degrees of proficiency. Asriel's multilingualism

draws attention to his attenuated identity. In an effort to surmount his exile, Asriel imports Shaya, but the prodigy's Hebrew fluency is merely a token of the spiritual rootedness Asriel seeks. Asriel senses the transforming power of education, but he approaches learning as an object to be manipulated rather than a source of internal enrichment. Moreover, Shaya resists being objectified as an ornament of Jewish learning, further underscoring the insufficiency and incompleteness of Asriel's use of education.

Twenty-year-old daughter Flora values education because it marks her entitlement to a fully assimilated and upwardly mobile American life. Intent on marrying "an educated American gentleman" (20), in particular a doctor, Flora makes a point of reading Dickens, Scott, and Thackeray in order to set herself apart from her married girlfriends who speak broken English: "I won't marry anybody except a doctor," she would declare, with conscious avoidance of bad grammar as it behooved a doctor's wife" (20). Although initially uninterested in Shaya, Flora soon sees an opportunity to use the prodigy as a sign and guarantee of her deserved social status. Flora attempts to transform Shaya into an American doctor, and secure her dreams of social ascendance. However, Flora's romance with the prodigy does not bring her into the refined, fully Americanized community that she desires. Although Flora marries Shaya, "The Imported Bridegroom" ends with an image of her excluded from "Shaya's entire future" (86) as she stands outside of the prodigy's new circle of "shabby" (85) international intellectuals. Flora's exile from the Americanized life of educated refinement she has sought is underscored by the narrator's observation that "[t]he room was full of smoke and broken English" (85).⁴ Flora has viewed education narrowly as a means to an end, and now she is at a loss to respond to the scholarly debate she witnesses: "She could neither speak nor stir from her seat" (86). To a young ambition-driven American woman, the scene of intellectual engagement before her is utterly foreign and unfathomable.

The value of education for Shaya is more difficult to pinpoint than it is for Asriel and Flora. While Shaya shares at least some of the Stroons' opportunism, self-aggrandizement, and competitiveness, he also seizes onto learning as a way to reinvent himself and expand his intellectual and social horizons beyond those available to an *illoui* (a prodigy). To be sure, Shaya's Talmudic knowledge and reasoning skills are impressive: He fights "single-handed" and delivers a "knock-out blow" against his rabbinical opponents (55). At the same time, Shaya remains rather inscrutable. Flora perceptively observes that he "was never . . . invested in the image of a

'clumsy rustic' nor of a 'holy soul' ” (53). Notably, Shaya's gesticulations as he reads the Talmud are enigmatically characterized as “indescribable” and “controversial” (51). What is certain is that Shaya transcends expectations others have for him. Although he dazzles all with his scholarly deftness and sparring abilities, Shaya is not as narrowly focused on sacred learning as it first appears. In Pravy and New York, Shaya is used as a social and spiritual status symbol but soon begins to chart his own course. Shaya's American education moves him beyond the relatively narrow circle of Jewish scholars in Poland and in America who marvel at his skills and knowledge. In addition to mastering English, Shaya becomes interested in such subjects as geometry, natural philosophy, and acoustics. These interests lead him not to medical school, as Flora desires, but to study of the positivism of the nineteenth-century French philosopher Auguste Comte. This statement to Flora near the end of the story highlights his alienation from his new bride and as well as his transformation: “You don't know me yet. I tell you, you don't begin to know me” (83).

Jules Chametzky observes, “Shaya's career illustrates a process familiar to many—the prodigious intellectual effort to bridge in a lifetime, the gap from the Middle Ages to the modern world. . . . Shaya moves away from Asriel and his traditionalism; and for venerable sages swaying over volumes of Talmud he substitutes in his American paradise intense intellectuals pouring over volumes of the latest in advanced thought. It was a substitution often made” (82, 83). I would add that Shaya is not merely substituting one part of himself for another but broadening his identity. He does so by refusing to remain a commodity and using his education to advance his potential as a transnational human being. As Cahan explains in a piece published in the *Commercial Advertiser* (1901), Comtists celebrate leaders from diverse traditions and, moreover, profess a global “religion of human progress” (“Religion of Humanity” 334). By the end of the story Shaya begins to embody the ideal of education as a pathway to intellectual vitality and growth. Shaya implies the possibility of rising above both grasping Americanization and nostalgia for the Old World. His ever-expanding realm of knowledge moves him closer to the story's absent ideal of an unfettered, vibrant, and spiritually sustaining interior life. On the whole, however, the weight of “The Imported Bridegroom” rests on Cahan's ironic treatment of his characters' manipulations of education as social status. Shaya's possessive display of Flora to his new circle of Comtists, for example, suggests that his scholarship has at least a degree of theatricality: “Did you ever see such a beautiful

and stylish young lady?’ he seemed to be saying” (85). The performance is directed to Flora as well: Shaya announces somewhat vainly to her, “Look at these great men . . . I am their chum” (85).⁵

Like Shaya, David Levinsky may genuinely revere education, but his interest in learning is inevitably caught up in his compulsion to rise above others. Levinsky, a former Yeshiva student, having recently arrived in New York from Antomir (in Russian-held Lithuania) and now a struggling street peddler, expresses this exalted faith in education: “The prospect of going to school in the evenings would look before me during the hours of boredom or distress I spent at my cart as a promise of divine pleasure” (133). Although Levinsky claims that studying at a university “appealed to the better man in me, to what was purest in my thoughts and most sacred in my emotions” (169), he fails throughout the novel to explain what his pure thoughts and sacred emotions actually are; instead, he employs the idea of learning largely as a commodity to enhance his status and ego. An immigrant who rises rapidly from peddler to sweatshop worker to budding entrepreneur, Levinsky becomes a powerful cloak manufacturer. His great success as a businessman stems not from his formal education but from his shrewd intelligence combined with his competitive nature and the wider growth of the garment industry at the time of his immigration.⁶ Indeed, Levinsky’s early experiences in his adopted country actually underscore the irrelevance of his boyhood Talmudic training in Lithuania. This point is brought home when Levinsky, having just arrived in New York, is asked about his occupation. “I read Talmud,” he replies (91). The stark foreignness of Levinsky’s response is dramatically out of step with an America that would demand to know *for what purpose* he reads the Talmud. As Levinsky is told, reading the Talmud “is no business in America” (91).⁷ The new culture that Levinsky has entered values education predominantly for its tangible benefits, not its intrinsic rewards. Levinsky adapts well to this new culture by manipulating appeals to education to advance his social status. Although reading the Talmud offers Levinsky some psychological comfort when he is a poor young immigrant, the idea—rather than the reality—of his education is what is increasingly useful to him. In America, Levinsky cultivates an aura of learnedness and employs references to education to advance his self-interest and to protect himself from fully confronting the crudeness of his competitive personality.

Levinsky’s enchantment with education is inevitably entangled with his essentially domineering nature, his fascination with the idea

of learning bound up with his compulsion to manipulate others, a drive that prospers in the New World. We learn that Levinsky is an avid reader of Herbert Spencer (192), who in addition to delineating Social Darwinism was widely influential on British and American education. Spencer's central argument is that the primary purpose of education is to ensure an individual's self-preservation before anything else. Spencer claimed that the sort of intellectual aspirations Levinsky associates with the City College of New York,⁸ his intended institute of higher education that he never actually attends, are merely leisure pursuits. Spencer writes, "[I]t is one thing to admit that aesthetic culture is in a high degree conducive to human happiness; and another thing to admit that it is a fundamental requisite to human happiness. However important it may be, it must yield precedence to those kinds of culture which bear more directly on the duties of life" (73). Levinsky stays up late reading Spencer and Darwin, and when he comes across an editorial inspired by the theory of the "survival of the fittest," it occurs to him, "Why that's just what I have been saying all these days . . . The able fellow succeeds and the misfits fail" (282). Despite his pretensions to the rarified realm of higher learning, Levinsky's worldview narrows even further, as he increasingly identifies himself with Spencer's Social Darwinism. He doesn't so much learn from Spencer and Darwin as rationalizes the crudeness of his own competitive nature. As Sarah Wilson points out, "Reading as if evolutionary theory were intended for [Levinsky] specifically means not only turning a blind eye to the relative indifference of Darwin's schema to the individual, but also ignoring that in the most basic measure of evolutionary fitness, reproduction, he has failed (and continues to fail) utterly" (261).

Levinsky's relationship with education becomes part of the performance of his personality, the management of his identity in order to validate his rightful place as a powerful and influential man. One of Levinsky's most revealing observations is that "[w]e are all actors more or less. The only question is what our aim is and whether we are capable of a 'convincing personation [*sic*]' " (194). Levinsky puts on educated airs to bolster his sense of superiority. To borrow a phrase from Cahan's short story "Two Doctors" (1900), education serves as a kind of "high hat" that distinguishes him from lowly—and admiring—others (276). In *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, Hapgood describes how Jews sometimes imported "scholars" from Europe whose only qualification was that they knew more about the Talmud than most others in their community. These

men “clap a high hat on their head, impose on a poor congregation with their up-to-dateness and become rabbis without learning or piety” (62).

Philip Barrish argues that Levinsky repeatedly stages a divided self, an opposition between materialism “and something else that is distinct from it” (643) to propel his social rise. For example, Levinsky seeks help from another clothing manufacturer and realizes, “an occasional quotation or two from the Talmud was particularly helpful in obtaining a small favor from him” (208). Much later in the novel Levinsky demonstrates a more nuanced performance of his literacy as he tries to win the favor of the former poet Tevkin in order to secure his daughter Anna as his bride. Levinsky’s interest in Tevkin’s poetry is not simply contrived; as a student in Antomir, Levinsky read and admired his work. Nevertheless, Levinsky’s trip to the Astor Library to attain volumes of Tevkin’s poetry is predominantly strategic; indeed, Levinsky finds that sitting in the public library is an “undignified” act for a wealthy manufacturer (451). After introducing himself to Tevkin at a café, Levinsky performs a combination of self-deprecation, scholarliness, and critical insight in order to move toward his goal. Levinsky tells Tevkin, “I am just a prosaic businessman,” but this is part of his performance: “And by way of showing him I was not, I veered the conversation back to his poetry. I sought to impress him with a sense of my deep and critical appreciation of what I had read in his three volumes. I spoke enthusiastically of most of it, but took exception to the basic idea in a poem on Job and Solomon” (457). Later, Levinsky evades being perceived as manipulative by performing an act of “truth-telling”: “I became interested in [Anna] because I heard she was your daughter. . . . I made it my business to go the library and to read your works. My enthusiasm for your writing is genuine, I assure you Mr. Tevkin, and when I went to that café it was for the purpose of making your acquaintance as much for your own sake as for hers. There, I have told you the whole story” (467). Levinsky’s “honesty” attempts to defuse Tevkin’s suspicion that he has ulterior motives. His performance is only partially successful; Levinsky receives a look of “mixed satisfaction and perplexity” (467) from Tevkin. While he does become a regular guest at the Tevkin home, Levinsky is rebuked by Anna for the second time. Levinsky’s imperfect manipulations show that he is ultimately unable to separate his stated passion for lofty “intellectual pursuits” from his desire to be a powerful and revered businessman.

Levinsky’s references to education sometime only thinly cover what is rather crude self-interest. He, for example, twice considers marrying

Gussie, a cloak-finisher who has saved a considerable sum. In each case, Levinsky pursues her money. The first time he suggests that she could support his often mentioned but never fulfilled plans to attend the City College of New York—certainly, she would enjoy being married to a doctor—and the second time he wants her to invest in his new business. When Gussie observes that Levinsky seems to have jettisoned his dream of higher education, he responds, “Well, anyhow, what do they do at college? They read books. Can’t I read them at home? One can find time for everything” (198). The fact that Levinsky so quickly revisions lofty intellectual desires as merely a practical matter of schedule balancing reveals how education has increasingly become a contrivance for him. Perhaps to protect himself from the crudeness of this reality, Levinsky briefly convinces himself that he actually has feelings for Gussie (198). A short time later, when Levinsky confesses that he “felt like a convert [away from Judaism] passing a synagogue” while walking near City College, his guilt seems deliberately orchestrated: We read how Levinsky would “studiously” avert his eyes from the college (207). Levinsky appeals to the ideal of higher education to negotiate whatever feelings of guilt may be plaguing him, to earn favors and influence, and to enhance his mystique as an admired, erudite businessman. Levinsky has attempted to rationalize what he calls “The Destruction of My Temple,” the surrender of his dream to attend City College and, moreover, a life dedicated to “intellectual pursuits.” Levinsky voices this rationalization both to himself and others, and he resists owning up to the reality that the American ambition and acquisitiveness invade all possible havens of scholarly pursuit.

Although he cultivates an aura of learnedness, Levinsky strategically avoids thinking much about the competitive and shallow values that propel his career. Enormously wealthy but perpetually lonely, he enjoys attending lectures by Felix Adler, founder of the Ethical Culture Society, at Chickering Hall on Sunday mornings. Levinsky hears Adler’s words but is more attuned to the obscure “general atmosphere” of the lecture (175). This psychological detachment is necessary because it keeps him from coming to terms with the ethical challenges likely raised by Adler’s lecture. Levinsky tells us that he values the lectures “for their English rather than for anything else, but their spirit, reinforced by the general atmosphere of the place would send my soul soaring. These thoughts and my prospective *alma mater* [the City College of New York] appealed to me as being the same order of things, of the same world of refined ways, new thoughts, noble interests” (175).¹⁰ This passage is noteworthy in part for

its irony: Levinsky's manipulation of trade unions and some of his business practices, such as "accidentally" sending checks to the wrong address in order to gain more time to make a payment (238), are not examples of "ethical culture." The irony illuminates the gap between what Adler says and what Levinsky actually hears, and moreover points to the gulf between Levinsky's lofty intellectual aspirations and the ethical compromises of his life in the garment industry. Levinsky's selective listening helps him to avoid fully facing his choices and priorities.

Levinsky, however, cannot totally hide from the fact that his educational aspirations have quickly become pretenses and that he will never realize his dreams of scholarship. As a bachelor, Levinsky is somewhat insulated from this truth. Without children of his own to occupy his attention, and given his intellectual skills and mastery of English, Levinsky tries to keep his vague educational yearnings alive; however, his encounters with immigrant parents, such as Tevkin, and particularly Meyer Nodelman, indirectly underscore the fact that his dreams of education will not come to fruition. Nodelman, a cloak manufacturer with a net worth of \$100,000, wants to learn to write in English and in particular to be able to pen a more authoritative looking signature. Levinsky patronizingly characterizes Nodelman as "enjoy[ing] a considerable degree of native intellectual alertness," though not a sophisticated thinker. Nodelman, on the other hand, is puzzled by Levinsky's pursuit of "higher things" (180). This is not to say that Nodelman scoffs at education, but he views its value in wryly pragmatic terms: "A man without writing is like a deaf mute. What's the difference? The man who can't write has speech in his mouth but he is dumb with his fingers, while the deaf mute he can't talk with his mouth, but he can do so with his fingers. Both should be pitied" (181). Nodelman understands the importance of sending his sons to college; he respects but does not idolize education. Nodelman's decidedly unidealistic, pragmatic view of education strongly counterpoints Levinsky's deliberate romanticism. After his fifth lesson as Levinsky's tutee, Nodelman becomes frustrated and declares that it is "Too Late! Too Late!" (183). Nodelman's response can be explained both by the fact that he, unlike Levinsky, is not interested in the pursuit of "higher things" and that facing his limited literacy leaves him feeling ashamed and infantilized: "I don't want my kids to know their pa is learning like a little boy, don't you know . . . I ought to be a horse driver, not a manufacturer," says Nodelman with self-contempt (182). Education may be still useful to him, but Nodelman's efforts to improve his written

English exacerbate feelings of insecurity and limitation: “Those little dots won’t go through my head. It has grown too hard for them, I suppose” (183). Further growth and opportunity belong to the next, American-born generation. Despite his impressive literacy skills, Levinsky is very much like Nodelman. It is also “too late,” even at this relatively early point in the novel, for education to change Levinsky. In different ways, Nodelman and Levinsky demonstrate that for many first-generation immigrants personal resourcefulness, tenacity, and the burgeoning of the garment industry better explain Jewish American material gain than education. Nevertheless, since scholarship and literacy hold such importance in Jewish culture, material American success leaves them feeling vulnerable and incomplete in America.

Dora, the wife a business partner, with whom Levinsky falls in love, is another immigrant parent whose experience shines light on Levinsky’s own feelings that his opportunities for education may have passed him by and that, for all his intellectual airs, he remains an outsider in American culture. Dora supports her daughter Lucy’s American school education but feels competitive panic that she can’t keep up with her. Taking her daughter to school for the first time was one of the greatest joys in life, but “[s]he became jealous of the child” (241). Dora never learned to read Hebrew or Yiddish and she is now driven to keep up with her daughter. Levinsky finds himself pulled into this competition. In response to Lucy’s correction of his pronunciation, Levinsky “hastened to lower her crest by pointing out that she had said ‘nice’ when ‘nicely’ was in order (254). Lucy’s “real Yankee” education creates a web of tension between mother, daughter, and Levinsky. Dora won’t accept Levinsky’s explanations of any new English words Dora is expected to know, and if she can’t understand Lucy’s own explanations, she it blames it on her daughter: “You must have twisted it all up, you stupid” (252). Neither Dora’s determination to keep up with Lucy nor Levinsky’s pretentious erudition can give them a “real Yankee” education. Dora is plagued by her awareness that “[P]eople will beggar themselves to send their children to college only to be treated as fools and greenhorns by them” (243). Levinsky doesn’t possess quite the degree of fatalism as does Dora, however. He continues to hope that if he could just suppress his lingering Old World manners and nurture his intellect, he would become a true American.

Although Levinsky regrets giving up his dreams of formal higher education and continues to cultivate an impression of learnedness, he is

unwilling to change his status-seeking and materialistic priorities. Despite Levinsky's guilty moments and occasional compassionate impulses, his compulsive aim is to acquire wealth and clout. As Sam Girgus comments, "The deification of success for Levinsky into what William James called 'the bitch goddess' indicates his ready adaptability to a world in which there were no greater ideals than power over others. . . . Originally, success in the form of wealth and power was often considered symbolic of righteousness and strong character. In this novel, however, success becomes its own justification and establishes a new ideology that counters the more traditional democratic ideology of the American way" (75). Although he is enormously wealthy, Levinsky remains somewhat of an outsider in American culture, anxious about lingering Old World habits such as his Talmudic gesticulations (329) and unable to sustain meaningful, intimate connections with Jews and non-Jews alike. In response to these feelings, at the end of the novel Levinsky states that he has lost touch with his core values as a humble, passionate student of ideas. Levinsky's final thoughts suggest sorrow for having moved away from what he claims is his true identity as a scholar: "My past and my present do not comport well. David, the poor lad swinging over the Talmud volumes at the Preacher's Synagogue, seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky the well-known cloak manufacturer" (530). Levinsky's reflections, however, reveal not his essential identity but his ongoing need to manufacture an advantageous self-image. Levinsky has asserted and reasserted his conviction that his true calling is to be a student of higher learning, but his actions and choices consistently show him to be fundamentally driven by a quest for social and material power. Levinsky uses the idea of education, including his statements of regret for having given up his college ambitions, in order to hide from himself, to avoid genuinely encountering the fact that his life, though interesting, busy, and materially successful, is empty.

Nevertheless, for all his relentless competitiveness and willful self-delusion over the course of the novel, Levinsky demonstrates significant insight about learning and this helps to make his character far more interesting and sympathetic than if he were nothing more than an embodiment of materialism, status-seeking, and moral compromise. For example, Levinsky shows sensitivity to the needs of what we would today call English language learners. Responding to his night school instructor Mr. Bender's effort to distinguish perfect and imperfect verb tenses, Levinsky comments: "The trouble with him was that he pictured

the working of a foreigner's mind, with regard to English, as that of his own. It did not occur to him that people born to speak another language were guided by another language logic, so to say, and that in order to reach my understanding, he would have to impart his ideas in terms of my linguistic psychology" (134). Such moments of insight help to humanize the cloak manufacturer, giving us room to sympathize with his unfulfilled, frustrated yearning for a life of "intellectual pursuits." Here he recognizes how education can be unresponsive to students' cognitive needs. In addition, the deliberately exaggerated importance Levinsky gives to the idea of education throughout the novel also shields him from a dispiriting and broadly encountered truth: America has limited interest in learning unless it can be shown to have a tangible and quantifiable payoff. At one point in the novel, Levinsky lets slip that he has the "deep impression" that American education is a "cheap machine-made product" (167). Here we can perhaps commiserate with Levinsky's latent awareness that his professed love of learning is not necessarily shared by the wider culture in which he now lives.

The great faith that Asriel and Levinsky place in education, rather than leading them to a more fulfilled, enriched sense of self, exposes their insecurities and intensifies their longings. As a guarantee of his righteousness before God, Asriel stakes his identity to a young *illouï*; Levinsky idolizes his potential alma mater the City College of New York and romanticizes ill-defined "intellectual pursuits" in order to complement his material success with at least the appearance of spiritual depth. Both characters place grandiose and unrealistic expectations upon a numinous and vague notion of education, and in the end, both characters are deeply disappointed. More broadly, Cahan's fiction reveals how immigrants' encounters with American education are fraught with loss. In Europe, Talmudic study was infused with gravity and holiness; although only some men and boys participated in religious scholarship and religious schools were hardly free from worldly competitiveness and cruelty, education nevertheless was a focusing point of communal identity and offered purpose and sanctuary. After immigrating, Asriel and Levinsky continue appealing to education to provide spiritual sustenance and comfort, a conception of learning that may exist in their memory but is not an American cultural value, and the more they invest energy in education—or the idea of education—the more they are consumed by the isolation, vanity, and narrow ambition of American life. Their interest in education and educated people is corrupted by a desire to raise or affirm their social status,

to differentiate themselves rather than join with a community or to deepen their interior life. Even for Shaya, who may be more interested in learning for its own sake and in finding connections to cosmopolitan others, his nobler motives are tinged by hints of arrogant competitiveness. For all of these characters, education triggers a disintegration of personality. Perhaps this breakdown offers an opening for a reconfigured synthesis of secular and sacred knowledge for Shaya but the dominant impression that arises from these texts when taken together is that American life pulls individuals into an either-or choice between a strategic use of whatever knowledge will serve them and a slippery but aggrandizing and perhaps just as strategic notion of soulfulness.

Ideally, education builds a deep bond and connection among those who share similar interests and concerns. This view of education is outside of the grasp of a number of Cahan's characters who instead enclose themselves in the trappings of assimilation, which not only leaves them alienated but loveless. Rouvke, in "A Providential Match" (1898), and the title character of "*Yekl*," (1896) are each gracelessly and incompletely assimilated into American life. Rouvke and Yekl are casual students of street commerce and popular culture respectively. These interests give them a certain notoriety but nothing that can truly be considered success. Ultimately, their debased forms of study leave them lonely and isolated.

Rouvke is too preoccupied with his flourishing business to pay much conscious attention to romance. He has come a long way in just four years from serving as a driver in his native Kropovetz to becoming a prosperous peddler. Nevertheless, Rouvke is still remembered by the unflattering nickname Arbel (Yiddish for sleeve) for his habit of wiping his mouth on his jacket rather than using a handkerchief (87). The fact that Cahan opens the story with this anecdote from Rouvke's past hints at an underlying carelessness, despite his very diligent efforts to distance himself from any perception that he is a greenhorn, including adopting the name "Robert."

Rouvke's education in America is primarily experiential. He is a student of the "school of peddling": "[T]he curriculum . . . includes the occasional experience of being sent head foremost down all the stairs, of then picking one's self up and imperturbably knocking at some door on the ground floor, only to come face to face with the janitor and thus get into fresh trouble and so on" (91). To propel himself farther toward success, Rouvke enrolls in night school because he wants to be able to read advertisements from physicians who might remedy the small-pox scars on his face (93). Rouvke also believes that education will help

him protect his business interests; he has a suspicious fear that “his store is in danger of being robbed by his bookkeeper” (93). In addition Rouvke is competitive; he feels a need to keep up with those immigrants who have studied the Talmud and have “some mental training.” Finally, Rouvke’s lack of education makes him vulnerable, as he believes that women will reject a “man who does not know how to read a newspaper” (93).

Rouvke is interested in women but has always been detached from his own romantic impulses, despite his feelings of heart “stretching” when he encounters an attractive woman. In Kropovetz, when his boss’s daughter, Hanele, meets her first suitor, Rouvke is not himself and loses his appetite but lacks the self-awareness to recognize he has feelings for her. Later in America, the now prosperous Rouvke with the “dollar-ridden brain” (97), receives an offer for Hanele from Peretz, the matchmaker. Rouvke’s interest in Hanele is rekindled but has become like a calculated business enterprise rather than a heartfelt experience. Rouvke’s once confused, lovesick feelings are now directed to serve his desired social status in America. As he considers the offer of Hanele, Rouvke imagines how impressed the citizens of Propovetz would be with him: “What a glorious time it would be to let them see his stylish American dress, his business-like manners and general air of prosperity and ‘education’” (97). We later learn that Hannele’s father gave “[Rouvke] credit for his newly acquired education” (102), and so the marriage promises to elevate his status further. Education, or the appearance of education is clearly one of Rouvke’s valued possessions despite his lacking the Talmudic training of Peretz and others. The fact that Hannele’s own education appears to be limited would seem to remove any threat of his stature being diminished by marrying her. As the matchmaker states, this truly seems to be a “Providential affair.”

Rouvke’s aggrandizement is dramatically undercut at the end of the story. Hannele has fallen in love with an unnamed “collegian” on her transatlantic passage to Castle Garden. The “soothing smiles of the moon” (110), that shone down on the boat were apparently more persuasive than the promise of Rouvke’s money. Cahan reveals very little about the collegian so it is hard to claim that he represents a deeper level of learnedness than Rouvke’s narrowly self-serving sense of education but his presence does expose the custom peddler’s enduring carelessness, how, in a sense, he remains “the sleeve.”

Not unlike Shaya in “The Imported Bridegroom,” the collegian’s motives remain ambiguous. He does state that he will repay the money Rouvke gave to the matchmaker by borrowing funds from a rich uncle,

but that is essentially all. What is clear is that Rouvke has been humiliated. The story ends with the other peddlers assembled at Castle Garden whispering jokes at the expense of the ridiculously outraged Rouvke. The story implies that Rouvke's preoccupation with status and money, his calculating approach to marriage, leaves him blinded and vulnerable. Rouvke's failure to take hold of his affections for Hannele while he was still in Propovetz along with his solely strategic pursuit of education in America suggests a lack of attention to human affections. He says nothing in direct response to Hannele's assertion that the collegian is her "Providential match"; instead, he demands the return of the money for her passage. While we don't have insight into the collegian's motives or even what kind of student he is, he counterpoints how neither Rouvke's "school of peddling" nor the night school he attended has given him the education he needed. Rouvke, Cahan seems to be saying, is the wrong kind of student: impatient, egocentric and narrowly goal-oriented.

Similarly, in *Yekl* (1896) and in "Circumstances" (1898), Cahan portrays characters who actively chose or resign themselves to a distinctly reined-in notion of what it means to be educated. In *Yekl*, the eponymous protagonist clings to an identity built too narrowly on oral English communication skills and on superficial cultural literacy. Jake, as he has renamed himself, is a denizen of all things American, including cavorting with women at his beloved "Joe's Dance Academy." This pursuit of American culture requires that he either deny or psychologically segregate his responsibilities to his Old World wife Gitl and his son Yosselé, who come to join Jake after three years in America. Jake's moral failings are linked to the absence of a broader sense of literacy and education, which includes an ethical foundation and writing skills. This lack is underscored in the novella by Bernstein, a former rabbinical student, who values education, quietly studies English, and, directly and indirectly, exposes Jake's breathless embrace of American culture. Bernstein, who will fall in love with Gitl after she arrives in America, is by no means an embodiment of timeless Jewish ethics, but he avoids the headlong rush into American life that will ultimately leave *Yekl* alienated.

The opening of the story highlights Jake's somewhat distorted knowledge of American popular culture. While Jake and his fellow garment workers wait as their boss seeks more work for them, he delivers an "impromptu lecture" (168) about American boxing. As he does elsewhere in the text, Jake identifies himself by his apparently superior use of English. He reminds his audience of his time in Boston where, unlike

New York, “every Jew speaks English like a stream” (168). Although the narrator points out that Jake describes boxing terms such as “rawnds,” “left-handers,” and “sending to sleep” (168–169), punctuating his lectures with physical gestures that strike at least one of his colleagues as boorish. Jake extols the greatness of American boxers by asserting that they “must observe rules” (170), as if boxing has some kind of scholarly, Talmudic sanction. Even his reference to how boxers “tear each other’s sides according to right and left” (170) alludes inadvertently to the placement of a punctuation mark that distinguishes two Hebrew letters. Despite his adopted pride in American culture, Jake still views his environment to some extent through an Old World lens. This further emphasizes that Jake’s Americanization is a hastily adopted contrivance rather than a fully achieved new identity.

Jake’s defensive outbursts in this scene also suggest that his hold on American culture is more tenuous than he lets on. Bernstein picks up on this and comments mockingly, “America is an educated country, so they won’t even break bones without grammar” (170). Despite Jake’s attempt to carve out a distinctly American self, he finds himself on the defensive, inadvertently justifying American sports by using education as a standard to measure its worth: “*Alla right*, let it be as you say, the *fighters* are not *ejecate* . . . But what will you say to baseball? All *college boys* and *tony peoples* play it” (171). A moment later, Bernstein critiques Jake more directly: “Look here, Jake, since fighters and all baseball men are all educated, then why don’t you try to become so? Instead of *spending* your money on fights, dancing and things like that, would it not be better if you paid to a teacher” (175). Jake replies defensively that Bernstein can go on “tormenting” himself with study but that he can speak English “quicker” (175). This comment shames and silences Bernstein for the moment, but what Jake hasn’t yet appreciated is that his “quick” use of English may lend him a certain admiration within the immigrant community but without a more carefully developed, broader, and nuanced literacy, Jake faces shrinking horizons. This is why Bernstein’s books “torment” Jake. He has mastered what in the parlance of English language learning is called “Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills” (BICS), un-cognitively demanding language necessary for day-to-day social interaction. In contrast, Jake lacks “Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency” (CALP), which includes not only academic vocabulary but also the evaluation, analysis, and synthesis skills to make use of language that is not heavily embedded in context (e.g., sports, the dance hall). Jake’s problem is that he not only

lacks CALP, but mistakes his conversational skills (which in themselves are questionable) as an entrée into educated America. Normally, CALP requires five to seven years to develop; Jake has only been in the United States for three; the closest thing to a school he attends is “Joe’s Dance Academy.” He does not have CALP and never will.

Jake has always had a strategically selective attitude toward learning. During his cheder years, he would sometimes skip school in order to watch military parades and learn Russian words from Jewish soldiers in the local regiment. In America, his “broken Russian [is] . . . exchanged for English of corresponding quality” (177). Jake is clearly resourceful but he suffers from gaps in his literacy. His inability to read Yiddish or Hebrew, for example, keeps him one step removed from contact with his family and, therefore, somewhat insulated from pressure to meet his responsibilities to his family. Jake’s correspondence must be conducted through scribes. Cahan writes, “The missives which he received differed materially in length, style and degree of illiteracy as well as in point of penmanship; but they all agreed in containing glowing encomiums of Yosselé, exhorting Yekl not to stray from the path of righteousness, and reproachfully asking whether he meant to send the ticket” (192). Although Jake is touched by the letters, his lack of written literacy allows him a certain detachment from these moral exhortations. His scribe has a “standing order” to affirm that he will meet his responsibilities and not desert his wife (192). Jake’s illiteracy gives him an excuse to avoid fully engaging with his past. Cahan describes the process of Jake’s responses to his family’s letters, in a way that shows Jake rationalizing his deceptions. After the scribe writes “five cents worth of rhetoric,” he asks Jake what else he should write. Jake replies, “How do *I* know . . . It is you who can write; so you ought to understand what else to write” (193). The scribe’s words, like Jake’s pose as a devoted husband working faithfully toward the day when he can be reunited with his family, are contrivances. As Jake implies, the words in the letter are not really his, and this creates more room for him to attempt what is ultimately impossible, to “both import his family and continue his present life” (191) of dancing and flirtation, an effort that costs him his marriage.

The link between Jake’s moral waywardness and his limited literacy is further underscored as he searches for a prayer book after learning of the death of his father and as he continues to be plagued by guilty thoughts about his dalliances with the dancing school “ladas.” Jake has not prayed in three years and does not own his own prayer book. His