Talking in the Other Tongue: The Indivisible Remainder in Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*

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Introduction

Abraham Cahan may not be familiar to most people today. Born into a Jewish family in Lithuania in 1860, he spent his early days studying the Talmud. In 1882, partly to escape from anti-Semitic pogroms after the assassination of a Russian Czar Alexander II, but mainly to flee the Czar's police, he immigrated into the United States and lived there till he died in 1951.

In the United States, he was long an editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, a Yiddish socialist daily newspaper and a socialist activist. Although he worked as journalist for the Jewish people in the United States, especially in New York, until his death. He also wrote realistic fiction in English, most of which deal with the life of Jewish immigrants and their descendants in America. *The Rise of David Levinsky*, the only novel he wrote, describes the life of a Jewish male immigrant who achieves success in business but struggles in vain for happiness in a marriage with a

decent Jewish woman.

In this essay, we will consider the good and bad in the Americanization of David Levinsky, the Jewish immigrant protagonist of Cahan's novel, focusing on the influence of linguistic standardization upon identity formation. Through this investigation, we will see a paradoxical duality of identity particular to Jewish people depicted in this novel.

Plot Summary of *The Rise of David Levinsky*

The Rise of David Levinsky has fourteen books. The first book, titled "Home and School," shows David's earliest days in Antimor, his native place in Russia. Born fatherless, his pious mother makes a desperate effort to educate him as a Talmud student. In Book II, "Enter Satan," the reader sees how David's self-sacrificing mother brings him up in extreme poverty and how a warm-hearted mentor Reb Sender dotes on him. In Book III, "I Lose My Mother," when David is twenty-one, his affectionate mother is killed by a gang of hostile Russian Christians, who are called as Gentiles in the Jewish idiom, on the night of the Jewish Passover. In Book IV, "Matilda," Matilda, his beautiful patroness in Russia and first love, helps the impoverished David go to America. In Book V, "I Discover America" and Book VI "A Greenhorn No Longer," Levinsky learns the American way of life and English language, and tries to be Americanized as an educated man while working as a peddler. The title of Book VII, "My Temple," refers to the college he wants to enter, though by the end of Book VIII, "The Destruction of my Temple," he gives

up his dream of becoming a college student and starts a new life as a cloak manufacturer in New York. Book IX, "Dora," depicts his most passionate but failed love affair with Dora, a wife of a good-natured but rude Jew, Max, and mother of two American-born children. Book X, "On the Road," depicts his success in the cloak industry. In Book XI, "Matrimony," Book XII, "Miss Tevkin" and Book XIII, "At Her Father's House," Levinsky's vain attempts to marry a decent Jewish girl and his increasing anger and hatred to "Socialists, anarchists, unionists" (323) are outlined. In Book XIV, "Episodes of a Lonely Life," we see the middle-aged Levinsky still lamenting his mother's death, bitterly complaining about his lonely life.

Ⅰ：The Ambivalent Identity of a Young Jewish Man

In *The Rise of David Levinsky*, the theme of the split identity and that of assimilation to the Jewish society are inseparably intertwined in the young David, a Russian-bred expatriate Jew. While living in Russia, David is an earnest student of *yeshiva*, a Talmudic seminary. However, gradually seduced by the female-figured "Satan" and later by his atheist friend Naphtali, having lost his enthusiasm for the book, and finally forced into dire poverty by his mother's death and finally saved by Matilda, a wealthy and "secularized divorced daughter" (Marovitz 141), he decides to go to America and to get a college education there. From this moment on, however, David agonizes between his dual desire: to be a decent and "educated man in America" (80) as Matilda wishes him to be, and to stay a good and pious Jew and

a good Talmudist, which is the only and final wish of his dead mother.

For the young David, learning how the American Jews live in New York means that he gradually loses his Jewish identity and takes on an American one. At the beginning of Book V, when Levinsky has first landed in America in 1885, an old Jewish woman in New York treats him to his first meal. Serving him a chunk of bread and a glass of milk, she tells him that "[i]n America people are not foolish enough to be content with dry bread" (94). To surprise him more, they call themselves "are not [to be satisfied with dry bread], of course" because they "are Americanized" (94). This is the first cultural shock to this naive Russian-born "green one", and he soon finds that most of Jews in America are much more prosperous than those in Russia. Learning of the insatiable desire for prosperity among people, he comes to understand what the American way of life is like and that desire to get richer than others drives all people living in America, both native-born Americans and the immigrated Jewish fellows.

After several years' struggle, during which he persistently has been learning how to read and write English, David finally gets a job as a tailor at a cloak-making factory. One April day, while eating lunch, he mistakenly spills a bottle of milk ruining some silk coats and is harshly reproached by his foreman as "a lobster" (188). This is an outrageous insult to David, since this word means a person who is the unskilled and dumb-headed "greenhorn." This very incident and the awful image of the word

"lobster" drastically changes his mind and he decides to become an independent tailor manufacturer. In order to play this "great, daring of life" (189), however, he shrewdly persuades a fellow designer named Mr. Chaikin and his wife to join his enterprise. At this moment, he has taken a first step to be transformed into a greedy and deceitful manufacturer-capitalist, giving up his piety and modesty as a secularized but decent and honest Russian Jew as well as his dream of entering college.

Levinsky gradually achieves success in the cloak industry. Even before becoming a rich manufacturer, he was a very eloquent speaker and great reader of English, which invokes other European Jews' envy. However, the more his identity as a manufacturer and successfully Americanized Jew becomes confirmed, the more he comes to feel lonely and restless. The uneasiness he feels is caused by ambivalence toward his inner Jewishness, the waning of which he bemoans on the last page of the novel. It is ambivalent because it always has a dual meaning: his adoption of American manners indicates how close he is to a genuine American, while appearing to be so means how his native-born Jewishness has been waning. Perhaps partly because of the fear of losing it and partly because of the desire to be a full-fledged man, he vainly looks for a wife to be in "a well-to-do orthodox family" (379).

At the end of the novel, however, the middle-aged David Levinsky is still "crying over spilt milk." After his twenty-five years' life in New York, he still remembers "the days of [his] misery" (530) he underwent in the former half of his life. He

knows that he "cannot escape from [his] old self" (530), and thus his "past and [his] present do not comport well" (530). What torments him is his split self, one which consists of "the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher's Synagogue" and of "the well-known cloak manufacturer" — somehow never integrated into a new identity. In the very last sentence of the novel, Levinsky confesses that to him the former "seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well-known cloak-manufacturer" (530). A keen reader will find that this split self causes him a deep pain.[1]

Ⅱ：Americanization and the Linguistic Repression of Jewishness

For Levinsky, literacy and fluency in English, as well as American manners and gestures, is the very standard to gauge to what extent his fellow people from other countries (including himself) are Americanized. Acquisition of correct English is therefore essential for him to be a "modern" American Jew who is infinitely close to the "Gentiles"[2]

In his early days in America, Levinsky learns all about a life in America from a German-born Jewish man named Bender, who is Levinsky's teacher of English and later works with him as a bookkeeper in his factory. In his early days in America, Levinsky strives to "memorize every English word [he] could catch and watching intently, not only [Bender's] enunciation, but also his gestures, manners, and mannerisms, and accepting it all as part and parcel of the American way of speaking" (129).

For him, to feel that he is coming to be "a 'real American'" (176) makes him "feel at home in [America]" (175).

On the other hand, Levinsky thinks that those who cannot speak or behave like genuine Americans are unassimilated strangers, especially when they are his fellow folks. An example is found in an exchange between Levinsky and one of his old friends Gitelson, with whom he first landed at Hoboken pier. Although Gitelson is now rich and looks quite American, his poor pronunciation implies that he is not sophisticated enough to be truly American and, for Levinsky, thus inferior to himself, even though he is far more wealthy than he: i.e., seen from Levinsky's point of view, he is one of "'misfits', in a Darwinian sense" (347). Gitelson finds that Levinsky is a good reader and writer of English and secretly asks him to teach how to learn how to write and read English because he doesn't "want [his] kids to know their pa is learning like a little boy" and "American kinds have not much respect for their fathers" (182). Gitelson seems to be afraid that his children may lose their respect to him when they are successfully raised in American way. At the fifth lesson, however, while "spelling out some syllables in a First Reader", Gitelson suddenly cries in despair that "Too late! Too late! Those black little dots won't get through my forehead! It has grown too hard for them, I suppose" (183) and their lesson is ended in total failure.

Another example of attempted assimilation is Dora, Max Margolis' wife, the landlady of Levinsky's apartment and with whom Levinsky is in love. Dora hopes that her daughter Lucy

will "grow up and be an educated American lady" (243), while she herself takes "pains to produce the 'th' and the American 'r,' though her 'w's' were 'v's'" (229). For her, "[w]hatever came from that sacred source was 'real Yankee'; everything else was 'greenhorn'" (252), "a not-yet-Americanized poor fellow" in Jewish slang. Dora's envious longing for genuine Americanness may surpass Levinsky's, and she has changed her daughter's name form the original Hebrew name "Lizzie" to "Lucy" because the former "did not sound American enough" (244). Her enthusiastic wish to be a real American is best depicted in the following passage:

> [Lucy] had not been at school many weeks when [Dora] began to show signs of estrangement from her mother-tongue. Her Yiddish was rapidly becoming clogged with queer-sounding "r's" and with quaintly twisted idioms. Yiddish words came less and less readily to her tongue, and the tendency to replace them with their English equivalents grew in persistence. Dora would taunt her on her "Gentile" Yiddish," yet she took real pride in it. (245)

With great effort, Dora tries to learn English, which becomes her "child's natural means of expression" (245). However, we must notice that the passage above suggests that her native tongue Yiddish is encroached upon by English, the "other tongue." Attempting to speak pure English, Dora contaminates her Yiddish, just as her little daughter finally forgets her native language Yiddish as she learns more English words and expressions at school (and just as her little son speaks only English).

All the examples we have mentioned indicate a kind of cultural repression of the native tongue in English usage among Jewish immigrants and their descendants. The English they speak inevitably engulfs not only linguistic but physical traits of their nativity. Levinsky is no exception, of course. He is also self-conscious about looking American. Paradoxically enough, as long as he wishes to become "truly American," he can never be so because the very wish of his postulates the gap between himself and other sterling Americans. In other words, Levinsky internalizes the ethnic, religious and linguistic differences which differentiate and thus isolate him from both Americans and his fellow Jewish people.[3]

One typical example of such difference coming out is the image he holds to himself as he becomes a successful but reputedly cunning cloak manufacturer. Levinsky often pirates designs of garments others create, and that becomes "an open fact" (345). When he secretly copies a garment his old friend and designer Loeb invented, he knows it is "downright robbery" and his "Talmud gesticulations, a habit that worried [him] like a physical defect" which is "so distressingly un-American" (327) comes out and annoys him, as if it were an outburst of his conscience accusing him of his moral deterioration.

Another instance is the feeling Levinsky has in mind when his company is taking over the place of "the old cloak-manufacturers, the German Jews" (374). Again, Loeb harshly criticizes the "cutthroat competition on [Levinsky's] part" (374). To Levinsky, "[t]he drift of [Loeb's] harangue was that

'smashing' prices was something distasteful to the American spirit, that [Levinsky and his fellow workers] were only foreigners, products of an inferior civilization, and that [Levinsky's people] out to know [their] place" (374). While imitating the cheats done among the manufacturers, Levinsky comes to represent the figure of "kikes," a slang for "nasty Jews." However, this is the result of assimilation to the American way of life he finds in the world of "the survival of the fittest" (329): the more assimilated, the more their Jewish traits, the very differences between native-born Americans and Jewish immigrants, come out, at least to the eyes of those who are self-conscious of them.

Levinsky believes that those differences, which are perceived as Jewish traits, are literally externalized and even "visualized" Just as many phrenologists, physicians and Darwinian evolutionists of the time did. We have mentioned as one such trait the Yiddish-accented broken English the characters of the novel speak, and by looking carefully into his predilection for Social Darwinism, we will find more examples of such representation of Jewishness.

Ⅲ：Social Darwinism and Visualization of Jewish Stigma

In this chapter, we see the relationship between Social Darwinism and Levinsky's own potential social status in the text. Even before he reads Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Sociology*, one of the most influential books on Social Darwinism, and typical of quasi-scientific discourses of the day, he has been a practical believer of "the cold, drab theory of the struggle for

existence and the survival of the fittest" (380). Thus when he first reads Spencer, he feels "it breathed conviction" and says to himself, "Why, that's just what I have been saying all these days! . . . The able fellows succeed, and the misfits fail" (282).

We should not overlook Levinsky's short-circuit paraphrase of the Darwinist axioms quoted here. The theory of Social Darwinism justifies his success in the cloak industry due to backdoor hiring of strikebreakers or pirating designs of other cloak makers as a necessary result of his "ability," meanwhile he looks down upon poor laborers as Darwinist "misfits." What Levinsky contrives here is a deliberate mix-up of processes and results; it is a kind of tautology that the present situation of a man proves his ability (or inability) to adapt himself to his environment.

In this sense, Social Darwinism is a deceitful twentieth-century version of the neo-Platonic Great Chain of Being. While showing the process of gradual "evolution" from lower social status to upper ones (or possible degeneration into lower classes), it also posits the present position of each person and thus naturalizes social classification, alluding to the substantial (or biological) differences between social classes.

For such a view to the world of his, an operator named Blitt, one of Levinsky's employees from Antimor, his native town in Russia, is a typical example of his enemies: "Socialists, anarchists, unionists, and their whole crew" (323). He is a defiant Socialist, "with a nose so compressed at the nostrils that it looks as though it was inhaling some sharp, pleasant odor" (518), his

"compressed nose revolted [Levinsky] now" (518). Here what Blitt's remarkable nose represents is obvious: it indicates his Jewish trait--disobedient, ungrateful, perverted and hostile--in short, it is a sign of his being "utterly un-American" (518), a failure to Americanize himself, just as other Jewish people hitherto dealt with exemplify those traits of "un-American" through their linguistic awkwardness.

It is curious enough for us that Levinsky confesses his Jewish gestures "worried [him] like a physical defect" (327). Noteworthy is that Levinsky's own "Talmud gesticulations" (327), already mentioned in the former chapter, are also a sign of a failure and symptom of physical (and probably as well as mental) problems. In short, everything representing Jewishness is a plague in the context of Social Darwinism. Put in this context, we can understand why Levinsky pities himself as "a victim of circumstances" (530), just as his enemies are. Again, Jewishness goes against Americanization and a Jewish accent bars full verbal assimilation to American society, and thus must be purged out of those who want to become "purely American." However, this means that if a Jew truly wants to be an genuine American, s/he must not be a Jew anymore. Here rests the radical ambiguity of Jewishness in this novel: though it is partly the very kernel of Levinsky's identity, it also prevents him from becoming a true American and harasses him by implying he is just "a Jew, a social pariah" (502). Therefore, Levinsky, the middle-aged lonely manufacturer, cannot help seeking in vain for some consolation for his loneliness in the very traits he tries to conceal,

just as the young David, after giving up his dream of becoming a good Talmudist, tries to be a college student in his new Promised Land, only to fail.

Ⅳ：The Other's Desire and the Maternal Superego

This ambiguity may be the key to a psychoanalytic interpretation of Levinsky's repeated failure in his love affairs. Wishing to get married, Levinsky looks for a girl suitable for the wife of a wealthy manufacturer, but mainly because of his own lack of love and capriciousness, he never succeeds in marrying. In order to probe the cause of failure in his love affairs, we have to look carefully at his doting and self-sacrificing mother. Born fatherless, the young David's sole pleasure is to please his mother by having her see him studying, as the following quotation shows:

> My mother usually brought my dinner to the synagogue. She would make her entrance softly, so as to take me by surprise while I was absorbed in my studies. It did her heart good to see me read the holy book. As a result, I was never so diligent as I was at the hour when I expected her arrival with the dinner-pot. Very often I discovered her tiptoeing in or standing at a distance and watching me admiringly. Then I would take to singing and swaying to and fro with great gusto. (33)

Here we can see that Levinsky desires to fulfill, and to respond to, his mother's desire, and at the same time, by doing so his own desire. His desire is not his own in itself but his mother's. Borrowing Lacanian terminology, what Levinsky wishes to

fulfill is "the desire of the Other," whose desire one eagerly wants to know and one's very desiring to know it structures one's primal desire. Thus his mother, the reified maternal superego, occupies her son's soul both when she is alive and even after her death, for her own wish to gaze at her son studying is the very source of his desire, which has seized his heart hard enough not to allow him to devote himself to other girls.

In a sense, it is this maternal superego that ruins his love; appearing in the guise of his dead mother to him, it wishes him happy, happy as "a good Jew and a good man" (81). For Jews living in the United States, it is really hard to be both; a good Jew has to live a very tough life, while a successful and at least materially rich and seemingly happy Jew is venom to others. Thus the command of the superego to be a good and happy Jew, a pre-Oedipal double-bind situation, bars him from the self-Americanization he has been pursuing. At this point, we are tempted to say that this torturing maternal superego itself stands for the lack of his real father; that is, it substitutes the Name-of-the-Father, a symbolic Father that orders the world.

This leads us to another interpretation of the aforementioned "split self" of Levinsky. The order of the maternal superego suspends his desire to transform himself into a real American and thus keeps it unsatisfied so that Levinsky everlastingly feels agonized over his incomplete self image. Levinsky, left in the condition of, "enjoyment," a condition in which a person undergoes an agony of enduring a terrible mental pain "beyond the pleasure principle," enjoys his symptom. In short, the maternal

superego gives this incomplete self-image of his a semblance of a "split self," which Levinsky thinks bars him from happiness but in reality is the very source of his everlasting "enjoyment" of the torturing agony.

Such perverted logic of desire keeps one in the never-ending pursuit of happiness. Here we again see Dora's life after her love affair with Levinsky is over. After an adulterous affair between them, Dora says that "the Upper One brought [Levinsky] to [her] only to punish [her], to tease [her]" (300), and that therefore she has "no right to be happy" (301). Though she marries his husband Max without knowing what love is (and it is Levinsky that shows her love), she believes that her daughter "Lucy shall be happy" and that Lucy "certainly sha'n't marry without love" so that "[Lucy's] happiness will be [Dora's], too" (301).

When "[e]verything is all right" with Lucy, however, Dora cannot accept a "real" result of Americanization brought to her. After sixteen years' interval, Dora, whose own "English was a striking improvement upon what it had been sixteen years before" (488), suddenly visits Levinsky and bitterly confesses that Lucy, whose way of life and mentality are now quite Americanized, is married with a man "old enough to be her father" because it is "practical" (490) for her. For Lucy, her mother's "ideas weren't American" and she "was a dreamer" (490-91). Ironically enough, Dora's hope to Americanize her dearest daughter--not only her way of living but of thinking--is successfully achieved, and she has lost all the hope she once had to Lucy

is gone.[4] Now her "only consolation" is Dannie, her elder son, about whom she feels that "[i]f it wasn't for him life wouldn't be worth living" (491) and keeps praying for his happiness.

We can see that Dora's way of desiring is the same as that of Levinsky's mother if she were still alive. They abandon their own happiness because their happiness is not their own but the other's--her children's--happiness, and their desire is exactly to put themselves in such a situation as they can endure the other's happiness. This kind of self-sacrifice is their true desire, and in order to desire like this, they are ready to give, literally, everything they have, including their own lives.

Hence, for the mothers, true happiness, or enjoyment (*jouissance*), is equivalent to agonizing for the other, their children. By costing all they have and becoming dead to the world, the mother figure, the uncompromising maternal superego, orders her poor son to be happy and a good Jew, that is, to "enjoy," although "access to enjoyment is denied to the speaking being, as such" (Žižek *Looking Awry*, 24), and thus it is impossible for him to do so.

Here we should remember that we cannot know what the superego, the Other, exactly desires. We presume this "it" in order to conceptualize our ideal figures, only to believe that we are worth being desired by the Other. This inarticulateness of the "Thing," the indivisible "remainder-reminder" (Žižek *Indivisible Remainder*, 154) of the Other's desire (because it is really nothing other than we posit and thus it is never a substantial being), tortures Levinsky.

Of course, we could say that Levinsky has mistaken the object of desire (happiness, a goal of the desiring) for the process of desiring. But what is the difference? There are no fathers in this novel to give their sons a proper role model with which to live a happy life. Žižek points out a decisive change of mode of the superego in our age:

> [i]n all domains of our everyday lives, . . . there are fewer and fewer prohibitions, and more and more norms--ideals to follow. The suspended Law-Prohibition re-emerges in the guise of the ferocious superego that fills the subject with guilt the moment his performance is found lacking with respect to the norm or ideal. . . . In our late-capitalist universe, the subject is not guilty when he infringes a prohibition; it is more likely that he feels guilty when (or, rather, because) he is not happy--the command to be happy is perhaps the ultimate superego injunction. (Žižek *IR*, 119)

This lack of fatherly Law, or the irrecoverable sense of fatherlessness, and the doting maternal superego may be the radical fatality of the Jewish people in search of a promised land.

* This paper is a partial fulfillment of the joint study supported by the Chukyo University Research Grant in 2003 (本研究は、平成 15 年度中京大学特定研究助成に基づく).

** I am deeply indebted for checking my English to Dr. Christopher J. Armstrong, Associate Professor of the Department of British and American Studies, Chukyo University. I am responsible for any errors remaining.

Notes

1 A keen reader will also notice Levinsky the narrator carefully uses different indications in order to refer his old and present selves; "David Levinsky, the well-known cloak-manufacturer" is a different persona from "the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume." It is worth noting that the narrator uses his Americanized name "David" to mention his present self, he never specifies his original Hebrew name; that is, his American name reflects his identity transformation.

Also, we should remember Hana Wirth-Nesher's insightful comment that "Yiddish is a sign of the Old World, of an immigrant community turning to WEVD as a form of nostalgia" (110). The nostalgic longing for the past self is one of grand themes in this novel.

2 In this text, the word "modern" has a connotation of "secular" or "secularized," as well as "sophisticated and (especially economically) rich" when used to depict Jewish people. One typical example is found in the passage in which the young and motherless David, still dressed in a plain uniform of a Talmudist and with long beard and sidelocks and suffering from dire poverty, introduces Matilda's family to the reader:

> "I [Levinsky] know that her family was "*modern*," that her children spoke Russian and "behaved like Gentiles," that there was a grown young woman among them and that her name was Matilda. . . . Matilda's family being one of the "upper ten" in our town, its members were frequently the subject of envious gossip, . . . I had heard, for example, that Matilda had received her early education in a boarding-school in Germany (in accordance with a custom that had been in existence among people of her father's class until recently); that she had subsequently studied Russian and other subjects under Russian tutors at home; (65-66, my Italics)

We see all the episodes in the passage about Matilda suggest that she is like a cultured and prosperous Gentile, that is, "modern."

3 We also remember that we have no way to make sure which language the characters in the novel speak. Almost all the characters are Jewish people living in the United States and probably speak Yiddish or English in real conversations, but all that they say is translated through the narrator's interpretation and textual representation. In addition, Levinsky the narrator tells his life story to the reader in English, but the reader will find out his own English, though eloquent and grandiose, is not completely correct and genuine as he wishes. Because of this dual linguistic barrier, it is hard to see what they really say in their native tongues.

4 In the conversation with Levinsky, Dora regards Lucy's husband-to-be not as a kike but as "a *very* nice man" (491). Though we do not have enough space to argue this matter further, it is worth noting she, though unconsciously, also takes stereotypical images of nasty Jews in order to separate her and her people from the other Jewish people, notwithstanding her daughter's way of thinking are quite of kike's, compared with that of "ordinary Jews."

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