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“Betch you’ bootsh!”: Jewish Humour, Jewish Identity, and Yiddish Literary Traditions in Abraham Cahan’s *Yekl*

Brian Jansen

- 1 There’s a well-known Jewish joke which goes, more-or-less, as follows:

A Frenchman, a German, and a Jew walk into a bar. “I’m tired and thirsty,” says the Frenchman, “I must have wine.” “I’m tired and thirsty,” says the German, “I must have beer.” “I’m tired and thirsty,” says the Jew, “I must have diabetes.”¹

- 2 This is a joke that raises questions. To what extent does it depend on stereotypes? Is it racist? Is it funny? And does the answer to that last question depend on the identity of its teller? Can a joke—even such a seemingly mean-spirited joke—reveal something *positive* about its teller? Can ethnic humour be, as Howard Ehrlich claims, “an act of self-disclosure” (qtd. in Brandes 233)? There is a world of difference between a simple joke, told offhand, and a work of literature, but the questions such a joke raises may nevertheless be worth keeping in mind when approaching literary works in which ethnic humour is a prominent feature. And it is just one such literary work that this essay takes for its focus: Abraham Cahan’s *Yekl*, the most well-known of the Jewish-American author, politician, and newspaper editor’s tales of Yiddish life in New York City at the end of the nineteenth century.
- 3 In her essay “Problems of Representation in Turn-of-the-Century Immigrant Fiction,” Susan K. Harris claims that realism as a genre was inadequately suited to representing the subjectivities of immigrant lives in the turn-of-the-century United States. As she puts it, “these stories are often problematic in their aesthetic and ideological constructions of their ethnic characters, often recreating stereotypes prevalent in mainstream culture rather than representing ethnic characters’ own subjectivity” (128). For Harris, authors who represented immigrant characters were *de facto* implicated in a political debate between assimilationism and multiculturalism—and

once implicated in such a debate, there was no way out. Those who sided with the assimilationists wrote fiction that "accepted the implicit superiority assumed by mainstream narrators" (130) in the first place, while multiculturalists faced a more systemic problem: "voicing a given ethnic reality that was both different from and equal to the reality of the native-born population" (131). Sabine Haenni, in her essay "Visual and Theatrical Culture, Tenement Fiction, and the Immigrant Subject in Abraham Cahan's *Yekl*," seems to echo this concern when she argues that immigrant fiction can never "fully account for the immigrant subject outside middle-class norms of intimacy, privacy, and interiority" (519), which results in an immigrant subject left at a standstill.

- 4 Yet these arguments seem to me reductive. Harris and Haenni effectively summarize the problems that realism presents for turn-of-the-century immigrant writers without giving credit where credit is due for writers who are attempting, nevertheless, to find ways around those very same problems—and who, more importantly, may actually be drawing on other, very different literary traditions in addition to realism (or that subgenre of realism, local color) in order to make their point. As Matthew Frye Jacobsen puts it, "the American, English-language reception of [*Yekl*]... is paradigmatic of a certain blindness in American literary history toward transnational dimensions of 'ethnic' literatures" (103). Hana Wirth-Nesher argues rightly that "[t]his is the crucial difference between Cahan and local color writers... Cahan was not writing in his native language, and he was writing out of two linguistic, literary, and cultural frameworks, one of which was not American" (51). Cahan's *Yekl*, for example, is a text whose realist impulse and urge to interpret Yiddish-American immigrant culture for a wider audience is complemented—and complicated—by a knowledge of and engagement with non-realist, Yiddish literary traditions: the folk tale, folk figures like the *schlemiel*, and a history of verbal, self-deprecating, anecdotal Yiddish humour. *Yekl*'s narrative technique, and particularly its use of dialect and its sense of humour, thus, do far more than simply "recreat[e] stereotypes" (Harris 128). *Yekl* absolutely ridicules its characters, but it does so as part of a larger project that actually celebrates Yiddish identity and heritage, and laughs at one's personal flaws in a way that reveals, as Mark E. Bleiweiss puts it, "an admirable form of humility rather than any deep-seated self-hatred" (60).
- 5 Before proceeding, a word, briefly, on genre: Cahan's *Yekl* has historically been characterized variously, as "novel" (in its original published form), "novelette" (as in Bernard G. Richards' 1969 introduction [vii]), and "novella" (as in various works of scholarly criticism, from Hana Wirth-Nesher [49] to Natalie J. Friedman [71] and Sara Blair [261]). It has, likewise, been published in a variety of contexts, both as a standalone work (D. Appleton and Company, in 1896) and within the framework of Cahan's other stories of Yiddish New York (as in Dover's 1970 collection, which assembles *Yekl* along with the short story collection *The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto*). This is to say nothing of the fact that even in its original form, *Yekl* was originally subtitled as a *tale* (even if only at the behest of William Dean Howells, as we will see below), situating the text within yet another generic classification, one historically used to "refer to any narrative shorter than a novel, from about five to a hundred or more pages" (Good 197)—and one which specifically calls to mind Edgar Allan Poe's framework for short fiction: his "aesthetic of intensity and unity of effect" (Good 207). The manner in which *Yekl* has been collected and discussed, therefore, makes it something of a liminal case for generic classification;

these various characterizations speak to the fact that, as Graham Good has argued, "[c]ategories based purely on length are bound to be arbitrary; there is no magic number of words which constitutes the minimum for a novel or the maximum for a short story" (197). In focussing primarily on Cahan's *Yekl* (which runs to roughly 30,000 words in its first edition) in a journal ostensibly dedicated to the short story, I am in part following the argument of Good, who posits that the term "novella" ought to actually cover both short and medium-length works (200).² In presenting this claim, Good enumerates a series of compelling reasons for his argument, historical, linguistic, and formal:

(1) In the Renaissance the term encompassed both the very brief stories in the *Decameron* and the middle-length *Novelas Ejemplares* of Cervantes. (2) In post-1800 German practice "Novelle" includes texts of under five and well over a hundred pages. (3) The nineteenth-century English terms "tale" and "story" covered both lengths. (4) "Short story" is a mainly twentieth-century phrase for a particular type of magazine fiction; [. . .] (5) Short and medium lengths have enough in common in form, content and history to justify opposing them conjointly to the novel ... (200)

- 6 Good posits for this proposed shared "novella" classification a number of features, and though it needs to be pointed out that there are myriad short stories *and* novellas which can't be placed quite so neatly within this framework, Cahan's *Yekl* fits well—its novelty in setting (209) in terms of its depiction of Yiddish New York; its characteristic "written imitation of a 'live telling'" (210); its use of a "frame" (210); its intensity (as opposed to what Good calls the novel's "extensivity"); and its oral quality, are all central to my analysis here, and all mark *Yekl* as an archetypal "novella" in Good's sense of the term. More significantly for my purposes, *Yekl* shares these features with many (if not all) of the more "conventional" tales or short stories in Cahan's body of work. This fact ought not to be surprising given both that *Yekl* is (as mentioned previously) often collected with these other stories, and that *Yekl* was composed and published at a time when much of Cahan's literary output was dedicated to shorter prose fiction—*Yekl* having been written and released in the interim period between the publication of his first English-language story in 1895, and the 1898 release of his story collection *The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto* (Richards vi-vii).
- 7 Indeed, Harris's argument about the problematic aesthetics of turn-of-the-century immigrant fiction on which I draw above depends on a close reading of "The Imported Bridegroom," the titular story of the latter collection. That short story shares many of the humorous and dialect elements of *Yekl*, and, as Harris argues, the technique of realism fails it. Realism here, she says, is "intensely problematic because the close focus on physicality highlights aspects of the immigrant culture that are inimical to American sensibilities ... individual psychology is glossed and mocked, rather than explored for its representative status" (138). In particular, Harris takes issue with the way the story reproduces language. Cahan varies between writing dialect (or reproducing, phonetically, the broken English of a non-native speaker) and "translating" Yiddish (that is, purporting to have characters communicate in Yiddish, but having the text given to the story's readers in English). The "translated" Yiddish is, according to Harris, "rendered with a high degree of ornamentation" (138), while the English is problematic for the way in which it makes characters appear to be "ignoramus[es]" (138).

- 8 Though Harris does not touch on it, the problem she sees here is perhaps even exacerbated in *Yekl*, and especially in the speech of that novella's main character Jake, whose Yiddish is littered with words lifted from English and poorly pronounced (as in his declaration that, "I knew a *feller*, so he was a *preticly* friend of John Shullivan's" [2]). For Harris, neither of these reproduced languages are able to access a character's interiority—"neither language, as represented, gives the space for Cahan to develop" (138) the situation in which Cahan's characters have been thrust. Jake in *Yekl* and Asriel in "The Imported Bridegroom" are perhaps typical of first-generation Jewish immigrants to America, but Cahan's methods never even hint "at the relationship between [these characters] and the social, economic, or political situation of the immigrant community as a whole" (138).
- 9 Harris's critique, it should be noted, certainly attempts to celebrate marginalized voices, and her critique of realist immigrant authors is logically predicated on the perceived authority and influence of William Dean Howells's edicts about realism and dialect fiction and the relationship between the two. As Harris rightly points out, these edicts are intensely problematic in their implicit insistence that "the 'best' kind of ethnic writing portrays its given subjects within the confines of preexisting molds" (134). She quotes at length Howells's introduction to a collection of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry:
- ... there is a precious difference of temperaments between the races ... and this is most charmingly suggested by Mr. Dunbar in those pieces of his where he studies the moods and traits of his race in its own accent of our English. We call such pieces dialect pieces for want of some closer phrase, but they are really not dialect so much as delightful personal attempts and failures for the written spoken language. (qtd. in Harris 134)
- 10 There is something troublesome in Howells's argument, suggesting that Howells "not only felt that dialect represented difference" (134), but that he also viewed it as a comic form, "further distancing readers and characters by posing the latter as objects to be laughed at" (134). Realism—or Howells's realism—was therefore restricted from reassessing "the nature of human beings" (134); it depended rather, in its writing about ethnicity, on existing conceptions or stereotypes about the given ethnic group being portrayed.³
- 11 It is true that Cahan was a great admirer of Howells, of whom he wrote, "As a true realist he cares little for ideas; and yet it is just because he is such, because of his fidelity to the real, that he cannot help embodying an idea in his works" (qtd. in Wirth-Nesher 46). And it is also true that Cahan wrote *Yekl* at Howells's behest, even going so far as to change the main character's name and the story's title on the latter's advice—dropping *Yankel the Yankee* for Howells's suggested *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*. As Hana Wirth-Nesher argues, Howells probably "counted on [the subtitle] to attract readers who might want a glimpse of the exotic world of urban slums" (47). More importantly, his preference for the name "Yekl" may have stemmed from his reading of Heinrich Heine and his familiarity with the type of the fool in German and Yiddish traditions (49).⁴
- 12 Yet Howells's word, for all of this, was still surely not God's, and to read dialect fiction through this lens exclusively is to ignore the possibility for subversion on the part of an author like Cahan. The discourse of realism was surely not monolithic, and to suggest that immigrant writing and dialect writing as a whole are problematized because of Howells's view of them is certainly as problematic as Howells's view itself. It ignores a

whole strand of thought that viewed dialect as "a democratizing poetic" (Wirth-Nesher 50). Wirth-Nesher glosses over some such views. For Hamlin Garland, "dialect is the life of language..." (qtd. in Wirth-Nesher 50); Fred Patee demanded that artists "give us the people as they actually are. Give us their talk as they actually talk it" (qtd. in Wirth-Nesher 50). There is, of course, an essentializing aspect about even these edicts (positing as they do, a monolithic "they") that is somewhat troubling—and yet they seem to reflect a desire, a striving toward what Wirth-Nesher calls "a realistic portrayal of life in their communities" (50).

- 13 Harris, for her part, acknowledges that some authors—such as Charles Chesnutt, in the stories which comprise his collection *The Conjure Woman*—were able to subvert dominant culture through their dialect fiction. And yet she never fully articulates why this might be true of Chesnutt but not of Cahan or others. She refers only to the "African-American double consciousness [that] empowered [Chesnutt] to both use and subvert traditional narrative frames and dominant tones" (135)—but surely the concept of "double-consciousness," as articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois can be extrapolated and applied (to some degree) to non-African-American immigrant authors. Surely "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 3) is one felt by all "Othered" communities.⁵ And surely it is a sense that resonates through *Yekl*, given its central tension between Jewish and American identity—a tension which critical readings, such as that offered by Jason Paul Steed, see as being resolved *in favour* of Jewish identity: Gitl and Bernstein "find happiness only by maintaining their identity as Jews, ... [while] the story of assimilation—of Jake's desire to become a 'Yankee' through and through—is the novella's tragedy" (50). Wirth-Nesher would seem to agree when she posits that Jake's identity as an American is tied most closely with his "anti-intellectualism [and] his physical abilities" (59), neither of these being traits that seem especially positive.
- 14 Chesnutt's use of the eye dialect in *The Conjure Woman* is worth recognizing here as but one of an arsenal of subversive tools, and it is worth pointing out that Cahan's *Yekl* does in fact employ the same technique at times. But to stop there is to do an injustice to Cahan's attempts—however problematic they may ultimately be, according to Harris—to represent his characters. For the novella faithfully attempts to incorporate a process of language use and acquisition. Aviva Taubenfeld points out a few particular examples of attempts to differentiate the individual quirks and regional accents of different characters. The Russian-born Jake, for example, says "Vot'sh a madder?" (Cahan 28), while the Galician scribe to whom Jake takes his letters for translation says the same phrase with a subtly different pronunciation: "Vot's der madder" (28). As Sanford E. Marovitz puts it, "Cahan was a polyglot, and his ears were attuned to the numerous dialects of his native Yiddish—to which he later added Russian, German, and English" (273). He adds later: "This is a language not of caricature, but of living people" (273), and the effect is less leaving the immigrant subject at a standstill (as Haenni would have it) or subscribing to stereotypes than it is an attempt at humanization, personalization, and individualization of the Other.
- 15 More importantly, as Wirth-Nesher's argument elucidates, it is a language whose *method* of representation—phonetic transcription, interlingual puns, the English representation of absent Yiddish speech—itself communicates something (or, indeed many things) that Harris neglects to discuss in her reading of "The Imperial

Bridegroom." Aviva Taubenfeld explains some of the myriad methods Cahan used in an attempt to render his world realistically:

He first translates... Yiddish idiom[s] into English. ... Cahan also incorporates twenty transliterated Yiddish words into his narrative; he defines these words in footnotes below the text so as not to disrupt the story with excessive explanatory material. ... Transliterated Yiddish is also used to relate puns and wordplays popular on the Lower East Side. (151)

- 16 For each of these strategies, Taubenfeld offers an example, and ultimately concludes that each of them "underscore[s] the distance between the two language communities that the immigrant author must traverse" (152) to represent this group to an outside audience—but Wirth-Nesher offers an alternate and equally compelling reading of what the effects of these different strategies are. Phonetic transcriptions, for example, work at the level of representing the sound of speech, but they also communicate visually. When Jake mispronounces 'lick' as 'leak', for example, "the semantic content will already have done its job in accentuating Jake's crudeness, his bodily presence" (Wirth-Nesher 56), before the reader has processed the visual sign back into an oral one. More centrally to the purposes of establishing *Yekl* as a text that does strive to represent immigrant subjectivity, the story features signs that are simply not English words. The sign "Dzake" (2), for example, is a stand-in for "Jake"—the Americanized name that Yekl has adopted for himself, a name that is ironically completely unpronounceable to him and the other Lower East Side Jewish immigrants. The letter "j" has no Hebrew or Russian equivalent, and thus "Dzake" is the nearest approximation accessible by the community Jake inhabits. As Wirth-Nesher explains:

For the characters, Jake's American name is unspeakable. For the American readers, the orthographic sign 'dzake' is destabilizing, nearly unreadable. It can be read only by reproducing the sound made by the immigrants, by reading aloud, by speaking the word just as the foreign characters do. Processing the foreign-looking word into speech in order to read it situates the reader in the place of the immigrant, re-enacting the slowed pace of encounters with strange sounds and signs. (56)

- 17 If, as Wittgenstein posits, "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (5.6), then to inhabit the language of another is perhaps to inhabit (or begin to inhabit) their interiority. But of equal importance in the presence of the sign "dzake" is the extent to which it both is and is not part of the project of realism: part of the project in the sense that it seems that realism attempts to render speech as it is actually spoken, but not part of it in the sense that the absence of an actual English sign corresponding to "dzake" "calls attention to the name's representation on the page, to the poetic strategy at work ... [T]his absence promotes awareness of the materiality of the text" (Wirth-Nesher 57), which, in turn, draws our attention to the novella's author, its narrator, and the relationship between the two. These linguistic strategies suggest Cahan as author actually stood between multiple impulses: situating himself in the role of interpreter, portraying the lives of immigrants; telling a very human story; and deploying the tradition and mores of Yiddish literature. It is through this first lens—Cahan as cultural interpreter—that *Yekl* has been most frequently read, but how does our understanding of the text change if we ascribe to the text a different purpose? To read Cahan and his narrator as "interpreting" this world for a mainstream white American audience is to offer an incomplete reading, in other words, and such readings which decry the implicit anti-Semitism of the text or its narrator is to fail to grasp the additional milieus in which *Yekl* operates.

18 The novella has a third-person, omniscient—as Taubenfeld puts it—“superior” narrator (154). The narrator speaks deliberately, ostentatiously correct standard English, recognizable to an American audience (pointing out, for example that “Mamie’s English was a much nearer approach to a justification of its name than the gibberish spoken by men” [19]). Yet his or her knowledge of the Lower East Side, the ghettos, sweatshops, and tenements, suggests an intimate, personal knowledge of the scenes he or she is describing. Indeed, the narrator *must* be (or have been) part of this community, as he or she is able to gloss Yiddish puns for the reader, and judge the quality of Jake’s and others’ Yiddish speech patterns. Notice, for example, the description of Jake’s Boston Yiddish as “Yiddish more copiously spiced with mutilated English than is the language of the metropolitan Ghetto in which our story lies” (2). The narrator is thus placed in a curious situation, deliberately attempting to distance himself or herself from a community even as his narration implies an intimate knowledge of that community. Indeed, though it is perhaps unwise to draw parallels, the Yiddish version of *Yekl*, prepared by Cahan after his English version failed to convince publishers, actually acknowledges its narrator as an acquaintance of Jake’s through a first-person voice that opens the story:

I knew him. I met him a few times when his troubles were greatest. I know his story with all its details. But I will tell it only in short, simply tell it. Sketch it, paint it, perform it—that I will not even attempt. I will be very satisfied if I succeed in just telling it to you as if you were talking at a table. (qtd. in Taubenfeld 149)

19 We must of course treat these two versions of Cahan’s text as distinct (this introduction is certainly not the only difference between them),⁶ but it is interesting nevertheless to consider the implications of a comparison. The English version could never open this way, simply because—according to Taubenfeld—“the immigrant writer could never have presumed to share a table with his American readers” (149). Moreover, the first-person voice of the Yiddish *Yankel der Yankee* shifts quickly into a perspective of total omniscience not at all unlike the narrator of Cahan’s English version.⁷

20 Ultimately, however, the specific identity of the narrator is a question we simply cannot answer. But it is part of a larger question to ask about the text, that being what to make of the narrator’s treatment of the story’s characters. *Yekl* no doubt revels in its ability to ridicule its characters—and it seems that to know who the narrator is could potentially contextualize that level of ridicule. If the narrator is an outsider—or even a Jew himself whose proper English suggests an attempt to distance himself from the culture—then the *Yekl*’s meanness toward its characters takes on a degree of uncomfortable anti-Semitism. If the narrator is an insider, that interpretation is perhaps something different: a humble bit of self-deprecation and humility, an ability to laugh at one’s own flaws, a way for Jews who had “rejected Judaism without yet being absorbed into the non-Jewish society” to reconcile “their guilt feelings and ... their ‘need to search for self-identity’” (Bleiweiss 62).

21 There is no doubt that the narrator is mean, or at least quick to ridicule, and that no one is safe from his judgement. Even seemingly tossed-off observations are humorously cruel, and not even the novella’s most sympathetic characters are safe: Jake’s Yiddish is “copiously spiced with mutilated English” (2); a rabbi “discharge[s] his duty of dissuading the young couple from their contemplated step as scrupulously as he dare[s] in view of his wife’s signals to desist and not risk the fee” (83); “Mrs. Kavarsky gr[ows] as red as a boiled lobster” (72); Bernstein who, “as a rule, look[s] daggers at his meal” (46); Gitl illicitly trying on a corset is deemed pointless for the way “the corset prove[s]

utterly impotent against the baggy shapelessness of the Povodyne garment" (40) she wears overtop of it. The question that arises: what purpose does the narrator's meanness, or judgmental spirit serve?

- 22 *Yekl* takes place within the hermetic bubble of Jewish immigrants in the Lower East Side, and so the reader is never given to see a non-Jew in the novella. And yet the sustained tone of the book—the way, as we have seen, that even its heroes are treated with a sense of bemusement—suggests intuitively (and perhaps without sufficient evidence to make such an argument) that should a Gentile have ever entered a scene in the novella, he would be subject to the same humorous critique.
- 23 To some extent, it is worth acknowledging that *Yekl* was written in a very specific historical context and that it would be impossible for the novella to entirely escape the discourse of racial difference that would have dominated in turn-of-the-century America, and the truth is that at least a few of the novella's scenes will remain problematic no matter how generous of a reading we are willing to offer the text. Mrs. Aaronovitz's aforementioned attempts to prevent her rabbi husband from throwing away the fee associated with formalizing a divorce agreement immediately comes to mind, and so too does the narrator's initial description of Jake and "his very nose, which was fleshy and pear-shaped and decidedly not Jewish (although not decidedly anything else), [and] seemed to join the Mosaic faith" (3)—both descriptions which reflect associations about the essentialized physical or moral characteristics of Jews widely held at the end of the nineteenth-century. The latter reference is less defensible (except perhaps on the grounds of self-deprecation); the former, at the very least, might indicate the degree and extent of the poverty that prevailed within the Yiddish-American immigrant community. But the tone of these remarks seems less deliberate, somehow—less essentialized, even, insofar as the latter seems to suggest a figure who at least partly departs from physical type. This defence of Cahan is nebulous, and it is not my wish to gloss over problematic aspects of the text. As American folklorist Richard Dorson points out, "Jokes that ridicule and lampoon Jews in the eyes of other peoples cannot easily be separated from jests which, circulating among Jews, contain all the ammunition for anti-Semitic raillery" (qtd. in Brandes 234). However, he goes on to add, "the same joke can be told gently or harshly" (qtd. in Brandes 234), and Cahan's use of humour appears as more self-deprecating than stereotyping or racist: his humour can't help but be accompanied by what Stanley Brandes calls "a note of affectionate gentleness" (234).
- 24 It might be instructive here, to contrast these moments in *Yekl* with evocations of Jewish peoples in contemporary works. Edith Wharton's 1905 novel *The House of Mirth* seems most directly relevant here, given the recurring presence of a Jewish character, Mr. Rosedale—a social climber and member of the New Rich who is painted in a deeply unflattering and racially problematic light, as "a plump rosy man of the blond Jewish type, with smart London clothes fitting him like upholstery, and small sidelong eyes which gave him the air of appraising people as if they were bric-a-brac" (13). Elsewhere, he is noted as having "his race's accuracy in the appraisal of values" (16), as "the same little Jew who had been served up and rejected at the social board a dozen times" (16). And indeed, the novel's heroine Lily Bart seems almost naturally, intuitively predisposed to dislike him, for "some intuitive repugnance, ... had made her push Mr. Rosedale into his *oubliette* without a trial" (16). The essentialized association between the Jewish race and money or greed is here made explicitly, casually and

nonchalantly tossed off in a way that suggests the acceptability and widespread self-evidence of such a statement.⁸ And the same statements are echoed, albeit less severely, in a number of textual variations of W.D. Howells's 1885 novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham*—in which Jews are described as “they” (344), linked to dropping property values (344), and theorized by Mrs. Lapham as having “all the money” (345).

- 25 In this respect, at least, as problematic as *Yekl* may be at times, it certainly is a profound corrective to some of the easy stereotypes posited in contemporary texts—if nothing else, in terms of its depiction of a struggling, poverty-ridden Ghetto slum where Jews certainly *don't* have “all the money.” Moreover, as “mean” (and perhaps “mean” is the wrong word here, because it ignores how deeply humorous the narrator can be at times, especially in the juxtaposition between his high diction and the slang and polyglot language of the novella's characters) as the narrator of *Yekl* is, he seems to be mean *with a purpose*. As Cahan explained his purpose—in response to charges of anti-Semitism stemming from even within his own community:

The question in belle letters is not what kind of people the author presents, but how he presents them and whether they have a natural relation to the artistic plan of his work. I am sure that my theme touches on a situation that mirrors our immigrant life in a characteristic manner and that this has much more meaning than advertising the Jewish people. (qtd. in Taubenfeld 146)

- 26 As Taubenfeld explains it, Cahan wanted to be judged on “the realism, artistry, and thematic probing of his novel ... evaluated by the artistic merit and truth of his representation, not as an advocate of his ‘race’” (146). In this context, some of the narrator's decisions are understandable. Most of the narrator's cruelty (though obviously not all of it, as we have seen), after all, is directed at Jake—and directed at Jake not simply for his failure to become Americanized, but his desire to be Americanized in the first place, and his ignorance in general. Jake is an unappealing, unsympathetic, occasionally unpleasant character, and so the narrator's rough treatment of him is to some extent justifiable. Jake's movements are not American, they are grotesque. He responds to a question early in the first chapter “with what he consider[s] a Yankee jerk of his head” (2). A co-worker mocks Jake by observing that “He thinks that shaving one's mustache makes a Yankee!” (6). Later, the narrator notes (with a degree of sadness, which is interesting in light of all the charges of anti-Semitism) that “[s]oon after his arrival in Boston his religious scruples had followed in the wake of his former first name; and if he was still free from work on Saturdays he found many another way of ‘desecrating the Sabbath’” (11-12). Jake is also mocked for his lack of interest in his wife and child in the Old World, through the lens of the scribe who writes letters that “might have been printed and forwarded one copy at a time for all the additions or alterations Jake ever caused to be made in it” (27). He fails even to respond to jokes, especially those puns which rely on knowledge of the Yiddish language or Jewish culture. Steed describes one scene in particular in which Gitl puns on the word dinner, playing with the word's meaning in Yiddish—thinner. Jake is not even shown as reacting to the joke, for “to acknowledge and share in Gitl's humor would be to share in her Jewishness—precisely what Jake wishes to avoid” (Steed 49). The narrator paints Jake as humourless,⁹ and humorlessness—within a novel of such humour and lively language-play, and within a culture that so values humour—is perhaps the worst thing that Jake can be.
- 27 We should make no mistake that humour is what Cahan's story may all come down to. The narrator is mean to his characters, but mean in a way that is often tremendously

funny (and funny, more importantly, in a way that does not hinge on anti-Semitic stereotypes, such as Jake's ironic promise to Mamie that he will pay his debts "as sure as [his] name is Jake" [50]—which of course it actually isn't). For all his narrative ridicule, too, the narrator is not afraid, either, to let his characters get in their own jokes and balance the scales. Gitl's aforementioned pun on the word "dinner," her timidly ironic observation that it "is not for nothing that [America] is called the golden land" (52), her sarcastic declaration that Mamie looks like "a veritable *panenke*" (52) or young noblewoman, and her "curse upon Columbus" (66) actually frame her as one of *Yekl*'s most humorous figures. Bernstein, too, gets in his licks, in the form of his learned pun in the first chapter: "America is an educated country, so they won't even break bones without grammar. They tear each other's sides according to 'right and left'" (4), a joke which depends on knowledge of Hebrew. Indeed, charges of stereotyping seem especially absurd given the sheer number of jokes and references which depend (in some way) on knowledge of Hebrew, Yiddish, or Jewish culture. Even in terms of *Yekl*'s most serious moments, it is clear the narrator has respect for Jewish tradition. As Matthew Frye Jacobson observes, "one of *Yekl*'s rare moments of clarity, a momentary resolution to reform and fulfill his obligations to Gitl, was attended by Old World memories of 'the Hebrew words of the Sanctification of the Sabbath' and a homely vision of 'a plate of reeking tzimes'" (106). Even Jake gets in a few jokes before the arrival of his wife and his attempts at Americanization render him humourless, which we may witness in the form of the good-natured banter between sweatshop co-workers that opens the novel.

- 28 *Yekl* is no doubt a tragic tale too, ending as it does with virtually every character unsatisfied in some respect: Gitl "burst[s] into tears" (87) at the prospect of her child growing up without a father, even though she knows she is now better off, while Jake ends as "defeated victor" (87), a passive victim to the movement of the cable car he is on and the life he has chosen, a "violent lurch ... accompanied by a corresponding sensation in his heart" (89). But the tragedy is what may actually make the novel's humour so necessary. For this is where we see the tradition of Yiddish storytelling, following the lineage of Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh, Sholom Aleichem, I.L. Peretz and others, with which Cahan is surely to some extent engaged. Cahan, as surely as Aleichem before him, knew that (writes Irving Howe in his introduction to a collection of Aleichem's stories):

... the boundary between comedy and tragedy is always a thin and wavering line—and for Jews, often nonexistent. Almost all of [Aleichem's] best comic stories hover on the edge of disaster. All exemplify the truth of Saul Bellow's remark that in Jewish writing 'laughter and trembling are so curiously intermingled that it is not easy to determine the relations of the two.' (xxiv)

- 29 Mark Bleiweiss effectively parses the argument of Avner Ziv's monograph *Jewish Humor* in summarizing why this tradition of humour has been so prevalent for generations of Jewish authors, from folk narratives to contemporary novelists: "Jews laugh to ease their pain. Their own foibles provide the best target for their laughter, not only because they are most familiar with the subject, but because by laughing at themselves first, they may prevent others from following suit" (59).
- 30 Take, for example, some representative works by Yiddish humorist Sholom Aleichem, in which humour (and conceivably even negative Jewish stereotypes) abound. In "The Clock That Struck Thirteen," a family absurdly adds more and more weight to a grandfather clock in order to get it to function correctly, until more than "a half a ton"

(87) hangs from it. The same piece features a gossipy character, Muma Yente who is "toothless [and] dark-skinned" (85), mocked for the "breathless" (86) character of her monologues which go on "faster and faster" (86), paying no mind to others around her. Another Aleichem story, "On Account of a Hat," tells of a figure so absentminded that he is referred to as "Sholem Schachnah Rattlebrain" (103). Schachnah misses a train home for Passover because he actually mistakes himself for a police official who had been left sleeping on the train platform. The very same character is a real-estate broker, described as "contriv[ing] and conniv[ing]" (104), and the story ends with the narrator reflecting on the punishment inflicted on Schachnah by his wife—not just for failing to arrive home in time for Passover, but for including extraneous words in a telegram: "What possessed him to put that into the wire: Arriving home Passover without fail. Was he trying to make the telegraph company rich?" (109).

- 31 In light of these examples, Yekl's cast of characters are surely a descendent of Jewish folk characters, some of whom are evident in Aleichem's work above—characters like the luftgescheften, the schadchen, the schnorrer, each representing "a negative Jewish stereotype perpetuated inside as well as outside the ghetto walls" (Bleiweiss 60)¹⁰—and of the Yiddish schlemiel, that figure who "handles a situation in the worst possible manner or is dogged by an ill luck that is more or less due to his own ineptness" (qtd. in Pinsky 5) and who symbolizes "the continual shifting between ambition and defeat which characterized the experiences of the East European Jewry" (Pinsky 21), transplanted to a new, American milieu.
- 32 Yekl is an opportunity, then, for Cahan to represent his culture for a broader American audience, and the story does so beautifully, adopting a tradition of Eastern European humour to "mediate the chasm between [the Jew's] spiritual claims and his material situation" (Guttmann 330). Yekl is also part of a more traditional project of humility and self-improvement. For, as Bleiweiss suggests of those Jewish folk characters, "Jews from the ghetto did not mean to offend any specific person through their ridicule of these characters" (60); rather, they recognized that these faults—complaining, gossiping, begging, amongst other chutzpadik (or impudent, or impertinent) acts—were faults that all were guilty of, Jewish or Gentile. Ultimately, then Yekl is a text that has much in common with the joke with which we began, in that the answers to the questions they raise are much more complex than they may at first appear.

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NOTES

1. This is a joke the author confesses to having heard told at a party. However, it appears also in its rhythm and sequencing to be a variant of a similar (though much lengthier) joke told and explicated in multiple secondary sources (Brandes 233; Pinsker 3) consulted for this paper—a joke, more importantly, that apparently originated in Jewish circles.

2. Given the choice of the word *nouvelle* in the journal title, *Les cahiers de la nouvelle*, it is worth pointing out how these differences translate. As Good mentions, Guy de Maupassant used "nouvelle" to distinguish his longer works from his shorter "contes" (198).

3. At the same time, Howells's focus on "delightful *personal* attempts" (emphasis mine) does, to his credit, offer some opportunity for a personal, individual voice *in dialogue* with those stereotypes or preconceptions.

4. In particular, Jäkel the Fool (whose name would have been pronounced identically to 'Yekl') from Heine's 1840 novel *The Rabbi of Bacherach*. Jäkel's speech representation "was considered defective German and referred to as *mauscheln*" (Wirth-Nesher 48). *Mauscheln*, in this case, translates loosely as mumbling or fiddling.

5. Chesnutt's *Conjure Woman* is not without its own ambivalences, which makes Harris's defense of it somewhat confusing. I am indebted to Martin Schauss here, for pointing out that though the conjurers are some of (if not *the*) only black characters in Chesnutt's short stories who consistently defy white oppressors, and who surely serve as connections to an ancestral African home, their position is complicated by their refusal to take sides, and by the fact that they undertake their conjure for economic gain. In at least one instance, for example, the conjure figure discourages a character from attempting to escape slavery, asking him, "'W'at you want be free fer?'... 'Doan you git ernuff ter eat?'... 'Doan you git ernuff sleep?'... Does you wuk too ha'd?'" (187).

I am indebted likewise to an anonymous reviewer, who has suggested that Homi Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely" (141) is another, less specifically African-American theoretical frame that works here, connecting as it does diverse immigrant communities, émigrés, and the unhomed more generally. Jake's tendency to assimilationist values, after all, existed even in his native Russia: he would "often play truant" from Talmudic study in order to attend military parades, and "no lad in town knew so many Russian words" (10).

6. Amongst other differences, the two novels were titled differently. For the Yiddish version, Cahan retained the original title that Howells had nixed, *Yankel der Yankee*. He also much abbreviated the scene in which the letter writer relates Jake's father's death (Taubenfeld 150), and adds an encounter with an African-American grocer that is absent from the English original.

7. Not surprisingly, Cahan's debt to a Yiddish literary tradition is maybe most explicitly present in the language of this Yiddish introduction—which resembles in its phrasing and syntactical switchbacks the narrative style of so many works of Yiddish folk stories. See, for example, Sholom Aleichem's "The Clock That Struck Thirteen," which features the same "I" voice and the same linguistic quirks in its opening moments: "That's the truth. I wasn't joking. I am telling you a true story of what happened in Kasrilevke, in our own house. I was there" (82).

8. Interestingly, however, though Mr. Rosedale is certainly a caricature of Jewish-ness, he is ultimately also one of the novel's more human—and humane—characters, one of the few willing to associate with Lily Bart once she descends in class status. But this fact also raises questions: does Rosedale's decency absolve the novel of charges of anti-Semitism? Given the narrator's wide-ranging omniscient eye, who is it actually *making* these anti-Semitic characterizations? Are Rosedale and *Yekl's* Jake perhaps more alike than first glances would suggest? For more on the problem of anti-Semitism and race in *House of Mirth*, see Hildegard Hoeller, who argues that Rosedale "echoes both the crudities and complexities of the anti-Semitism of [Wharton's] time" (14).

9. Or at least humourless once Gitl and Joey arrive—the fun-loving, fast-talking Jake seems to lose his sense of humour at this point in the novel, though those around him go on making their jokes.

10. *Luftgesheften* here translates literally to something like "air person," and refers to a schemer or conniver who finds ways to obtain money fraudulently; *schadchen* refers to a "matchmaker" (likely in this case an intrusive matchmaker whose matches are flawed; *schnorrer* translates to "beggar" or "sponger"—suggesting a freeloader, a kind of person who constantly asks for or borrows small items without offering anything in return.

ABSTRACTS

Contrairement aux idées qu'avancent notamment Susan K. Harris et Sabine Haenni, le réalisme littéraire américain est un genre tout à fait approprié pour décrire la vie d'immigrants au tournant du vingtième siècle dans toutes ses subjectivités – parce qu'il recourt à des dialectes qui ne permettent pas de donner accès à l'intériorité des personnages ou parce qu'il s'orientait toujours vers des normes propres aux classes moyennes reléguant les immigrants à la marge. Cet article propose une autre manière de lire la littérature émanant de l'immigration à partir de *Yekl*, l'histoire du New York Yiddish d'Abraham Cahan. *Yekl* est lu comme un récit dont la dimension réaliste et le désir d'interpréter la culture yiddish américaine pour un public large se complètent – et se compliquent – car il prend en compte et s'engage dans une réflexion avec les traditions littéraires yiddishs qui ne relèvent pas du réalisme : le conte populaire, les figures populaires comme le schlemiel (le pauvre maladroit) et l'humour que l'on trouve dans les formes verbales, le recours à l'anecdote et à la dérision. La technique narrative qu'emploie Cahan et plus particulièrement son utilisation du dialecte yiddish et de l'humour font plus que de recréer des stéréotypes. La novella tourne ses personnages en ridicule et ce dans le but plus large de célébrer l'identité yiddish et son héritage.

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