

Call It Modernism: Henry Roth

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Abstract

Unlike almost all previous works by American writers of Jewish origin, Henry Roth's novel Call It Sleep (1934) is more a story of initiation than a story of assimilation and acculturation. Roth's prose is thus much closer to the works of Anglo-American modernists. The essay analyzes modernist features in Call It Sleep, on both the thematic and formal levels, and concentrates on the parallels with Eliot's Wasteland.

Keywords: American Jewish Modernism, Henry Roth, Call It Sleep, T. S. Eliot, The Wasteland

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In the 1920s modernism became increasingly popular among the new generation of American Jewish novelists. Among the most prominent American Jewish modernists of that time belong Waldo Frank (1914–1967), Samuel Ornitz (1890–1957) and Paul Rosenfeld (1890–1945). However, the writer who became the most eminent representative of American Jewish modernism in prose was Henry Roth (1906–1995), who became famous mainly for his first novel *Call It Sleep* (1934).

Call It Sleep is set in various parts of New York (Brownsville, the Lower East Side and Harlem) at the beginning of the 20th century. At that time millions of East European Jews were fleeing tsarist Russia to seek refuge in America. Though the novel deals with the lives of the immigrants (Roth himself came from Tysmenica in Galicia, which was at that time a part of Austria-Hungary), it did not fit into the traditional genre of immigration narratives—as written e.g. by Abraham Cahan (1860–1951), Mary Antin (1881–1949) or Anzia Yezierska (1885–1970). *Call It Sleep* is more a story of initiation than a story of

assimilation and acculturation. Moreover, even though it was written in the 1930s, it did not primarily focus on the economic crisis and its consequences.

The novel was not well received at the time of its publication. It only became appreciated in the second half of the 20th century, when American Jewish literature became part of the mainstream. Although *Call It Sleep* belongs among the most important American (Jewish) modernist novels, it had very little influence and no direct following. The position of ethnic minority writers was described by Josef Jařab:

Looking back at the beginning of the [20th] century today it must be rather disappointing to observe that disproportionately little of the social and cultural experience within the pluralistic melting pot of the United States was perceived by the mainstream modernist community as particularly modern, or even interesting. Yet, the experience was clearly an exciting feature so typical of the modern times—change of country, of place, of home, change of language and lifestyle, of identity, which was sometimes accompanied by changes of name and even of appearance. Mobility, movement, journeys, uprooting, passing, becoming ... all these manifestations of change brought about by modernity naturally became the subject matter of artistic works produced by minority artists who, however, were regularly, and also by the then current definition of art and literature, considered parochial, provincial, and marginal. Or nonexistent. (Jařab 6)

Many American Jewish writers tried to capture the enormous changes in modern society (see e.g. Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*, 1917, or Edna Ferber's *So Big*, 1924). Not only does Roth deal with these changes that brought about the sense of alienation or cultural displacement, he also shows their effects on the mind of modern man, such as fear, guilt, aggression, paranoia or loneliness, which represent an essential part of modernist aesthetics.

Search for method

Before writing his novel, Roth could as well have quoted T. S. Eliot: "I have *lived* through material for a score of long poems in the last six months" (Eliot, *Wasteland* x). He gathered substantial material that he wanted to transform into fiction: immigration, his close relationship with his mother, or the turbulent city life of New York. Yet he did not know how to use this material to create a work of art.

At that time, Roth was close to the modernist poet and critic Eda Lou Walton (1894–1961), to whom he dedicated his novel. He became familiar with the *Wasteland* of T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) and *Ulysses* by James Joyce (1882–1941), and it was these two writers that inspired him (Sollors 160). He realized that it was abstraction and use of language that created the fictional world. As Daniel Schwarz observed: Joyce believed "that language had the potential to discover the value of trivial things" (17).

Moreover, he learnt that the quest of his protagonist did not necessarily have to be external. The main emphasis was placed rather on the internal monologue and stream of consciousness of the over-sensitive and self-doubting and self-centered child protagonist David Shearl,¹ who can see and hear various things but is not able to understand them.

As his mother remarked: “Aren’t you just a pair of eyes and ears! You see, you hear, you remember, but when will you know?” (Roth 173).

Both Roth and Joyce combine several narrative techniques. The unknown narrators function as stage directors, presenting the surroundings and the action. But the only consciousness they enter is that of the protagonist.

The story of *Ulysses* is built upon parallels with Homer’s *Odyssey*, the works of William Shakespeare, the story of Jesus, and Hebraic narratives, especially the Passover stories (i.e. the song “Chad Gadya”). Eliot’s poetry also oscillates between modern and ancient setting and characters. That is the method employed by James George Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1922): he uses stories and rituals of primitive or ancient tribes to create a link between their practices and modern ones. Roth followed the example of these writers by combining myths and stories from many cultures, e.g. Oedipus Rex, the life of Jesus, Germanic mythology, the story of Isaiah, or “Chad Gadya”.

Roth’s method of narration is closer to *The Wasteland*, as Joyce’s *Ulysses* has a more organized structure based on Homer. *Call It Sleep* and *The Wasteland* have no such underlying frame; they merge myths and the present. The method was described by T. S. Eliot as follows:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. [...] Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. (Eliot, Prose 177–8)

In Eliot, Joyce and Roth, the historical narratives are being re-lived in the modern world and are helping the protagonists to find meaning and order. The myths and legends become alive in the characters’ lives; they are not distant abstract models that are morally superior or unreachable, even though *The Wasteland* is often interpreted in that way.²

American Wasteland

The immigrants viewed America as *goldene medina*, the golden land, where riches and subsequent happiness lie on the pavement. However, their naive expectations were often disappointed. The novel starts with the arrival of the protagonist David Schearl and his mother Genya at Ellis Island. As in the second part of Eliot’s *The Wasteland*, the “Game of Chess” begins:

Now Albert’s coming back, make yourself a bit smart.
He’ll want to know what you done with that money he gave you
[...] and think of poor Albert,
He’s been in the army for four years, he wants a good time,
And if you don’t give it him, there’s others will, I said. (Eliot, *Selected Poems* 56)

In the novel it is not the husband Albert who is coming home, but his wife Genya and her child, who has never seen his father before. Albert goes to Ellis Island to meet his family. He is late and his wife does not immediately recognize him, which creates a constant and growing tension in the novel:

But these two stood silent, apart; the man staring with aloof, offended eyes grimly down at the water-or if he turned his face toward his wife at all, it was only to glare in harsh contempt at the blue straw hat worn by the child in her arms, and then his hostile eyes would sweep about the deck to see if anyone else was observing them. And his wife beside him regarding him uneasily, appealingly. And the child against her breast looking from one to the other with watchful, frightened eyes. (Roth 11)

He does not even look at his wife, being ashamed of her, as she and the child look so old-fashioned. It is as if he was thinking of leaving and never admitting they belonged to him.

But if Albert makes off, it won't be for a lack of telling.
You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.
(And her only thirty-one.) (Eliot, *Selected Poems* 56)

Both of his parents did something shameful in their home country. Genya had a relationship with a Catholic organist and Albert did not help his father, who was attacked by a bull, and let him die. The nature and the past of his parents are partially revealed in the decorations they bring home and hang on the wall. Genya bought a picture of corn and her husband brought bull's horns. Corn is not only a symbol of fertility, but David views it as a symbol of his mother's "playing" with the organist. Consequently, he sees himself as the *benkart* (bastard) about whom his mother was talking. David even understands the connection between the bull's horns and his father's uncontrollable fits of aggression. He sees his father as a wild, dangerous man with enormous strength. He associates him with a hammer which his father used against one of his co-workers in a fit of uncontrollable anger.

All these attributes point to the second most powerful Nordic god, Thor, son of Odin, who was married to the goddess of vegetation and fertility, Sif (Sibylla). She had been married and had a son, who was later adopted by gods (Rydberg 563). During storms, Thor rode on his thunder-chariot pulled by two goats, whereas Albert drove around town delivering milk and descending in anger on all who crossed his path. Thor was known for his physical, not mental strength and his uncontrollable temper (Rydberg 182). Roth is thus presenting the family in a mythical context, which is a strategy used by most modernist writers.

Albert, an insecure man with a bad temper, went to America first, and after a few years sent for his wife and son. However, he held a strong suspicion that David was not his. All these mysteries, guilt, suppressed anger and fear are recurrent motifs in the novel.

David does not and cannot understand it. Therefore he sees his father Albert as aggressive and cruel: "He had seen it before – that look, that flicker of veiled suspicion more frightening than wrath – had seen it almost always the day his father had thrown up a job. Why? What had he done? He didn't know. He didn't even want to know. It frightened him too much. Everything he knew frightened him" (Roth 137).

The alienation is not only within the family, but also between America and newcomers. David is only a child and his memories of his homeland are blurred and fragmented. The same is true for his vision of America, which he sees as a hostile world with a foreign culture and language. He feels he is not wanted, and indeed America does not welcome him:

And before them, rising high on her pedestal from the scaling swarmy brilliance of sunlit water to the West, Liberty. The spinning disk of the late afternoon sun slanted behind her, and to those on board who gazed, her features were charred with shadow, her depths exhausted, her masses ironed to one single plain. Against the luminous sky the rays of her halo were spikes of darkness roweling the air; shadow flattened the torch she bore to a black cross against flawless light – the blackened hilt of a broken sword. Liberty. (Roth 14)

The Statue of Liberty does not welcome the newcomers as in the most famous sonnet by Emma Lazarus (1849–1887), “The New Colossus” (1883). “The Mother of Exiles” stopped asking the Old World:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door! (Lazarus, *Poems* 202–3)

By describing the Statue of Liberty as cold and hostile, Roth joined his American Jewish predecessors—e.g. Abraham Cahan, Samuel Ornitz or Ludwig Lewisohn (1882–1955)—and tried to express his critical attitude to America.

The Statue reappears at the end of the novel, where it is seen as a prostitute anyone can enter: “And do you know, you can go all the way up inside her for twenty-five cents. For only twenty-five cents, mind you! Every American man, woman and child ought to go up inside her, it’s a thrilling experience. The Statue of Liberty is –” (Roth 415) American values of freedom and democracy are presented as a cheap commodity.

Perceptions as reality

The main motto of modernism was to make and see things new. That is why modernist writers often tried to represent the ever-changing perceptions of the protagonists reflecting the outside world. According to Stephen Frosh, “[m]odernism is [...] always about the present, but it dramatizes an awareness that the present is a temporary state” (121). The temporariness is best demonstrated in David’s perceptions of a cellar of the house in which the Schearl family lives. David associates it with dirt, danger, sexuality and death. His mother’s sexuality and his father’s aggression are also part of the “cellar”—which represents everything that is forbidden and suppressed. This image helps him to project all his paranoid feelings of fear and guilt.

David’s only shelter against the alien, hostile world is his mother Genya. He is extremely dependent on her. Thus he suffers greatly whenever he feels his mother is not

paying close attention to him. Yet the dependence is mutual. Genya is isolated from the outer world both by her nature and the language barrier. Though she knows a few English words, nobody can understand her apart from the Jewish immigrants. She tries to compensate for her alienation from her husband and her social surroundings by taking care of her son. David sees her as his only parent and life model. That separates him from the other boys in the street, who look up to their fathers. He watches her every move and believes that she is mentally and physically part of him. Her body is in a way an extended part of his. He is therefore very anxious when he slowly realizes that her body is an object of interest for other men.

Albert has a friend Luter whom he often invites for dinner. It is soon obvious that Luter is not interested in the food but in the shapely body of the hostess. David believes that no man has a right to look at his mother that way: "Luter, his eyes narrowed by a fixed yawn, was staring at his mother, at her hips. For the first time, David was aware of how her flesh, confined by the skirt, formed separate molds against it. He felt suddenly bewildered, struggling with something in his mind that would not become a thought" (Roth 40).

Still, he does not know what is really happening. He eventually understands it after a visit. His mother took him to play with his friend Yussie and his sister Annie. Yussie showed him a rat trap. He explains how the rats live in the cellar and creep out into the flats. This scares David even more. Later he is caught in a trap by Annie, who shuts him up in a closet and wants to play bad:

"Yuh must ask me," she said. "G'wan ask me."

"Wot?"

"Yuh must say, Yuh wanna play bad? Say it!"

He trembled. "Yuh wanna play bad?"

"Now, *you* said it," she whispered. "Don' forget, you said it."

By the emphasis of her words, David knew he had crossed some awful threshold.

"Will yuh tell?"

"No," he answered weakly. The guilt was his.

"Yuh swear?"

"I swear."

"Yuh know w' ea babies comm from?"

"N-no."

"From de knish"

"-*Knish?*"

"Between de legs. Who puts id in is de poppa. De poppas god de petzel. Yaw de poppa." (Roth 53)

David manages to connect this horrifying experience both with the dirty rats in the cellar and Luter's visits. After this, David's world falls apart; it becomes a dangerous trap. What is worse, he has nobody to talk to, nobody to share his fears with, not even his mother: "But she didn't know as he knew how the whole world could break into a thousand little pieces, all buzzing, all whining, and no one hearing them and no one seeing them except himself" (Roth 55).

The darkness of the cellar takes on new meanings. On his way back from school David sees a black car with a coffin: “The black carriage with the window. Scared. The long box. Scared. The cellar. No! No!” (Roth 64) David tries to ask his mother what happens after death. She says she does not know: “They say there is a heaven and in heaven they waken. But I myself do not believe it. May God forgive me for telling you this. I know only that they are buried in the dark earth and their names last a few more lifetimes on their gravestones” (Roth 69). The cellar for him thus represents not only sexuality but a trap, aggression and death.

However, the cellar can become a place of refuge. After an argument on the street David hits one boy who falls down and does not move. David is scared; he thinks he has killed him and tries to hide. He feels he cannot go home as Luter has come to visit his mother. The only safe place is the cellar. David sits in the darkness that is not still and quiet but noisy, with strange creatures squirming, moving and making strange noises.

This is one of the essential features of modernism: a concrete object acquires various meanings as a result of the constantly changing human consciousness. The main emphasis does not lie on the cellar as a concrete object, but on the way in which it is perceived. David sees it as a dangerous space full of danger, “unclean” sexuality, or death. Yet it can become the only safe place to hide. Other features typical of modernism, such as the subjective rendering of time and space, are also connected with the method of the flow of consciousness.

After some time spent hiding in the cellar David decides to run as far as he can so that the police cannot catch him. He does not know where he is running or how long for—the only indicators of time and space are telegraph poles.³

After some time the exhausted David realizes that he is lost and cannot find his way home. He—similarly to his father—has paranoid feelings that everybody knows what he has done and only pretends that nothing happened. For the first time he understands that he cannot believe all that is being said:

Trust nothing. Trust nothing. Trust nothing. Wherever you look, never believe. Whatever anything was or did or said, it pretended. Never believe. If you played hide’n’-go-see, it wasn’t hide’n’-go-see, it was something else, something sinister. If you played follow the leader, the world turned upside down and an evil face passed through it. Don’t play; never believe. The man who had directed him; the old woman who had left him here; the policeman; all had tricked him. They would never call his mother, never. He knew. They would keep him there. That rat cellar underneath. That rat cellar! The boy he had pushed was still. Coffin-box still. They knew it. And they knew about Annie. They made believe they didn’t but they knew. Never believe. Never play. Never believe. Not anything. Everything shifted. Everything changed. Even words. Words, you said. Wanna, you said. I wanna. Yea. I wanna. What? You know what. They were something else, something horrible! Trust nothing. Even sidewalks, even streets, houses, you looked at them. You knew where you were and they turned. (Roth 102–3)

The outer world has thus become a place of vulgarity, death, violence and lies for him. David is not only a spoilt scared child but also a child hero on his way to initiation and

illumination. The only problem is that he does not know how to reach it. He is constantly torn between his desire to become one of the street boys who know where their fathers work and contempt for their vulgarity and simplicity. His feelings of imagined guilt gradually drive him away both from his mother, who cannot understand his confusion, and from the street that is full of death, violence and sex. He tries to escape this by trying to bring back his idyllic childhood in Europe.

In the second part of the novel, called "The Picture", this darkness is transmitted to his inner world. David hears a conversation between his mother and her sister Bertha. Genya starts talking about her past and her relationship with the organist. However, her narrative is so fragmented that it cannot be positively said whose son David really is. The important parts of the story are told in Polish and David cannot understand it. The only thing he knows is that he is somehow concerned and that the secret the women are talking about is sinister. He catches only two words, *benkart* and *organist*.

In the third part of the novel, called "The Coal," when David becomes acquainted with Jewish history, culture and religion, the cellar will acquire yet another meaning. When David hears the story of Isaiah, he cannot understand how dirty coal (which he associates with the cellar) could purify a foul mouth. He decides to become the Isaiah of the streets and starts searching for his light and purifying the coal around him, though he is scorned by the rabbi, who tries to explain to him that such light and purity is not of this world. Yet for him the Biblical stories are real and present a part of his life and experience.

"What The Thunder Said"

"Sleep is like a temporary death."

Bob Dylan, "Workingman Blues"

In the third part, David's mother tries to observe the rituals of Jewish cooking but she never goes to the synagogue. David thus has no knowledge of the Jewish tradition at all. Albert believes that David should learn Hebrew so that he could say *Kaddish*, the prayer for the dead, for his father. That is why he sends David to the *cheder*, the Jewish school. David is scared and resentful. He has to stay in a dark room without his mother and listen to the rabbi. Yet he eventually starts enjoying his classes. As Šárka Bubíková remarks: "The theme of forgetting one's biological parents and turning to one's spiritual parent instead often appears in American literature in order to highlight the motif of hope situated in the future" (Bubíková 97). Unlike the protagonists of *The Rise of David Levinsky* by Abraham Cahan and *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl* by Samuel Ornitz, who were both happy to leave the school and forget all about the religion of their ancestors, David sees Judaism and Hebrew as a way to light and purification. The Jewish tradition thus offers him a long-sought historical and social sense of belonging.

In the last part, called "The Rail," David tries to escape not only the outer world but his parents as well. He seeks consolation in religion, not only in Judaism but also in Christianity, which is especially attractive for him. Unlike Judaism, Christianity uses visible objects

of worship, such as rosaries or holy images, which he finds comforting and reassuring. Another appealing feature is the concept of God's mercy and purification of sins, which is what David seeks.

The duality and coexistence of these religions and cultures appears throughout the whole novel. It is even present in his name: David Schearl. In Hebrew David means "Beloved" and it refers to David, the King of Israel who fought against Goliath. According to Christian tradition, King David was an ancestor of Jesus; moreover, "Beloved" is used as a name for Jesus. The surname Schearl comes from Yiddish and means scissors.

Yet the role of different languages and cultures presented in this book is not so clear-cut and simple. As Hana Wirth-Nesher points out:

Yiddish is associated with his mother, but it is the language of the father as well. And although Hebrew signifies the language of Judaism and thus serves to reinforce his ties to his family, it is represented in the King James translation evoking Christian Western culture as much as it does Jewish civilization. In fact, the passage from Isaiah Roth cites is read in Christian hermeneutics as a prophecy of the coming of Christ, just as the Chad Goya song, with its link to the sacrificial lamb and the Passover seder, signifies both Jewish and Christian traditions. (9)

By admiring these texts, David is moving between both religions and cultures. Not only does he partially understand two other languages, English and Hebrew, he even accepts their respective heritages.

David so strongly desires the light that will save him from the darkness of sin that he is willing to do anything to get near it. He thinks that a blond, blue-eyed boy named Leo who comes from a Polish Christian family can and will protect him. Leo tells him about Jesus, light and miraculous healing. Both boys meet on the roof in a house to which David's family has moved. In this house there is no cellar, only stairs leading up.

David sees Leo as a happy angelic child. Leo is not scared; he does not have a father and does not see his mother, and moreover, he owns skates. Leo also has sacred talismans: pictures of the Virgin Mary, a crucifix and a rosary:

"Dintcha ever see dat befaw?"

"No."

"At's Jesus an' de Sacred Heart."

"Oh! What makes it?"

"Makes wot?"

"He's all light inside."

"Well'at's'cause he's so holy."

"Oh," David suddenly understood. "Like him, too!" He stared in fascination at the picture. "De man my rabbi told me about – he had it!"

"Had w'a'?" Leo drew abreast of him to look up.

"Dot light over dere!"

"Couldnda had dat," Leo answered dogmatically. "Dat's Christchin light – it's way bigger. Bigger den Jew light." (Roth 322)

Because of his ignorance of Judaism, David is willing to believe that Christian symbols can free him of his fear. Moreover, he is shocked when Leo tells him that the Jews are Christ-killers. So shocked, indeed, that he is willing to ridicule his own tradition. But his desire to be near Leo and keep his rosary leads only back to the cellar. Leo wants to visit David's cousins and have some fun with them. David is torn between his urge to have the magic rosary and disgust as he realizes Leo's intentions. Yet he eventually agrees to take him there and stand guard. They are caught by David's aunt and he feels even greater guilt.

He tries to find shelter in the *cheder*, where he tells the rabbi that his mother is dead and his father was an organist. After all this Albert is sure that David is not his son. Not only was he offering his cousins to Christians of Polish origin, to make things worse, he had a rosary in his pocket.

David feels that only God's light can purify him from his imagined sins and guilt (which are no less real to him). That is why he throws his father's milk dipper onto the rails. There is a lightning bolt followed by thunderous noise. David receives an electric shock and loses consciousness, looking as if he were dead:

Prison and palace and reverberation
Of thunder of spring over distant mountains
He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying
With a little patience (Eliot, *Selected Poems* 64)

In the Jewish tradition, thunder is often used as a manifestation of God's presence. The Law was given to Moses amid thunder and lightning (Ex xix, 16). In David's case it is not only the Lord, but also his father, who was associated with thunder. In Ezekiel 1 it is the Ofanim ("Wheeled [ones]"), a class of chariot angels who create thunder and lightning (Geoffrey 191). Moreover, the chief god of the Canaanites was Baal ("Lord/Master/Husband"), who was the God of thunder and fertility (Geoffrey 27).

When David lies on the ground, his subconscious is flooded by fragmented images from his outer and inner world: cellar, coal, father and mother. These images, which have both secular and religious meanings, are intertwined with various, diverse voices from the street. The English of the street is a mixture of English, German, Italian and Yiddish. The utterances of the people watching David contain Christian and Jewish elements and combine the secular and the sacred:

"Dere's a star for yeh! Watch it! Tree Kings I god. Dey came on huzzbeck! Yee! Hee Hee! Mary! Nawthin' to do but wait fer day light and go home. To a red cock crowin'. Over a statue of. A jerkin'. Cod. Clang! Clang! Oy! Machine! Liberty! Revolt! Redeem!"

Power

*Power! Power like a paw, titanic power,
ripped through the earth and slammed
against his body and shackled him
where he stood. Power! Incredible,
barbaric power! A blast, a siren of light
within him, rending, quaking, fusing his*

*brain and blood to a fountain of flame,
vast rockets in a searing spray! Power!* (Roth 418–9)

This passage represents a typical example of modernist writing. Roth uses rhythmical prose that formally overlaps with poetry. The final chapter of the book is a vortex of both *acoustic and visual* images whirling in the protagonist's mind.

In all modernist works, language plays an essential role in the novel. In *Call It Sleep*, the emphasis is put on the spoken word, on the sound. Roth tried to represent America through the complex, often cacophonous voices of people coming from different countries and speaking in various languages, such as Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew or distorted English. As Kolář observed: “The languages are linked with David's initiation into Jewish culture and with his fervent desire to be cleansed of his sins” (“Ethnicity” 76). As the novel is a modernist reflection of the child protagonist's mind, which is not yet able to understand the outside world, the representation of sounds was the only way of creating a full picture of the multicultural and hectic life of the city.

The sound is the bearer of meaning—as is true for the Jewish tradition, where the heard is more important than the seen. Moreover, the sounds also reflect David's way of thinking and hearing. Some of the sounds in *The Wasteland* “Twit twit twit/ Jug jug jug jug jug jug” (Eliot, *Selected Poems* 59) are reproduced in the immigrant English in *Call It Sleep*:

Sin melted into light...
Uh chug chug, ug chug!
– Cucka cucka ... Is a chicken...
Uh chug ug ch ch ch – Tew weet!
– No ... Can't be...
Ug chug, ug chug, ug – TEW WEET! (Roth 248)

Most of the visual images are coming from the outside, from the onlookers. Their words are important on both an acoustic level (they are speaking in broken English) and a visual one, as they provide cultural allusions unknown to the narrator. According to Werner Sollors, these objects “externalize his emotional dilemmas” (158). They represent the essential images from David's life, mixing Christian images of the Virgin Mary and the Three Kings with the Jewish Star of David. The red cock is an allusion to a famous sonnet by Emma Lazarus, “The Crowing of the Red Cock” (1882) that deals with the massacres of Jews in Europe in the 14th century and the fate of the Jews. In the last stanza Lazarus writes:

Coward? Not he, who faces death,
Who singly against worlds has fought,
For what? A name he may not breathe,
For liberty of prayer and thought.
The angry sword he will not whet,
His nobler task is – to forget. (Lazarus, *Dance* 52)

David does not want to retaliate; he is willing to face death and find purifying light and forgiveness. His state is described as sleep. David's consciousness, together with his reason, is asleep and he is freed from his fear. Only his subconscious is awake. As Eliot says in *The Wasteland*: "I could not/ speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither/ Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,/ Looking into the heart of light, the silence" (Eliot, *Selected Poems* 52). In the Jewish tradition the state of subconscious is connected with the number *three*, represented by the letter *gimel* (meaning return, wean, or camel in Hebrew, it is mainly associated with a blessing connected with the receiving of God's Light).⁴

During his "sleep" the contrasting images of the inner and outer world join in a whirling epiphany. Epiphany ("manifestation" in Greek) is, among other things, connected with the festival of the Three Kings. However, it is not experienced only by David but also by his father. When the doctor brings David, who is in shock, home, Albert realizes that he does not want to lose his son. He finally accepts him as his own and tries to be a good father. Still, the ending is open and reflects the last two lines of *The Wasteland*:

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata. (Self-restraint, charity and mercy)⁵
Shantih shantih shantih (peace and silence) (Eliot, *Selected Poems* 73)

That, according to *Upanishads*, is what the thunder really means. The "thunder of spring" (Eliot, *Selected Poems* 64) is announcing a change, a new life, and urges all to restrain themselves, be generous to those in need and be compassionate. After David's incident, the whole family gains hope of a better future. David returns to his Father on both a symbolic and a literal level. He is finally becoming less dependent on his mother and is initiated into his new life—which, however, may not necessarily be better.

Notes

¹ For more on the function of child protagonists in literature see Šárka Bubíková, "Growing up and the Quest for Identity," in: *Growing Up in British and American Literature*, ed. Šárka Bubíková, et al. (Pardubice: Pavel Mervart/Univerzita Pardubice, 2008), 97–114.

² See e.g. Schwarz, Joyce 21.

³ The same strategy was used by Virginia Woolf in her short stories "The Mark on the Wall" (1917) and "The Kew Gardens" (1919), where the main indicator of time and space is a snail.

⁴ See the allusion to the Three Kings above. In Jewish tradition the number *three* is also associated with the Three Fathers: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Three Kings were riding on camels as well.

⁵ Three essential virtues in Hinduism: see "Brihadâraṇyaka Upanishad," in *Upanishads*, trans. Suren Navlakha (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2000), 124.

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