

**The Writer as Creator of Selves: Where Fiction and
Autobiography Meet in the Work of Anzia Yezierska**

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Anzia Yeziarska wrote about the experience of being the other, the immigrant in America, at a time when to voice that experience, particularly as a woman, was extremely exotic, even anomalous. Yeziarska's work was billed at the time of her greatest success, in the 20's, as thoroughly autobiographical. Yeziarska herself was the rags to riches immigrant story about which she was writing, and both she and those who promoted her recognized the commercial advantages of the inspiring scenario: the illiterate sweatshop worker turned novelist./1/ In other words, all of Yeziarska's work was promoted as autobiography and, for the most part, read with autobiographical expectations.

In reality, Anzia Yeziarska was at once similar and different from the characters she created. She had a natural talent for melodrama (she studied drama on scholarship in her early twenties at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts). This talent served her well as a writer whose stories were propelled mostly by intense emotion and who, according to her daughter Louise Levitas Henriksen, had a "need to expand and elaborate on the actual experience...and a talent for dramatizing and enlarging her life to an appreciative listener."/2/

To read Yeziarska as the pure autobiography of a "self-educated primitive" as many of her critics did, or as a journalist simply recalling what she saw around her, is to underestimate Yeziarska as a writer, and to ignore the extent to which autobiography and fiction draw on each other in her

work.

Like Sonya in her novel Salome of the Tenements, the real Yeziarska was not afraid to beg, plead, flatter or even lie to get what she wanted. As Sonya lies her way into an exclusive dress shop on Fifth Avenue, Yeziarska fabricated a high school diploma in order to accept a scholarship to Teacher's College in 1900. And like many of her immigrant characters, both men and women, Yeziarska had a fierce will to succeed, a will so strong that she left her husband and young daughter to pursue her writing in 1917, an act that was not only unheard of in her time but was certainly viewed by all who knew her as nothing short of an abomination. Those feelings of rejecting what was expected of her, and of being rejected for it by all, are expressed over and over again in her characters:

"Knowledge was what I wanted more than anything else in the world. I had made my choice. And now I had to pay the price. So this is what it cost, daring to follow the urge in me. No father. No lover. No family. No friend. I must go on and on. I must go on--alone." (Bread Givers, page 208)

Perhaps her tendency towards melodrama and her fierce will to succeed, together with the experience of being scorned by family and community, finally left Yeziarska completely free to create herself, because that is exactly what she did, hitting her stride in the 1920's, earning commercial and artistic recognition by taking the immigrant experience and making it uniquely hers.

Like many other writers who came through Ellis Island, Anzia Yeziarska gave birth to herself. Though her stories are

obviously based closely on her own story and her own emotions, the "absolute self" who comes across loud, clear and strong in her fiction is still a created one. Her autobiographically based characters were penned by a writer who was once the illiterate Eastern European sweat shop worker living on Hester street, but who obviously is not any longer in that position, (or she wouldn't be writing the stories in the first place). Yeziarska has gone back to recreate that position and that perspective, and to look at it. She is a prime example of the self describing self describing self, both in her fiction and in her autobiography, illustrating most blatantly the interconnectedness of the two forms:

"What shall I keep and what shall I throw away? Which is madness and which is inspiration? I never know. I pick and choose things like a person feeling his way in the dark. I never know whether the thoughts I've discarded are not perhaps better than the thoughts I've kept....the utterance of the ignorant like me is something like the utterance of the dying. It's up and incoherent, but it has in it the last breath of life and death." (Children of Loneliness Page 11: "Mostly About Myself")

Part of the persona Yeziarska created around herself was the ultimate rags to riches tale. She rarely mentioned her formal education in interviews (her drama school scholarship nor her scholarship to Teachers College in 1900). Even the very voice of her narrative, a kind of "Yiddish in English," gives the impression that the teller has stepped straight from the sweatshop to the typewriter.

Yeziarska consciously adopted (or more accurately re-adopted) this speech pattern from listening to her sister Annie. Annie had five children, had never gone to school, and

was much more involved in lower east side communal life than Anzia. Obviously, having graduated from Columbia, taught in the public schools, and done research for educator John Dewey (I'll get to him later), Yeziarska could have written in plain correct English.

But it is also the creation of this voice that distinguishes her from other immigrant writers, showing the genius of her creativity. Through language she is able to get closer to the rhythm, sounds, and consequently the experiences that she left behind ten or fifteen years before she started writing. And it is this voice that makes her stories immediate. The reader is in the tenement from the first line, hearing the conversations and getting as close to ghetto life as re-creation permits:

"'Oi, WEH! How it shines the beautifulness!' exulted Hanneh Hayyeh over her newly painted kitchen." (first line, "The lost Beautifulness")

"It ain't that I still love him, but nothing don't seem real to me no more. For the little while when we was lovers I breathed the air from the highest places where love comes from, and I can't no more come down." (last lines, "Where Lovers Dream")

This voice, a kind of literary conceit, also allows Yeziarska to control her characters, and comment on their actions from a distant, unaccented narrator within the same story. The result is that she is both immigrant and controlling commentator:

"Hannah Hayyeh thrust back the money. 'Ain't I hurt enough without you having hurt me yet with charity. You want to give me hush money to swallow down an unrightness that burns my flesh? I want justice.'

The woman's words were like bullets that shot through the static security of Mrs. Preston's life. She realized with

a guilty pang that while strawberries and cream were served at her table in January, Hanneh Hayyeh had doubtless gone without a square meal in months." (The Lost "Beautifulness", page 13-14)

Yeziarska, like Mary Antin, and many of the other autobiographical writers of the immigrant experience, was also created by historical timing. Her subjects, her emotions, her drive for success, almost all of what she writes about is fueled by history. And like Antin, Emma Goldman, Henry Roth, Abraham Cahan, and others, the pain she describes; the struggle for physical cleanliness, the conflict of old world religious values and new found opportunity, of hope and hopelessness, all these came from the life experiences of immigration:

"After a while I understood why the young men [at college] didn't like me. I knew more of life as a ten year old girl, running the streets, than these psychology instructors did with all their heads swelled from too much knowing." (Bread Givers page 231)

Yeziarska, like these other writers, was also aware of the time in which she wrote, and of the exotic flavor of her ordinary experience to the average American reader. The late teens and early twenties of this century were not a time of particularly warm feelings towards immigrants, and both Yeziarska's own rags to riches story, and the poignant suffering of her fictionalized selves, could only have a positive influence on her public. This was even more true when her story, Hungry Hearts was bought by the movies.

But unlike Antin, who published ten years earlier, and who saw a kind of black and white experience in the horrors of Poland and the wonders of America, or Ephraim Lisitzky, who

sees Europe as spiritually superior and America as the fallen land, Yeziarska's protagonists are often stuck in the grey area. She flips back and forth from relief when her characters are freed from their poverty, to guilt and loneliness when they "arrive." Her characters never fully embrace the new world (like Antin), but rarely do they ever want to turn back to Poland, either.

This is most dramatically illustrated in "Fat of the Land," one of Yeziarska's earlier stories, in which an immigrant woman, Hanneh Breineh, exists in terribly impoverished conditions with six children, and is always complaining to her neighbor, Mrs. Peltz. But as miserable as Hannah Breineh is in the ghetto, she is twice as miserable later in the story when all her children have "made it" and she is living in the lap of luxury on Riverside Drive, each of her children more ashamed and mocking of her old world ways than the next. On the night of her son Benny's award winning play, to which the President of the United States is coming, Hannah Breineh, mother of the playwright, has not been invited to attend.

In reaction to the slight, Hannah Breineh goes back to the tenements in search of Mrs. Peltz to once again tell her troubles to, asking:

"Why should my children shame themselves from me? From where did they get the stuff to work themselves up in the world?...How did they get their smartness to rise above the people around them? Why don't the children of born American mothers write my Benny's plays? It is I, who never had a chance to be a person, who gave him the fire in his head." (page 25 "Fat of the Land")

Here is the dilemma that Yeziarska both examines, and must

have felt herself, as the daughter scorned by and ashamed of her old world parents. This theme of the clash of old world and new, and of the guilt and alienation that ensue for both generations, is one of the ongoing themes of Yeziarska's work.

In Children of Loneliness Yeziarska writes from the point of view of a daughter who comes home to her self-sacrificing immigrant parents after four years at Cornell, and finds their manners and lifestyle dirty and embarrassing. The daughter, Rachel, moves out in order to embrace a lifestyle that will meet the approval of her non-Jewish, American born boyfriend. But she is not comfortable in his world either, and finds herself without a home, on a literal, as well as an emotional and spiritual level,

"I can't live in the old world, and I'm yet too green for the new. I don't belong to those who gave birth to me, or to those with whom I was educated." (page 17, Children of Loneliness)

Here is perhaps the closest glance at the Yeziarska who lied her way into Columbia University, and was shunned by her father, the Torah scholar, for not being married and living a traditional life. Rachel's last remarks, optimistic and consoling words to a readership that might not respond well to a hopeless ending, are also the writer's way of consoling herself, not only in her lost relationship with her parents, but in her loss of John Dewey, with whom Yeziarska herself had a broken love affair.

This theme of how much assimilation is good and how much is unworkable in the world of romance is another ongoing

Yeziarska theme:

"I have broken away from the old world, I'm through with it...Frank Baker can't help me. I must hope for no help from the outside. I'm alone...but am I really alone in my seeking? I'm one of millions of immigrant children, children of loneliness.."(last paragraph, Children of Loneliness)

In Salome of the Tenements, Yeziarska again tackles the relationship between a Jewish emigre woman, the "spirited Jewess," and a controlled, unemotional and well educated WASP. Like Philip Roth's "shiksa ideal," Yeziarska has her own "shegitz" ideal, and he appears over and over in her stories, like an archetypal friend. He is the teacher in "The Miracle"; John Manning, the millionaire philanthropist in Salome; John Morrow in Red Ribbon on a White Horse, and Frank Baker in Children of Loneliness. Yeziarska plays out her own unsuccessful and never consummated affair with John Dewey over and over again.

These Wasp males are usually set off next to the Jewish immigrant man, who often comes off wanting. Lipkin, the poet and editor of "Ghetto News" in Salome of the Tenements, or the younger Morris Lipkin the poet in Bread Givers (who are perhaps the same character at different stages of life), are considered and then dismissed by the books' heroines. In both cases Lipkin is seen as dreamer and idealist who still has a foot in the old world and can't achieve in the new. He is pulled down by physical circumstances and lacks spiritual inspiration (even as poet), paling in comparison to characters like Manning:

" 'Ut! Lipkin! For all his fine poetry, he has a poverty-stricken dent in his chest. A poet is not a poet if he has a pitiful 'nebich' look even though he is starving and in rags. A real poet should be able to clothe himself with the heavens and feed himself with stars.'"(page 10, Salome)

"Head swung back, Sonya looked up in admiration at Manning, her heart pierced by the cultured elegance of his attire. Not a detail of his well-dressed figure escaped her. His finished grooming stood out all the more vividly in this background of horrid poverty...the rich hidden quietness of his silk tie; even his shoes had a hand-made quality to them..." (page 9, Salome)

If the Jewish immigrant men in her stories do make it, then they become obsessed with money, are crass and uneducated, and view women as commodities, exemplified by Max Goldstein who proposes to Sara in Bread Givers:

"The man seemed to turn into a talking roll of dollar bills right there before my eyes. His smile. He could buy everything. That's what laughed in his eyes. He could buy everything. To him, a wife would only be another piece of property." (page 199)

Or if the Jewish man is not materialist, and becomes educated and cultured, then he is spineless, and rejects his immigrant girlfriend. He, or his father or other benefactor, decide that the immigrant girl is not sufficiently Americanized and will cause professional embarrassment, like David the doctor in "Where Lovers Dream" or Jacob Novak the pianist in Bread Givers.

But by far Yeziarska's most negative portrayal of the Jewish man is her portrayal of the father in Bread Givers. Like Yeziarska's own father, Reb Smolinsky is a Torah scholar who keeps himself hidden in the old world while the rest of the family struggles to survive in the new. He sends his daughters to work to support him and takes all their wages, chases away their suitors and selects husbands for them who are their ruination. He sits all day studying, taking the juiciest portions of food for himself while his daughters come home from sweat

shops half starved. He can not function at all in the real world, and on the rare moments that he attempts contact with it, loses any savings or hope for the future that the family has scraped together. Most upsetting of all is the low role he sees for women, the role that finally drives his youngest daughter, Sara, from the house (as it drove Yeziarska from her own father's house):

"Woe to America where women are let free like men. All that's false in politics, prohibition, and all the evils of the world come from them." (page 205)

"'Women are always the curse of men,' he went on, 'but when they get older they're devils and witches. That's why it says in the Torah that a man has a right to hate an old maid for no other reason but that no man had her, so no man wants her.'" (page 95-96)

"Always Father was throwing up to Mother that she had borne him no son to be an honor to his days and to say prayers for him when he died...The prayers of his daughters didn't count because God didn't listen to women's prayers. Heaven and the next world were for men. Women could get into Heaven because they were wives and daughters of men..." (page 9 Bread Givers)

Despite what would seem this very stark contrast of the good WASP man contrasted with the unfeeling Jewish man, Yeziarska is not completely black and white on this issue either. In the end, Sara Smolinsky goes back to Hester Street and takes care of her sick father in his old age, admitting that she is as tied to the old world as anybody, despite her education. Sonya in Salome of the Tenements inevitably rejects millionaire John Manning for a fellow immigrant made good, Jacques Hollins (formerly Jakie Solomon).

And the WASP men Yeziarska portrays, though shining examples of "American-ness," either abandon the women who idolize them

(like Dewey abandoned Yeziarska), or treat them badly and drive them away. For Yeziarska's females, the world of men and women is difficult because of their old world backgrounds, and their poverty, but it is even more difficult because they are so independent and fiercely driven. Simply put, like Yeziarska herself, her female characters just don't take any crap, and that's why they have a tough time in traditional relationships.

This is not because Yeziarska had any sweeping ^{feminist ideals.} Yeziarska herself was a strong willed (leaving two husbands for her writing). Marriage was not a way in which Yeziarska gained acceptance in America, as it was for Mary Antin. If anything, marriage and family for Yeziarska served only to deflect her from her true ambition--to write.

Rather, she wrote from personal experience

In none of Yeziarska's writing, nor any interview she ever granted, does she ever discuss her two broken marriages, the fact that she left her second husband, or the daughter she left to be raised by her father (Yeziarska had the equivalent of weekend custody). Yet, though the facts are not there, the emotion, the affect of such a bold move, is apparent in almost all her female characters. To write about a woman abandoning her husband would certainly not have won Yeziarska many readers, but it is not difficult to read between the lines and see Yeziarska's fierce, obsessive struggle for "a room of her own" in her characters' struggles:

"I furnished my room very simply...when I thought of the dirt from where I came, this simplicity was rich and fragrant with unutterable beauty...life was all before me because my work was all before me. I Sara Smolinsky, had done what I had set out to do. I was now a teacher in the public schools. And

this was the first step in the ladder of my new life...

Once I had been elated at the thought that a man had wanted me. How much more thrilling to feel that I had made my work wanted!" (Bread Givers, page 241)

Though the experiences she writes about are easily autobiographical in nature (such as returning home to visit her immigrant parents after college, or having her first private room), it is the emotion of the immigrant experience that is the true autobiography in Yeziarska's fiction. Not the facts, but the affect, is where we meet the real Anzia. After all, like Benny the playwright described by his mother in "The Fat of the Land," an American born fiction writer who grew up with a native English vocabulary and American parents would never have written these stories. The desperation, yearning and hunger are Yeziarska's, even more than the details.

For example, in "The Miracle," Sara Reisel declares to her audience in the first sentence, "Like all people who have nothing, I lived on dreams." She then goes on to manipulate her parents into selling the only items of value they have, Shabbat candlesticks and the Saifer Torah, in order to buy her passage to America, the only place, she is convinced, where she can marry for love, and not be at the whim of the matchmaker:

"With nothing but my longing for love," says Sara Reisel, "I burned away stone walls till I got to America."

To a reading audience in 1920 love was a much more acceptable commodity for a woman to "burn away for" (not to mention emigrate and manipulate her parents for), than ambition, creative drive, or the desire to be something, all of which were the fodder for Yeziarska. But though the facts are tempered

to fit the times and the readers, the "burning" is what's important in propelling both the story and its narrator.

Ironically, the book Yeziarska calls her autobiography A Red Ribbon on a White Horse, written in 1950, with much of her career behind her, is much less true to Yeziarska's real life than many of her works of fiction, particularly, Bread Givers.

But in Red Ribbon on a White Horse, called "my story," we get another level of the Yeziarska persona, here in the form of consciously created autobiography with mature perspective. Just as her fiction often masks autobiography, here we have the autobiography that is conspicuously fictitious. More interesting though, is the idea that Yeziarska specifically wanted the character she writes of here to be herself as she's seen by her readers. Conspicuously missing is her time at Columbia (or any reference to it), her marriages (one lasted 24 hours), or her daughter (to whom she dedicates the book, oddly enough). Considered by many to be her best writing, the story uses very little idiomized Yiddish, and is told mostly in a straight forward and clear narrative style.

The book touches very briefly on her early struggles, but if there is any theme to Red Ribbon, it is the theme of how difficult success can be for someone who once had nothing, and how difficult it can be to come to terms with life for the person who has hungered for everything, the person with impossible expectations.

The tone here is wisened, more philosophical, and the form

is not Yeziarska's usual straightforward biblical-type narrative. Instead we hear about Yeziarska's life looking back, sometimes in flashbacks or in a kind of reflection on the past. The actual story tells mostly of Yeziarska's time in Hollywood, her years in the WPA writer's project, and a brief period afterwards, covering all together a span of about 15 years.

Where the story is lacking sometimes in facts, it is most fascinating in the way in which an aging Yeziarska, virtually unpublished for the past 18 years, brings up so many of the old conflicts of her fiction without the Yiddishized histrionics. Instead, we have a more mature narrator who has obviously reflected on the old issues, and is for the most part kinder, more self aware, and more willing to take the blame for her part in things.

For instance, John Dewey is back, this time in a flashback disguised as John Morrow, the high class boss who gave a young Yeziarska a chance after she's thrown out of the sweatshop for refusing to work overtime without pay.

In reality, after graduating from Columbia Yeziarska went to Dewey, then Dean of Teacher's College, when she couldn't find a teaching job. He fell in love with her spirit, and encouraged her to write, eventually hiring her to help him with a research project about a Polish community in Philadelphia. But the connection between "John Morrow" and John Dewey is most clear in the poetry which Morrow sends the fictionalized Anzia character. One poem she quotes of Morrow's in the book is taken almost straight from a collection of Dewey's poems. It is as

if she is almost playing with her readers with such a bold move, showing us in her autobiography that her characters are, in fact, fictionalized. But in the poem is the sentiment, and for Anzia the sentiment was what was most important--to her Dewey was the first and only man who loved her strength and accepted her as she was:

" 'Oh my dear.'" He shook his head. 'I've never fought for anything with the spirit that you have. I like the passion with which you live every moment. Everything that has ever happened to you is in your eyes.'" (Red Ribbon, page 109)

"I had found some one who saw me, knew me, reassured me that I existed (page 108)

But Yeziarska is kinder to the Dewey story here. Though we still feel Yeziarska's pain, we are allowed to be more understanding of the man's predicament than in previous stories. At moment^s in the description she actually lays some of the blame for the relationship's end on her own shoulders, and in her own confusion and inability to break with a past fraught with, among other things, religious guilt and intense fear of intimacy:

"The natural delight of his touch was checked by a wild alarm that stiffened me with fear...a dark river of distrust rose between us...sensing my unyielding body, he released me.

"Our walk home was an agony of confusion. Old fears bread into me before I was born, taboos older than my father's memory, conflicts between the things I had learned and those I could not forget held me rigid.

"At the door I was torn between asking him up to my room and the fear that if I gave myself to him I'd hate him." (page 113)

In the same way that Yeziarska appears here to have more perspective on her relationship with Dewey than she had in past writing, she also has more compassion for her father, and ^{is} more

accepting of the old world from which he comes. This is beautifully illustrated in a made-up story in the book about an old man, Reb Boruch Shlomo Mayer, who writes to Yeziarska the famous Hollywood screen writer asking her for enough money for his return to Poland. He calls America "Godless" and a worse "golut" than Poland. His letter, which calls on a variety of religious references, including an appeal for tzedakah, pulls Yeziarska back to the past she has been running from:

"...this old man's plea for a place to die had pulled me back to the dim past, to all those I had abandoned to become a writer. Like a runner who runs a race in a curved track and must get back to his starting point, the distance I had covered running away to live my life with pencil and paper had brought me back to where I had started." (page 94)

Yeziarska goes back to Hester Street in search of Reb Mayer, /3/ and Hester Street and its poor make her feel a simultaneous revulsion and love, (just as she feels both attraction and revulsion to for Reb Mayer, yet she went back to look for him anyway).

"Strange how one can love and hate at the same time. I loved and hated the noise, the dirt, and the foul air from which I had fled. In every bearded old Jew I passed on the street I saw my father--ghosts of the people I had abandoned to 'make myself a person in the world.' And now I look across the gulf, consumed with homesickness and longing for my own kind." (page 94)

There is more of a sense of resolution in this passage. Like it or not, Yeziarska is telling us, she lives in both the old world and the new, and she can't escape one for the other. But Reb Mayer has died, and viewing the squalor and dirt of his room, and the desperation of his landlady, Yeziarska gives the woman some money and leaves, admitting that the poverty

she sees around her is "a bag with a hole in it." From now on in the book she must search for community elsewhere, but she does it with a stronger sense of who she is. Unlike her fictional characters, Yeziarska is not running from Hester Street anymore, it is part of her.

This new awareness of her roots, however, also ends up being the source of an intense writer's block, for even success brings pain. Once she makes it big in Hollywood, the money, luxury and recognition she had yearned for throughout her life are still not enough to make her happy. Ironically, instead of inspiring her to go further, success makes Yeziarska impotent, and she becomes intensely blocked as a writer:

" When I had lived in dingy furnished rooms and pushcart clothes, I had dreamed of this beautiful room, this plain costly dress I wore. But now-after many years and much labor...I was struck dumb. I could buy everything I wanted except the driving force I once had to inspire my work." (page 120)

It is not the luxuries themselves that freeze Yeziarska's creativity, as she says, nor was it the poverty only that inspired her. What's really rendering her dumb is her conscience, is the guilt of looking over her shoulder and remembering the suffering of those she left behind.

Like Lot's wife, the Yeziarska persona looks back and, in terms of her creativity, turns to salt. Often in her prose, this looking back is represented in a literal trip back to Hester Street, as Hanneh Heinnah takes in "Fat of the Land," and as the Yeziarska persona takes in Red Ribbon (and probably took many times in actuality, as all of her sisters remained on the lower east side, even after Yeziarska made it big).

"Once you knew what poor people suffered it kept gnawing at you. You'd been there yourself. You wanted to reach out and help. But if you did, you were afraid you might be dragged back into the abyss." (pg 97, Red Ribbon on a White Horse)

Here guilt is equated so strongly with success that it's no mystery that Yeziarska found Hollywood, and material success, in direct conflict with creativity. Hers was the classic story of the writer who gains notoriety too quickly, and here Yeziarska puts all of her old fears boldly on the table for her readers to look at, a kind of apology for her long hiatus from print./4/

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As Yeziarska tackles crucial issues like the clash between old world and new, the difficulties of success, and the guilt she feels at the poverty of those she left behind, she also introduces a larger theme, the quest for community. She is not writing with the immediacy of people stuck in ghetto life, as she did in much of her fiction, and her voice is not constrained to the voice of the Lower East Side. It is clear she does not belong there as narrator any longer. But she also makes her feelings of estrangement in Hollywood clear. Hollywood was not a home for her either, she was too afraid it would turn her into a commercial writer. When the depression comes, an out of work Yeziarska is once again left asking "where do I belong?"

For a while, the WPA Writer's Project gives Yeziarska a sense of community and fellowship with other writers. But just as the fictionalized Reb Mayer character is used as a device to reveal Yeziarska's real feelings about her father, here another fictionalized character, Jeremiah Kunzler, shows up in the story to reveal Yeziarska's real feelings about the WPA and her adopted community. Kunzler is completely obsessed with a book he's writing about Spinoza, but upon his death Yeziarska, his only friend in the group, discovers that his briefcase is filled with trash. There never was a manuscript, and Kunzler was obviously insane:

"Like a sleepwalker I returned to my room, gathered all my notes, my boxes of manuscripts, and carried them down to mingle my wasted years with Jeremiah's." (page 197)

"The Writer's Project became more desolate after Jeremiah's

death. Every day it became harder to blind ourselves to the cold fact that we, like the privy builders and road-makers of other public projects, were being paid not for what we did, but to put money into circulation." (page 198)

Kunzler signifies Yeziarska's own disgust with her wasted writing years--both her writer's block, and the unproductive time on the WPA. Another WPA writer, a young Richard Wright, (perhaps the only famous person she ever names directly in any of her work), stands for the new young writer Yeziarska knows she will never be again:

"It was in his face, the look of a man driving straight toward what he wanted. I knew the double edged thrill of his triumph...he would know how to take success for what it was worth and not become rattled by it as I had been." (page 195)

After the WPA, Yeziarska tries another kind of community, running away to a small town in New Hampshire. At first she is awed by the strong sense of community and generosity in "Fair Oaks," but here both her Judaism, and her urban heritage, make this community just as impossible. In one very telling scene in which Yeziarska confides her sense of uneasiness in one of the residents, the woman's response illuminates one of Yeziarska's major character flaws:

"You expect too much," she laughed. "You go around looking for perfect understanding, don't you?"

Here Yeziarska herself is recognizing the impossibility of her own search. After all, her whole life she has made a career of writing about herself as the other, yet suddenly she wants to belong. As omniscient author she knows she can't have both, as character on a quest she must show how blindly she continues searching.

Though Yeziarska leaves "Fair Oaks," she walks away with a new sense of awareness, much as she did in walking away from Hester Street on her visit to Reb Mayer. Just as she realized she could never go back to that world, she is doubly aware that

she does not belong in this one:

"With a sudden sense of clarity I realized that the battle I thought I was waging against the world had been against myself, against the Jew in me. I remembered my job hunting, immigrant days. How often I had been tempted to hide my Jewishness--for a job! It was like cutting off part of myself..." (page 212)

This theme of her search for belonging, the plight of the wandering Jew, is a canvas on which Yeziarska can paint some of her most introspective pictures. The acknowledgment that what she is looking for is within herself, that what she is running from is "the Jew" in her, and that no group or geographical cure can give her self love--these are all major moments of epiphany that seem to pop effortlessly out of Yeziarska-the-character's mouth. In a typical trick of autobiographical perspective, she gives us the impression that these moments of self awareness are occurring as she experiences each scene, but these are the kind of realizations that can only come with time and distance.

As a reader, we must always keep in mind that 18 years passed between Yeziarska's last book of fiction and her autobiography. She is almost 70 as the narrator of Red Ribbon, and many of the characters she writes of were, in fact, created characters. But this does not detract from the wisdom of her perspective, the wisdom that created these fictionalized people.

This is particularly true of the one friend that the Yeziarska character manages to make in Fair Oaks, Mrs. Cobb. Part therapist, part sage, Mrs. Cobb gives Yeziarska one of the strongest insights in the book:

"There had been something haunting in Mrs. Cobb's face [as she said goodbye]. Something that made me feel I had known her for a long time. And now, on the train, it came to me where I had seen that look before. That expression at once serene and wise had been on my father's face.

"The likeness shocked me...the same purity and trustfulness was in their faces. (page 215)

"It was Mrs. Cobb who brought me back to him. She was like a still pool in whose depth I caught a glimpse of the self from which I had been fleeing. With new opened eyes I saw the poverty of spirit that had kept me barren until now, the fierce obsession with my will to lift my head up out of the squalor and anonymity of the poor." (page 216)

Was there a Mrs. Cobb or a Fair Oaks? Most likely not.

In her afterward to the collection of her mother's work, Louise Levitas Henriksen says that Red Ribbon, though labeled autobiographical, was "interlarded with invented characters and scenes." I would postulate that Fair Oaks was one of those invented places.

Instead, age and time did for Yeziarska what this invented place did for her persona in the book. It would be tough on the reader if she were to write "eighteen years past^{sed} and I felt a new sense of perspective when looking at my relationship with my father, and my other struggles," but by sending us out into the wilderness of New Hampshire, and then bringing us back to New York, Yeziarska creates the same effect as her own inner return to herself.

In a typically Rousseauian fashion, Yeziarska gives us the sense that she was once lost, but now has arrived. She can now claim all her character defects: her stubbornness, her fierce willfulness, the way she alienates those around her, the perfection she demands of everyone. It's all okay because as autobiographer she has passed through it all, her defects are

now behind her:

"The power that makes grass grow, fruit ripen, and guides the birds in its flight is in us all. At any moment when man becomes aware of that inner power, he can rise above the accidents of fortune that rule his outward life, creating and recreating himself out of his defeats."

Yesterday I was a bungler and an idiot, a blind destroyer of myself, reaching for I knew not what and only pushing it from me in ignorance. Today the knowledge of a thousand failures cannot keep me from this light born of my darkness, here, now."

Did Yeziarska really go through this kind of spiritual transformation, where suddenly her faults were illuminated, and a new spiritual power filled her with the ability to go on? Maybe, but according to her daughter, Louise Levitas Henriksen, Yeziarska remained as egotistical, willful and driven as her fictionalized characters until the very end. Still, something must have changed in her to allow her to publish this book after 18 years of no significant publications. And something must have changed to allow her to walk away from her stylized Yiddish-English voice and present herself, vulnerabilities, faults and all, in her true voice, to the completely different audience of 1950. The key word here, I believe, is "re-create." Just as Yeziarska created herself once, in the 1920's, going back and tracing her steps as an illiterate immigrant for thousands of readers, here she has again re-created herself. It is no longer 1920, and she is no longer so connected to those other personas. She can not be the melodramatic Sonya of Salome of the Tenements, or the angry Sara of Breadgivers. Instead she has created another older, wiser self, the self she would most likely like to be. Like those other selves speaking from the ghetto (though the author was far away from it), this

autobiographical self is off in a wise and spiritual place, somewhere above it all. Yet Yeziarska, as she wrote, was living in a single room on 113th street, still struggling in many ways with her inner conflicts. /4 /

What Yeziarska is writing about is not a sweeping change in her personality as much as a sweeping change in her writing life. For years she wrote about conflict and the clashing of opposites: hope and hopelessness; belonging and estrangement, grandiosity and self loathing; success and the loss of success; love and rejection. Rarely did an ending in her stories give any sense of resolution. Finally, in the guise of autobiography, Yeziarska gives us a new theme. No longer is she just exploring the intricacies of inner-conflict. For the first time in any of her work, we finally see hints of a quest for inner peace, the kind of peace that can only be reached after so many of life's struggles have been waged:

"A warm wave of happiness welled up in me. Often before I had tried to be happy, but this happiness now came unbidden, unwilled, as though all the hells I had been through had opened a secret door. Why had I no premonition in the wandering years when I was hungry and thirsting for recognition, that this quiet joy, this sanctuary was waiting for me after I had sunk back to anonymity?" (page 220)

End notes:

1/ Yezierska emerged from a Sunday supplement a celebrity in 1923, after a movie studio publicity department fed the magazines splashy features about her overnight rise from the sweatshops to Hollywood (with no mention of College). "Whether or not she encouraged such exaggeration," says her daughter in the afterwards to The Open Cage, she was able to use it to her advantage.

2/ Louis Levitas Henriksen, Yezierska's daughter, admits to feeling slighted as a child that her mother was a writer, though she says the two were very close: "often as a child, competing with the paramount compulsion of mother's life, and naturally comparing her with "normal" mother's, I had reason to regret that she was first of all a writer." (page 1, afterward to The Open Cage). Regardless of her objectivity as a scholar, Henriksen's comments on Yezierska in both her book and essays are bound to be affected by the nature of such conflicts. Still, she is the most accurate source on the discrepancies between what Yezierska said in her books, and what was real.

3/ "Hatie Mayer" was the name first used by Anzia Yezierska when she came to America (taken from her brother's first name, Meyer). The connection between her father and Reb Mayer could not be clearer, yet as she does with John Dewey and John Morrow,

she feels a need to keep Mayer as a separate named persona.

4/ Describing her mother while she worked on Red Ribbon, Louise Levitas Henriksen said of Yeziarska: "Although sometimes humbled and remorseful, set back by the stomach disorders that came with constant emotional tension, as well as the failure to sell her work, she remained the same vigorous egotist fiercely centered on herself and her own sufferings." (page 284 Anzia Yeziarska). This is hardly the description Yeziarska paints of herself in her autobiography of a serene, spiritual soul resigned to anonymity.

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