Writing Mothers, Writing Daughters

Tracing the Maternal in Stories by American Jewish Women

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Translating Immigrant Women: Writing the Manifold Self

We are translations into different dialects of a text still being written in the original.
—Adrienne Rich, "Sibling Mysteries"

From where we are, in the last decade of the twentieth century, the Jewish women who came to America from Europe look like heroic beginners. Founders of our families, the matrix that nurtured our mothers and/or grandmothers, to us they seem pioneers: intrepid adventurers who move always forward, setting in motion the long process that produced us. From a less self-centered point of view, however, these women who began Jewish life in America were also part of a much longer process. Caught in a moment of radical change, they were also shaped by ancient influences that resisted change. Thus, they lived at the confluence of powerful forces that moved in different directions. Out of the tensions created by their situation as immigrants, as Jews, and as women, they fashioned a distinctive—if not always heroic—sense of self. Their daughters' stories not only translate that achievement but also record its effects upon their own efforts to become Americans.

Bearing featherbeds and samovars from Eastern Europe to make homelike the new world, Jewish women also brought to America an assortment of disparate self-images.[1] These working-class immigrants differed from one another in countless ways, but as Jews they had all seen themselves reflected in the prejudices of gentile Europe.[2] By reflection in the teachings of traditional Judaism, moreover, they knew themselves as women to be secondary creatures. Within their own communities they

were excluded from authority in communal and religious life and denied the education enjoyed by their brothers, fathers, and husbands (Baum, Hyman, and Michel 3–16; Glenn 8; Weinberg 6, 9, 14). Thus, they were accustomed in Europe to subordinate status as both Jews and females. However, they were also responsible for the sustenance of their families. Husbands and older children might help to earn the bread and maintain the "fundamental religious rituals of private life"[3] but, in a world where most Jews were poor and politically impotent, women's work at home and in the marketplace was acknowledged as an "essential component of physical and cultural survival"—even though women themselves "were considered inferior to men" (Glenn 8). Such discordances between their actual accomplishments and their subordinate cultural status probably toughened (when it did not erode) their confidence in their own skills, strengths, and wisdoms.[4] Acquainted with what Patricia Waugh has called "the provisionality and positionality of identity" (13), they stabilized their sense of self by doing, working, giving, caring for others.[5]

In America, their work remained essential to the survival of their families, but their lives changed. As Jews began to "conform to modern, not traditional, understandings about women's roles" (Glenn 77), married women withdrew from the marketplace into the home. Unfamiliar with the new language, they were insecure in streets beyond the neighborhood. They were also barred by the proprietary sexual protectiveness of their husbands from work in factories and shops—marketplaces of the new world that accelerated their children's and husbands' cultural adaptation. Shut away in urban tenements, married women are said to have measured their housework by higher standards and performed even more complex domestic tasks in America than they had known in Europe (Glenn 71).[6] Like their neighbors, they worked at these tasks alone, having left in Europe the relatives who might have helped with housework and child care.[7] Thus, the scope and status of the Jewish mother, whose economic and domestic prowess had been widely acknowledged in Europe, whose work had given her "some family authority, a knowledge of the marketplace, and a certain worldliness" (Glenn 14), were often diminished rather than enlarged by her emigration to America.[8]

In America, immigrant daughters entered an even wider world than the European one in which their mothers had labored. As an unmarried Jewish woman's economic responsibilities and social opportunities expanded, she benefited from the tradition of women's work in Eastern Europe that had empowered and validated her mother. Because her sexuality escaped ritual notice, she was also freer than her mother had been to work for and with men (Glenn 81). Politically and socially sophisticated by work in the factories and shops of the American marketplace, some Jewish daughters transformed themselves into union organizers; others found ways to become teachers. But the malaise of the newly sequestered mother and the disjunctions between the lives of mother and daughter troubled the Jewish immigrant daughter and complicated her development.

These developmental complexities are often submerged in historical accounts of immigrant women that necessarily concentrate on achievements rather than the subjective issues that inspire or accompany achievement. They are muted also in many oral histories, which implicitly encourage inexperienced informants toward versions of their experience that suit the scholarly agendas and listening skills of their interviewers.[9] Then too, memory often obscures difficulties unresolved by time—or delivers them transformed by resignation. But the stories of several Jewish immigrant daughters surface the complex issues they confronted as they turned themselves into American women.

Mary Antin, Anzia Yezierska, Emma Goldman, and Kate Simon are prominent among writers whose stories probe these complexities. Their stories set forth the needs of young protagonists in terms quite consistent with historical accounts: to meet both their own and their families' expectations, unmarried fictional protagonists and autobiographical personae need to become active subjects in a public world where their mothers once flourished but from which they have virtually withdrawn. To accomplish that task, immigrant daughters in fiction and memoir accommodate themselves to the changes in their mothers' lives and to the increasing disparity between their mothers' experience and their own. Without maternal models of even limited "worldliness," moreover, some daughters in these stories require—more than ever—fathers who can be for them what psychoanalysts believe fathers have always been: their "way into the world" (Benjamin, "Alienation" 122).[10] Like the disparate self-images that toughened their mothers' confidence, the tension between such needs and their uncertain gratifications tempers, where it does not subdue, the strength and self-awareness of immigrant daughters in stories by these writers.

The first fruits of that tension are the stories themselves, which translate into the language of America the experience of women born in Europe. Immigrant daughters knew the fascination of the story from the

novels they read to their mothers and from the tales their mothers told of their own pasts, of the neighborhood, or of people who wrote letters to the Yiddish newspaper. Unlike the Jewish women who continued to write in Yiddish after they came to America,[11] these writers tried to tell for the first time, in a new language, stories of mothers that carried the European past into the American present and stories of Jewish girls who became women as they became Americans. In these stories, one can see the tensions that strained relations between mothers and daughters, as well as the differing strategies of connection and differentiation that continued to bind them to one another. One sees also the emergence into awareness through storytelling of an American Jewish woman who knew several disparate versions of herself. This sense of a manifold self—and the power to formulate it in stories—may have been the immigrant mother's most distinctive legacy to her American daughter.

The work of translation that these writers perform by writing in English was familiar to East European Jews who had always needed several languages to manage their everyday lives. Translating an exchange with peasants in Russian into an anecdote in Yiddish, for example, acknowledged the simultaneous existence of two modes or versions of experience. One version did not become or replace the other. Consistent with the Freudian assumption that dream images translated psychic messages, or that the "talking cure" translated affects into words (Hunter 111), the work of translation always implied that the original was alive and well. Moreover, Jewish women were often accomplished literary translators whose work, according to Naomi Shepherd, played a very important part in the diffusion of Marxist culture in Eastern Europe (124). Thus, the choice of English may raise many questions about the relationship of these American Jewish women writers to both their Yiddish-speaking families and their own ethnic identities. But that choice need not suggest that these writers either converted away from or rejected the experiential "text" that inspired their translations.[12]

Indeed, the translator's attentiveness to her original may testify to its enduring vitality even though, like the work of writing itself, translation also attenuates the bond between the original and its transcriber. As she concentrates—to hear more clearly the meaning of an event in her family, for example—and as she searches for language appropriate to its retelling, this effort differentiates her family, as object, from her self as subject. The work thus distances the writer from her "original" but also affirms the power and endurance of the bond between them. Perhaps

more vividly and more self-consciously than is common for native-born writers, the immigrant writer who is also translator experiences both attachment to and alienation from her subject.

No single story represents more clearly than Mary Antin's *Promised Land* (1912) this tension between attachment and alienation in the immigrant writer/translator's work. Indeed, in Antin's memoir, negotiating that tension becomes an analogue for her own development as an immigrant daughter. If, as one critic has suggested, Ludwig Lewisohn's autobiographical persona is "born" out of the opposing versions of himself that his memoir enunciates (Sollors 198), Antin's persona is created by the disjunctions and connections her memoir manages to embody. Her story presents duality as the developmental puzzle that her persona must solve as she becomes both an American and a woman.

From the memoir's two beginnings, dichotomy constructs this narrative, offering divided images of both self and world. First, the autobiographer divides her adult self from her childhood self: "I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell," she insists (xix). Then, almost immediately, the child/"person" speaks, denying the autobiographer's detachment by connecting the adult's creation of a divided self to the child's perception of a world "divided into two parts": the shtetl and everything beyond it. In some ways, the child's vision both reinforces and interprets the adult's. What the child first saw in the world, the adult still feels in herself. That sense of duality in experience will develop as the narrator records other disjunctions she perceived as a child: between mother and father (xix), Jews and gentiles (5, 17), men and women (33–37), reality and imagination (132).

Antin—the adult persona created by this narrative—is always *both* the adult who distinguishes herself as subject and the child she has objectified as "the person." While the narrator denies this child's subjectivity, the story itself immediately confirms it. Antin's representation of the uneasy, unstable connection between these two personae reproduces inadvertently one facet of a developmental process that, in D. W. Winnicott's theory, validates an individual's sense of her own subjective authenticity (Benjamin, *Bonds* 37). According to Jessica Benjamin, Winnicott calls this process "recognition" and believes that subjective self-realization depends upon one's ability to both recognize and be recognized by an "other" who is experienced as entirely beyond the control of the self: an "entity in its own right." Moreover, the "other" has to survive as an independent entity one's attempts to "destroy" or negate it—by trying to

control it. In its earliest form, a mother and her nursing infant demonstrate this process most clearly. As the child nurses, its gaze recognizes the mother as subject. When the child looks away, a mother who is not an independent entity may withdraw or seek to attract the child's attention back to herself. Either way, she acknowledges her inability to survive as a subject without her child's recognition. Thus, she subverts the child's awareness of her as an "entity in [her] own right," for her subjective status can be "destroyed" by the child who controls her attention. Similarly, the child's sense of herself as subject depends upon her mother's recognition and her own capacity to survive her mother's distractions (Benjamin, *Bonds* 24–27).

In Benjamin's and Winnicott's view, the sense of oneself as a subject depends upon a process that originates in a child's earliest experience with its parent and that is repeated in every phase of development. By alternately denying, attempting to subvert, and experiencing the independent reality of other subjects, Winnicott's individual discovers again and again, in each new phase of her life, that she is neither solitary nor omnipotent—but companioned in the world by others both like and unlike herself.

This early drama is replicated in the shifting mode of relationship that Antin's memoir creates between her child and her adult personae. As Antin's child tells her story, the adult narrator clarifies and confirms her own sense of self by identifying likeness or difference between them. The adult heightens awareness of difference by "destroying" the child as subject: objectifying, evaluating, judging, criticizing her. But her text also sustains the child's subjective authority and demonstrates likeness between them. The unstable yet undeniable mode of connection this memoir creates between these divided personae thus becomes a metaphor for the self-creating American Jewish woman who was once a Russian immigrant child. The memoir embodies the narrator's validation of two editions of herself: the Russian original and the American translation.

In this narrator's efforts to differentiate herself from the child she was, readers often perceive the displacement of an immigrant by an American self-image. But the memoir suggests that differences are no more important to Antin than similarities. Among the likenesses that connect these two personae perhaps the most significant is their identical response to the massive dissonances produced by their experiences of poverty, of prejudice, and of dislocation. Both personae become writers/translators partly in response to the disintegrative power of those experiences.

For both, writing/translating serves the survival of the self. By the time she is ten years old, Antin masters potentially disintegrative anxiety by translating feelings into words. When government agents invade her fatherless, impoverished home, she retires to a "quiet corner" to "grapple" with the "oppressive fear" that threatens to overwhelm her: "I was not given to weeping," she writes, "but I must think things out in words" (147). She has already learned the power of words to overcome separation. Her letters to her father in America and the ones she writes later from America to her uncle in Europe not only bind absent people in far places to one another but also join past to present. The letters find their way into this narrative where—in translation—they draw the impressions of the child into the narrative of the adult.

The double vision of self so pronounced in the adult narrator is apparent also in the child/writer, who uses metaphor self-consciously to connect subjective to objective perceptions of herself. On the journey across Europe the child sees herself from two perspectives: subjectively, she is one of a group of bewildered emigrants, terrified by treatment they cannot understand. Objectively, she and other emigrants appear "like dumb animals, helpless and unresisting" (175), "a flock of giant fowls roosting, only wide awake" (176), or "a picture of woe, and yet so funny" (177). These images catch the double vision of the immigrant whose journey constructs her as "other" even to herself.

One reader identifies Antin's "distance from her old self" with her "rebirth" as an American (Sollors 32). But division within this narrator's self-image appeared long before her American experience began.[13] As a Jew in a non-Jewish culture, as a female in a patriarchal religious tradition, and as an immigrant among people who are at home in the world, this child knew very early what Elaine Showalter called the dual languages and paradigms of both the "muted" group to which she belonged and the "dominant" groups within which she had to function ("Feminist" 261–62). Her writing is itself a strategy of negotiation between such groups: of adaptation by translation.

In the memoir, adaptation is always in process, for the text contains without resolving the tensions created by such dualities. The most sustained source of tension for this immigrant daughter, for example, is created by the ethnic and gendered dichotomies that shaped her parents. Antin's father and mother can and do sustain her work of self-creation. But they cannot give the recognition she needs to take her place as a subject outside the text, in the world. Benjamin believes one becomes

such a subject by identifying with parents who are subjects in their own lives and who can recognize one as a subject like themselves. But both ethnicity and gender prevent Antin's immigrant parents from fulfilling these requirements.

As a student, Antin identifies most explicitly with her father, whose male privilege entitled him to the education her mother longed for, but was denied. Her father's intellectuality, stimulated but not satisfied by Jewish learning, makes him restless within the shtetl and ultimately drives him to America. Here, as in Europe, his economic skills are weaker than her mother's. But his daughter models herself on him nonetheless. Like him, she would be an intellectual, a writer, a teacher, a doubter of conventional pieties, an adaptor to modernity, and an unquestioning believer in the virtues of learning. H· affirms these shared characteristics in his daughter. By his unwavering support, he recognizes Antin as a being like himself. His recognition confirms her as an active subject in the world. Indeed, as she reckons his deprivations and failures beside the successes he empowered her to achieve, she recognizes herself as an instrument of his ultimate achievement. Through her, she believes, he "took possession of America" (203–5).

Recognition of this sort between shtetl father and American daughter is rare in stories by immigrant Jewish women. Its value to this daughter is augmented by her mother's generous encouragement and worldly status as breadwinner. The strength, competence, and resourcefulness of Antin's mother make her in her daughter's eyes a worker in the world rather than a domestic nurturer. In good times and bad, she runs the businesses that liberate this daughter from economic responsibility. In her work, moreover, she thrives—learning English rapidly and making herself at home in the American store (196) as she was in the European marketplace. Unlike her, Antin never excels at women's work; indeed, from her earliest years she is alienated by it. She knows the heaviness of women's burdens (311) and the emptiness and narrowness of women's lives (95–96). But she also knows that her escape from this treadmill is made possible only by the work of her mother and elder sister. Unlike them, she will neither sew nor cook nor clerk in a store. But from their unfailing and unselfish support she draws the strength to carry out her own and her father's agendas.

Mother and sister thus help Antin to become her father's active, intellectual daughter. But the traditional self-subordination of even this powerful and generous mother limits her ability to validate her daughter as subject of her own life. From her mother, Antin inherits not only the image of woman as worker in the world but also—less advantageously—the image of woman as secondary creature, whose power as a subject is traditionally limited by her subordinate status. This mother's story makes her subordination very clear. After defying unsuccessfully the parents who would rather marry than educate her, Antin's mother not only submits but also clings for the rest of her life, respectfully and obediently, to powerful conventions and prejudices. When her child is abused in Europe by a peasant boy, this mother teaches resignation: "The Gentiles do as they like with us Jews" (5). Because the mother is "one of those women who always obey the highest law they know, even though it leads them to their doom" (64), in America Antin's mother follows her husband's orders, painfully divesting herself of the "mantle of Orthodox observance . . . that . . . was interwoven with the fabric of her soul" (247). Seeing her pain, Antin praises her mother's "native adaptability, the readiness to fall into line, which is one of the most charming traits of her gentle, self-effacing nature" (246). The narrator does not acknowledge such "charming traits" in herself. But they affect her sense of her own subjective authority.

In Benjamin's words, "only a mother who feels entitled to be a person in her own right can ever be seen as such by her child, and only such a mother can appreciate and set limits to the inevitable aggression and anxiety that accompany a child's growing independence. Only someone who fully achieves subjectivity can survive destruction and permit full differentiation" (*Bonds* 82). Despite her physical strength, her economic prowess, and her resourcefulness in her husband's absence, Antin's mother only partially achieves subjectivity in this memoir, for her daughter records the obedience exacted of this mother by parents and husband, as well as her submissive acquiescence to the assaults of non-Jews. Thus limited by gender and ethnicity, Antin's mother transmits to her daughter her own limitations.

Antin rejects them, in part, by identifying with her father. In her defiant assertions of equality with George Washington, her embarrassingly self-celebratory claims to success as a student, and her insistent refusal of "woman's work" that might liken her to her mother, one also hears echoes of that rejection. But her defiance betrays the insecurity that makes defiance necessary. Like both parents who subordinated themselves to the will of the gentiles, she is a Jew (18). Like her mother, moreover, whose story recalls defiance but whose behavior models obe-

dience, Antin becomes obedient to a fault to the non-Jewish authorities who dominate the world she seeks to enter.

Of course, this habit of obedience complicates her sense of herself as an active subject, for it undermines her self-esteem. As she idealizes and exaggerates her gratitude toward those subjects who command her obedience and upon whom she depends (cf. Sollors 45), she becomes, according to Benjamin, like a child who "idealizes the father because the father is the magical mirror that reflects the self as it wants to be." Indeed, such idealization "can become the basis for adult ideal love, the submission to a powerful other who seemingly embodies the agency and desire one lacks in oneself" (*Bonds* 100). But the one who loves in this way also harbors anger toward those to whom she submits. Anxious about her own unacknowledged and dangerous hostility toward subjects who command her obedience, she then defends them against herself, enlarging their virtues and magnifying her gratitude toward them. As Benjamin reminds us, Freud believed that "obedience . . . does not exorcise aggression; it merely directs it against the self. There it becomes a means of self-domination, infusing the voice of conscience with the hostility that cannot be aimed at the 'unattackable authority'" (*Bonds* 5). Thus, as Antin yields, always gratefully, to the power of various mentors in this memoir, she acknowledges them—but not herself—as subjects.

Beneath the surface of this American success story, an undercurrent of insecurity persists. Antin fulfills her intellectual father's ambitions but remains her subordinate mother's daughter. Embodying not only her achievements but also the unresolved tensions of her own development, Antin's memoir becomes an eloquent translation into English of the gendered and ethnic strengths and restraints carried by one immigrant daughter from Europe to America. The narrative strategies and complexities of her story carry into the public world the manifold persona of an American Jewish woman writer who remains, in her complexity, very like her European mother.

Anzia Yezierska lived and wrote much closer than Mary Antin to the emotional turbulence of self-creation. In her changes of direction one discerns the uncertainties that often divided her against herself and frustrated her development as both a woman and a writer. Marrying twice but unwilling to live with either husband, bearing a daughter whom she could not raise by herself but to whom she was devoted, forging and reforging fictional versions of her own story whose imperfect untangling kept her at work for nearly a decade on her own autobiography, and creating a series of narrator/protagonists whose relationship to their creator defies clarification (Schoen 15; Sullivan 60), Yezierska's life and work, like cloudy mirrors, reflect the uncertainty of her sense of herself as a subject. But they also reflect her powerful drive to satisfy her need for recognition. If, as Thomas Ferraro persuasively argues, Yezierska's *Bread Givers* chronicles the reinscription of traditional Jewish patriarchy in ethnic American middle-class culture (76), then the novel identifies the daughter's attempt to be "recognized" by a powerful male figure as the motive force behind that dynamic—and as an imitation of her mother.

Both parents shaped the quest for recognition that dominates Yezierska's life and work. Although many readers have identified hunger as the crucial issue in Yezierska's stories (e.g., Duncan, "Hungry" 231–41), her protagonists—like Yezierska herself—are driven by longing not for food or money but for the regard of powerful subjects. The intensity of that longing owes much to the relationship between the traditional Jewish patriarch and his immigrant daughter.[14] Yezierska's novel, *Bread Givers* (1925), portrays the gendered imbalance of subjective authority that seemed to her to characterize such relationships. In this work the father, Reb Smolinsky, knows that

> the prayers of his daughters didn't count because God didn't listen to women. Heaven and the next world were only for men. Women could get into Heaven because they were wives and daughters of men. Women had no brains for the study of God's Torah, but they could be the servants of men who studied the Torah. Only if they cooked for the men, and washed for the men, and didn't nag or curse the men out of their homes; only if they let the men study the Torah in peace, then, maybe, they could push themselves into Heaven with the men, to wait on them there. (9–10)

Spiritually dependent, traditional women had to serve the patriarch who could study and speak for them before God, who could embody what Benjamin calls the agency and desire that women lack. Yezierska's Reb Smolinsky thus commands obedience and enjoys the fruits of his daughters' labor until husbands replace him in their lives.[15]

The father is also moral arbiter and judge. Economically incompetent, he demonstrates powerfully by his devotion to study and his control of his daughters' wages a value system in which money serves chiefly to foster intellect. In this respect, this traditional father inspires his young-

est daughter, who has always hated him, to imitate him and to seek his recognition. Against his will, Sara struggles to set her own feet upon his path—to follow his way into the world. But after leaving home to go to school, and after rejecting a suitor too materialistic to value her commitment to study, she longs for her father's validation of her as a being like himself: "A sudden longing to see my father came over me. I felt that my refusal to marry Max Goldstein was something he could understand. He had given up worldly success to drink the wisdom of the Torah. He would tell me that, after all, I was the only daughter of his faith. I had lived the old, old story which he had drilled into our childhood ears—the story of Jacob and Esau. I had it from Father, this ingrained something in me that would not let me take the mess of pottage" (202). Like a child seeking the confirmation of its mother's recognition as it takes its first independent steps away from her, Sara is drawn to her father "in my great spiritual need, *as a person is drawn to a person*" (202, my emphasis). Having demonstrated her ability to exist as a subject beyond her father's control, she needs him to recognize her as a subject like himself.

But in this novel—as often in works by Jewish immigrant daughters—the father withholds what he has primary power to give: moral and intellectual validation of his daughter's effort to become, like him, a powerful, authoritative subject. He comes to her door to disown, not to recognize her. To him, she is neither student nor writer, but woman: "A woman's highest happiness is to be a man's wife, the mother of a man's children. You're not a person at all," he scolds (206). This daughter knows herself to be her father's child and thus a subject in the world beyond the family, but that knowledge is not secure until her father confirms it.

The situation of this protagonist parallels in some ways Yezierska's own family situation and helps to explain the radical insecurities that made her, in her daughter's words, "an explosion to everyone" (quoted in Kessler-Harris xii). She was, of course, seriously handicapped by poverty and by unfamiliarity with the language and customs of America. But beside the hindrances of class and culture, her insecurities reflect the developmental dilemma of a woman whose studious rabbinical father never affirmed, or encouraged, or supported her desire to study: never recognized her as a subject like himself.[16]

Yezierska's response to this dilemma constitutes the distinctive drama of both her life and her work. The key to that response, her stories suggest, is furnished not by the father but by the mother, who transmits the

habit of idealizing love. Beyond the habitual deference to the patriarch that was common in traditional Jewish homes (but cf. Weinberg 16), the mother in *Bread Givers* teases, blames, and complains about her husband; she even occasionally subverts his authority. But—most memorably for her daughters—she adores him as what Benjamin calls "an other who is what she cannot be" (*Bonds* 86). When he tells stories, "Mother licked up Father's every little word, like honey" (12). When he touches his wife kindly, her daughter notes, "Mother's sad face turned into smiles" (11). Even when she is dying, "the touch of his hand was like magic. Her whole face softened. A beautiful look came into her eyes as she gazed at Father, undying worship in her face" (248). By idealizing in this way the husband who has lost her patrimony, doomed the family to poverty, and wasted the lives of three daughters, this mother acknowledges him as a powerful subject and demonstrates to her daughters her own inability to achieve such status for herself. She requires his touch, his glance, his voice to bring her to life.

From her mother, therefore, Sara Smolinsky learns the habit of idealizing the "other who is what she cannot be" and whose recognition enables her to realize herself. This daughter's achievements will feel empty to her until her father recognizes them. Other protagonists demonstrate again and again this fateful tendency toward idealizing love that confirms their need of recognition as subjects by powerful—usually male—"others." But these other men are not generally Orthodox Jewish patriarchs like Reb Smolinsky, for Yezierska suspected that the culture he represents could not satisfy his daughter's need.[17] Instead, Yezierska's protagonists—like Yezierska herself—seek validation by male surrogates who are not handicapped in America by Orthodoxy or immigrant poverty but possess the traditional patriarch's power to recognize immigrant daughters and to help them become active subjects in the new world.[18]

Yezierska's brief but intense relationship with the educator John Dewey furnishes the prototypical love affair in which a whole series of her protagonists enjoy, momentarily, the recognition that transforms and confirms them as subjects in their own lives. Sometimes the transformation has spiritual overtones. More often, the effect of the idealized male gaze upon the woman who lives only to be seen by him is psychological. Fanya's mentor/lover in Yezierska's novel *All I Could Never Be* (1932) exemplifies this effect: "'You desire to be. You are: but you do not yet fully know that you are. And perhaps I can have the happiness of help-

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ing you realize that you are and what you are'" (208–9). An earlier protagonist, Sonya in *Salome of the Tenements* (1932), knows the "fire of worship" is "roused" in her by her mentor/lover's "unconscious air of superiority" (7). "It's my worship for him that lifts me out of myself!" she cries (25). As Yezierska herself was urged into becoming a writer by Dewey's recognition of her talent, Sonya is fired by her lover's regard to create of her shabby self a stylish, silken creature capable of winning and holding a Protestant American millionaire. In her later memoir, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950), Yezierska clarifies the source of the father/mentor/lover's power to transform a woman by his gaze into her better self: when she meets the figure called in this work John Morrow, she says, "I had found some one who saw me, knew me, reassured me that I existed" (108). Although several of her protagonists suspect that their inability to become and to sustain themselves as subjects is related to their cultural alienation from family and ghetto, these protagonists—like Yezierska herself, one suspects—actually seek throughout their lives confirmation of themselves as subjects in the regard of powerful men.

In the background of these endless quests in Yezierska's work for recognition by an idealized male figure lies the felt loss of something beautiful and precious that once belonged to the protagonists' mothers in an earlier phase and mode of being. Sara Smolinsky's mother, for example, recalls a particular hand-crocheted tablecloth with "all the colours of the rainbow" in it; "there was a feeling in my tablecloth—" she says, as she mourns its loss (32–33). Similarly, the protagonist of Yezierska's memoir mourns the loss of her mother's wonderful flowered shawl that "had been her Sabbath, her holiday" (*Red Ribbon* 26). Without these lost remnants of an earlier time that carry echoes of the mother's story into the daughter's life, the world feels ugly and empty for Yezierska's protagonists. Likewise, Antin's "mother," whose girlhood is also symbolic of beautiful promises and lost romance and whose efforts to sustain her family in Europe are as heroic as Mrs. Smolinky's in *Bread Givers*, recedes into the background of the memoir after she brings her children to their father in America. These mothers exist now only to sustain others, but their own brief stories speak of early promise, agency, and desire. Thus, they model the womanly energy, strength, and generosity that will empower their daughters. But as they defer to their husbands, obeying their orders and seeking their confirmation of their value, mothers transmit also the sense of subjective impairment and the compensatory habit of idealizing love.

The mothers' lives, moreover, offer no current image of work in the world as a source of the recognition the daughters seek. Many of Yezierska's protagonists are fervent workers, but the value of their work is always entangled with their need for its recognition by the loved one. An early protagonist, Sonya/Salome, briefly sees her work as sufficient to this need. But the later protagonist of Yezierska's memoir is more typical, for she knows that success as a writer will satisfy her only when her former mentor recognizes and responds to it. As she waits for the train that will take her to fame in Hollywood, "every man I saw seemed John Morrow coming to see me off. . . . He must know *Hungry Hearts* was written for him" (*Red Ribbon* 34). Like Yezierska herself, who was both personally and professionally confirmed by Dewey's regard for her attractiveness and her talent, her protagonists' pleasure in their work when their idealized lovers are gone always feels incomplete.

Thus they become, like Antin, both proud achievers and dependent, clinging lovers of powerful men. Threatened by what W. H. Auden in his preface to Yezierska's memoir called "the abyss of nonentity" (*Red Ribbon* 16), her protagonists whip back and forth between the poles of excessive humility (Henriksen 269) and gratitude toward privileged benefactors on the one hand (cf. Dearborn, *Love* 108) and outraged rebellion against powerful philanthropists, social scientists, and filmmakers on the other. As familiar with self-assertiveness as they are with obedience, these protagonists—like the writers who created them—replicate the disparate modes of self modeled by Jewish immigrant mothers. Ironically, the replication of the mother's life that both Antin and Yezierska's Sara seek to avoid, becomes, by translation into narrative, an imitation of her way of being herself.

That irony is deepened in the writings of Emma Goldman, who knew—like Antin and Yezierska—the family imbalance that diminished the mother and enlarged the patriarchal father. Like many other immigrant daughters, however, Goldman was also keenly sensitive to the social conditions that surrounded and intensified the family dynamic. Memoirs, oral histories, and autobiographies provide plentiful evidence of those conditions, clarifying from a social perspective the desire of daughters to avoid living their mothers' lives.

Well-acquainted with loss, for example, many immigrant Jewish mothers knew first the departure of their husbands and children for America (Hasanovitz 10–12, 194) and later their own separation from families left in Europe (R. Cohen 149). They knew the sudden or gradual erosion of

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and read by their daughters, and in the inadvertent dramas of their neighbors, Jewish mothers attended to the stories of men and women rather than to the politics of the shop, the rules of rabbis, or the ordinances of God. Thus, beside the political utterances that moved multitudes to change the world, the familiar, homely, maternal mode of the story became central to the literature of American Jewish women writers. In the process, they translated the disparate, manifold selves of European mothers and American daughters into the vernacular of the new world.

Notes

1. Hyman observes that "East European Jewish culture offered women contradictory messages" ("Gender" 227). These are Ashkenazi from Eastern Europe, not Sephardi Jews from Spain or the Orient.

2. Thus, as Glenn argues, they knew they weren't going home again (64). But Hyman cautions, "It is as rash to generalize" about them "as about immigrant men" ("Culture" 157).

3. Weinberg writes, "Although the great majority of men worked, helping to earn a livelihood was frequently considered a woman's job and an extension of her work in the home. This meant that working for money was not a source of shame for Jewish women as it would be among cultures where a man's status depended upon his ability to support his family. Throughout most of preindustrial Europe, non-Jewish women also shared this burden with their husbands, but only among the Jews of Eastern Europe was it accepted practice that some women would provide the sole means of support" (6).

4. Other, potentially toughening, discordances include the cultural image of the Jewish woman as both "inherently close to the physical, material world" and "endowed with an exceptional capacity for moral persuasion" (Baum et al. 12).

5. Echoing Weinberg's informants, who talk about their lives in terms of what they did instead of what they had or were (252–53), Barbara Myerhoff described the elderly Jewish women she studied as communicating "a quiet conviction and satisfaction with themselves, perhaps because they did what had to be done, did it as well as it could be done, and knew that without what they did there would be nothing and no one" (quoted in Weinberg 257).

6. It is hard, however, to imagine a more complex domestic task than the washing, bleaching, starching, and ironing of the family laundry described by Rose Pesotta in her memoir, *Days of Our Lives* (154–56), a process that

began at the local river, progressed to a hollow tree trunk filled—pail by pail—with cleaned ashes from the kitchen fire and boiling water, and ended in the muddy yard where a stray animal, rubbing itself against the drying clothes, might render the entire process futile.

7. But see Hyman on the functions of "female friendship groups" and the use of the "neighborhood and the public spaces of markets, shops, and stoops" as the locus of immigrant women's "communal Jewish identity and of their political activism" ("Culture" 164).

8. When daughters of these women speak to contemporary interviewers, they often stress the hardships and deprivations of their mothers' lives (Weinberg 36, 38, 45, 74). More important, perhaps, is Weinberg's comment that "mothers could not provide role models for their teenage daughters on the Lower East Side of New York any more than they could in the working-class areas of Bialystok or Odessa. Urbanization and industrialization had altered life in both places, and their mothers' homebound lives offered no clues to behavior" (118).

9. According to Anderson and Jack, "women often mute their own thoughts and feelings when they try to describe their lives in the familiar and publicly acceptable terms of prevailing concepts and conventions" (11).

10. According to Benjamin, even fathers who do not triumph—or even go "into the world"—can look as though they do to children whose mothers are most familiar with the child's dependent needs. To such children, the father's relative distance from that intensely intimate relationship appears to give him the key to the child's independence or freedom from that primary bond ("Alienation" 123–25).

11. See Pratt, "Culture and Radical Politics," for more information on these writers.

12. Klein has suggested that literary portrayers of the ghetto benefited by paying their literary respects and thus assuaging their guilt; by mythicizing and thus further emigrating from it; or by teaching "official Americans" that the ghetto, too, constituted a "home town" (184). See also Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, in which he describes Antin's grammatical treatment of her two "subjects" as evidence of a "conversion" experience (32–33).

13. Composed, translated, and inserted into her adult memoir, the child's images of alienation from herself as traveler attach themselves to and help to explain the adult narrator's euphoric celebration of America as journey's end, as home. Thus, the images link child to adult as effectively as they once overcame the distance between the child/writer and her relatives and between Europe and America.

14. Weinberg's informants emphasize male assumption of superiority in the shtetl (16) but note as well that even in Europe women made the important decisions in the home (24) and, in America, commonly deferred to

their husbands in public in order to uphold the mainly "ceremonial" authority of their men (132–33). Weinberg also reports that fathers were less likely than mothers to encourage their daughters toward an education. In the workplace, Glenn notes, the lack of male encouragement for women's efforts reflected "the status anxieties of immigrant men": as Jewish men experienced the downward social mobility common to immigrants, "women became the victims of men's efforts to assert, or perhaps reclaim, their masculine dignity" (116).

15. Weinberg reports that working daughters were initially expected to turn over all their wages to their family but, in time, customarily kept a portion for their own use (187–202).

16. Regenbaum also develops the consequences for Yezierska's work and self-image of her father's failure to "recognize" her (55–66).

17. Ammons has called attention to the Orthodox father's life-sustaining recognition of several of Yezierska's pr[illegible]gonists. As her Sophie in an early short story is literally fed a sacramental meal by Shmendrik, the old man who is her neighbor (164), so Sara Smolinsky in *Bread Givers* is redeemed from dissatisfaction and despair by her Orthodox father's willingness to live with her. But the gift these fathers possess is not, strictly speaking, "the nourishment to be received from traditional patriarchal culture" (Ammons 165). In both the early novel, *Bread Givers* (296–97), and the late memoir, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (216–18), protagonists recognize that the culture of their fathers will not validate women as subjects.

18. Henriksen, Yezierska's daughter and biographer, has called attention to the resemblance Yezierska noted between one beloved man and her father: "The feeling of familiarity shocked and amazed her. Absurd! Her father had lived . . . in the ghetto of Poland. This man was a Gentile, an American. And yet for all their difference, there was that unworldly look about [his] eyes that made her feel her father . . . as he might have been in [the] new world" (111).

It is important to note that Yezierska was mentored by women as well as men. Sullivan describes, for example, the liberating effect of Henrietta Rodman's encouragement as an "emissary from the American world ready to meet [Yezierska] as she was, accept her goals as she expressed them, and help her find what she was looking for" (54).

19. Wexler describes the complex and sometimes ambivalent roots of Goldman's work for birth control (210).

20. Falk, another biographer, often notes Goldman's tendency to "universalize" personal conflict, pain, and anger in letters and lectures that formulate her ideal vision (75–76, 140, 233, 282).

21. But to Johan Most, Goldman's earliest mentor, Wexler gives credit for teaching Goldman her early rhetorical style (53).

22. Wexler argues that Goldman's public persona may have been her most original creation (xviii).

23. The autobiography reveals the residue of that anger as well in Goldman's patronizing recollection of her mother's belated "proof" of maternal love: the gift of assorted medals she had received from various charity organizations (Goldman 697). "I assured her that I had already received too many medals of my own," Goldman remembers. Even grammar betrays the persistent ambivalence of this immigrant daughter's attitude toward her mother. "She was the *grande dame par excellence*," Goldman insists, "more careful of her toilet than her daughters" (696). More careful than her daughters were? or more careful of her appearance than of her daughters? One cannot tell. The confused comparison suggests deeper confusions in the relationship between this immigrant daughter and her mother.

24. Contemporary theorists address the generic problem of autobiographical literature by recognizing at the outset the creation of a "self" as the chief function of the narrative. In this genre, as in the personal narratives offered to oral historians, narrative unreliability is not optional—as in a novel—but inevitable, for the self is partly discovered and partly created by the autobiographer as she remembers and composes the story of her life (cf. S. Smith 45).

25. Another source of the aggressive pursuit of work and education, according to Glenn, was the "drive for accomplishment for its own sake" (124) that differentiated Jews from other immigrant women.

26. Glenn observes that the union movement revealed "women's evolving awareness of the power of their public voice and political agency" (169): "The authority of radical women in the factories derived from their ability to articulate in clear and sympathetic ways ideological tenets that were part of the cultural milieu of the immigrant communities" (184).