

# CAHAN, A. The Rise of David Levinsky (Notes)

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY: The Story of Birth & Rebirth

Original title: "The AB of an American Jew" McClure's (1913)

### B. THE IMMIGRATION

- 1) mass immigration itself gives rise to 100s of ABs of Lifschutz's bibliography
- 2) story itself covers All 5 points above
- 3) plus: < PLOT OF REBIRTH >

"Intro" to Mary Antin's The Promised Land (1912)

I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over. Is it not time to write my life's story? I am just so much out of the way so if I were dead, for I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell."

- 4) split between protagonist / narrator taken to extreme
- 5) wrolzry: SEARCH FOR PARENT SURROGATES
- 6) THEME OF SUCCESS < Horatio Alger, p. 16 >

< 135 > diligence, perseverance, tenacity

## II THE MAKING OF A MILLIONAIRE: NATURE OR NURTURE?

### A. BIRTH

- 1) loss of father → Reb Sender
- 2) central, protective role of mother
  - beware of sin, of <sup>old yr</sup>
  - dies to avenge his besting
- 3) his gambling, forbearance, strength, envy
- 4) his battle of body / soul → which side is MATILDA on?
- 5) hard-knocks school of life
- 6) nature of his male friends

### B. REBIRTH

- 1) new manners, morals
- 2) new father-surrogates: Ewen, Nodelman, Tevkin  
moral figures of 1 sort
- 3) surrogate mothers: Matilda, Gussie, Dora  
but also disapprove of his behavior →  
unresolved Oedipal conflict
- 4) new faith
  - textbook → checkbook
  - lost new Temple too
  - Darwinian law of survival
- 5) new form of suffering: alone among teeming masses

11/11/12

I Home & School

- ① melancholy - music - gambling
- ② Red Esther - sexual deviance - tension with no'ye - Naphtali
- ③ Heder - bearing the pain
- ④ 1st romance with Sarah-Leah - power struggle in heder

II Enter Satan

- ① Yeshiva - Reb Sender - Naphtali
- ② Love of God - Satan = thoughts of women
- ③ Envy of the Pole

III I Lose My Mother

- ① Murder no'ye - Naphtali's atheism - hunger - Tevkin's romance
- ② Mrs. Minsker ~~name~~ - food breaks the spell - America

IV Matilda : potential lover

- ① 1st encounter
- ② Teasing him → love
- ③ Kissing > Red Esther (75)
- ④ Fateful night - fails to sin - leave taking
- ⑤ Off to America

V I Discover America

< 101 >

- ① Psalm 104 - Gitelson - cloak contractor grabs up Gitelson
- \* ② Greenhorn - in shul - Mr. Even > Reb Sender (102) transformation
- ③ Mrs. Dienotog - peddling diff things
- ④ Mrs. Levinsky - shaves

VI A Greenhorn No Longer = loss of innocence

< 122-23 >

< 129 >

- ① Maximum Max - ethic of seduction - fails on Mrs. Levinsky recapitulates his sexual education (119)
- ② Rebuffed by Mrs. Levinsky; partial success with Mrs. Dienotog
- ③ Frequenting whores - politics - Argentine Rachael, good whore
- ④ Bender - educ in Am pronunciation, gestures, smiles, politics
- ⑤ Reading - watching dances - hunger - Rachael's kindness - Octavio Oeta

America = land of corruption?  
Bender/Rachael stand out

VII My Temple

- ① Gitelson brings him into garments
- ② Joe - idealism of honest work - sex in shop - Gursie: sex & \$
- ③ Jew. theatre - Jake
- ④ Sex & theatre; trying to corrupt Naphtali > Naphtali <sup>Jake</sup>
- ⑤ Reading
- ⑥ City College = Temple; advance in clock making
- ⑦ Strike, union membership - increased earnings
- ⑧ Gursie as "college match" - Esrah Nodelman - \$ ethic (180-81)

VIII Destruction of My Temple

- ① Spilled milk - Anshl Chaikin
- ② Stalking the Chaikins
- ③ Failure to seduce Gursie for her \$ < 198 >
- ④ Check book replaces text book - Torah of credit face (202)
- ⑤ Midwest order - borrows \$ - firm goes bust
- ⑥ Mr. Even turns his back - Temple destroyed

IX Dora

- ① Nodelman comes thru with goods - visits Max for \$
- ② Finds Dora in search of \$
- ③ Check comes thru - growing attraction to Dora<sup>(+)</sup> - thought of dropping<sup>(-)</sup> Chaikin
- < ④ Dishonesty in business - now violated Nodelman's Rules - craving for love, family
- ⑤ Conversations with Dora
- ⑥ Becomes their boarder
- ⑦ Mother/draughter - gesture 1/2 of sex
- ⑧ Max oblivious
- ⑨ 1st restaurant - confesses his ignorance
- ⑩ Tells of his affair with Matilda to win Dora
- ⑪ Sees her love for him; her 3/3 style of talking (267)
- < ⑫ Exploiting the workers - branded a traitor
- ⑬ Dora's self-sacrifice; her old-styled marriage to Max
- ⑭ First kisses > Dora; bored by her suffering - Darwinism
- < ⑮ Cheating the union - now Dora resists sex - turns to whores
- ⑯ Chaikin drops out
- ⑰ Bracelet - her downfall < 295 / 300 >
- ⑱ Dora breaks up relationship
- ⑲ Max unable to reconcile

## X On the Road (new school of business & life)

- ① Hires Bender - from patronism → obsequiousness
- ② Max confronts him
- ③ Bender = Am. method/precision - winning over Gene in Michigan  
Lesson: don't talk too much or reveal the truth
- ④ Conflict with Loeb - same dirty talk as in shop < 328 >
- ⑤ Stalking Huntington
- ⑥ Cheikin's return & are rebuffed
- ⑦ Meets Jake the Dr. ; amazed at his transformation

## XI Matrimony

- ① Meets Lucy on trolley
- ② Loneliness - confides in Nodelman
- ③ Visits the Nodelmans
- ④ Intro to Miss Melmanovitch < 364 > : examine the merchandise
- ⑤ Loeb defeated - falling of old order - Cheikin becomes his designer
- ⑥ Nostalgia & exploitation of «Совет» - word = jungle
- ⑦ Rejected by Matilda
- ⑧ Going to shul with prospective father-in-law - functional religion
- ⑨ Fanny - engagement has ennobling effect, though it is a  
marriage of convenience

## XII Miss Terkin

- ① Sin begets sin; riding on Sabbath  
Rigi Kulm House - Mrs. Kalch - enters Miss Terkin
- ② Her "Oh!" - the "husband train"
- ③ dinner at the Rigi Kulm - Stars & Stripes
- ④ no longer cares for Fanny - dance - Miss Terkin's antipathy
- ⑤ the secret will out - Sunday
- ⑥ Storm on Monday - rejected by her - returns to NY
- ⑦ the Russian Jew & Clothing Industry - moving into Fifth Ave  
return of Nodelman, commission agent, Mr Eaton - Even is dead

## XIII At Her Father's House

- ① ~~meeting, stalking~~ ~~PARANOID~~ Preparing the attack
- ② Meeting Terkin - latter tries to make a deal & fails
- ③ Real estate boom - reveals his motives to Terkin - invite to home
- ④ Anna, Elsie, Moissey, Sasha - new culture - bribe
- ⑤ more bribes - lured into real estate - passionate love = gambling  
<483>
- ⑥ Reenter: Max, Dora; Lucy's sell-out
- ⑦ Seder - final defeat

## XIV Episodes of a Lonely Life

- ① rescued from financial ruin - shamed the financier - spell of past London
- ② **Matilda** - loses her memory too
- ③ Boom collapses
- ④ Painful meeting with Gitelson
- ⑤ **Gusnie** & the strike against Levinsky
- ⑥ business booming - sporting life
- ⑦ final verdict: unhappy

### Structure & Meaning

- I Childhood & adolescence (I-IV) 4
  - loss of mother
  - replaced by Matilda
- II Initiation to America (V-VIII) 4
  - sex / \$ = Gussie
  - Bender = culture, civility, decency
  - temple destroyed
- III Levinosky's rise to power/money (IX-XI) 3
  - in pursuit of love & \$
  - conquest of Dora → failure
  - temporary reprieve with Fanny
- IV Levinosky's downfall (XIII-XIV) 3
  - conquest / loss of a father
  - stalks him the same way he does Huntington in St. Louis
  - rejected by Miss Tevkin; Gussie leads strike against him
  - completion of Bk I: loses past/future; last meeting w Matilda

All 4 women who reject him  
 Matilda (I, III, IV)  
 Gussie (II, IV)  
 Dora (III)  
 Miss Tevkin (IV)

do so out of deep moral conviction  
 while he acts solely out of need, passion

Analogical structure (next page)

d) life of symmetrical unfulfillment

Bender → book keeper

Loeb → his salesman

Matilda → 2 meetings

Terkin romance → failure of his

### Romance & the Novel

a) anti-romance

theory / practice of **realism** < Becker >

b) city vs. shtetl

c) fact vs. experience (Benjamin)

d) indiv vs. collective

e) bildungsroman & character

### DAVID LEVINSKY

- very much a Dickensian novel
- a Jewish Great Expectations?
- of first novel he ever reads, Dombey & Sons (138)
- full of coincidental encounters
- circular plot: no loose ends
- all characters either reappear or are accounted for

### Analogical structure

a) trying to understand his new life in terms of the old

b) same psych needs → same situations

Naphtali // Jake (163)

graduating to indep. study // advance in cloakmaking (172)

Reb Sender // Mejer Nodelman, Mr. Even (102)

Matilda // Dora

c) ~~not a novel of a city, but a shtetl~~

③ Social Darwinism : ideological component

(153) 1st \$ he earns honestly has ennobling effect  
could have been swayed toward Socialism

(282) 1st enunciates his credo

(335) inability to reach Huntington : I saw the law of free competition, the great law of struggle & the survival of the fittest defied, violated, desecrated

(347) I came to think myself infallible... I looked upon poor people with more contempt than ever. I still called them misfits in a Darwinian sense

(378) exploiting communal ties for profit → Blitt refusing to join the Society, organ. of slaves (519)

(380) outside the family, the human world was as brutally selfish as the jungle...

(443) ~~kind~~ How the Russian Jew improved Natural Selection

Levinsky = opp of Socialism = anathema to him (469)

<next page >

Cahen - ① critique of capitalism

② apologia for the Russian Jew

leave for

III LEVINSKY AS PARABLE

A. THEME OF SUFFERING

- Duality of 1) Levinsky's biography writ large
- ① 2) Russian Jews arrived in traumatized state
- ② 3) will seek compensation for that sense of vulnerability  
unions / big business Frederick Raphael

B. THEME OF SUCCESS - only in America of My Brilliant Career

- 1) embarrassed to make it
- 2) somehow you have to sell your soul
- 3) even tho this embodies American Dream

C. MARXIST CRITIQUE OR APOLOGIA

- 1) his behavior not governed by class
- 2) all elements firmly in place before he came into contact w/ capitalism

### ③ The Novel

## Rezeptionsgeschichte

● From Higham's intro xi

- sold 8000 copies in 1st 2 yrs
- cheap reprint in 1928
- OUP in 1943

1952: Isaac Rosenfeld's glowing appreciation in Commentary  
both Jewish and quintessentially American (Jewish Citizen Kane)

1960 Harper's reissue w/ Higham's intro

- sociology of American Jews determines their relation to their immigrant past
- "perhaps we are ready at last to read him"
- how many reprintings since then?
- recent publications

# Levinsky: The Myth, the Man, the Novel

## I. The Myth

< 85 > steerage to America

- his piety same as before
- but now the sanctity of texts he knows by heart → quality of personal experience
- Psalms = AB PT

< 86 > 2nd connection: self-as-immigrant / pilgrims

- both his religious faith & fact that he was in flight from persecution
- would make him alien in any European country
- these precisely qualify him as a true American
- he recalls / recapitulates the route traveled generations earlier by America's founders

Abraham Cahen: believed in myth himself

cultural mediator per excellence

~~chance encounter w/ Am Olam activist in 18 brought him to America~~

member of Russian rev. cell in Vilna - militant internationalist  
spring 1882: in flight from police → heading for Switzerland → join rev. colony

met leading Bilu, Hirschel Belkind: if not Palestine, then America  
planned to join Am Olam, agrarian commune

- factory worker in NY
- accepted into public school
- began teaching English to Jew. immigrant
- delivered 1st Xiv speech to a workers rally (1882) on Marxism

1890 Arbuzter tsytung 3'20 ny p... 675/52

1855 1st pub. short story in Eng

1857-1902 NY Commercial Advertiser: role of cultural mediator  
< Grandma, XXii > mediating Russian culture & EB Jews

1857: Forverts founded - left after a split

1903 - total control of paper: 1/2 century  
chief instrument of Americanization  
cf. Mordecai Soltes 1924

- American history, customs, behavior, attitudes (Bintel Brief)
- promoted the use of English