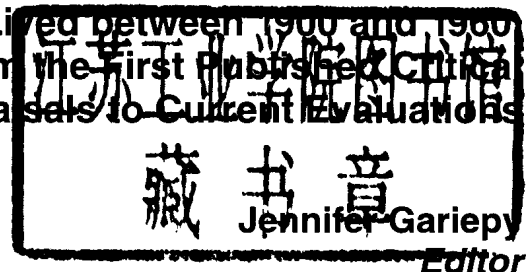


Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 71

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Excerpts from Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1900
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. *TCLC* has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities, and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *TCLC*. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” *TCLC* “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many libraries would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1960 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of this period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and excerpting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, *TCLC* helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in *TCLC* presents a comprehensive survey of an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of *TCLC* is devoted to literary topics. These topic entries widen the focus of the series from individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, which reprints commentary on authors now living or who have died since 1960. Because of the different periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between *CLC* and *TCLC*. For additional information about *CLC* and Gale's other criticism titles, users should consult the Guide to Gale Literary Criticism Series preceding the title page in this volume.

Coverage

Each volume of *TCLC* is carefully compiled to present:

- criticism of authors, or literary topics, representing a variety of genres and nationalities
- both major and lesser-known writers and literary works of the period
- 6-12 authors or 3-6 topics per volume
- individual entries that survey critical response to each author's work or each topic in literary history, including early criticism to reflect initial reactions; later criticism to represent any rise or decline in reputation; and current retrospective analyses.

Organization of This Book

An author entry consists of the following elements: author heading, biographical and critical introduction, list of principal works, excerpts of criticism (each preceded by an annotation and a bibliographic citation), and a bibliography of further reading.

- The **Author Heading** consists of the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. If an author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction to the author entry are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.
- The **Biographical and Critical Introduction** outlines the author's life and career, as well as the critical issues surrounding his or her work. References to past volumes of *TCLC* are provided at the beginning of the introduction. Additional sources of information in other biographical and critical reference series published by Gale, including *Short Story Criticism*, *Children's Literature Review*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, and *Something about the Author*, are listed in a box at the end of the entry.
- Some *TCLC* entries include **Portraits** of the author. Entries also may contain reproductions of materials pertinent to an author's career, including manuscript pages, title pages, dust jackets, letters, and drawings, as well as photographs of important people, places, and events in an author's life.
- The **List of Principal Works** is chronological by date of first book publication and identifies the genre of each work. In the case of foreign authors with both foreign-language publications and English translations, the title and date of the first English-language edition are given in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Critical excerpts are prefaced by **Annotations** providing the reader with information about both the critic and the criticism that follows. Included are the critic's reputation, individual approach to literary criticism, and particular expertise in an author's works. Also noted are the relative importance of a work of criticism, the scope of the excerpt, and the growth of critical controversy or changes in critical trends regarding an author. In some cases, these annotations cross-reference excerpts by critics who discuss each other's commentary.
- A complete **Bibliographic Citation** designed to facilitate location of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each author entry to provide a perspective on changes in critical evaluation over the years. All titles of works by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type to enable the user to easily locate discussion of particular works. Also for purposes of easier identification, the critic's name and the publication date of the essay are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the journal in which it appeared. Some of the excerpts in *TCLC* also contain translated material. Unless otherwise noted, translations in brackets are by the editors; translations in parentheses or continuous with the text are by the critic. Publication information (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of works) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.

- An annotated list of **Further Reading** appearing at the end of each author entry suggests secondary sources on the author. In some cases it includes essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights.

Cumulative Indexes

- Each volume of *TCLC* contains a cumulative **Author Index** listing all authors who have appeared in Gale's Literary Criticism Series, along with cross references to such biographical series as *Contemporary Authors* and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. For readers' convenience, a complete list of Gale titles included appears on the first page of the author index. Useful for locating authors within the various series, this index is particularly valuable for those authors who are identified by a certain period but who, because of their death dates, are placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald is found in *TCLC*, yet a writer often associated with him, Ernest Hemingway, is found in *CLC*.
- Each *TCLC* volume includes a cumulative **Nationality Index** which lists all authors who have appeared in *TCLC* volumes, arranged alphabetically under their respective nationalities, as well as Topics volume entries devoted to particular national literatures.
- Each new volume in Gale's Literary Criticism Series includes a cumulative **Topic Index**, which lists all literary topics treated in *NCLC*, *TCLC*, *LC 1400-1800*, and the *CLC* yearbook.
- Each new volume of *TCLC*, with the exception of the Topics volumes, includes a **Title Index** listing the titles of all literary works discussed in the volume. In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale has also produced a **Special Paperbound Edition** of the *TCLC* title index. This annual cumulation lists all titles discussed in the series since its inception and is issued with the first volume of *TCLC* published each year. Additional copies of the index are available on request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the following year's cumulation. Titles discussed in the Topics volume entries are not included *TCLC* cumulative index.

Citing *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in Gale's literary Criticism Series may use the following general forms to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to materials drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books.

¹William H. Slavick, "Going to School to DuBose Heyward," *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined*, (AMS Press, 1987); excerpted and reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, Vol. 59, ed. Jennifer Garipey (Detroit: Gale Research, 1995), pp. 94-105.

²George Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi," *Partisan Review*, 6 (Winter 1949), pp. 85-92; excerpted and reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, Vol. 59, ed. Jennifer Garipey (Detroit: Gale Research, 1995), pp. 40-3.

Suggestions Are Welcome

In response to suggestions, several features have been added to *TCLC* since the series began, including

annotations to excerpted criticism, a cumulative index to authors in all Gale literary criticism series, entries devoted to criticism on a single work by a major author, more extensive illustrations, and a title index listing all literary works discussed in the series since its inception.

Readers who wish to suggest authors or topics to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to write the editors.

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Abraham Cahan

1860-1951

(Also wrote under the pseudonyms Sotius and David Bernstein) Lithuanian-born American novelist.

INTRODUCTION

Through his accomplishments as a newspaper editor and journalist, Cahan became a highly influential figure in early twentieth-century Jewish-American letters. His innovative editorship of the *Jewish Daily Forward* made it a major cultural force in the Yiddish-speaking American community. Writing in both English and Yiddish, Cahan also produced novels and short stories that were among the first to realistically depict the experiences of his fellow Russian Jewish immigrants in the United States.

Biographical Information

Cahan was raised in the lower-class Yiddish-speaking Jewish subculture of Vilna, Lithuania. As a young student, he taught himself Russian in order to gain access to the Gentile-dominated public schools and library in Vilna. He attended college, preparing for a career as a teacher, but involvement in a radical socialist group at the time of the unsuccessful 1881 revolution made it dangerous for him to remain in Russia, so he emigrated to the United States in 1882. He took up residence in a poverty-plagued, overcrowded section of New York City's Lower East Side that was populated predominantly by Jewish immigrants. While working in a cigar factory Cahan experienced firsthand the deprivations and exploitation suffered by many immigrant workers. Cahan became a successful union organizer and pro-labor orator. He also learned his trade as a journalist, serving as a correspondent for Russian newspapers and contributing to both Yiddish and English-language American publications, notably under editor Lincoln Steffens at the *New York Commercial Advertiser*. His work as a reporter brought him into daily contact with people of all classes in the Jewish and Gentile communities, and in his articles Cahan demonstrated skill as a canny social observer. Adapting the market-driven editorial strategies of mainstream American newspapers to the needs of America's new Jewish immigrants, Cahan built the *Jewish Daily Forward*, which he cofounded in 1897, into the most widely read Yiddish-language daily newspaper of its era. The *Forward*, which he edited until just before his death in 1951, championed socialist and progressive political causes, provided its readers with a forum for expressing their views and learning about American culture, and served as a showcase for fiction in Yiddish by such authors as Sholem Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singer. While engaged in his groundbreaking work as a journalist and social activist, Cahan also produced a number of novels, short stories, and nonfiction



books in Yiddish and English, most of which expanded on themes of the Russian Jewish immigrant experience.

Major Works

Cahan's first published short story, "Motke Arbel un zayn shiddokh" (1892; "A Providential Match"), introduced the topic that would typify his fiction: the struggles of Russian Jews to assimilate into American culture, and the moral, social, and psychological effects of this cultural change. The story's protagonist, a poor peasant who has made his fortune in America, sends for the daughter of his former employer in Russia, intending to marry her; however, his intended bride takes advantage of her newfound American freedom to choose her own mate. With the enthusiastic encouragement of one of his mentors, the novelist and critic William Dean Howells, Cahan expanded on this theme in his novella *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896), about an ambitious young immigrant who rejects his devoted Orthodox Jewish wife for a flashier, more Americanized young woman. In such stories as "The Imported Bridegroom" and "Rabbi Eliezer's

Christmas," Cahan further explored this theme of the clash of cultures experienced by new Americans. The novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), Cahan's most highly regarded work of fiction, evolved from a series of magazine articles he was commissioned to write about Jewish-American entrepreneurs. Cahan chose to tell this story as the personal history of one fictional representative of this type of man, an impoverished Russian yeshiva student who becomes a millionaire in America, but in the process loses his religious values, his respect for himself and his fellow human beings, and his ability to love.

Critical Reception

During his lifetime, Cahan's work as a newspaper editor and journalist overshadowed his career as a creative writer. Reviewers, tending to view him primarily as a reporter rather than literary artist, praised his novels and short stories for their accurate depiction of social conditions while downgrading their stylistic merits. With the emergence of interest in ethnic literature in the decades following Cahan's death, scholars have favorably reevaluated his fiction, particularly *The Rise of David Levinsky*. Critics have compared his experiments in social realism to those of his contemporaries Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser, and have observed that his frank, unromanticized treatment of the Jewish-American experience prefigured the work of later writers, including Irving Howe, Philip Roth, and Saul Bellow.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (novel) 1896
The Imported Bridegroom, and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto (short stories) 1898
The White Terror and the Red: A Novel of Revolutionary Russia (novel) 1905
Rafael Naarizokh: An Erzaylung Vegin a Stolyer Vos Iz Gekommen Zum Saykhl [*Rafael Naarizokh: A Story of a Carpenter Who Came to His Senses*] (novel) 1907
Historia fun di Fareingte Shtaaten. 2 vols. [*History of the United States*] (history) 1910-1912
The Rise of David Levinsky (novel) 1917
Bleter fun Mayn Leben. 5 vols. [*Leaves from My Life*] (autobiography) 1926-31; Vols. 1 and 2 also published as *The Education of Abraham Cahan*, 1969
Palestina [Palestine] (nonfiction) 1934
Rashel: A Biografia [*Raschell: A Biography*] (biography) 1938
Grandma Never Lived in America: The New Journalism of Abraham Cahan (journalism) 1986

CRITICISM

Isaac Rosenfeld (essay date 1952)

SOURCE: "The Fall of David Levinsky," in *Preserving the Hunger*, edited and introduced by Mark Shechner, Wayne State University Press, 1988, pp. 152-89.

[In the following essay, originally published in 1952, Rosenfeld reviews *The Rise of David Levinsky*, noting the novel's study of "Jewish character" and its examination of American business culture.]

I had long avoided *The Rise of David Levinsky* because I imagined it was a badly written account of immigrants and sweatshops in a genre which—though this novel had practically established it—was intolerably stale by now. It is nothing of the kind. To be sure, it is a genre piece, and excellence of diction and sentence structure are not among its strong points; but it is one of the best fictional studies of Jewish character available in English, and at the same time an intimate and sophisticated account of American business culture, and it ought to be celebrated as such.

The story is a simple one and fundamentally Jewish in conception, as it consists of an extended commentary on a single text, somewhat in the manner of Talmud. This text is presented in the opening paragraph:

Sometimes, when I think of my past . . . the metamorphosis I have gone through strikes me as nothing short of a miracle. I was born and reared in the lowest depths of poverty and I arrived in America—in 1885—with four cents in my pocket. I am now worth more than two million dollars and recognized as one of the two or three leading men in the cloak-and-suit trade in the United States. And yet . . . my inner identity . . . impresses me as being precisely the same as it was thirty or forty years ago. My present station, power, the amount of worldly happiness at my command, and the rest of it, seem to be devoid of significance.

I have set in italics what I take to be the key sentences. These express Levinsky's uniquely Jewish character, as they refer to the poor days of his childhood and early youth ("my inner identity") when, supported by his mother, he devoted himself to the study of the Jewish Law. Nothing in a man's life could be more purely Jewish, and his constant longing, through all his later years, for the conditions of his past confirms him in an unchanging spirit. But the remarkable thing about this theme, as the late Abraham Cahan developed it, is that it is, at the same time, an exemplary treatment of one of the dominant myths of American capitalism—that the millionaire finds nothing but emptiness at the top of the heap. It is not by accident that Cahan, for forty years and until his death the editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, and identified all his life with Jewish affairs and the Yiddish language, wrote this novel in English (it has only

recently been translated into Yiddish). He was writing an American novel par excellence in the very center of the Jewish genre.

It seems to me that certain conclusions about the relation between Jewish and American character should be implicit in the fact that so singularly Jewish a theme can so readily be assimilated to an American one. I am not suggesting that Jewish and American character are identical, for the Levinsky who arrived in New York with four cents in his pocket was as unlike an American as anyone could possibly be; but there is a complementary relation between the two which, so far as I know, no other novel has brought out so clearly.

David Levinsky was born in the Russian town of Antomir in 1865. His father died when David was three, and he lived with his mother in one corner of a basement room that was occupied by three other families. "The bulk of the population [of Antomir]," writes Cahan, "lived on less than . . . twenty-five cents . . . a day, and that was difficult to earn. A hunk of rye bread and a bit of herring or cheese constituted a meal. [With] a quarter of a copeck (an eighth of a cent) . . . one purchased a few crumbs of pot cheese or some boiled water for tea. . . . Children had to nag their mothers for a piece of bread." But Levinsky's mother, who "peddled pea mush [and did] odds and ends of jobs," was kind to him and indulgent, "because God has punished you hard enough as it is, poor orphan mine."

At the usual early age, Levinsky was sent to *cheder*, where he was made to feel very keenly the disadvantages of poverty, as his teachers risked nothing in punishing a poor boy. His mother would intervene for him (this impulse was to prove fatal) and fought with many a *melamed* for laying hands on her David. In spite of the humiliations and hardships, she maintained him in *cheder*, and after his Bar Mitzvah sent him to Yeshiva (Talmudic seminary) at an even greater sacrifice, as it meant he would not be in a position to relieve her distress by learning a trade. She was determined that he devote his life to God, and he showed great aptitude for holy study. He soon distinguished himself as a student, but his sexual instincts began to distract his mind. His contacts with women, as was the case with all Yeshiva students, were extremely limited. It was considered "an offense to good Judaism" for a pious man to seek feminine company, attend dances, dress in worldly fashion, or in any other way to behave as a "Gentile." Naturally, these restraints only multiplied Levinsky's temptations. He would do penance, undergo a period of religious exaltation, and again fall into sin (in his mind).

The next great event in his life was the death of his mother. Levinsky, in earlocks and black caftan, was attacked by Gentile boys on his way from Yeshiva. When he came home bruised and bleeding, his mother, against his entreaties and those of their friends and neighbors, ran to the Gentile quarter to avenge him. This was the

last time he saw her alive. She was brought back with a broken head.

It is a credit to Cahan's economy as a writer and to his grasp of character that at this point, in the sixty-odd pages which I have summarized, he has already drawn so convincing a picture of Levinsky, including all essential details, that Levinsky's subsequent adventures in the old country and America, his further encounters with poverty and with women, the rest of his intellectual development, and his ultimate transformation into a millionaire, have all been fully prepared. I will therefore cut off the exposition and attempt some generalizations which may serve the understanding of the whole of Levinsky's character and perhaps help explain how the old-world Yeshiva student is essentially an American in ethos.

Levinsky's character was formed by hunger. The individual experiences of his life—poverty, squalor, orphanage, years of religious study and sexual restraint, the self-sacrificing love of his mother and her violent death—all these experiences contain, as their common element, a core of permanent dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction expresses itself in two ways: first, as a yearning for fulfillment, where it operates to win for him all the goods and values he has been deprived of—wealth, dignity, a "father principle" as well as a substitute for his father (as shown in his passionate attachment to Red Sender, with whom he studied at the Yeshiva), the pleasures of intellectual liberty that attend his break with Orthodoxy, the pleasures of sex, and unrestrained access to the society of women, though he goes among them mainly to find a substitute for his mother. (These are the positive "Americanizing" tendencies of his discontent.) At the same time, dissatisfaction has become an organic habit, a form which determines his apprehension of experience in general, and actually directs the flow of experience his way, so that he is not merely the result of what has happened to him, but on the contrary, the events in his life are predetermined, in large measure, by what he has already become. In the second sense, dissatisfaction is unending; instead of providing the urge to overcome privation, it returns every fulfillment, by a way no matter how roundabout, to the original tension, so that no satisfaction is possible.

Thus Levinsky is a man who cannot feel at home with his desires. Because hunger is strong in him, he must always strive to relieve it; but precisely because it is strong, it has to be preserved. It owes its strength to the fact that for so many years everything that influenced Levinsky most deeply—say, piety and mother love—was inseparable from it. For hunger, in this broader, rather metaphysical sense of the term that I have been using, is not only the state of tension out of which the desires for relief and betterment spring; precisely because the desires are formed under its sign, they become assimilated to it, and convert it into the prime source of all value, so that the man, in his pursuit of whatever he considers pleasurable and good, seeks to return to his yearning as much as he does to escape it.

Levinsky's entire behavior is characterized by this duality. In love, he is drawn to women he cannot have. They are either hopelessly above his rank in wealth, sophistication, and culture, or married and faithful mother-surrogates, or simply not interested. The women who do find him attractive fail to move him. He goes to prostitutes, one frustration feeding the other.

His accumulation of wealth, which he wins through perseverance, ingenuity, and luck, is also of this pattern—it, too, represents a loss, a virtual impoverishment. Before he turned to business enterprise, Levinsky had entertained serious academic ambitions. Though he had broken away from Orthodoxy, shaved his beard, adopted American dress, and gone to night school to learn English, he had retained his Talmudic intellectuality and love of scholarship. He took a job in the garment industry only as a means of sending himself through college. The event to which he attributes his becoming a businessman fell on a day when he was having his lunch in the factory. A bottle of milk slipped out of his hands as he was trying to open it and spilled on some silks. His employer, Jeff Manheimer, who witnessed the accident, broadly made fun of his clumsiness and called him a lobster. The humiliation festered and that very day Levinsky decided to steal the boss's designer and go into business for himself. This is the reason he gives, but it is a rationalization. He would never have entered business and gone on to wealth had it not been necessary to sacrifice something—in this case his desire for learning. And when he obtains great wealth, it makes a circle, joining the pattern of his love life by condemning him to loneliness, as he suspects all women who smile on him want only his money.

So with everything. All things in Levinsky's life are divided, alienated from themselves, and simplicity is impossible. But no matter how many transformations it undergoes, his hunger remains constant. He longs for his wretched boyhood (which appeals to him "as a sick child does to its mother") from which, were he able to re-enter it, he would again be driven in an endless yearning after yearning.

Now this is a profoundly Jewish trait, our whole history is marked by this twist. The significant thing about the structure I have been describing is that it is not confined to single personalities like Levinsky, but is exactly repeated on an impersonal and much larger scale in Jewish history, religion, culture—wherever our tradition and its spirit find expression. Consider *Galut*, the Diaspora, through the centuries in which it has dominated Jewish life: the theme of the Return, of yearning for Eretz Israel, to which are linked Cabala and Messianism, modes of prayer and worship as well as modern political and social movements, so that the whole becomes a compendium of Jewish activity per se—the yearning for Israel runs through the Diaspora in no simple sense, as of a fixed desire for a fixed object. It is a reflexive desire, turning on itself and becoming its own object. This is the meaning of the passage: "If I forget Thee O Jerusalem. . . ." The yearning is itself Jerusalem, as in the words ". . . if

I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy," and it is to this yearning that the good Jew remains faithful. Otherwise, why the proscription of temporizing in *Galut*, of making any compromise with desire, no matter how small, even down to the obdurate and seemingly ridiculous prohibition of shaving the beard? The hunger must be preserved at all cost. This theme is taken up and elaborated all through Yiddish literature, receiving its ultimate ironic sanctification in the work of Sholom Aleichem, where squalor, suffering, and persecution become the "blessings of poverty," signs and stigmata of the condition of being Chosen, "for which the whole world envies us." The character of David Levinsky, therefore, does not stand alone, nor does he come, with his four cents, unattended to the American shore. He drags the whole past after him, being himself the Diaspora Man.

But what is so American about this? Nothing directly, especially if I am right in calling Levinsky the essential Jewish type of the Dispersion. And yet in the character of the American businessman and in the surrounding culture that his figure dominates, there is also such a twist, a similar play on striving and fulfillment. We worship success; all the same it is on process and origin that we place the emphasis of gratification, seldom on the attainment as such. The value of the successful man's career lies in "rags to riches," it is defined in our saying, "He worked himself up." Of those who are born to wealth we say, "Poor little rich boy." Now this, I am aware, is folklore, and there is a great deal of irony in it, too. Nevertheless, our favorite representation of the rich is of a class that doesn't know what to do with its money. It has brought them no real accretion of happiness, and the process of accumulation, on which the emphasis falls, is manifestly a self-destructive one, as it never can be stopped in time: the successful man faces the futility of retirement. He, too, loves to dream about his boyhood in an unreal *askesis*, having for the most part been ashamed of the ascetic impulse (poverty, we protest too much, is no disgrace) which he has concealed under a conspicuous acquisition; and yet he is not enough a materialist to enjoy his goods as they come to him and welcome the spiritual consolations that worldly pleasures bestow. "Money isn't everything," he will say, making more, and he says this to preserve an air of disconsolateness, as though virtue were impossible without a sour face. He does all this for show, but unconsciously his affections hit upon the truth. All his life he is at loose ends, and expert only in ennui, which Tolstoy defined as the desire for desire, cousin to Levinsky's yearning. And even if none of this is true, and there is (as I strongly suspect) a direct gratification in wealth as such, it is still significant that most of us profess it to be true, clinging to a protective disenchantment.

Whatever the case with our much disputed and still, I suppose, amorphous American character, Levinsky, the Diaspora Man, had relatively little to overcome (speaking inwardly) to grow into the typical American of fortune. Only the environment was alien to him, but its inner loneliness was anticipated in his own, for one loneliness is

much like another; and the very fact that the American environment was alien, and would remain so, to his Jewishness, enabled him to make good in it on his own peculiar terms—to satisfy everything but hunger. To be sure, his is only a single career, a single example of the Jew as American, but it draws our attention to the considerable structural congruity that must underlie the character and culture of the two peoples. And if Levinsky's career is understood in its essentially Jewish aspect, it may explain why the Jews, as an immigrant group, were among the first to achieve a virtually flawless Americanization.

I have purposely refrained from treating David Levinsky as a fictional character and have spoken of the novel as though it were the actual memoir of an American Jew, in tribute to Cahan's power of characterization. Such immediacy of revelation is the novel's strongest quality, and Levinsky is made to talk about himself not only with an authentic accent, but with a motive in disclosure verging on something sly—precisely as such a man would talk. This well known and widely respected businessman tells the truth about himself, his love affairs, his efforts to outsmart the unions, the way other men tell lies—to see if he can get away with it! But as fiction, Cahan's writing lacks continuity: his transitions from subjects tend to be abrupt, with a perseveration in the linking of sex and economics. Thus when he describes Levinsky's broken engagement (the cause was his falling in love with another woman), Cahan devotes less than twenty lines to the scene, and opens his very next paragraph (after a line space, but this may have been the typographer's doing) with the words, "Our rush season had passed. . . ." Often the trains of thought collide within the single paragraph, business plowing into everything else. True, Levinsky's mind would work this way, and the habit would also serve him the purpose of saying, "I may not be doing so well with the girls—but think of the money I'm making." (Though business is meaningless to Levinsky, one of the most touching insights of the novel is provided by Cahan's showing how he succumbs to a businessman's vulgarity of tone and manner, and berates himself for the weakness.) Yet it is not always possible to distinguish character from author, and this failure in detachment, the consequence of an imperfectly developed ear for nuances in language, becomes noticeable and sometimes quite confusing when there is no lucky congruity to justify it, as in the matter of the abrupt transitions from pleasure to business.

But these flaws, as I have already indicated, are of minor account. So much so, that I wonder what the critical reception and, no doubt, misunderstanding, of *The Rise of David Levinsky* must have been, that it should languish in the status of an "undiscovered" book, a standard footnote or paragraph in surveys of American Jewish literature, and not be known for the remarkable novel it is.

David Singer (essay date 1967)

SOURCE: "David Levinsky's Fall: A Note on the Liebman Thesis," in *American Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Winter, 1967, pp. 696-706.

[In the following essay, Singer examines *The Rise of David Levinsky* in light of Charles Liebman's thesis that most Jews who emigrated to the United States were shaped more by cultural and social mores than by religious orthodoxy.]

The notion that the overwhelming majority of East European Jews who came to the United States between 1880 and 1915 were Orthodox has assumed a central position in the popular mythology of American-Jewish life. On a more scholarly level, this same idea has established itself in the canon of American-Jewish historiography. The standard works on American Jewry have, in varying degrees, accepted this premise, and their interpretations have been fashioned accordingly. Even Moses Rischin, whose *The Promised City* is perhaps the most sophisticated achievement to date in the reconstruction of the American-Jewish experience, seems for the most part to have accepted the prevailing thesis of the Orthodoxy of the East European masses. In part, this view follows from the tendency of historians to construct a rather stereotyped portrait of East European Jewish life, in which the Orthodox shtetl completely dominates the scene. On the other hand, the Orthodoxy of the immigrant masses would appear to be confirmed by every shred of evidence accumulated thus far by students of the period. Virtually everybody, including the immigrants themselves, has accepted the Orthodoxy of the "first generation" as an unquestionable fact.

Recently, however, this generally prevailing view has come under direct assault in the work of Professor Charles Liebman, whose illuminating studies of American Orthodoxy are setting in its proper historical perspective a subject long neglected. In essence, Liebman has argued that most of the nominally Orthodox immigrants who came to the United States were bound by commitments that were ethnic rather than religious. Because they often outwardly conformed to many traditional religious norms, they were regarded as Orthodox by their more acculturated coreligionists. At best, however, their residual piety was what Leo Baeck has called *Milieu-Frommigkeit*.

In support of his thesis, Liebman has compiled a body of evidence which, while it is often rather fragmentary, does raise serious doubts about the generally accepted view. In dealing with the European setting of the exodus to America, Liebman correctly asserts that historians have not paid sufficient attention to the forces of secularism which were shattering the Orthodox consensus of the East European Jewish communities. At the very time when large groups of Jews were emigrating to the United States, traditional Judaism was facing the challenge of such movements as the *Haskalah*, political Zionism and Marxist socialism.

Turning specifically to those Jews who came to these shores, Liebman argues that it can be expected that those who emigrated first would be the least traditional, since they were willing to uproot themselves from home and

family. Among the evidence that Liebman cites in support of this contention is the significant fact that leading Rabbinic authorities such as the *Hafetz Hayyim*, warned their fellow Jews not to endanger their Judaism by leaving home. The Rabbi of Slutsk, on a visit to the United States, castigated those Jews who had emigrated to a *trefa* (impure) land.

Liebman's strongest argument, however, is the evidence he cites to show that the East European Jews failed to create those institutions which were necessary for the maintenance of an Orthodox community. The very multiplicity of synagogues which were established far exceeding the number necessary for the purposes of worship, Liebman argues, indicates that their primary purpose was cultural and social, rather than religious. While there was a superabundant proliferation of synagogues, there is evidence to indicate that there was a serious shortage of *mikvaot* (ritual baths). The most serious failure of the East European Jewish community in the United States, however, was in the area of Jewish education. A New York survey taken in 1908 produced the remarkable information that only 28 per cent of the Jewish children between the ages of six and sixteen were receiving any Jewish education at all. Until 1915, there were only two Jewish day schools in the whole country. America also suffered from a paucity of distinguished rabbinic scholars among the immigrants. When the New York Orthodox community began to search for a rabbinic leader, no American rabbi was even considered. Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Vilna was finally selected in 1887.

The implications of Liebman's thesis are, of course, revolutionary. If he is, in fact, correct, his arguments necessitate a radical reconstruction of our understanding of the American-Jewish experience. No longer will it be tenable to view Jewish history in the United States as a simplistic conflict between religious orthodoxy and secularism. Historians will have to refine their conceptual apparatus to deal with more subtle categories. The popular notion of the development of the Conservative movement will also have to be drastically revised. The rise of Conservative Judaism and secularism, according to Professor Liebman, "did not entail a decision to opt out of traditional religion. It was, rather, a decision to substitute new social and cultural mores for the older ones, which had been intermingled with certain ritual manifestations."

It should be emphasized that Liebman has presented his thesis in a rather tentative manner. In his writings thus far, the question of the Orthodoxy of the East European immigrants has been marginal to his primary concerns. Obviously, a great deal of basic research will have to be done before the issue can be considered with any kind of finality. To illustrate, however, how fruitful Liebman's thesis can be as an analytical tool in American-Jewish historiography, I would like to turn to an examination of Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*.

Published in 1917, *The Rise of David Levinsky* was the foremost literary achievement of the man who, more than

any other individual, helped shape the cultural pattern of New York's Jewish community. As the editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, Cahan, who arrived in the United States in 1882, served for many years as the central mediating force between the Jewish immigrant masses and the great metropolis. *The Rise of David Levinsky*, which was hailed by many at the time of its publication as a masterpiece of realistic fiction, and which served to introduce New York's East Side to the American reading public, has continued to evoke high praise from discerning readers. The novel has been acclaimed by Saul Bel-low, Isaac Rosenfeld and Nathan Glazer. John Higham has lauded the novel as a "unique masterpiece of social criticism," and as "the unrivaled record of a great historical experience."

While *The Rise of David Levinsky* has been praised both in terms of its literary merits and as a document of social history, it has been, I would contend, often misunderstood, because it has been analyzed from the perspective of the prevailing thesis of the Orthodoxy of the East European immigrants. To illustrate the standard interpretation of the novel, let me quote Nathan Glazer:

We read in *The Rise of David Levinsky* of how a young Russian Jewish yeshiva student, learned and pious, emigrates to this country. On the boat he eats no forbidden food and prays daily. In America he seeks out and finds solace in the synagogue established by people from his home town. But he also moves inevitably from one transgression to the next. First his earlocks are cut off, then he shaves, soon he abandons the synagogue in favor of night school and English studies. And soon nothing is left—and with practically no soul searching.

To the casual reader of the novel this summary may well appear as quite accurate. A closer examination of Glazer's analysis, however, raises a serious problem. Glazer is certainly correct in placing great emphasis on the two dramatic scenes in the early part of the book, where Levinsky cuts off his earlocks and then his beard, for the loss of these two symbols does, in fact, immediately open the floodgates to a host of transgressions, and to Levinsky's complete abandonment of Jewish religious law. To the modern reader, however, these happenings can only be viewed with bewilderment. Why should a beard and earlocks, which are only customs, play such a pivotal role in Levinsky's religious development? Are we to believe that a "learned and pious" yeshiva student is so unable to distinguish between the essentials and nonessentials of Judaism, that the surrender of these customs becomes the decisive factor in his complete alienation from traditional norms? Yet Glazer has not erred in viewing Levinsky's loss of his earlocks and beard as a dramatic turning point in his life. The fundamental weakness of his argument is that Glazer views Levinsky's abandonment of these customs as the *beginning* of a process of alienation, when in fact, a close reading of the novel reveals that Levinsky's surrendering of his earlocks and beard is the *culmination* of an estrangement from his tra-