

# A Study of the “Marginal Man” and Identity Crisis as Reflected in Some American Jewish Writers’ Works

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Among scholars of society and literary people of modern-day America, there is lingering sense of ambivalence concerning the assimilation of Jews into the mainstream of American culture. Many people describe American Jewish life today in the most glowing, optimistic terms. The struggles and frustrations are over; at long last the Jew has found a society in which he feels entirely at home, to which he has perfectly adapted himself. At the same time, others still look upon the Jew in America as “alienated.” Especially in much contemporary American literature, in fact, he is presented as a symbol of the Alienation of Modern Man.

This ambivalence or the uniqueness of the modern Jew’s situation has been oft remarked theoretically by sociologists. In 1928, the sociologist Robert Park developed an argument in arriving at his construct of the “marginal man,” the prototype for the modern Jew:

When, however, the walls of the medieval ghetto were torn down and the Jew was permitted to participate in the cultural life of the peoples among whom he lived, there appeared a new type of personality, namely, a cultural hybrid, a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples; never quite willing to break, even if he were permitted to do so, with his past and traditions, and not quite accepted, because of racial prejudice, in the new society in which he now sought to find a place. He was a man on the margin of two cultures and two societies, which never completely interpenetrated and fused. The emancipated man, the first cosmopolite and citizen of the world. He is, par excellence, the “stranger,” . . .<sup>1)</sup>

Park said that the autobiographies of Jewish immigrants are all different versions of the same story—the story of the marginal man. He saw that the conflict of cultures as it takes place in the mind of the immigrant in these autobiographies is just the conflict of “the divided self,” “the old self and the new.”

Stonequist further elaborated this theory by adding a new perspective that an individual is not a marginal person until he experiences the group conflict as a personal problem, which he called “crisis experience.”<sup>2)</sup> According to this theory, an individual, at first,

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1) Robert E. Park, “Human Migration and the Marginal Man,” *The American Journal of Sociology*, XXXIII (May 1928), pp. 891–892.

2) Everett V. Stonequist, *The Marginal Man: A Study in Personality and Culture Conflict* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1937), p. 140.

absorbs the culture of the dominant group without any clear consciousness that he does not belong to it. In fact, frequently the opposite is true: he dislikes the contacts he has with the subordinate group; it does not attract or interest him. Hence the experience itself comes as a shock. The individual finds his social world disorganized. Personal relations and cultural forms which he had previously taken for granted suddenly become problematic. He does not know quite how to act. There is a feeling of confusion, of loss of direction, of being overwhelmed.

This is the period when the characteristic personality traits first appear. As a consequence of the crisis experience the individual finds himself estranged from both cultures. Having participated in each he is now able to look at himself from two viewpoints: for example, the marginal Jew sees himself from the Jewish standpoint and from the Gentile standpoint. Since these two standpoints are in conflict—the contempt or prejudice of the one conflicting with the self-respect and demand for loyalty of the other—the individual experiences this conflict. He has something of a dual personality, a split personality, a “double consciousness.” Hence the ambivalence of attitude and sentiment is at the core of those things which characterize the marginal man. He is torn between two courses of action and is unable calmly to take the one and leave the other.

Thus the marginal man is the key personality in the contacts of culture. It is in his mind that the cultures come together, conflict, and eventually work out some kind of mutual adjustment and interpenetration. He is the crucible of cultural fusion. If he tries and succeeds in making an adjustment he succeeds in becoming assimilated. Then, his marginal experience proves to be a period of transition from the old culture to the new.

The American Jewish life today owes greatly to this “split personality” or duality for its existence, according to Yaffe.<sup>3)</sup> Because for the East European immigrant Jew, this duality took the form of the frenzy to become a “real American” on one hand and of the strong urge to hold on to his old tradition. Without this duality, Jewish life in America would be very different today or perhaps it wouldn’t exist at all.

The experience and realization of one’s marginality is vividly described in Ludwig Lewisohn’s autobiography *Upstream* (1922). Born in Germany and brought to the United States as a young boy he rapidly assimilated American culture and identified himself completely with American life. His literary talents induced him to set his heart on becoming a professor of English literature. At that time he did not realize the widespread nature of the prejudice against Jews. The difficulties he encountered seemed to him to be local and transitory. He did graduate work in a university and then looked for a teaching position. After receiving a letter from his teacher telling him “how terribly hard it is for a man of Jewish birth to get a good position” teaching in an American University Lewisohn finally—as a kind of climax to a summation of events—realized the

3) James Yaffe, *The American Jews* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 18.

bearing of the Jewish-Gentile cleavage upon his personal life:

I sat in my boarding-house room playing with this letter. I seemed to have no feeling at all for the moment. By the light of a sunbeam that fell in I saw that the picture of my parents on the mantelpiece was very dusty. I got up and wiped the dust off carefully. Gradually an eerie, lost feeling came over me. I took my hat and walked out and up Amsterdam Avenue, farther and farther to High Bridge and stood on the bridge and watched the swift, tiny tandems on the Speedway below and the skiffs gliding up and down the Harlem River. A numbness held my soul and mutely I watched life, like a dream pageant, float by me . . . I ate nothing till evening when I went into a bakery and, catching sight of myself in a mirror, noted with dull objectivity my dark hair, my melancholy eyes, my unmistakably Semitic nose . . . An outcast . . . A sentence arose in my mind which I have remembered and used ever since. So long as there is discrimination there is exile. And for the first time in my life my heart turned with grief and remorse to the thought of my brethren in exile all over the world.<sup>4)</sup>

This is the moment when Lewisohn gives up assimilation and again becomes a Jew. This awakening or reawakening of Jewish consciousness even turns to his physical characteristics—"my dark hair, my melancholy eyes, my unmistakably Semitic nose." He feels his isolation—"an outcast"—and states the cause and the effect in one ever-remembered sentence: "So long as there is discrimination, there is exile."

Nevertheless, Lewisohn could not, in a moment, become a satisfied Jew. For he had thoroughly assimilated American culture, and even become a Christian and married a Gentile. This made his situation all the more difficult, for, as he notes, his problem was more than one of earning a living.:

I didn't know how to go on living a reasonable and reasonably harmonious inner life. I could take no refuge in the spirit and traditions of my own people. I knew little of them. My physical life was Aryan through and through. Slowly, in the course of the years, I have discovered traits in me which I sometimes call Jewish. But that interpretation is open to grave doubt. I can, in reality, find no difference between my own inner life of thought and impulse and that of my very close friends whether American or German. So that the picture of a young man disappointed because he can't get the kind of a job he wants, doesn't exhaust, barely indeed touched the dilemma. I didn't know what to do with my life or with myself. (p. 125)

As is seen above, the crisis is not merely a simple experience of discrimination. In the experience of the marginal man it is crucial, for it involves his whole life organization and future career. It defines his place in the world in a way which he had not anticipated. It delimits his present and future in terms of his career, his ideals and aspirations, and most importantly his inmost conception of himself.

This dual consciousness constitutes the main problem in Abraham Cahan's *The Rise*

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4) Ludwig Lewisohn, *Up Stream: An American Chronicle* (New York: Boni and Liveright), pp. 122-3.

of *David Levinsky*, still “the best novel of immigrant life ever written in America.”<sup>5)</sup> This novel is basically a rags-to-riches Jewish Horatio Alger story. The title of the novel is instructive. David rises in America, but he also falls. He becomes a millionaire but he loses his soul in the process. The opening paragraph presents Levinsky’s uniquely Jewish character—the dual consciousness:

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 1881—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.<sup>6)</sup>

David Levinsky was born in the Russian town of Antomir in 1865. The village of Antomir is a shtetl like a thousand others, with its synagogue, its cheder, its run-down houses, its poor Jews, and its dangerous Cossacks. Antomir’s claim to fame is its yeshiva, its Talmudic seminary, which attracts Jews from several provinces. David’s mother points to the multi-volumed Talmud and tells him, “this is the trade I am going to have you learn, and let our enemies grow green with envy.” Tragedy enters in Book III, when David’s mother foolishly rushes out into the street to attack a crowd of Gentiles who had turned from the mild sport of “rolling brightly colored Easter eggs” to the more exciting game of Jew-baiting. Instead of avenging her son, whom the Gentiles had beaten, she is herself killed. This shock is quickly followed by the apostasy of David’s closest friend, Naphtali, who now laughs at Talmudic study. David’s faith is challenged also by the “modern” Minsker family with whom he stays after his mother’s death.

The outbreak of the pogroms of 1881–82 and the mysterious attractions of America combine to influence David’s decision to leave Antomir. Matilda Minsker, with whom David is in love, gives him the money for passage. When Rabbi Sender learns of David’s intentions, he was thunderstruck. He says, “Lord of the World! But one becomes a Gentile there.” David reassures him that “there are lots of good Jews there, and they don’t neglect their Talmud, either,” but the rabbi proves to have been right.

Fresh off the boat in New York as an immigrant, he meets a prospective employer who asks him what his profession is. “I read Talmud,” he replies. “I see,” the man responds, “but that’s no business in America.” America offers David opportunity, but it is at a great price. An old man in a synagogue tells the freshly arrived David, “I wish I could take you to my house, but—well America is not Russia. There is no pity here, no hospitability.” A prostitute tells him: “I am sorry you came here. Honest. You should have stayed at

5) Yaffe, p. 18.

6) Abraham Cahan. *The Rise of David Levinsky* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1917), p. 1.

home and stuck to your holy books. It would have been a thousand times better than coming to America and calling on girls like myself." David is befriended by the famous Hebrew poet, Tevkin, who in America works as a real estate promoter. Tevkin, recognizing the opportunities and freedoms of America, still longs for the Old Country.

"It is of my soul I speak," he said resentfully. . . . There is more poetry there, more music, more feeling . . . The Russian people are really a warm-hearted people. . . . There is much materialism here, too much hurry and too much prose, and—yes, too much machinery. It's all very well to make shows or bread by machinery, but alas! the things of the spirit, too, seem to be machine-made in America." (p. )

Throughout the novel, David is forced to choose between the traditions of religion, education, and intellect on the one hand and materialism, wealth, and business on the other. It is tragic that he opts at each critical juncture for the latter, but it is also the means by which he becomes more rapidly Americanized.

David shears off his earlocks and abandons the 613 commandments by which the truly pious Jew regulates his life. The transition has been prepared for by subtle psychological shifts in Antomir and in New York, but the fall into apostasy is swift:

If you are a Jew of the type to which I belonged when I came to New York and you attempt to bend your religion to the spirit of your new surroundings, it breaks. It falls to pieces. The very clothes I wore and the very food I ate had a fatal effect on my religious habits. A whole book could be written on the influence of a strached collar and a necktie on a man who was brought up as I was. It was inevitable that, sooner or later, I should let a barber shave my sprouting beard. (p. 110)

The day of decision comes when a peddler remarks that David's beard makes him look like a "green one." David's actions fulfill the requirements stated by a popular handbook of the day: "Forget your past, your customs, and your ideals. Select a goal and pursue it with all your might."

David learns to be "a greenhorn no longer." His greatest ambition is to attend City College, which he refers to as his "Temple," but he continues instead in the garment industry and rises to the ranks of millionaires.

David's entire behavior is characterized by 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, David 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 David 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 David'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 from which, were he able to reenter it, he would again be driven in an endless yearning after yearning.

The last section of the novel, "Episodes of a Lonely Life," suggests that David's life is ultimately a failure. David remembers his past with considerable ambivalence. He begins his story with comments on the miraculous metamorphosis that transformed a boy with four cents in his pocket to a man worth two million dollars, but he concludes with serious doubts about his career, and about his identity:

I can never forget the days of my misery. I cannot escape from my old self. My past and my present do not comport well. David, the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher's Synagogue, seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well-known cloak manufacturer. (p. 530).

David Levinsky's nostalgia for his past is purely Jewish. But there is no return for him. As is illustrated in the case of David Levinsky, assimilation in America has meant secularization and loss of ethnic identity or identity crisis. Actually the anxiety accompanying discussions of Jewish identity is greatest among secular Jews and least among the Orthodox. The latter have no doubts about who they are; they have not hesitated to condemn secularists as apostates and to deny that atheists are Jews. Among the Orthodox, there is little doubt about who is and who is not a Jew. Among secular Jews, definitions and conceptions of Jewish identity have proliferated, until Jew is alleged to be anyone born of Jewish parents, anyone converted to Judaism, anyone who considers himself a Jew, anyone who is thought by others to be a Jew.

Usually the children of the immigrant are in a distinctive social situation. As native-

born residents they are identified with the land of their birth and its institutions; but as children of immigrants they inevitably absorb much of the culture carried over from the "old country." They are the meeting point of two streams of culture. To the extent that the two cultures conflict they experience this conflict as a personal problem.

Thus, speaking of the second generation Jewish intellectuals as the representative of the marginal status of the Jews, Irving Howe calls them "twice alienated." That they have largely lost their sense of Jewishness, of belonging to a people with a meaningful tradition, and they have not succeeded in finding a place for themselves in the American scene or the American tradition. What these intellectuals have in common is a marginal status and the sense of estrangement in their relation and attitude toward both general American society and their own Jewish background.

Hence, it is the secular Jew in America who occupies a special vantage point—he is spurred by alienation, a double alienation. Having rejected his own religious heritage he is not fully assimilated into the dominant culture. He is a marginal man living on the fringes of two cultures, able to offer an outside view but not held back by a conflict with conventional theology.

To a large extent, the American Jewish novelist reflects the historical experience of the Jew in America. Stage by stage, the successive alternations in the social structure of the American Jewry are depicted by the writers who are the products of these changes. From the immigrant Abraham Cahan and Ludwig Lewisohn to American-born Philip Roth and Saul Bellow, we perceive the processes of taking root and alienation, of adaptation and recoil which mark the inner biography of the American Jewish community. Within the general framework of American experience and attitudes, the specific problems of the immigrants and later of their sons and grandsons are crystallized and expressed in fiction.

The question of assimilation—the conversion to Americanism—and identity crisis especially for the secular Jews is most well explored by Philip Roth. If Abraham Cahan and Ludwig Lewisohn presented the problem of identity and Americanization of the first generation immigrants, Roth mainly deals with that of their sons and grandsons.

The title of *Goodbye Columbus* is significant because it implies Neil's rejection of the Patimkin's values on several levels. On an immediate level, he is rejecting all that is represented by the phonograph record Ronald Patimkin has kept as a souvenir of his triumphant days with the Ohio State basketball team. Second, he is rejecting Columbus, Ohio, that most American of American cities. Columbus is not an accidental choice; it is also Christopher Columbus, the very discoverer of America, who is being rejected as well. Finally, he is rejecting America's materialism, its success ethic, and its pressures for assimilation, all of which the Patimkins accept without question. The Patimkins have traveled a great distance from Newark to Short Hills. They have made it in America. But in accepting America on its terms rather than on their own, they have lost a great deal. There is a parallel between Roth's *Goodbye Columbus* and Abraham Cahan's *The Rise*

of *David Levinsky*. Like David Levinsky, the Patimkins have risen in America; but also like Levinsky, who traded poverty, the Talmud, and oppression in Europe for wealth, cloak manufacturing, and loneliness in America, the Patimkins have fallen by giving up worthwhile qualities they may have once possessed—their own noses, for example.

Neil Klugman is a twenty-three-year-old adventurer after experience and social advancement. A Philosophy major and a graduate of Newark College of Rutgers University, Neil works in a library and lives with his Aunt Gladys and Uncle Max in a lower-middle-class Newark neighborhood. He has effectively cut himself off from his parents and his religion. When asked if he is orthodox or conservative, he replies, "I'm just Jewish." But what characterizes his feelings about the city in which he has grown up is divided but at the same time deep. On one occasion, while sitting in a park, Neil "felt a deep knowledge of Newark, an attachment so rooted that it could not help but branch out into affection." More typically, however, Newark too painfully reminds Neil of the social fixity that has restricted his dream of the rich life—of a life that carries with it the potential for economic, intellectual and spiritual fulfillment.

Access to this fuller life is offered by Brenda Patimkin, daughter of the wealthy Patimkins of Short Hills. The Patimkins have risen to suburban wealth through sales of kitchen sinks, phenomenally good during the war years. Surely cleanliness is more profitable than godliness. The Patimkin family has whatever goods the world calls good. Their refrigerators burst with fruit; their trees are hung with sporting goods. On one occasion, Neil examines the contents of an old refrigerator in their pine-paneled basement:

I opened the door of the old refrigerator; it was not empty. No longer did it hold butter, eggs, herring in cream sauce, ginger ale, tuna fish salad, an occasional corsage—rather it was heaped with fruit, shelves swelled with it, every color, every texture, and hidden within, every kind of pit. There were greengage plums, black plums, red plums, apricots, nectarines, peaches, long horns of grapes, black, yellow, red, and cherries, cherries flowing out of boxes and staining everything scarlet. And there were melons—cantaloupes and honeydews—and on the top shelf, half of a huge watermelon . . . Oh Patimkins! Fruit grew in their refrigerator and sporting goods dropped from their trees!<sup>7)</sup>

Brenda Patimkin, the family's older daughter, is a paragon of Olympic virtues; she plays tennis, she runs, she swims. She is a far cry from the Yiddishe Momma of yesteryear. She stands for a world sharply contrasted to that of Neil Klugman's Aunt Gladys, a woman of the immigrant generation. Aunt Gladys knows that a growing boy should eat. But Neil is not about to be satisfied with the food she makes the center of her life. Neil describes his aunt with the eye of an outsider:

Life was a throwing off for poor Aunt Gladys, her greatest joys were taking out the garbage,

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7) Philip Roth, *Goodbye Columbus and Five Short Stories* (New York: Modern Library, 1966), p. 43.



emptying her pantry, and making threadbare bundles for what she still referred to as the Poor Jews in Palestine. I only hope she dies with an empty refrigerator, otherwise she'll ruin eternity for everyone else, what with her Velveta turning green, and her navel oranges growing fuzzy jackets down below (p. 7)

To Neil, Brenda is an angel of deliverance: "There were two wet triangles on the back of her tiny-collared white polo shirt, right where her wings would have been if she'd had a pair." When Neil first embraces Brenda, his hands upon her shoulder blades, he senses,

a faint fluttering, as though something stirred so deep in her breasts, so far back it could make itself felt through her shirt. It was like the fluttering of wings, tiny wings no bigger than her breasts. The smallness of the wings did not bother me—it would not take an eagle to carry me up those lousy hundred and eighty feet that make summer nights so much cooler in Short Hills than they are in Newark. (p. 14)

His affair with his "angel" finally proves unsuccessful, however, for Neil does not know how to reach the consummation of his heart's ultimate need.

The marvels of money, and simply physical beauty, are counterpointed by the vision of Gauguin's Tahiti. In the downtown library where Neil works, a little Negro boy comes daily to stare at a book of reproductions of Gauguin. His moan of pleasure is poignant: "man, that's the fuckin life . . . Look, look, look here at this one. Ain't that the fuckin life?" But the breadfruit-and-wild flower life is unobtainable for the little Negro boy, except in fantasy.

For Neil, however, the luxuriant vision of Tahiti is fulfilled by the wealth and luxury of the Patimkins: "I sat at the Information Desk thinking about Brenda and reminding myself that that evening I would have to get gas before I started up to Short Hills, which I could see now, in my mind's eye, at dusk, rose-colored, like a Gauguin stream."

As Neil's involvement with Brenda becomes more serious, what Neil discovers is that involvement incurs responsibilities that he is not ready to accept. Brenda, who first appeared to Neil to be "a sailor's dream of a Polynesian maiden" wishes to impose upon Neil normal conventional demands as they are conveyed to her through her parents: marriage, then a job in her father's business of manufacturing kitchen and bathroom sinks. Although he is attracted to Brenda and to the Patimkin wealth, Neil is not ready to commit himself, especially to a family like the Patimkins. Brenda's father, Ben, is a generous but coarse man; her mother is an overbearing, insensitive matriarch who mindlessly flaunts her money and her Jewish orthodoxy (when Neil asks Mrs. Patimkin if she is familiar with Martin Buber, she can only reply, "Is he *reformed?*"); Brenda's brother, Ron, is a former Ohio State basketball player who entertains himself by listening to his "Goodbye Columbus" record, a record that nostalgically recounts the glories of Ohio State. To counter the crude power of these Brobdingnags (as Neil calls them) and to

escape the marriage that all the Patimkins expect, Neil suggests an alternative to Brenda: she can buy a diaphragm.

In suggesting that Brenda buy a diaphragm, a symbol of the sterility of the relationship, Neil brings to the surface his previously repressed understanding that Patimkin wealth does not hold “fruitful” rewards for his spiritual selfhood. While he waits for Brenda to be fitted for the contraceptive device, he enters St. Patrick’s Cathedral, where he perceives for the first time just how far his desire for the rich life has led him away from his spiritual quest:

I took a seat at the rear and while I couldn’t bring myself to kneel, I did lean forward onto the back of the bench before me and held my hands together and closed my eyes. I wondered if I looked like a Catholic, and in my wonderment I began to make a little speech to myself. Can I call the self-conscious words I spoke prayer? At any rate, I called my audience God. God, I said, I am twenty-three years old. I want to make the best of things. Now the doctor is about to wed Brenda to me, and I am not entirely certain this is all for the best. What is it I love, Lord? Why have I chosen? Who is Brenda? The race is to the swift. Should I have stopped to think?,

I was getting no answers, but I went on. If we meet You at all, God, it’s that we’re carnal, and acquisitive, and thereby partake of You. I am carnal, and I know You approve, I just know it. But how carnal can I get? I am acquisitive. Where do I turn now in my acquisitiveness? Where do we meet? Which prize is You?

It was an ingenious meditation, and suddenly I felt ashamed. I got up and walked outside, and the noise of Fifth Avenue met me with an answer:

Which prize do you think, *schmuck*? Gold dinnerware, sporting-goods trees, nectarines, garbage disposals, bumpless noses, Patimkin sink, Bonwit Teller—

But damn it, God, that *is* You!

And God only laughed, that clown. (p. 100)

The shame that Neil feels for his “ingenious meditation” is due to a conscious recognition that Patimkin wealth is not the answer, finally, to his vague yearning for paradisaical peace and serenity.

At the end of the novel, Neil argues with Brenda (significantly, the argument centers around the diaphragm, which Brenda has, wittingly or unwittingly, allowed her parents to discover), and Neil says a final farewell to her. He refuses to pay the price. He will not sacrifice his moral integrity for a comfortable position in the Patimkin household, even if it means losing Brenda. Neil’s rejection of Brenda and her way of life is not a painless one, however, for he realizes that the experience has taken its toll. In rejecting Brenda, he has lost a dream and gained a sad insight into the shallowness of his quest.

In making himself, even in making God, over in the Patimkin image, he has lost sight of larger intellectual and spiritual goals, goals symbolized by the Newark Public Library, "whose long marble stairs . . . led to Tahiti."

In the last scene, Neil stands before the Lamont Library, above Harvard Yard, and muses about his identity. In the glass font of the building he sees his own reflection:

Suddenly I wanted to set down my suitcase and pick up a rock and heave it right through the glass. But of course I didn't. I simply looked at myself in the mirror the light made of the window. I was only that substance, I thought, those limbs, that face that I saw in front of me. I looked, but the outside of me gave up little information about the inside of me. I wished I could scoot around to the other side of the window, faster than light or sound . . . to get behind that image and catch whatever it was that looked through those eyes. What was it inside of me that had turned pursuit and clutching into love, and then turned it inside out again? What was it that had turned winning into losing, and losing—who knows—into winning? . . . I looked hard at the image of me, at that darkening of the glass, and then my gaze pushed through it, over the cool floor, to a broken wall of books, imperfectly shelved. (p. 135)

With this image in mind, Neil returns to his old job at the Newark Public Library, where he begins work on the first day of the Jewish New Year.

Surely it is his identity that Neil seeks as he shuttles back and forth between his aunt's apartment in Newark and Short Hills. Newark and Short Hills are opposite poles of attraction for Neil. Newark with poverty-stricken Jewish neighborhood, with first generation Aunt Gladys going to Workmen's Circle picnics, and employment for Neil in the Public Library. Short Hills with houses spread out so far in affluence, with second generation American Mrs. Patimkin doing volunteer work for Hadassah while her black servant makes dinner, and Mr. Patimkin commuting daily into the city to his business. Newark represents dirt, traffic and crime, but something real to Neil whereas Short Hills stands for dream.

Neil cannot join the Patimkins. At the same time, he cannot remain in the world of Aunt Gladys either. He does not commit himself to any particular set of values which these two worlds represent. In this sense, Neil partakes of the characteristic ambivalence of the marginal man.

What gives real depth to Roth's notation of the social and ethnic changes that assimilation has produced is that he fixes them not only by their external signs—country club membership, fixing of nose, the schools the children go to, etc.—but also by their subtle effects upon the individual's sense of his personal, moral identity as a Jew.

For the boy in the *Conversion of the Jews* struggles to get out from under the shadow of the old, unreasonable dogmas, but the problem is rather that of one whose Jewishness has become merely a vague feeling and requires both a direct challenge from the outside and an act of moral imagination to come alive and identify him and his basic values. Even

*Goodbye Columbus*, for all its thick social and cultural reference, turns out to be really a story about the fatal moral demands that Neil Klugman has made on Brenda Patimkin and, as Neil's aunt puts it, on her "fancy-schmancy" world, and involves, though in different terms and with more ambiguous results, the same problem of identity, the same moral question of "What am I?" Thus Roth is clearly writing about the modern Secular Jew in America.

The central character in *The Conversion of the Jews*, significantly named Ozzie Freedman, is a thirteen-year-old Jewish boy who brings a great deal of distress to his mother and to his rabbi by asking difficult questions about his religion. Rabbi Marvin Binder has twice summoned Ozzie's mother to the Hebrew School because of Ozzie's seeming impertinence during so-called "free discussion" period.

Now Rabbi Binder must summon Mrs. Freedman again, for Ozzie has questioned the rabbi's explanation that the Immaculate Conception is quite impossible. Ozzie explains his own position to his friend, Itzie Lieberman, by pointing to the omnipotence of a God who could create the world in six days: "I asked Binder if He could make all that in six days, and He could *pick* the six days. He wanted right out of nowhere, why couldn't he let a woman have a baby without having intercourse."

Previously, Ozzie had caused the rabbi's displeasure by asking how Binder could call the Jews "The Chosen People" if the Declaration of Independence claimed all men to be created equal. Too, Ozzie had dared to ask why some of his relatives considered a plane crash a tragedy only because eight of the fifth-eight victims were Jewish. Ozzie's question about the Immaculate Conception is, it seems, too much for the rabbi and Mrs. Freedman to bear. When Ozzie tells his mother that she must once again see Rabbi Binder, she hits Ozzie across the face with her hand. And when Rabbi Binder forces Ozzie to participate in "free-discussion" in the following class meeting, Ozzie's contribution ("You don't know anything about God!") results in the rabbi's slapping Ozzie squarely on the nose.

The rabbi's slap precipitates a fast-paced response. Ozzie twice calls Rabbi Binder a "bastard" and then races to the roof of the school. He locks the only door to the roof, and then pauses to consider his actions:

A question shot through his brain. "Can this be *me*?" For a thirteen-year-old who had just labeled his religious leader a bastard, twice, it was not an improper question. Louder and louder the question came to him—"Is it me? Is it me?"—until he discovered himself no longer kneeling, but racing crazily towards the edge of the roof, his eyes crying, his throat screaming, and his arms flying every which way as though not his own.

"Is it me? Is it Me Me Me Me! It has to be me—but is it!" (p. 146-148)

After a few moments, however, "his self-examination began to grow fuzzy." He peers at the street below, where a crowd has begun to form. Rabbi Binder, standing in the attitude of a dictator, points a menacing finger at Ozzie and orders him to come down from the

roof immediately.

Ozzie does not answer. Instead, looking down at the world beneath him he started to feel the meaning of the word control: he feels power.

Ozzie's mother, having just arrived for her conference with Binder, pleads for her "martyr" to come down. Rabbi Binder repeats her words: "Don't be a martyr, my baby. Don't be a martyr"; the other children, however, misunderstanding the word, join in singing "Be a Martin, be a Martin." At first Ozzie is confused about his choice: JUMP or DON'T JUMP. Soon, however, he asserts his new-found power by demanding that everyone must tell him, first individually and then all together, that God can do anything, that He can make a child without intercourse, and that they all believe in Jesus Christ. He concludes with a final demand:

"Promise me, promise me you'll never hit anybody about God."

He had asked only his mother, but for some reason everyone kneeling in the street promised he would never hit anybody about God.

Once again there was silence.

"I can come down now, Mamma" the boy on the roof finally said. He turned his head both ways as though checking the traffic lights. "Now I can come down . . ." (p. 155)

Thirteen-year-old Ozzie Freedman is drawn by a desire to be, as his last name suggests, a freed man—to know who he is and what he is for. But he is only dimly aware of the impulse that drives him, and his final pronouncement that "you should never hit anybody about God" indicates the limits of his spiritual insight. His quest for spiritual truth is genuine in a sense—so much so that he is willing to suffer the indignities of social disapproval to achieve his end, a disapproval that is dramatized by the slaps administered by his mother and his rabbi. Ozzie sifts through his home life and his religious training for spiritual truth, but he is thwarted at every turn.

At home Ozzie is confronted with a mother whose religiosity is limited to lighting candles for the Sabbath and for her dead husband.

When his mother lit the candles . . . her eyes would get glassy with tears. Even when his father was alive Ozzie remembered that her eyes had gotten glassy, so it didn't have anything to do with his dying. It had something to do with lighting the candles. (pp. 143-144)

Ozzie perceives the importance of the ritual for his mother. At other times she did not look like a chosen person, but when she lit candles "she looked like something better; like a woman who knew momentarily that God could do anything." The moment passes all too quickly, however, when Ozzie tells her that she must see Rabbi Binder after school she strikes him. It seems that, after all, Mrs. Freedman is no more convinced that God can do anything than is Rabbi Binder.

Rabbi Binder is as spiritually empty as Mrs. Freedman. He can offer only clichéd theo-

logical responses about cultural unity and historical evidence in replying to Ozzie's questions. "What Ozzie wanted to know was always something different." Rabbi Binder "binds" Ozzie to the letter of theology, and by so doing he fetters the spiritual quest that Ozzie unconsciously wishes to take:

When it was Ozzie's turn to read aloud from the Hebrew book the rabbi had asked him petulantly why he didn't read more rapidly. He was showing no progress. Ozzie said he could read faster but that if he did he was sure not to understand what he was reading. Nevertheless, at the rabbi's repeated suggestion Ozzie tried, and showed a great talent, but in the midst of a long passage he stopped short and said he didn't understand a word he was reading, and started in again at a drag-footed pace. Then came the soul-battering, (pp. 144-145)

Rabbi Binder inhibits the religious experience by insisting upon a doctrinaire and literal theology when he is exposed to the naive but nonetheless spiritually "right" impulses of his students. His religious sense seems no more fully developed than Mrs. Freedman's.

Binder and Mrs. Freedman represent the narrow religiosity from which Ozzie wishes to escape. The religious sensibilities of Binder and Mrs. Freedman are not meaningful to Ozzie. Ozzie's flight to the roof is initially an attempt to escape this limitation ("he had just run to get away"), but from his new perspective on the roof Ozzie is momentarily given an insight into his own spiritual and, ironically, communal power. For a moment, Ozzie becomes Christ, saint, and martyr in one, offering his life symbolically for his followers, who kneel in a "whole little upside down heaven" below him. Believing that he has accomplished the conversion of the Jews through a spiritual revitalization, he concludes, "Now I can come down," and here-enters the community by hurling himself from spiritual as well as physical heights into "the yellow net that glowed in the evening's edge like an overgrown halo."

Ozzie works within the community that oppresses him, rises above the community only as a last desperate action, and symbolically as well as literally leaps back into the community at the end of the tale. Ozzie struggles for a sense of self in an undefined and unarticulated way that befits his age. What he is protesting is his individuality rather than his theology.

Thus the question of assimilation and identity has been the constant concern of the Jewish writers in America. But what distinguished the Jewish writers of the 1950s and 1960s and their predecessors—Abraham Cahan and Ludwig Lewisohn, on the one hand and Philip Roth and Saul Bellow on the other, for example—was not so much their choice of subject matter as the status they now held as American writers. American Jewish writers are no longer concerned to prove that they are spectators no longer but full participants in the cultural life of their country.

An obvious reason for this change is the Jewish experience in Nazi Germany which dramatically thrust the Jews to the forefront of world consciousness. Another is suggested by the heralded decline of the WASP and the new search for ethnic roots. Yet even more profound answer is contained in David Daiches' remark that "to a certain extent modern American literary Jewishness is a stance of the sensitive man."<sup>9</sup> Thus, to have been born a Jew was to have been thrust into a condition that all men in our time were destined to enter by a more devious route, "the sense of being an outsider, the sense of being homeless and in exile. Because in a chaotic era like ours, everyone is forced to ask the questions which are the natural inheritance of the outsider: Who am I? Where do I belong?"

Leslie Fiedler has suggested a provocative interpretation in this respect:

In the high literature of Europe and, more slowly, in that of the United States, Gentile and Jew have joined forces to portray the Jewish character as a figure representing man's fate in the modern, urbanized world. In general, the point of such portrayals is to suggest that we live in an age of rootlessness, alienation, and terror, in which the exiled condition so long thought peculiar to the Jew comes to seem the human lot.<sup>10</sup>

In this regard, the achievements of Abe Cahan, Ludwig Lewisohn, Saul Bellow and Philip Roth are one result of the process of assimilation and its concomitant crisis of identity. Bellow's fiction is in large measure reflective in the sense that his achievement is the literary climax of social process.<sup>11</sup> It is in the works of Bellow that the "Centrality" of Jewish experience itself was finally established.

Bellow himself is par excellence the explorer of marginality. Born in Canada and reared in Chicago, at home with Yiddish literature and with the classics of Western culture, Bellow himself is most concerned in the problem of uncertain identity of modern man. His *Dangling Man* is an exploration of the theme of marginality in urban civilization. It examines the identity crisis of Joseph, the hero, as it is revealed in his journal, tracing his progressive alienation from family, friends, and society and his final desperate attempt to accommodate himself to others with all their imperfections because he makes the frightening discovery that he lacks the resources to survive alone.

Joseph's surname is never given in the novel. He is a young man, married, a Canadian citizen who has been living in Chicago for eighteen years. He is employed by the Inter-American Travel Bureau. In the spring of 1942 he receives an induction notice from the Army, as a result of which he quits his job, submits to a physical, and is accepted for service. But before he actually becomes a soldier and joins himself to the war effort, questions

8) Roth, pp. 147-148.

9) David Daiches, "Breakthrough?" in Irving Malin, ed., *Contemporary American-Jewish Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 30.

10) Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1960), p. 253.

11) Allen Guttman, *The Jewish Writer in America: Assimilation and the Crisis of Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 12.

about his past and present are raised by officialdom. For almost a year he is kept in a state of uncertainty as a “friendly alien,” a “la.” then a “3a”; he is classified and reclassified, finally accepted, but not drafted. This official search for Joseph’s identity stimulates his personal quest for identity. No longer an active member of the civilian world, and not yet committed to the military, he becomes “condemned to freedom.” His philosophical mind is given full rein. Since his wife Iva’s library job is adequate to support the two of them, he is thrown completely on his own resources. He begins to measure out his life in aimless days and ways. He dangles not merely between the military world and the civilian world, but between the material world of action and the ideal world of thought, between detachment and involvement, between life and death. He becomes more and more introspective and isolated. As time drags on and the disparity between the ideal world and the real world becomes more apparent to him, he grows less confident of his ability to make sense out of the universe or to discover his proper relationship to it. At last, in some desperation, Joseph decided that he will find no answers in his detached state, and he goes to his draft board to submit himself to the same fate his countrymen are enduring. The novel records this progress from Joseph, with the philosophical set of mind to G.I. Joe.

The novel’s setting is the alien world of the existentialist hero, a place of nausea and terror with the presence of “threatening other”:

There was a time when people were in the habit of addressing themselves frequently and felt no shame at making a record of their inward transactions. But to keep a journal nowadays is considered a kind of self-indulgence, a weakness, and in poor taste. For this is an era of hardboiled-dom. Today, the code of the athlete, of the tough boy—an American inheritance, I believe, from the English gentleman—that curious mixture of striving, asceticism, and rigor, the origins of which some trace to Alexander the Great—is stronger than ever.<sup>12)</sup>

Joseph feels imprisoned in one room in the inexpensive rooming house: “I, in this room, separate, alienate, distrustful, find in my purpose not an open world, but a closed, hopeless jail. My perspectives end in the walls.” He suffers from a “feeling of strangeness, of not quite belonging to the world, of lying under a cloud and looking up at it.” He begins, figuratively, to fade away as a person. Early in the book Joseph distinguishes between the New Joseph and the Old Joseph he was before he began to dangle:

Very little about the Joseph of a year ago pleases me. I cannot help laughing at him, at some of his traits and saying. Joseph, aged twenty-seven, an employee of the Inter-American Travel Bureau, a tall, already slightly flabby but, nevertheless, handsome young man, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin—major, History—married five years, amiable, generally takes himself to be well-liked . . . He is a person greatly concerned of his own being, its impor-

12) Saul Bellow, *Dangling Man* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1944), p. 9.



tance. Yet he is not abnormally cold, nor is he egotistic. He keeps a tight hold because, as is happening to him. He wants to miss nothing. (p. 27)

The old Joseph was mainly a "creature of plans": he has "a close grasp on himself, that he knows what he wants and how to go about getting it . . . has worked everything out in accordance with a general plan." His life has been devoted to formulating an answer to the central question that he posed for himself: "How should a good man live? What ought he do?" That he was qualified as a good man was clear to the Old Joseph. Because he believed in his own goodness, he believed also in the goodness of others. With the tension of war came the disruption of the Old Joseph's plans and the creation of the New Joseph, whose confidence is shaken, whose values are undermined, and whose plans for the future are as uncertain as his dangling stance in the present. The question, "How should a good man live?" still cries out for an answer, but Joseph finds himself increasingly incapable of formulating one. His own life, he is painfully aware, provides no answer.

His patience diminishes and the question of his identity presents itself with ever-mounting intensity. Joseph tries to cash Iva's check, which she has endorsed to him, in their local bank. He is greeted by a vice president, Mr. Frink, who questions his identification, calls him by his first name, and refuses to cash the check because he is unemployed. Joseph reacts instantly, creating a scene.

A similar scene occurs in December in the Arrow, a restaurant in which Jimmy Burns, who had been once Joseph's comrade will not acknowledge Joseph's greeting because Joseph is no longer part of the movement. Joseph interprets this slight as a refusal to acknowledge his existence. He becomes enraged, confronts Burns, and forces him into a begrudged response.

The deterioration of his relations with friends and society is paralleled by strains in his various friendships and by quarrels within his family.

Joseph has never been close to his brother Amos who married a wealthy woman and has become a successful businessman. Amos is disappointed in Joseph's choice of career—his choice of failure. After a quarrel at the dinner table at Christmas during which Joseph refuses to consider becoming a military officer, believing that to succeed would be to climb "upon the backs of the dead," he rejects both Amos' present of a hundred dollars and his way of life—those profiteering values. Amos cannot understand and thinks Joseph a fool.

Relations with Iva's family also sustain an added strain. Visiting his father-in-law, sick in bed, Joseph asks Mr. Almstadt, "How did you ever manage to stick it out so long?" "Stick what out?" "With her." That is, with Mrs. Almstadt. Although the old man has frequently criticized his wife, he naturally grows angry when others usurp his socially accepted role.

Joseph's relation with his wife begins to deteriorate too. Iva is a sensible, hard-working,

devoted wife. She tries to make a difficult situation as easy on Joseph as possible. But Joseph begins to see Iva as another flaw in his rapidly disintegrating plan, and remarks that Iva is "as far as ever from what I once desired to make her. I am afraid she has not capacity for that." He reflects on Iva's failure to fulfill his expectations for her:

Was it possible that she should not want to be guided, formed by me? I expected some opposition. No one, I would have said then, no one came simply and of his own accord, effortlessly, to prize the most truly human traditions, the heavenly cities. You had to be taught to struggle toward them . . . But it was now evident that Iva did not want to be towed . . . Eventually I learned that Iva could not live in my infatuations. (pp. 99-100)

Distanced from Iva, Joseph seeks solace in the arms of Kitty Daumler, a "warm, uncomplicated" girl who flatteringly finds him desirable. Their affair lasts two months before Joseph discovers that such activity is out of character for him. Joseph is angered when, coming to her apartment unexpectedly to retrieve his copy of *Dubliners*, he discovers her in bed with another man. Again, Joseph feels his identity threatened, his place usurped by another. He finds all occasion informing against him.

Closely interlocked with the issue of identity is that of mortality. He is aided in this philosophical search by the voice of his divided self, to whom he gives a name: To As Raison Aussi, the Spirit of Alternatives. He has to invent a Spirit of Alternatives to talk to so that his ideas can have a sounding board especially when he affronts his friends and rejects his family.

As the occasion for both death and dramatic human conflict in the realm of actuality, the war is a central problem for Joseph. He does not wish to profit from it as Amos is doing. If he goes, he tells Amos, it will be in emulation of Socrates, as a common foot soldier. But Joseph is not sure that he should go. It is not so much a question of death, which he has come to accept but his destiny. The question that puzzles him is: Is it indeed his destiny? Does his life of quiet desperation have no unique qualities to distinguish it from the mass of men? Must he submit his individuality to an institution as totally limiting as a wartime army? He takes up these questions with the Spirit of Alternatives.

The Spirit of Alternatives asks the questions which Joseph has been wrestling with in vain for much of the past year. He asks whether Joseph truly has a separate destiny. Can he define himself in any essential way apart from the others who make up his world? Joseph pales. He cannot answer the question. He reaches a dark moment in which he feels that reason has nothing to do with action.

Ten days later, Joseph notifies his draft board that he is ready for immediate induction. Because he realizes that "the moment I had been waiting for had come, and that it was impossible to resist any longer. I must give myself up." He gives up his freedom because the tensions of marginality are too much for him. His last entry records:

I am no longer to be held accountable for myself: I am grateful for that, I am in the other hands, relieved in self-determination, freedom cancelled. Hurray for regular hours! And for the supervision of the spirit! Long live regimentation! (p. 191)

Joseph celebrates the end of his long, painful isolation, the return to community experience and the bare possibility that he may indeed find answers to his questions in a new way of life.

If the marginality of the secular Jew is no more one that is unique to being a Jew, as is seen in *Dangling Man*, a last question can be asked. Has the American Jewry fully assimilated to the American culture that its marginality was merely a period of transition from the old culture to the new, as Park and Stonequist argued?

In an answer to this question, I may draw upon Sklare's criticism of the early sociologists' (including Park and Stonequist) theory of assimilation that immigrant groups would go through a three stage process of self segregation, acculturation and assimilation (and marginality would disappear at the last stage). Speaking of American Jewry, Sklare says that assimilation has occurred in many individual cases, but it did not become a mass phenomenon, that most of American Jews are presently located on the level known as acculturation. And the continuance of Jewish identity owes greatly to the emergence of "cultural pluralism" advanced by Horace Kallen.<sup>13)</sup>

So we come back to the mystery with which we began: the mystery of Jewish distinctiveness—the Jewish paradox. What was it that made the American Jews so ready to break into American culture while keeping their own heritage? We know some portion of the answer—the dialectical training of talmudic study. But something of a mystery still remains. Would they then, remain Jews because of this duality? . . . that is a question.

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