

ENLIGHTENMENT AND GHETTO:

MICHAEL GOLD'S DUAL VISION

Jerry Schuchalter

University of Turku

When Michael Gold wrote his celebrated *Jews Without Money* (1930) he was most certainly responding to the increasingly popular anti-Semitic belief that the Jews were controlling the purse strings in America and elsewhere. The familiar stereotypes of Jewish bankers and Wall Street stock swindlers were particularly fashionable during this period, and while Gold's principal animus for writing the book may not have been primarily to combat anti-Semitism, but to present his own struggles in the slums and his discovery of the class struggle and socialism, the significance of this theme for Gold's novel cannot be denied. This becomes especially apparent in the introduction he wrote for his work in 1935. Here Gold emphasizes that, despite Nazi propaganda, the vast majority of Jews are living in poverty and belong to the proletariat. This does not however prevent him from succumbing himself to a variant of left wing anti-Semitism: »And Jewish bankers are fascists everywhere. Hitler has received their support, both with money and ideas.«¹

In the novel itself the same juxtaposition of conflicting viewpoints appears. While Gold depicts with great vividness the struggles and suffering of the Jews on the Lower East Side, there is a curious representation that almost belies this intention. Leslie Fiedler already noted this in his essay »The Jew as Mythic American« (1963) that Gold finds recourse to a stock anti-Semitic image - that of the Jewish landlord.² Fiedler argues that no anti-Semitic writer could have presented a more hideous view of the Jewish patriarch than that presented in *Jews Without Money*. In fact, this description conforms almost exactly to the kinds of caricatures found, as Fiedler notes, in Julius Streicher's *Der Stürmer*: »One saw only his scaly yellow face and bulging eyes; he was like an anxious spider« (JM, 256).³ The Jewish landlord is physically repellent, wallowing in filth, as well as being a tyrant who is addicted to the money fetish. In his characteristically iconoclastic way, Fiedler argues that not only famous Gentile modernists, such as Hemingway, Dreiser, Wolfe and Fitzgerald freely employed anti-Semitic imagery, but also the Jewish writers of the period - even vociferous writers on the left - were guilty of this practice.⁴ Yet if we examine Fiedler's interpretation more closely, we notice that he has only discussed one section of the novel. The narrator in *Jews Without Money* suggests that the Jewish landlord is as much a victim of the cash nexus as other Jews trapped in poverty on the Lower East Side. In

¹ Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1935). See page 3 of an unpaginated introduction.

² Leslie A. Fiedler, »The Jew as Mythic American,« *Ramparts* (Autumn, 1963): 39. See also Fiedler's later essay »The Jew in the American Novel« 40 in *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler, II*, (New York: Stein & Day, 1971) for a reworking of similar themes.

³ All references to *Jews Without Money* will be taken from the following edition: New York: Avon Books, 1965 and designated (JM + page no.).

⁴ Fiedler, »The Jew as Mythic American« 39-40.

fact, the narrator spends two pages, individualizing the figure of the landlord and examining his fixation, which he regards as a disease (JM, 253-54).⁵

Fiedler perhaps more than any other critic sets the contours of Gold criticism and so-called proletarian writing in the 1930s. In another essay Fiedler remarks that *Jews Without Money* is »the prototype of the Proletarian Novel.«⁶ Commenting briefly on its form, Fiedler continues, »Not quite a novel, really, or quite an autobiography, it seems more than anything a collection of vignettes of Jewish life making a moral point - a conversion tract illustrating the passage of a thinking man from Judaism to Communism.«⁷ The inference that Fiedler however draws from this is even more significant for assessing Gold's work: »The pattern is simple enough ...: to make of 'Jewish nationalism' and the Jewish religion the chief symbols of reaction; the pious man, the pillar of the synagogue, appears as a landlord and owner of warehouses, the rabbi becomes an old lecher; and the rituals of the Jews instances of backwardness and hypocrisy.«⁸ It is evident that Fiedler assigns a one dimensionality to Gold's novel, attributing to it all the cardinal sins a novel should not contain, such as moralizing and sentimentality, as well as an inability to engage seriously with Jewish traditions and values.⁹

Yet other critics have taken Gold's achievement more seriously. Jules Chametzky places *Jews Without Money* in a continuum of narratives, all serving to illustrate »a process of acculturation over three generations ...«¹⁰ Chametzky makes an important observation in Gold's novel, pointing the way to a new discussion of *Jews Without Money*: »There are two voices jostling for dominance in this passage [in *Jews Without Money*] - and an inability, finally, to integrate them or to decide between them. ... That these questions can arise reveals the uncertainties, the tensions, that exist in this second or transitional phase.«¹¹ Chametzky employs the phrase »bifurcation of sensibility« to describe Gold and other writers who, according to

⁵ In Gold's writings we do not find the same tortured and vituperative examples of Jewish self-hate, frequently found in the works of other Jewish radicals. See Paul Mendes-Flohr »The Throes of Assimilation: Self Hatred and the Jewish Revolutionary,« in *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991) 67-76.

⁶ Fiedler, »The Jew in the American Novel« in *Collected Essays*, 2, 89.

⁷ Fiedler, »The Jew in the American Novel« 89.

⁸ Fiedler, 89. Fiedler cements his literary assessment of Gold by referring to him as »the Al Jolson of the Communist Movement« (89), adding »indeed, in and through him, a cloying tradition of self-pity, which is also, alas, Jewish, and which had already possessed the American stage, moves on into literature« (89-90).

⁹ Fiedler's influence has been pervasive, affecting more recent judgments of Gold's work. For example, Sam B. Girgus writes, »Michael Gold serves as an example of the anti-jeremiad tradition. He rejected the myth of America but ultimately failed to produce a meaningful alternative because of his inability to mediate between his bitterness over America and his adherence to Communism.« See »The New Covenant: the Jews and the Myth of America,« in *The American Self: Myth, Ideology, and Popular Culture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981) 110.

¹⁰ Jules Chametzky, »Notes on the Assimilation of the Jewish Writer: Abraham Cahan to Saul Bellow,« *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien*, 9 (1964): 173.

¹¹ Chametzky 176.

Chametzky, belong to »the second transitional generation of American Jewish writers.«¹² »Bifurcation of sensibility is defined as «The two views, the two voices, neither penetrate nor wholly invalidate the other, finally, but there is no synthesis -.« ...»¹³

In Chametzky's discussion of Gold's writing, several assumptions about the structure of the literary work become visible. Comparing Gold's work invidiously with that of Bellow, Chametzky asserts, »There is authority behind Bellow's language - assurance and precision in his thought and emotion.... The combination of learning and observation, of high style and vernacular, by its wit and delicate irony convinces us, that here is an author *in control*.«¹⁴ Chametzky clearly reveals his adherence to the so-called New Criticism of the fifties, emphasizing the author's »authority« and »control« as the essential elements of the literary work, both of which are said to be necessary for establishing unity and integrity, without which a literary work is said to be flawed.

However since the eclipse of the New Criticism other approaches have come to discover virtues in the dividedness of the literary work, preferring to find in the concept of *polyphony* the complexity and mystery that the literary text ought to possess. *Jews Without Money* is an example of a text that professes to do one thing and ends up doing another - or at least presents two contradictory narratives that coexist with one another, illuminating the dramatic dimensions of proletarian fiction.¹⁵ Granville Hicks already noted this dissonance in 1933 in his study *The Great Tradition*, which attempted to rewrite American literary history by employing stringent Marxist criteria. Commenting on what he sees as the »weaknesses« in proletarian writing, Hicks notes:

... all radical writers, even those born in the working class, have acquired many of the ideas and attitudes of the bourgeoisie, and though there may be much of value for them in bourgeois traditions, there is also much that is incompatible with the philosophy to which they now subscribe, and the resulting conflict makes itself known in their works. Even Michael Gold, who has been in the radical movement for years, interpreted East Side life largely in terms of his original attitude to it, and as a result we are not prepared for the conversion to socialism with which the book ends¹⁶

What Hicks describes as a »conflict« between bourgeois and proletarian traditions has since found other explanations. The work of literary studies has been long aware of the complexities of

¹² Chametzky 179.

¹³ Chametzky 179. Chametzky employs this analysis in Clifford Odets's play *Waiting for Lefty* (1935). He argues that Gold and Odets fit into the same category of the American Jewish writer of the middle or transitional period.

¹⁴ Chametzky 177.

¹⁵ Gold criticism has noted this fact from the very inception of *Jews Without Money*. Rolf Meyn writes that the initial responses to the novel ranged from disappointment in Gold's deviation from his own political principles of »proletarian realism« to praise of Gold's evocative powers. In fact Meyn writes that for the first reviewers of Gold's novel, »das 'conversion ending' wurde zumeist völlig übersehen.« See Rolf Meyn, *Die »Rote Dekade«: Studien zur Literaturkritik und Romanliteratur der dreißiger Jahre in den USA* (Hamburg: Hamburger Buchagentur, 1980) 169.

¹⁶ Granville Hicks, *The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature Since the Civil War* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969) 300. Hicks, as we know, recanted his previous Marxist position, attributing his heretical judgments about canonical writers to his Marxism and his youth. See the Afterword to *The Great Tradition*, 307-322 in the edition mentioned above.

intertextuality and intratextuality with its attendant notions of dialogue and subversiveness. Further, the literature of ethnicity in America is replete with ambivalence and conflicting motives. As Werner Sollors shows, the ethnic sensibility has been dominated by two impulses - the longing for »descent« and the need for »consent«. Descent means simply the desire to belong to a cultural-ethnic group or category and consent means the desire to pursue the standard American belief in individualism and self-advancement. The first impulse, according to Sollors, was rooted in the past, tied to such values as tradition and ascribed status. The second impulse was wildly free of the past and in full pursuit of a future unfettered by allegiance to tradition or ancestry.¹⁷ In Gold's case he was reenacting a familiar conflict that had its inception long before *Jews Without Money* was written. Karl Marx, in his early essay - »Zur Judenfrage« (1843) - had already intimated, however unintentionally, the principal dilemma in socialist thinking and in Enlightenment thinking as well when he polemically maintained that it was not the Jew who must be emancipated, but humanity who must be emancipated from the Jew. In other words, do the imperatives of Enlightenment and socialist thinking necessarily preclude the existence or perpetuation of ethnic or national cultures? Even in his theoretical writings Gold hovers between his belief in ethnicity and his vision of a messianic socialist future. In his early tract, »Towards Proletarian Art« (1921), he describes himself as »a boy of the tenement.«¹⁸ This is of course not the tenement as ideal type, but the tenement that Gold immortalizes in his novel and sketches is the Jewish tenement culture of the Lower East Side. In the same essay, Gold writes,

The Social Revolution of the world today arises out of the deep need of the masses for the old primitive group life. Too long have they suppressed that instinct most fundamental to their nature - the instinct of human solidarity. Man turns bitter as a competitive animal. In the Orient, where millions live and labor and die, peace has brooded in the air for centuries. There have never been individuals there, but family clans and ancestor worshipers, so that men have felt themselves as part of a mystic group extending from the dim past into the unfolding future. Men have gathered peace from that bond, and strength to support the sorrow of life.¹⁹

Gold's »Social Revolution« is more rooted in the tribal community than in the classless society, free from the constraints of capitalist production. His surprising allusions to the Orient and to »a mystic group« reveal that Gold is as deeply moved by visions of a traditional ethnic community as he is by a proletarian society.²⁰

The ghetto however in *Jews without Money* is more complex than a mere antipode or foil to the progressive vision of the Enlightenment. It is a place of enormous vitality as well as that of profound oppression, engendering, as the narrator shows, a panoply of stories and anecdotes. On one occasion, the narrator exclaims, »Day after day we explored the street, we wandered in

¹⁷ Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹⁸ Gold, »Towards Proletarian Art« in *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*, ed. Michael Folsom (New York: International Publishers, 1972) 65.

¹⁹ Gold, »Towards Proletarian Art« 66-67.

²⁰ Michael Folsom comments that »Towards Proletarian Art« »was to Gold the source of pride as well as embarrassment in later years.« It was presumably not as explicitly and consistently Marxist as his later works. See *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology* 62.

this remarkable dream of a million Jews« (JM, 23-24).²¹ The ghetto in Gold's narrative assumes the traditional imagery of a realm besieged by external enemies, cramped and rife with injustice. However, it is also a realm that can be metamorphosed into the stuff of fairy tales: »My gang seized upon one of these Delancey Street Lots, and turned it, with the power of imagination, into a vast Western plain« (JM, 29). Again and again in *Jews without Money* ethical and social indictments are juxtaposed with the narrator's ability to transform and transcend the squalor of ghetto existence through dream and myth. An example of the latter is the figure of »Nigger.« Endowed with a name signifying certain mythic attributes in Gold's novel, »Nigger« is the hero of fairy tales and oral narrative, rebelling against authority and injustice and overcoming great odds in defeating his enemies.²² Gold's description of the battle with the rival gang is, as he himself writes, filled with all the imagery of stock adventure yarns accessible even to immigrant children in the ghetto (JM, 30-31).

Jews Without Money is thus more than a mere novel of social protest. It is deeply anchored in another narrative - that of remembrance and initiation. The initial lines of the novel »I can never forget the East Side where I lived as a boy« (JM, 5) is a recurrent motif throughout the novel, evoking the specifically Jewish narrative in liturgical practice (*Kaddish*) of the communicant remembering the dead and at the same time remembering the covenant and the law, with the obligation of passing this experience on to posterity.²³

However in *Jews Without Money* memory is not the only organizing structure in the novel. The novel follows a more recognizable and traditional, symbolic structure that is partly disguised by the surface structure of sketches of Jewish life in the ghetto. The narrator's memory unfolds in spring and summer and at the end of the novel moves to fall and winter. Spring and summer mean poverty and suffering, but they are also filled with storytelling and invocations of Jewish traditions and communal feelings. Winter in the narrator's memory is couched in death and failure and at the same time evokes further examples of proletarian indictment:

The workers drifted by us wearily, endlessly; a defeated army wrapped in dreams of home. Elevated trains crashed; the Cooper Union clock burned above us; the sky grew black, the wind poured, the slush burned through our shoes. There were thousands of strange, silent figures pouring over the sidewalks in snow. None of them stopped to buy bananas. I yelled and yelled. Nobody listened. (JM, 218)

The countless allusions to solidarity and ethnic uniqueness that marked the earlier strata of the narrator's memory in summer have been replaced by images of an anonymous, spectral work force in winter.

In *Jews Without Money* the image of the ghetto is often closely attached to the presence of the father. The strength and success of the father determine whether Jewish traditions and values will be successfully transmitted or not. In Gold's novel the fate of the father is given as much weight as the fate of the son. In fact another significant plot component in the novel is the decline in the fortunes of the father. The narrator includes in his tale the rebellion of his father against his own father in the ghetto in Rumania. According to ghetto custom and Jewish lore, the

²¹ The dream motif recurs in *Jews Without Money*. On another occasion the narrator calls New York »a devils dream« (JM, 25).

²² Here it is interesting how pejorative terms associated with one minority group are employed by another minority group to produce different meanings.

²³ For a moving interpretation of the *Kaddish*, see Herman Wouk, *This Is My God* (New York: Doubleday, 1959) 172-175.

son is compelled to marry a woman of his father's choice. In *Jews Without Money* the son refuses to marry and transgresses a vital element of the covenant that governs Jewish culture. Instead the narrator's father decides to leave for America and make his fortune. Leaving for America is equated with breaking out of the ghetto. In other words, it is an act of rebellion, which, as Ursula Brumm notes in another context, is characteristic of the American experience - the act of severance from European parentage with concomitant feelings of loss and guilt.²⁴ This act of rebellion and severance is also accompanied in Gold's novel by a curse: »When I left for America everyone repeated my fathers words: he will eat the bread of sorrow and shame in America. He will never make his fortune (JM, 990).« The passage to America then is not solely an act of liberation - the easy passage into the modern world. Instead it is couched in ambivalence, replete with an omen of doom. Yet despite this admonition and prophecy of doom, the ambivalence grows: the son is given money to go to America and comments: »It was the greatest mistake in my life« (JM, 101).²⁵

It is not surprising then that the fluctuating perceptions of the father mold the ghetto experience of the son. Vacillating between the euphoric belief in the American Dream to visions of abject failure, the father's dreams and defeats become the standard upon which the narrator assesses the ghetto and the American experience. That this is a standard replete with conflict and contradiction is evident, since the ghetto on the Lower East Side, contrary to many of the Hasidic communities in New York today, was in the grip of the *haskalah*, the Enlightenment, which meant that the younger members of the early ghetto often chose the path of acculturation and even assimilation. In other words, the conflict between fathers and sons was inevitable. As Irving Howe perceptively writes, »The distance between generations came to be like a chasm of silence which neither affection nor good will could bridge.«²⁶ In *Jews Without Money* the father cannot extricate himself from this web of ambivalence. By contrast the son has - at least on the surface--shed his belief in Jewish culture and the American Dream, only to embrace the messianic dream of Marxism: »Revolution: You are the true Messiah« (JM, 309). The father, rebelling against the tenets of Judaism in Europe only to embrace the American credo, becomes in his son's eyes »my father the upright conservative pauper« (JM, 169), hostile to the principles of socialism and solidarity.²⁷ The narrator's insight: »I was caught like my father in poverty's trap. I was nothing, bound for nowhere« (JM, 308) leads, unlike the father, who persists in his ambivalence, to the creation of a new system of belief, a new culture of the revolutionary. The conversion experience, a fundamental motif in American ethnic literature, culminates in *Jews Without Money* in a leap into internationalism and proletarian solidarity and a repudiation of Americanism.²⁸

Thus it is all the more interesting that in a series of articles published as a supposed sequel to *Jews Without Money* in 1959, Gold's rendition of his past undergoes significant changes,

²⁴ Ursula Brumm, *Geschichte und Wildnis in der amerikanischen Literatur* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1980) 158-174.

²⁵ Compare this theme with the introduction to Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, in which the father at the beginning of the novel expresses his bitterness and disappointment in the failed vision of Americanism.

²⁶ Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) 255.

²⁷ In *Jews Without Money* the mother becomes a kind of incipient socialist hero, defying the wiles of the capitalist landlord and acting according to the principles of solidarity.

²⁸ Sollors shows in the above-mentioned monograph the significance of this theme for understanding the literature of ethnicity. See *Beyond Ethnicity* 31-33.

shedding additional light on his attitudes to Judaism and socialism.²⁹ In the first place the title of the new work, compared with *Jews Without Money* has become devoid of polemic, acquiring the almost non-descript title - »A Jewish Child in the New York Slums.« Secondly, the title, while retaining its typological character, focuses on the microcosmic («A Jewish Child») rather than the macrocosmic («Jews»). Thirdly, the chapter headings in the »sequel« in many cases possess a strangely generic quality that resembles a guidebook or primer on becoming acquainted with the manners and mores of another culture («The Passion for Sports,« »A Jewish Father,« »The Glorious Yiddish Stage.«) - in other words, they no longer evoke an imagined world of conflict as much as a static realm of abstract categories.

Nonetheless, in Gold's reminiscences the ghetto is still depicted with the same ambivalence as in *Jews Without Money*. In his memoirs Gold carefully differentiates between the traditional European ghetto and the new ghetto in America »But worst was all was the athletics. A craze for sports swept the East Side. The parents could not understand. In the old ghetto prison sport was as unthinkable as in the slave barracks of America. Crippled by the ghetto life, the Jew had forgotten the beauty of earth, the joys of the body« (G, 295). In the ghetto of America the traditional stereotype begins to dissolve. The image of »the crippled Jew,« a frequently employed stereotype to characterize the denizens of the ghetto in Europe, is being transformed into a new type through the processes of assimilation and acculturation.³⁰

The father in Gold's new account has become the embodiment of the traditional ghetto. In contrast to *Jews Without Money*, the father in Gold's sequel is permanently defeated - both a victim of American capitalism and a relic of European Jewish life.³¹ Himself a cripple, he attempts to impose the values of the European ghetto upon his son. The growing young man dare not be physical--that is not Jewish in his father's eyes. Instead he must return to the Jewish ideal of education: »In Rumania a Jewish child was not permitted to reach an education, but here it is free! Here the poorest Jewish children can become rabbis, doctors, lawyers! but my sons spits on education. He is a basketball bum, a fighter, he comes back from that dirty Irish gym with a black eye, a broken nose, every night, like a bloody wolf!« (G, 294). Male aggression, bodily effort and pleasure are associated with life outside the ghetto, which is dirty, impure, allegedly contrary to Jewish lore. Deviating from these teachings of course evokes guilt in the young man. Gold still remembers his father's chant as a response to his backsliding: »O God of the suffering Jews, help my son change his foolish ways! cut my throat Mechell! Drink my hearts blood but only go back to school!« (G, 254).

The widely discussed question of Jewish guilt receives an interesting interpretation in Gold's memoirs. The Jewish child learns guilt not directly from his failure to conform to the commandments of God, but rather this mechanism is mediated through the father. The father incorporates at once the ghetto and the teachings of Jehovah. Hence the son feels guilty because he cannot meet his father's expectations and at the same time those of his culture: »And so forth

²⁹ This was published under the title »A Jewish Childhood in the New York Slums« in *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology* (New York: International Publishers, 1972). All subsequent citations will be taken from this edition and designated (G + page no.). The editor argues that »Properly speaking, these articles are not a sequel to the early reminiscences, but rather a complement. They add to the story of Gold's adolescence but rarely go beyond« (G, 292).

³⁰ See Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (London: Routledge, 1991).

³¹ In an early draft of a novel on the Lower East Side entitled »Birth: A Prologue to a Tentative East Side Novel« (1917), Gold describes his father as »a slim, cleanshaven, unusual kind of Jew,« providing a synopsis of his father's life, which he would later develop in *Jews Without Money*. Otherwise the father is presented in the stereotypical fashion of the subservient ghetto Jew.

and so on. It always filled my blood with melancholy and defeat. How could I tell him that it was his sickness that forced me to become a breadwinner before my time« (G, 294).

However if Gold presents the ghetto as a realm characterized by guilt and conflict, another representation of the ghetto emerges in this account - the familiar rendition of the ghetto as a lost paradise:

The ordinary gulf of misunderstanding between generations had terribly widened in the new country. Many of the East Side young cast off like rusty shackles the old ways, the religion of the fathers, the respect for parents and elders, the love of learning and even the Mama Loschen, Yiddish, Mother-Tongue so loved by Jews, the family speech so warm and tender, so rich with humble poetry and humor of the folk. (G, 295)

The familiar indictment of modernity and the paean to vanished traditions and folkways is resurrected. It is remarkable in this passage that the internationalist Gold gives way to the folklorist Gold, the Gold who appropriates a Jewish text that had been propagated before and after him. The »religion of the fathers,« »the love of learning,« »the respect for parents and elders« are familiar themes found in the literature on the ghetto. But even more interesting the reverence for Yiddish - looked askance by the internationalist Gold - is not only warmly praised for its inherent merits, but also because it reflects the spirit or identity of the »folk.«

Not only is the image of the ghetto revised, but the father, refracted through the prism of memory, also undergoes a radical change from an invalid stifling his son's physical prowess to a considerable athlete himself. In short, he becomes the embodiment of the ideal, active, even heroic man.³²

I could remember how handsome he'd been as a young father, a tall, rangy figure with a smiling clean-cut face, high forehead, a red moustache and long sideburns. His eyes sparkled, he had that quality only the French regard seriously as an important virtue - he was gay. (G, 308)

Gold's account also contains another interesting and perhaps familiar motif. The figure of the grandfather often assumes a magical, supernatural quality in the narrative of the ghetto, evoking images of Biblical patriarchs, transforming the traditional anti-Semitic image of the ghetto Jew from a cowardly, subservient, physically helpless victim to a hero who drives away his Jew-baiting persecutor:

And my grandfather had been quite a strong man. He owned a pottery in the city of Jassy, in far-off Rumania. My father told us children many tales of his legendary father, described him as a tall powerful giant with red cheeks and a great flowing white beard across his great chest, like Moses and the prophets.

'So one day my father was walking down the street in his big sheepskin coat and fur hat,' my father used to begin, impressively. 'And a strong drunken peasant grabbed him by the beard. When drunk the Christians like to torture and beat up Jews. The police often joined them so my father lifted his heavy cane and hit the drunken peasant on his head. he split it open. they arrested him and he had to bribe the police captain. But my father did not fear. he was past eighty when this happened. He was very strong.' (G, 296)

This reads like a typical *Heldensaga* of the ghetto - the legendary patriarch who defeats his arch-enemy »the drunken peasant« and then actually proves victorious over the established

³² This is also the case in *Jews Without Money*. The father continually vacillates between being a failure in American terms (an unemployed house painter and banana vendor) and a success in ghetto Jewish terms.

authorities. It is interesting that the grandfather in ghetto literature is often a sacral figure, whereas the father is steeped in the profane, a figure ambivalent and tortured - a product of all the contradictions of being an outsider and an immigrant amid an alien culture. The problem of identification with the male figure emerges when young Gold expresses his wish to be like his grandfather. The father, however, impedes his son's identification by transforming his grandfather into a sacral figure: »Your grandfather did not make a religion out of strength like you boys. It came to him naturally. It was a gift from God. He didn't play games with it. He used it in his work with his father, to save the synagogue, to be a man, not an idle basketball player« (G, 296). By making the grandfather an inaccessible figure, the father is also preventing the narrator from identifying with Judaism.

In relating to his father, Gold employs another motif found in Jewish culture and the ghetto - the storyteller who tells stories to avert misfortune. Like Sholom Aleichem's story, »Tevye the Dairyman,« Gold's narrator must create a fictional world, a world that intrudes a miracle upon the hopeless wretchedness of things, leading to a solution:

So desperate I invented a quick fable, a Horatio Alger fairy tale about how I met a rich kindly lawyer who gave me a job at fifty dollars a week and offered to make me a lawyer and so forth. My father's sad fading eyes gleamed again with hope. All of them were suddenly happy. For the next few days, my heart warmly urged me to become a lawyer, to keep them happy. (G, 303)

Thus in Jewish literature and culture, narrative assumes the function of concrete amelioration: the dream replaces or at least assumes a new weight in relation to reality, at times eclipsing it, sometimes modifying it, permitting alternative worlds to exist side by side. Ultimately the narrative - the fable - becomes more important than mundane reality.³³

On the other hand, reality often proves to be too strong for narrative to intervene and transform. The Lower East Side in Gold's narrative is also realistically presented, which means that sexuality and violence are not sentimentalized or mythicized. Especially sexuality in American-Jewish fiction is invariably a troubling phenomenon for the Jewish boy growing up. As in *Call it Sleep* sexuality is couched in horror and violation, causing the Jewish boy to remain an outsider and flee.³⁴ However even in Gold's narrative there is an interesting coupling of narrative strands - something that appears quite frequently in Jewish narrative. When Gold describes a scene of brutality and sexual violation as an observer:

³³ A good example of this is Jurek Becker's novel *Jakob der Lügner* (1969) - a traditional ghetto tale endowed in modern garb - of a simple Jewish tailor who pretends that he has heard on the radio that the Red Army is approaching the ghetto and will liberate all its inhabitants from Nazi brutality. Jakob's story becomes a form of survival, a narrative that replaces the existing narrative of endless suffering and eventual extermination in a concentration camp. Also interesting with regard to this quote is the young narrator's use in *Jews Without Money* of Horatio Alger in his narrative to his father. This reveals that the process of acculturation has infiltrated ghetto lore as well, since the father accepts this narrative. We also might want to include Hannah Arendt's controversial thesis that Jewish culture, after the collapse of the Sabbati Zevi movement in the sixteenth century, lived in a world of unreality, choosing to indulge in dreams and visions instead of dealing with concrete political and economic realities. See *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1951).

³⁴ Henry Roth's famous novel *Call It Sleep* does not fit into the cultural pattern of the father as signifying an array of important ideas and values in Jewish culture. Rather this novel is characterized by the absent father. See also for the inability of the father to transmit cultural values, Isaac Rosenfeld, *Passage from Home* (1946) (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1961).

»Around her buzzed a dozen young products of the Thing, like dirty flies around a carrion, cruelly gloating, snickering, wisecracking nervously. It was that slum horror, a »line up,« or »shag party,« as the West Side Irish called it« (G, 303), the young narrator identifies with the victim. There is however no rescue in such a world - only helplessness and eventually flight. But important for the narrative, flight does not lead into emptiness, but into another world: »I ran away. Down the steps into the street, where old-world Jews were moving to the synagogue for evening prayers« (G, 305).

There is in other words - a juxtaposition of worlds and levels of meaning in this narrative. The sacred and the profane, Europe and America, tradition and modernity, Jew and Gentile - all form the double vision in which the narrator orders his experience. Even more important, however, there is redemption in such a world. The level of naturalistic narration - the sexual abuse of a young girl presented in the ash can style of helplessness and inevitability - leads to flight into another world, into the safe haven of the synagogue and »the old-world Jews.« It is also significant here that Gold does not employ any of the narratives of socialism . Simply stated, there is no economic justice, no amelioration of social ills on this planet, but only escape into another world, a world that stands in stark contrast to the official world of the Enlightenment that Gold so adamantly embraces.

This double vision persists throughout Gold's narrative. When the narrator muses, »I would often stop to listen, and wonder why God had chosen the Jews for so much suffering« (G, 306), he then recalls that the ghetto is not only a world of perpetual suffering, but also a world of perpetual song. Once again narrative becomes a strategy of survival. The song allows one to step outside the world of mundane sorrow into another world, a world that cements the connection with a lost world of innocence. In Gold's recollections the father once again symbolizes two levels of meaning: » It was from my father that we learned the old songs; it was he who sang lullabies to us when we were small. His favorite was 'Raisons and Almonds,' by Goldfaden. That pure, lovely melody is still sung, and when I hear it my heart is touched and I remember my poor father« (G, 3040). The father then is not merely a figure of ambivalence - someone whom the young narrator must continuously shift his opinion about, but also the father forges two levels of meaning. Song and suffering, strength and weakness, the actor and the victim-all these dualisms are sustained for the narrator by the figure of the father.

If the father signifies connectedness amid oppression and dissolution in the narrator's world, he also comes to represent the principal mediator of ghetto culture. Women are almost completely absent in Gold's »sequel.« There is no mention of the will to struggle or of the civilizing influences of the mother that we find in *Jews Without Money* and in other American-Jewish novels.³⁵ Instead it is the father who initiates the young narrator into the enormous richness of ghetto culture. As a result the narrator undermines his own argument that the ghetto is a dark, impoverished world of hopeless and lost denizens. Cultural wealth and material poverty exist side by side, or even more exactly material poverty is transformed by cultural wealth into a new narrative - both a song and a story of struggle and transcendence. In this narrative it is not only individual poets but poets as a group who attempt to impose meaning on the old narrative of misery and defeat:

There were a group of these sweatshop poets. They knew the same life and suffering as the people, and what they wrote of themselves was true of the people. They dwelt on no special, remote planet

³⁵ Once again *Call It Sleep* comes to mind. The father defines the introduction to the novel--the frame of futility and hopelessness--and then virtually disappears, leaving the figure of the mother to dominate the narrator's world.

of fine letters, but in the world of the people. Their poetry was realist [sic] as a photograph, all the homely details of truth were there, yet ennobled with the rebellion and hope of man. (G, 305)

This description again illustrates the double vision of the narrator. On the one hand, the familiar Gold appears - the ideologue of »proletarian realism« and the proponent of the writer as the vanguard and molder of proletarian consciousness.³⁶ On the other hand, the narrator's vision flits back to a concept of the people not as a class but as a tribe with all the mythical and religious connotations evoked by this concept. Thus when he rounds off his description of the sweatshop poets, Gold makes the following analogy: »The East Side Jews knew and loved their poets as warmly as the Scottish folk have loved their peasant-bard, Bobby Burns« (G, 305). The Lower East Side ghetto Jews are no longer the *Lumpenproletariat* of American capitalism, but a *folk* in the Herderian sense of the world. This of course implies that this group has not only been rediscovered but also resurrected onto the stage of history. It also means that their traditions, language, folkways have all been granted a new legitimacy to exist along side the so-called higher cultures.

This dual vision is a recurrent motif throughout Gold's literary career. In his confrontation with Theodore Dreiser over the latter's alleged anti-Semitism, Gold's arguments reveal the same ambivalence, often resulting in logical inconsistencies. He begins by attacking Dreiser's notion of race, arguing that class is the central factor in human history and not race: »The simplest and most basic discovery made by Marx is that there are no indivisible races or nations, but that all the races and nations are split sharply by the war of two classes, the war of owners against workers.«³⁷ The result of this conflict, characterized by exploitation and alienation, is the creation of the Jewish ghetto, which is depicted from the perspective of a believer in progress and civilization:

This was only one Jewish ghetto. All over the world the mass of Jews live in such hell-holes of poverty, and have been living in them for centuries. The ghetto is the historic home of the Jewish race, and the ghetto is not picturesque, I can assure you; it is bedbugs, hunger, filth, tears, sickness, poverty!³⁸

There is no mention in this passage of the redeeming qualities of Jewish culture or of the sense of community found in the ghetto along with its denizens's remarkable will to survive and generate cultural achievements. Instead the ghetto is seen as a negative manifestation of capitalism--a visible symbol of proletarianization.

Gold also offers advice to Jewish revolutionaries on how to extricate themselves from the fetters of the past and ally themselves with the inevitable laws of historical change and progress: »And the first spiritual operation a young Jew must perform on himself, if he is to become a fighter, is to weed out the ghetto melancholy, defeatism and despair that centuries of poverty have instilled in his blood« (G, 226). On the other hand, Gold's entire literary career, before his quarrel with Dreiser and after this publication, exemplifies the inability to free himself from the influence of the ghetto. The ghetto in *Jews Without Money* and his proposed »sequel« becomes a permanent presence, a source of identity and meaning, a terrain where his literary sensibility could always return and exhume new stories and new imaginative powers. Thus in his critique of

³⁶ For a discussion of Gold's concept of »proletarian realism,« see Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 208.

³⁷ Gold, »The Gun is Loaded Dreiser,« (1935) in *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology* 225.

³⁸ Gold 226.

Dreiser Gold could assert that »I am one of those who sees only good in assimilation. I want to see the time when all the races have intermingled, and there is an end to this disgusting and barbarous race hatred. I want to see a single, strong, beautiful and united human race, and I am more than willing to surrender all that I know is good in the Jewish tradition in return for a greater good« (G, 226). However in the same essay he could praise the Soviet Union for allegedly creating a genuinely multicultural and multiethnic society:

In the Soviet Union there is no such cultural imperialism [referring to Dreiser]. The Jews who have nationalist feelings have been given a great territory of land, large as France, for their own autonomous republic. Other Jews are scattered throughout the Soviet Union, in factories and collective farms. Those who wish to carry on the old Jewish culture are helped to do so. Those who wish to be assimilated find no prejudices in the way; ... (G, 228)

Still, in another essay the Gold who would like to efface ethnic differences finds himself in a »Jewish restaurant« with Isaac Babel, swapping stories about the Lower East Side and the Jewish quarter of Odessa.³⁹

The credo of progress towards an ideal society free of ethnic and class distinctions, counterpointed by the obsessive need to return to the past to a nearly tribal society, self-contained, replete with all the markers of ethnic distinctiveness, is the most salient characteristic of Gold's writing. The narrator in *Jews Without Money*, who bewails the burden and curse of being Jewish, returns to it once again after decades of being committed to socialism. The frenetic search for moorings, as Allen Guttman poignantly writes, assumes an additional pathos in the case of radical Jewish intellectuals:

Every Jew in Christendom knows what many Christians never know—that there is more than one Answer. The intellectual of Jewish background knows still more. He knows that there are at least two Answers, and that neither of them will do. He is the wanderer who must create the Zion he can return to.⁴⁰

Thus the final line of Gold's memoir, »The ghetto walls were thin in America« (G, 319) contains a hidden irony. If the narrator finds it easy to break out of the ghetto in America, it is, as evinced by writing this work, equally easy to return.

³⁹ Gold, »A Love Letter for France,« (1935) in *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology* 235.

⁴⁰ Allen Guttman, »Jewish Radicals, Jewish Writers,« *The American Scholar* 32 (1963): 571.