The rise of David Levinsky: Autobiographical mask for a dispossessed American Adam.

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THE RISE OF DAVID LEVINSKY:
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MASK
FOR A
DISPOSSESSED AMERICAN ADAM

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ABSTRACT

Many readers of *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Abraham Cahan's novel about a poor scholar's rise to fortune, view it in the context of Jewish-American cultural history, sociological studies, or genre realism. Little has been said, however, of Cahan's ironic use of the Americanized version of the Edenic myth and the autobiographical form that supports it. This study explores David Levinsky's search for a new Eden in America and, as a dispossessed Adam figure, his role as both narrator and character for his own story.

The idealistic image of America as the new Eden and the realistic view of it as a weedy garden together form an ironic paradox that weaves part of the fabric of Cahan's novel. Like so many before and after him, Levinsky the "immigrant everyman" yearns within for fulfillment of his hopes in this land of promise. Experience, however, falls short of expectations for Cahan's American Adam and paradise remains distant and elusive.

Cahan's selection of an American businessman for his subject appropriately follows a long tradition of the "self-made man" as American Adam in the literature of the nation. Autobiography has often been used to trace the "rise" to success of such men. Abraham Cahan
turns to the autobiographical form not only to provide an ironic reflection of the autobiographies of American businessmen, but also to draw attention to the doubleness of perspective between the individual's idealized dreams and the reality of his experience.

The Rise of David Levinsky, a fictional autobiography of a man caught between paradise and paradox, exposes the archetype of a modern Adam dispossessed of Eden. David Levinsky tells his own story of a life lived between Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained.
How can one describe the emotions with which any immigrant, after thirteen days on the ocean, beholds in the distance for the first time the thin line of land that means America? As the British Queen approached the shore, the green foliage stood bright in the blazing sunshine and the water and the sky were blue with the blueness of paradise and all around us the sea gulls hailed us with their cries. The endless ocean had enchanted me; this magic land overwhelmed me. . . The realization that I was in America filled me with elation. I had moved from the ordinary world into a special world -- America. But I spied a cat on the pier and almost cried out, "Look, a cat, just like at home," and then I knew that America was in the same world as Russia, Austria, Germany.

The Education of Abraham Cahan
INTRODUCTION: THE RISE OF THE AMERICAN BUSINESSMAN

Would a man Rise by his Business? I say, then let him Rise to his Business. It was foretold. Prov. 22.29, Seest thou a man Diligent in his Business? He shall stand before Kings; He shall come to preferment. And it was instanced by him who foretold it; 1 Kings 11.28 Solomon, seeing that the young man was industrious, he made him a Ruler. I tell you, with Diligence, a man may do marvellous things. Young man, work hard while you are Young: You'll reap the effects of it when you are Old. Yea, how can you Ordinarily enjoy any rest at Night, if you have not been well at work during the Day? Let your Business ingross the most of your time.

Cotton Mather
Two Brief Discourses

I. America and the Self-Made Man

Benjamin Franklin, the eighteenth century pragmatist whose Autobiography provided a model for those who wished to "reap the effects" of diligence and common sense, had the words of this proverb "drummed" into his head from a very early age. Indeed, the American legend of the "self-made man" is deeply rooted in the Calvinist tradition which demands thrift, industriousness, initiative, and perseverance as prerequisites for opportunity and progress in the New World. Even in its first settlements, "America seemed to be the only

country where a man felt ashamed if he had nothing to do." The Calvinist emphasis on the work ethic and its rewards motivated the individual to look for a place where through self-reliance and individual spirit, one could pursue goals of his own choosing. Like William Perkins, a seventeenth-century Cambridge theologian who carried *A Treatise of the Vocations* (1603) to the New World as a source for "guidance and inspiration," many European immigrants perceived the promise of unlimited professional opportunity in America as a fulfillment of religious faith. "With the consciousness of standing in the fulness of God's grace and being visibly blessed by Him, the bourgeois business man, as long as he remained within the bounds of formal correctness, as long as his moral conduct was spotless and the use to which he put his wealth unobjectionable, could follow his pecuniary interests as he would and feel that he was fulfilling a duty in doing so. The power of religious asceticism provided him in addition, with sober, conscientious, and unusually industrious workmen, who clung to their work

2 Ibid., p. 4.
3 Ibid., p. 11.
as to a life purpose willed by God." According to the modern historian and sociologist Max Weber, the Calvinism of our American forefathers "engendered a spirit that was congruent with the spirit of capitalism."

What began in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a religious pursuit to fulfill God's will as presented in the Scripture became in the nineteenth a secularized enterprise effecting the "Gospel of Wealth." The social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner provided the philosophical foundation for these new American articles of faith. Darwin's natural law of "the survival of the fittest" was translated by the spokesmen of the new industrialized society as an argument in favor of \textit{laissez-faire} economics and evolutionary progression. The personal qualities encouraged by Calvinist doctrine still applied; the man of business was to be industrious, courageous, practical, and


ambitious.

During this period, numerous "prophets of success" in the business world described their own "rags-to-riches" experiences in public lectures, class-room textbooks, and autobiographies. Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Mellon, J. D. Rockefeller, J. P. Morgan, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and John Jacob Astor constantly reminded the nation's youth that ambition, hard work, and success were a part of the heritage left behind by the fathers of this country. In 1844, Moses Yale Beach described John Jacob Astor, the "modern Croesus," in this way: "Landing on our shores as a common steerage passenger -- a poor uneducated boy -- a stranger to the language and the people -- he has by the sole aid of his own industry, accumulated fortune scarcely second to that of any individual on the globe, and has executed projects that have become identified with the history of his country, and which will perpetuate his name to the latest age."

The American businessman of the nineteenth century saw

7. Wyllie, p. 121.
himself as the heir to opportunity in all things.

II. American Literature and the Role of the Businessman

Studies of the American Businessman, particularly as he is represented in the fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have most often focused on the historical and social context or have offered rather skeletal outlines of similarities and differences between a wide range of popular and serious fiction. "The Changing Conception of the Businessman in the American Novel, 1865-1940", a dissertation prepared by Gordon W. Clarke in 1949, traces novelists' generally negative presentation of the businessman since the Civil War. Though the discussion offers only a "general survey" of "the entire field of these novels in a period from the Civil War to 1940," it does include an exhaustive bibliography of American fiction which aided in the preliminary stages of this study. In addition, Van Reneselaer Halsey Jr.'s dissertation, "The Portrait of the Businessman in Twentieth Century American Fiction," provided an overview of the ethical and sociological presentations of the businessman in modern fiction. The

conclusion of this work suggests that "because of his hostility toward business and his concern with the individual, the literary artist consistently presents a biased and atypical concept of the businessman." Halsey, much more than Clarke, concerns himself with the dichotomy between the businessman in fiction and his counterpart in reality. Moreover, he raises a question that is central to any study of the businessman in American fiction: is the futility of pursuing the elusive and insubstantial goal of success a typical businessman's experience, or is it a "typical American experience?"

Through the colonial period when newcomers worked to civilize the American wilderness, and into the modern age of industrialization, fictional characters have looked to a national dream which emphasizes the vastness of freedom, opportunity, and success. America has continually been presented as a land of "manifest destiny," not only in the sense of political expansionism as expressed by President Buchanan at the annexing of Oregon in 1845, but also in the popularly held moral ideal that Providence gave to the Americans a whole

10 Halsey, p. 168.
11 Ibid., p. 167.
continent to develop, a special mission to perform for the divine. "Moral idealism divested of all intent of sacrilege the half-belief that God, who walked with Noah, rode with the American pioneer in his journeys over the continent." Even Thomas Jefferson felt compelled to see the development of America as part of God's plan as revealed in his suggestion that the United States choose for its seal the image of the children of Israel walking out of the wilderness toward the New Jerusalem.

In the context of American literature, those who have been searching for the New Jerusalem include everyone from a frontier character like Huck Finn to an eastern businessman like Silas Lapham. The edenic promises of a nation of new races and new cultures coupled with the memories of past civilizations shape a national character that is poised between the old world and the new. Speaking to fellow Frenchmen in 1782, St. Jean de Crevecoeur describes the American as one who, "leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and

manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds." However, Archibald MacLeish in an "American Letter: For Gerald Murphy," written in 1930, poses a more realistic view that emphasizes the impossibility for Americans to feel that they belong to a completely "new mode of life," free of their past traditions:

How can a wise man have two countries?

It is a strange thing to be an American.

America is neither a land nor a people, a word's shape it is, a wind's sweep -- America is alone: many together, Many of one mouth, of one breath, Dressed as one -- and none brothers among them: Only the taught speech and the aped tongue. America is alone and the gulls calling.

It is strange to be born of no race and no people.

This is our race, we that have none, that have had Neither the old walls nor the voices around us, This is our land, this is our ancient ground The raw earth, the mixed bloods and the strangers,

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It is within this modern world of change and loneliness that the American businessman has assumed a more central role in fiction as a modern American "type," an "American character seeking the American dream."

Lapham, Babbitt, Loman, "the man in the gray flannel suit" -- these are characters who depict the rise and fall, the success and failure of the self-made man. According to the historian Vernon Louis Parrington, it was inevitable for the businessman to "enter the portals of fiction" at a time when the Carnegies and the Vanderbilts served as models for the American public. Indeed, the businessman became "the central, dominating figure in a capitalistic world . . . The more acutely he was analyzed the clearer it became that here was a figure greater than kings or presidents -- a figure that had taken our traditional American life in his hands and was reshaping it to his ends; and that if realism


were to be true to its ideal it must paint him as he was without detraction and without glorification." The American businessman is no mythic hero or melodramatic villain. He is a modern man searching for his place in a chaotic world of moral relativism.

III. THE RISE OF DAVID LEVINSKY

Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*, published in 1917, is set in an age when American businessmen clearly believed that they were to play a part in the "manifest destiny" of the nation. David Levinsky idolizes John Jacob Astor and dreams of attaining his wealth, notoriety, and influence. However, Levinsky tells us this in his opening words: "My present station, power, the amount of worldly happiness at my command, and the rest of it, seem to be devoid of significance." Like Lapham and Babbit, Levinsky wonders about the meaning of his "rise."

The similarities between Cahan's novel and others in the mainstream of American realistic fiction compel


this reader to pose the following questions:

How does Cahan's journalistic background influence his theories on literature and the writing of his fiction? How do these compare to that of other American realists?

Since most readers view Cahan as a Jewish novelist, in what ways does The Rise of David Levinsky reflect the Jewish tradition of its protagonist and its author?

Is there a central or universal motif in Cahan's novel that links it to other American literature? If so, how is this explored?

How does the autobiographical form support the subject of the novel?

These questions will be explored in the chapters that follow.

It is interesting to note that the final question on the use of the autobiographical form has received almost no critical attention. What little has been said about the businessman and the autobiographical form applies mainly to non-fictional autobiographies. One such study, a recent dissertation by John William Boettjer, "The Autobiography of the American Businessman," attempts to demonstrate how "the businessman's autobiography can provide a unique insight into our national cultural history by presenting the self-image of men who have come to represent America more broadly
Boettjer's work identifies and analyzes various types of non-fictionalized autobiographies of particular value for establishing the autobiography as a literary form. In addition, Boettjer's commentary on the developmental autobiography provides added support for the view that a certain pose, mediating between the inner man and the outer world, offers a pattern for self-discovery that "becomes universal since this one man's humanity is made representative of all men."

The rise of the businessman so eloquently described by Cotton Mather has developed into a modern archetype for the American experience itself. Abraham Cahan's The Rise of David Levinsky provides both a realistic and subjective narration of the individual's search for his place in his new Eden, America. In the consciousness of David Levinsky, we see how the self, confronted with his own subjective and objective reality, attempts to create a coherent center as he struggles with his role in society and his place in time. The Rise of David Levinsky, like so many modern novels which focus on the

"egotistical sublime," gives the reader an historical picture of one American's attempt to define his identity in a world in which he feels a stranger.
I was hungry for the bigger world I had not yet come to know.

I. Abraham Cahan: Journalist and Realist

Born in 1862 in Vilna, Lithuania, the highly educated Abraham Cahan emigrated to the United States in 1882 in search of a new life of political and intellectual freedom. He was one of many Eastern European Jews who came to America en masse in the late 1800's to escape the persecution of the Russian pogroms following the assassination of Alexander II. A believer in the socialist cause for Jews and gentiles, the twenty-two year old Cahan looked to the New World for "a life without 'mine' and 'thine'." In Russia "such a dream of equality could be realized only in the distant future; in America it could become reality" (Education, pp. 186). Though the young reformer hoped "to start a new Jewish life in America" for his people, it took him only three days to realize that establishing utopian commune colonies in rural America would not be part of

his role in this transition process (Education, p. 196). Instead, Cahan immersed himself in the center of the intellectual, political, and social activity of the great American city. He could not desert "this seething, stimulating life in the midst of the struggles of the workers and take off, instead for some far-off puny colony" (Education, p. 228). As a worker in a cigar factory, a teacher of English to Jews of all ages, a lecturer for the socialist movement, a labor organizer for garment workers on New York's East Side, and as a popular writer for the Jewish Quarter, Cahan became acutely aware of the variety of sensibilities and cultures in his new environment.

The young Jewish intellectual began writing about immigrant life within the first year of his arrival and even sent some of his pieces to Russky Yevrey, a Russian weekly devoted to Jewish affairs. During this same year he also wrote an article in English on Tsar Alexander II for the New York World. Cahan continued to develop his journalistic career during the 1880's by serving as an American correspondent for Russian periodicals, editing numerous Yiddish newspapers, writing editorials for the socialist paper, The Workmen's Advocate, and contributing features, stories, and literary criticism to the Sun, the World, the Century, and the Forum. Between
1897 and 1901 Cahan worked closely with Lincoln Steffens and Hutchins Hapgood on the Commercial Advertiser where he shared with them "the spirit of the East Side" and gained for himself a broader exposure to American politics and personalities.

Whether he was writing in Russian, Yiddish, or English, Abraham Cahan usually chose to explore the feelings of estrangement experienced by immigrants in a rapidly changing social and economic environment. The period in which Cahan began writing was characterized by "the end of the frontier and the agrarian dream, a triumphant technology and mechanization, powerful corporate capitalism in arrogant dominion at home and abroad, [and] above all the growth of great cities and attendant urban problems." Cahan watched as six million immigrants came to America between 1870 and 1890 and New York grew from 1 1/2 million in 1870 to 2 1/2 million in 1890, and in his sketches of immigrant life, he graphically described a lonely people with Old World concepts and customs shocked by the American emphasis on openness and perpetual movement.


3 Ibid., p. 31.
Historians of the late nineteenth century have noted that America's concept of individual freedom, a byword of the American faith, could no longer carry the same meaning it once had. St. Jean de Crevecoeur, writing in the eighteenth century, perceived America as a promising homeland for every new arrival: "Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims, who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigor, and industry which began long since in the east; they will finish the great circle." The immigrants of the late nineteenth century, however, did not enter this land of freedom by stepping out upon a rock that would become a national symbol for the steadfastness of the American dream. Instead, they were part of a massive wave of people washed up upon the shores of an island in New York harbor. No longer could they be self-reliant pioneers creating a garden out of the wilderness; the hoe had given way to the machine and these new immigrants were part of a bustling industrial age. "The problem of salvaging the individual in an economy dominated by

4 St. Jean de Crevecoeur, p. 174.
vast, impersonal and largely incomprehensible forces" became the subject matter for much of Abraham Cahan's writing.

This spokesman for the immigrant populace of New York could not avoid noticing the inconsistencies of the American dream: "While capitalistic greed ground the faces of the poor under its own heel, individual potentates of wealth lavished millions upon hospitals, libraries, colleges, churches, museums, and art galleries for the good of all." As immigrants began to wonder if their "New Jerusalem" might also be an "Ancient Babylon," they looked to Abraham Cahan and the newspaper he founded for advice and consolation. During the fifty years he edited The Jewish Daily Forward, the largest Yiddish newspaper in the world, Cahan informed and influenced most of the Jewish populace on the Lower East Side of New York. His contributions ranged from editorials addressing current political issues to "Dear Abby" type columns offering personal advice to a rather young and often naive audience. It is not surprising that his contemporaries

5 Commager, p. 49.
7 Ibid., p. 436.
dubbed him "socialist-journalist-friend of the ghetto."

Abraham Cahan's objective reporting for the Commercial Advertiser and his experience as a Yiddish journalist contributed to the emphasis on details and truth in his fiction. In 1889, Cahan wrote an article, "Realism," for The Workmen's Advocate in response to critical comments about the paintings of Vereschagin. He records in his autobiography that "the critics praised [Vereschagin's] talent but condemned his paintings. They insisted that the purpose of art is to afford pleasure. Vereschagin's paintings were pictures of pain. It is frightful to see a painting of a hospital ward with scores of crippled soldiers, one missing an arm, another without a leg and some with bandages stained with blood that has seeped through" (Education, pp. 404-405). For Cahan, such an image contained the beauty of truthfulness; "the power of realistic art arises from the pleasure we derive from recognizing the truth as it is mirrored by art" (Education, p. 405). Cahan continued to express his literary theories in another article, "The Yiddish Theater and American Novels," published in the Arbeiter.

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Tseitung in 1892: "True literature mirrors life . . . If we don't put in the dark parts along with the light, the portrait emerges pale and dead." Even in his earliest fictional sketches of American immigrant life, Cahan put his theories into practice as he wrote of failures as well as successes, exposing the losses in love and cultural tradition along with the gains in wealth and societal approval.

All of Cahan's fiction focuses on the bittersweet "Americanization" experience of the Jewish immigrant estranged from his old homeland and seeking a new one. Yekl; A Tale of the New York Ghetto, published in 1896 as Cahan's first novel, tells the story of a "greenhorn" Jew who detaches everyone and everything in his Russian past from his American present: he changes his name from Yekl to Jake; he divorces his Russian-Jewish wife Gitl because this unsophisticated woman is certainly no match for "Jake the Yenkee." Cahan continues to explore the loneliness and despair of young immigrants as they attempt to create a new life for themselves in his second book published in 1898, The Imported Bridegroom and Other Tales of the New York Ghetto. In this collection of short stories, parents and lovers find

9 Chametzky, Ghetto, p. 40.
their expectations reversed, their hopes frustrated: a father chooses a Talmudic scholar for his son-in-law only to watch him change into a "new thinker"; an "Americanized" peddler and a Russian father agree to a "providential match" that seems so only for the daughter who falls in love with someone else on her way to America; well-educated immigrants find that their marriage fails because of a change in social and economic circumstances; newlyweds begin their life together with nothing because they squander everything on the wedding celebration. In this latter story, "A Ghetto Wedding," Cahan strikingly contrasts the "enchanted world" of the lovers and their "beatific sense of their own seclusion, of there being only themselves in the universe, to live and to delight in each other" to the "sombre, impoverished street" where they are assailed by a gang of loafers and from whom they escape by "div[ing] into the denser gloom of a side-street." This ironic duality between fulfillment and emptiness, triumph and defeat is characteristic of Cahan's fiction.

The artistic sensibilities of Abraham Cahan clearly

echo those of the American realists whose works he avidly read during the 1880's and 1890's. Cahan was a member of an American literary club and was highly disappointed when he learned that the other members did not recognize the names of William Dean Howells and Henry James, two of America's leading realistic writers. In his autobiography Cahan noted that "this kind of thing would have been impossible in Russia. It was unimaginable that a young man in that country just out of the university would not know the finest and most important belles-lettres of the day" (Education, p. 351). He particularly recognized in Henry James and William Dean Howells a shared literary perspective that rejected the sugar-coated sentiment of romance and escapist literature so popular during this age of social and economic upheaval. That the American reading public chose to avoid what some believed to be sordid and degraded realistic novels and made Pollyanna a best-seller did not deter Abraham Cahan from transmitting the "thrill of truth" in his art. He agreed with Henry James that "the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life." Following

the models of the American realists, Cahan tried to depict the dark as well as the light side of experience. Indeed, William Dean Howells recognized this quality in Cahan's works and hailed him as a realist who "sees things with American eyes."

II. THE RISE OF DAVID LEVINSKY: The Jewish Heritage

Though Howells identified Abraham Cahan as an American writer, many readers view Cahan's most well-known novel, The Rise of David Levinsky, as a representative social document depicting the "Americanization" of the Jewish immigrant and the effects it had upon the individual's faithfulness to the traditional Jewish culture and religion. Published in 1917, this last of Cahan's novels has recently received more critical attention and acclaim than any of his other


13 Two of Cahan's readers in particular draw attention to the body of criticism which focuses on the Jewish cultural and religious strains in the novel:


works. However, David Engel is probably quite accurate when he notes that David Levinsky "has rarely been praised strictly on its own merits as a novel." We most often see David Levinsky examined in the context of "Jewish" cultural history, "Jewish" sociological studies, or "Jewish" realism.

According to David Singer, The Rise of David Levinsky substantiates the historical view of Charles Liebman that the secularization of American Jews began long before they ever reached the United States. In his article "David Levinsky's Fall: A Note on the Liebman Thesis," Singer treats Cahan's novel as though it were historic evidence; David Levinsky becomes the typical Jewish immigrant whose "estrangement from his traditional roots had begun much earlier, while he was in Europe." Singer emphasizes that the "cumulative effect" of Levinsky's sexual awakening, his loss of his mother, and his shock at his friend Naphtali's atheism lead him to break the ties with the Jewish community even when he is still in Russia. While a study such

14 Engel, p. 69.
16 Ibid., p. 702.
as this certainly provides helpful insights for understanding the nature of the orthodoxy of the first generation Jewish immigrants, it virtually neglects the art of Cahan's novel.

From a sociological perspective, Cahan's David Levinsky stands as one of those "classic accounts of the crisis of ethnic identity." Numerous readers have pointed to the novel's detailed dramatization of the conflict between freshly discovered individual yearnings and long-held cultural restraints. For Cushing Strout, David Levinsky reveals the "growth of personality through conflict and crisis" at the same time that it "resonate[s] with the historical and cultural issues" affecting the personality. He believes that "in Levinsky's life Cahan dramatized the portentous fact that Judaism in America, like Catholicism, would be intimately connected with the problem of ethnic identity." Sociological studies such as this tend to focus on the difficulties of transition for an American

19 Ibid., p. 436.
immigrant like David Levinsky, but rarely treat the character as other than his "ethnic identity."

The largest body of Cahan criticism analyzes *The Rise of David Levinsky* as an example of "Jewish" realism. The most basic of these interpretations identifies Cahan as a writer of "ghetto realism," presenting a picture of New York's East Side in a way that some might compare to Stephen Crane's depiction of life in the bowery. Irving Howe called *David Levinsky* a "minor masterpiece of genre realism," simply pointing to it as a laudable example of Jewish fiction.

A more specific analysis by Dan Vogel explores this thought by suggesting that in *The Rise of David Levinsky* the archetypal anti-hero is involved in the conflict between old world Orthodoxy and new world emancipation, a so-called typically Jewish situation. Like many other Jewish protagonists, Levinsky wallows in self-pity and tells his story in the form of a confessional. According to Vogel, "Cahan's story -- of one who tried to get out from under his Jewishness and learned that he could not -- is archetypal of a specific genre of

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Probably the most detailed critical study of David Levinsky as a piece of Jewish fiction is Jules Zanger's "David Levinsky: Master of Pilpul." Concerned that few readers have treated the novel as a "coherent work of art," Zanger proposes that Cahan applies the Talmudic concept of "pilpul" as the central influence on Levinsky's vision of the world. "The habit of mind which moves the Talmudist to seek alternative interpretations, to discover discrepancies and contradictions, to analyze and dissect and analogize, to greet each conclusion with 'On the other hand, however . . .,' this habit of mind which in Antomir found its primary channel within the limits of Talmudic exegesis spills over in America to shape all of David's secular life." Levinsky's doubleness of vision and values, his constant vascillation in searching for a place both in the past and the present, is perceived by Zanger as rooted in his Talmudic training. This critic would argue that Cahan's art is shaped by the Jewish tradition of the protagonist.

22 Ibid., p. 287.
himself.

Readings of *David Levinsky* which focus primarily on the Jewish tradition of its author and its subject have a tendency to limit themselves by their very approach. Cahan's novel about an immigrant businessman does place him in an American context, struggling with the new values and demands of an American culture. This novel, unlike most of Cahan's writings, was written in English, not Yiddish. The story which formed the basis for the novel was serialized in *McClure's* magazine in 1913 under the title, "The Autobiography of an American Jew." Cahan was writing a novel that was to be read by an American reading public. As such, it is essential to explore how *The Rise of David Levinsky* fits into the mainstream of twentieth century American fiction.

III. THE RISE OF DAVID LEVINSKY: Between Paradise Lost And Paradise Regained

With the eye of a twentieth century realist, Abraham Cahan weaves his story of the wealthy but unhappy Jewish businessman around a universal strand that has given texture to many American writings. David Levinsky, an archetype for the immigrant experience and,

24 Chametzky, *Ghetto*, p. 32.
in a larger sense, the American quest for a new Eden, plays the role of a dispossessed American Adam. Gaining knowledge and losing innocence, he finds himself an orphan in his own world; dispossessed of the paradise created for him, he searches for a New Eden, a promised land, a return to the glory of the past and a union with the Divine.

David Levinsky, a Jewish-Russian-American immigrant, begins and lives his life as an orphan of the world, displaced as a child and as a man. Even after he has come to know material success in America, David Levinsky describes his sense of homelessness: "I was full of energy, full of the joy of being alive, but there was usually an undercurrent of sadness to all this. While on the road I would feel homesick for New York, and at the same time I would feel that I had no home anywhere, that my mother was dead and I was all alone in the world. . . And so I was forever homesick, not for Antomir -- for my native town had become a mere poem -- but for a home" (p. 325). "Forever homesick," Levinsky experiences an isolation and emptiness which neither faith nor love can assuage.

Leslie Fiedler suggests that Cahan's subject in this novel is "loneliness: the loneliness of the emancipated Jew, who has lost the shared alienation of
the ghetto to become a self-declared citizen of a world which rejects even as it rewards him." Levinsky may indeed attempt to play the emancipated Jew in a highly materialistic and secular world, but surely it is not this world that is responsible for his loneliness. In Russia and in America, Levinsky portrays a dichotomy of the self which prevents him from experiencing any sense of belonging. He is unable to free himself from his own former yearnings to be a pious and respected Talmudic scholar. At the same time, the cloak manufacturer wishes to project an image of himself as another Andrew Carnegie, a living example of the American success story. As David Engel notes, "Levinsky is suspended between a past and present that are equally inauthentic. He is nowhere at home."

A universal perspective of America as a new Eden casts a character like David Levinsky in the role of the "immigrant Everyman." He is "modern man as 'spiritual' orphan . . . ., as a man without parents (literally), home, God, or any satisfactory center to give meaning to

26 Engel, p. 83.
his life." The story Levinsky relates in his autobiography reveals in the most subjective and passionate manner the self-revelation of his own spiritual nakedness in a modern world where God no longer inspires trance-like rapture for the Talmudic scholar, where a doting mother can be murdered for questioning the harsh treatment of her son by gentiles, and where the American businessman is hard-pressed to answer the question, "Who are you living for?" (p. 447).

Like so many others before and after him, Levinsky comes to America looking for adventure, opportunity, and mystery. He describes it as a place of romantic idealism when he tells the reader "the United States lured me not merely as a land of milk and honey, but also, and perhaps chiefly, as one of mystery, of fantastic experiences, of marvelous transformations. To leave my native place and to seek my fortune in that distant, weird world seemed to be just the kind of sensational adventure my heart was hankering for" (p. 61). Levinsky, leaving the old world and all of the corruption so often associated with it, innocently yearns for a new beginning, a new Garden. "In Virgin Wilderness, where all things seemed possible, the new

Adam could recreate his lost paradise by the sweat of his brow."

Numerous studies in American culture, history, and literature suggest the Edenic myth as the most pervasive of all for this new nation of old world immigrants. In a study on "Autobiography and American Myth," Spengemann and Lundquist view the hope to return to paradise as a belief in America as a moral ideal. "The American myth, in its most general form, describes human history as a pilgrimage from imperfection to perfection; from a dimly remembered union with the Divine to a re-establishment of that union." Charles Sanford's *Quest for Paradise* traces this idea through the development of America as a nation and the writings it produced. He argues that "the main theme in American literature during the twentieth century has been the dispossession from paradise, America's abandonment of the security and innocence of an earlier day through some essentially sinful act, an act most frequently associated with..."

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industrialism and the commercial ethic." With this in mind, it becomes apparent that Cahan's David Levinsky is indeed a novel that belongs to the American tradition.

For the immigrant Levinsky, America is both Garden and Wilderness, a land of promise and a land of insurmountable odds. Levinsky, who comes here looking for a new beginning, that primal yearning for return to innocence and harmony, finds that "America is a topsy-turvy country" (p. 97). Indeed, the "icy inhospitality" of people upon his arrival "sent a chill through [his] very soul" (p. 89). He learns from this first experience that America may not be the embodiment of his imaginative fancy of an ideal world.

Cahan underlines the paradox of Levinsky's situation in an image the immigrant beholds on his arrival to the New World. Levinsky describes it this way:

When I say that my first view of New York Bay struck me as something not of this earth it is not a mere figure of speech. I vividly recall the feeling, for example with which I greeted the first cat I saw on American soil. I was on Hoboken pier, while the steerage passengers were being marched to the ferry. A large, black, well-fed feline stood in a corner, eying the crowd of new-comers. The sight of it gave me a thrill of joy. 'Look! there is

a cat!' I said to Gitelson. And in my heart I added, 'Just like those at home!' For the moment the little animal made America real to me. At the same time it seemed unreal in itself. I was tempted to feel its fur to ascertain whether it was actually the kind of creature I took it to be. (p. 88)

Levinsky wants to see the cat as a creature of ideal proportions in a paradise set apart from the rest of the world. Yet, like Cahan in his own autobiography, he knows that it is no different from cats in Russia and finds himself experiencing the tension between his yearning for the ideal and his observing the real.

Cahan's David Levinsky, an orphan in a strange land, relates his story with this same doubleness of perspective in the form of autobiography. Like the Talmud he read as a youth, his autobiography reads with "a peculiar sense of duality" (p. 35). Levinsky's own words describe the tension between his subjective and objective treatment of his own story: "While your mind is absorbed in the meaning of the words you utter, the melody in which you utter them tells your heart a tale of its own. You live in two distinct worlds at once" (p. 35). For David Levinsky, this means living in that ambiguous place between Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained.
America! To go to America! To re-establish the Garden of Eden in that distant land. My spirit soared. All my other plans dissolved. I was for America!

The Education of Abraham Cahan
(p. 187)

I. America: The New Eden

The quest for paradise in America has historically carried with it hope for freedom, order, and perfection in both the physical and the spiritual dimensions of life. For most new settlers and immigrants, this has been understood as a rebirth of a new life out of the old. Indeed, America is a land filled with place-names like Canaan, New England, New York, New Haven, and Virginia. Even as early as 1498, a man named Annius attempted to identify the American Indians with the ten lost tribes of Israel, "an undertaking which later supported the belief of American colonists that the New Jerusalem would be founded in America." Modern historians such as Everett Carter have suggested that America has been shaped by the central ideas of optimism, progress, and rebirth: "The Puritans were part of a movement toward the future; they were part of the first...

Sanford, p. 41
wave of the transatlantic migration that turned its back on Europe and hoped for an improvement in the New World." In its most universal sense, the myth of America affirms a regenerative experience for newcomers in this foreign land, a variant on the primal myth of return.

From the time when America was first being settled up to the present, the idea of America as the new Eden has been embodied in the writings of the nation. The Puritan Cotton Mather wrote of a wilderness filled with fiery serpents through which his people had to pass to reach the Promised Land. Both Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, founding fathers of the new nation, contributed their views on America as a land of individual freedom, opportunity, and rebirth. The Declaration of Independence and Franklin's Autobiography proclaim the possibilities for an individual to pursue a self-renewal in this land of boundless resources.

Poets, too, became spokesmen for this belief in Edenic destiny. James Russell Lowell, writing of his country and his President, recreated the Eden myth within an American context to describe Lincoln and the

2 Carter, p. 12.
3 Sanford, p. 87.
paradise he governed:

Nature, they say, doth dote,
And cannot make a man
Save on some worn-out plan,
Repeating us by rote:
For him her Old-World moulds aside she threw,
And choosing sweet clay from the breast
Of the unexhausted West,
With stuff untainted shaped a hero new,
Wise, steadfast in the strength of God, and true.

We sit here in the Promised Land  
That flows with Freedom's honey and milk.

Writers like Emerson and Whitman echoed this view in their poems which depicted an America free of the corruptions of the civilizations of the Old World. In "America, My Country," Emerson looks around his democratic land and sees "no castles, no cathedrals, and no kings." Instead, along with many others in the nineteenth century, he describes a new type of Eden in America which can allow the "machine" -- the railroad, the telegraph, the steamboat -- to enter the garden and not disrupt the harmony. One interesting example of this is a title published in 1842, The Paradise Within the Reach of All Men . . . By Powers of Nature and

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Machinery.

Not all who wrote of the New Eden, however, unquestioningly believed in the promises it held. Responding to an injustice directed toward immigrants in a court of law, Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote, "Let us abandon, then, our gardens and go home" for we can only leave to our children's children "a blighted earth to till/ With a broken hoe." Since the turn of the century, many American writers have transformed America's image of the Garden to that of the Wasteland. In addition, with the move into a more technological and industrialized age, America has become more often associated with laboratories, factories, supermarkets, and steel bridges. For Hart Crane writing in 1930, the image of the Brooklyn Bridge signifies a discrepancy rather than a link between a growing industrial America and the promises it holds for its people:

O Sleepless as the river under thee,
Vaulting the sea, the prairies' dreaming sod,
Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend
And of the curveship lend a myth to God.

6 Sanford, p. 173.

This was the Promised Land, and still it is
To the persuasive suburban land agent
In bootleg roadhouses where the gin fizz
Bubbles in time to Hollywood's new love-nest pageant.  

The Promised Land that was, the dispossession from Eden, serves as a focus of American writing from Fitzgerald to Faulkner and Millay to Ginsberg.

Twentieth century writers in particular have found an inherent paradox in the image of America as the new Eden: "If America seemed to promise everything that men always had wanted, it also threatened to obliterate much of what they already had achieved." America as both Garden and Wilderness juxtaposes the potential for creating a utopian harmony with the prospect of facing an unknown destructive power. In his poem "America," Claud McKay expresses this tension:

I love this cultured hell that tests my youth.

Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
And see her might and granite wonders there,
Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.


America, with all of its Edenic promises, offers a testing ground for idealistic dreams and hopes. Still, even as a possible paradise regained, America too has its serpent and the American Adam must confront it.

II. THE RISE OF DAVID LEVINSKY: The New Adam

In a chapter entitled, "I Discover America," David Levinsky sets foot upon the "magic shores" of America as a "new-born babe" in a "new world . . . unlike anything [he] had ever seen or dreamed of before. It unfolded itself like a divine revelation"(pp. 86-87). Like so many explorers before him, Levinsky imagines this new Eden as a "land of gold . . . as a thoroughfare strewn with nuggets of the precious metal. Symbolically speaking, this was the idea one had of the 'land of Columbus'" (p. 95). It seems that even the poor reborn Talmudic scholar measures paradise in America in terms of material wealth.

Levinsky's continued discovery of his new paradise leads him to believe that "nothing is impossible in the land of Columbus" (p. 192). He learns what it means to possess a checkbook, to have a "credit face," to open a Fifth Avenue establishment with only American models for only American cloak designs. For David Levinsky, "each day brought new experiences, fresh impressions, keen
sensations. An American day seemed to be far richer in substance than an Antomir year. [He] was in an everlasting flutter. [He] seemed to be panting for breath for the sheer speed with which [he] was rushing through life" (p. 131). Levinsky's new Eden is a place of "more" -- "more self-confidence and energy, . . . larger ambitions and wider scopes" (p. 93). David Levinsky seems to epitomize the new American Adam, from de Tocqueville's native American who grasps at all within his reach to a businessman like Carnegie who believes in a faith that magnifies the value of the individual self.

Still, Levinsky desperately tries to become as American as possible, even to the point of sacrificing his Jewish heritage. He is ashamed of his "Talmud gesticulations, a habit that worried [him] like a physical defect. It was so distressingly un-American" (p. 327). Indeed, Levinsky "would watch American smokers and study their ways, as though there were a special American manner of smoking. . ." (p. 326). For this immigrant American, the ideal sense of being American comes as he is travelling in a dining car with some gentile salesmen, "a nobleman among noblemen" (p. 329). Levinsky feels the novel experience of "speeding onward through the night" while "partaking of a repast
in an enchanted palace" (p. 331). Though he acclaims America and these gentiles in expressions of unrealistic romance and the ideal, he soon finds himself wondering if these men found the Jewish salesman a nuisance and feels himself removed from their "American" conversation. This example is typical of Levinsky's constant feeling of alienation from the social fabric of American life, being caught between his old life in Antomir and his new one in America.

In his role as a new American Adam, David Levinsky transforms from the young scholar of the synagogue to a businessman who worships success, "the almighty goddess of the hour" (p. 445). As a son of the heavenly father, the young David studies the Talmud and its "questions of conscience, religious duty, and human sympathy -- in short, . . . the relations 'between man and God' and those 'between man and man'" (p. 28). Following in the footsteps of the first Adam, Levinsky turns from the authority of the Talmud to woman and the desire for knowledge and finds his union with God shattered. Influenced by Naphtali who denies the existence of God and Matilda who believes in the power of education, David Levinsky pays reverence to a new synagogue in America, the City College of New York which becomes his
temple, his House of Sanctity, and stands as his "symbol of spiritual promotion" (p. 169). Levinsky romanticizes and idealizes his new religion of education and simplistically blames the destruction of this Temple on the spilling of a bottle of milk, the "accident" which he believes shaped his life in America and led him to open his own business. Throughout his life, Levinsky searches for a religion that will bring him the ecstasy of knowing -- "of light breaking all around him . . . of life becoming clearer" (p. 169) -- but finds only that "the gloomiest past is dearer than the brightest present" (p. 526).

For the increasingly "successful" Levinsky, the new Eden of America is no garden and he is no gardener. "It is a big barn-yard full of chickens and they are scratching one another, and scrambling over one another" (p. 272). After discovering the philosophies of Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin, Levinsky prides himself as being one of the "victors of Existence" (p. 283) in the brutal, jungle-like struggle for the survival of the fittest. This new Adam finds no spiritual nourishment in his chosen paradise. Instead, he "picture[s] civilization as a harlot with cheeks, lips, and eyelashes of artificial beauty. [He] imagine[s] mountains of powder and paint, a deafening chorus of
affected laughter, a huge heart, as large as a city, full of falsehood and mischief" (p. 380). The new Adam succumbs to this temptress and, as Tevkin notes in his poetry, the freedom of the spirit is imprisoned. "America is [his] cage. It is not [his] home. [His] song is gone" (p. 459). Levinsky has no creeds and knows no ideals (p. 380). He only believes in the "cold, drab theory of the struggle for existence . . . and this could not satisfy a heart that was hungry for enthusiasm and affections, . . . and dreams of family life" (p. 380).

Even before he comes to America, however, Levinsky, "the poor little orphan" (p. 4), considers himself estranged from his parents and his home. According to the historian Charles Sanford, "the myth of the Garden of Eden expresses the relationship of the individual or group to authority." Levinsky, without a biological or spiritual father, finds himself cast out into the world, searching for a home, for a sense of belonging, for an authority that can give meaning to his life. In his autobiography, Levinsky notes that "a great immigrant city like New York or Chicago is full of men

11 Sanford, p. 28.
12 Lyons, p. 88.
and women who are alone amid a welter of human life. For these nothing has greater glamour than a family in whose house they might be made to feel at home" (p. 239). The successful Jewish businessman always craved some place in the "nest of a family" in which his "lonely soul had a sense of home and domestic comfort" (p. 251). Neither the Nodelmans or the Magolises are able to meet this need fully. Indeed, another of Tevkin's poems best describes modern orphaned man, particularly Levinsky, and his loneliness and alienation:

Since the destruction of the Temple instrumental music has been forbidden in the synagogues. The children of Israel are in mourning. They are in exile and in mourning. Silent is their harp. So is mine. I am in exile. I am in a strange land. My harp is silent (p. 458).

III. THE RISE OF DAVID LEVINSKY: Images of the Garden

Mankind's fall from innocence in the Garden of Eden, the Judeo-Christian interpretation of paradise and sinless existence, provides the ironic framework for David Levinsky's "rise" in the new American Eden. "Organized by an evocative structure of parallelism - and - contrast," this myth brings to the modern story of an American businessman the reality of his precarious

position in a world that is no longer innocent. As the new Adam, Levinsky is poised between his own divinity and devilishness.

Levinsky begins his story by describing his separation from his father in images reminiscent of Adam's expulsion from the Garden: "All I remember of my father is his tawny beard, a huge yellow apple he once gave me at the gate of an orchard where he was employed as watchman, and the candle which burned at his head as his body lay under a white shroud on the floor" (p. 4). The orphan Levinsky, an archetype for modern fallen man, never gets inside the gate of paradise but instead lives out his life with only the "fantastic shapes" and "bizarre visions" of heaven afforded beneath the rusty old coat of his dead father (p. 5).

In Antomir and America, Levinsky attempts to fill the "great blank" of his father's absence by turning to possible substitutes for authority and caring. As a Talmudic scholar, Levinsky seeks the approval of a God in heaven who would be interested in his every move and thought (p. 38) and the companionship of a Reb Sender whose admonitions could keep him pure and chaste. Still, these along with Meyer Nodelman, Abraham Tevkin, and even Spencer's "Unknowable" cannot replace the
father gone from him. David Levinsky, the archetypal fallen Adam, can only yearn for belonging. A chapter entitled "At Her Father's House" suggests not only that "Levinsky is searching for a father as well as for a wife" but it also "signifies Levinsky's separation from God: he no longer has a place in his Father's house."  

Suspended between a paradise lost and a paradise hoped for, as the new Adam Levinsky unsuccessfully struggles to reconcile his perceptions of woman as madonna and woman as temptress. The title of the chapter in which the young David begins his Talmudic studies points to the duality of his situation: "Enter Satan." Levinsky notes that his "relations with God were of a personal and of a rather familiar character" and that he "loved Him as one does a woman" (p. 38). Satan, too, however, is associated with the female image in Levinsky's mind. Reb Sender's story of the temptation of Rabbi Mathia transmutes the role of the tempter from the image of the snake to "the guise of the most beautiful woman in the world" (p. 40). Woman, then, becomes a reminder for both the god-man union that once was and the separation that occurred with the Fall.  

From his first love of Matilda who is an "angel of

14 Lyons, p. 92.
light and a messenger of death" (p. 80), Levinsky's image of woman underlines modern man's struggle to be "two men at once" (p. 312). According to Charles Sanford, in the universal myth of the Garden of Eden "Eve as temptress and Eve as madonna split off from the mother image, releasing a repressed eroticism, but linking man's apprehension of ideal beauty to love throughout nature." For Levinsky this means worshipping a Madame Klesmer from afar and yet treating women as his "quarry." In his love for Dora, a wife and mother, Levinsky reveals feelings that suggest both the sacred and the profane:

I idolized Dora. It seemed to me that I adored her soul even more than I did her body. I was under her moral influence, and the firmness with which she maintained the distance between us added to my respect for her. And yet I never ceased to dream of and to seek her moral downfall (p. 291).

Levinsky himself admits that in his relationship with this woman he experiences an unusual blend of "animal selfishness and spiritual sublimity" (p. 279).

Even though Levinsky is faced with the dualistic nature of male-female relations, he continually attempts to idealize them and force them into the realm of sentimentalized romance. As a young man in Antomir,

Levinsky is entranced by the story of Abraham Tevkin expressing his passion for his "lady-love" in letters to her father (p. 57). In America, he is easily caught up in the "starry enchantment" and "love-enraptured solemnity of the spring night" when he proposes to Gussie, who later brings to his heart the "predominant feeling . . . of physical distaste" (pp. 198-199). "An enchanted man," Levinsky thrills at buying Dora flowers and jewelry (p. 251). These form but the prologue, however, for his most determined attempts to capture the innocent Eve of his dreams.

Anna Tevkin, whom Levinsky calls "the first virgin [he] ever loved" (p. 483), becomes for this new American Adam the inaccessible ideal woman. He first meets her in the Catskills, which he notes "is just the kind of place for God to live in" (p. 406). Surrounded by the only pastoral setting in Levinsky's memories (complete with the gardens and the purifying streams so elemental to the universal myth), Anna seems to inspire the sunset, the sky full of stars, and the fire of light within the dancing pavilion. Ironically, however, as Levinsky describes it, the light of this pavilion becomes an image of destruction rather than creation.

I gazed at the spectacle until it fascinated me as something weird. The pavilion with its brightly illuminated windows was an immense
magic lamp, and the young people flocking to it so many huge moths of a supernatural species. As I saw them disappear in the glare of the doorway I pictured them as being burned up. I was tempted to join the unearthly procession and to be "burned" like the others. Then, discarding the image, I visioned men and women of ordinary flesh and blood dancing, and I was seized with a desire to see the sexes in mutual embrace (p. 428).

This surrealistic description of sexual gratification and destruction in the context of the Catskill paradise ironically underscores that Eden has been lost.

David Levinsky begins and ends the tale of his "rise" in the world with thoughts on marriage and the meaning that such a relationship can bring to life. With the image of a woman he can never have, Levinsky yearns for union with the ideal while knowing it can never be. Looking back in the mirror, Levinsky might have seen the reflection of paradise lost in his earliest memory of the Eden myth:

I was in a trance. The [wedding] ceremony was a poem to me, something inexpressibly beautiful and sacred.

Presently a boy, somewhat older than I, made a jest at the young couple's expense. What he said was a startling revelation to me. Certain things which I had known before suddenly appeared in a new light to me. I relished the discovery and I relished the deviltry of it. But the poem vanished. The beauty of the wedding I had just witnessed, and of weddings in general, seemed to be irretrievably desecrated (p. 14).
CHAPTER 3: THE RISE OF DAVID LEVINSKY: AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A DISPOSSESSED AMERICAN ADAM

America was, in a literal sense, a new world, a strange world, a disagreeable world, but also a challenging world that strengthened me with a strong healthy odor like that of a freshly plowed field. America intrigued me, puzzled me . . . All around me was astounding wealth, activity and enterprise. I had not yet heard the expression "the land of unlimited possibilities." But I felt all around me the sense of opportunity. . . . I examined all, I listened to everything, I observed everywhere. I was repelled and attracted, possessed and homesick and excited by expectations. . . . I was torn between the pleasure of new achievement and the longing for home. Sometimes, in my restlessness, I didn't recognize my old self.

The Education of Abraham Cahan
(pp. 243-244)

I. Autobiography: Search for the Self

From Augustine's Confessions to Saul Bellow's Dangling Man, writers have turned to the autobiographical form to recreate and evaluate the movement of an individual life through the labyrinth of personal and external experience. Engaged in the literary act of self-consciousness, the autobiographer reflects and examines the metamorphosis of his life and attempts to shape a coherent and meaningful frame for it. According to Roy Pascal, autobiography "establishes certain stages in an individual life, makes links between them, and defines, implicitly or explicitly, a
certain consistency of relationship between the self and the outside world." Individual identity with all of its component parts -- traditions, dreams, responsibilities, and so forth -- becomes the center of all that is revealed. The exploration of this center as revealed by narrative persona and created character forms the fabric of autobiography.

In his novel about the financially successful but lonely cloak-manufacturer, Abraham Cahan adopts autobiography as an artistic strategy for revealing the inherent tension of modern man's exploration of the self. This fictional autobiography goes beyond providing an outside narrator's view of Levinsky's "rise" in the new world. Drawing upon intuitive knowledge as opposed to objective knowledge, Levinsky's story becomes "not only an account of things done or known, an exposition of a personality, but also a search for the true self, and a means to come to terms with it." By having Levinsky serve as both narrator and central character of his own story, Cahan magnifies and universalizes the dual tension of this one man's search for Eden.

2 Ibid., p. 39.
Within the mythical context of America as the new Eden, it has previously been noted that the individual strives to progress toward perfection and the ideal. This concept has often been an integral part of the autobiographical tradition at large. In autobiographies from Rousseau to Franklin, the speaker "exists for himself as something uncompleted, something full of potentiality, always overflowing the actuality, and it is this indeterminateness and unlimitedness that he communicates to us as an essential quality of being." The sense of "becoming," developing more fully through the artistic re-enactment of past experiences, provides the autobiographer with an opportunity to "shape and reshape himself" in the telling of his story. Benjamin Franklin, for instance, describes in his Autobiography, with some "fluidity of poses," his own progress from penury and immaturity to wealth and moral improvement. American businessmen writing autobiographies after Franklin often modeled their stories of personal fulfillment on his and together created a body of

3 Ibid., p. 18.
4 Ibid., p. 23.
legends for the mythology of material progress and success in the new world.

If one were to read only the title of Cahan's novel, The Rise of David Levinsky might appear to belong to this same body of legends. Levinsky, the narrator, however, indicates otherwise on the first page: "Sometimes, when I think of my past in a superficial, casual way, the metamorphosis I have gone through strikes me as nothing short of a miracle... And yet when I take a look at my inner identity it impresses me as being precisely the same as it was thirty or forty years ago" (p. 3). When Levinsky begins to set down in writing the story of his life, he has already internalized the personal journey he will describe. When Levinsky the autobiographer tells his readers that his inner self has not changed and that the days of his youth seem closer to him than those of the present, he appears to be "self-absorbed, full of nostalgic yearning and a sense of his own unfulfilled desires." The sense of "becoming" throughout the novel is clearly shadowed by his desire to return to the past.

Time in its influence upon the incidents and values of life plays a vital role for the autobio-

Chametzky, p. 138.
graphical form. Autobiography juxtaposes the temporal planes of the past and the present and, through reflection, reconstruction, and analysis of details within these planes, creates a structure to unify the subject as a whole. The critic Alfred Kazin identifies this as creating an organic history of the self in which "the past is not merely recovered but...redeemed as a key to immortality." Autobiography, then, involves an interplay, a collusion between the past and the present.

David Levinsky, however, does not experience a sense of balance between his past and his present. At the conclusion of his life's story, he notes "I cannot escape from my old self. My past and my present do not comport well" (p. 530). In his efforts to be the new American Adam, Levinsky denies his past and rejects his Jewish identity which eventually leads to a "disabling self-betrayal, an un-making of the self." Frustrated

9 Pascal, *Design*, p. 11.
10 Engel, p. 75.
by the loneliness of a barren life, Levinsky nostalgically remembers his days in Antomir and surrounds himself with reminders of them. He even attempts to create an "Antomir atmosphere" in his shop (p. 378). Levinsky's idealizations of the past, however, consistently lead to disappointment and even haunt the successful businessman.

In the final book of his autobiography, "Episodes of a Lonely Life," Levinsky encounters people from his past that evoke feelings of his own weaknesses and unfulfilled yearnings. Seeing his former tormentor Shmerl the Pincher as a shabby and feeble peddler, Levinsky struggles between his desire to help and to avenge himself on the decrepit old man. Matilda, once his goddess on a pedestal, fails to "touch a romantic chord in [his] heart" (p. 510) when they meet at the theatre. The "image of Gussie giving her hard-earned money to help the strikers" (p. 520) in Levinsky's shop recalls memories of his earlier unsuccessful attempts to marry her for her money. Even the celebration of his second birth in the new Eden with Gitelson, his "ship brother," leaves Levinsky's "heart heavy with distaste and sadness" (p. 516). Rather than redeeming the past, each of these reunions "deprives Levinsky of the
satisfactions of memory and mocks his nostalgia."

Cahan's selection of the autobiographical form provides added dimensions to a fictional tale of a businessman's rise to fortune. This Jewish-American realist extends this subject beyond simple narrative to include a sense of the teller's responsibility towards the self as he exposes his own mental exploration. "What saves David Levinsky from its mere sociological or historical interest . . . is Cahan's sensitivity to the poignant effects of [Levinsky's] rise upon the character and inner life of his narrator." The conflict between Levinsky's inner and outer identity is particularly augmented and amplified through his own voice as a new American Adam.

II. THE RISE OF DAVID LEVINSKY: Autobiography and the American Adam

According to Arthur Clark in Autobiography: Its Genesis and Phases, autobiographies essentially record and interpret periods of personal transition in which the individual attempts to explain his sense of

11 Engel, p. 83.
difference from the world around him. Within the context of the American faith in individual identity and its movement toward perfection, this has most often been manifested in "non-fictional" autobiographical works by nineteenth and twentieth century businessmen who attempt to explain the changes in their lives in relationship to the culture surrounding them. Many American prophets of success writing between 1850 and 1920, P. T. Barnum, Thomas Mellon, Henry Clews, J. D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie to name a few, emphasize "how character triumph[s] over circumstances."

The autobiographical form provides these writers with a mechanism to bring together the telling of personal experiences and the evaluating of those experiences in terms of the body of values of their culture. "The act of recollection becomes an act of creation and an act of self-evaluation at the same time." Consequently, in autobiography, the writer often suggests that changes within have "somehow isolated him from his fellows and produced a degree of

14 Wyllie, p. 21.
15 Spengemann & Lundquist, p. 502.
loneliness, a kind of need . . . for either sympathy, or self-justification, or appreciation, or communication." Cahan's The Rise of David Levinsky reflects all of these tendencies for motivation in ways that are particularly ironic for this American Adam.

If on one level Levinsky begins writing his autobiography to draw attention to and appreciation for his business success in the New World, he continues in ways that ultimately work against this goal. As the narrator of his story, he describes his character of the past as one who wants to be the "hero" of a romance or adventure, who "thrills" in the "limelight of world-wide publicity" (p. 100). The more successful the character Levinsky seems in his story as an American businessman, however, the more the narrator Levinsky undercuts his success.

As character, with no home to call his own, Levinsky struggles desperately to be appreciated as an American. He despises being a "green one" and does everything in his power to become a "true" American (p. 111). From shaving off his beard to moving his shop to Fifth Avenue, Levinsky reveals his desire to belong and to be appreciated. Levinsky the narrator, however,

16 Clark, p. 22.
notes ironically from the start that whether this man has four cents or two million dollars in his pocket, his life seems essentially "devoid of significance" (p. 3).

David Levinsky, archetype for the dispossessed Adam, develops a "relish for flaunting [his] martyrdom, for being an object of pity" (p. 19). Orphaned and alone, Levinsky seeks the sympathy of his reader as he describes the hardships of his youth and the loneliness of his life in America. The exaggerated and often repeated references to his "gnawing . . . loneliness and desolation" ring falsely and inauthentically (p. 526). The distortions reflected in his own consciousness inspire not sympathy but irony.

Like many autobiographers, Levinsky seems to relate the story of his life in ways that seek to justify his past thoughts, motivations, and actions. The now successful American cloak-manufacturer narrating his rise to fortune in the new Eden prefers to look outside his inner self for reasons behind developments in his life. According to Levinsky the narrator, Dickens' Dombey and Son proves to be the ruin of his push-cart business (p. 138) and an "unimportant accident, a mere trifle" of spilling a bottle of milk on some silk coats gives a "new turn to the trend of events changing the character of [his] whole life" (p. 187). Even as he
concludes the story of his rise in the New World, Levinsky sees himself a subject for pity because he has been a "victim of circumstances" (p. 530).

Throughout the autobiographical novel, Levinsky as American Adam rationalizes his fall, his corruption in all phases of life ranging from love to family life to business. His "romantic conspiracy with a married woman" impresses him as something "sacred" (p. 281). As narrator he reflects and evaluates his behavior with Dora:

I seemed to accept the general rule that a wife-stealer is a dispicable creature, a thief, a vile immoral wretch . . . Simultaneously with this feeling I had another one which excused my conduct on the theory that everybody was at the bottom of his heart likewise ready to set that rule at defiance and to make a mistress of his friend's wife, provided it could be done with absolute secrecy and safety . . . I treated myself as a doting mother does a wayward son (pp. 281-283).

Though the final statement seems to reveal self-criticism reached through personal awareness, the reader quickly learns that Levinsky does not grow from this understanding. Instead, he continues to selfishly take advantage of others like The Antomir Benefit Society, a group of native people in whom he hopes to build a "family spirit," but instead uses for cheap labor while protecting himself from the unions (p. 378). Levinsky
even rationalizes that "business honor and business dignity often are a luxury" (p. 239) he can't afford and turns to stealing the cloak designs of his former partner Chaikin.

If Levinsky communicates anything through his narrative, it is that he is still "a great dreamer of . . . dreams" (p. 5). In the final chapter of his life's story, this American businessman still yearns for his idealized Anna and for "a life of intellectual interest" (p. 529). Levinsky simplistically envies the successful in science, music, or art, feeling that he might have been much happier if he had experienced his rise in those fields rather than in business. There is little indication anywhere in the novel, however, that this is more than just another of Levinsky's intellectual ideas as expressed through a narrator who rarely exposes himself as a realistic character.

Indeed, Levinsky the narrator is not altogether honest with himself. Exaggerated statements and generalizations, reflective moments of self-indulgence, and distorted views of events and motivations color the voice of the American Adam as he tells of his rise. Cahan's choice of first-person narrative emphasizes how Levinsky allows falsehoods, misconceptions, and
inauthentic feelings to rule his thinking and his language.

In autobiography, the writer is both participant and observer. The details and events selected for inclusion in one's life story reveal meaning for the teller's present self as well as for the historical self. The shape the writer "gives his life is valid as part of his life; it is not a judgment so much as a self-creation in terms of the life experienced." The autobiographer, then, plays a double role in his own story. Viewing himself from the outside, he attempts to describe the historical self in more or less objective terms. As narrator, though, "he is also the subject, the temperament whose inner and outer world owes its appearance to the manner in which he sees it." As both subject and object, narrative persona and created character, the autobiographer expresses a dichotomy of self that often appears shadowy and even contradictory.

David Levinsky's narrative about his "rise" from peddler to rich man does not affirm a consistency of

17 Engel, p. 85
19 Pascal, Design, p. 71.

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relationships between his conception of his past and his present. Indeed, as he reminisces and attempts to bring together the diverse elements of his life, his "words express his fear that his personality lacks a coherent center." His devotion to the "sing-song" of the Talmud rather than its substance, his worship of superficial American education which seemed "a cheap machine-made product" (p. 167), and his preoccupation with a "vague portrait of a woman in the abstract" who could only be a "romantic ideal" (p. 376), are just a few examples of Levinsky's inability to come to terms with the difference between intellectual idea and realistic experience.

III. THE RISE OF DAVID LEVINSKY: Paradise and Paradox

Within the context of a universal mythic structure that emphasizes man's hope for a return to paradise, Abraham Cahan explores the motivations for writing one's own story, whether it be to gain appreciation, inspire sympathy, justify action, or to reveal self-development. In the case of David Levinsky, Cahan has imagined a man attempting to do each of these at various moments in his search for fulfillment, his pursuit of the eternal

20 Chametzky, Ghetto, p. 138.

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American promise of a new beginning. With the use of autobiography, Cahan places his focus on the conflict between the individual's inner yearnings to fulfill the promise and his acknowledgement of its outward unfulfillment.

The idealistic image of America as the new Eden and the realistic view of it as a weedy garden together form an ironic paradox evident in much of American life and literature. In *Quest for Paradise*, Charles Sanford emphasizes that the universal image of Eden carries with it opposing impulses in tension with one another. "The image of Paradise . . . would seem to be at once an image of desire and an image for the release of desire, an image for the realization and fulfillment of self and an image for the surrender of self." Such a statement particularly seems to describe Levinsky's struggles to make real his idealistic views of women and his new garden. Writing of the American Dream and Nightmare in literature, David Madden suggests that "the edenic promises of the American land helped shape aspects of the American character; ironic and paradoxical tensions between romantic and idealistic elements in that

21 Madden, p. xli.
22 Sanford, p. 266.
character, as it experienced the land, helped produce the American Dream." Eighteenth and nineteenth century autobiographical writers describing their quest for the dream often play the roles of prophets and heros in their life stories. For twentieth century man, however, the role shifts.

According to numerous critics of twentieth century autobiography, literary introspection is particularly appropriate for an age in which the multiplicity of experience often seems at odds with the desire for personal unity and perfection. "The twentieth century is appropriately a time of autobiography -- mere witnesses must assert their reality at a time when history rejects the individual." Indeed, in a world where change pervades all elements of life, the individual experiences the need to look within and engage in the process of self-exploration to identify some meaning for his existence. "The atmosphere of doubt, restlessness, insecurity, caused by intellectual upheavals, produces in the serious mind a desire to clear the ground for himself, and to aid others, --

23 Madden, p. xvii.
24 Ibid., p. xi.
produces, in a word, the autobiographical intention." In many cases of modern literature, the introspective individual rarely performs heroic action or achieves any kind of significant success. Instead, the man with deficiencies and limitations often "seems best qualified to tell us what we are like from within." David Levinsky, restless for change and confused by his environment, and hungry for a better life that even lacks clarity for him, tells a personal yet universal story of an American Adam to whom life remains as incoherent at the end as at the beginning.

David Levinsky's autobiography ironically does not describe the story of the rise of a successful businessman. For it to be such, he should affirm an identity that can unite his past and present experiences. His story should stand as evidence of the American myth of fulfillment and "becoming." Levinsky, however, reveals that his faith in the myth has led him to ruin. In referring to his rise, Levinsky concludes that "there are cases when success is a

tragedy" (p.529). His is the autobiography of the Disenchanted. "This man no longer draws strength from his culture, and having nothing to substitute for it, he can neither criticize it nor flout its mandates with any satisfaction." This autobiographer seems caught in the paradox of the new Adam seeking paradise in the modern world: the sooner it appears that his intellectual visions of Eden are to be realized, the sooner they are to be destroyed in actuality.

The sense of dualistic tension permeating Levinsky's autobiography often reveals a contradiction in his perception of the self. His final comments express his own inadequacies in understanding the man within:

I am always more or less conscious of my good clothes, of the high quality of my office furniture, of the power I wield over the men in my pay. As I have said in another connection, I still have a lurking fear of restaurant waiters. . . . 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).

This dichotomy between the outward appearance of Levinsky's rise and the inner reality that exposes his

27 Spengemann and Lundquist, p. 515.
28 Ibid., p. 515.
hollowness provides a creative tension that aptly weaves together the fabric of man's situation in the modern world.
CONCLUSION: FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

My sense of triumph is coupled with a brooding sense of emptiness and insignificance. . . .
(p. 526)

These words of David Levinsky accentuate the dualistic quality of the autobiographic mask of the dispossessed American Adam. As part of the mainstream of modern American realistic fiction, *The Rise of David Levinsky* explores the archetypal experience of this immigrant everyman born into a new world of street peddling, cloak-manufacturing, and social corruption. Cahan appropriately chooses the autobiographical form to emphasize the double nature of human perspective and predicament.

This study has certainly not exhausted all there is to say on these and related subjects. Indeed, it has raised a number of questions for further consideration:

What role does the motif of the quest for paradise play in Abraham Cahan's other novels and short stories?

How does Cahan apply autobiography as artistic strategy in his other works?

How does Cahan's fictional autobiography compare to other works of fiction using the same form?

In what ways does Cahan's autobiography of David Levinsky reflect the popular "non-fictional" autobiographies of American businessmen in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?
The richness of Cahan's novel, the complexity of the context in which it was written, and the imagination of its readers will undoubtedly lead to continued explorations of this somewhat neglected novel.
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