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Between Political Commitment and Literary Modernism: Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money*

Michael Gold could not have imagined a more appropriate time to publish his fictionalized memoir *Jews Without Money*. Coming out in March 1930, as the first signs of what would develop into the Great Depression became visible, the book enjoyed a huge popularity for its depiction of the miserable life led by Jewish immigrants in New York's Lower East Side, and went through eleven printings by October (Folsom 15). In the long run, however, *Jews Without Money* was forgotten, and even during the post-war ethnic revival it received scant attention. One of the reasons behind this neglect can be ascribed to Gold's political commitment. Until his death in 1967 he remained a staunch critic of capitalism and from his column in *The Daily Worker* he targeted the most pressing political issues. Moreover, his compliance with the Russian Communist Party agenda during the 1930s got him many "enemies" in the American cultural establishment. The academia has remained almost indifferent to the book: only among the historians of the Jewish immigration there has been a mild interest in it as a documentary source.

Marcus Klein's *Foreigners* is one of the few exceptions. Reconstructing the cultural milieu of New York's Greenwich Village and following the vicissitudes of radical publications like *Masses*, *Liberator* and *New Masses*, Klein shed new light on Gold as a leading figure of the inter-war cultural revolution.¹ Moreover, he claimed a crucial role for ethnic writers in the shaping of American modernism. By now, the role of ethnicity in the understanding of modernism has been affirmed, even though traditional readings centered on contributions by the expatriates still prevail.

Jews Without Money, however, demonstrates that alternative approaches to modernity were in existence alongside the activity of intellectuals living in London and Paris. New York, with its futuristic architecture, multicultural and multilingual population, diversification of spaces into business districts, immigrant ghettos and leisure areas, imposed a fragmented perception of the urban experience. Gold, from the vantage point of his immigrant background, could grasp the multiple layers of the metropolitan texture more

¹ Klein's analysis of *Jews Without Money*, though, fails to acknowledge Gold's experimentalist approach to narrative form.

distinctly than other intellectuals, and his Marxist training helped him understand its state as a consequence of the advent of capitalism. In his book, then, Gold tries to make sense of both the fragmentation of the urban experience and the exploitation of immigrant labor, establishing a middle-ground between art and politics: the descriptions of squalid conditions of the Jewish working-class avoid melodramatic sensationalism and blend with the style and imagery inspired by the literary experimentalism of the 1920s. In this way, his work well documents how ethnic modernism originates from the immigrant writer's need to aggregate all the scattered pieces of the self and the community after their mass dislocation in the late nineteenth-century. Modernism thus appears to function as a strategy of survival, a desperate attempt to keep together both the self and the community as (fragmented) wholes.

I. In Search of Form

It took more than a decade for Gold to achieve his precarious middle-ground. The author, who was yet to assume the pseudonym by which he became famous,² came up with the idea of writing a book about his childhood in the Lower East Side as early as 1917, when in the November issue of the radical periodical *Masses* he published "Birth." The sketch had a subtitle, "A Prologue to a Tentative East-Side Novel," which revealed the lack of any definitive plan about the final outcome of his project, still in need of direction. Gold was looking for a suitable form to fictionalize the ghetto. "Birth" begins thus:

I was born (so my mother once told me), on a certain dim day of April, about seven in a morning wrapped in fog. The streets of the East Side were dark with grey, wet gloom; the boats of the harbor cried constantly, like great bewildered gulls, like deep, booming voices of calamity. The day was somber and heavy and unavoidable, like the walls of a prison about the city. And in the same hour and the same tenement that bore me, Rosie Hyman the prostitute died, and the pale ear of the same doctor heard my first wails and the last quiverings of her sore heart. (44)

The paragraph exploits traditional narrative techniques; like a staple nineteenth-century novel, the opening lines mark a point of origin and identify the narrator/protagonist as creator of the emotional and visual landscape. The omniscient narrator imposes his vi-

² Michael Gold was born Itzok Isaac Granich. His first works, "Birth" included, were published under the name Irwin Granich.

sion, providing the reader with the metaphors by which the setting should be interpreted and underlining the link between life and death by associating the narrator's birth and a prostitute's death. Eleven years later, the beginning of *Jews Without Money* makes quite a different impression:

I can never forget the East Side where I lived as a boy.
It was a block from the notorious Bowery, a tenement canyon hung with fire-escapes, bed-clothing, and faces.
Always these faces at the tenement windows. The street never failed them. It was an immense excitement. It never slept. It roared like a sea. It exploded like fireworks.
People pushed and wrangled in the street. There were armies of howling pushcart peddlers. Women screamed, dogs barked and copulated. Babies cried.
A parrot cursed. Ragged kids played under truck-horses. Fat housewives fought from stoop to stoop. A beggar sang. (13)

Both quotations present the East Side as a wretched neighborhood, and the author is mainly concerned with its misery and overcrowding. But whereas the first draft expresses all this through the prison metaphor and the use of dark colors, in the final version Gold shifts his focus onto the sounds and the physical presence of people. Furthermore, the short coordinate sentences that replace the meditative phrasing of "Birth" pile up a succession of images that overlap and create a comprehensive picture of an East Side block. The street is put at the center of the stage, the exterior prevails over the individual and no filter is interpolated between text and reader.

The stylistic evolution of Gold's writing, along with an evocative imagery and the presentation of city life through a kaleidoscope of scenes, comes from his decade-long literary apprenticeship as both critic and writer. His first meditations on art, published some years after "Birth," reveal a degree of naivety and lack a clearly defined poetics. "Towards Proletarian Art," the manifesto that appeared in the *Liberator* in March 1921, calls for an artistic renewal led by the masses, who will impose new contents and new styles on literature. Faced with the necessity to balance the personal recollections of his tough childhood in the ghetto and the messianic invocations of a more equal social order, Gold singles out the tenement as a metaphor suggesting a new artistic principle. The writer declares that the tenement is "the pattern in which my being has been cast" ("Towards" 64), providing the filter through which the outside world is seen and understood.

But what is a tenement? In his article, Gold writes about weeping mothers, sick workers and dirty children, and this thematic aspect provides the very nourishment for his artistic vision. The tenement, however, is more than that: it is not just a "content," but

a style. The tenement is a “theatre” where the dwellers involuntarily stage “shows” for one another, causing a confusion which the traditional single points of view cannot decipher. The narrow and mostly dark spaces compel the people to project parts of their lives outside onto stoops, fire-escapes, roofs and street-corners, establishing a continuity between exteriors and interiors that challenged the Victorian notions of domesticity. In short, to put the tenement into fiction requires a new way of writing fiction.

What in “Towards Proletarian Art” was no more than an intuition achieves a clearer shape in the following years, when a flourish of experiments in literature, ranging from Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer* to the works of the Paris expatriate colony, provided Gold with a new literary language and helped him understand what stylistic direction he should follow. In “Hemingway – White Collar Poet,” a review published in 1928, Gold criticizes the author of *The Sun Also Rises* for adhering to escapist literature but, at the same time, praises his “bare, hard style of a god-like reporter,” providing the ground for a narrative that is “precise and perfect as science” (100). In his later writing, Gold would go so far as to acknowledge that “Hemingway and others have had the intuition to incorporate [a] proletarian element into their work,” the scorn for any “vague fumbling poetry” (“Proletarian Realism” 206). In the article, written in the mood of confidence following the publication of *Jews Without Money*, Gold outlines ten rules for writing what he calls “proletarian realism,” among which there is the recommendation to use “as few words as possible,” to avoid “straining or melodrama or other effects,” and to attempt to create “cinema in words,” concentrating on “swift action, clear form” and the “direct line” (“Proletarian” 207-208).

Avoiding melodrama when confronting a neighborhood where deaths, alcoholism and sickness were daily features was not an easy task. Gold, however, follows Hemingway’s rule of evoking emotion through the employment of mere facts. The episode in which the reaction to the death of Esther, the narrator’s sister, is described is a perfect example of this technique. The situation of death could have occasioned an overflow of sentimentality, but Gold avoids such an effect by first providing a visual representation focused on the mother, seen in her stillness and changed attitude after the great loss, and then contrasting her silence with the usual vitality that was peculiar to her. The bare fact of Esther’s death asks for no further comment:

Esther was dead. My mother had borne everything in life, but this she could not bear. It frightened one to see how quiet she became. She was no longer active, cheerful, quarrelsome. She sat by the window all day, and read her prayer-book. As she mumbled the endless Hebrew prayers, tears flowed silently down her face. She did not speak, but she knew why she was crying. Esther was dead. (288)

Throughout the book, Gold appears to be quite in control of his narrative material³; the episodes are dramatized through sentences that relate facts and avoid interpretations, thus communicating particular states of mind without any direct reference to them. Another example can be found in the following passage about the narrator's discovery of sex:

...Then they went to her room.

Nigger and I followed them. It was on the ground floor of my tenement. Stealthy as detectives, we stared through the keyhole. What I saw made my heart beat, my face redden with shock.

Nigger snickered. He saw I was hurt and it amused him. (25)

The ensuing row between Nigger and young Mickey discloses the latter's psychological drama occasioned by a discovery he was not yet equipped to deal with. This key episode, testifying to the vulnerability of immigrant children to the crude aspects of life, does not give rein to the explicit condemnation of living conditions. Emotions are restrained, but the repeated references to crime and prostitution in the following chapters help to envision the grimness of a childhood spent in the ghetto.

II. The Ghetto as Theatre

The Lower East Side was not just a site of vice and sordidness. The immigrant communities transformed this section of the city into a cultural laboratory and the street became the incubator of new forms of art. This street culture, that reshaped the urban setting into a multitude of theatrical stages, is central in *Jews Without Money*. The East Side is "an endless pageant" (13), a "free enormous circus" where "there was always something for boys to see" (38); the coming of an organ grinder, for example, stirs up children who, gathering into a dance, catch the attention of passers-by. People stop their activities and become the audience:

But the dancers make every one else happy- some of the prostitutes have left their 'business' for a moment, and watch with gentle smiles. The cop leans against a lamp-post and smiles. A grim old graybeard with a live chicken under his arm is smiling at the children. A truckdriver has slowed down and watches them dreamily as he rattles by. Mothers watch from the tenement windows. A fat important little business Jew, bursting like a plum with heat, mops his face, and admires the children. (51)

³ There are few exceptions, like the episode that describes an unjust punishment at school (36-37).

This description, highlighting the social variety of the audience, testifies to the author's intention of using theatre as a trope to convey the complexity of the ghetto life.

Even attending a synagogue service is perceived in performative terms: "The synagogue... was like a theater. The Rabbi blew a ram's horn, and a hundred bearded men wrapped in shrouds convulsed themselves in agony. They groaned, sobbed, beat their breasts and wailed those strange Oriental melodies..."(185). Since his visit to Russia in 1925, where he sojourned for almost a year, Gold became an enthusiast of constructivist theatre. He was particularly impressed by Meierhold's attempt to bring "the street onto the stage" and his ability to reproduce the rhythms and dynamics of the modern city life (Tuerk 7-9). Back in America, Gold tried to follow the Russian director's example in a new play, *Hoboken Blues*. The stage directions for Act III, depicting the life in Harlem, reflect Gold's preoccupation with a scenography which blends big advertising signs and futuristic architecture, and which requires the reproduction of city music, a mixture of "horns, gongs, sirens, whistles, bells, flat wheels" (Tuerk 9). It is not difficult to see the correspondence between this experiment and the emphasis on the sounds in first paragraphs in *Jews Without Money*; placed at the very beginning of the narrative, the "musical overture" works as a soundtrack that must be kept in mind throughout the reading of the book.

Another cue Gold derived from watching productions by Meierhold was the division of the stage into a number of spaces where different actions were performed simultaneously, thus presenting the plurality and complexity of working-class neighborhoods. The juxtaposition of scenes without chronological concatenation, allowing for the inclusion of all possible perspectives through which a space becomes textualized, had been already successfully attempted in fiction by writers like Sherwood Anderson (*Winesburg, Ohio*) and John Dos Passos (*Manhattan Transfer*); Gold followed their example and adopted what might be called a cubist narrative strategy. This choice, though, is not just a matter of form, but responds to an inner necessity of the dislocated immigrant, who, as Henry Roth once put it, saw his own life as something made "out of rags and patches... a crazy quilt" (211): the scenes described in *Jews Without Money*, thus, are to be understood as pieces that make up a fragmented picture of the immigrants, suspended between worlds and confronting a pluralistic and heterogeneous environment. The relics of the European past, whether people or their stories, constitute the narrator's identity as much as the sounds of streetcars, the towering buildings and the products of popular culture, all signifying the metropolitan experience. Thus, the subdivision of the narrative material into autonomous scenes, each describing a particular character, situation or place, on the one hand reflects the complex and multi-faceted ghetto life, and on the other illustrates the process of self-reinvention by which the narrator can claim all the "rags and patches" that make up his quilt-like identity.

Mickey, the narrator/spectator, finds himself caught in a kaleidoscope of images and perceptions, and any attempt at imposing a single vision or interpretation on the surrounding environment is bound to fail. The diverse and contrasting images and experiences generate a confusion that reproduces the situation of a child whose intellectual faculties are yet to develop.⁴ Only gradually does the contemplation of human suffering and exploitation emerge as a consequence of the dominant capitalist order, until the final invocation of the “workers’ Revolution” (309) discloses the author’s political vision.⁵

III. A Landscape of War, Junk and Decay

While Gold’s withdrawn narrator avoids imposing any view and meaning of the events, the recurring images define the prevailing metaphors that shape the perception of the ghetto experience. Concerned mostly with the misery of the immigrants’ lives, the author puts emphasis on three emblems of urban existence: ruin, waste and violence. Evidently, Gold reassesses the enthusiasm with which the astounding economic expansion of the 1920s was greeted. The Lower East Side “was a world of violence and stone” (*Jews* 63) and throughout the book it is seen as a territory to be conquered, which reflects the immigrant struggle to carve out an own place. When Mickey crosses the Bowery, new exotic worlds appear to him: a pig’s head in a butcher’s window, the “strange green vegetables” and “men eating oysters” fascinate the young explorer in Little Italy, but he is soon singled out as a Jew, and the boys of the neighborhood beat him with sticks (187). The fights between gangs of children epitomize the struggle of immigrants to take root in a territory, a vital space that has to be controlled and defended against forces from outside, as in the episode about the battle for the possession of a vacant lot used as playground (45-48).

As the only available, although temporary, open-air recreation area, the Delancey street vacant lot has a quite un-edenic outlook, being “home of all the twisted junk, rusty baby carriages, lumber, bottles, boxes, moldy pants and dead cats of the neighborhood” (46). Junk and garbage are a constant feature of Gold’s Lower East Side, and their signi-

⁴ What contemporary critic Kenneth Burke wrote in defense of Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep* in a letter to *New Masses* seems also appropriate for *Jews Without Money*; Burke declared that Roth “caught the ‘pre-political’ thinking of childhood”, and the great merit of his book lies in the “fluent and civilized way in which he found, on our city streets, the new equivalents of an ancient jungle” (quoted in Denning 236).

⁵ Although some scholars consider the final invocation as too sudden and ungrounded, a gradual development of the narrator’s political awareness can effectively be traced. Politics comes suddenly into the book when Dr. Solow mentions the union as a possible cure to the illness that affects the narrator’s father (233). Then, it is Aunt Lena’s involvement in a strike that originates political debates in the family (235-237). Finally, in chapter 18, the narrator show awareness of the connections between capital and immigrants’ living conditions (241).

ficance goes beyond a simplistic indictment of the unhealthy conditions in the neighborhood to signal the deterioration of the American myth as promise. Discarded objects, the polluted waters of the East River, the stench emanating from garbage cans and tiny alleys used as dumps are tokens of a city in ruin, where life has withered under the pressure of economic expansion:

New York is a devil's dream.... It is all geometry angles and stone. It is mythical, a city buried by a volcano. No grass is found in this petrified city...
Just stone. It is the ruins of Pompeii...(40)

Transforming the New York cityscape – unquestionably the very image of modernity – into an archaeological phantasy has much to do with challenging the great American narrative of development and progress.⁶ Gold's representation of New York contrasts with the imperial vision that characterizes late nineteenth-century culture, when a public discourse modeled on classical ideals of order and symmetry, that found expression in a number of architectural projects, was considered the solution to threats of social fragmentation (Trachtenberg, Rutkoff).

The repeated reference to junk – the archeological artifacts of a consumer society where objects quickly lose their functions – puts alongside the official public discourse of economic prosperity those elements excluded from it, establishing an identification between immigrants and useless, undesirable objects (Celati). A further reference to historical past reinforces the role of waste as sole bearer of the immigrant's instances: some seventeenth-century gravestones that pave a tenement's backyard, one of the few places where the ghetto children can play, refer to an epoch that is alien to their experience. Looking at them, the narrator cannot find any cathartic continuity between the traditional past and his own present (Denning 248). The discarded objects that he recognizes are just those that fill garbage bins and empty lots.

The overall picture of the city is that of a lifeless place, taking a heavy toll on its inhabitants. Nigger's father, a tailor by trade, is likened to a mummy, as his face resembles "a skull with sharp cheek bones and nose from which the flesh had rotted" (263), while another character, Aunt Lena, hardened by sweatshop labor, has lost the "rosy peasant cheeks" and "shiny black hair" (131), which people admired when she arrived from Europe: her "skin was yellowish with bad health, coarsened and tight over the cheek bones" (236). The immigrants inhabit a dystopian urban space, and when the winter and the economic panic coincide, they transform the ghetto into a scene of apocalyptic disaster:

⁶ See Benjamin: "with the destabilization of market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled" (13).

There was a panic on Wall Street. Multitudes were without work; there were strikes, suicides, and food riots. The prostitutes roamed our street like wolves... Life froze. The sun vanished from the deathly gray sky.... There were hundreds of evictions... Other dogs and cats were frozen. Men and women, too, were found dead in hallways and on docks. (241-242)

IV. An Ethnic Route to Modernism

The vision of the modern metropolis as an “unreal city” recalls T. S. Eliot’s depiction of London in *The Waste Land*, even though it could be hardly possible to think of a more distant pair of writers. Gold’s modernism, although sharing imagery and style with the literary circles in Europe, has a peculiar genealogy. The modernist school, which originated in the New York radical circles, developed through the contribution of intellectuals, coming from different backgrounds and united by the challenge to represent the city’s social and ethnic multiplicity in novels, paintings and music. Theirs was a completely different approach from the academism of the London and Paris circles, where tradition was held as the unifying element against the fragmentation of modernity. This “transatlantic” divarication, although regrettably underestimated, is important in order to appreciate how modernism itself was a fragmented cultural experience, and illustrates the plurality and heterogeneity of responses to the challenges of the new era. This divarication hints at a basic contradiction that has marked the intellectual response to modernity from its beginnings: as a number of artists reacted to urbanism and industrialization with a sense of horror and estrangement, others fed upon “the real trouble in the modern streets, and transformed their noise and dissonance into beauty and truth” (Berman 31). In most countries modernism was “a compound of the futuristic and the nihilistic, the revolutionary and the conservative” (Bradbury 46), and in the context of Anglo-American letters these contrasting attitudes depend much on the thousands miles that separated Europe from the United States. In New York a peculiar combination of bohemia and radicalism made the Greenwich Village a unique laboratory where art seemed to contain “two types of revolt, the individual and the social” (Cowley 66). It was the product of two overlapping geographies: a web of intellectual circles, magazines (from the *Masses* to the *Broom*), galleries (Stieglitz’s 291) and theatre companies (The Provincetown Players) thrived alongside the sweatshops where Italian and Jewish workers earned their daily bread and fought for better conditions.⁷ The immigrants,

⁷ The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, notorious for the fire that killed more than a hundred female immigrant workers in March 1911, was located on Washington Square.

then, played a key role in bringing political issues to the fore, and in the case of the “Paterson Pageant,” staged in 1913 at the Madison Square Garden, art not just represented their struggles, but articulated them.

As he came of age and crossed Broadway to settle in the Village, Gold found a cultural milieu where his past life in the Lower East Side could be infused with new political meaning and find literary expression. He absorbed a view of the artist’s quest as revolution, against both cultural tradition and society, and of intellectual work as a step toward the creation of a new order. The ramification of Anglo-American modernism, thus, depends on a difference in political attitudes as much as the socialism professed by many New York-based artists was completely antithetic to, say, Eliot’s staunch belief in the forces of tradition, church and monarchy. Moreover, the presence of immigrant communities and intellectuals in the American metropolis represented a powerful agency of radicalization. It is true that ethnic literature, although showing a “remarkable concern for the American world of modernity” (Sollors 406), for the most part clung to traditional styles. All the same, a convergence between the immigrant experience and modernism took place, as some writers of different backgrounds like Toomer, Roth, Di Donato and Gold ventured into the territories of the avant-garde to find a vocabulary and a stylistic repertoire suitable for their personal versions of ethnic life.

In the context of American modernism, the quest to frame into a coherent whole an urban environment that had undergone dramatic changes involved both Anglo-Saxon and ethnic writers. *Jews Without Money*, a powerful depiction of immigrant life in the modern American metropolis, has to be understood as part of this artistic effort. The strength of Gold’s book lies in the equilibrium between politics and modernism achieved through a rigorous stylistic discipline. This choice elicited attacks from many left-wing intellectuals, who blamed the author for having allowed only marginal space to “true” proletarian issues (Klein 185). By deferring meaning and concealing his own political vision, though, Gold leads the reader through a new hell where people, sounds, smells, violence and exploitation emerge as primary features of the daily life of immigrant neighborhood. It is only at the end of the journey that the writer/narrator unmasks himself and cries out his “revelation.” The style Gold borrowed from other modernist writers intends to show life in the metropolis as a battleground where the individual is lost and overwhelmed, a seemingly incomprehensible enigma that only the final reference to Marxism – providing an interpretative frame which connects economic growth, development, urbanization and immigrant exploitation into a single thread – can illuminate.

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