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Author(s): Stephen J. Adams

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“The Noisiest Novel Ever Written”: The Soundscape of Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*

STEPHEN J. ADAMS

“The squalor and filth, the hopelessness and helplessness of slum life are remorselessly presented and the cacophony never ceases—this must be the *noisiest* novel ever written.”¹ Walter Allen’s remark identifies one of the most striking and unusual features of Henry Roth’s novel: this text opens up a world of sound as few others seem to do. Although most fictional imagery is, like our language itself, overwhelmingly visual, *Call It Sleep* offers many lessons in the verbal evocation of “soundscape”—a term coined by the composer R. Murray Schafer in his highly original study of the sonic environment *The Tuning of the World*. Schafer advances many new terms and concepts which, by overturning the visual bias of our language and culture, create a vocabulary that helps to explain the operations of sound in the world of young David Schearl, Roth’s central character. Roth’s uncanny evocation of David’s sonic environment does much to account for the emotional intensity felt by most of the novel’s readers.

Call It Sleep is, I am convinced, still undervalued. Though the peculiarities of the novel’s publication history—its virtual disappearance in the Thirties, its acclaim after the paperback edition of 1964—are well known to Roth’s readers, the book since then seems to have become pigeonholed as a “Jewish novel,” rather than the essential American novel that I think it is. There may well be, as Leslie Fiedler has said, “no more Jewish book among American novels,”² but the impact and significance of this book extend far beyond its Jewish interest, profound as that may be. No other American novel dramatizes so powerfully the

trauma of the newly arrived immigrant. It is the classic portrayal, writes Richard J. Fein, “of the Americanized son who pits himself against the unyielding immigrant father.”³ In David’s psychological adventure, we experience from the inside a paradigmatic rejection of Old World values and a tentative reaching toward the new. And the novel treats this distinctively American theme with unparalleled richness of implication and technical mastery. Far from being a novel of a particular ethnic group, *Call It Sleep* claims a central place in the canon of American fiction.

Critics of *Call It Sleep* have tended to focus on David’s psychology—his oedipal attachment to his mother, Genya, and his fear of his father, Albert. Or they have focused on the novel’s spiritual implications, treating it, like Fiedler, as “astonishingly a religious book.”⁴ On the other hand—still perhaps influenced by the Thirties’ controversy in the Marxist *New Masses* over its supposed failure as “proletarian fiction”—they have downplayed the novel’s broader social significance. Yet from the immigrant-crowded steamer Peter Stuyvesant sailing past the Statue of Liberty in the prologue, to David’s climactic acts of betrayal and atonement, Roth’s novel lives through the painful processes of separation and assimilation. Psychologically, David must separate himself from his father’s rejection and his mother’s emotional hold. Spiritually, he attempts to reach beyond a confining and yet somewhat destabilized Judaism, moving from an Old Testament culture into one defined and controlled by the New.⁵ The gradual orientation of a fearful child, and his painful discovery of power, of relative maturity, of freedom from fear—of all the freedoms held out by America—form the core of the novel’s experience.

The intensity of this experience derives from Roth’s creation of the young boy’s point of view, which critics have universally praised. More specifically, it derives, I believe, from Roth’s ability to create the sensory world of the child, particularly the sense of sound. Though the text has not entirely traded eyes for ears, it has at least altered the usual ratio. The world of sound, as Schafer insists (taking his cue from Marshall McLuhan), is “loaded with direct personal significance for the hearer.”⁶ While sight defines objects as separate and distanced from the perceiver, sound seems to enter inside the body. Vision separates objects as distinct things, but the heard object is often unseen and unidentified. For this reason, sound is naturally linked to the disembodied or the supernatural; as Schafer puts it, “God originally came to man through the ear, not the eye.”⁷ Don Ihde, in *Listening and Voice*, agrees:

It is the *invisible* which poses a series of almost unsurmountable problems for much contemporary philosophy. "Other minds" or persons who fail to disclose themselves in their "inner" invisibility; the "Gods" who remain hidden; my own "self" which constantly eludes a simple visual appearance; the whole realm of spoken and heard language must remain unsolvable so long as our seeing is not also a listening. *It is to the invisible that listening may attend.* . . . The primary presence of the God of the West has been the God of Word, YHWH.⁸

But if sound can acquire a numinous cast, it is also inseparable from the instincts of alarm. As Schafer observes:

The sense of hearing cannot be closed off at will. There are no earlids. When we go to sleep, our perception of sound is the last door to close and it is also the first to open when we awaken. These facts have prompted McLuhan to write: "Terror is the normal state of any oral society for in it everything affects everything all the time."⁹

If *Call It Sleep* is, as Walter Allen declares, "the most powerful evocation of the terrors of childhood ever written,"¹⁰ the reason may be David's heightened sensitivity to sound. And after David's final vision in which his unconscious mind constructs a "self" which survives his father's wrath, deliverance from terror of the loud world forms part of the meaning of the ambivalent sleep at the end of the novel.

Roth's text evokes David's soundscape on three levels of awareness. Often it records sound simply as part of the child's general perception. On a second level, David not only registers sounds but reacts to them—often with alarm, but with a range of other emotions as well. On a third level, however, he not only hears and reacts but he interprets as well. David is not the simple passive character that some critics, and even Roth himself, seem to think.¹¹ As Naomi Diamant has shown, in some of the best criticism written about the novel, *Call It Sleep* is "a semiotic *Bildungsroman*" in which David learns not only to *decode* but to *encode* his environment.¹² (Diamant wisely qualifies this phrase, since the novel covers only three years of David's life and is not technically a *Bildungsroman*, but it raises many issues common to the genre.) I would add furthermore that this process, which Roth quite consciously modeled on Joyce,¹³ occurs simultaneously in the character and in the reader; as motifs accumulate, we together with David gradually invest them with symbolic and emotional attributes. The reader's experience fuses with that of the young boy, as he learns not simply to react to his New World but to interpret it and live in it.

On the level of simple perception, David is a remarkably sensitive

register of his sonic environment, or to use Schafer's word, he is a reliable "earwitness." After the dry, objective narration of the Prologue, which tonally as well as semantically establishes the family's sense of emotional exile as they enter New York harbor in 1907, the text plunges into David's phenomenal world, creating auditory as well as visual perspective:

Where did the water come from that lurked so secretly in the curve of the brass? Where did it go, gurgling in the drain? What a strange world must be hidden behind the walls of a house! But he was thirsty. "Mama!" he called, his voice rising above the hiss of sweeping in the frontroom. "Mama, I want a drink." The unseen broom stopped to listen. "I'll be there in a moment," his mother answered. A chair squealed on its castors; a window chuckled down; his mother's approaching tread. (p. 17)

Roth often makes us hear by finding the unexpected phrase: the "slight, spattering sound from the end of her lip," as Genya drinks tea (p. 121); a "hiss of shoes" on stone outside the door (p. 355); a door "tittering to and fro in the wind" (p. 418).

And of course, as Bonnie Lyons and others have noted, the text makes us aware of the sounds of languages—Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, and all the broken English dialects of the street. Roth expertly distinguishes, for example, the Irish brogue of the policemen from the speech of an Italian peanut vendor (p. 148), and with virtuoso flair even endows one of his speakers with both dialect and an almost impenetrable lisp: "Cauthye I wanthyloo, dayuth w'y'" (p. 360). Roth ensures that his text must be read with ears as well as eyes. Such passages may be said to dramatize David's awareness of the difficulty of extracting meaning from an alien language. As Raymond Chapman has noted,

the primacy of speech over writing can be asserted even through the written text, with humor or with some social purpose. Indeed, the writer may actually draw attention to the difficulty and artificiality of what he is doing. He may emphasize the fact that the nature of language in its two realizations gives him an impossible task.¹⁴

In "The Cellar," David registers primarily the domestic environment of the apartment in Brownsville: As his mother touches the lock on the door, "the hidden tongue sprang in the groove" (p. 46); she sets the table, "knives ringing faintly, forks, spoons, side by side" (p. 69); she talks to her husband, "noisily setting the dishes down in the sink" (p. 77). David at this point is indoors mostly, and on his major venture outdoors, following the telegraph poles, he gets lost. His sleep is

disturbed one time by “the frosty ring of a shovel scraping the stony sidewalk” (p. 56); but his awareness of the outdoor soundscape in this setting is dominated by children’s play: “So get back in de line. Foller de leader. Boom! Boom! Boom!” (p. 87).

In “The Picture,” however, when the Schearls move to the lower East Side, the outdoor soundscape is more insistent:

Here in 9th Street it wasn’t the sun that swamped one as one left the doorway, it was sound—an avalanche of sound. There were countless children, there were countless baby carriages, there were countless mothers. And to the screams, rebukes, and bickerings of these, a seemingly endless file of hucksters joined their bawling cries. On Avenue D horse-cars clattered and banged. Avenue D was thronged with beer wagons, garbage carts, and coal trucks. There were many automobiles, some blunt and rangey, some with high straw poops, honking. Beyond Avenue D, at the end of a stunted, ruined block that began with shacks and smithies and seltzer bottling works and ended in a junk heap, was the East River on which many boat horns sounded. On 10th Street, the 8th Street Crosstown car ground its way toward the switch. (p. 143)

The noises of general humanity invade the indoors as well: “The stairs were of stone and one could hear himself climb. The toilets were in the hall. Sometimes the people in them rattled newspapers, sometimes they hummed, sometimes they groaned. That was cheering” (pp. 143–44). In one scene after another, David’s ears register the sound of human crowds:

Curtains overhead paddled out of open windows. The air had shivered into a thousand shrill, splintered cries, wedged here and there by the sudden whoop of a boy or the impatient squawk of a mother. . . . In the shelter of a doorway, across the gutter, a cluster of children shouted in monotone up at the sky:

“Rain, rain, go away, come again some oddeh day. Rain, rain. . . .”

The yard was gloomy. Wash-poles creaked and swayed, pulleys jangled. In a window overhead, a bulky, bare-armed woman shrilled curses at someone behind her and hastily hauled in the bedding that straddled the sills like bulging sacks.

“And your guts be plucked!” her words rang out over the yard. “Couldn’t you tell me it was raining?” (pp. 223–24)

Even when David, near the beginning of “The Rail,” retreats to the freedom of the rooftop—“that silent balcony on the pinnacle of turmoil”—he remains eerily aware of the humanity below: “What sounds

from the street, what voices drifted up the air-shafts, only made his solitude more real" (p. 299). Human crowds provide what Schafer calls the "keynote" sound of the novel, the sound that acts as a constant point of reference like tonality in a piece of music; or to borrow Schafer's figure-ground analogy from visual perception, they provide the ground against which more meaning-laden figures are heard. This crescendo of voices accompanies David through the latter half of the novel to his climactic action at the trolley rail. It amply prepares for the daring divided narration of Chapter 21, in which David's self-enclosed consciousness is surrounded by this keynote chorus of human voices, even though he no longer hears them.¹⁵

Reading *Call It Sleep* with Schafer's account of past and present soundscapes in mind, one is struck by the predominance of human over mechanical sounds in Roth's city. If this is in fact the noisiest novel ever written, the reason is the narrating character's sensitivity and the author's vivid aural memory; for the soundscape in the New York of 1907 was hardly as noisy as the modern city's, where the keynote, as Schafer observes, is that of the internal-combustion engine.¹⁶ Despite Roth's occasional mention of automobiles, they play little role in the novel; and despite his references to horse-cars, smithies, boat horns, and trolleys—all of which assume important symbolic functions—the human presence dominates; there is a feeling of perspective, of sounds near and far, which is largely obliterated in today's city. Absent from this intensely urban novel too are most natural sounds, apart from the domesticated horses, chickens, parrots, and canaries. And absent, of course, from Roth's indoor settings are modern intrusions like telephone or radio—or any electronic or amplified sound (though curiously enough, Roth's text registers the whine of power lines [p. 425], the so-called "corona noise" that power companies have just recently begun to study).

In fact, for such a noisy book, there is notably little music of any kind. The music is not set apart as an aesthetic object, but is integrated into the lives of the characters, like the children's game song that arouses David's dim memories of Europe (p. 23), or the work song that Genya absently sings as she washes windows (p. 329). Mention is made of a gramophone (Genya had heard one in Europe): "I never heard anything labor so or squawk," she says. "But the peasants were awed. They swore there was devil in the box" (p. 33). The Schearls possess one, but it remains an empty possession, "mute and motionless as the day before creation" (p. 156), as Aunt Bertha chides—though she desires to possess one herself (p. 185).

But Roth does not treat sonic imagery simply as part of the neutral background of the novelistic world. One cannot consider sound in *Call It Sleep* without quickly becoming entangled in David's emotional responses to it; nor can one consider sound apart from silence. David reacts to both sound and silence at first mainly with aversion, with fear. But gradually in the course of the novel he learns to overcome his fears, to find his place in the apparently hostile environment of the New World. Ultimately, he challenges the noise of power, and he acquiesces in the silence of sleep.

In the important passage near the beginning that establishes David's fear of sudden extinction, symbolized by the dark cellar, critics have noticed Roth's use of darkness and light, but they have failed to comment on his use of sound and silence:

David never found himself alone on these stairs, but he wished there were not carpet covering them. How could you hear the sound of your own feet in the dark if a carpet muffled every step you took? And if you couldn't hear the sound of your own feet and couldn't see anything either, how could you be sure you were actually there and not dreaming? A few steps from the bottom landing, he paused and stared rigidly at the cellar door. It bulged with darkness. Would it hold? . . . It held! He jumped from the last steps and raced through the narrow hallway to the light of the street. (p. 20)

The incident vividly dramatizes what R. D. Laing would call David's ontological insecurity—his failure to feel secure of his own presence in the world as a real, whole, and continuous person. Thus a few pages later, when David again ventures the same route, he begs his mother, "Mama, will you leave the door open till—till I'm gone—till you hear me downstairs?" (p. 58).

Being heard is assurance of being. As Schafer remarks, silence, in the Western world at least, has mainly negative connotations: "Man likes to make sounds to remind himself that he is not alone. From this point of view total silence is the negation of human personality. Man fears the absence of sound as he fears the absence of life."¹⁷ This fear is observable in other characters as well. Bill Whitney, the watchman who appears briefly in Chapter 21 of "The Rail," mutters to himself—"and this he did not so much to populate the silence with ephemeral, figment selves, but to follow the links of his own, slow thinking, which when he failed to hear, he lost" (p. 410). And the irrepressible Aunt Bertha, perhaps the only character besides David who fully senses the soundscape around her, embraces the turmoil—"I hate quiet and I hate

death" (p. 168)—as roundly as she rejects the Old World she has left behind: "But there's life here, isn't there? There's a stir always. Listen! The street! The cars! High laughter! Ha, good! Veljish was still as a fart in company. Who could endure it?" (p. 153).

Many scenes dramatize David's equation of silence with death and sound with life. When he witnesses a passing funeral, he tells himself, frantically:

Make a noise. Noise. . . . He advanced. What? Noise. Any. "Aaaaah! Ooooo!" he quavered. "My country 'tis of dee!" He began running. The cellar door. Louder. "Sweet land of liberty," he shrilled, and whirled toward the stairs. . . . "Land where our foddors died!" The landing; he dove for the door, flinging himself upon it. . . . (p. 62)

The land where David's forefathers actually died, of course, is not America but the Old World, though his choice of lyrics ironically underlines an oedipal wish for his father's death here. A much later scene again equates silence with nonexistence. David drops a rosary gotten from his Catholic friend Leo on the floor of a different cellar: "At the floor of a vast pit of silence glimmered the rough light, pulsed and glimmered like a coin." He gropes for it: "'I'm gonna get it,' almost audibly. '*I am!*' His teeth gritted, head quivering in such desperate rage, the blood whirred in his ears. . . '*I am!*'" (p. 354). But with the whir of his own life processes in his ears, David's desperation is interrupted by the precocious sexual experimentation of Leo and cousin Polly—sounds that signify not the extinction but the creation of life. At yet another point in the book, David thinks of himself in his mother's womb, a memory, possibly even a prenatal memory, triggered when he overhears the mysterious word "Benkart," Polish for *bastard*: "—Benkart! (Beside the doorway David fastened on the word) What? Know it. No, don't. Heard it. In her belly. Listen!" (p. 202).

David learns early that where there is life there is sound: pure silence is unattainable. Hiding himself in the cellar darkness after a fight with playmates, he discovers

there was no silence here, but if he dared to listen, he could hear tappings and creakings, patterings and whisperings, all furtive, all malign. It was horrible, the dark. The rats lived there, the hordes of nightmare, the wobbly faces, the crawling and misshapen things. (p. 92)

The composer John Cage similarly learned that there is no such thing as pure silence: when he entered an anechoic chamber and reported two sounds, one high and one low, he was told that one was his nervous

system in operation, the other his blood circulating.¹⁸ David likewise experiences sound as part of his most intimate bodily rhythms; his system vibrates with the world around him. Helping with his father's milk deliveries, he is physically oppressed by the jangling bottles: "Louder, louder, nearer, they seemed to clank in David's heart as well. With every step his father took, the breath in his own body became more labored, more suffocating" (p. 279). Sonic metaphors enter Roth's language: "His blood, which a moment before had been chiming in bright abandon, deepened its stress, weighted its rhythm to an ominous tolling" (p. 339). As David flees the violent family confrontation in "The Rail," "every racked fibre in his body screamed out in exhaustion. Each time his foot fell was like a plunger through his skull" (p. 404).

Call It Sleep depicts many scenes in which David detects others by sound, or lurks out of sight eavesdropping on an adult world otherwise closed to him: "He crept to his doorway, stiff ankle-joints cracking like gun-shots. A blur of voices behind the door. . . . Hope clutched at it" (p. 386). David's instinctive recoil from Luter includes a disjunction of sight from sound: "But chiefly he found himself resenting Mr. Luter's eyes. They seemed to be independent of his speech, far outstripping it in fact; for instead of glancing at one, they fixed one and then held on until the voice caught up" (pp. 30–31). Elsewhere, David notes "a short chuckle that pecked like a tiny hammer" (p. 37), or a frown and "a faint smacking sound from the side of his mouth" (p. 45). Indeed throughout the novel, Roth's dialogue is loaded with stage directions in what may seem an excessive way. Within the space of a page we read: "said Luter sympathetically . . . said Luter meditatively . . . she laughed, straightening up . . . said Luter with a sigh . . . she agreed . . . he said warmly . . . said Luter with conviction . . . his mother laughed condoningly . . . he assured her . . . said Luter with the hesitance of careful appraisal" (pp. 40–41). This is a mannerism to be sure, but it is consistent with David's sensitivities. As he constitutes his world through listening, he is alert not just to what is said, but even more to the intonations and intentions behind what is said.

Roth seems unusually aware of the relationship between sound as phenomenon and sound as sign. This is clear in his treatment of languages—such as the Hebrew instilled phonetically before it is joined to "chumish," or translation. And when Genya and Aunt Bertha converse in Polish to close David out of the conversation, he strains to follow: "But though he pried here, there, everywhere among the gutturals and surds striving with all his power so split the stubborn scales of speech, he could not" (pp. 195–96). But nonverbal signals, too,

clutter David's world—from the “familiar tinny jangle” of a shopkeeper's bell (p. 78), to the factory whistles (p. 22) and school bells (p. 59) by which he keeps time.

The factory whistle, however, serves not only as a timekeeper but, to borrow another of Schafer's coinages, a “soundmark” as well. Schafer defines a soundmark as “a community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community.”¹⁹ In other words, the sound is not merely registered but invested with particular meaning or feeling. During the episode in which David, lost, is taken in by sympathetic policemen, Roth makes it plain that he has learned to orient himself, to interpret his environment, not through his eyes but through his ears. When he loses his way, he first tries to find himself visually: “Though he conned every house on either side of the crossing, no single landmark stirred his memory. They were all alike—wooden houses and narrow sidewalks to his right and left” (p. 96). But when at the police station he hears the familiar whistle, he immediately comprehends the distance he has traveled and panics at the thought of his mother: “Whistles? He raised his head. Factory whistles! The others? None! Too far! So far she was. So far away!—But she heard them—she heard the other whistles that he couldn't hear” (p. 104). The policemen notice, but Genya soon arrives and, as the two walk home, the process of sensory orientation is repeated. David is again deceived by his eyes:

“That way, Mama?” He stared incredulously. “This way!” He pointed to the right. “This way is my school.”

“That's why you were lost! It's the other way.” (p. 109)

But he knows he has arrived in the right place through the aural and tactile sensations of the wind: “They neared the open lot. He knew where he was now, certain of every step. There was a wind that prowled over that area of rock and dead grass, that would spring up at them when they passed it. And the wind did” (pp. 109–110).

This sonic orientation is repeated in “The Picture,” where David again secures his place in the new East Side neighborhood largely through sound:

He knew his world now. With a kind of meditative assurance, he singled out the elements of the ever-present din—the far voices, the near, the bells of a junk wagon, the sing-song cry of the I-Cash-clothes-man, waving his truncheon-newspaper, the sloshing jangle of the keys on the huge ring on the back of the tinker. (pp. 173–74)

Indeed throughout the novel, from the bellow of the steamer on the

first page to the climactic moment when David regains consciousness at the end, whistles and boat horns—which “set up strange reverberations in the heart” (p. 63)—gather symbolic associations having to do with orientation in time and place.

In *Call It Sleep*, one can observe this process by which a sound signal becomes a sound symbol, or to repeat Naomi Diamant's terms, by which David learns not only to decode but to encode his environment. As Schafer puts it, “a sound event is symbolic when it stirs in us emotions or thoughts beyond its mechanical sensations or signalling function, when it has a numinosity or reverberation that rings through the deeper recesses of the psyche.”²⁰ Whistles and boat horns are the most obvious examples in the novel, but many other sonic motifs are developed and interrelated in complex ways. Furthermore, although the factory whistles suggest David's increasing security in his surroundings, other symbols take on more mysterious overtones. As Walter Allen remarks, Roth's novel captures “better than it has ever been done in English before what might be called a child's magical thinking, which is clearly allied to the thinking of the poet.”²¹ Like his literary precursor Huck Finn, who hears “an owl, away off, who-whooping about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody who was going to die” (Chapter 1), David Schearl hears certain sounds, like the Hebrew words of Isaiah, that trigger feelings of the supernatural.²²

All his senses dissolved into the sound. The lines, unknown, dimly surmised, thundered in his heart with limitless meaning, rolled out and flooded the last shores of his being. Unmoored in space, he saw one walking on impalpable pavements that rose with the rising trees. Or were they trees or telegraph-poles, each crossed and leafy, none could say, but forms stood there with footholds in unmitigated light. (pp. 255–56)

Here Isaiah's coal, which purifies his unclean lips and makes him a prophet of God, is associated not only with telegraph poles (and thus with David's earlier venture into the unknown), but also with the cross of the Christian Messiah, the thunder of Yahweh (see below), and the blinding light of unlimited power. It is associations like these, formed in David's mind, that drive him to the apparently irrational but quite explicable act of the penultimate chapter.

Because David, a young boy in a new world, must invent his own symbols, Reb Yiddel Pankower asks himself a key question: “What was going to become of these Yiddish youth? What would become of this new breed? These Americans?” (p. 374). This process of becoming is what *Call It Sleep* reveals. There may be, as Meyer Levin suggests, “no

more perceptive work in any literature dealing with a child's conditioning."²³ But just as the melodramatic convergences of "The Rail" reveal this positive process of conditioning, of encoding and creating new meanings, so do they join them to a mounting series of betrayals—betrayals of his mother's sexual secret and his father's presumed disgrace, of his sympathetic aunt and her stepdaughter's honor, of his religion and his rabbi. The betrayals are psychological, moral, cultural, and religious.

David's climactic act then, is simultaneously an effort to atone for them and an effort to seize power—literally the electric power of the trolley rail, but symbolically the sexual power of his father and the religious power of his private messianic vision. The scene is a confluence of interrelated symbols in which the psychological battle between father and son stands for conflicts on several other levels: it suggests a battle between Old and New Worlds, between Old and New Testaments, between captivity and freedom. As Roth's punning reference to Ahura Mazda suggests ("Vus dere a hura mezda, Morr's?" [p. 414]), it is a Manichaeian battle between symbols of light and darkness.²⁴ To these conflicts, which a number of Roth's critics have explored, I would add that it is a battle between sound and silence.

As Schafer says, "Noise equals Power."²⁵ The loudest noises in the soundscape are created by those who hold greatest power over it. Thus the factory whistles, boat horns, and trolley noises dominate a society controlled by industry and commerce. It is a society David wishes to enter. This equation of loudness with power is understood instinctively by David's peers:

"Yuh don' make enough noise, dat's why. Yuh oughta ha' Wildy."

"Who don' make enough noise? I hollered loud like anyt'ing. Who beats?" (p. 219)

At various points, David's Brownsville playmate Yussie imitates the noise of a gun: "Bing! I'm an Innian" (p. 81); a firecracker that exploded prematurely in a man's hand: "Kling! Kling! Kling! Jos' like dat! Kling! Kling! Kling! Cauze de fiyuh crecker wen' bang by his ears!" (p. 139); and the printing press that injures Albert's thumb: "Id don' go boof?" (p. 141). David, whose sensibilities are clearly more delicate, at first recoils from such noisemaking; but when he discovers a source of mystical power between the trolley rails, he experiences it as an overwhelming fusion of light and sound, as Roth's language resorts to the figure of synesthesia:

From open fingers, the blade plunged into darkness.

Power!

Like a paw ripping through all the stable fibres of the earth, power, gigantic, fetterless, thudded into day! And light, unleashed, terrific light bellowed out of iron lips. The street quaked and roared, and like a tortured thing, the sheet zinc sword, leapt writhing, fell back, consumed with radiance. (p. 253)

This first electric shock has resulted from anti-Semitic hounding by a group of street bullies; that is, it is tied to David's difficulties in making a place for himself in the Gentile-dominated world that he struggles to understand. But after the event, he discovers that his fear of the darkness has been lifted: "Gee. Used to be darker. . . . Ain't really there. Inside my head. Better inside. Can carry it" (p. 261). And soon after, he discovers the relative freedom of the rooftop, where the sunlight again is felt in terms of synesthesia—"a trumpet, triple-trumpet bearing light" (p. 296)—and where he can actually strike up a friendship, though an unequal one, with a kite-flying Christian. (Leo's kite, of course, recalls that prototypical American Ben Franklin, who tapped the sources of electric power directly from the sky.)

The second and climactic electric shock again reaches for the language of synesthesia, but it takes on more intricate symbolic associations, including a fusion of the sexual and the religious. As if to underscore the religious dimension of Roth's sound symbolism, Schafer advances a concept that he calls "sacred noise." "Wherever Noise has been granted immunity from human intervention," he writes, "there will be found a seat of power":

The association of Noise and power has never really been broken in the human imagination. It descends from God, to the priest, to the industrialist, and more recently to the broadcaster and the aviator. The important thing to realize is this: to have the Sacred Noise is not merely to make the biggest noise; rather it is a matter of having authority to make it without censure.²⁶

When David shoves the metal milk dipper—a symbol associated with both his father's penis and his mother's breast—into the trolley track, his quasi-sexual act ("in the crack be born") seems to him "as though he had struck the enormous bell of the very heart of silence" (p. 411).²⁷ When the circuit is completed, amid allusions to the virgin birth of Jesus and Peter's betrayal, David experiences the shock as "a blast, a siren of light within him . . . braying his body with pinions of intolerable light," while onlookers witness "a single cymbal-clash of light" and the milk dipper "consumed in roaring incandescence" (p. 419). Significantly, David

seeks this sacred noise not in the cheder but in the power circuit of the commercial world. His privately coded symbolic act brings him into contact, literally, with the true sources of social power.

Roth's cumulative technique builds complex symbolic chains: David's final self-immolation is anticipated in the doll-burning scene of "The Picture" (p. 207), and the incandescent milk dipper by the ritually burned Passover spoon of "The Coal" (p. 244). Likewise, the whistle that brings David back to consciousness (p. 431) is invested with symbolic and magical properties from many earlier scenes; most prominent is the hallucinatory waterfront scene in which David, transfixed by "fire on the water," is saved from falling by the blast of a tugboat:

Minutes passed while he stared. The brilliance was hypnotic. He could not take his eyes away. . . . And he heard the rubbing on a wash-board and the splashing suds, smelled again the acrid soap and a voice speaking words that opened like the bands of a burnished silver accordion—Brighter than day. . . . Brighter. . . . Sin melted into light. . . .

Uh chug chug, ug chug!

—Cucka cucka. . . . Is a chicken

Ug chug, ug chug, ug—TEW WEET!

What! He started as if out of a dream. A tremor shook him from head to foot so violently that his ears whirred and rang. His eyes bulged, staring. (pp. 247–48)

David then sees the man on the tugboat who has saved him, "a man in his undershirt, bare, outstretched arms gripping the doorpost on either side. He whistled again, shrill from mobile lips, grinned, spat, and 'Wake up, Kid!' his sudden amused hail rolled over the water, 'fore you throw a belly-w'opper!'" (p. 248).

This complex scene is mentioned by most of Roth's commentators, but again the auditory imagery has been largely ignored. As Lyons observes, the man's "Wake up, Kid!" links David to the sacrificial kid of the Chadgodya, and the man's pose with outstretched arms suggests the Crucifixion (p. 61). But this pose also links him to David's father emerging from his bedroom in the previous chapter: "His stretching arms pressed against both sides of the door-frame till it creaked. 'We need some light'" (p. 242). And the sound of the washboard and splashing suds recalls his mother in the same scene, pronouncing the mystical words "Brighter than day" as she sits in the dark, washing curtains for Passover—surreptitiously breaking the Sabbath after sundown on Friday. The image is thus colored by both oedipal and religious guilt. Furthermore, the "cucka cucka"—a sonic rendition of

the chugging tugboat—recalls through a sonic pun an earlier visit with Genya to a chicken market:

It's a sin. . . . So God told him eat in your own markets. . . . That time with mama in the chicken market when we went. Where all the chickens ran around—cuckacucka—when did I say? Cucka. Gee! Funny. Some place I said. And then the man with a knife went zing! Gee! Blood and wings. And threw him down. Even kosher meat when you see, you don't want to eat— (p. 226)

Although the market was kosher, as David recalls while seated in the cheder, Genya's laxity is disturbing: "Mama don't care except when Bertha was looking" (p. 226). The chicken reference furthermore looks forward to the icon David notices in Leo's apartment, Jesus of the Sacred Heart holding his breast open and pointing to his inner organs: "Guts like a chicken, open. And he's holding them" (p. 321). This scene, in which Leo lectures David on the restrictiveness of the Jewish diet and the superiority of "Christchin light"—"Bigger den Jew light" (p. 322)—is the same in which David also gathers information about the mysterious occupation of Genya's Gentile lover, a church organist. Leo describes a church organ: "Dey looks like pianers, on'y dey w'istles" (p. 321).²⁸ Chickens, organs, whistles, breaking the Mosaic law, taking a Gentile lover, and the superior power of Christian light—all conspire in the subterranean linkages of Roth's text and David's mind (and the reader's) to drive him to question his own origins and to emulate the freedom of the Christian boy whom he first saw flying a kite and "whistling up at the sky" (p. 301): "*Not afraid! Leo wasn't afraid!*" (p. 305).

Furthermore, in David's hallucinating mind at the waterfront, the tugboat whistle and the whistling man aboard her together fuse with a different bird sound:

E-e-e. Twee-twee-twee. Tweet! Tweet! Cheep! Eet! R-rawk Gee! Whistle. Thought it was that man. In the tugboat. In the shirt. Whistling. Only birds. Canary. That lady's. Polly too—Polly want a cracker—is out already. On the fire-escape. Whistle. (p. 260)

Behind this stands an episode in which David has heard two caged birds in his East Side neighborhood:

A parrot and a canary. Awk! Awk! the first cried. Eee-tee-tee—tweet! the other. A smooth and a rusty pulley. He wondered if they understood each other. Maybe it was like Yiddish and English, or Yiddish and Polish, the way his mother and aunt sometimes spoke. Secrets. What? (p. 174)

David clearly associates the bird sounds with the Polish-encoded secrets of his mother, and thus with his own possibly illegitimate origins. The canary, furthermore, looks forward to the escaped canary the boys pursue in Chapter 4 of "The Rail," and thence to the "yellow birds" that symbolize freedom throughout the climactic scene. Though the boys fail to catch the canary in the chapter, they do catch sight of Genya, naked, bathing in the washtub, much to David's anguish. In addition, the parrot bears the name of David's cousin Polly, whom he betrays to Leo's sexual predation in the candy-store cellar, thus repeating the forbidden liaison of Jew and Gentile begun by his mother. Leo, in fact, being Polish, acts as a double for David, suggesting to the reader and perhaps to his own subconscious the boy he might have been if he were truly the son of Genya's lover. Thus the birds and their sounds are circuitously related to David's awareness of his mother's sexuality and his own, to their mutual need for atonement and purification, and at the same time—even at the cost of betraying his Jewishness—to the desirability of the freedoms allowed to Gentiles.

One other significant though less intricate sound symbol reinforces the association of Leo with freedom of mobility and freedom from fear. Again an early memory is involved. In "The Cellar," David, returning home through the snow with a newspaper for his father, began to run: "He had only taken a few strides forward when his foot suddenly landed on something that was not pavement. The sound of hollow iron warned him too late—A coal-chute cover. He slipped" (pp. 78–79). The ruined paper rouses his father's anger, leading soon after to the brutal beating with a coat hanger. The hollow iron sound of the coal-chute ties together his fear of the cellar with his fear of his father, and relates as well to his desire for Isaiah's purifying coal. Near the end of the novel, the same sound alerts David to Leo's approach behind him—on the coveted roller skates: "The sudden whirr of wheels behind him—now louder on the sidewalk now roaring momentarily over the hollow buckle of a coal-chute—" (p. 337). Leo, the liberated and potent Gentile, flies over coal-chutes as he flies over rooftops. This sound is closely allied to the hollow metallic sound of the phallic milk dipper as David pries it loose: "It bulged, sounded hollow. Again he braced himself, thrust—Clank!" (pp. 407–08). And again when he strikes it against the trolley rail: "Only in his ears, the hollow click of iron lingered. Hollow, vain" (p. 414).

Roth weaves together these sound symbols with many other motifs in the climactic scene to suggest David's reaching out for purification and freedom; but he introduces a number of others, as well, linked with

the negative psychological forces embodied in David's father. Bonnie Lyons traces one of these, the *Zwank* motif, and though she concentrates on its semantic meaning—the Yiddish word for tongs, connecting his mother's sugar tongs with those of Isaiah's angel—she recognizes that when the word first appears in the scene at the rail, “the sound itself seems most important”; the word “assumes its semantic and imagistic significance” only gradually, as David's mind recollects.²⁹ She does not explain, however, why the word appears not with the angelic tongs but together with David's terrifying vision of his father leaping godlike over the rooftops and swinging his hammer. This recollection goes back to a glimpse inside a blacksmith's shop, just before David burns his Passover spoon and becomes hypnotized by the “fire on the water,” where tongs and hammer are combined:

Acrid odor of seared hooves lingered about the place. Now a horse-shoe glowed under the hammer—ong-jonga-ong-jong-jong—ringing on the anvil as the pincers turned it.

—Zwank. Zwank. In a cellar is—

He passed the seltzer bottlery—the rattle and gurgle—passed the stable. (p. 245)

Thus, like the milk dipper, the tongs are associated not only with the mother and her sugar tongs, but also with the father and his hammer, and also therefore with the fear and guilt that both parents arouse. But this passage also links the hammer and tongs to horses and jangling bottles—sounds later invested with terrifying associations in the milk-delivery episode. These sounds at first seem relatively neutral, even positive, since the event promises an adventure into the outer world as his father's helper; but disaster strikes when David first disobeys instructions to wait with the wagon, and then watches helplessly as two bullies steal milk. His father's rage is soon inscribed into the sounds of the wagon, the bottles, the horses—and above all the whip, with which Albert almost beats to death one of the offenders:

The crunch of heels on the gravel. Terror! His eyes snapped open.

Dwarfed between the huge gas tanks, his father rounded the path. Eyes downcast as always he hurried, jangling the empty grey bottles in their trays. . . .

“Paid yourself again!” he snarled. “Giddap! Giddap, Billy!” He snatched the whip out of the socket, lashed the horse. Stung, the beast plunged forward. The wheels ground against the curb. “Giddap!” Again the whip. Hooves rang out in a pounding, powerful gallop. The wagon lurched, careened around the

corner on creaking axle, empty bottles banging in their boxes.
 . . . (pp. 279–80)

These sounds, incidentally, are among those identified by Schafer as the most aversive in the pre-automotive urban soundscape³⁰; but David's response to the cracking whip needs little explication when he presents it to his father for punishment at the end of the violent quarrel in Chapter 19 of "The Rail." For although David is not physically whipped for the stolen milk, he is verbally disavowed by his raging father—"False son! You, the cause!"—and he is psychologically pressed into silence and nonexistence—"Say anything to your mother . . . and I'll beat you to death! Hear me?" (p. 282). Little wonder, then, that in David's vision the father appears accompanied by jangling milk bottles, a hammer that "snapped like a whip," and the reiterated *Zwank!* as he orders his son to "Go down" (p. 426).

One other archetypal sound attaches to Albert Schearl in this terrible vision: twice we read that his voice "thundered" (pp. 427–28). Lyons quite plausibly identifies this thunder motif with the Germanic hammer-wielding god of wrath, Thor³¹; but oddly enough, she omits reference to the one scene in the novel in which we actually hear "a clap of thunder and a rumbling like a barrel rolling down cellar stairs" (p. 234). It occurs when David, in the cheder, has just successfully recited the Chadgodya. The thunder excites the other children: "Bang! Bang what a bust it gave! I tol' yuh I see a blitz before!" (p. 234). The only characters frightened by the din are David himself and Reb Yiddel Pankower, who ducks his head and exclaims "Shma yisroel. . . . Woe is me!" Both regain composure:

"Before God," the rabbi interrupted, "none may stand upright."

—Before God

"But what did you think?"

"I thought it was a bed before. Upstairs. But it wasn't."
 (p. 235)

There is ample precedent in scripture for the rabbi's association of thunder with the wrath of Yahweh. But David's unexpected linking of thunder to the sound of a bed upstairs relates both thunderclap and God's wrath with his oedipal antagonism to his father. The rabbi underlines this association unknowingly, when he derides David's visionary account of Isaiah's coal in the trolley rail: "Oy! Chah! Chah! Chah! I'll split like a herring! Yesterday he heard a bed in the thunder! Today he sees a vision in the crack!" (p. 257). Failing to grasp David's mystical and quasi-sexual symbolic language, the rabbi disqualifies

himself in David's mind as an authority: "The rabbi didn't know as he knew what the light was." Thus when the milk dipper makes contact with the rail, it appears (amid cries of "Jesus!," "Schloimee, a blitz like—," and "Holy Mother o' God") as a burst of flame that "growled as if the veil of earth were splitting" (p. 420), and the Old Testament thunder is exchanged for that which rends the veil of the temple at Christ's Crucifixion in the Gospel of Matthew.

The father's appearance in David's vision enacts the psychological conflicts that the boy is struggling to resolve, a life-and-death struggle partly figured in symbolic language of sound and silence. Before such a God, none may stand upright—and as the visionary father orders David to "Go down," his consciousness approaches "nothingness," "oblivion," and "silence" (p. 430). But the sounds of life prevail. We hear the "Kh-r-r-r-r-f! S-s-s-s" of David's breath, supplied by artificial respiration, but also, certainly, by his will to survive. And we hear the wires that "whined on their crosses" (p. 425) and the groans of the "man in the wires" whose "purple chicken-guts slipped through his fingers" (p. 426), as David's imagination fuses the two episodes in which he is saved by a whistle into a single image of a messianic Savior.

Although the critics are divided, and Roth himself seems uncertain whether the ending of his novel is positive or negative, my own view is close to those of Naomi Diamant, Maxwell Geismar (in his introduction to the Cooper Square edition of the novel), or William Freedman, who writes:

The myths of redemption and rebirth are implicit in the story of David Schearl, and both are rendered largely by means of symbolic image pattern that is part of David's own conscious awareness and that is viewed symbolically by his own fertile imagination as well as by the reader.³²

David, whose name allies him to the messianic family of scriptural tradition, clearly emerges from his ordeal as victor, having undergone an almost literal death and rebirth. Though Leslie Fiedler contends that David's "intended sacrifice redeems no one,"³³ it does, I think, redeem himself, and by extension the population that he stands for—that of the newly assimilated immigrant. The novel portrays in the intensity of David's vision not a passive sensibility but an emerging poetic imagination capable of shaping an imperfect world to its own uses.

As readers of this climactic scene, we witness David's unconscious mind constitute a "self" in terms of a symbolic narrative woven out of its own experience. This narrative functions, in a paradigmatic Freudian

way, to exorcise the parental demons and reassert the unconscious self on new ground; for as Paul Jay has noted, the whole idea of Freudian analysis "depends on the subject's ability to fashion a narrative, a discursive formulation of the meaning of past events identified in the process of analysis as significant."³⁴ The outcome of this narrative is, to be sure, provisional, for it almost ends in David's death. But his recovery signifies, in psychological terms, a readiness to assert his independent being in the face of his father's rejection, and in social terms, his ability to assume a place in the loud world. At the novel's end, David Schearl is a successful adult and assimilated American *in posse*. Thus he can finally accept the natural rhythm and natural silence of sleep without fear:

It was only toward sleep that his ears had power to cull again and reassemble the shrill cry, the hoarse voice, the scream of fear, the bells, the thick-breathing, the roar of crowds and all the sounds that lay fermenting in the vats of silence and the past . . . and feel them all and feel, not pain, not terror, but strangest triumph, strangest acquiescence. One might as well call it sleep. He shut his eyes. (p. 441)

¹ Walter Allen, "Afterword" to Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (New York: Avon, 1964), p. 445. Subsequent references to *Call It Sleep* are cited parenthetically in the text.

² Leslie Fiedler, "Henry Roth's Neglected Masterpiece," in *Unfinished Business* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), p. 82. I am also indebted to Naomi Diamant, "Linguistic Universes in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*," *Contemporary Literature*, 27 (1986), 336–55; James Ferguson, "Symbolic Patterns in *Call It Sleep*," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 14 (1969), 211–20; Ita Scheres, "Exile and Redemption in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*," *Markham Review*, 6 (1977), 72–77; and Bonnie Lyons, *Henry Roth: The Man and His Work* (New York: Cooper Square, 1976). I must also mention essays by two students, Brian Greenspan and Karim Mamdami.

³ Richard J. Fein, "Fear, Fatherhood and Desire in *Call It Sleep*," *Yiddish*, 5 (1984), 49.

⁴ Fiedler, "Henry Roth's Neglected Masterpiece," p. 85.

⁵ Compare Roth's autobiographical reminiscence: "I wanted to adapt to this gentile Irish neighborhood in the shortest time possible; and one of the conditions for adapting was to get away from Judaism" (Lyons, *Henry Roth*, p. 172). Lyons' chapter "*Call It Sleep* as a Jewish Novel" (pp. 125–34) places this issue in context.

⁶ R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), p. 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁸ Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 14–15.

⁹ Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*, p. 11.

¹⁰ Allen, "Afterword," p. 444.

¹¹ Roth tells Lyons (*Henry Roth*, p. 160), that David's character is "much too innocent, almost completely victimized, passive." Compare Helge Norman Nilsen, "The Role of the Protagonist in *Call It Sleep*," *Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters*, 13 (1983), 28–41.

¹² Diamant, "Linguistic Universes," pp. 337 and 346. For a semiotic reading that judges David's efforts a failure, see Wayne Lesser, "A Narrative's Revolutionary Edge: The Example of Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*," *Criticism*, 23 (1981), 155–76.

¹³ Lyons, *Henry Roth*, pp. 169 and 117–23.

¹⁴ Raymond Chapman, *The Treatment of Sounds in Language and Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p. 195.

¹⁵ Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*, pp. 9–10. Roth (Lyons, *Henry Roth*, p. 170) fears that while to that point he had written "a fairly cohesive, formally recognizable novel," in this chapter he "ruptures the whole envelope." Richard J. Fein, too, thinks that this scene is "the least convincing part" ("Fear, Fatherhood and Desire in *Call It Sleep*," p. 53).

¹⁶ Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*, p. 82.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

¹⁸ John Cage, *Silence* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1966), p. 13.

¹⁹ Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*, p. 274.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

²¹ Allen, "Afterword," p. 446.

²² Roth identifies *Huckleberry Finn* as "one of my great transitions" (Lyons, *Henry Roth*, p. 168). Don Ihde likewise emphasizes the relationship between religion and sound (*Listening and Voice*, p. 177):

The very experience of God in the biblical traditions is . . . such that the person of God is "like" an intense auditory experience. . . . In the classical religious experience of Isaiah in the Temple, vision is obscured as the Temple is filled with the smoke of the offering, but the voice of God presents itself in the very midst of the visual obscurity. The God of voice surrounds, penetrates, and fills the worshipper.

²³ Meyer Levin, "A Personal Appreciation," in Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (New York: Cooper Square, 1965), p. xlvii.

²⁴ "Was there a whore master, Morris?" Roth points out the pun to Lyons (*Henry Roth*, p. 171).

²⁵ Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*, p. 74.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁷ Both Schafer (*ibid.*, p. 176) and Chapman (*The Treatment of Sounds*, p. 158) discuss the numinous quality of the bell symbol. On the plausibility of David's near-electrocution, see Henry Roth, *Shifting Landscape* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), p. 10.

²⁸ Schafer (*The Tuning of the World*, p. 55) identifies the cathedral organ, the loudest machine produced until that time, as the "sacred noise" of the medieval European.

²⁹ Lyons, *Henry Roth*, p. 63.

³⁰ Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*, p. 62.

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³¹ Lyons, *Henry Roth*, pp. 56–59.

³² William Freedman, “Henry Roth and the Redemptive Imagination,” in Warren French, ed., *The Thirties* (Deland, Fla.: Everett/Edwards, 1967), p. 114. For Roth’s comments on the ending, see Lyons, *Henry Roth*, pp. 170–71.

³³ Fiedler, “Henry Roth’s Neglected Manuscript,” p. 87.

³⁴ Paul Jay, *Being in the Text: Self-Representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 24–25.