



Breaking Ground, Broken English: Abraham Cahan's *The Imported Bridegroom*

By Hana Wirth-Nesher

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BREAKING GROUND, BROKEN ENGLISH: ABRAHAM CAHAN'S *THE IMPORTED BRIDEGROOM*

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Abstract: *In this essay, Wirth-Nesher examines Abraham Cahan's novella, The Imported Bridegroom, through the lens of David Roskies' idea of "Jewspeak": an exploration of speech poetics in modern Yiddish writing. The characters of Asriel and Flora Stroon navigate their respective linguistic landscapes of broken English and fractured Yiddish, wrestling with the ways in which language and speech reflect their status and position in American society.*

"Dis a choych?" asks Asriel Stroon of a passerby in lower Manhattan. It is the first time in Abraham Cahan's novella *The Imported Bridegroom* that we hear Asriel speaking English.¹ "A church?" exclaims the stranger. "No, it's a library. The Astor Library." This exchange takes place right before Asriel's discovery that the pious Talmud scholar he "imported" to New York as a bridegroom for his daughter has deceived him by abandoning the *beit midrash* for America's secular temple of culture, the public library. Asriel's heavily accented speech, occurring near the end of the work, jars both the reader's eye and ear, because up to this point all of his Yiddish speech has been represented in English. This revelatory moment, when he mistakes a library for a church, marks the collapse of his world, just as we readers are jolted out of the familiar convention of immigrant dialogue made familiar through translation. Accented speech in "Dis a choych?" disturbs and complicates our reading of *The Imported Bridegroom* as

¹ Abraham Cahan, *Yekl and The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of Yiddish New York* (New York: Dover, 1970), 152. Originally published as *The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories* (Boston: Houghton, 1898). Page numbers in parentheses throughout this essay refer to the 1970 edition.

mispronunciation requires sounding out speech that is foreign to our eyes and ears, just as a public library is foreign to Asriel. By the time this dialogue takes place, we know how deeply committed this character is to realizing his dream of success in terms of Old World values that no longer shape the lives of his daughter's generation in America. By now we also know that Shaya, the imported bridegroom, has shifted his scholarly fervor and allegiance from Talmud to social theory, from Rashi to Comte. The phrase "Dis a choych," with its embedded "oy" as both Asriel's heartbreak and his creator's mockery, invites us to consider Cahan's writing in English as breaking new ground in Jewish American literature. Cahan's attention both to reading practices and to speech register and accent in *The Imported Bridegroom* undermines sentimental depictions of the Lower East Side while at the same time it introduces American readers to the sound and sensibility of three kinds of Yiddish speaking immigrants: boor, woman, and intellectual.²

This essay on Cahan's fiction is part of a larger project that has been and continues to be in dialogue with David Roskies' landmark study on the evolution of speech in modern Yiddish writing, "Call It Jewspeak."³ In a sweeping and masterful genealogy and analysis of speech poetics in Yiddish, Roskies argues that spoken language became a central feature of modern Yiddish literature. Abraham Cahan wrote *The Imported Bridegroom* sixteen years after his arrival in the United States at a time when speech representation was a central feature of local color and dialect writing. Immigrating at the age of twenty-two, Cahan was steeped in his native Yiddish literature and culture, and he rapidly immersed himself in the English literary world. Although he wrote this novella in English, he tapped into Yiddish poetic conventions, exemplified most dramatically in his portrait of Asriel Stroon. An uneducated immigrant, Stroon remains a boor despite his financial success as the owner of bakeries and real estate. His comical mispronunciation of "choych" locates him in a long line of lisping country bumpkins that began with the first modern Yiddish play, *Serkele, oder di yortsayt nokh a bruder* (*Serkele; or, In Mourning for a Brother*; 1839). According to Roskies, "For Shloyme Ettinger (1803-56), from Warsaw and Zamosc, the first modern Yiddish playwright, the orality of Yiddish made it the ideal moral compass: how you spoke was the most accurate measure of who you were."⁴ Whereas a Yiddish speaking reader would recognize Asriel as a trope in modern Yiddish writing, Cahan's American readers would

² For a thought-provoking discussion of Abraham Cahan's writings as the arena for Lower East side practices, literary as well as social, and as assisting at the birth of American modernity, see Sara Blair, "Whose Modernism Is It? Abraham Cahan, Fictions of Yiddish, and the Contest of Modernity," *Modern Fiction Studies* 51, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 258–84.

³ David Roskies, "Call It Jewspeak: On the Evolution of Speech in Modern Jewish Writing," *Poetics Today* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 225–301. The essay is part of a special issue on "Modern Yiddish Literary Studies" edited by Hana Wirth-Nesher.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 231.

recognize him as a speaker of dialect in regional literature during a period when dialect writing was the rage in American realism.⁵ Two years prior to the publication of *The Imported Bridegroom*, Cahan made his auspicious debut on the American literary scene with *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*, also a novella about a boorish greenhorn with an accent that was received as an exemplar of the popular genre of local color writing.⁶ Cahan's *Imported Bridegroom*, therefore, emerged from two linguistic and literary traditions which, at this particular period, dovetailed. For American readers at the turn of the century, representing speech in dialect underscored regional, racial, and class difference in the guise of a democratic plurality of voices, while at the same time affirming normative English as a national standard. Writers like Cahan gave readers a glimpse into foreign terrain, a region they knew as the New York Ghetto.

The Imported Bridegroom revolves around the ambitions and desires of the widower Asriel and his daughter, Flora. Although it begins and ends with Flora's dreams for herself, most of *The Imported Bridegroom* is from Stroon's perspective. Eager to improve his status within his immigrant community in New York, he decides to compensate for his lack of learning by procuring a Talmud scholar as bridegroom for his only daughter Flora who has her own strategy for upward social mobility—marrying a doctor. To that end, she applies herself to refining her English. Unaware of her ambition, Stroon aims to implement his plan by returning to his hometown of Pravly, where he offers the highest bid for an *illui* bridegroom, “imports” him to America, and assumes that Flora will happily submit to the match. In one respect Stroon achieves exactly what he desired: Flora overcomes her vehement objections, comes to love Shaya, and marries him. Yet it is a Pyrrhic victory. Their love develops only insofar as Shaya abandons his religious learning and piety for secular knowledge. Like her father, Flora is stunned by the unforeseen results of her painstaking efforts to marry a well educated professional. What she does not anticipate is that the bridegroom's newly acquired English and American ways do not pave the way to medical school and bourgeois stability as she had hoped, but rather to smoky rooms of unkempt intellectuals bent on probing the depths of socialist theory. When Stroon discovers that they married without “Canopy and Sanctification,” he resolves to leave America for Palestine, to die in Zion wed to his widowed housekeeper in a grim marriage of convenience.

Asriel's life is constituted of a series of exclusions. Even among his transplanted community of Pravly Jews in New York, he has not attained a place in the *beit midrash*

⁵ For an account of dialect literature in America, see Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). For an analysis of the poetics and politics of accented writing, see Joshua Miller, *Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶ For a discussion of speech, dialect and realism in *Yekl*, see chapter two of my book *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 32-52.

due to his ignorance. When he returns to Pravly as a wealthy American who can outbid the most revered scholar of his community for a bridegroom, he is publicly rebuked for his arrogance. Moreover, his return trip to Pravly reminds him of the Jew's alienation from non-Jewish Poland. Yes, as his question to the passerby in lower Manhattan demonstrates, he is also a stranger in America. These exclusions are conveyed most powerfully in Cahan's representation of languages. Although Asriel's house on Mott Street displays affluence, his inner world of scraps of language exposes scarcity. Words fail him even as he speaks his Yiddish native tongue. When he returns to the Pravly countryside, for example, he is overjoyed at the sight of "plushy clover knobs," "dandelions and golden buttercups" (100), which David Roskies reads as "Asriel's romance with the shtetl."⁷ Whereas Cahan names each distinctive flower in English, he calls attention to the inadequacy of Asriel's "poor mother tongue" that could not afford a special name for each flower." The impoverished botanical lexicon of Yiddish makes Asriel lump them all together as "*tzatzkes*," a Polish word for beautiful decorative objects. Asriel rejoices at his homecoming, and "felt as though there were no such flowers in America," an observation based on the highly congested urban environment of the Lower East Side, but is also ironic given that the narrator required English words to identify them. Ignorance about flora in the landscape portends his ignorance about his own Flora, the Latinized/Anglicized *blume* whose Americanization has estranged her from him. He addresses the Polish peasant driving his cart in the two non-Jewish languages from which he is excluded: First he mistakenly cries "Say" in English and then promptly switches to "*Sloukhai!*" (102), which means "listen" in Polish. Non-Jews being interchangeable for him, English surfaces by force of habit, in contrast to Polish that he shouts "with delight." In fact, his "heart bounds with joy" even at the sight of a church, a familiar landmark of "home" in Poland promptly followed by a self-reproach: "Hush, wicked thing! It's a church of Gentiles." (Ibid.) In Poland he recognizes a church at first glance, in contrast to his inability to read the New York cityscape, where he needs to ask whether a building is a "choych."

Taken aback by his spontaneous joy at seeing the familiar landscape of Poland, he atones for his lapse by revisiting the site of his Jewish Old World roots—the cemetery. As he pays respect to his forebears, he pauses at the graves "to make out their Hebrew inscriptions." (117) Humbled by his ignorance of Hebrew, he returns to the synagogue to beg forgiveness of Reb Lippe, whom he outbid for Shaya in a shameful flaunting of his American fortune. As he pays tribute to a learned member of the community, Asriel admits that "You can read Talmud yourself, while I am only a boor." (118) Stroon's linguistic landscape sums up his world: An earthy man with a natural attraction to

⁷ David Roskies, "The Shtetl in Jewish Collective Memory," *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Bloomington, IND: Indiana University Press, 1999), 43.

nature, he is born into a culture that values knowledge of sacred texts in loshn-koydesh. Ignorant of such knowledge, he is portrayed as a native Yiddish speaker lacking words for the flora that he cherishes, a bumbling English speaker doomed to be an outsider in American culture, and an illiterate in Hebrew/Aramaic, the language that bestows honor on Jewish males in the society whose judgment matters to him most. It is fitting, therefore, that apart from asking whether a library is a church, and addressing a Polish peasant with an English word that he momentarily thought was Polish, the only other word that he utters in English in this story is his reply to a waiter in the non-kosher restaurant where he tracks down his apikoros son-in-law. What will he have? inquires the waiter. “Notink!” (153).

If Asriel’s speech in “Dis a choych?” betrays his bitter disappointment in America, then the equivalent for his daughter Flora is her sinking realization at the end of the novel that her young husband has destined her to a life of “smoke and broken English.” (161) She too suffers exclusion, not only as the child of an immigrant but also as a woman; a first generation American, she exhibits one of this group’s main traits, an obsession with perfecting English. In sharp contrast to her father’s generation, Flora speaks, reads, and dreams in English, which serves as entry into the middle class, and which she believes will make her eligible to marry a doctor. Since this is an “uncommon occurrence in the Ghetto,” according to the narrator, Flora is doing all she can to turn herself into an attractive match, which requires language vigilance, “avoidance of bad grammar, as it behooved a doctor’s wife.” (94) The key to social mobility is English, and she applies herself to it assiduously. Indeed, *The Imported Bridegroom* opens with Flora reading Dickens’ *Little Dorrit* in a bourgeois “parlor” complete with piano and “a neat little library.” Although reading a Dickens novel in America at that time signifies middle class cultural capital, Cahan knows that Dickens’ novels are also indictments of the cruelty of capitalism, and he cleverly chooses *Little Dorrit* with its critique of debtors’ prisons. The narrator describes her as “the only girl of her circle who would read Dickens, Scott, or Thackeray in addition to the *Family Story Paper* and *The Fireside Companion*.” (93) In short, her reading habits rise above advice columns in women’s magazines, although she reads them as well.

Flora as reader contrasts sharply with Flora as speaker. In the first scene she converses with her father in colloquial English that is hardly the language of Dickens’ parlor, greeting him with “Just comin’ from the synagogue, papa?” When he announces that he has decided to make the journey back to his hometown, she coyly but firmly disapproves: “Mister, you ain’ goin’ nowheres.” (95) For all her reading of British classics, she does not sound like the proper middle and upper class characters that she emulates. In conversation with her Yiddish-speaking father, Flora not only speaks in American slang, but she also appears to be putting on an act straight from vaudeville,

unlike the English she will later speak with Shaya. By this combination of simple street language and teasing mimicry from popular culture, she asserts her American identity with her immigrant parent, although the playfulness in “Mister, you ain’ goin’ nowhere” is obviously lost on him, as is her tone of amused condescension. She can pretend to take charge in this coy performance, but she has no influence over his actions. Eventually she and Shaya do take charge in their rebellious civil marriage, but by then Asriel knows that Shaya has betrayed him by abandoning his Talmud studies for the books in the Astor Library.

Whereas Flora regards spoken English as cultural capital, Shaya regards English as a portal to universal knowledge. When he applies his passion for learning to secular study, “he could tell the meaning of thousands of printed English words, although he neither knew how to use them himself nor recognized them in the speech of others.” (135) What troubles him most, he tells Flora, is that when he speaks English, he cannot make himself understood. Sharing his wonder at the Astor Library with Flora—“I never knew there were so many Gentile books in the world at all”—he confesses “I am so troubled about my English...When I asked them for the book, and how to get it, they could not understand me.” (137) Since Shaya does not aspire to social status in America, speech for him is entirely functional. He cares neither for accent nor grammar, only for intelligibility, and his poor speech is merely an impediment in obtaining the books that he wants to read. “He was in a fever of impatience to inhale the whole of the Gentile language—definitions, spelling, pronunciation, and all—with one desperate effort.” (138) This stands in sharp contrast to Asriel, who is not a man of words, and who wants to inhale the fragrance of flowers for which he has no words. Shaya wants to inhale language. Moreover, he is most drawn to Flora not when she speaks, but when she plays the piano. For Flora, the piano is a tool for bourgeois status; for Shaya, the piano would make his heart contract. Shaya has shifted from valuing the particular knowledge of Jewish religious textuality to what he regards as universal knowledge. Music and philosophy express that universalism, not speech, which for him is class linked.

Furthermore, due to his Talmud studies where reading aloud was common practice, he does not regard speech as far removed from reading. When force of habit makes him read aloud at the library, an old gentleman taps him on the shoulder, telling him to be quiet. When he reads English aloud with Flora, their romance peaks as “she leaned forward to see a mispronounced word for herself.” (138) Whereas Flora reads novels and magazines as solitary activity in a private space signaling her middle class aspirations, Shaya reads in public spaces, first in the *beit midrash*, later in the Astor library, and finally in a smoke filled room with a motley group of bohemian intellectuals who read French social philosophy in translation. They read aloud in order to clarify the

concepts that underlie their commitment to social revolution, and not to acquire the niceties of proper English for social acceptance.

Flora's attitude toward spoken English is shaped by her gender as well as her religious and ethnic identity. Since her father imported a bridegroom without her consent, she is forced to slide back into Yiddish to make herself understood, instead of living her fantasy of impressing a medical student with her grammatical English. Her prospective bridegroom observes that Flora spoke Yiddish with an accent that "was so decidedly American that to Shaya it sounded at once like his native tongue and the language of Gentiles." (123) In short, Flora speaks accented Yiddish as well as English. At first, she rejects Shaya outright for his ignorance of English as well as for his pious Old World demeanor. As he acquires the language and a thirst for Gentile knowledge, however, her attitude changes. Like other courtship scenes in immigrant novels that revolve around English diction, grammar, or usage, including Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* which he would write twenty years later, Flora warms to Shaya when "she quizzed him about his manners, and once or twice even went over his English lessons with him, laughing at his mispronunciations, and correcting him in the imposing manner of her former schoolteachers." (134)

Caught between Americanized Yiddish and unrefined English, Flora pins her hopes on Shaya's intellectual brilliance and thirst for Gentile books to secure their future. That is why the sound of "broken English" in the crowded shabby room of even shabbier intellectuals described on the last page paralyzes her body and robs her of speech: "she could neither speak nor stir from her seat." (162) Let us look in greater detail at the phrase "smoke and broken English," both emanating from the mouths of the men in that dingy room. To begin with, smoke is antithetical to bourgeois respectability when it comes to women. As she would have known from her reading of the women's magazines that Cahan is careful to name, in polite society of the late nineteenth century men did not smoke in the presence of ladies. As early as 1864, a book entitled *The Habits of Good Society* lays down the ground rules: "One must never smoke, nor even ask to smoke, in the company of the fair... One must never smoke in a public place, where ladies are or might be, for instance, a flower-show or promenade. But if you smoke, or if you are in the company of smokers, and are to wear your clothes in the presence of ladies afterwards, you must change them to smoke in."⁸ In 1889, less than ten years before the publication of *The Imported Bridegroom*, a Hand-book of official social etiquette and public ceremonials offered similar advice, "It would be a proper course and a respect to ladies for a gentleman not to smoke while in their

⁸ *The Habits of Good Society: A Handbook for Ladies and Gentlemen* (New York: Carleton, 1865), 290. As quoted in Evangeline Holland, "Smoking Etiquette," *Edwardian Promenade*, January 21, 2010, <http://www.edwardianpromenade.com/amusements/smoking-etiquette/>.

society.”⁹ And within a few months of the publication of the story, *Etiquette for Americans* was just as emphatic: “a man should never smoke anywhere, without first assuring himself that it is not disagreeable to the ladies in the room, and in the house. An American gentleman does not smoke when he is walking with a lady, or where he is likely to meet a lady.”¹⁰ Flora’s hopes of becoming a lady through her marriage to Shaya are dashed when he insists on bringing his would-be lady to a room full of smoke.

For Flora, mouthing “broken English” is an even greater affront to her than the smoke emanating from those mouths. *The Imported Bridegroom* opens with her bright dreams of the future and ends with a bleak vision of her future. It opens and closes with scenes of reading. Unlike Flora, who reads Dickens in the privacy of the Anglo-American domestic parlor, Shaya reads Comte in a public space with a circle of international comrades: a Scotsman who is “a laborer by day and a philosopher by night,” a Swedish tailor, a young “Hindoo,” and several Russian Jews (160). Flora regards them as “grotesque and uncouth characters in Dickens’s novels,” in contrast to the upper class refined characters in those novels who are her models of acculturation. Shaya’s Talmudic study in *hevrutah* has given way to another male communal reading group, but this time comprised of impoverished social dreamers. Entirely engrossed in their discussion—“Ah, it’s so deep!” (161)—Shaya neglects Flora in his quest for philosophical truths unmoored from particular language.

Flora, in contrast, takes in “the empty tea-glasses and the slices of lemon on their bottoms” as a sign of failure. No porcelain cups, no tea with milk. Flora is rendered mute, neither speaking nor stirring. What exactly is a broken language? It is often a term used in America to belittle immigrants. During a campaign rally in 2015, then-candidate Donald Trump mocked Chinese negotiators by accusing them of foregoing small talk and niceties in their business negotiations and starting conversations with the phrase “we want deal.”¹¹ They begin their talk with broken English and for Trump, in his xenophobic stance, this is a sign of their defectiveness and immediately gives him the upper hand. There are, of course, other ways to express poor performance in speech, but there is something particularly poignant about *breaking* a language.

To be sure, not all utterances using the verb “to break” mean to damage. Shakespeare captures both the promise and ruin of “break” when Henry implores the French princess Katherine to marry him (*Henry V*), knowing that her command of the

⁹ De B. Randolph Keim, *Hand-Book of Official and Social Etiquette and Public Ceremonials at Washington* (Washington, DC, 1889), 242. As quoted in Holland, “Smoking Etiquette.”

¹⁰ *Etiquette for Americans* (New York: H.S. Stone, 1898), 176. As quoted in Holland, “Smoking Etiquette.”

¹¹ Frances Kai-Hwa Wang, “Trump’s ‘Offensive’ Asian Parody Sparks Criticism,” *NBC News*, August 27, 2015,

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/trumps-offensive-asian-parody-sparks-criticism-n41692>

English language is limited. “Come, your answer in broken music; for thy voice is music and thy English broken; therefore, queen of all, Katherine, break thy mind to me in broken English.” “Break thy mind to me” suggests promise and warmth, as in the break of day, or breaking bread. Henry’s speech assumes that feelings and ideas exist independent of their utterance in speech, and that voice can be musical apart from the words it communicates. “To break” need not be destructive. Yet, when expressed in the past tense as in *The Imported Bridegroom*, when already *broken*, language has fallen from a higher to a lower state. A broken language assumes an ideal, intact, whole language that has been willfully damaged. This is how Americans in the first part of the twentieth century perceived the speech of immigrants—as a betrayal of all that America represented. This is how Flora perceives the English that she hears as she contemplates a future “from which she seemed excluded.” (162) A broken language is like a broken woman, a broken marriage, a broken heart—many of the themes in the English prose that she has been reading. “The room was full of smoke and broken English” marks a literary breakthrough for Cahan as a Jewish immigrant writer in America. It is also the most lyrically devastating English sentence that he ever wrote.