

Chapter 1

On Whose Watch?

Animation, Arrest, and the Subject of the Ghetto

On July 20, 1892, Jacob Riis—by then celebrated as the author of *How the Other Half Lives*—gave a dazzling lantern-slide photo lecture, featuring over a hundred of his images of New York City’s slums, in Ocean Grove, New Jersey. Having worked small-town America as a magic-lantern operator before attempting to fill urban lecture halls, Riis knew how to put on a show. During the early 1880s he had tried his hand as a self-styled “street fakir,” providing patter for travelogue-style images; they were projected onto a seventeen-foot screen mounted in public squares in Long Island villages (the bulk of his earnings was from advertising).¹ When Riis committed himself to photo lectures for the social-gospel cause, he used that experience to create what historian Daniel Czitrom calls a “vaudeville of reform”: a theatrical mix of extemporaneous remarks, exhortation, anecdotes drawn from his work on the downtown police beat, dialect jokes, and hymn-singing, shaped around his shocking, larger-than-life, lime-lit images of the slums.²

On the strength of his unprecedented use of “Photographs from Real Life,” Riis patented his lectures. He also branded them as a new kind of visual experience.³ In the persona of a tour guide leading his audience through the threatening landscape of the ghetto, Riis gave dynamic form to moral convictions that were, as he put it, “too hot for pen and ink” (278).⁴ Riis’s Ocean Grove audience presumably responded as spectators, encountering his work not in print but in the form of projected stereopticon slides, typically did: with gasps, moans, other displays of feeling and frequent applause, in appreciation “that the entertainment provided for them had proved most excellent.”⁵

Although the Ocean Grove lecture was only one of many Riis gave, it unfolded in a setting that lent special force to the double life of his images as

entertainment and enlightenment, evidence and spectacle. Founded as a Methodist camp-meeting community, Ocean Grove had become a summer resort for genteel city-dwellers seeking to escape the oppressive heat and crowding of the ever-more dense metropolis. That summer, threats associated with downtown crowding would have been much on their minds. An outbreak of typhus and cholera epidemics within the immigrant community of the Lower East Side during the winter and early spring had become a source of panic across the city, and indeed the US public health officials and proponents of immigration restriction had cried the need for cordoning off “the impoverished, unkempt class” of Eastern European Jews presumed to be the source of the “scourge.”⁶ Withdrawing from stifling air and talk of contamination, gathered in the historic site of communal conviction, Ocean Grove’s summer class was the ideal audience for dynamic exhortation about the Lower East Side’s moral threats and ills.⁷ What better place for Riis to arouse Christian sentiment about the urgent problem of the slums on the strength of spectacular visual display? And what better context to press the power of an image repertoire of the other half taking shape in the city’s dynamic print and visual cultures?

At least one of Riis’s spectators can be said to have seen the light—that is, the point of the spectacle as such. In his audience that day was a twenty-year-old youth, the fourteenth and youngest child of a well-known Methodist minister and a leading light of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, respectively.⁸ A recent dropout of Syracuse University, he was employed as a stringer for his brother’s summer news agency, which wrote up society gossip and reports of shore town events for the New York papers. Four days later, the *New York Tribune* published his brief account of Riis’s lecture. Among notices of society arrivals and leisure class “shore doings,” the text appears quite unremarkable. Yet within a matter of months, the same young man began writing what would become the most celebrated nineteenth-century fiction of the underclasses of downtown New York, a novel hailed then and since as a benchmark of documentary power and of literary naturalism. The text in question was the notorious *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*; the author, Stephen Crane.

Where, we might well ask, did Crane’s landmark, breakout novel come from? Self-published in 1893, *Maggie* was the work of an unknown, untested writer who had slim journalistic credits to his name. Not surprisingly, the resources for its genesis have been a matter of considerable speculation. Once hailed as the product of avid slumming in the haunts of

downtown street gangs, tenement-dwellers, and Bowery toughs, *Maggie* has more recently been read as the precondition for Crane's low pursuits, an imaginative exercise that preceded his actual experience. Some of the evidence (notoriously inconclusive) suggests that Crane completed a full draft of the novel before he took up residence in a midtown tenement, began haunting Lower East Side precincts of vice and need, or wrote the journalistic essays, like "An Experiment in Misery" and "An Experiment in Opium-Taking," that describe these exploits.⁹ Given the sensational power and wide circulation of Riis's *Other Half* images, the supposition that they served as a point of departure for *Maggie*'s unflinching naturalism is, well, natural. Crane, critical readers have argued, was "undoubtedly" influenced by Riis.¹⁰ How could the fledgling writer of the ghetto not have responded to the most famous of the era's guides to the urban frontier, the showman said to combine "the aims of the Brothers Mayhew and the realistic instinct of Zola" in one?¹¹

For my purposes, the fact of Crane's engagement is less critical than the critical presumptions about what his engagement might mean. Typically, the precedent of Riis is invoked to explain both Crane's fascination with downtown New York and his documentary expression of it. But a sense of Riis's broader practice should give pause about his images as models for any kind of transcriptional realism. What Riis's lantern-slide shows might more likely have communicated was the spectacular effects to which photography could be put—especially in response to the landscape of the tenements.

By virtue of his family and upbringing, Crane was intimately familiar with Protestant and reform deployment of the so-called power of attraction wielded at contemporary Methodist revivals, temperance meetings, youth camps, and church lectures. "Chalk-talks" and other visual demonstrations, designed to promote personal piety by engaging sentiment and the senses, had become a key strategy for marketing evangelical faith and culture.¹² Crane's tireless mother, Mary Helen Peck Crane, had striking success in this line. Her signature lecture, "The Effects of Alcohol on the Organs and Tissues of the Body," expounded on the evils of inebriation with a brio worthy of the lantern-slide circuit or even P. T. Barnum. Its climax was a dramatic explosion of flaming egg whites: this is your brain; this is your brain on booze. Popular up and down the Jersey Shore, her rousing performances were written up, her temperance lectures published, in the very journals to which her son later contributed.¹³ (Her disposition was also reflected, with vitriolic irony, in Crane's *Maggie* and his 1896 novel

George's Mother.) If, as one of Crane's biographers puts it, Crane "gave no sign of being moved" by Riis's Ocean Grove lecture in the published account of it, he was exceptionally well prepared to consider its double agency.¹⁴ In Riis's magic-lantern photo lectures, unprecedented fidelity to visual detail was pressed in service of realizing—making real—a far from objective, monitory vision of the world of the other half.

What Crane might have taken away from Riis's performed images, in other words, was not a propensity for some kind of documentary or realist fidelity to hard facts or social conditions, but in effect the opposite: an awareness of the affective power of iconography, in the form of those arresting images Riis called "lightning flashes from the slums."¹⁵ The spectacular projection of Riis's images in the form of three-dimensional stereopticon slides, accompanied by music and framed by practiced showmanship and oration "humorous, statistical, and pathetic"—a kind of precinematic *Gesamtkunstwerk*—would have had the effect of making the tenements thrillingly vivid as an experiential landscape while at the same framing their subjects as dramatic figures of distress, helplessness, and shock.¹⁶ The effect produced by this form of visual spectacle on its genteel viewers was readily sutured to conditions of poverty and viciousness. But its production in the first place was surely intensified by the guerrilla tactics of Riis and the sanitary officials who accompanied him into the tenements, setting off volatile, dangerous chemicals to produce the flash illumination that enabled unprecedented photographic capture under low- or no-light conditions. Riis himself admits as much. "Our party carried terror wherever it went," he retrospectively noted. "The spectacle of half a dozen strange men invading a house in the midnight hour armed with big pistols which they shot off recklessly"—Riis's original mechanism for exploding magnesium powder to produce flash—"was hardly reassuring."¹⁷ (Indeed, Riis noted, tenement-dwellers "bolted through windows and down fire-escapes where we went," and "the recollection of our visits h[ung] over a Stanton Street block like a nightmare.")¹⁸ If Riis was leading a war on the tenements, it was in fact a shooting war. No wonder the rudely awakened sleepers of *Five Cents a Spot* look so disoriented, so inadequate to their own remediation (see figure OL.4). Thus framed, they entered the image repertoire of the photograph, and of modern times, in America.

In the context of this image and the many like it that featured in Riis's lantern-slide shows, Crane's presence at the 1892 lecture brings into view a key effect of Riis's work and his own—an effect native to the broader

project of imaging the tenements that both helped make definitive of late nineteenth-century US culture. The spectator of Riis's lantern-slide flashes from the slums is *animated* by a heightened sensory experience of the slum as contact zone, even as—in part because—its visible figures are *arrested*, caught in iconic gestures or displays of the intransigence of their condition. To be sure, photography came into being as a technology of arrest, to solve the problem of what pioneer William Henry Fox Talbot called “fixing the shadow”: arresting the chemical process by which nitrates changed color after exposure to light, thereby making possible the creation of permanent visual records.¹⁹ But as Allan Sekula has shown, not until the later nineteenth century did a regime of “instrumental social realism” mobilize such records for a fully fledged project of social control over its citizens. By the early 1890s—at the very moment when Riis was experimenting with his lantern-slide shows of the ghetto—photography, in the form of mug shots, Bertillon cards, and other imaging systems, promoted the actual arrest of alien, criminal, and otherwise threatening bodies.²⁰ The logic of photographic capture thus offered itself up for new kinds of engagement with the spectacle, and specter, of the social other.

With respect to Riis's images of the ghetto, their power depends on a dynamic of capture and spectacle that was both spatial and temporal in effect. Creating what photo historian Maren Stange calls “an attractively secure and collective point of view from which to survey the show” (and, we might add, the social landscape it framed), and mobilizing the effects of lantern-slide projection, which heightened the sensory experience of its subjects, Riis's lectures hail his spectators as citizens of a progressive, forward-looking America, capable of mobile response to urgent challenges and the city's rapid transformation.²¹ Consider by contrast the figures who typically populate Riis's signature images: immobile, flash-blinded, huddled against the glare of charitable discipline and the law. Photographically arrested, they appear unequal to the very modernity they themselves—as new masses, tenement-dwellers, street hustlers, organized laborers, sweatshop workers, alternative culture-makers—are bringing into being. The contrast created and made iconic by Riis's work raises a powerful question: on whose watch is American futurity being shaped?²² The temporal disjunction founded in the photograph's structural effect of arrest, and heightened by Riis's technique, aims, and ideological bent, provides a useful point of entry into Crane's textual response to the tenements. It also helps frame the problem that photographically inflected modes of seeing

posed for real-time inhabitants of the Lower East Side confronting such responses. In its movement between animation and arrest, Riis's work modeled a historically salient way of seeing immigrant and ethnic New York, of marking modern time and belonging (or unbelonging) in it. Its effects can be traced in *Maggie's* distinctive temporality—and beyond, in writing of and from the Lower East Side attuned to the problem of making visible the modernity of the other half.

Readers' responses to *Maggie*, we might note, were always about time. Long before the revival of critical interest in naturalism and the movements of history that reshaped Americanist literary studies in the 1980s and 1990s, the text struck readers as temporally disordered in a fundamental way. A reviewer for the *New York Tribune*—Crane's own organ as a fledgling journalist and reviewer of Riis—seized on a distinctly “monotonous” quality attending the novel's “vicious themes,” the dialect of its downtown toughs (whose “talk is as dreary as their lives are empty”), and its “stupid roughness” alike.²³ Even its brutality and shock, the reviewer opines, are repetitive as clockwork; to read its pages is “like hav[ing] one's face slapped twice a minute for half an hour.”²⁴ Complaints about the brutish protagonists and deliberate vulgarity of literary naturalism were common in its context. But the effect underscored by the *Tribune* reviewer exceeds naturalism's hallmark concerns with geological or evolutionary time and the logic of reversion to type.²⁵ How might we understand the kind of shock *Maggie* creates in relation to its clock-like effects? In what follows, I want to suggest that the experience of animation generated by the text corresponds with, and depends upon, a certain mechanical temporality or arrest, by which the inhabitants of the slums are *watched* in Crane's distinctive narrative mode.

If, as Jennifer Fleissner has argued, naturalism's “most characteristic plot” is marked “by an ongoing, nonlinear, repetitive motion—back and forth, around and around, on and on”—the “stuckness in place” that defines the narrative world of *Maggie* and the reader's experience of that world encodes a distinctive logic.²⁶ The immobility traced and conditioned by Crane's fledgling text seems only remotely akin to the kind that, in Fleissner's incisive reading, figures “what happens to history” at modernity's critical juncture, “when women start to leave the sphere of nature behind,” flocking to the cities, embracing new forms of work and subjectivity (3). The

immobility of *Maggie*, and the shock it elicits in readers, is less an effect of the New Woman liberated from bio-determinism than a residue of the Old World in the form of immigrant others who cannot be assimilated to genteel norms or to the progressive, technocratic modernity overtaking them. Like Riis's lantern-slide show, Crane's narrative seeks to produce an experience of animation—titillating, shocking, even violent—in and through an aesthetics of arrest, an annulling of the new temporal order that immigrants, members of the working classes, and other others were forced to confront.

More specifically at stake in *Maggie* is a textual and narrative stasis conditioned on a decisive social immobility. The spasmodic fury of the inhabitants of Rum Alley is nothing if not fixed and unvarying. Maggie's brother Jimmie is beaten for "fightin' agin" first by his father, then by his mother (131); paradoxically, the former then upbraids the latter in a fine display of imitative form: "Yer allus poundin' a kid . . . Don't be allus poundin' a kid" (132). A sympathetic neighbor who harbors Jimmie when he seeks relief from this domestic terror similarly asks, "'Eh, child, what is it dis time? Is yer fader beatin' yer mudder, or yer mudder beatin' yer fader?" (134). The relentless quality of the family's domestic life—neither a periodic cycle nor in any meaningful sense a progression—is itself a matter of wry comment within the world of the fiction. Court officials, we read, "invariably grinned, and cried out, 'Hello, Mary, you here again?'" (143). That maternal figure, "eternally swollen and disheveled," is "a familiar sight on the island" (that is, Rikers, which had recently been established as the city's primary jail [143]). All the more terrifying for her maudlin invocations of maternal sentiment, Mary is both a fixed type and a figure of fixity, a chronic offender who "measure[s] time by means of sprees" (143).

In this disposition, she embodies the logic of Crane's narrative: its interest not in mimicking a rhythm of compulsion, but in measuring a dysfunctional experiential time. Linked with the iconic landscape of poverty, otherness, and vice, that time remains incommensurate with meaningful social experience, history, and the possibilities for transformation associated with them. Again and again arrested, Maggie's mother enacts not just a state of irremediable viciousness but a narrative condition—call it dystemporal—that attaches to every figure in the tenement world. The temporal disorder that attends Crane's tenement subjects, and to which they are subjected by his aesthetic, marks itself forcefully in some of the most perfunctory (and often cited) sentences in the novel:

The babe, Tommie, died. He went away in an insignificant coffin, his small waxen hand clutching a flower that the girl, Maggie, had stolen from an Italian. She and Jimmie lived. (138)

The girl, Maggie, blossomed in a mud puddle. (141)

Although distinctive, such moments exemplify Crane's narrative logic. Pre- and overdetermined, they occur within a suspended time, neither evolutionary nor regressive but static, resistant to meaningful social reckoning. This temporal mode attaches both to Maggie's experience and to the narrative that relays it. That it is symptomatic becomes clear when, after having met Jimmie's street-mate, the swaggering Bowery playboy Pete, Maggie feels compelled to take the measure of her surroundings in light of his departure from them: "Turning, Maggie contemplated the dark, dust-stained walls, and the scant and crude furniture of her home. A clock, in a splintered and battered oblong box of varnished wood, she suddenly regarded as an abomination. She noted that it ticked raspingly" (145).

Like the ill-fated lambrequin she makes to "freshen" the family's dirty, disheveled flat (it's destroyed in another of her mother's alcoholic rages), the clock suggests how "piteous" are Maggie's inchoate aspirations to mobility, order, and futurity (145). With its unpleasant rasp, the clock does indeed tell time, mark movement toward a future—but one so inexorable and alienated that the experience preceding it can hardly count as such. In this tableau of arrested development, the battered box of varnished wood already figures the coffin in which Maggie, following her infant brother, will be laid to rest, only so as to reap the effects of her mother's final threat: "Oh, yes, I'll fergive her! I'll fergive her!" (189). Like its splintered instrument, time itself in this imagined space has ceased to measure anything but the fixed, unbridgeable distance between tenement subjects and the objects of their need or desire.

Figures of the literary naturalism that had been imported from Europe—most notably the grifters, grafters, and petty shopkeepers who populated Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* novels, set in Second Empire Paris—had already been recognized by readers in the United States for their arrested evolutionary development, their tragic inability to break free of fixed trajectories of causality and fate. But the problem of oppressive temporalities and ways of marking time had distinctive resonances for the American and would-be American laborers, immigrants, and tenement-dwellers featured in *Maggie* and subsequent accounts of the other half. In the early 1890s

Americans at large, including the “native” and genteel, were still adjusting to a regime of standard time instituted throughout the United States in 1883—not by act of Congress, the president, or courts but by that ruthless engine of industrial expansion and wealth-creation, the railroads, for which precisely regulated alignment of times and time zones had become critical to transcontinental dominion.²⁷ The formal institution of clock time—abstract, cut off from bodily and social process, minutely divisible in the service of mechanization and profit—constituted a decisive triumph for industrial modernization, and it radically altered the way everyday citizens experienced their social spaces and being.

Nowhere was this more acutely so than in the urban precincts of the working and immigrant poor or for tenement-dwellers like Maggie, she of “the eternal collars and cuffs” (147). (The materiality of Maggie’s labor becomes more striking when we recall the fact that Crane had the habit of writing notes for his fiction on his own shirt-cuffs.)²⁸ Standardization and ever more precise measurement of time strengthened the disciplinary regime of the factory and sweatshop, whose owners were determined to clock labor-power to the moment and the fraction of a cent. Tensions surged over control of the production regime—the hours mandated in a working day, the measurement of start and stoppage times. As timekeeping became an increasingly powerful resource for management and capital, it generated a thriving culture of resistance, from as early as the institution in 1831 of a “Mechanic’s Bell” sounding workers’ time in Cannon Street (just south of Delancey and the future entrance to the Williamsburg Bridge) to organized labor (likewise burgeoning downtown) and its highly visible “eight-hour” campaigns of the post-Civil War era.²⁹ By the mid-1880s, the imagery of the workers’ clock, of time reapportioned and aligned to the needs of the laboring body, had become central to these campaigns (figure 1.1).

In other words, American modernity shaped itself—often violently—around the question: on whose watch? An 1886 cover of the nation’s popular journal of satire *Puck* makes it clear that contestation between urban capital and labor over control of the clock had become a defining effect and condition of the nation’s industrial boom (figure 1.2). But as the illustrated antics of the eponymous sprite suggest, no amount of arbitration could resolve such a volatile structural standoff. After May 1886, in the wake of the notorious Haymarket Square bombing in Chicago—which targeted a peaceful workers’ demonstration in support of the eight-hour workday—bourgeois Americans and titans of industry alike were determined to crush

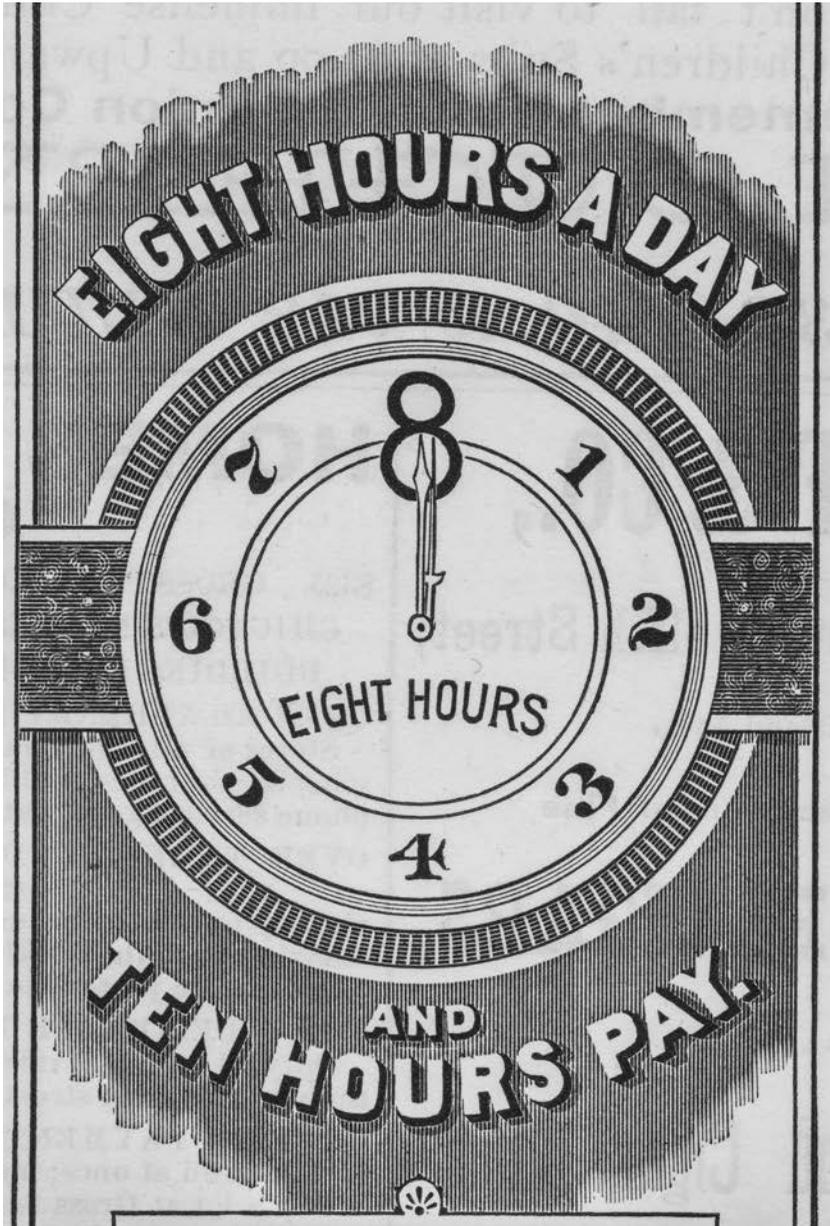


FIGURE 1.1. Detail of advertisement for the Eight-Hour Plug Tobacco Company, *Knights of Labor*, April 10, 1886. Chicago History Museum, ICHI-168903-01, www.chicago.history.org.

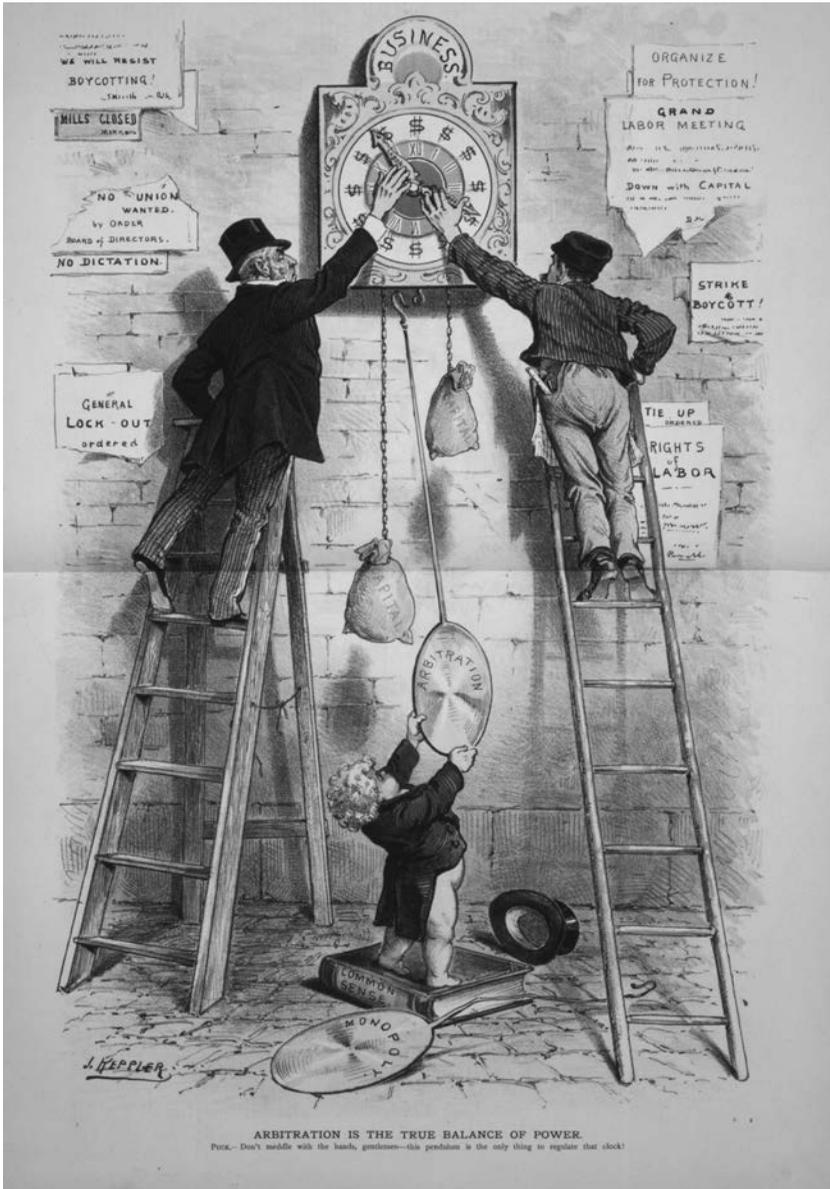


FIGURE 1.2. Joseph Keppler, *Arbitration Is the True Balance of Power*. Puck: "Don't meddle with the hands, gentlemen—this pendulum is the only thing to regulate that clock!" Puck, March 17, 1886. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division LC-USZC4-5956.

any threat of foreign, anarchic, or otherwise threatening resistance to law and order—not least the time-discipline driving the nation’s astonishing industrial growth: 433 percent in manufacturing profits and 550 percent in total wealth between 1860 and 1890 alone.³⁰

From the perspective of labor activism and its histories, the increasingly divisive politics of temporality was framed as an issue for the urban working *man*. But life in immigrant, working-class enclaves arising across the nation subjected women to particularly intense, redoubled regimes of temporal discipline. At once pieceworkers and caretakers, immigrant women and girls were charged by charitable agencies and agents of social reform with keeping time for their families and their men. A representative *Primer for Foreign Speaking Women*, compiled in 1912 for the California Commission for Immigration and Housing, devotes two full pages to the evils of tardiness, particularly for the male child imagined as the future and de facto head of household: “If you [let him be late for school], when he grows up he will be late at his work. Thus he will lose his job, and always be poor and miserable.”³¹ Such injunctions had become time-honored among the charitable institutions that sprang up in New York City during the late 1880s and 1890s to address perceived threats to hygiene, moral order, and the American way of life posed by massive immigration and tenement crowding. Under the sign of women’s care, their instruction held sway.

Given the disciplinary emphasis by the city’s guardians of welfare on time-discipline, the clock itself came to serve as a visible emblem of aspiration and belonging to modernity in tenement households. Historian Elizabeth Ewen details the case of a Lower East Side family that immigrated from Galicia in 1895 whose husband felt compelled to choose between a sewing machine and “a bronze clock for the mantelpiece” as a gift for his wife, given that his tenement neighbors all “purchased one or another” to mark their domestic spaces as American (thus reinforcing the link between the machinery of sweatshop labor and that for measuring adherence to its regime).³² Given this protocol, it is unsurprising that clocks figure with increasing prominence in documentary images of tenement life. In the early tenement studies of progressive documentarian Lewis Wickes Hine—for example, his tenement portrait of a nine-year-old girl, finishing garments alongside her parents (figure 1.3)—the clock surveys the landscape of domestic life and labor, signifying a normative aspiration to citizenship and social fitness.



FIGURE 1.3. Lewis Wickes Hine, 11:30 a.m. Jennie Rizzandi, nine-year-old girl, helping mother and father finish garments in a dilapidated tenement, 5 Extra Pl., New York, New York, 1913. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, National Child Labor Committee Collection LC-USZ62-42207.

In a grim irony, however, the very investment of the working poor in ownership of domestic instruments of time-discipline tended to intensify its oppressive effects. Riis himself describes a telling incident along these lines. Calling at the home of “a poor washer-woman living in an East Side tenement,” he is confronted by her daughter, who inquires whether he is “the clock man”—the salesman who has come to collect yet another payment, on the installment plan, for a timepiece the family can ill afford. Hers, Riis notes, is “a life measured from the cradle by such incidents”; the flow of experience in the tenement world is marked by the invariable and straitening effect of a desperate struggle to remain on time and in time, for which the clock is both an emblem and the disciplinary mechanism.³³

In this broader sense of struggle with temporal frameworks, Maggie is clocked from the outset of the narrative. Her identity consists in her failure to be an agent of any kind of transformation. This is both a matter of her character (so Jimmie’s worldlier love interest, Nell, suggests: “A little pale

thing with no spirit . . . Did you note the expression of her eyes?" [179]) and of the logic of the narrative. Hence Maggie's pathetic question to Pete as he scorns her for her loss of respectability (which he himself, of course, has compromised): "But where kin I go?" (180). Maggie can only "go t'hell," as Pete directs her to do (180); she can only free-fall, in the gravity of her circumstances, into the physical and moral depths for which she is destined from the outset.

Narratively speaking, however, that outcome is not only a matter of naturalist-inflected predetermination. Maggie's fate is an effect of the fixity of her character and social being. Both remain impervious to willed or meaningful movement over time. Throughout the novel, the action most associated with Maggie is precisely that of going—but only in the past tense, and in a curiously passive mode. Confronted with her mother's vituperations about her keeping company with Pete, "Maggie went" (158); abandoned by Jimmie in her moment of ruin and need, "Maggie turned and went" (178). As reiterated over the course of the narrative, Crane's distinctive use of the intransitive past tense conveys not motion but its opposite: the act of continuing in a given state or condition, like that of a ragged child who "went barefoot," or "went without." A fixture in her environment, Maggie embodies an involuntary withdrawal from social agency as well as being in time.

Nowhere is this more striking than the chapter in which the flower of the tenement, now turned prostitute, comes (or goes) to her end. In the city's brilliant precincts of "pleasure and prosperity," she "of the painted cohorts of the city went along the street" (182). Estranged from the ranks of pleasure-seekers, upright citizens, and street habitués alike, she "went into gloomy districts near the river" (183). Failing to connect (or hook up) with any of the shadowy inhabitants of that shadow world, she "went into the blackness of the final block" (183). The static quality of Maggie's narrative condition is all the more notable in the context of Crane's insistence on the vivid color and motion of the streetscape against which it comes into view. Surging crowds, "clatter[ing] cabs," the "tossing seas" of the pavements, the "endless procession" of the throngs toward elevated stations, the whole lit with the "blurred radiance" of electric lights: at no other time throughout the narrative is the city as social context so dynamic, so modern, so animated (181, 182). (By comparison, it seems far more alive than the woman herself; even the most derelict buildings "seemed to have eyes that looked over" the streets, as the streetcar bells "jingled with a sound of merriment

[182].) Moved through a scenography of modern times, the streetwalking woman appears to be set iconographically against them, rather than in them or of them. In spite of her attempts to generate custom among the men she passes, she belongs to another temporal order than that of urban daily life, with its “metropolitan” getting and spending (182). Her movement synchs itself not to the ebb and flow of progress or the streets but to that of the “deathly black . . . river” (182), that iconic site or chronotope of the woman ruined, passed, in the image repertoire of US temperance and reform fiction, beyond lived time and social redemption (figure 1.4).

In her final chapter, in other words, the “woman”—no longer even individuated enough for a name—embodies her own status as an icon: a figure barred from temporal being and futurity.³⁴ More to the point, her banishment from social time intensifies our sense of the dynamism of the modern times to which she cannot belong. In this she differs critically from the reader of Crane’s narrative, whose very engagement with representations of the tenement lifeworld and its “gloomy districts” is an emblem of belonging to modernity: a “metropolitan seal,” a badge of contemporaneity if not of courage (182). Like the spectator of Riis’s lantern-slide shows, the reader of *Maggie* is animated—shocked, titillated, disgusted, entertained—by the very prospect of the tenement-dweller’s arrested being. In this sense, Crane’s narrative approximates the effects of Riis’s lantern-slide exhibitions. In both modes of social observation, fixity and animation become mutually mediating, with the effect of intensifying the felt sense of the tenement world as an incommensurable time zone and a temporally disordered space. If, as one of Crane’s biographers puts it, his developing aesthetic coalesces around his “arresting word pictures,” it owes something of its force—its animation—to the logic of arrest conditioning representations of the ghetto and the other half after Riis.³⁵

With respect to this logic, we might also say that Crane’s characters are imprisoned not only in or by the slums but in and by the emerging conventions, pace Riis, of its visualization. Legible as types indexed, made newly real, through the agency of photographic capture and display, Crane’s figures of the other half are imprisoned within an image repertoire, disabled from speaking to—or even registering—the experience of its negotiation. Linked with Riis’s magic-lantern imaging, *Maggie* draws our attention to the effects for actual subjects of the tenements of their place in realist representation, their temporal and existential arrest in the iconographic mode. In this way, if no other, Crane’s tenement-dwellers—long recognized as



FIGURE 1.4. "The Street-Girl's End," illustration in Charles Loring Brace, *The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years' Work among Them*. New York: Wynkoop & Hallenbeck, 1872.

mash-ups of figures from reform literature, temperance iconography, and sensational accounts of the slums—are suggestively true to life. What indeed might actual social beings who have been made to embody poverty, inassimilability, and worse—the irremediable state of being left behind—contribute to the representation of American modernity? What kind of realism or modernism of expression could make visible their ways of experiencing intense and rapid transformation, or their struggle to negotiate the image repertoire defining their place within it? To address these questions, let me turn to a writer who has often figured in the shadow of Riis, Crane, and the realist project, and whose work responds quite differently to the challenges of making the other half real and visible to so-called native Americans.

In October of 1897, Riis—now the acknowledged boss reporter of downtown New York, famed for his activism and his ongoing exposés of life in the tenements—briefly took on a journalistic apprentice. Riis’s previous partner in reform had been Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt, whose dramatic midnight raids on downtown dives, caves, and lodging houses had earned him a reputation for tough efficiency that launched his national political career.³⁶ By contrast, the newcomer was a thirty-seven-year-old immigrant Jew from Russia, a socialist who had fled the czar’s police. A onetime factory hand, he was well known inside the ghetto as a union organizer, translator, and journalist in the Yiddish-language press for the socialist weeklies the *Neuzeit* and the *Arbeiter Tzeitung*. To his surprise, he had just been hired as a staff reporter on the city desk of the *Commercial Advertiser*, the oldest daily newspaper in New York City. Under Lincoln Steffens, the unconventional city editor who aimed to transform the polite organ into a “bright-eyed journal of culture and sensibility,” the newcomer’s beat was police reporting, centered in police headquarters on Mulberry Street and in the surrounding tenement and vice districts.³⁷ Having landed, struggled, taught, written, and preached collective action and cultural enlightenment on the Lower East Side, the newcomer hardly needed instruction from Riis on the poverty and exploitation to be found there. Soon to become editor-in-chief of the largest, most influential Yiddish-language journal in the United States, he had recently published his first novel in English, expressly designed to represent the immigrant community for native readers and to afford him a place on the landscape

of US literary realism. That novel was *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*; the newcomer, Abraham Cahan.

What would it have been like for Cahan to be schooled by Riis on the project of representing the landscape of the other half, to apprentice to the celebrated muckraker who had singled out the inhabitants of the ghetto's "Jewtown" for "their low intellectual status" and the "intensely bald and materialistic . . . aspect" of their culture?³⁸ From the redoubt of later prominence, Cahan would dismiss Riis as an exploitative outsider sensationalizing Jews and the Lower East Side for his own gain.³⁹ For the aspiring literary realist, however, such tutelage was instructive. Observing the downtown lifeworld for genteel English-language readers meant negotiating conventions for seeing the modern city that Riis's work had helped to codify. At the same time, Cahan's contact with Riis in the shadow of the tenements brought home the problem of his own visibility as an observer from within the space of the ghetto. To work with Riis was, in effect, for Cahan to see himself being seen as subject to an increasingly powerful image repertoire of the ghetto's Jews: figures both of the "busy industry" that makes American modernity hum, and of a distinctive time warp, "stand[ing] . . . where the new day that dawned on Calvary left them standing, stubbornly refusing to see the light."⁴⁰

If the encounter with Riis throws light on this problem of being watched, Cahan is hardly unique in confronting it. For Yiddish-language Lower East Side writers in the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, lament about their perceived condition of belatedness and the invisibility of their aesthetic and cultural innovations forms a steady refrain. (As the celebrated critic Abraham Tabachnik, associated with the eddying currents of Yiddish-language modernism in New York, put it, "People come to the East Side expecting to find gefilte fish . . . Instead they find T. S. Eliot.")⁴¹ At stake was recognition not only of the innovative culture of the tenements, but of something more profound: a suppressed history of mutual mediation through which American modernism and modernity were forged. For US writers and artists prone to experimentation or a progressive outlook, the Lower East Side offered far more than raw material for realist or sensational representations of urban life. It was a catalyst for their own transformation. Exploiting the energies and resources of Yiddish- and European-inflected practices and institutions, from labor activism and free-speech movements to radical political networks and expressionist theater, native renegades from Protestant sobriety (like Crane) remade themselves as protagonists of a

self-consciously modern American culture. Slummers and avant-gardes alike sought to frame their activities as *sui generis*, the creation of a distinctly new stance or *gestalt*. They thus obscured the indebtedness of their innovations in practice and style to the social world that immigrant tenement-dwellers, sweatshop workers, and urban masses were making. In the process, they helped reproduce the image repertoire of the Lower East Side as a vestigial, atavistic space, and of its inhabitants as untimely, insufficient to the very modernity their energies were catalyzing.⁴² Like the spectators of Riis's lantern-slide photographs, America's moderns animated themselves by representing the alterity they courted as a condition of immobility or belatedness. The subjects of their observation and encounter remained imprisoned in iconography, and therefore, in lived social terms, invisible.

No figure embodies this problem more profoundly than Cahan. Written into histories of Yiddish-language production as a progenitor with outmoded politics, footnoted in accounts of American culture as an imitator of native movements, Cahan is trapped in the classic position of the alien, caught between two unfolding histories, in neither of which he wholly belongs. The literary gatekeeper who helped bring *Yekl* into being, William Dean Howells, puffed its author along just those lines: as "a Hebrew" and "a Russian" with a racial facility for the "naturalistic" that issues from some ethnically marked place "between a laugh and a heartache."⁴³ Yet it was Cahan who led Howells into the world of labor activism as background for Howells's 1892–1893 novel *A Traveler from Altruria*; Cahan who introduced the native muckrakers and radicals clustered around the *Commercial Advertiser*, Schwab's saloon, and the labor-affiliated lecture halls of Eldridge and Chrystie Streets to the ferment of Yiddish-language debates on European political ideologies, avant-garde movements, and global events; Cahan who shepherded Howells, Steffens, Henry James, and other literary lions to the Yiddish theater, home not just to immigrant melodrama but to serious aesthetic experimentation; Cahan who facilitated exchanges between German-, Russian-, and English-speaking activist communities via the organs of Yiddish press and print.⁴⁴ Yet when he praised Cahan's tales of ghetto life as "entirely of our time and place," Howells presumed a modernity belonging to "native" Americans—those of "our race and civilization," for whom the immigrant's historical consciousness could only remain belated and radically "foreign."⁴⁵

Cahan's self-consciousness about such timekeeping was profound. In choosing English as his vehicle, he cast himself as an agent of progressive

change, uniquely positioned to expose American readers to the thought of such European intellectuals as Marx, Turgenyev, and Dostoyevsky. Far from imitative or belated, in other words, Cahan understood his work as mediating meaningful literary and social responses to modernity for US writers and readers alike. It was not the famously green masses of the immigrant ghetto, he opined, but America's literary gatekeepers who figured as "hopelessly 'romantic,' 'unreal,' and undeveloped in their literary tastes and standards."⁴⁶ From the vantage point of the émigré intellectual schooled in the most radical European social movements, America's native culture-makers needed serious training in modern reality, let alone the expressive possibilities of realism. On whose watch, then, would meaningful responses to modernity be made?

Anticipating Cahan's experience of shadowing Riis in the precincts of squalor and vice, *Yekl* foregrounds the problem of Cahan's own visibility as a problem of being in time. Like *Maggie*, Cahan's *Tale of the New York Ghetto* registers the condition of arrest dramatized—intensified—by Riis's photographs. But it understands that mode to govern both the incompletely American subject of the Lower East Side and the immigrant Jewish intellectual, whose mutually transformative engagements with American modernity remain invisible within the realist project and on the broader landscape of literary culture. Paradoxically, Cahan explored this condition by experimenting with modes of visibility conditioned by print. The linked problems of belatedness, timekeeping, and cultural transmission resonate in the very look of *Yekl*, in whose pages and around whose production Cahan grappled with his own dual identity as belated imitator and bearer of the avant-garde.⁴⁷

Like Crane's *Maggie*, Cahan's protagonist is subject to a fate whose pre-determination is strikingly overdetermined. Having immigrated from a raw shtetl just three years previously, the onetime blacksmith's son Yekl has become Jake, a cloak-maker in the needle trades and a fixture in the ghetto's world of sporting and entertainment. So passionately does he embrace the prospect of transformation as a "regely Yankee" that when his wife Gitl and their child finally join him he is appalled by the sight of her Old World garments, her speech, religiosity, and bodily hexis (15). She appears to him disturbingly alien, a "bonnetless, wigged, dowdyish little greenhorn" (75). Unable to countenance Gitl's very modesty, lured by his dancing-school partner Mamie (who is as fast, in the vernacular sense, as Gitl is slow), Jake divorces Gitl, only to feel trapped at the prospect of the

marriage Mamie has exacted as the price of her payment of his legal bills. In a key sense, Yekl's willed transformation as an acculturated American recalls not his namesake Jacob—that figure whose wrestling match with an angel yields a new identity, Israel, at a critical moment of change in Jewish history—but Esau, Jacob's older twin brother, who sells his birthright for the infamous mess of pottage.⁴⁸ Jake, it would seem, can never belong wholly to America. What price belonging, writ as contempt for a past he can experience only as fixed and untimely?

As the novel opens, Cahan's narrator leads the reader directly into the world of the sweatshop, whose inhabitants are caught in a different kind of fixity, a state of waiting; when the piece goods arrive, the frantic rush to work will begin. Cahan makes it clear that this condition of arrest or "suspense"—historically specific, organic to the rhythm of industrial sweatshop labor—is marked by a range of dynamic, transformational activity.⁴⁹ A "rabbinical-looking man," accommodating the machinery of labor to his needs, has his chair "tilted against his sewing machine" as he shuttles between an "English" newspaper and the Yiddish-English dictionary balanced on his knees beneath it (1). Another sewing machine becomes the prop for a socialist organ of the Yiddish press, over which its reader "sway[s] to and fro," lending an ages-old "Talmudic intonation" and traditions of Judaic literacy to the radical ferment of Lower East Side political culture (2). Across the shop floor, three seamstresses and a presser variously occupy their own machines, which configure a theater for the "impromptu lecture" delivered by a boisterous, self-confident Jake on the relative merits of Boston and New York as metropolitan lifeworlds and the finer points of boxing (2). This, Cahan suggests, is the relevant form of arrest: a state of becoming that impinges on the conditions generating it. Here, the very habits and gestures that mark ghetto subjects as Old World index their fitness for a New World context of coalescing social forms and rapid change: the sweatshop, the ghetto, urban modernity.

Jake is not the only one to offer a lecture of sorts on immigrant life, "treat[ing] the subject rather too scientifically" (5). Cahan's narrator is an authoritative guide who takes the reader from the sweatshop floor into the streetscape of "the New York Ghetto," tracing Jake's progress "through dense swarms of half-naked humanity; past garbage barrels rearing their overflowing contents in sickening piles," past "fire escapes, barricaded and festooned with mattresses, pillows, and featherbeds," through streets packed with "the teeming populations of the cyclopic tenement houses" (27).⁵⁰

Mimicking the perspective and rhetoric of Riis's didactic tour of the ghetto in *How the Other Half Lives*, the narrator follows the narrative's subject to Suffolk Street only to probe its placement "in the very thick of the battle for breath," at the very center of "the Ghetto of the American metropolis" that is "the metropolis of the Ghettos of the world" (28).

But where Riis in *How the Other Half Lives* sees undifferentiated "Jewry" and other clearly legible types, Cahan's narrator observes extraordinary multiplicity. In his exposition, fixed notions of racial type are beggared by varieties of national, linguistic, socioeconomic, and experiential being. In fact, the dancing school—conspicuously not the synagogue, tenement flat, or sweatshop—offers itself as the most salient space for the reader's encounter with this new New World in the making, precisely because it produces the dynamic, unsettled, spectacular "effect of [a] kaleidoscope" (32):

Hardly a block but shelters Jews from every nook and corner of Russia, Poland, Galicia, Hungary, Roumania; Lithuanian Jews, Vohynian Jews, south Russian Jews, Bessarabian Jews; Jews crowded out of the "pale of Jewish settlement"; Russified Jews expelled from Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kieff, or Saratoff; Jewish runaways from justice; Jewish refugees from crying political and economical injustice; people torn from a hard-gained foothold in life and from deep-rooted attachments by the caprice of intolerance or the wiles of demagoguery—innocent scapegoats of a guilty Government for its outraged populace to misspend its blind fury upon; students shut out of the Russian universities, and come to these shores in quest of learning; artisans, merchants, teachers, rabbis, artists, beggars—all come in search of fortune. (28–29)

If these are "the children of Israel of the great modern exodus," they embody not a condition beyond or out of time but the turbulent global "metamorphoses" of modernity: political upheaval, urbanization, imperial nationalism, ethnic cleansing (29). The Jews of the ghetto may have come to seek fortune, but they know how elusive their relationship to futurity may be, and the location Cahan chooses to map Jake's initial mobility suggests as much. As his own protagonists would know—but his English-language readers would not—"Suffolk" is a homonym for "*soffick*," the Yiddish for "doubt."⁵¹

The question of what becomes intelligible, or visible, to Cahan's English-language readers shapes the very form of *Yekl* and its pursuit of the realist

project. Even a cursory glance at the text suggests how deeply Cahan embeds the problem of negotiating the contexts of Yiddish and English, immigrant and native, Jewish modern and “Yankee” modern, in its pages, which are rife with running italics, asterisks, footnotes, and variant orthographies (figure 1.5). Throughout, the fluent Yiddish of Jake and his fellow inhabitants of the tenements is recorded in English (if a notably stilted one), while their uses of American English appear in italics, suggesting the double otherness of this language: still foreign to Yiddish speakers in the text; not readily legible, in its nonstandard, accented mode, to English-language readers encountering it on the page. Hana Wirth-Nesher has persuasively argued that Cahan renders ghetto speech in this way so as to turn realist conventions to his own ends, staging a hybridity only the multilingual intellectual himself can mediate.⁵² As she suggests, a key aspect of this practice is its visual impact: Cahan’s mobilization in material form of what Mikhail Bakhtin called “*the artistic image of a language*” in the novelistic mode.⁵³ In the context of the influence of Riis’s work, however, the image thereby problematized is not only, or even primarily, figurative. Against the iconography codified in Riis’s images of the other half, *Yekl* activates typography, whose dynamic effects beggar the assignment of arrest to ghetto subjects, and simultaneously make the reader’s experience of the text continuous—coeval—with immigrant social experience.

To put this another way, Cahan aims in *Yekl* to create a very different kind of “arresting word pictures,” whose mode of arrest concerns his native readers rather than his unassimilated subjects. Confronted with his pages, those readers must struggle to respond to a typography of mutual mediation: a jumble of vernacular variants, italicized renderings of English language phrases used (and misused) by Yiddish speakers, quintessential Yiddishisms rendered in semantically odd English, and the unstable argot of “the American metropolis,” all jostling and contending (3). To read *Yekl* is not to be animated by the spectacle of subjects caught in a belated temporal regime. It is to be subjected to such a regime: forced to “reenact the slowed pace of encounter with strange words and signs,” parsing the text’s pages for elusive meaning, struggling with their visual as well as aural irregularity.⁵⁴

Until recently, these effects were dismissed as unsuccessful attempts on Cahan’s part to assimilate to the project of native literary realism. His experiments in the look of ghetto idioms were read in light of the controversy raging in realist circles during the mid-nineties about so-called eye or sight

“*Say, Dzake,*” the presser broke in, “John Sullivan is *tzampion* no longer, is he?”

“Oh, no! Not always is it holiday!” Jake responded, with what he considered a Yankee jerk of his head. “Why, don’t you know? Jimmie Corbett *leaked* him, and Jimmie *leaked* Cholly Meetchel, too. *You can betch you’ bootsh!* Johnnie could not leak Chollie, *becaush* he is a big *bluffer*, Chollie is,” he pursued, his clean-shaven florid face beaming with enthusiasm for his subject, and with pride in the diminutive proper nouns he flaunted. “But Jimmie *pundished* him. *Oh, didn’t he knock him out off shight!* He came near making a meat ball of him”—with a chuckle. “He *tzettled* him in three *roynds*. I knew a feller who had seen the fight.”

FIGURE 1.5. Abraham Cahan, *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*, first edition. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896.

dialect, the rendering of regional or local idiolects in phonetic form.⁵⁵ If eye dialect in the hands of local colorists representing Southern and Midwestern vernacular speech was bad enough, on many critical readings, Cahan’s mimetic attempts to render the language of immigrant Jews are worse. They register his anxiety over his own fitness for English letters; reflect an “insecure taste”; manifest his “contempt” for his illiterate protagonist, serving as the overemphatic “record” of his own lofty “distance from the

vulgar, mutilated Yinglish” of that unfortunate figure.⁵⁶ In none of these accounts does the visually marked duality of Cahan’s dialect—its intense self-consciousness about time scales for culture-making—register in the slightest. Indeed, the ongoing reception of Cahan’s text might be said to replicate the scenes of failed transmission recorded within it.

Read with respect not only to issues of translation but to the problem of visibility of Lower East Side intellectuals on the field of turn-of-the-century culture, *Yekl*’s pages can be seen to inscribe something like what Jerome McGann has called the “visible language of modernism”: a rendering of fraught scales and contexts for cultural transmission, in the marked effects of dialect.⁵⁷ Consider a key scene set in the Lower East Side dancing school to which Jake makes his way after release from the sweatshop, joining the Americanized siren who will become his pretext for abandoning the wife he has left temporally and affectively behind. Cahan’s attempts to render the unevenness of Jake and Mamie’s oscillating dialect (Americanized Yiddish; Yiddish-ridden English) make for laborious reading as—because—they highlight the energy of contemporary idioms in the making:

“You are a monkey from monkey-land,” he said. “Vill you dansh mit dot feller?”

“Rats! Vot vill you give me?”

“Vot should I give you?” he asked impatiently.

“Vill you treat?”

“Treat? Ger-rr oyt!” he replied with a sweeping kick at space.

“Den I von’t dance.”

“Alla right. I’ll treat you mit a coupel a waltch.”

“Is dot so? You must really tink I am swooning to dance vit you,” she said, dividing the remark between both jargons.

“Look at her, look! she is a *regely* getzke* [*Cahan’s footnote: “A crucifix”]: one must take off one’s cap to speak to her. Don’t you always say you like to *dansh* with me *becush* I am a good *dansher*?”

“You must tink you are a peach of a dancer, ain’ it? Bennie can dance a——sight better dan you,” she recurred to her English.

“Alla right!” he said tartly. “So you don’ vonted?”

“O sugar! He is gettin’ mad again. Vell, who is de getzke, me or you? All right, I’ll dance vid de slob. But it’s only becuss you ask me, mind you!” she added fawningly.

“Dot’sh alla right!” he rejoined, with an affectation of gravity, concealing his triumph. “But you makin’ too much fush. I like to shpeak plain, shee? Dot’sh a kin’ a man *I* am.” (39–42)

What “kin’ a man” is Jake is the central question of the text—that is, whether he is the “kin’ a man” who can successfully belong to America and its futurity. (His unduly confident Americanisms, readers generally argue, imply not.) But the passage also raises a less obvious question. Who here is the “getzke”? The word, a classic Yiddishism, derives from the German *gotze*, meaning “false idol.” Cahan gives it the more pointed meaning of “crucifix,” an icon of America’s secular religion: class standing, social power, a New World identity both commanding and specious, longed for and derided. That the term goes visually unmarked yet conspicuously translated in a footnote is a leading index to Cahan’s project: making visible the life of Yiddish as a dynamic vernacular, uniquely responsive to the emerging realities of the American now. Infused with that dynamism—the give-and-take of the downtown streets, the energies of the laboring classes and their “beesnesh”—the visibly fractured speech of Cahan’s protagonists tells time in an unexpected way. It suggests the hesitancy of the native reader’s American languages for naming social reality after the Gilded Age. At the same time, it insists on the just-in-time cultural mobility of its immigrant Jews, illiterate, socially awkward, or vulgar as they may be. Even Jake’s unwelcome wife Gitl, who has literally just stepped off the boat after running the official gauntlet at Ellis Island, begins immediately to accommodate herself to the brave new world of the Lower East Side by negotiating the relations between English and Yiddish as cultural forms:

“You must be hungry?” [Jake] asked.

“Not at all! Where do you eat your *varimess* [Cahan’s footnote: “Yiddish for dinner]?”

“Don’t say *varimess*,” he corrected her complaisantly; “here it is called dinner.”

“*Dinner*? [Cahan’s footnote: “Yiddish for thinner.”] And what if one becomes fatter?” she confusedly ventured an irresistible pun. (38)

If this is indeed Gitl’s “first lesson” in “English words and phrases” (81), it momentarily puts Cahan’s reader—for whom translation is alike necessary—in the position presumed to be Gitl’s: groping for ways to comprehend familiar objects rendered unfamiliar, illegible, in their movement

between contexts and ways of naming contemporary experience. Confronted with such exchanges, Cahan's American readers inhabit a zone of encounter not unlike that of the Lower East Side. However briefly, they too occupy a site of estrangement from secure reference where a definitively modern identity is being forged in real time.

At large, Cahan's use of dialect in *Yekl* speaks to his concerns about coeval modernities, and the mutual mediation of immigrant and "native." The visually marked character of his protagonists' exchanges can be seen as an experiment in making this mediation visible in the form of protocollage. I use the term cautiously, aware of its privileged place in histories of modernism and in theories of cultural hybridity. (Among other things, collage has been called "the single most revolutionary formal innovation in artistic representation" of the twentieth century.)⁵⁸ Still, the resonances with Cahan's text—with its look and ambitions—are striking. Collage depends on the displacement of materials from one context to another, and its elements lead "necessarily to a double reading": of the fragment "in relation to its text of origin" and "as incorporated into a new whole."⁵⁹ Crucially, as David Antin has pointed out, collage also involves deliberate confusion of hierarchies of meaning or value—which elements are subordinated, dependent, or entailed by others.⁶⁰ And in spite of claims for collage as a primarily spatial form (as against montage), it has marked temporal effects. Conjoining frictional elements, it creates a new and hybrid time frame, inassimilable to any of its source contexts.

In its use of incongruous registers and its shifting frames of reference, *Yekl* uses a protocollage sensibility to explore an alternative way of watching and telling time. Within its unfolding, the text calls into question the dominant model of cultural transmission presumed to define American modernity: from native to immigrant, modern to Old World, historically progressive to temporally belated. In this respect, *Yekl* echoes the life of very different pages on which, by 1897, Cahan also labored: those of the *Forverts*, a.k.a. the *Jewish Daily Forward*. His leadership transformed the journal from an obscure and doctrinaire socialist organ to the leading advocate for inhabitants of the ghetto and a critical voice for socialist thinking in the United States.

Cahan's ambitious claims on the status of his readers—laborers and new Americans, making America's future—were reflected in both the look and the substance of the journal. Its masthead was printed in Yiddish, Polish, and English; headlines included borrowed phrases and rank Americanisms,

rendered in both Yiddish and English. Its front page occasionally featured translations in English as well as multilingual political cartoons; inside matter included such features as “People’s” songs and poems, written in English with Yiddish titles, in Yiddish with transliterations of American argot, and in other hybrid forms. Printed alongside and around this gray matter were the journal’s advertisements, whose effects offer a useful frame for viewing Cahan’s fiction. Freely mixing Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian, they literally force readers to reorient themselves in midtext, as they move between right-to-left orthography (employed for Yiddish and Hebrew) and left-to-right (for English and Cyrillic alphabets), and between horizontal and vertical orientations. If, as historian David M. Henkin has argued, the pages of mid-nineteenth-century English-language newspapers in New York register the social logic and dynamics of encounter in the city’s rapidly changing streets, the pages of the *Forverts*—and, more subtly, of Cahan’s own fiction—reflect the exponentially greater forces of cultural dislocation acting on turn-of-the-century East Side Jews.⁶¹ The very act of reading in Yiddish, on the Lower East Side, meant negotiating competing visual frames: the literal push and pull of languages, experiential histories, and temporal scales for understanding social reality. This kind of collage effect, it can be argued, allowed immigrant readers not only to assimilate or adjust to modernity but to make a distinctive, timely sense of its proliferating forms. And this sense—an ability to link, or hold in tension, competing cultural and experiential frames—registered in social practices, idioms, and projects that in turn shaped the emergence of definitively modern American cultural forms.

To see this effect in Cahan’s early fiction in English is to insist on his self-consciousness about temporal identities. Implicit to *Yekl* and its engagements with modes for observing the ghetto is a series of questions about where modernity begins, and whose modernism—whose cultural projects, whose literary forebears and revaluative gestures—makes the most powerful sense of those beginnings: in other words, on whose watch? That question figures quite literally in the narrative of *Yekl*, which suggests what it means to be a subject on (and at the same time off) the clock. Notably, the problem of time and timekeeping asserts itself most literally at, and as, a moment of regression, as Jake receives the news of his father’s death in a letter (61). In response to the news, Jake lapses into a state of morbid sentiment and guilt. Alone in his tenement, paralyzed with dread, he lies “vaguely listening to the weird ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece

above the stove,” which sounds the inevitability of death not as a movement toward the future but as a frightening hegemony of the past: “‘Cho-king! Cho-king! Cho-king!’ went the clock . . . presently he felt the cold grip of a pair of hands about his throat” (68).

What overcomes Jake in this moment is the threat not of death so much as of a special kind of arrest: an entombment in the regime of the inexorable “old belief,” the world of our fathers whose horizon remains fixed and unyielding (68). By the end of the novel Jake’s mastery of Yankee modernity has taken the form of a radically altered temporal subjectivity, reflected in the transformation of his way of telling time. On board the Third Avenue El, headed to the mayor’s office for the civil ceremony that will join him with Mamie in a secular American marriage, Jake marks the rapid motion toward his future—an ostensibly more perfect union—by way of “the pause” produced “each time the car came to a halt” (190). Seized with doubts about the nature of his new freedom, Jake now longs to occupy the very condition of arrest that once threatened him; “he wished the pause could be prolonged indefinitely” (190). By now, however, arrest has become irrelevant to Jake’s lived experience—and equally to the realist representation of it. With each “violent lurch” of the speeding El car, Jake experiences “a corresponding sensation in his heart” (190). Animated, in synch with the time-motion of that iconic conveyance of modernity, the train, he has become a quintessential modern, riding a streetcar whose name is desire. The “dark and impenetrable future” he faces arises not only from his willed rejection of a timeless Judaic past (89). The same unreadable future, haunting as it beckons, is being shaped for all the inhabitants—Jew and Yankee, newcomer and native—of a frighteningly mobile time.

Ultimately, *Yekl* implies something radical indeed: that the exemplary subject of American modernity is none other than the inhabitant of the ghetto, whose incomplete assimilation is both a symptom and an index of contemporary social being. Far from merely imitating realist conventions, Cahan attempts to recalibrate them, to disrupt the dynamic of arrest and animation that marks the postphotographic project of seeing the other half. His fiction never succeeds in overcoming its own reception in the realist context. (Notably, the last word of the published text in the first edition of *Yekl* is given over to advertisements for work by the likes of Crane, Joel Chandler Harris, and Charles Darwin—texts that collectively shape and are shaped by notions of the temporal otherness of the other half, the primitive, the regressive, against which Cahan struggles.)⁶² In this

sense, Cahan becomes, like his own protagonist, a kind of “defeated victor” (190). Still, read with a view to a hardening iconography of the ghetto, *Yekl* opens another understanding of the landscape of the tenements: as a critical site of engagement with an unfolding history of moving subjects and moving images, observant Jews and animated tenement-dwellers, on whose watch Americans will learn to see their emerging social life in unprecedented ways.