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American Literary Forms as Signs of Patriotism and Belonging in Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*

AMERYKAŃSKIE FORMY LITERACKIE JAKO OZNAKI PATRIOTYZMU
I PRZYNALEŻNOŚCI W ZIEMI OBIECANEJ MARY ANTIN

W artykule zanalizowano formy narracyjne, ideologie i ich funkcje w autobiografii Mary Antin *Ziemia obiecana* (1912). Aby podkreślić swoje poparcie dla procesu asymilacji i przekonać amerykańskich czytelników, że imigranci z Imperium Rosyjskiego nie są zagrożeniem dla życia kulturalnego i politycznego Amerykanów, Antin świadomie wybiera autobiografię i narracje niewoli jako gatunki, które mocno zakorzeniły się w amerykańskiej literaturze i kulturze. W swojej bezkrytycznej akceptacji wszystkich aspektów życia w Ameryce, Antin korzysta z koncepcji Michela Guillaume'a Jean'a de Crèvecoeuira, a także z teorii amerykańskiego transcendentalizmu.

Słowa kluczowe: Mary Antin, autobiografia amerykańska, narracje niewoli, narracja imigracyjna

AMЕРИКАНСКИЕ ЛИТЕРАТУРНЫЕ ФОРМЫ КАК ЗНАКИ ПАТРИОТИЗМА
И ПРИНАДЛЕЖНОСТИ В ЗЕМЛЕ ОБЕТОВАННОЙ МЭРИ АНТИН

Автор статьи анализирует нарративные формы и идеологии, а также их функции в автобиографии Мэри Антин *Земля обетованная* (1912). Чтобы подчеркнуть свою поддержку процессу ассимиляции и убедить американских читателей в том, что иммигранты из Российской империи не представляют угрозы культурной и политической жизни американцев, Антин сознательно выбирает автобиографию и повествования порабощения как жанры, прочно укоренившиеся в американской литературе и культуре. В своем некритическом принятии всех аспектов американской жизни, Антин опирается на идеи Мишеля-Гийома Жана де Кревекёра, а также на теории американского трансцендентализма.

Ключевые слова: Мэри Антин, американская автобиография, повествования порабощения, повествование иммиграционное

Antin and Immigrant Attitudes Towards Assimilation

In the first two decades of the 20th century, immigrants and their social and political status became a widely discussed issue in Amer-

ican society. Many newcomers imagined (and later presented) America as a promised land of unlimited possibilities, progress, and science, and promoted full assimilation. The chief aim of immigration narratives was to address American audiences. As Anzia Yezierska put in her autobiographical short story "America and I" (1923): "I speak to you as one of the dumb, silent. One in millions, millions of immigrants whose hearts are beating, beating at your gates for a drop of understanding."¹ With rising anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic sentiments, immigrant writers sought to portray newcomers as ambitious and grateful citizens who posed no threat to the American political and cultural institutions. The majority of these writers, however, could not remain oblivious of the harshness of American reality: namely, the loss of social status, harsh working conditions, and the aforementioned anti-immigrant sentiments. The stories and novels by Abraham Cahan (born in 1860 in Vilnius Governorate, Russian Empire) therefore featured immigrants whose desire for a full assimilation did not bring them happiness; on the contrary, the financial success often led to alienation and social isolation.²

The tension between the desire for assimilation and religious or ethnic heritage occupied not only the fiction writers but also the social critics, especially Slovak-born Edward Alfred Steiner (1866–1956).³ In his famous lecture *The Confession of a Hyphenated American* (1916), Steiner demonstrates the shifts in the role of immigrants in America, as well as in the way in which they were perceived. He explains how a predicate that used to unite two different cultures is suddenly seen as something that divides: "So that which had the same significance as the ring at a wedding ceremony has suddenly become the symbol of divorce, and is being given the same place in the sphere of patriotism that adultery has in married life."⁴ Steiner considered himself truly American and he declared that immigrants have a "a sense of loyalty and devotion which the native-born American cannot always feel."⁵ While acknowledging that the pressure of assimilation was rap-

¹ Anzia Yezierska, "America and I," in *Open Cage*, (New York: Persea Books, 1990), 20.

² See for instance, *The Imported Bridegroom, and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto* (1898) or *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917).

³ Steiner became famous for his pacifism and defense of immigration, which he addresses in all his major works, see for instance, *From Alien to Citizen: The Story of My Life in America* (1914) and autobiographical novels *Uncle Joe's Lincoln* (1918), *Sanctus Spiritus and Company* (1919), and *The Eternal Hunger: Vivid Moments in Personal Experiences* (1925).

⁴ Edward A. Steiner, *The Confession of a Hyphenated American: A Lecture Delivered under the Auspices of the League for Political Education* (New York City: Fleming H. Revel Company, 1916), 1–2.

⁵ Steiner, *The Confessions*, 2.

idly suppressing specific minority cultures, he believed that if immigrants had started to form communities outside the American life, they would have violated America's "ideal of internationalism" and humanism, which could consequently provoke aversion and distrust. Each national or ethnic group would then have defended their culture and principles and would have become increasingly hostile and isolated. He ended his essay with a strong patriotic exclamation: "In our heart of hearts we love this country more than Germany, or Austria or England or France; we love it above the holy names of Jerusalem or Rome — The Sanctuary of Humanity — America."⁶

Amongst the moderately critical immigrant voices, there was one that ardently embraced the American experience and all features of American life. This optimistic and affirming voice belonged to a Russian-born Jewish immigrant, Mary Antin. Her autobiography, *The Promised Land: An Autobiography of a Russian Immigrant* (1912),⁷ aroused significant critical acclaim, as it demonstrated that (Eastern European Jewish) immigrants wanted to adopt American values and, at the same time, highlighted immigration as a key element of American national identity. In the context of early 20th century American literature, Antin's book was exceptional, as it expressed uncritical joy and enthusiasm for all that America represented. Antin relentlessly celebrates America even though the country did not turn out to be the imagined paradise for her family. Antin's father, however, did not prosper in America, mainly due to his ethnicity, age, and the language barrier. His family thus constantly kept moving to poorer and poorer neighborhoods. In Russia he was a respected member of the community; in America he sold ice cream from a stall at the beach. Antin, however, does not consider the change of social status as significant: "He dished out ice cream with enthusiasm, so I supposed he was getting rich. It never occurred to me to compare his present occupation with the position for which he had been originally destined; [...] All occupations were respectable, all men were equal, in America."⁸ Unlike Steiner, Antin did not believe in any form of negotiation between her Russian, Jewish, and American loyalties — she wished to be seen as the embodiment of Crevecoeur's concept of the American:

⁶ Steiner, *The Confessions*, 25.

⁷ The book was based on Antin's letter to her uncle from 1894, which was originally written in Yiddish and later published in English under the title *From Plotzk [sic!] to Boston* (1899) with a foreword by the British playwright Israel Zangwill, whose play *The Melting Pot*, popularized the term as a chief metaphor for assimilation.

⁸ Mary Antin, *The Promised Land. An Autobiography of a Russian Immigrant* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 193.

the woman without a past.⁹ Remembering her arrival to America, Antin enthusiastically describes how her family disregarded everything that reminded them of their heritage and homeland:

[I]n a dazzlingly beautiful palace called a “department store,” we exchanged our hateful homemade European costumes, which pointed us out as “greenhorns” to the children on the street, for real American machine-made garments, and issued forth glorified in each other’s eyes. With our despised immigrant clothing we shed also our impossible Hebrew names. A committee of our friends, several years ahead of us in American experience, put their heads together and concocted American names for us all. Those of our real names that had no pleasing American equivalents they ruthlessly discarded, content if they retained the initials.¹⁰

This identity shift was, as she believed, made possible by the nature of American democracy, which promoted individualism and (American) nationalism by encouraging the newcomers to forget their cultural and political heritage, and replace it by a patriotic embrace of American values.

Antin does not see the minority cultures as relevant, and her book is a proclamation of her determination and dedication to complete assimilation and Americanization. This paper will explore the use of language, philosophy, and, above all, the narrative forms, which play a significant role in Antin’s assimilationist proclamation. Her unwavering belief in America is already manifested by her choice of the English language over Yiddish, which determined the book’s target audience — the American (read “not newly arrived immigrant”) readers — as well as the selected narrative format. As will become obvious from the discussion below, Antin deliberately employs autobiography and captivity narrative to enhance her knowledge and acceptance of American literary taste and tradition. What is more, she is drawing on Emersonian transcendentalist ideas to further distance herself from her ethnic past and emerge as the true American.

Autobiography and Captivity Narratives as New Immigrant Genres

To highlight her acceptance and celebration of the American culture, Antin opted for the most popular and traditional Ameri-

⁹ See J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, “Letter III. What Is an American?” in *Letters from an American Farmer and Other Essays*, ed. Dennis D. Moore (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 31.

¹⁰ Antin, *The Promised Land*, 187.

can literary form: the autobiography. The genre has become a respected flourishing form since the late colonial times; William L. Andrews even proclaims that “autobiography and America were made for each other,” as they emerged approximately at the same time.¹¹ The American authors of Jewish descent did not fail to notice the impact of Benjamin Franklin’s *The Autobiography* (written 1771–1778, published 1791–1818) or *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845).¹²

However, the form was foreign to Jewish literatures. Autobiographies can only be composed if an individual’s life is considered important. Due to the social and cultural situation of Eastern European Jews at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the community and its preservation were given a much higher value than its individual members. If this was true of men, it was doubly true of women. Still, the immigrants found autobiography and autobiographical stories not only relevant but, due to the lack of their literary heritage, crucial and perhaps the most viable format. As a literary form, autobiography has never been a mere enumeration of biographical data. It is a retrospective view of one’s own life, from which the author gains distance, deliberately evaluates it, regroups it, and selects from it what he or she considers essential. Autobiography is often written after a certain turning point in life, whether mental or physical, which is meant to manifest the author’s personal growth and actions for the common good. Andrews notes how Franklin’s autobiography (or memoir, as he himself called it), showed “a life of a nobody who became a somebody, a provincial outsider, a poor boy who became a cosmopolitan insider.”¹³ This is another reason why this form was so popular: after arriving in the New World, immigrants felt they had to come to terms with the old one. No matter how the authors dealt with their new living conditions, it was always the end of a certain stage of life which could be viewed from a distance.

To prove her thoroughly American literary influence, Antin fused her autobiography with another literary form popular in America: the captivity narrative. Such stories followed a pre-given narrative structure: from captivity and imprisonment to liberation. Originally, these narratives merged elements of adventure with

¹¹ William L. Andrews, ed., *Classic American Autobiographies* (New York: Signet Classics, 2014), vii.

¹² In 1855, Douglass published an enlarged version of the autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). Douglass published another autobiography under the title *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, enlarged edition 1892).

¹³ Andrews, *Classic American Autobiographies*, ix.

sermon, as the act of captivity was constructed as a manifestation of God's will and a testing of one's faith. The religious subtext of these narratives is also reflected in their style, relying heavily on the Old Testament symbolism and references. The language of Antin's *Promised Land* corresponds with the Puritan *plaine style*¹⁴ of the captivity narratives, as the chapter titles "Exodus," "Mana," "Tree of Knowledge," or "Burning Bush" document.

The captivity narratives, be it the captivity tales by Native Americans, slave captivity narratives, or immigrant narratives, all feature the protagonist's journey to freedom; in this respect, these stories were also essentially viewed as American, relying on the essential elements of the United States Constitution in expressing the desire for life, freedom, and the search for one's own happiness. Individual narratives differ mainly in the figures of prisoners and oppressors: for Puritans it was the Indians, for African Americans they were the white slaveholders, and for American Jewish immigrants — Eastern Europe and the Russian Empire. Antin does not understand the Russian "imprisonment" only in a political or economic sense, but mostly in a spiritual one. *The Promised Land* is written as a so-called spiritual autobiography, where the protagonist is freed from spiritual captivity and becomes a free and better person.¹⁵ This spiritual transformation is described metaphorically as a journey, usually by sea. Antin describes Russia as a country where she suffered spiritually and felt intellectual and moral limitations. As in other immigrant works, there is a strong desire for education and self-assertion.

While in Russia, Antin feels her rootedness in the Jewish community and is critical to the country's hostile non-Jewish environment: "I was afraid of the cross. Everybody was, in Polotzk — all the Jews, I mean. For it was the cross that made the priests, and the priests made our troubles, as even some Christians admitted."¹⁶ Once Antin leaves Russia and the Jewish Pale of Settlement, the vision of her homeland rapidly changes. She depicts her native Polotzk as "Egypt" and the family journey from Russia to America as "Exodus." Paul Baepler observes that captivity narrative writers

¹⁴ See Larzer Ziff, "Literary Consequences of Puritanism," in *The Puritan Imagination: Essays in Reevaluation*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 40.

¹⁵ For a more complex discussion on immigrant spiritual autobiography, including Antin's *The Promised Land*, see Stanislav Kolář, *The Spiritual Transformation of Jewish Women in the Fiction of Four Jewish American Women Writers*, in *Growing Up a Woman: The Private/Public Divide in the Narratives of Female Development*, ed. Milena Kaličanin and Soňa Šnircová (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2015), 120–144. Andrews, *Classic American Autobiographies*, ix.

¹⁶ Antin, *The Promised Land*, 6.

clearly establish a moral and cultural difference based on the “unmoral,” “unlawful,” “inhuman” act of abduction itself, which begins to define a widening gulf between the civilized and the barbaric. The aggrieved captive can then easily insist upon other differences between herself and her new masters, differences that are usually framed in terms of something lacking and something a civilized country could eventually supply: rationality, progress, history, self-control, etc.¹⁷

Although Antin was not abducted, she was born into political and cultural imprisonment, though it took her some time to realize it. While her depiction of her childhood is almost idyllic, she is aware of the isolation of the Jewish Pale,¹⁸ poverty, and diseases, which were the primary reasons for the family’s voyage to America. She also refers to the imprisoning nature of the Russian army — as she notes, Jewish conscripts were forced to give up all forms of manifestation of their religious faith, ranging from “eating trefah” and shaving their beards to having no space for prayers. Such life often had tremendous impact on the soldiers who suffered from the stigma of those enforced sins.¹⁹

Antin’s father was a liberal who sent his daughters to school and, at times he could afford it, the girls received private lessons. Mashke’s (Mary’s) religious doubts were strengthened after she saw her father putting out the Sabbath lamp and there was no divine punishment upon him for the desecration. She started to view all ceremonies and traditions as mere superstitions. Perhaps that is why the traditional ceremonial greeting at the end of the synagogue service was changed from “May we be next year in Jerusalem,” to “Next year — in America!”²⁰

Antin presented America as the symbol of “rationality, progress, history, self-control.” She celebrated the technical progress and rationality, which she considered liberating: “If we of the twentieth century do not believe in baseball as much as in philosophy, we have not learned the lesson of modern science, which teaches, among other things, that the body is the nursery of the soul; the instrument of our moral development; the secret chart of our

¹⁷ Paul Baepler, *White Slaves, African Masters: An Anthology of American Barbary Captivity Narratives* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 33.

¹⁸ Antin uses the term “Russian” in multiple senses, either referring to the Russian Empire, as in the case of the Russian army and in a more condensed sense, outside of the Pale of Settlement: “It was not so bad in Polotzk, within the Pale; but in Russian cities, and even more in the country districts, where Jewish families lived scattered, by special permission of the police, who were always changing their minds about letting them stay, the Gentiles made the Passover a time of horror for the Jews.” Antin, *The Promised Land*, 5. Polotzk is thus not considered to be “Russian.”

¹⁹ Antin, *The Promised Land*, 13.

²⁰ Antin, *The Promised Land*, 141.

devious progress from worm to man.”²¹ Antin’s captivity narrative thus does not refer to the passing of the divine test or finding faith — the liberation lay in the opposite, that is, in the possibility to worship progress and science, shedding her ethnic and religious legacy as irrational superstitions, which do not have their place in a free and democratic land.

Embrace of Transcendentalism

Antin was inspired to write her autobiography by her close friend, Josephine Lazarus, who introduced her to the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Antin’s work was therefore directly inspired by American Transcendentalism, though, as Levinson notes, Antin never fully disregarded the sense and importance of history. On the contrary, she turned to the Jewish past for inspiration and spiritual power.²²

Discarding her religious beliefs as a set of superstition, Antin rediscovered her spiritual concept of the world from the Emerson’s teachings, especially its focus on self-reliance, individual relation to nature, spirit, and the world.²³ The concept of one universal Over-soul, which is manifested both in the individual self as well as in Nature, was ideologically close both to Antin and the American audience:

Mary Antin says she doesn’t believe in God!” Rachel Goldstein’s horror is duplicated. Kitty Maloney, who used to mock Rachel’s Jewish accent, instantly becomes her voluble ally, and proceeds to annihilate me by plying me with crucial questions.

“You don’t believe in God? Then who made you, Mary Antin?”

“Nature made me.”

“Nature made you! What’s that?”

“It’s — everything. It’s the trees — no, it’s what makes the trees grow. That’s what it is.”²⁴

Though Antin initially felt that the argument did not lead anywhere and did not feel that much interested in pursuing it further, once the classmates started attacking her, she felt it as a violation of the American Constitution and religious freedom. What she,

²¹ Antin, *The Promised Land*, 288.

²² See Julian Levinson, *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 52.

²³ Antin returned to the Jewish tradition and religion only in the 1940s in her essay “House of the One Father” (1941).

²⁴ Antin, *The Promised Land*, 242.

perhaps unwittingly, advocates is Emerson's call for an original, intuitive relation to Nature and universe as such.²⁵ Antin's uncritical acceptance of American culture, often without any deeper reflection had a significant impact on the whole Antin family. Mary's mother could visit the synagogue if she wished so but she had to allow the children to visit their non-Jewish neighbors and classmates. The family thus limited their involvement in the Jewish community; instead, individualism and the idea of American dream replaced the traditional Jewish values without a deeper understanding:

In America, suddenly, we were let loose on the street. Why? Because my father having renounced his faith, and my mother being uncertain of hers, they had no particular creed to hold us to. The conception of a system of ethics independent of religion could not at once enter as an active principle in their life; so that they could give a child no reason why to be truthful or kind. And as with religion, so it fared with other branches of our domestic education. Chaos took the place of system; uncertainty, inconsistency undermined discipline. My parents knew only that they desired us to be like American children.²⁶

While Mary managed to shed her faith and culture and readily replaced it by belief in science and progress, her parents, especially her mother, struggled with the acceptance of American life. They never reached the American dream but rather supported their children in finding theirs. Mary does not see or fully understand her parents' and her sister's sacrifice and promotes acculturation as the only right path. The text thus ends on an optimistic Whitmanesque note, where Antin celebrates herself, celebrates America and proclaims herself to be the heiress of the bright American future:

[I]t is not I that belong to the past, but the past that belongs to me. America is the youngest of the nations and inherits all that went before in history. And I am the youngest of America's children, and into my hands is given all her priceless heritage, to the last white star espied through the telescope, to the last great thought of the philosopher. Mine is the whole majestic past, and mine is the shining future.²⁷

Unlike Whitman, who restrained his optimism after the Civil War, Antin disregards the social conditions of the immigrants. She unconditionally believes in the American dream and perfect equality of opportunities: "That an outcast should become a privileged citizen, that a beggar should dwell in a palace — this was a romance

²⁵ See Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (Boston: James Munroe, 1894), xi.

²⁶ Antin, *The Promised Land*, 271.

²⁷ Antin, *The Promised Land*, 364.

more thrilling than poet ever sung. Surely I was rocked in an enchanted cradle."²⁸

On the basis of her work, many critics blamed Antin for her open support of assimilation; in private, however, Antin did not completely reject her heritage: she celebrated some Jewish holidays, used Yiddish, and was interested in what was happening in Europe. In 1941, many years after breaking with her Jewish heritage, she wrote: "I cannot return to Judaism, just as I cannot return to my mother's body. However, I cannot freely rejoice that I am safe at the time when the Jews are being persecuted. The least I can do to support my people is to say I'm one of them."²⁹ Antin thus became an enthusiastic promoter of unrestricted immigration and, perhaps unexpectedly, of Zionism,³⁰ even though she is still remembered as an ardent assimilationist. *The Promised Land* has become an American classic, proudly fusing two popular American genres: the autobiography and the captivity narrative, accompanied by Benjamin Franklin's pragmatic rationalism and the transcendentalist thought without its neglect of history. In the times of anti-immigrant and anti-socialist sentiments, Antin managed to show the American readers that immigration is the keystone of American nation and that immigrants can contribute to the development of America and show respect to their language and culture.

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²⁸ Antin, *The Promised Land*, 342–343.

²⁹ Quoted in Evelyn Salz, *Introduction to Selected Letters of Mary Antin* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), xxiii.

³⁰ Salz, *Introduction*, xxii.

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