# "A story must have a plot, otherwise it's not a story": Anzia Yezierska's Melodramatic Meaning-Making

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> Probably as romantic a figure as contemporary American literature affords is that of Anzia Yezierska, who landed at Ellis Island as a frail, young Polish-Jew immigrant girl, and who now has won her way through dreary hours in sweatshop and scullery to a place among the successful authors of the day.
> (New York Tribune, November 19, 1922, qtd. Henriksen 1)

The preface of Louise Levitas Henriksen's biography of the life of her mother, Anzia Yezierska, is titled "Who was she?". It sets in with the above newspaper blurb—and answers its title question in the very first sentence: "She was the heroine of a very American fairy tale" (1). Of course, Anzia Yezierska's life story of a sweat- shop Cinderella, from rags to riches, from the tenements of New York to the studios of Hollywood, lent itself remarkably well to the melodramatic emplotment in terms of a fairy tale. On many counts, Yezierska was indeed the "personification of the happy ending that Hollywood has been turning out" (Yezierska, Red Ribbon 54),[1] as the script writer Julian Josephson once remarked. And the 1922 Hollywood melodrama Hungry Hearts, fashioned after her collection of short stories and "patterned to share the enormous financial success of [ghetto films] like Humoresque (1920)" (Konzett 19), presented in many respects the blueprint of a ghetto film, this genre which had taken over the popular scene from the race melodramas of the nineteenth century.[2] Anzia Yezierska recalled Hungry Hearts being praised as "[t]he Uncle Tom's Cabin of the immigrant"

1 Hereafter cited in the text as RR.

2 On the vogue of the ghetto film and the representation of ethnicity and immigration in early Hollywood cinema see: Cohen; Erens; Hansen; Rogin. On Hungry Hearts cf. Konzett; Botshon.

(RR61). However, for a writer who relied as heavily on the aura of authenticity and personal experience as Yezierska such praise was double-edged: The fact that her stories did well in Hollywood with its formulaic story requirements indicated, after all, that she was about to lose the very street credibility that made her interesting in the first place. The representative immigrant author risked becoming a trite sensationalist, and Yezierska was very well aware of this danger: "What is the difference between a potbellied boss who exploits the labor of helpless workers and an author who grows rich writing of the poor?" (RR133), she asked rhetorically in a speech delivered some time after luck had turned her way (cf. also Botshon 208). But if Yezierska's success in the publishing world and in Hollywood curbed her highly successful melodramatic (self)-enactment as the naive immigrant girl, it did by no means lead to her renunciation of the mode of melodrama, as I will show. Her response to the predicament of success consisted rather in a reformulation or reconceptualization of this mode, even though it was now couched, to a certain extent, in the rhetoric of realism. In what follows I will explore the ramifications of a literary career that involved continuous negotiations of the genre definitions of 'melodrama' and 'realism' and their varying cultural assessments—and eventually testifies to the wide scope and enormous flexibility, rather than the decline, of the melodramatic mode.

## I.

"You're what I call a natural-born sob sister" (RR45), Hollywood director Paul Bern greeted Yezierska at their first meeting—and doubtlessly he had a point: Anzia Yezierska's Hollywood career was predicated upon her skill to affect people emotionally. In addition, of course, it was her relentless self-fashioning that made for her success, her deliberate mixing of autobiography and fiction, which made her write the same story of the poor ghetto girl making good over and over again until her audience grew tired of it: "Anzia never corrected those who took her fiction literally," wrote her daughter (Henriksen 14). In fact, in her interviews and autobiographical writing Yezierska went considerably farther than that. Already at the outset of her Hollywood success, she was far from the innocent immigrant girl that the journals celebrated—she had been

married twice and had a daughter, whom she had left behind to be raised by her father. Moreover, her immigration experiences were not quite as dark and not quite as recent as she made them out: "Absent in Yezierska's account of herself are a dozen years of middle-class experience: college, teaching in the public schools, marriage and motherhood," concludes Thomas Ferraro: "Absent, too, are a half-dozen years of apprenticeship in the business of writing, during which she courageously acquired, late in her life but ahead of her time, rooms of her own" (55). Her Red Ribbon on a White Horse, which came out thirty years after her time in Hollywood, in 1950, and was by no means the faithful autobiography that its misleading subtitle "my story" suggests, perpetuated the self-inventions of her Hollywood years by polishing the rough edges and shaving off the gritty details. She "melodramatized the extremes of her life," concludes Louise Levitas in an afterword to Red Ribbon, "skip[ping] over and obliterate[ing] the twenty years it took her after the ghetto to reach Hollywood" (RR222).

But of course, Yezierska's predicament is not that extraordinary. It is, at heart, the predicament of every artist who relies upon the rhetoric and repertory of authenticity. What interests me here is thus not to separate truth from fiction, or—worse—find fault with Yezierska's authorial and narrative unreliability, but rather to look at the intricate workings of a dialectic of truth and fake in Yezierska's melodramatic self-fashioning. This dialectic, I argue, organizes Yezierska's writing and her self-enactment as a writer on several levels, and is intricately interlinked with her status and self-awareness as an autodidactic immigrant author and shooting star in the literary sky. My major point of reference will be Red Ribbon on a White Horse, and thus a text in which Yezierska tried to come to terms with her convoluted life story and a literary career which seemed to have ended as quickly as it began. The book was praised by the critics of her time as evidence for her development as a writer—away from the earlier embarrassments of melodrama and "beautifully redeeming]" her former crudeness (Zaborowska 156). Many critics apparently felt that since the 1930s Yezierska "had progressed in the artistry and could now resume an up-to-date place in the literary world with this late flowering of her talent," as Levitas reports on the reception of the book, which was a critical success but a failure on the book market (273). Indeed, one recurring theme of Red Ribbon is the reflection on what constitutes good

writing and authentic art as opposed to cheap entertainment and melodramatic thrill. Time and again Yezierska outlines the distinctions between 'true' and 'false' writing, real emotions and fake feelings, 'deep' authenticity and 'shallow' make-belief.

On the most basic level, the book locates the extreme ends of truth and deception geographically: Reality and true feelings belong to New York, or more precisely to the immigrant's world of the Lower Eastside, and they hinge upon poverty, squalor, and want. The world of deception and make-believe, by contrast, is associated—little surprisingly—with Los Angeles, with the glittering sur- face of the Hollywood studio life and the superficial existences of the rich and the shallow. "In Hester Street," Yezierska writes, "I knew my way. Black was black; white was white. Right was right; wrong was wrong. Now black, white, right, wrong—nothing was real any more" (RR41). Her response to the "unreal" world of Hollywood (RR59) consists, at first, in an act of masquerade—the successful and affluent screen writer "cling[s]" to her "pushcart clothes": "The familiar feel of the creases in my blouse, my unpolished shoes, the shine of my old skirt reassured me that with all the change around me, I was still unchanged" (RR56-57). Yet coming upon Will Rogers, whom she likes immediately because he too "dared to crash into society without evening clothes" (RR62), she learns soon enough that there is no escape from play-acting in Hollywood. Rogers, for one, is a star not despite his uncouth appearance but because of it, and he is so good at what he does because he never allows himself to reflect upon a possible clash between appearance and reality, true being and made-up act, "a perfect sales- man of himself' (RR67). There is no escape from representation in Hollywood. Yezierska's secretary, who has to dress up for work although she seems to barely make enough money to feed herself properly, pins this logic down: "I'm part of the stage-set [...]. If I didn't dress the part, I'd lose my job" (RK64). The same feeling of being "part of a stage-set" (RR69), whatever she looks like, then becomes an integral part of Yezierska's sense of unease in Hollywood.

In Hollywood you either dress down or you dress up, but your clothes never manage to express who you truly are. And the very act of film-making constitutes another instance of alienation for Yezierska's persona. While she loves the work of Julian Josephson, the screen-writer for Hungry Hearts, she soon feels caught up in a

machinery that distorts rather than expresses what she means to tell the world. People like the Jewish humorist Montague Glass, who is hired at a later stage of the project to write additional titles, and whom Yezierska detests for what she calls his turning out "caricatures of Jews like sausage meat for the popular weekly and monthly magazines" (RR81), spoil the project for her, "murder[ing] it with slapstick" (RR82, cf. also Botshon).

Yet while Yezierska recalls her growing disillusionment with Goldwyn's studio, she does not condemn the Hollywood system as a whole. One interesting alternative presents itself when she comments upon the work of William Fox, another Hollywood mogul seeking her attention. Although she turns down his generous offer eventually on the grounds that she cannot produce art on demand, she does admit that this man seems to steer a different course than his peers in film production:

> William Fox was then the spark plug of the movie industry. He had the dramatic flair that could transform a simple small-town girl into Theda Bara, world-famous vamp. He was one of the first producers to attempt realism in his stories. He made the first pictures without artificial happy endings. While the rest of Hollywood still ground out its Pollyanna love stories and Western melodramas, Fox produced the American version of Les Misérables. He followed this venture with a still greater success, Over the Hill. (RR83)

The contradistinction of good and bad fiction which Yezierska addresses here is not new, the same effort to distinguish between real art and cheap effects runs through her earlier reflections on writing in "Mostly about Myself' (1923) or Bread Givers (1925). But it is only now, in 1950, that she casts this distinction in terms of melodrama versus realism.[3] In Red Ribbon, these terms are clearly value-laden—melodrama is bad and realism is good—and they are associated with narrative closure: sad endings, it seems, are more realistic than saccharine-sweet conclusions. This is an insight which radi-

3 But then, in the 1920s, the term 'melodrama' had not yet gained the negative connotations it started to acquire in the 1940s, when Yezierska was writing Red Ribbon. For a reflection on the common usage of the term 'melodrama' from the 1910s to the 1960s (which overlaps only in part with the definitions of film theory) cf. Neale 179-181. For a reevaluation of the term and the genre see also Linda Williams's seminal "Melodrama Revised."

cally turns against much of Yezierska's own writing many years before—her tendency to attach surprisingly trite happy endings to often quite dark stories of ghetto alienation and immigrant suffering—"too many melodramatic conclusions," as Magdalena Zaborowska sums up the response to this phase (Zaborowska 118). Yet already in 1927, with her story "Wild Winter Love," Yezierska explicitly breaks with the scheme of the happy ending: "This is a story with an unhappy ending. And I too have become Americanized enough to be terrified of unhappy endings," the story sets in, to then interlink the idea of the unhappy ending with the notion of realistic narration: "You pick up one magazine after another, and it's all love stories. [...] Why are they writing only about love, as if there was nothing else real to write about?" (Yezierska, "Wild Winter Love," 316-317).

For most of her critics up to the present day, this associative interlinkage of the unhappy ending with good fiction, or, in more general terms, of realistic narration as the opposite of melodrama, seems to still ring true. In particular many of her feminist readers were never comfortable with the happy endings, they "would prefer a defense of a single woman's independence to a conventional romantic solution," Magdalena Zaborowska writes critically about the debate on Yezierska, although in what follows she seems just as anxious as many of her colleagues to explain away the author's melodramatic leanings: "I argue that she did not fall prey to her clichéd romantic endings, as most of the critics suggest, but, rather, used them for an ironic and self-conscious contrast highlighting the unglamorous side of female Americanization" (121).

Now, I don't think that irony ever was a prominent trope in Yezierska's story telling—and I certainly do not read her happy endings in terms of ironic deconstruction. But more than that, I argue that even in Yezierska's later writing, in which she endorses unhappy (or less contrived) endings, she does not really turn against the melodramatic mode per se but rather against a particular kind of fabricated story-telling that seems 'Hollywoodesque' to her—unconvincing like the "slapstick" conclusion Montague Glass added to her stories in the film version (the very ending which—ironically enough—critics also read as an ironically subversive turn these

days[4]). The films she mentions when she praises William Fox's work—Les Misérables and Over the Hill—are, of course, unabashedly melodramatic not only by today's standards. In fact, Yezierska's understanding of realism, although developed in contradistinction to some elements pertaining to the repertory of melodrama—artificial happy endings, Pollyanna optimism—relies much more on the melodramatic mode than she allows for. Let us have a closer look at Yezierska's reflections on writing and narration to get a grip on this associative interlinkage and its implications.

## II.

> She writes about life, not as a reporter, social student, slummer or reformer, but as one who has lived it before recording it ... She has, in one sense of the word, no literary style. There was so much style in some of Meredith and Henry James that it got between the reader and the object. In the works of Tolstoy, the style is like plate glass, so perfectly does the plain, simple word fit the thought, but in Anzia Yezierska's stories there is nothing. One does not seem to read, one is too completely inside. (RR125)

This review of Anzia Yezierska's work by her mentor William Phelps, which appeared in the International Book Review at the height of her success in the 1920s, epitomizes the idea of authentic

4 Delia Konzett subjects Hungry Hearts to revisionary reading, seeing it more in terms of a critique than an endorsement of the dominant ideology of ethnic assimilation: "Indeed, the film employs nothing but clichés and popular conventions [...] to explain and represent the experience of immigration. [...] [Yet] [t]hese conventions, in particular those concerning culture shock and the representation of the landlord, were already outmoded by the 1920s, dating back to the early ghetto films. Thus, this stereotypic representation, with its temporal condensation, is not a serious social treatment [...] but an ironic parody of the ritual of Americanization and its expectations" (24). However, in the light of the success of other ghetto films such as The Jazz Singer, which endorse, rather than ironically undermine, the logic of assimilation and work with the very stereotypes which are at display in Hungry Hearts, Konzett's assumption of a 'post-ghetto film irony' seems problematical—the effect of ironic rupture might have more to do with the critic's revisionary perspective than with the film and its mode of production. For a similar reading of the film cf. also Botshon.

authorship, unblemished by writerly design, which was at heart of Yezierska's popular appeal at the time. What could easily be read as a piece of patronizing condescension (and generally Yezierska was quick to detect and take on condescension in her critics, as her response to W.H. Auden's foreword to Red Ribbon exemplifies [cf. Levitas 268-273]), for once was not received along these lines by the author herself. In Red Ribbon, thirty years after the fact, she still quotes the piece at length to then express her delight in being ad- dressed as a fellow 'woman of letters' by Phelps. And in fact, while Phelps arguably did not manage to capture the characteristic spirit of Yezierska's highly stylized narrations with his patronizing praise, he did manage, inadvertently, to pinpoint Yezierska's technique of fictional and real-life self-stylization. She wanted her writing, over which she struggled so much, to appear effortless, natural, and altogether unself-conscious: "My idea of success," held this writer who did everything to mislead the public about the most basic data of her private life, "is to appear wholly myself' (RR131). When describing first attempts at writing in her stories, she resorted time and again to the imagery of an overwhelming urge, an uncontrollable stream, a huge and irresistible force: "Presently the barriers burst," she wrote, characteristically in "My Own People": "Something in her began pouring itself out. [...] Whether she reached out to God or man she knew not but she wrote on and on all through that night" (Yezierska, "My Own People" 151).

One could easily read such passages, which also make their way into Red Ribbon, as acts of hypocritical self-fashioning. But that would be to miss the point of Yezierska's strongly reception-oriented poetics. Truth, for Yezierska, ultimately had very little to do with the petty details of everyday life, least of all the awkward course of her own life which did not go together at all with her sense of selfhood. And although her idea of literary effect could very well be described in the terms of Roland Barthes as aiming at "the direct collusion of a referent and a signifier" so that "the signified is expelled from the sign" (16) (this is, after all, a more sophisticated rendition of Phelps's notion of the 'styleless style'), Yezierska's 'truth effect' is very much at odds with the 'reality effect' of realism, as Roland Barthes described it. Especially when compared with the aesthetics of an author like Gustave Flaubert, whose 'reality effect' rests upon the technique of interspersing the narrative with odd, incoherent, superfluous detail, as Barthes has shown,

Yezierska's understanding of realism turns out to be deeply rooted in the sentimental tradition, which in her adaptation abounds with excessive effects, stark contrasts, and a strong emotionalism—in short, with melodrama.[5] For her, truth relies upon emotional impact and immediate effect so much more than on photographic precision; it hinges upon a text's aura, its 'feel' rather than on its factuality or verisimilitude. When she describes the reaction of John Morrow, Red Ribbon's stand-in for her lover John Dewey,[6] to a Yiddish play, she focuses precisely on this distinction: "It surprised me how well he understood everything without knowing Yiddish. He said the emotion of the actors was so vivid and the audience so responsive that this interested him more than the play. 'You know, they have something you have too,' he said, studying me. 'The same intensity'" (RR109). What comes to the fore here is one of the basic principles of the melodramatic imagination, as Peter Brooks under- stands it, as a "mode of high emotionality" (12). And it is certainly significant that it is a theater play that triggers this observation in Red Ribbon. "In considering melodrama, we are in a sense talking about a form of theatricality which will underlie novelistic efforts at representation" (13), writes Peter Brooks—and one central goal of Yezierska's writing could indeed be said to consist in the effort to produce a theatrical intensity and immediacy by means of prose narration.

Yezierska's repeated spirited turns against the idea of writing as a scheme, a plan, a method need to be seen against the backdrop of this understanding of theatrical/poetic effect. At one point in Red Ribbon she enacts her first beginnings as a writer—recalling a conversation with a teacher to whom she turned as a beginner for guidance and advice with her writing. She describes being turned down brutally, her work being dismissed as "emotional hodgepodge, not a story," after which the teacher outlined his own idea of literary mastery: "A story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. [...] A story must have a plot, otherwise it's not a story." Yezierska recalls to have protested vehemently: "What would be the good of writing unless I wrote what I felt, the way I felt it? Why must I

5 For a differentiation of the terminology of sentimentalism and melodrama cf. the introduction to this volume, p. 6.

6 On the love affair between Anzia Yezierska and John Dewey and its literary refashioning in Yezierska's work, cf. Dearborn.

squeeze myself into a plot?" (RR78). This episode contains in a nutshell Yezierska's experiences with the literary establishment—the world of publishers, critics, even Hollywood producers. Not accidentally, the memory is tightly interlinked with the narrative of an encounter with Sam Goldwyn in Hollywood. Goldwyn is made out as a business-minded character who reacts strongly to Yezierska's rambling account of her next film script. Before, the young writer had tried to avoid answering his questions altogether: "'I've written only fragments of scenes. I can't talk about it until I get to the end.'" Already then, Goldwyn did not get it: "'I don't know much about literature. [...] But I do know that a plot of a good story can be summed up in a sentence and you must know the end of the plot before you begin—" (RR72).

Now, Yezierska's narratives are anything but impressionistically abstract, they do not lack plots—in fact, they are replete with formulaic turns and conventional framing devices. As her critical reviewers pointed out time and again, her love stories tend to steer the same course over and over again, and the ending usually can be seen from afar, long before the often quite predicable conflicts between patriarchal father and rebellious daughter, Anglo-Saxon intellectual lover and immigrant ingénue, spiritless sister and spirited ambitious heroine find their resolution. Even if Yezierska does not defy the logic of emplotment in her narratives, it could still be said that she turns against the logic of the plot. In fact, it is precisely by means of plotting that she ultimately undermines the significance of the plot. Multiplying plots, adding plotline to plotline, rather than abandoning the logic of the plot for good, she does indeed manage to break with the structure of 'beginning, middle, and end.'

"I don't think, I'm being reborn, as you do. [...] I don't transform myself with every new experience the way you do," Louise Levitas once wrote unnerved in response to one of her mother's enthusiastic letters (267), this one celebrating her daughter's commitment as a Red Cross worker in the Pacific during World War II. The quick rebuke highlights a characteristic feature not only of Yezierska's self-understanding but also of her writing. Yezierska's unceasing (melo)dramatization of her every experience into a revelation, a meaningful moment on the road to self-fulfillment, is reflected in the structure of her writing. It comes to the fore already in her first autobiographically inflected novel, Bread Givers of 1925, yet leaves its strongest mark in Red Ribbon, which is, in many re-

spects, a story of multiple beginnings and many endings—relentlessly refashioning the bits and pieces of an often painfully incoherent career into a narrative of self-awareness or emotional unfolding—or rather, into a series of such narratives.

At first glance, however, Red Ribbon does have one definitive ending, in which the narrator's many experiences and her convoluted career are being assessed and resolved. Significantly enough, it is again with reference to the logic of plotting that Yezierska reviews her life at the end of her book:

> Years ago, in Hollywood, Samuel Goldwyn said to me that to tell a good story, you must know the end before you begin it. And if you know the end, you can sum up the whole plot in a sentence. But I had always plunged into writing before I knew where it would take me. If a story was alive, it worked itself out as I wrote it. Even when I began this story [...] I did not know how it would end—that is, the meaning of the end. I thought I was writing the downward career of a failure. Goldwyn would have summed it up in a phrase: "From an author in Hollywood to a pauper on the W.P.A."
>
> I wanted to unburden my shame for having failed. But on the train, as I faced my disgrace, I saw that Hollywood was not my success, nor my present poverty and anonymity, failure. I saw that "success," "failure," "poverty," "riches" were price tags, money values of the market place which had mesmerized and sidetracked me for years. (RR219)

Challenging the dominant definitions of success and failure, this paragraph aims at closure by means of inverting the established value system—personal fulfillment replacing the materialistic evaluations of the modem world. Still, it might not be accidental that the narrator reaches this insight during a train ride, in the middle of the journey, as it were. In fact, the strength of Yezierska's narrative, as I see it, does not consist in the fact that she manages to draw a conclusive and concluding moral from her life story eventually, but that she does not fashion the rest of the narration to fit this ending. On the one hand, the ending thus fails to do away with earlier passages which convey a blatant sense of failure and alienation. On the other hand, in the chapters on Hollywood and on Yezierska's 'Golden Twenties' a sense of material achievement and pride comes to the fore which cannot be effaced by way of the final dis- missal of material success either.

What might thus have taken the guise of a smooth ascending line if it had been consistently written in the style of the classical auto-

biography or Bildungsroman, in Yezierska's approach takes on the appearance of an uneven curve or twisted arrow. Her revelations, her transformations, her achievements, and her failures do not add up, so that each of the stations related in her book—the ghetto experience, the Hollywood months, the depression era activities, the time spent in Vermont—and each of the many resolutions, decisions, insights, and recognitions seems to trigger or end a life story in its own right, one of the many lives of Anzia Yezierska, the writer.

## III.

In many respects, Yezierksa's implementation of the autobiographical conventions complies fully with the requirements of the melodramatic mode as Peter Brooks defined it, even if it does no longer provide the sense of a committing system of values, or overarching frame, which lends meaning to the concatenation of experiences:

> The peripeties through which [the characters] pass must be as absolute as they are frequent, bringing alternatively the victory of blackness and whiteness, and in each instance giving a full enunciation of the condition experienced. Polarization is not only a dramatic principle but the very means by which integral ethical conditions are identified and shaped, made clear and operative (Brooks 36).

The extremes of opposition, the excess of emotional investment in Yezierska's writing have to be seen against this backdrop. While nothing is meaningless in her account of her life, very much in analogy with Brooks's idea of the "cosmic moral sense of everyday gestures" (Brooks, 20), the meanings ascribed to the disparate events of this difficult life cannot be synchronized. Idiosyncratic experiences, isolated events, incoherent reminiscences are related in a highly associative pattern—calling each other up and triggering ever new reminiscences. The structure of Yezierska's narration is thus not so much linear or circular, but rather folded in a multi-layered system of emotionally laden cross-references.

This pattern of narration is not unique to Red Ribbon, it comes to the fore in earlier writings of Yezierska just as well, but in Red Ribbon it is arguably most fully developed. While it is thus possible to read her story with regard to a conclusive (political or spiritual)

message, as the testimony of a strong woman coming into her own defying the materialistic spirit of her day, as many critics have done,[7] this would be to downplay the very aspect of Yezierska's story-telling that makes her work most fascinating. Winfried Fluck comments on this phenomenon when he discussed Yezierska's technique of changing register in Salome in the Tenements. There, Yezierska moves inadvertently from a political narrative of ethnic or feminist self-empowerment to an individual love story, an over-emotional account of love and longing. She seems to leave a serious topic behind to embark on a trite course of narration which concludes the story. However, instead of considering "these two aspects as opposites that get into each other's way," Fluck argues, they should be seen "as basically complementary and mutually reinforcing" (20). Insisting on the characteristic potential of fiction to "articulate an interiority that cannot be represented in any other way," and to "engage this interiority, thereby providing the possibility of articulating something radically subjective, while at the same time representing this dimension of interiority in a way that opens up a way for public recognition" (25), Fluck approaches the elements of politics and of romance in Yezierska as deeply interrelated: "In the novel, politics and romance, although quite different in content, are not opposites but options within the same project that present two possible ethics for the realization of the same goal. There is a romance of politics and a politics of romance" (20-21).

While Red Ribbon backgrounds the narrative of romance, which is so prominent in Yezierska's earlier fiction, the logic which Fluck discusses is still quite obvious here. Again, the book can be read on the level of its explicit messages, especially since here the spiritual resolution is conveniently located at the very end. But the text only unfolds in all of its complexity if one allows for the unresolved tensions between its many highly emotionalized episodes of success, defeat, marginalization, empowerment, and futile struggle. Red Ribbon presents life in terms of a never-ending battle against arbitrariness and contingency, and thus correlates with what Peter Brooks has identified as the hermeneutic project of the twentieth century—the (Freudian) quest to recover "for meaning [...] what

7 For readings along these lines, which are very much the 'classical' lines for approaching Yezierska, cf. Schoen; Kessler-Harris. Cf. also the debate on Yezierska as outlined in Zaborowska.

might appear to be outside any systems of meaning and the urge to gain "victory over voids of meaning, to ensure that the universe may once again become the seamless web of signification" (79). Yet in marked contrast to what I believe to be Yezierska's aim—moral resolution—, the accomplishment of her book might very well consist in its failure: It demonstrates vividly, if perhaps inadvertently, that the outcome of this battle is far from certain.

Commenting about the 1923 novel Salome of the Tenements, Winfried Fluck comes to the conclusion that to turn from the political narrative to the register of romance opens up a 'safe' narrative pattern, because it is eminently familiar to the readers and writers of the day. By the 1950s, this narrative pattern had 'written itself out' for Anzia Yezierska, to make use of a characteristic expression of hers, and she made use of a pattern of resolution instead that was more intellectually respectable, and promptly found the approval of her critics. The intense self-scrutiny and probing that she engaged upon in Red Ribbon seemed to overcome the deficits of melodramatic storytelling—especially since it presented a satisfactory alternative to the embarrassing happy endings in Yezierska's earlier writing. Yet a closer look at the ending of Red Ribbon, I argue, reveals that it might be no less at odds with the rest of the narration than the happy resolutions were before. However, by reading the ending of the novel in terms of a break rather than a resolution I do not mean to subscribe to Zaborowska's idea of an ironic turn in Yezierska's writing after all. Neither this nor the earlier endings are cleverly contrived statements against the conventions or expectations of the literary market. In fact, all of these endings attest to Yezierska's fatal entanglement with this market, especially when it comes to the long-standing structures and logic of autobiographical narration. Yet precisely because the narrative does draw upon long-established patterns of emplotment, it cannot but bring to the fore the shortcomings of such formal devices with regard to the material—and the experiences—at hand. The tension between content and form which informs this text thus manages to express the very contradictions and strictures of Yezierska's writerly career, her struggle for full access to and acceptance by a literary market that would only admit her on the grounds of her difference. Her experiences would never completely fit in the narrative forms she chose to adopt, yet it is precisely in the clashes between form and feeling that her texts come into their own, pitting melodramatic closure and

melodramatic excess against each other, as it were, and thus reinventing the melodramatic mode to satisfy her desire for resolution and her urge at self-expression. Consequently, it is not in spite of its melodramatic leanings that Yezierska's fiction should be appreciated, but because of them, even though her contemporary critics seem to be on a mission to rescue her from the embarrassment of this association. Her various and highly variegated self-emplotments from the 1920s to the 1950s demonstrate that the mode of melodrama is a success story in its own right, and that this story is not over yet.

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