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ABSTRACT

The Story of Irving Berlin (1925), written by drama critic Alexander Woollcott when Berlin was only 36, is the composer’s first full-length biography. Despite its acknowledged hyperbolic and apocryphal nature, the biography is consistently invoked by scholars as a source document for Berlin’s career. This thesis examines the rhetoric, function, and influence of The Story of Irving Berlin and uses its construction to consider dominant American ideologies of the 1920s. Situated among other biographies of its era, Woollcott’s writing adheres to the tenets of the then-popular “new biography” school, which emphasized an anecdotal, fiction-like approach. By fashioning a narrative modeled on patterns of fiction and invoking Berlin’s Jewish heritage to heroically characterize the composer, Woollcott effectively mythologized Irving Berlin as an archetype for the American dream. Although this characterization was intended to promote Berlin’s public image, Woollcott’s fictional constructs have hampered subsequent scholarship on the composer, outlasting the era they were intended to serve.
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INTRODUCTION

In January 2006 millions of viewers watched a penitent writer sit on Oprah Winfrey’s couch and call himself a liar. James Frey, author of the bestselling memoir *A Million Little Pieces*, had basked in Winfrey’s praise just a few months prior when she announced his book as a selection for her popular Book Club. A media circus ensued, however, when an internet exposé revealed that Frey’s recounting of his dramatic life-story was an imaginative blend of truth and fiction. Winfrey confronted Frey on her show with a host of questions about the nature of his memoir—“Were you making that up or was that your idea of who you are?, -Did you cling to that image because that’s how you wanted to see yourself?, Or did you cling to that image because that would make a better book?” “Probably both,” Frey confessed. Announcing that she felt conned by Frey’s fictitious representation, Winfrey publicly retracted her support of the author, concluding her interview with the statement, “I believe that the truth matters.”¹

How much the truth does matter in biographical/autobiographical writing is a question that occupies much of the scholarship dedicated to the study of this genre. Capturing a life’s essence on the printed page will always involve reconstruction of some sort. Though a memoirist may not create stories as Frey reportedly did, portraying the story of one’s own life with utter objectivity requires an unnatural and impossible self-detachment. On the other hand, writing the story of another’s life has its own host of problems. Fashioning biography that conveys a coherent narrative, reveals inner character, and stays true to the facts, all while providing engaging reading material, forces the biographer to make difficult artistic and

journalistic judgments. To further complicate the task, a biographer must navigate preconceived notions about the subject, public or private pressure to tell the story a certain way, and society’s dominant ideologies and prejudices. Considering all of this, no wonder Virginia Woolf’s statement about biography is a faithfully echoed sentiment among biographers: “Yes—writing lives is the devil!”

Recognizing the powerful influence a biography can have on interpretation of a subject’s life reveals the difficulties of the genre. Because biographies are a first stop for general information about a public figure, influential biographers both shape the public’s opinion and frame the discourse about their subjects’ lives. When a biography is especially popular or is the first one written on a particular person, its construction can widely affect all subsequent interpretation and understanding of its subject.

The influence of biographies, however, stretches beyond just that of their subjects’ life. Even given its problematic nature, biography remains a powerful cultural force. Through life stories, biographers set forth models for both good and bad characters, and exemplify societal formulas for success and failure. Fueled by human curiosity, the genre of biography generally enjoys a broad readership, and biographers are continually churning out new interpretations of historical and contemporary lives. The underlying messages of biographies are often the very beliefs that propel society: perseverance results in triumph over adversity, hope prevails in the bleakest circumstances, goodness conquers evil. In the case of James Frey, issues of factual misrepresentation did not bother millions of readers who, despite (or perhaps because of) the scandal, bought copies of the book in droves, still devouring its fundamental message of hope.

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and human strength. As a reflection of society, biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs reveal elements of a collective value system.

Trends in American biography/autobiography demonstrate how one life can be used to understand the values, prejudices, and beliefs of society. Contextualizing biography can be a valuable way of interpreting cultural history, for, as literary scholar Marita Sturken comments: “The meaning of certain life stories helps to shape the ways in which the nation and its history are defined . . . . Biographies and autobiographies mark the moment when personal stories are imbued with cultural meaning.”

Noting that the cultural meaning of many American biographies simply follows the clichéd patter of an idealized American dream, scholar Rob Wilson wondered, “Can the American biographer resist Americanizing his subject, with all the distortions and legitimations that this ideology of form implies?”

How Americanization can affect interpretation and understanding of a public figure is epitomized in the first book-length biography on composer Irving Berlin, written in 1925 by drama critic Alexander Woollcott. *The Story of Irving Berlin* is consistently invoked by scholars as a central source document for Berlin’s early career, despite the frequent admission that much of the narrative is hyperbolic and apocryphal. One scholar judged that it “[can] not be called a critical biography in any normal sense. It [is], however, the story of Irving Berlin as he might have wanted it to be told, the story of a rags-to-riches rise of a young Russian immigrant on the sidewalks of New York.” The immense popularity of this biography, coupled with the fact that

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it is the first of its kind has contributed to a mythic construction of Berlin’s personality, life, and legacy. In a review of the biography’s 1984 reprint edition, musicologist Joanne Hillman wrote, “The Story of Irving Berlin has served as a precedent for future writings on Berlin,” and that “Irving Berlin presents a problem for the musicologist. In addition to the Woollcott [biography] there have been numerous articles written about him in books on American popular song . . . but these too concentrate on his very interesting life and prolificacy, rather than the nature of the music itself.” Considering that Berlin is widely acknowledged as one of America’s most prolific and influential vernacular music composers, the lack of musicological treatment he has received is surprising. The legacy of Woollcott’s biography contributes to the tendency to view Berlin more as a mythic character than legitimate composer, cloaking him in fable and heroic narrative.

Although the apocryphal nature of Woollcott’s biography has been mentioned in scholarly texts and book reviews, the purpose and the effects of its mythical construction remain unexplored. In this thesis, I examine the rhetoric, the function and the influence of The Story of Irving Berlin and use its construction as a lens to consider dominant American ideologies of its era. First situating it among other biographies of its era, I discuss how Woollcott’s writing adheres to the then-popular “new biography” school. I then demonstrate how Woollcott’s fanciful biography constituted an intentional effort to fictionalize Irving Berlin as an archetype for the American dream and discuss why this construct has hampered subsequent scholarship on the composer. As a final step, I examine how Woollcott invoked Berlin’s Jewish heritage as a means to heroically characterize the composer and discuss stereotypes of the era to show how they affected Berlin’s reception. It has been suggested that “when an age demands heroes,  

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biography will supply them,“7 but in the case of Woollcott’s biography, the usefulness of Berlin’s characterization outlasted the era it was intended to serve.

CHAPTER 1
SOCIAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

“New Biography” in the Jazz Age

Prior to 1918, biographical writing was generally regarded as a second-tier art form. The majority of biographers traded in either dry recitation of fact or epic-length tributes to greatness, and both approaches resulted in multi-volume, cumbersome works incapable of generating public interest.¹ In a critical essay that called for succinct biographies, Thomas Carlyle concluded by “suggesting that authors be paid for *not* writing fulsome lives.”² The consensus in academic circles before World War I was that the biographical genre had quite deservedly earned its reputation as a lower form of writing.³

At the end of World War I, there was a major shift in biographical style and in the quality of biographical writing. Writers and literary scholars of the 1920s dubbed this movement “new biography” and anointed English writer Lyton Strachey as their principal leader, taking his writings as their model.⁴ Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians*, published in 1918, was a best-selling collection of biographical sketches on an assortment of Victorian personalities.⁵ What made this

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²Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact & Form* (New York: St. Martin’s Press: 1984), 14. Carlyle was referring to epic-length biographies such as James Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*.


⁴Marcus, 195. According to Marcus, the rise of new biography also led to a proliferation of literary scholarship that addressed its techniques. Biography, a genre that had been largely ignored by literary circles up until then, suddenly took center stage as the modern and progressive literary genre.

⁵Strachey further solidified his position as head of this literary movement by publishing commentaries on the genre of biography, which, quite naturally, extolled the progressive nature of his life-writing philosophies. (Marcus, 194). By writing about his own writing, Strachey exemplified the very self-conscious analysis which
biography “new” was that it emphasized, “not . . . the subject’s life as a whole, but rather those aspects of it that brought out the individual characteristics.” Strachey’s approach focused on the anecdotal, ironic, and dramatic elements of a subject’s life rather than on dutiful documentation of a subject’s notable achievements.

Strachey’s success inspired a flood of emulators, such as Roy F. Dibble’s *Strenuous Americans* (1923) (the American equivalent of *Eminent Victorians*), Harold Nicholson’s *Tennyson* (1923), and M. R. Werner’s *Barnum* (1923). New biographies had a number of literary elements that distinguished them from works of old. Instead of meticulous recitation of facts, dates, and events, the new biographies were usually short character sketches. Authors focused on a few anecdotal episodes from their subject’s life and extracted broad conclusions about character and psyche based on these isolated stories. This shift from fact-gathering to character analysis was inspired in part by the relatively new practice of psychoanalysis. As psychoanalytical theories grew more fashionable in America, new biographers attempted to use them as a way of determining which aspects of their subject’s psyche had led to fame and success. To complement the new anecdotal and analytical approaches, biographers relaxed their writing style, incorporating both modern slang and psychoanalytic scientific jargon. In contrast to the formal, ponderous documentaries of old, what resulted was an accessible product that the public found modern, relevant, and entertaining.

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6 O’Neill, 121.


Another new aspect of 1920s biography was that authors began allowing their subjects to speak—literally—by writing original dialogue to enhance the narrative. Because new biographers chose not to cite the sources of their information, a reader was unable to tell whether the dialogue was something the subject had actually stated or if it had originated in the author’s imagination. Citations are scarce throughout biographies of the 1920s, purportedly to encourage reader-friendly accessibility. At most, a biographer would include a bibliography of sources consulted, but even then the reader had no way of knowing which information came from which source. While all of these stylistic changes made for marketable and entertaining reading, the story-like approach, the incorporation of dialogue, and the de-emphasis of archival research sparked concerns that biographers were crossing the line into fiction.9

Despite these concerns, public and scholarly opinion about the quality of biographical writing rose steadily. As a contemporary witness to the new biographical movement, literary scholar Lawrence O’Neill declared, “Biography has made more definite progress in the last fifteen years than has any other form of literature.”10 As biographies changed, public desire for them reached an unprecedented level, to the point where “demand [for biographies] seemed to exceed the supply.”11 This rise in popularity “was linked to the perception that biography had been reinvented for the twentieth century,”12 but this voracious public demand cannot be

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9 André Maurois, Aspects of Biography, trans. Sydney Castle Roberts (New York: D. Appleton, 1929), 3–37. Maurois’s lecture on biographical theory addresses concerns that arose throughout the 1920s about imitators of Strachey who made up facts and wrote with unnecessarily cruel ironic spirits. Similarly, O’Neill exonerates Strachey from accusations of fiction by asserting that the original conception of “new biography” encouraged realism, but he states that other “less equipped” authors were unable to avoid dipping into fictional constructions of their characters (O’Neill, 178).

10 O’Neill, 178.

11 Ibid., 179

12 Marcus, 194.
attributed solely to the new biography movement. The 1920s also saw major shifts in social climate, which accentuated public interest in the lives of famous persons.

Between the trauma and uncertainty of a post-War culture and the increasing mechanization of society, many Americans during the 1920s believed that their world had grown cold and impersonal. As urbanization accelerated and immigrants flooded into American cities, many regarded the ever-expanding American social climate with suspicion and fear. Observing this, literary scholars and sociologists of the era speculated that American readers were turning to biography as a way of finding human connection.\textsuperscript{13} This need worked in tandem with a rise in mass media entertainment, resulting in a new fascination with celebrity and “mass gossip.”\textsuperscript{14} In assessing the popularity of new biographies, scholars who witnessed their emergence concluded that the genre succeeded because it fed society’s desire for role models: “Modern man is more conscious of himself than was the man of a century ago. He tries to find reflections of himself in the lives of great men and to act as they acted. That is why many men and women read biography.”\textsuperscript{15} Because many new biographies dwelled on the familiar tropes of success, the personality and character traits of biographical subjects were “looked upon as examples of success that can be imitated. These life stories are really intended to be educational models. They are written—at least ideologically—for someone who the next day may try to emulate the man whom he has just envied.”\textsuperscript{16}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[13]{O’Neill, 177.}
\footnotetext[15]{O’Neill, 178.}
\footnotetext[16]{Lowenthal, 71.}
\end{footnotes}
This search for individual role models mirrored America’s large-scale quest for cultural identity during the 1920s. Americans were growing increasingly aware of the American dream ideology—both its potential and its failings. Due perhaps to the increase in patriotism and national awareness sparked by World War I, discussions of what defined the true American character were omnipresent. According to cultural historian Sam Girgus: “The idea of studying America as a special culture and the American as a unique ‘self’ or character type gained momentum during the 1920s.” As part of the quest for national selfhood, Americans found in biographies of their heroes representations of national values. Both on the individual and national level, biographical writing provided models for success and contributed to the indoctrination of American ideals.

As “one of the most conspicuous newcomers in the realm of print,” biographical writing was ubiquitous—and not just limited to book-length publications. Nearly every popular magazine and newspaper included, at the very least, a profile or brief character sketch in each issue. People who weren’t necessarily professional writers tried their hand at analytical character sketches, adding to the decidedly non-literary tone of new biographies while also feeding the market’s demand for intimate profiles of modern-day heroes. There were precedents for this type of writing in mass periodicals of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, but the sheer abundance of biographical sketches in 1920s periodicals suggests that there is truth to the hypothesis that “there must be a social need seeking gratification by this type of literature.”

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18 Lowenthal, 71.
19 Ibid., 64, 67.
20 Ibid., 65.
The popular press responded to the unpretentiousness of the new biography movement by incorporating its philosophies into reader-friendly biographical features ready for mass consumption.

New Biographies in Popular Magazines

To illustrate both the abundance of biography and the influence of the new biography movement on popular culture, one need not look further than The Saturday Evening Post. As the self-proclaimed “oldest [and] world’s greatest magazine in prestige and circulation,” the magazine was a cultural touchstone of America in the 1920s. Under the editorship of George Horace Lorimer, the Post’s express mission was to “interpret America to itself” by creating an American mass consciousness, espousing American ideals, and indoctrinating Americans with principles of business and success.

Measuring the extent to which the Post achieved its lofty mission is difficult, so historians derive conclusions about its far-reaching influence from the popularity of the magazine and from documentary evidence about its pervasiveness. By 1925 weekly circulation was “more than two million and a quarter,” and the Philadelphia-based publication was distributed throughout the Americas and to Europe. As evidence of its perceived importance, a range of articles appeared in other contemporary periodicals dealing with concerns about “the

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21 A Short History of The Saturday Evening Post (Philadelphia: Curtis Publishing, 1937), 7. The Saturday Evening Post was originally conceived by Benjamin Franklin and first published in 1728.


23 Because of its ancestry, longevity, and wide circulation the Post, the public took the magazine very seriously. The Post and other periodicals occasionally “attempted a sober analysis and evaluation of the effect of the Post on the America it claimed to interpret.” Jan Cohn, Creating America: George Horace Lorimer and the Saturday Evening Post (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburg Press, 1989), 169.

24 The Saturday Evening Post, 3 January 1925, 140.
influence of the Post.” In 1927 writer Leon Whipple asserted in *Survey* Magazine that the *Post* was a “magic mirror: it not only reflects us, it creates us . . . it molds our ideas . . . and it does queer things to our psychology by printing tales that deceive us with a surface realism, but are too often tissues of illusion.”

This “magic mirror” presented its estimated ten million weekly readers with “a portrait of American success, lavish, powerful, abundant.” This ideology of success and business was dispersed in myriad forms, and each feature in the magazine was geared towards the *Post’s* goal of “the creation and dissemination of a transcendent American consciousness.” Although fiction was the most abundant genre in the *Post* during the 1920s, each approximately two-hundred-page issue also included political news, business articles, editorial essays, informational pieces, and biographical profiles of Americans from all walks of life.

An examination of the *Post’s* biographical essays demonstrates how authors invoked literary principles of new biography to execute the *Post’s* mission of reinforcing American ideology. If the duty of American biographers was “to reproduce and inhabit…the shape of a ‘representative American self,’” then their writings were especially relevant to a magazine that was consciously cultivating an American national image. The types of lives and professions receiving biographical treatment ranged from the commonplace to the exotic, but, regardless of the subject matter, the theme of the representative American success story runs throughout.

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26Cohn, 166.

27Ibid., 9.

28Ibid.

29Wilson, 168.

30Cohn, 11. A survey of *The Saturday Evening Post*’s 1925 issues demonstrates the range of subjects receiving biographical treatment. Some are historical subjects, but many are nameless profiles of “common man,”
Personality characteristics that the Post’s editors viewed as especially American are accentuated in these biographies. The Post’s model Americans were: “hardworking, prudent, honest, self-reliant. They were practical not idealistic, well informed not intellectual. They were optimistic, trusting their future to America’s future.”31 With the range of biographical subjects exhibiting such unity of character, we see in the Post biographies didactic goals in line with the philosophies of new biography.

The Post biographies worked to reinforce the American national character. Authors for the Post frequently used an anecdotal approach, focusing on isolated incidents in order to derive broad conclusions about character, much like the analytical biographies of Strachey and his followers. For example, in Alexander Woollcott’s piece about the Marx Brothers, the reader is entertained by stories of their offstage shenanigans and then is told that through these “misadventures it is possible for the onlooking historian to detect the traces of a kind of impish justice . . . and it is this kind of impishness which attended the final fulfillment of every vaudeville player’s dream.”32 In a feature on William B. Hibbs, a Wall Street businessman,
readers learn that “like the conventional Alger hero . . . he sold newspapers in his tender years . . . the value of his youthful judgment may be gauged from the fact that his present residence occupies the top floor of a white marble office building” that is just above the spot he peddled newspapers too heavy for his childish frame nearly fifty years prior. With the turn of each page, Americans reading the Post learned that success was attainable through honest work and a few strokes of good luck. The familiar trope seems to have provided an inexhaustible source of entertainment and inspiration. Commenting on biographies in the Post and in other popular periodicals of that era, sociologist Lowenthal concludes: “People derive a great deal of satisfaction from the continual repetition of familiar patterns. There are but a very limited number of plots and problems. . . . The biographies repeat what we have always known.”

**Alexander Woollcott and ‘The Story of Irving Berlin’**

During the height of the new biography movement, the rise in American fascination with celebrity, and the search for American national identity, Alexander Woollcott (1887–1943) gained prominence in the fields of literary and dramatic criticism. As one of the early twentieth century’s most colorful critics, Woollcott both reflected and influenced trends in national literary thought. So pervasive was his influence that “at the hour of his death [he] was the most powerful literary figure in the English-speaking world.” With more than twenty published books,

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34. Lowenthal, 109.

35. Hoyt, *Alexander Woollcott*, 1. The reason Woollcott has fallen into relative obscurity today is attributed to the fact that “his most important work was done in the most transitory of media” as well as to his deliberate rejection of literary self-promotion and pretension. His “everyman” image made him wildly successful during his lifetime, but has kept him from earning a seat in discussions of American literature.
hundreds of magazine articles, thousands of literary and theatrical reviews and countless radio broadcasts, Woollcott’s sway over American popular opinion invaded every form of media.  

His influence was due partly to his wit and his clever rhetorical style and partly to his position as a public icon; during the height of his career he had fans hanging onto his every word and every move.  

Because of his writings’ popularity, Woollcott earned the distinction of being the “last remaining man in an ever-maddening world who could make a success of a play or a book he thought worthy.” In theatrical and literary criticism, Woollcott’s enthusiastic “stamp of approval” guaranteed success to the point where “just a mention by Woollcott was enough” to generate national fervor.

In addition to journalistic criticism, Woollcott won his way into America’s mass consciousness through his highly personal “Woollcottian essays,” which were published in magazines, newspapers, and collected in anthologies throughout the 1920s and ’30s. As conscious attempts to appeal to the common sensibilities of the American public, these essays were Woollcott’s idiosyncratic adaptation of the personal essay genre. In them, he developed several highly stylized writing techniques.

Deliberately shedding literary pretension, Woollcott’s writing style was conversational (including exploitation of first-person construction) and anecdotal. It was around these anecdotes, which at first blush might have seemed like trivial or unrelated tangents, that

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36Howard Teichmann, Smart Aleck (New York: William Morrow, 1976), 10, 15.

37Wayne Chatterton, Alexander Woollcott (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1978), 52. In this biography, Chatterton calls Woollcott “earliest literary counterpart of the popular idol.”

38Teichmann, 10.

39Ibid., 13.

40Chatterton, 50–6.
Woollcott constructed elaborate analogies. These analogies in turn conveyed the essence of his subject matter. He also had a “flair for seeing and emphasizing the ‘human interest’ values in his stories . . . [and] his familiarity with historical minutiae . . . provided him with engaging anecdotes for all occasions.”

Woollcott’s choice of subject matter for his essays ran the gamut of American popular culture, and he had a unique sense of what the public wanted to read:

By way of Woollcott’s prose, the bored or harried or fancy-starved American citizen of the jazz age and the depression era could pursue his own closest and most secret enthrallments: the private lives and public behavior of celebrities; spectacular rises from poverty to success, sensational crimes; bizarre coincidences; heroic actions; heart-warming sentiment.

Taking great pleasure in using his influence to promote the careers of his friends, Woollcott often focused his creative energies on short biographical sketches, which he called “Enthusiasms.” These brief sketches suggest the influences of Strachey and the new biography movement through their anecdotal, analytical, and conversational style. Even though Woollcott deliberately distanced his writings from those of high literature, probably in order to maintain his image as a critic for the common person, he betrayed his admiration of Strachey’s writings in a 1935 New Yorker article. In it, Woollcott counts the famous biographer among authors in whom I [Woollcott] have such abiding faith and such deep interest that, sight unseen, I would want to read any book they might care to write. . . [there are] only three [such writers]—Lytton Strachey, Willa Cather, and Ernest Hemingway. Well, Mr. Strachey, taken from the world at the height of his powers, will write no more.

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41Ibid., 53–4.
42Ibid., 56.
43Ibid., 52.
44Alexander Woollcott, Enchanted Aisles (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1924), vii. Woollcott was also known as a scathing critic of those who fell out of his favor. In Enchanted Aisles, a collection of Woollcottian essays, only the first half comprises his “Enthusiasms,” whereas the second half of the book is a compilation of his scornful “Resentments.”
45Hoyt, Alexander Woollcott, 231.
Although Woollcott’s writing style was too idiosyncratic to count him among one of Strachey’s followers, his method of biographical sketching, his position as a literary critic, and his open admiration for Strachey demonstrate his awareness of new biographical trends. In his short “Enthusiasms” written for newspapers and later in *The Story of Irving Berlin*, Woollcott contributed to the influence of new biography on American culture.

When, in the summer of 1924, Putnam contracted Woollcott to write a biography of Irving Berlin, it was the author’s first foray into long-form writing. Because of the fame he had found through character sketches, biography was a natural choice for Woollcott’s first attempt to sustain and develop a book-length narrative. Choosing his friend Irving Berlin as subject matter was a labor of love, as Woollcott revealed in a letter to Jerome Kern, “Confidentially, I am puttering about at present with a biography of Irving Berlin whose story has a strong appeal to my foolish and romantic heart.”

This would be neither the first nor last time Woollcott would look to Berlin’s life for inspiration. The choice of subject matter, however, proved to be problematic for reasons that Woollcott would unashamedly reveal in the final pages of the biography.

First, Woollcott knew little about “technicalities of composing music,” so he had to call upon the authority of his friends Jerome Kern and John Alden Carpenter to supply musical

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46 Beatrice Kaufman and Joseph Hennessey, eds., *The Letters of Alexander Woollcott* (New York: Viking Press, 1944), 77. That the two men knew each other well is apparent through Woollcott’s role in Berlin’s wedding (when the critic did “everything except [perform] the ceremony and [cut] the cake”) and through the various anecdotes about Woollcott attending the christening of Berlin’s daughter and dining with some regularity at the composer’s home. For more about their friendship, see Kaufman and Hennessey, 77, 266; and Teichmann, 132, 236.

commentary.\textsuperscript{48} Second, Berlin was only thirty-six years old when Woollcott began writing, meaning that it would be impossible to tell the “essential part of the full story” of any man “who, in time and space, lives just around the corner and may himself read the words that you have written.”\textsuperscript{49} Thus, from the outset, the author knew that the biography could not be a definitive one, but rather “sketchy, tentative, unfinished—[it] is a source book for the convenience of the wiser historian who will put the facts in permanent form.”\textsuperscript{50}

Despite these challenges, Woollcott embarked upon the project with zeal. He collected information through interviews with friends and acquaintances (because Berlin and Woollcott frequented the same social circle in New York, the information was readily accessible and highly personal), interviewed Berlin himself, requested letters from “experts,” and tapped into his own memories of the years in New York City in which Berlin came of age.\textsuperscript{51} He then sequestered himself in Enos Booth’s Neshobe Island vacation home during the summer of 1924 in order to focus on writing.\textsuperscript{52} The resulting narrative proved to be Woollcott’s most financially successful endeavor to date. The \textit{Saturday Evening Post} serialized it in weekly issues between January 24 and February 21, 1925, adding both to the biography’s profits and public exposure. The book itself sold extremely well, earning Woollcott as much as he would have made in a year in his job as drama critic for the \textit{New York Sun}.

The popular success the book achieved was not matched with critical acclaim, however. Woollcott’s trademark style, which worked so well in short personal essays, bewildered critics

\textsuperscript{48}Chatterton, 124–5.

\textsuperscript{49}Woollcott, \textit{The Story of Irving Berlin} (New York: Putnam, 1925), 223.

\textsuperscript{50}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{51}Chatterton, 125.

\textsuperscript{52}Ibid.
when it was transferred into full-length biography. The most puzzling element was that the 223–page *Story of Irving Berlin* had very little to do with Berlin or his music. This was no accident; Woollcott had made his intentions perfectly clear in his letter to Kern: “I have no notion of trying to turn learned in the midst of [the biography] nor do I think that grave musical criticism has any place in the project.”

Perhaps in effort to compensate for the acknowledged limitations of his biography, Woollcott opted for rosy and romantic prose and freely indulged in digressions about everything from medieval jongleurs to New York City crime bosses. Woollcott’s focus so frequently strays from the actual story of Berlin’s life that the biography caused one puzzled reviewer to ask, “What is the significance of writing about a man if his picture, far from being rounded or complete, is to be deliberately concealed from the reader’s eyes?”

The book documents the thirty-six year-old composer’s life in eleven chapters. Chapter 1 (“Introducing Izzy Baline”) functions as a prologue, and its four pages relay a tale from Berlin’s earliest days as a newsboy. In the second chapter, “Cherry Street,” the reader learns of his family’s migration from the terrors of Russia, their struggle for survival in the tenements of the Lower East Side, the death of his father, and his mother’s determination to provide for the family. In Chapter 3 (“The Bowery”), Berlin runs away from home and attempts to make his way in the world as a wandering minstrel. Woollcott waxes at great length about the rough-and-tumble world of street urchins and gives the reader a vivid picture of the young composer’s dire living conditions. In Chapter 4 (“Chinatown”), Berlin begins to move up in the world by taking a position as a singing waiter at a saloon, only to be knocked onto the streets again after he is

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53 Kaufman and Hennessey, 77.

54 Louis Kronenberger, “Irving Berlin, ‘From Rags to Riches,’” *New York Times*, 12 April 1925, BR11. Incidentally, Kronenberger remained one of Woollcott’s most adversarial critics throughout his career. In response to Woollcott’s 1935 publication of *The Woollcott Reader*, an anthology of literature that enjoyed a great deal of public success, Kronenberger attacked not just Woollcott’s writing, but also his integrity as a critic (Hoyt, 267–71).
accused of stealing from the cash register and fired. Picking himself up by his bootstraps in Chapter 5 (“Union Square”), Berlin, through a series of chance occurrences, gets published and is soon making $25 dollars a week as a lyricist for the Ted Snyder Company. Chapter 6 (“Broadway”) relays stories of Berlin’s early collaborations with Ted Snyder, his knack for writing clever lyrics, and his growing popularity. In a span of a few pages, Berlin rises from Tin Pan Alley minion to international superstar, and Woollcott documents the sensation of his hit song “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.” In Chapter 7 (“Two Songs”), Woollcott abandons chronological narrative to focus on the context surrounding two of Berlin’s songs, “When I Leave the World Behind” and “When I Lost You.” The chapter concludes with a lengthy anecdote about a medieval jongleur purportedly to illustrate the essence of Berlin’s character.

Chapter 8 (“Yaphank”) documents Berlin’s tenure in the army and the launching of the successful Yip-Yip Yaphank, a benefit Berlin wrote to be performed by the troops. By the time Woollcott reaches Chapter 9 (“The Sale of a Song”) his focus has shifted entirely away from Berlin. Instead, he gives a history of Tin Pan Alley, theorizing about how best to market a hit song to the American public. Chapter 10, “The Music Box,” details the building of Berlin’s theater and the mounting of his famous Music Box Revues.

In Chapter 11 (“Finale”), Woollcott attempts to comment on Berlin’s legacy. This chapter functions as an epilogue separate from the main narrative. In it, letters from Jerome Kern and John Alden Carpenter are quoted extensively, reflecting Woollcott’s attempt to provide insight into Berlin’s music. These letters, coupled with Woollcott’s own sweeping generalizations about Berlin’s importance, leave the reader with the impression that there was never a composer or a man greater than Berlin. Throughout this chapter and the biography as a
whole, Berlin emerges as larger-than-life, precisely the type of American hero Woollcott wanted to construct.
CHAPTER 2
RAGS TO RICHES: IRVING BERLIN AS AMERICAN HERO

A Fictional Hero

By the mid-1920s, an American archetype had emerged to match the ideologies and realities of the post-War era. Although the “roaring twenties” image was that of a modern, progressive, and increasingly secular society, the standard for American success came from stories by a nostalgic, traditional and moralistic children’s author who had died more than twenty years prior. Horatio Alger (1832–1899), author of over one hundred works of juvenile fiction, championed the American dream’s self-help creed throughout his formulaic and didactic plots. Alger’s works held tremendous mass market appeal during his lifetime and then achieved their greatest popularity during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Despite the critical consensus that Alger’s novels smacked of poor writing and lowbrow literary taste, a generation of Americans “[grew] up on Alger” and his characters were adopted as “symbol[s] about America.” Although the number of children reading his novels began to dwindle after World War I, Alger’s stereotypical protagonists and plotlines had worked their way into American culture. Alger’s name was adopted into America’s lexicon and used as “shorthand for someone

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2Weiss, 60. Total estimates for the sale of Alger novels prior to the first World War are over sixteen million. One survey notes, “most of these sales came after Alger’s death, at which time obituaries placed his total sales at about 800,000.” (Frank Luther Mott, Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States [New York: The Macmillan Co., 1947], 158; quoted in Weiss, 63, n. 29.)


4Weiss, 52. Analysis of his legacy suggests that his works influenced popular culture more than any author of his age except Mark Twain (Nackenoff, 3). A similar claim appears on the frontispiece to Edwin P. Hoyt, Horatio’s Boys (New York: Stein and Day, 1974). It states that “to call Horatio Alger, Jr., America’s most
who has risen through the ranks—the self-made man, against the odds." In the twenties, references to Alger’s novels appeared consistently in discourse and debates about opportunities for mobility and success in America’s capitalist system.

Almost without exception, the hero of Alger’s boilerplate novels is an immigrant boy on his own in New York City. The boy always undergoes a difficult rite of passage in which his moral and physical well-being is threatened. Through uncanny strokes of good luck, moral choices, and a dose of hard-work, the Alger hero overcomes all odds to emerge triumphant and prosperous. Within each narrative, Alger dispensed pedantic instructions about making one’s way in the world, giving his readers tactics for obtaining the same kind of success his heroes had found. The author’s expressed goal was to make economic prosperity appear available to any upstanding American.

Given Alger’s mark on popular culture, it follows that similar plotlines would appear throughout this period. When a real-life success story bore similarities to Alger’s “uniquely American” pattern for success, biographers and journalists were quick to alert readers to the connection. Biographies in periodicals would include Alger-reminiscent instructions on how to succeed in the subject’s chosen profession. In newspapers, descriptions such as “[they were] like

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Nackenoff, 4.

There was a backlash against Alger’s success ideology in the twenties among America’s intelligentsia that should be noted. This rejection is epitomized by the 1925 publications The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald and An American Tragedy by Theodore Dreiser. In both of these novels the major theme is the failure of the American dream; throughout their narratives both authors, “revealed the latent pessimism of their period. In their respective ways they revealed the end of the American dream. . . . With the barometric sensitivity to change of the superior artist, [Fitzgerald and Dreiser] were able to anticipate the crash of the American dream of success four years before 1929.” (Alexander C. Kern, “Dreiser and Fitzgerald as Social Critics,” The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association, 5, No. 2. [1972]: 87.) The need these authors had to write anti-Alger cautionary tales further indicates that American dream ideology was dominant within popular culture.

Nackenoff, 45.
Horatio Alger’s heroes excepting the fact that they both went to college,”8 or “His rise to this commanding position reads like one of the stories by Horatio Alger . . . [his] career has the dramatic appeal which we like to think of as peculiarly American”9 were ubiquitous. Surveying the number of publications that were alluding to Alger or engaging in his brand of moralizing instruction leads to the conclusion that “in the twenties the spirit we usually associate with Horatio Alger was alive and well.”10

*The Story of Irving Berlin* has a particularly recognizable connection to the Horatio Alger spirit, a fact that scholars, critics, and Woollcott himself noted. In the final pages of the Berlin biography, Woollcott admits, “It is hard to keep his story free from the pattern and the patter of those narratives of prosperity with which our tables are overcrowded.”11 In the book’s 1925 *New York Times* book review, Louis Kronenberger criticizes such parallels by making an oblique connection to Alger-inspired writings. Concluding that Woollcott’s writing “really does nothing more for Irving Berlin than the *American Magazine* has done for hundreds of men,”12 Kronenberger references the popular periodical that ran edifying interviews with prominent Americans who eagerly divulged how readers might emulate their successes.13 Kronenberger’s link between *The Story of Irving Berlin* and a magazine that consistently espoused Alger ideals demonstrates that the Alger correlation would have been apparent to contemporary readers.

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9“Editorial Comments on the Death of Mr. Munsey,” *New York Times*, 12 December 1925, 8


11Woollcott, 221.


13Carter, 145. Carter’s excerpts from *American Magazine* interviews drip with Alger references: “Don’t fear a thing just because it looks big, nothing is ever as hard as it seems to be”; “There was apparently nothing to distinguish him, from the thousands of other ragged, yelling little sons of foreign immigrants with whom he dodged under the feet of the drawn horses in the narrow streets.”
Recent commentaries on Woollcott and *The Story of Irving Berlin* also make direct references to Alger. Woollcott biographer Edwin P. Hoyt refers to the opening of the Berlin biography as a “Horatio Alger beginning.” Wayne Chatterton describes Woollcott’s interpretation of Berlin’s life as a rise “from poverty to prominence in the best Horatio Alger tradition.” Since one of Woollcott’s main points is that Berlin’s life is “part of the American epic,” fashioning the narrative after the novels that defined the American dream was a logical rhetorical gambit. Modeling children’s fiction had always been one of Woollcott’s tricks for ensuring warm popular reception: “One of Woollcott’s best professional secrets was his knowledge that his adult audience wanted him to write for them in the old familiar tone of the children’s story.” In *The Story of Irving Berlin*, this approach appears to have been particularly useful. By emulating Alger, America’s most popular author of juvenile fiction, Woollcott both capitalized on the nostalgic feelings his audience had for Alger’s writings and impressed images of the American dream onto the life of Irving Berlin.

Like Alger novels, the opening paragraphs of *The Story of Irving Berlin* have a folkloric and nostalgic tone:

> It was a sweltering summer afternoon in the middle nineties—the loitering nineties when a veteran of the Civil War could still be President in Washington and the skirts of American womanhood still swept up the dust of our avenues. A dirty, little, barefoot newsboy, already well enough known to the rival gangs of Cherry Street as Izzy Baline, stood on the edge of an East River pier, there where Cherry Hill slopes down to the New York waterfront.

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15 Chatterton, 125.

16 Woollcott, 222.

17 Chatterton, 53.

18 Woollcott, 3. Irving Berlin is a pseudonym for Israel Baline, the composer’s given name. Throughout the opening chapters Woollcott refers to Berlin as “Izzy” Baline. The significance Woollcott attaches to Berlin’s name change is addressed on 68.
In the first few fable-like paragraphs, the reader meets the protagonist on his first day as a newsboy, protectively clutching the “five sticky pennies” he has managed to earn. As the boy gazes across the New York City waterfront, a large crane suddenly sweeps by, catches him and “drop[s] him into the deep water of the East River.” After much commotion, he is rescued and taken to the hospital where, “as they stretched him out on a cot . . . they laughed at discovering that his clenched left hand still held all five of the pennies.” Woollcott then formally introduces this “small merchant” to his reader by revealing that, “You know him as Irving Berlin.”

By placing Berlin in grave danger on the first page, but having him miraculously survive (with profits intact!), Woollcott establishes Berlin as a hero and concludes that this anecdote, “suggests ominously that this newsboy was a magnate in the making.” He reinforces this theme by writing: “Those pennies were due in the lap of his mother’s apron. Therefore, even while drowning, he could hardly be expected to let go of them.” Emphasizing Berlin’s effort to earn his keep through honest work parallels Alger novels, in which “virtually all central characters must earn their living or help support the family,” but, in order to do so, they are

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19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 5.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 6. This method of “introduction” is typical of Woollcott’s style. In a number of his biographical sketches, such as those anthologized in Long, Long Ago (New York: Viking Press, 1943), Woollcott intentionally conceals the subject’s identity only to reveal it in what amounts to a journalistic equivalent of the game “I Spy.” Reportedly, audiences delighted in trying to guess from the opening anecdote who Woollcott was writing about.

23 Ibid., 5.

24 Ibid., 18.
forced to encounter dangers that threaten their survival. Berlin’s occupation as a newsboy also might have sparked an Alger connection in the minds of American readers since Alger liked to rehash, “We find that many of our most conspicuous public men have commenced their careers as newsboys.” Through his triumph over adversity as well as his apparently fortuitous position as newspaper seller, Berlin appears destined for success.

The intersection of Woollcott’s biography with patterns of fiction continues with the depiction of Berlin’s decision to run away from home at age fourteen. Woollcott’s method of rehearsing the tale is reminiscent of Alger’s protagonists, who are almost always driven from home by economic hardship and the dissolution of family stability. The reader learns that Berlin’s father passed away when the boy was only eight and that the loss of steady income exacerbated the sufferings of the large immigrant family. Struggling in the tenements of the lower East side, Berlin, his mother, and five siblings were “as poor as a family can be.” Much like Alger’s heroes, for whom “money is a constant topic of conversation or concern,” Woollcott remarks that Berlin had “no impulse half so strong as his deep sense of the need of money.” However, as a young boy who “contributed less than the least of his sisters,” Berlin could do little to remedy his family’s economic situation. In an attempt to analyze Berlin’s

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25 Nackenoff, 57.
26 Ibid., 88, original emphasis.
27 Ibid., 57.
28 Woollcott, 17.
29 Nackenoff, 57.
30 Woollcott, 18.
31 Ibid.
psyche, Woollcott diagnoses the boy as “sick with a sense of his own worthlessness.”32 When Berlin decides to run away from home, Woollcott attributes the choice to Berlin’s humiliating family position and uses it as evidence of his self-sacrificing and tormented conscience:

He was a misfit and he knew it and he suffered intolerably. Finally in a miserable retreat from reproaches unspoken, he cleared out one evening after supper, vaguely bent on fending for himself or starving if he failed.33

The narrative Woollcott constructs out of Berlin’s choices blends melodramatic psychological insights with the dialect of an Alger novel. By the end of this third chapter, Woollcott has constructed Berlin as a downtrodden but resolute hero determined to carve out his own success.

With Berlin now filling the role of the vagrant, Woollcott embarks on a long narrative detailing the composer’s life as a runaway. Here, he adheres to the Alger template of ignoring almost all day-to-day details of his hero’s itinerant lifestyle except facts about what the boy will eat and where he will sleep. Alger novels have an almost myopic focus on money and the cost of scraping by, a technique that makes the harshness of the character’s conditions especially poignant. The reader always knows precisely how little the protagonist earns and what kind of room and board those earnings can secure.34 In Woollcott’s biography, Berlin is a “hungry troubadour in quest of shelter”35 who obtains intermittent income as a busker, or street-singer, which enables him to find food and lodging. At this point in the story, Woollcott sacrifices details of Berlin’s life for a series of remotely related digressions. We read tidbits about vaudeville, Chaucer’s depiction of England, and a man named Chuck, the so-called “Mayor of

32Ibid., 21.
33Ibid.
34Nackenoff, 57–8, 60.
35Woollcott, 24.
Chinatown.” When Woollcott returns his focus to Berlin, the life details are more an Alger-reminiscent cultural study than a biographical account:

[If] you had fifteen cents you could have a room to yourself, and if you had a quarter you could wallow in the extra luxury of sheets. The bed, to be sure, was occasionally verminous . . . The meals left something still in the pocket . . . The menus may have been fly-specked but . . . [you] could let your fancy range through such choices as these: Regular Dinner, 13 cents, Chicken Fricassee, 8 cents, Chicken Pot Pie, 10 cents. 36

Describing Berlin’s living conditions as opposed to Berlin himself is a rhetorical tool borrowed directly from Alger; it reinforces the image of Berlin as a typical immigrant boy, scraping by on the tough streets of New York City.

Because the pattern of Berlin’s life bears striking resemblance to stereotyped fictional characters, Woollcott accentuates parallels between those heroes and the composer, typecasting him in a well-known role. As a biographer, Woollcott had license to include or omit anecdotes at will. In constructing Berlin’s story, Woollcott clung to the stylized pattern of children’s novels, even deriving the same moral lessons from Berlin’s life that authors like Alger extracted from their heroes’ stories. For example, Woollcott plays up several Alger conventions to highlight both Berlin’s moral character as well as his will to succeed despite adversity. In the Alger manual for success, performing good deeds and adhering to moral standards inevitably resulted in tangible financial rewards. The key to the success of many Alger protagonists is a chance occurrence where they perform an act of service for someone “in a position to express gratitude with money or employment.” 37 Woollcott echoes similarly serendipitous occasions in the Berlin biography. For example, alone in the “gaudy and mysterious and adult” 38

36Ibid., 30–1. Woollcott’s choice to alternate written out numbers with Arabic numerals is preserved in the quotation.
37Nackenoff, 136.
38Woollcott, 23.
Bowery, Berlin makes the acquaintance of Blind Sol, a veteran busker who needs help navigating the city streets. Woollcott tells his readers that Blind Sol’s guide would establish a drawing account with Saint Peter by serving as guide for the blind singer. For [Berlin’s] first ventures as a busker, the small runaway from Cherry Hill . . . trudged from saloon to saloon with the lean hand of Blind Sol clamped to his shoulder. Thus he himself became known . . . and he would usually have as much as fifty cents jingling in his pocket by the time dawn had crossed the East River.  

Exhibiting kindness befitting an Alger hero, Berlin earns providential favor by helping the blind comrade earn a living. This has both immediate and future financial rewards, for Woollcott hints that Berlin’s deeds have marked him for future blessings. Thus, in Woollcott’s tale, much as in Alger’s tales, the reader is reminded that moral character is rewarded with prosperity.

Woollcott employs another Alger technique by using an anecdote about Berlin losing his job to demonstrate the composer’s righteous and innocent nature. A frequent event in Alger’s novels is that once the hero obtains steady employment, his co-workers conspire to frame him in a crime. The protagonist’s boss is either a conspirator or an unmerciful judge and the hero loses both his job and his upstanding reputation for a crime he did not commit.  

In Woollcott’s narrative, Berlin, after finally reaching a comfortable and lucrative position as a singing waiter, gets fired because money goes missing from the cash register when he falls asleep on the job:

It was not disdain of this shabby tavern nor a stirring desire for a better world which drove [Berlin] out. He was fired. . . . The sun was up and in the drawer of the yawning cash register there was no sign of the $25 that had been in it. . . . Wherefore [Berlin's boss] gave vent to his ideas on the singing waiter’s voice, his probity, and his ancestry. He further bade him clear out and never show his ugly face in Chinatown again.

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39Ibid., 30.
40Nackenoff, 62.
41Woollcott, 62.
The reader then learns that the crime was staged by the boy’s boss who, while “the guardian of the cash register slept, had taken the twenty-five.” Berlin, who Woollcott is careful to depict as an innocent victim of injustice and deceit, is cast from his “bourgeois days as a salaried man” and forced onto the streets again. As in Alger’s novels, however, it turns out to be an advantageous injustice, because it provides the impetus that drives Berlin out of the ghetto and toward success.

A final example of direct parallels to Alger’s novels is the cautionary way Woollcott treats aspirations for money and wealth. Even though Alger promoted material success, it was always tempered with cautions about greed and the dangers of excess. He warned against the “unnatural and destructive desire” of hoarding and his heroes learned, along with Alger’s readers, that material gain comes with responsibility to society. Similarly, Woollcott employs an anecdote about Berlin’s first diamond ring to demonstrate how the composer learned fiscal responsibility:

The ring, once acquired gave [Berlin] his first hint of the burden that vast riches entail. For when, as so often, he would fall asleep beside the piano . . . the local humorists would steal his ring from him and not yield it up until he had ransomed it by opening a bottle of champagne. And in the end it proved a sore disappointment, for the skeptical jeweler with whom he finally had to hypothecate it, would pay him only one dollar for every ten he had given to the evil old peddler who had sold it to him.

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42 Ibid., 63.
43 Ibid.
44 Along with functioning as a way to highlight character and continue anecdotally relaying the success patterns of Berlin’s life, choosing to include a story of Berlin’s firing may have been a way of making him seem even more like “everyman.” Four years before the desperate circumstances of the Great Depression, getting fired in 1920’s “booming entrepreneurial economy, rightly considered, was not a disgrace but an opportunity” (Carter, 158).
45 Nackenoff, 153.
46 Woollcott, 69–70.
In yet another depiction of classic Alger American values, the reader learns through Berlin’s life that one should guard against avarice while aspiring for success.

With so many connections to fictional writing, Woollcott’s biography adheres neatly to the tenets of new biography. These biographers operated on, “the assumption that the life has a novel’s coherence . . . [due to] an intrinsically human propensity to play a role, to construct one’s own self as a pattern with a kind of fictive coherence.” By modeling the patterns of fiction, lives written by new biographers “[became] something very much made.” Because of these novelistic tendencies, scholars cautioned that those writing in Strachey’s anecdotal and analytical style could slip into writing that was “more often untruthful.” New biographers had a difficult line to tread. In an effort to depict inner character they “turn[ed] to the devices of fiction in order to depict [the human] experience” and, as a result, “the insight they display into their subjects’ minds is more characteristic of the modern psychological novel than of traditional biography.”

Methods for crafting novelistic narratives in biography were well-documented. For example, Strachey and his followers dexterously manipulated the opening scenes of their biographies. In French scholar André Maurois’s instructive lecture on how to appropriately compose biography, he told his students that the biographer, “must begin simply . . . with the one object of placing his reader in an atmosphere which will facilitate his understanding of the first feelings of the hero in his youth.” Strachey was known for “arranging his material as a

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47 Hoberman, 61.
48 Ibid., 58, original emphasis.
49 O’Neill, 182.
50 Hoberman, 60.
51 Maurois, 58.
dramatist sets his stage, and achiev[ing] the same effects.” The opening paragraphs of new biographies were essentially theatrical devices to hook readers while simultaneously revealing the subject’s character.

In The Story of Irving Berlin, Woollcott constructs his opening material as carefully as any new biographer. For a tale thematically focused on the rags-to-riches element of its subject’s life, opening with a near-death experience to dramatize the dire circumstances is effective. Through just a few paragraphs of anecdote, the reader gains vivid insights into the self-sacrificing, determined, and moral character of Berlin, all while Woollcott establishes a familiar heroic pattern as the mold for Berlin’s life.

Opening the curtains on Berlin’s life in such a fanciful manner arouses the question of how much of the East river story is grounded in reality—biographers intent on character analysis and fictive narrative were not known for their adherence to fact. There is no way of proving how desperate Berlin’s circumstances were that day or if he fell into the river at all. The reader cannot know if the young boy really had the presence of mind to clutch his “five sticky pennies” while flailing in the river or whether his mother’s welfare was foremost in his thoughts as he went “down for the third time.” Woollcott, opting for a dramatic, novelistic opening, does not reveal the source of the story, but sets the scene for the type of character with which he wants to outfit Berlin.

In this opening tale, readers in the 1920s might have also recognized hallmarks of Woollcott’s personal writing style. He was known for his tendency to make “material in the

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52 O’Neill, 182.
53 Woollcott, 5.
54 More recent biographies rehash this tumble into the East River, often using it as their opening anecdote as well. For more on the story’s impact, see page 54.
opening paragraphs or pages . . . just as entertaining and effective as the main subject.”

Regardless of whether this story is based on an actual occurrence or not, it functions to establish the biography as a tale to be spun rather than as a factual report. The language, the dramatization, and the tenor of these opening paragraphs, like so much of Woollcott’s writing, suggests, “the fairy tale and the oral story . . . these forms of story telling have almost universal appeal.”

A Woollcott aficionado in the twenties would have come to expect this style of writing, the author had a “fascination with imaginative writing which remained with him all his life [that] colored, heightened, and intensified his presentation of factual matters.” With the novelistic elements of new biography in the hands of a writer who “could so smoothly and so ingeniously treat fact as fiction,” separating the two becomes difficult, if not impossible for the reader.

An Ordinary Hero

Modeling Alger’s fiction and ideology is just one way Woollcott constructed Berlin’s life as an archetype of the American dream. Keeping with the topical trends of contemporary biographies, Woollcott goes out of his way to depict Berlin as a common American. Part of the mission of new biographies was to soothe the longings of the troubled citizens of a post-War society. Lecturing on Strachey’s brand of biography, Maurois instructed writers to construct

55Chatterton, 54. Woollcott was also known for intentionally using hackneyed opening sentences such as “Once upon a time . . .” and “This is the story . . .” in order to convey his “lack of literary pretension” (Chatterton., 53). The opening of Berlin’s biography (“It was a sweltering summer afternoon . . .” (3), and “This is his story . . .” (6)) suggests a similar affect.

56Ibid., 53.

57Ibid., 50.

58Ibid.
heroes who were “brothers who share[d] [the common person’s] troubles. He [the reader] longs to believe that others have known the struggles which he endures . . . So he is grateful to those more human biographies for showing him that even the hero is a divided being.”

Biographers were set on both “justifying their hero by means of undiscriminating superlatives while still interpreting him in terms that bring him as close as possible to the level of the average man.”

Stressing the ordinary elements of a hero at first seems paradoxical. However, given the pragmatic goals of new biographers (instructing the audience, espousing contemporary ideals, dissecting human nature), this tactic was useful for facilitating personal identification with the larger-than-life hero. It is, in fact, this continual emphasis on the typical and the ordinary that firmly establishes a biographical subject as the fulfillment of the American dream; if the hero is just like everybody else then every reader has a similar chance to succeed.

Strachey’s express goal of demonstrating “not that the hero is an ordinary man, but that an ordinary man or woman can become a hero or a heroine” is fleshed out in Woollcott’s biography. While never abandoning his convictions about Berlin’s greatness, Woollcott continually emphasizes the composer’s role as an average American. One way he promotes Berlin’s “everyman” image is by highlighting the role chance played in the composer’s wild success. When Berlin runs away from home, Woollcott steps out of the narrative to address the reader directly, commenting that: “We carom across the board of life and if we win, it is usually by the accident of blind, panic-stricken flight.” Woollcott assures readers that, as a young

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59 Maurois, 34.

60 Lowenthal, 79, original emphasis.

61 Ibid., 105.

62 Maurois, 24.

63 Woollcott, 20.
runaway, Berlin had no advantage over any other poor vagrant and no inkling of what he could become: “You would be wrong if you imagined his suspecting for one instant that that head of his was the home of a thousand tunes.” The implication is that anyone reading Woollcott’s biography might also find a similar ticket to success.

Emphasizing chance and luck was one way to reconcile questions of economic disparity in society. By the 1920s, popular ideology had acquiesced to the contradictions of a “free-for-all” American dream that bestowed success on a few and left many “expelled from the Horatio Alger dream.” With a belief in “luck for the deserving,” society’s prescription for transcendence of class was rooted in beliefs about “the intervention of Providence on the side of the worthy.” Much like the average worker who toiled daily at his job, Berlin’s life prior to his success is portrayed as a series of missed opportunities while he waited for his chance to come. For example, Woollcott reveals that, unbeknownst to Berlin, the young waiter had been discovered by a Tin Pan Alley scout several years before his escape from the Bowery. When the job didn’t pan out, Woollcott’s prose hints at some providential hand waiting to dole out opportunity, “Instead of receiving a flattering summons to Broadway, [Berlin] was allowed to linger on there until [his boss] threw him out.” The implicit message is that even if fortune does not arrive immediately, a lucky hand may eventually be dealt to those who wait. By depicting Berlin’s rise to fame as an “accidental and irrational event,” Woollcott insists that

64Ibid.
65Lowenthal, 110.
66Anne Scott MacLeod, American Childhood: Essays on Children’s Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 82.
67Woollcott, 128, emphasis added.
68Lowenthal, 94–5.
nothing distinguished Berlin’s life from the lives of typical Americans except a series of chance occurrences that led to fame.

Woollcott even suggests that there are advantages to growing up in dire conditions. He implies that Berlin’s difficult childhood actually created an environment conducive to the kind of success Berlin achieved:

One cannot help wondering what would have happened if some benevolent soul, divining the talent in the Bowery busker, had pounced upon him, washed him and sent him off to Lawrenceville and Princeton. Probably in that event, this tale would never have been told. Probably there would have been no tale to tell.69

This could have been read as encouragement to his readers: success does not fall to those with cushioned and carefree childhoods. Instead, it comes upon those with everything stacked against them. This implicit message kept very much with the spirit of the twenties, a decade where tycoon Andrew Carnegie’s dictum that “the almighty dollar bequeathed to children is an almighty curse. No man has a right to handicap his son with such a burden as great wealth,”70 influenced a number of political measures to encourage “making it on your own.” Woollcott tells readers that Berlin succeeded because of, not despite, the difficulties in his life.

Another way Woollcott depicts Berlin as a commoner is through the manner in which he refers to Berlin. Rarely is the composer called by name. Instead, he is a “shabby troubadour,”71 and a “true and gentle American.”72 He is dubbed a “shabby Lord Fauntleroy,” yet another mark of Woollcott’s habit of alluding to children’s stories. (Little Lord Fauntleroy by Frances

69 Woollcott, 38.

70 Carter, 149. The Darwinist ideals espoused by Carnegie and other of the era led to hefty inheritance taxes. In June 1924 Congress passed a law that raised taxes on estates worth more than ten million to 40%. We see that, even in politics, self-made ideals of the American dream were shaping society.

71 Woollcott, 50.

72 Ibid., 223.

73 Ibid., 30.
Hodgson Burnett was the English equivalent of a Horatio Alger tale, documenting the story of a young boy of upstanding moral character plucked from New York City to become a British aristocrat.)

Even in his successful years, Berlin’s past is never out of sight: He is “the escaped busker from the Bowery” and “the fugitive from Chinatown and Union Square, still feeling the breath of his boyhood on his neck.” When Woollcott recounts the night of the Music Box Theatre’s grand opening, the successful and established composer is still referred to as “the waiter from [Chinatown].” Berlin’s given name, Izzy Baline, resurfaces when Woollcott wants to juxtapose the composer’s adult successes with his humble beginnings. The reader is reminded that only a few years separate Berlin from the newsboys who whistle his latest hits “as they [hawk] the Evening Journal along Izzy Baline’s old route.” By consistently replacing the name of Irving Berlin with more diminutive forms of address, Woollcott retains Berlin’s humanity.

When juxtaposed with Woollcott’s frequent hyperbolic statements, these nicknames bring Berlin’s dual construction as common man and mythic hero into bold relief. Woollcott, who first introduces Berlin as “that urchin whom the crane knocked into the East river,” later encourages readers to view the composer as a “phenomenon of Broadway or as a force of nature or as a spring of melody or as a master of rhythms.” Within one sentence, Berlin is dubbed at once a

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74 MacLeod, 77–83.
75 Woollcott, 82, emphasis added.
76 Ibid., 79, emphasis added.
77 Ibid., 185.
78 Ibid., 81.
79 Ibid., 8.
80 Ibid., 149.
“genius” and a “creative ignoramus.”⁸¹ In popular biographies, such superlatives were ubiquitous. Many new biographers, like the advertisements that flanked the magazine pages of their serialized writings, were “level[ing] the presentation of human life to the presentation of merchandise.”⁸² By combining language that emphasized Berlin’s humility and humanity with hyperbolic statements that could just as easily be advertisements for a new product, Woollcott clearly set out to market Berlin to his readers as the American hero. His rhetoric maximized both the humble and the heroic aspects of Berlin’s life.

Along with cloaking heroes in hyperbole, new biographers also made “frequent references to an assortment of mythical and historical associations, in order, it would seem, to confer pseudo-sanctity.”⁸³ By situating the biographical subject among the Classics, the hero becomes not only an outstanding figure of his era, but one of timeless proportions. In concocting such analogies, new biographers transferred all the characteristics of a familiar life story to those of their biographical subject.⁸⁴ Woollcott, already famous for his idiosyncratic historical allusions, used this rhetorical tool frequently. Berlin’s humble educational background is likened to that of a “not unsuccessful poet named Homer [who] was, in all probability, unable to read and write.”⁸⁵ Berlin is also compared to “a fellow of such little schooling as Shakespeare [who] writes the loveliest poetry his language knows.”⁸⁶ In the final chapter, the reader learns that

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⁸¹Ibid., 218.
⁸²Lowenthal, 101.
⁸³Ibid., 102–3.
⁸⁴Ira Bruce Nadel, Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form (St. Martin’s Press: New York, 1984), 104. Allusion and metaphor served a twofold purpose. First, to unite the essential humanity found in all men and second, to contribute towards a biography’s succinct analysis: packaging the life of one man with the all the associations of another well-known life story helps condense a character analysis.
⁸⁵Woollcott, 35.
⁸⁶Ibid., 38.
Berlin “has been called . . . a modern disciple of Aristoxenos, who . . . attacked the Pythagorean theory by asserting that the ear was the only authority in determining consonance and dissonance.”

By making direct analogies to poets and philosophers who occupy the highest levels of academic respect, Woollcott demonstrates that formal instruction is unnecessary for success and that Berlin deserves to be counted among the greats of history.

Woollcott’s historical analogies extend into the musical world. He muses that “if Schubert had lived in America in the year of grace, 1925, perhaps he, too, would have had a suite at the Ritz,” and justifies Berlin’s eleventh-hour working methods by arguing that “they say that Mozart wrote the overture for ‘Don Giovanni’ on park benches that were carried into the theater just in time for the first performance.” He preserves Berlin’s accessibility and American nature by maintaining:

It is an injustice at once to his true achievements, to his deepest aspirations and to his honest unpretentiousness to link his name with a Wagner or Rimsky-Korsakoff, when his true comrade in the long annals of music is rather that cobbler poet of Nuremberg or Rouget de Lisle or, better still, any one of those nameless minstrels of France who sang a while and died unsung, but who left behind them such deathless [songs] . . . . Rather should Berlin be written of in terms of his own predecessor—a lesser troubadour as characteristic of his sentimental day as Berlin is of his. That was Stephen Foster . . . .

Had Woollcott attributed to Berlin large-scale ambitions similar to those of Wagner or Rimsky-Korsakov, it would have contradicted his attempts to make his hero as accessible as possible. However, just by mentioning Wagner and Rimsky-Korsakov, Woollcott intimates the possibility that someone might associate Berlin with those giants of composition. The suggestion emerges

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87 Ibid., 213.
88 Ibid., 192.
89 Ibid., 195.
90 Ibid., 219.
as an attempt to raise acceptance of Berlin’s music as among the “greats.” Woollcott then exalts musicians and composers he sees as “of the people” and compares Berlin to mythical, nondescript medieval minstrels along with the beloved American songwriter Stephen Foster. The reader is coaxed into the thought that Berlin could be America’s Wagner if he chose to, but Woollcott quickly assures readers that the composer is much too humble, much too “American” to aspire to that status. By comparing Berlin to historical figures, Woollcott advances the picture of him as humble hero.

An Illiterate Hero

The characterization that has arguably had the most impact on both Berlin’s reception as a figurehead for the American dream is Woollcott’s continual emphasis on Berlin’s musical illiteracy. At the book’s outset, Berlin is pitted against violin great Jascha Heifetz: “When Heifetz was the age of that urchin . . . he was toiling eight and ten hours a day over his violin and piano lessons.”91 The reader is informed immediately, though, that “what music Berlin knows, he learned on the sidewalks of New York. It seems to have been the school of schools for him.”92 Woollcott begins his biography with such a juxtaposition to highlight Berlin’s utterly ordinary upbringing. He consistently alerts readers to the fact that Berlin “is not yet much of a musician,”93 that he is “a slave of one key” who “always plays helplessly in F sharp.”94 Nor has Berlin developed compositional refinements throughout his successes. Even when Berlin becomes an established composer, Woollcott divulges that the “hieroglyphics of written music

91Ibid., 8.
92Ibid., 9.
93Ibid., 35.
94Ibid., 36.
are still a trifle baffling.” In a statement that comes off as both reverential and pejorative, Woollcott proclaims, “It is quite true, then, that Berlin can neither read music nor transcribe it. He can only give birth to it.”

Woollcott probably had several motives for zealously playing up what many would see as personal and compositional weakness in his hero. Highlighting Berlin’s musical limitations corresponds with trends in the new biography movement that tried to highlight the most ironic aspects of the biographical subject’s life. Strachey and his followers believed that pointing out the essential “littleness” of great biographical characters was one way of achieving realism in biographical style. In any life, paradoxes and incongruities emerge, so the very act of creating an unpolished image could theoretically make a biography seem authentic. In this process, a biographer could, like Woollcott, emphasize the irony so much that the subject appeared touched by some divine gift. What better way of demonstrating Berlin’s humanity than by continually drawing attention to the fact that he has achieved greatness in a field where his knowledge and skills are very weak?

An additional motivation for accentuating Berlin’s illiteracy could be in the biography’s role as a marketing tool for Berlin’s career. After all, if a composer completely lacks compositional skills then anything he writes is a work to be admired. It is difficult to criticize someone who does not know any better, so Woollcott’s emphasis on Berlin’s musical illiteracy is a way to demonstrate that what the composer has is truly a “melodic gift.” Woollcott also revels in the wonderment of Berlin’s status as “creative ignoramus” in order to address and dispel rumors that the composer did not write his own music:

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95Ibid., 35.
96Ibid., 37.
97O’Neill, 182.
But to turn back . . . to Irving Berlin and his melodic gift, you can imagine . . . how persistent is the story that he does not write his songs at all. The story is always a little hazy in outline and invariably omits one highly interesting detail. It invariably omits the identity of the obliging, self-effacing genius who seems content that Berlin should enjoy the fame which rightly belongs to himself.  

Had Woollcott ignored Berlin’s lack of musical education, readers might have interpreted it as an attempt to cover-up questions of dubious authorship. However, by confronting it head-on and treating his ignorance as a thing of wonder, Woollcott effectively squashes potential rumors.

Another subtle rhetorical tool that Woollcott implements to emphasize Berlin’s ordinary qualities is personifying Berlin’s music and referring to its composition in passive voice. As a result, the composer is rarely the active agent in the compositional process. Instead, his music has the leading role; it functions as an entity operating independently from within the composer, not as something he created. The reader learns that the music was “in” Berlin and that it “found its way out.” Berlin is removed from the equation of his first song, “Marie from Sunny Italy,” when Woollcott tells his readers that it “had been concocted.” Another hit, “Sadie Salome, Won’t You Please Go Home?” takes on its own life and “[invades] at least 200,000 innocent American homes.” “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” the song that established Berlin’s international success, “infected other song-writers. It infected Berlin himself. It smote its day and generation as few songs have.” The melody of Berlin’s famous wartime song “Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning” “could not confine itself to those notes.”

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98 Woollcott, 38. Rumors that Berlin stole music from another composer are intertwined with issues of ethnicity and race, discussed in Chapter 3.

99 Ibid., 8.

100 Ibid., 65.

101 Ibid., 74.

102 Ibid., 88.

103 Ibid., 118.
focuses on the composition of “When I Leave the World Behind” and “When I Lost You” the reader learns that those songs “separate themselves from the long list [of Berlin hits] by virtue of the circumstances under which they happened to be written.” 104 Each of these songs appears to have carved out its own success and the use of the passive voice in reference to their conception weakens Berlin’s role. One by one, Woollcott separates the compositions from the composer. During the compositional process, the “lyric and melody grow apace, each shaping and giving character to the other.” 105 Berlin’s only role appears to be as a vessel, obedient to the melodies that “life was always shaking out of him.” 106

A “Hero of Consumption” 107

Despite the amount of control music is given over Berlin, Woollcott always manipulates it to serve his hero. Berlin can afford time away from his publishing company because “his tunes linger there and work for him.” 108 New songs come to Berlin and take residence “in the wild scrap bag of his casual mind.” 109 Even Berlin’s piano takes on a human role to help the composer as it “faithfully makes amends for the lapses in its boss’s education.” 110 This demonstrates how biographical characterization was shifting to suit 1920s culture. As the

104 Ibid., 99.
105 Ibid., 77.
106 Ibid., 126.
107 This term is borrowed from Lowenthal, who divided biographical subjects into two categories: “Heroes of Production” and “Heroes of Consumption.” In his survey, he found that “Heroes of Consumption” (usually passive subjects whose professions were in luxury or entertainment-centered fields (movies, music, sports, etc.) gradually became more prominent in mass periodicals than “Heroes of Production.”
108 Woollcott, 170.
109 Ibid., 189.
110 Ibid., 38.
booming American economy became evermore consumer-focused, so too did biographies. Heroes took full advantage of modern conveniences and indulged in luxury items. Although authors still made Alger-hero characterizations, they downplayed the importance of self-sufficiency and emphasized the roles of outside agents acting on their hero’s behalf. In a biographical survey, Lowenthal found, “It is neither a world of ‘doers’ nor a world of ‘doing’ for which the biographical curiosity of a mass public is evoked. . . . [The hero] appears no longer as a center of outwardly bound energies and actions; as an inexhaustible reservoir of initiative and enterprise.”

As society became more mechanized, the optimistic hope of the decade was that one day all men would have machines that worked for them. Biographies echoed this trend by announcing that their heroes were consumers who were blessed with a life of convenience. In Woollcott’s depiction of Berlin’s life, society’s new emphasis on consumption manifests itself through a deemphasis on the creative role the composer plays in composition.

Woollcott heightens Berlin’s passive heroism through the roles he gives to the composer’s friends and associates. They are presented based on how advantageous they have been to the advancement of Berlin’s career, a trend appearing in many 1920s biographies. Here again, the modification of the American dream to suit the realities of the day is evident. Although self-initiative was the ideal, many recognized that “the art of making it could no longer be pursued in the manner of that archetypal bourgeois Robinson Crusoe.” The reader learns that Berlin is an ordinary man fortunate enough to have a number of beneficial friendships. Nearly all of the composer’s friendships follow the same, Berlin-centered pattern. When Berlin writes his first song, the reader learns that “much of it had to be doctored by Nick [M. Nicholson, 

\[111\] Lowenthal, 87.
\[112\] Carter, 150.
resident pianist at the Pelham Cafe].”¹¹³ Later, as an established composer, Berlin has a number of associates who do nothing but serve him. His business manager and friend Max Winslow makes it his “chief business and chief enjoyment in life . . . [to sell Berlin’s] songs.”¹¹⁴ Berlin’s resident pianist Arthur Johnston “seldom resists—relaxing himself utterly to Berlin’s needs, as sensitive and submissive as the table on a ouija board, and as appreciative, in his role of Berlin’s first audience, as any busker could wish.”¹¹⁵ Berlin builds a theater of his own with the blessing (and financial backing) of Broadway producer Sam H. Harris. When the expenses of building the theater rise to an exorbitant level, investor Joseph M. Schenck, a dear friend from the Bowery days, assures the composer of his continued generosity, “Never mind, Irving, after all it’s no more than you or I would lose in a good stud game and never think of it again.”¹¹⁶ With friends only characterized through their function in Berlin’s life, Woollcott drives home the message that Berlin is just an ordinary man in a set of extraordinary circumstances. All this relates to the emphasis on consumption in the lives of biographical subjects: “the hero appears in his human relationships as the one who takes, not as the one who gives.”¹¹⁷ Such taking, however, is never judged as greedy or self-serving; instead, the hero is merely a participant in an increasingly consumer-oriented American culture.

¹¹³Woollcott, 67.
¹¹⁴Ibid., 126.
¹¹⁵Ibid., 193.
¹¹⁶Ibid., 183.
¹¹⁷Lowenthal, 82.
Analyzing a Hero

In Woolcott’s attempt to characterize Berlin’s nature, he stops short of the outright psychoanalysis found in the new biographies of Strachey. This could be due to Woolcott’s awareness that Berlin would be reading his words. Woolcott unashamedly writes, “I cannot freely set down . . . all the good qualities of the head and of the heart which the neighbors of Irving Berlin know are an essential part of the full story.”¹¹⁸ In admitting his work’s incompleteness, he rests perfectly within the “rules” of new biography, which recognized that not all facts of character can or should be told in a biography.¹¹⁹ However, he does make several attempts at portraying the inner workings of Berlin’s soul. The reader sees through those brief glimpses a hero with very human struggles. For a man who has “so many tunes in his head,”¹²⁰ they are wrought with “great groanings and infinite travail of the spirit.”¹²¹ Despite Woolcott’s insistence on “melodic gift,” music causes the composer distress. As a boy he would “pick out painfully on its black keys the tunes he had heard the day before”¹²² At his first position, “The writing of countless verses was a matter of considerable anguish.”¹²³ The reader is encouraged to see Berlin as someone very much like themselves, as a soul with trials and struggles, even in the profession he seems to master so easily.

Woolcott subtly psychoanalyzes Berlin as a divided man: “You can guess something of the inner struggle which goes on in the bosom of one who plays both roles [of publisher and

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¹¹⁸Woolcott, 223.
¹¹⁹Maurois, 21.
¹²⁰Woolcott, 163.
¹²¹Ibid., 67.
¹²²Ibid., 39.
¹²³Ibid., 75.
songwriter]. Amusing signs of that struggle mark all Berlin’s days in the world.”124 The “publisher” side of Berlin’s personality is given control over any attempt at artistic creation that the “songwriter” side comes up with; it is “the publisher in him that drags his lazy, sick, reluctant body to the piano and tyrannically bids him write [the songs].”125 Berlin becomes an artist ruled by Tin Pan Alley demands: “The artist in him may be tickled mightily by some neat, unexpected phrase in the chorus he has just written, but the publisher in him will ruthlessly strike it out in favor of some quite routine threadbare word with no disconcerting unfamiliarity about it to stick in the crop of the proletariat.”126 Woollcott’s choice to give Berlin a tortured soul serves a twofold purpose. First, the duality of personality manufactures a sense of granting the reader an analytic glimpse into Berlin’s psyche without actually divulging any intimate details. Second, it clears Berlin from the responsibility of artistic creativity because Woollcott makes it clear that the composer is a man unwittingly ruled by the buyer’s market. This is one way in which Woollcott attempts to intercept criticism about the quality of Berlin’s music.

Woollcott is also careful to emphasize that Berlin remains in touch with his humble beginnings. This, after all, is the true mark of an American hero: a local boy who makes good but never forgets his roots. The reader learns that, in the midst of all his fame, Berlin is frequently reminded of his humble days as a waiter:

Thus it has often happened that Irving Berlin, sitting at some dinner table in London or New York has suddenly (and silently) recognized in his host or the guest across the way some former gay blade to whom he had been wont to bear drinks in the old days off the bowery. Sometimes it has been his privilege to express out of a full heart an admiration first formed back in his apprenticeship as a minstrel.127

124Ibid., 152.
125Ibid.
126Ibid., 153.
127Ibid., 50.
Thus, Berlin is a hero in the world of glitter and fame but not of it. Instead, he maintains the fiber of an American boy, a product of his difficult upbringing who is not ashamed of where he came from: “To this day . . . it requires all his self control to keep from going forth to the nearest street corner, gathering a crowd around him and singing it to them.”128 His successes are framed by the irony of his background. Berlin buys a “home on one of those giddy thorough-fares to which he had so often delivered telegrams in his fugitive days,”129 and Woollcott ensures his readers that Berlin is aware of his unusual luck: “Unformed in his thoughts is a mild wonder at the monstrous changes since the simpler days when he would write a song at sundown, sing it in Maxim’s at midnight and start in next day on another.”130

The problematic nature of biography appears in statements such as this. Woollcott is putting thoughts (unformed ones, at that) inside Berlin’s head, assessing his emotional and psychological condition with sweeping generalizations, and manipulating the picture of Berlin to make the composer out to be exactly the product readers would have wanted. New biographers argued that such a liberal interpretation was just part of an author’s creative license and freely acknowledged that no new biography gave their readers a complete picture of their subject. Perhaps Woollcott, as a man who admired Strachey so immensely, worked under a similar credo as the original new biographer who unabashedly proclaimed his purpose: “I have sought to examine and elucidate certain fragments of the truth which took my fancy and lay to my

128Ibid., 82.
129Ibid., 117.
130Ibid., 208.
As a writer concerned with “effect rather than truth,” those “certain fragments” often spun into stories and characterizations that, like Woolcott’s, were not provable.\footnote{131}{Lytton Strachey, preface to *Eminent Victorians*, quoted in Stanley Weintraub, *Biography and Truth* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1967), 38.}

*Criticizing a Hero*

Obviously not all of Woolcott’s biography is fiction. Despite rosy prose, imaginative storytelling and dubious psychoanalysis, Woolcott’s biography accurately documents the essential facts of Berlin’s life. Readers can also acknowledge that the anecdotes are possible, if not provable. Woolcott’s analysis is conceivable, if not determinable. What Woolcott unquestionably does invent, however, is the pattern of Berlin’s life narrative. By weaving elaborate stories around fragments of truth, Woolcott effectively mythologizes Berlin. As Berlin’s first biography and the only sourcebook for information about his early years, Woolcott’s fictionalized American tale affected both contemporary criticism as well as nearly all writing about Berlin in subsequent decades.

The little music criticism that exists in Woolcott’s biography is couched in terms that reinforce the composer’s role as an American hero. Woolcott emphasizes the dual images of common man and “creative ignoramus”\footnote{133}{Woolcott, 218.} by dismissing scholarly criticism while invoking the blessings of his friend Jerome Kern. In his final chapter, Woolcott addresses Berlin’s role in

\footnote{132}{Robert Blake, “The Art of Biography,” in *The Troubled Face of Biography*, eds. Eric Homberger and John Charmley (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), 77. Blake relays an anecdote where Strachey was challenged to document how he knew one of his subjects had legs that were too short for his build. Strachey’s confident reply was that he had no evidence except that his subject “was the sort of man whose legs would be too short for his body.”}
American music by first rejecting formal criticism such as that made by contemporary critic Gilbert Seldes.

Seldes’s 1924 treatise on popular entertainments, *The Seven Lively Arts*, was one of the first attempts at scholarly analysis of popular culture in the 1920s. In it, Seldes dissected Berlin’s music as well as that of his contemporaries. As one of the few academic voices of the time who advocated serious examination of popular art, the majority of Seldes’s writings are positive, but they carry an admitted “professorial” air. In his personal objection to scholarly writing as well as in his attempts to paint Berlin as a common man, perhaps Woollcott objected to Seldes’s highbrow critical language, which made the following muddled attempt at defining ragtime:

Ragtime is not, strictly speaking, time at all; neither is it *tempo rubato*: and eminently safe composers have been known to score their music *con alcuna licenza*, which leaves the delicate adjustment of time to the performer. A certain number of liberties may be taken with ragtime, and beyond this point no liberties may be taken. Within its framework, ragtime is definite enough; and you must syncopate at precisely the right, the indicated and required moment, or the effect of the syncopation is lost.

Woollcott intimates that this fumbled, academic language calls for an immediate dismissal of the critic’s musical commentary: “So I turn from Mr. Seldes, influenced by a faint, heretical suspicion that he may not know what he is talking about and certainly controlled by a conviction that, any way, Berlin would not.” Woollcott’s implication is that even a leading music critic lacks the ability to discuss Berlin’s music effectively, that the composer doesn’t understand analysis anyway, and that perhaps his songs lie outside the realm of normal criticism.

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136 Woollcott, 212. Woollcott’s attempt at distancing Berlin from the criticism of Gilbert Seldes may have also been an attempt to deflect the negative racial commentary in Seldes’s book. The racial and ethnic issues of Berlin’s reception as well as Woollcott’s manner of facing them are examined in Chapter 3.
After rejecting Seldes, Woollcott then defers all musical analysis to Jerome Kern, who contributed a letter discussing Berlin’s contribution to American music for the biography. Kern’s letter exalts Berlin's music, but further highlights the futility of critical analysis claiming:

> Since then, columns have been written about Berlin and his music. Learned expressions like “genre,” “con alcune licenza,” “melodic architecture,” “rhythmic pulsations,” have been hurled at the head of modest, shy, little Irving, to his utter bewilderment. The message is that “little Irving” has been victimized by learned scholars (read Seldes) who hurl analysis at the unsuspecting composer. By making scholarly criticisms appear “bold and foolish” and beneath the natural talent of the boyish composer, Kern outfits Berlin with the image of the common American. When praising Berlin, Kern combines the ideas of providential intervention (by calling his melodies “heaven-sent material”) with common humility (“Any suggestion that it possesses a sheer musical magnificence makes him laugh himself to death”). The superhuman/common-man duality presented in both the Horatio Alger narrative and the analysis of Berlin’s music reinforces the opinion that any attempt to seriously criticize the composer’s music is inappropriate. The reader sees this yet again when Kern comments:

> And all the time this highfalutin’ bombardment has been going on, Berlin has entrenched himself in a shell-proof, impregnable position as commander-in-chief of all the purveyors of American light music.

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137 In a letter from Woollcott to Kern, he outlines his ideas for how to approach musical criticism in his biography by saying that “I think the thing for me to do is to call a witness and I am wondering if you would care to be the witness. If it could take the form of a letter from you to me, the trick would be done” (Kaufman and Hennessey, *The Letters of Alexander Woollcott*, 77). By summing up his ideas as a “trick” to be accomplished, Woollcott reveals his intentional effort to manufacture a specific characterization of Berlin.


139 Ibid.

140 Ibid., 215.

141 Ibid., 214.
In Kern’s vocabulary, highfalutin’ criticism is both pretentious and aggressive, forcing Berlin to take cover from its attacks. Although Kern clearly intended to glorify Berlin’s role as a composer who knows the hearts of common people, his emphasis on the simple nature of Berlin’s character is ultimately patronizing.

The result of this heroic characterization is that it renders Berlin immune to criticism and analysis. After this tale of survival and triumph, dramatic enough for any novel, criticizing a main character who has endured so much seems inappropriate. Berlin’s phenomenal rise to success is certainly noteworthy, but Woollcott capitalizes on the dramatic interest and declares his life a “microcosm of this nation’s history.”142 With Berlin portrayed as the representative of the American dream, Woollcott attempts to persuade his readers to revere Berlin the hero rather than engage in serious analysis.

Evidence that Woollcott’s persuasiveness succeeded appears in scholarly criticism soon after the biography’s 1925 publication. In the last chapter of the biography, the reader learns that Berlin’s life is of such mythical proportions that it would be an excellent storyline for the first American opera. A 1926 article in *Modern Music* suggests the direct influence of these comments and demonstrates how widespread Berlin’s larger-than-life construction had become:

>The real American legends are of another nature. They are the legends . . . (you may call it a myth) of “from rags to riches”; or the legends of the immigrants; or of pioneers. Our heroes are Buffalo Bill and Booker T. Washington and Charlie Chaplin and Charlie Murphy of Tammany and Hinky Dink and the witch-burners of New England and Irving Berlin. Just as the Russian ballet has used myth directly, or nourished itself from myth, so can we.143

142Woollcott, 222.

143Gilbert Seldes, “Jazz Opera or Ballet?” *Modern Music* 3, no. 2 (1926): 15–6. The original suggestion of Berlin’s story as an opera libretto is attributed to Kern and appears on page 221 of Woollcott’s biography.
This undisguised depiction of Berlin as an American hero demonstrates how much Woollcott’s characterization had infiltrated discourse about the composer. This is one of the only references that Berlin ever receives in the journal and, instead of addressing the composer’s music, the article mimics the biography by making him a character. It could be suggested that the League of American Composers ignored Berlin in its journal simply because, as a bastion of high musical criticism, it had a bias against popular music. However, the journal faithfully undertook serious examination of popular idioms such as “jazz, swing, radio, [and] movies,”144 so the fact that Berlin is only mentioned as a character is surprising. Throughout writings on Berlin opportunities to assess his compositional skill are consistently sacrificed for glorification of his life story. Although the popularity Berlin earned on his own prior to Woollcott’s book undoubtedly had something to do with the heroic status he attained, the biography was the first printed codification of Berlin-as-myth.

In the eight decades since Woollcott’s biography first appeared, almost every publication about Berlin has depicted his character in the same heroic way. Most quote from Woollcott directly, using the same rosy narrative and the same anecdotes. For example, in *Story-Lives of American Composers*, Berlin is “a kind of Cinderella boy, who by his own hard work and cleverness grew ‘from rags to riches’”; a “wandering minstrel”; and a “misfit” with the same “sense of his own worthlessness”—statements reproduced word-for-word from Woollcott’s biography.145 Authors cannot resist recounting the tale of Berlin’s fall into the East River and

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describing how close he was to death and how desperately he clung to his five pennies.\textsuperscript{146} With only a few exceptions, analysis of his music remains largely untackled because most authors parrot the same anecdotes and reach the same glowing conclusion that Berlin is an “American legend.”\textsuperscript{147}

By continually emphasizing Berlin’s absence of musical knowledge, Woollcott codifies the attitude that analyzing Berlin’s music is futile—if the composer cannot understand musical criticism, then criticism is inappropriate. This creed is invoked throughout subsequent writings on Berlin. For example, Osgood’s 1926 text \textit{So This Is Jazz} addresses other popular composers/arrangers by comparing them to great composers and affording them narrative, analysis, and musical examples.\textsuperscript{148} In contrast, Osgood limits his discussion of Berlin to comments such as the following: Berlin is “so ignorant of its theory he can scarcely read music”; “his ‘compositions’ are noted down and arranged by a musical amanuensis [quotation marks original].”\textsuperscript{149} Scholars appear to be transfixed by this apparent lack of musical knowledge, continually reminding their readers that Berlin “cannot read a note of music, cannot write music, [and] can hardly play the piano.”\textsuperscript{150} Biographer Laurence Bergreen depicts Berlin

\textsuperscript{146} For recitations of Berlin’s East River mishap, see Henry O. Osgood, \textit{So This Is Jazz} (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1926), 220; Barbara Salsini, \textit{Irving Berlin: Master Composer of Twentieth Century Songs} (Charlottesville, NY: SamHar Press, 1972), 7; Laurence Bergreen, \textit{As Thousands Cheer: The Life of Irving Berlin} (New York: Viking, 1990), 11; and Edward Jablonski, \textit{Irving Berlin: American Troubadour} (New York: Holt, 1999), 18. These authors also indulge in the Alger-like focus on Berlin’s low wages, the tenement squalor and the moral danger Berlin encountered when he ran away from home.

\textsuperscript{147} For an example see the biography written by Berlin’s own daughter who effectively mythologizes her father: Mary Ellin Barrett, \textit{Irving Berlin: A Daughter’s Memoir} (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 25. For a discussion of scholars who have taken new approaches to Berlin free from Woollcott’s myths see pages 81–3.

\textsuperscript{148} It should be noted that Berlin was highly protective of his work, usually denying authors the right to reprint musical examples. Though this could be part of the reason Osgood focuses on character and biography, his treatment of Berlin stands out among his other writings as especially pejorative and condescending.

\textsuperscript{149} Osgood, 219.

as a man haunted by his “nagging lack of musical ability.”

Attempts to analyze Berlin’s music are almost always qualified by statements such as: “I am convinced that were Irving Berlin ever to read these pages, he would be more puzzled than pleased.”

Despite the fact that Berlin gradually acquired the ability to play piano and read music, it makes a much better story if an author invokes the Woollcott myth. Authors are usually upfront about their reliance on the “entertaining biography of Berlin written by Alexander Woollcott,” even while acknowledging its apocryphal nature. When Woollcott set out to write “a source book for the convenience of the wiser historian who will put the facts in permanent form,” he manufactured an image of Berlin that colored nearly all subsequent criticism.

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151 Bergreen, 45.


154 Woollcott, 223.
During the same spring that Woollcott began Berlin’s biography, the United States Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Act, a quota-based immigration law that reduced the flood of American immigration to a mere trickle.\footnote{Rita J. Simon, \textit{Public Opinion and the Immigrant: Print Media Coverage, 1880–1980} (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1985), 14. In an unprecedented wave of immigration, approximately twenty-four million people came to America between 1880–1924. The Johnson-Reed act placed regionally (and racially) regulated quotas on the number of immigrants that would be allowed into America. Eastern European Jews were among the ethnic groups whose immigration numbers were severely restricted.} In the \textit{Saturday Evening Post} issue that ran Woollcott’s tale of Berlin’s journey to America, an article with the subtitle “Red Poison” warned of “foreign communist agitation in the U. S.” from “aliens . . . [who] never become Americanized.”\footnote{Isaac F. Marcosson, \textit{“After Lenin—What?: Red Poison,” Saturday Evening Post} 25 January 1925, 98. The editors of the \textit{Post} launched a push for immigration restriction in their articles and editorials. Throughout the 1920s the periodical advocated a nativist, restrictionist approach to American politics and celebrated the passage of the 1924 immigration act. Later on, the \textit{Post} would be pinpointed as a source of anti-Semitism in America. (Simon, 52–3).} That same year, Henry Ford’s anti-Semitic periodical \textit{The Dearborn Independent} reached a circulation of nearly one million with articles such as “The International Jew: The World’s Foremost Problem.”\footnote{Ford R. Bryan, \textit{Beyond the Model T: The Other Ventures of Henry Ford} (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 103.} With issues of immigration and sentiments of anti-Semitism at the forefront of American culture, Woollcott, though not a Jew himself, could not have avoided addressing Berlin’s role as a Jewish immigrant. Despite the prevalent negative Jewish stereotypes in American culture, however, he engineered a reading of Berlin’s heritage that enhanced his public image, further situating the composer in the mythical and heroic narrative.
An Ancient Inheritance

In an era when prejudice against Jewish people abounded in American culture, Jews in the popular entertainment sphere had to manage their public image carefully. With nearly every popular Tin Pan Alley song written by a composer of Jewish heritage, Americans could not ignore the pivotal roles they played in entertainment.⁴ Even though it was common for composers and performers to Anglicize their names, many still held on to their ethnicity as a part of their public persona. Instead of concealing or ignoring their heritage, Jewish entertainers constructed it as positive and non-threatening. Because the anti-Semitic rhetoric of the 1920s centered on negative stereotypes about un-Americanized “New World” Jews, Jewish entertainers fashioned public images that focused on their “Old World” legacy. To fight prejudicial views of Jews as a predatory, money-grubbing, and opportunistic sect, Jews in the public eye delicately glorified their heritage as an Ancient chosen people. As scholar Jeffrey Melnick has observed: “Given that the 1910s and 1920s gave rise to some broad rhetorical attacks on secular urban Jews . . . it was quite savvy for Jews and their friends to construct a public narrative which decontaminated American Jews by making them over in the (invented) image of their . . . ancestors.”⁵ The control Jewish entertainers obtained over their public image is impressive considering that they were fighting the ugliest forms of hatred and “revis[ing] race concepts which had done (and would again do) so much to oppress other Jews.”⁶

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⁶Ibid., 62.
The “complex magic” of public image construction by Jews was most commonly obtained by attributing all of an entertainer’s musical gifts to an inheritance from fathers and grandfathers who had served as cantors. Long lineages of musical fathers helped justify the prominence of Jews in the entertainment industry; it made working as a professional musician appear like a birthright, rather than, as some saw it, as an attempt to subvert and take over American culture. Such a construct was a very useful public relations tool, for “if . . . all Jewish men were cantors, then it was religious destiny that led Jews [to Tin Pan Alley].” Promoting this belief “helped them erase the commercial taint which loom[ed]” over Jews in the music business.

Melnick observed that the inheritance-focused interpretation of Jews in popular culture sprung from biography. Once subjects were marked with the credential of “Jewish composer,” a number of laudatory lineage-based readings could be used to interpret their music. The emphasis on heritage was not confined to biographies about subjects of Jewish origin, however. Many period biographies attempted to “impress on the reader that his hero . . . must be understood in terms of his biological and regional inheritance,” a construction that relates directly to the “Hero of Consumption” characterizations popular in 1920s biography. Authors used inheritance as another way to situate their subjects into era-appropriate roles of passivity. When biographers analyzed their subjects’ character and professional success “the burden of

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7Ibid., 173. Aside from Irving Berlin, prominent Jews in the entertainment field who emphasized their cantorial heritage included Harold Arlen, Eddie Cantor, and Al Jolson. Woollcott includes mention of both Cantor and Jolson when discussing Berlin’s musical inheritance (Woollcott, 14).

8Melnick, 176.

9Ibid.

10Ibid., 168–9.

11Lowenthal, 81.
explanation and of responsibility” was placed on “the shoulders of the past generations.”

For Irving Berlin and other Jewish entertainers, portrayal as “a mere product of his past” was a particularly useful way for biographers to combat negative stereotypes.

In Berlin’s biography, Woollcott “encourages a descent-based reading of Berlin’s art” by confronting the reader with Berlin’s Jewish heritage immediately. Following the whimsical introductory anecdote, the first substantive chapter begins with the succinct declaration, “Like Jascha Heifetz, Irving Berlin is a Russian Jew.” Woollcott then infuses much of his narrative about Berlin’s childhood with references to the composer’s musical inheritance. Woollcott points out that Berlin’s father, grandfather, and great-grandfather had all been cantors in Russia. Woollcott concludes that, because the young Israel Baline was the last son in the family, his father must have been “grimly determined that his Israel should somehow fall heir to this legacy of piety and sweet sound.” Although in reality Berlin’s father was “somewhat of a journeyman failure,” a cantor who died when his son was too young to benefit from serious training, Woollcott declares that the boy received focused cantorial instruction: “[Berlin’s father] had great hopes of the boy’s future as a cantor . . . the frail transplanted rabbi spent his strength training this small son’s voice for music which is the plaint of a homeless people to the great Jehovah.” Despite very little evidence, Woollcott insists that Berlin’s father was dedicated to

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Melnick, 173.
15 Woollcott, 8.
16 Ibid., 13
17 Melnick, 256, n. 15.
18 Woollcott, 14.
raising a musical son who would fulfill the supposed expectations of their heritage. Such a narrative demonstrates a typical way to elevate the public image of Jews, for, in “calling attention to fantasized versions of their embattled first-generation fathers, these Jewish musical figures created more suitable genealogies for themselves than their actual fathers could furnish.”

Images of inheritance permeate Woollcott’s interpretation of Berlin’s career and reinforce his passive role in musical composition. Woollcott suggests that Berlin ended up on Tin Pan Alley because of some kind of divine ancestral intercession: “He had turned a corner and found himself in Tin Pan Alley. For a voice—perhaps the ancestral voice of some cantor in a poor synagogue in Russia countless years before—was whispering to him that he had found his way home.” Woollcott explains Berlin’s inspiration for songwriting by tracing the family bloodline: “It is in his blood to write the lugubrious melodies which . . . have a tear in them. Back of him are generations of wailing cantors to tinge all his work with an enjoyable melancholy.” Berlin’s “unrivaled capacity for inventing themes” is dubbed his “birthright,” but Woollcott comments that “he has added little of the art, the patience, the interest in form and the musicianly knowledge which could elaborate them.” Although Woollcott clearly set out to promote Berlin’s career, commentary such as this effectively strips him of personal initiative and inspiration. As with the chance-based American dream narrative, Woollcott does not grant Berlin any agency over his creativity or musical gifts.

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19 Melnick, 172.
20 Woollcott, 76.
21 Ibid., 86.
22 Ibid., 219.
Interpreting Berlin’s musical output as a product of his heritage, however, is useful in addressing suspicions that some of Berlin’s soulful numbers might just be an attempt to exploit the American public’s sentimentality. For a composer whose repertoire list included lighthearted numbers such as “Snookey Ookums,” “The Monkey Doodle Do,” and “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” Woollcott acknowledges that the composer’s serious numbers might not appear authentic. He expresses fears that “puzzled onlookers” think Berlin is an extortionist because they have “so little understanding that they could see only a celebrated character of Tin Pan Alley trying to sell his incommunicable woe at twenty-five cents a copy.”

Negative ethnic stereotyping fed the perception of inauthenticity and opportunism, so Woollcott invokes Berlin’s ethnicity to explain the accusations away. He dedicates a whole chapter to the story of two heartfelt Berlin numbers, “When I Lost You” and “When I Leave the World Behind.” By tracing the roots of their conception and composition, Woollcott insists that their pathos is real, not just a maudlin exploitation of personal loss. (Berlin composed “When I Lost You” shortly after the death of his first wife and based “When I Leave the World Behind” on the contents of a deceased man’s will). Through his narrative, Woollcott acknowledges that Berlin would have been aware of the popular appeal of songs that had “a tear in them” but insists that their “plaintive wail” is a result of Berlin’s heritage, not monetary incentive: “It may be the inheritance of his tribe in Irving Berlin that tinges so many of his songs with the mournfulness of solitude and self-pity. But somewhere within him the voice of the publisher whispers reassuringly that sadness is rather apt to sell better than gayety in the song market.” Woollcott nods to Berlin’s business savvy, but insists that financial return is only a small consolation in

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23 Ibid., 104.
24 Ibid., 149.
25 Ibid., 157.
comparison to the composer’s inherited despair. When discussing the intimate sadness of “When I Lost You,” Woollcott suggests that despite the “shining heap of dollars” it earned, “There must have been times when [Berlin] wished he had let no one hear it.”

Woollcott exonerates Berlin from ulterior monetary motives by giving him a naturally inherited melancholy. This is in line with the public image of Jewish composers during the 1920s, for “most accounts of Jewish music preferred to imagine that the ‘sigh and the sob’ of the Jew in music represented a spiritual inheritance.”

Outfitting Berlin with stereotypical mournfulness, Woollcott continually integrates Berlin’s ethnicity into the biography. Even though such melancholic characterization is “contrary to everything we know about Berlin’s personality,” Woollcott insists that Berlin is inspired by the “plaintive race notes, the wail of his sorrowing tribe, the lamentation of a people harried and self-pitying since time out of mind.” As a child, Berlin had “a plaintive voice tuned to the grieving of the schule [synagogue].” When considering possible motivations for Berlin’s sad songs, Woollcott states: “No lady is to blame. It is his grandfather. He would probably admit that the moment he is left alone and the sounds of the city die down, he begins to turn Russian, growing a long beard and feeling sorry for himself.”

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26 Ibid., 104. Melnick’s observation about Woollcott’s use of Jewish melancholy to interpret Berlin’s compositions is worth noting: “Irving Berlin’s lineage might permit listeners in 1912 to hear his song “When I Lost You” as a by-product of a vague and atemporal yet artistically rich Jewish melancholy” (Melnick, 171).

27 Melnick, 172.

28 Ibid., 185.

29 Woollcott, 6.

30 Ibid., 13.

31 Ibid., 86.
melancholy such an inherent part of his character helps fight negative press about Jewish opportunism and greed.

While playing up the beneficial elements of Berlin’s heritage, Woollcott also points out that the composer is not too Jewish. A construction of Berlin that clung too strongly to ethnic roots would have interfered with the everyman American hero image that Woollcott was trying to construct. Instead, Woollcott suggests several ways that Berlin is more typically American than Jewish. Berlin responded to his father’s Hebraic teaching with “blundering woolly-witted hopelessness” that “aroused all his [father’s] wrath and his despair.”

He distances himself from his religious heritage by marrying a “Gentile,” which Woollcott points out was a “violation of [his mother’s] most sacred creed.” By using both Berlin’s secular career choice and his marriage as ways to mitigate his religion, Woollcott erects a comfortable barrier between the ardent religiosity of Berlin’s first-generation immigrant family and the popular composer. Woollcott even makes sure to demonstrate that the Baline family was aware of the composer’s Americanization. According to Woollcott, Berlin’s mother eventually acknowledged that “[Berlin’s] way, whatever it might be, was one he had made for himself and that, as the tribe had not been able to help him in the beginning, so it might not rule him now.”

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32 Ibid., 14.

33 Ibid., 20. In contrast to the Americanized image of Berlin, Woollcott characterizes Berlin’s mother as a stereotypical immigrant woman: “She was an austere and pious and heavily burdened woman, who held the purse and cooked the food for all her tribe. She never learned the speech or the folkways of the new land to which she had come, nor dreamed what was going on in the turbulent world around her.” (Ibid., 14). Woollcott suggests that Mrs. Baline clung closely to her Russian heritage by encouraging readers to believe that the Baline family managed to rescue their giant feather bed (“such a one as the bride’s folks always provide when a Jewish girl is married in Russia” [Ibid., 11]) from the flames of their burning home, haul it across the ocean in a boat where the family was “shelved below deck” (Ibid., 9) and move it into a New York City tenement, all because “Mrs. Baline had issued her eight children into an unwelcoming world from that bed and she did not propose to set up housekeeping in America without it.” (Ibid., 11). No matter how implausible the story seems, it does serve to juxtapose Berlin from his traditional mother, keeping his heritage apparent all while he appears more Americanized than the standard immigrant.

34 Ibid., 22.
divide between the composer and his immigrant family helps Woollcott emphasize only the most publicly appealing aspects of Berlin’s heritage.

Another way Woollcott demonstrates that there was an appropriate distance between Berlin’s ethnic roots and American self is through an anecdote concerning the composer’s decision to change his name. Around the same time Berlin begins to aspire for a diamond ring, the story goes, he decides that he wants to be known by a less ethnic name. Woollcott claims that the composer thought his given name, Israel, was “too solemn and Talmudic a name” but knew that his nickname, Izzy, “smacked of Cherry Street and sweltering doorsteps.” The fledgling composer negotiates between an “old pride” (the ancestral ties bound up in his Hebraic name) and a “new embarrassment” (being associated with the poorest cross-section of Jewish immigrants), by naming himself Irving Berlin. While ethnically ambiguous stage names were standard practice during the 1920s, Woollcott capitalizes on Berlin’s name change to emphasize the composer’s complete Americanization. The anecdote demonstrates that Berlin knew he needed to adapt to American culture in order to succeed, that he retained enough ancestral pride to preserve his soulful Jewish inheritance, and that he wanted to rid himself of any shame associated with his immigrant status.

*Spicing Up the “Melting Pot”*

Even though Woollcott projects positive images of Jewish inheritance into his characterization of Berlin, he seasons his narrative with colorful, albeit stereotyped, stories of Jewish immigrant life. In the early decades of the twentieth century, New York’s Lower East

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35 Ibid., 70. Cherry Street, the neighborhood where the Berlin family established residence was one of the most poverty-stricken sections of the Lower East Side (Stephen Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth: Race Ethnicity and Class in America* [Boston: Beacon Press, 2001], 135).
Side was feared by outsiders as a hub of gang activity, prostitution, and violence. Anti-Semitic politicians skewed crime statistics, making it appear as if Jewish immigrants committed a disproportionate number of the city’s crimes. As fears about rising “Jewish crime” troubled New York City, a host of gangsters who were of Eastern European descent achieved infamy.

Woollcott adds zest to Berlin’s story by detailing the composer’s relationship with and proximity to these gangsters. When discussing Berlin’s early years as a waiter in Chinatown, Woollcott regales the reader with elaborate tales of corrupt voting schemes, of throat-slittings in dark stairways, and of vengeful gang murders that the composer might have witnessed. As if realizing how dramatic the Berlin fable is becoming, Woollcott steps back in the middle of the narrative and monologues: “The biographer of Irving Berlin must struggle with a temptation to hint that he served his apprenticeship in one of the deepest hell-holes of a depraved past and the temptation is all the stronger because there are so many good people who would believe it.”

Nevertheless, Woollcott continues with gangster narratives for pages, side-stepping true assessment of how depraved the conditions were for the young waiter and sensationalizing the violence he might have experienced.

Woollcott probably had several rationales behind such a glamorization of Berlin’s early life. When writing a biography of a man as young as Berlin was at the time, dedicating a

36Steinberg, 114–5.


38Woollcott, 45–6.

39For example, in an anecdote about “Hobnailed Casey’s” murder at the hand of “Frisco Joe,” Berlin is the first one to arrive back at his place of employment. Upon noticing that another waiter had preemptively drawn a line through Casey’s name on the bartab (indicating that the murder had been predicted), Woollcott has an amazed Berlin remark: “‘Gee,’ murmured the singing waiter, appreciatively, ‘did you do that when you heard the shot?’ ‘I did it,’ said the admirable Sulky, ‘when I saw Joe take the gat out of the ice box.’” (Ibid., 57). Such casual reactions suggest that violence must have been routine in the neighborhood, leading the reader to marvel at how Berlin managed to escape from a tough gangster life.
substantial amount of the book to his youth is unavoidable. Drumming up tales of a childhood spent in the underworld makes an enthralling addition to any life story, and Woollcott capitalizes on the mystery and intrigue of Chinatown to propel his narrative. However, it is in terms of constructing Berlin’s character that these gangster narratives prove most useful. Having Berlin survive the rough-and-tumble world of the Lower East Side gives the composer enough street credibility to write music that faithfully “[clings] to the idiom of the sidewalk” with lyrics that are truly “in American.” ⁴⁰ Berlin “traded on a valuable vernacular credibility early in his career” ⁴¹ and dramatizing his childhood struggles was a way for Woollcott to augment his public image. Furthermore, drawing attention to an upbringing in the masculine gang-world was a method of shedding perceptions of effeminacy that were sweepingly attached to Jews in the music business. ⁴² Also, that Berlin escaped from this world of crime and misfortune indicates that, as an immigrant Jew, he was not of the threatening “New World” stock feared and despised by the American public. Rather, the image of Berlin that emerges through Woollcott’s gangster stories is an Americanized, civilized citizen who had risen above the type of immigrants Americans did not want in their country. He, unlike the miscreants that troubled his youth, fulfilled the common generalization that the Jewish experience was “the greatest collective Horatio Alger story in American immigrant history.” ⁴³

⁴⁰Ibid., 70.
⁴¹Melnick, 97.
⁴²Ibid., 118.
Assimilating America

Another way Woollcott emphasizes the positive elements of Berlin’s Jewish ethnicity is by depicting his heritage as a tool for assimilating American culture. A popular belief in the 1920s was that Jewish composers, through their perceived rootlessness, were able to capture the truest expression of American life by merging the myriad cultures in the United States into a coherent whole. At the time, one benefit of belonging to a “wandering race” was that “‘Jewish things’ [could become], quite simply, all things. These Jews constructed their public image as ‘omni-Americans.’”44 As Jews became increasingly prominent in entertainment culture, the popular interpretation of their ethnicity was that it was “defined mostly by its mutability, its gift for assimilating the racial characteristics of ‘other’ peoples into itself.”45

Woollcott was a key voice in cultivating this public image of Jews as assimilators of American culture. He, along with John Hammond, Gilbert Seldes, Carl Van Vechten and Flo Ziegfeld, zealously promoted a view of Jews as cultural interpreters.46 Woollcott uses the assimilationist concepts attached to Jewish ethnicity in order to construct the composer as a kind of modern prophet whose music was capable of proclaiming the essence of American culture. Such rhetoric begins with the biography’s first chapter, where the concluding paragraph lists influences on Berlin’s life and envisions him as a kind of musical apothecary:

It will be left to you to guess by what alchemy he transmuted into music the jumbled sounds of his life—the wash of the river against the blackened piers, the alarums [sic] of

44 Melnick, 65. Evidence of this belief can be seen in the wildly successful 1909 play The Melting Pot by Israel Zangwill. It told the story of a young Jewish immigrant who integrated into American culture and fulfilled his “hopes and idealism for a new nation” while composing a great American symphony. Within this symphony, the genius but uneducated composer “creates America” through the “fusion of all races.” For more about the significance of The Melting Pot as well as assimilationist views of Jews see Nicholas M. Evans, Writing Jazz: Race, Nationalism, and Modern Culture in the 1920s (New York: Garland, 2000), 58–63.

45 Melnick, 62.

46 Ibid., 46; For more about the notable public figures who advocated Jewish as well as African-American entertainers, see Moore, 92–108.
the street cars, the roar of the elevated, the frightening scream of the fire engines, the polyglot hubbub of the curbs and doorsteps of his own East Side, the brassy jangle of the hurdy-gurdies, the cries of the fruit vendors and push cart peddlers, the chants in the synagogues, the whines and squeals of Chinatown, the clink of glass and the crack of revolvers in saloons along the Bowery, above all the plaintive race notes, the wail of his sorrowing tribe, the lamentation of a people harried and self-pitying since time out of mind.\textsuperscript{47}

Here, Berlin’s ability to musically synthesize the bustling American culture begins with the suggestion of magical powers and ends with observation that his Jewishness, above all, contributed to this ability. As is the case throughout the biography, Woollcott gives Berlin the ability “to wear Jewishness as a kind of magic, a lucky charm which allowed its owner good access to American stuff.”\textsuperscript{48}

Just how valuable this ethnic amulet could be is apparent through the hyperbolic praise heaped upon the composer in the final chapter. His powers of assimilation are proclaimed his strongest asset, for “he honestly absorbs the vibrations emanating from the people, manners and life of his time, and in turn, gives these impressions back to the world,—simplified,—clarified,—glorified.”\textsuperscript{49} Affording such powers to a simple immigrant seems like poetic justice to Woollcott, who argues that “if the musical interpreter of American civilization came over in the foul hold of a ship, so did American civilization.”\textsuperscript{50} The magic of Berlin’s music comes across through statements such as, “The average United States citizen [is] perfectly epitomized in Irving Berlin’s music.”\textsuperscript{51} The reader is told that Berlin “must be regarded as a pioneer” in jazz music,
for it is “first spontaneous musical expression of the United States of America.” In regard to Berlin’s future musical reception, Woollcott surmises that “the musical historian of the year 2000 will find the birthday of American music and that of Irving Berlin to have been the same.”

And, in perhaps the most often quoted statement about Berlin’s greatness, Woollcott summons Jerome Kern to report that: "Irving Berlin has no place in American music. HE IS AMERICAN MUSIC." With proclamations as definitive as these, Woollcott maximizes the perceived benefits of Berlin’s ethnicity. The composer transcends the ethnically based role as assimilator and becomes the embodiment of all things American. While assimilation was a trend in biographical representation of Jewish entertainers, Woollcott depicts the “magic of [Berlin’s] synergistic relationship” with American culture as something even greater than that of his peers.

*Special Access*

In a nation torn by racial divide, Jews were seen not just as assimilators of American culture, but also as intermediaries between the dominant European-American culture and African-Americans. The perceived special connection between African-Americans and Jews sprung from vague ideas about a shared past of enslavement and captivity and a present existence in America as peoples adrift in a nation not their own. In the realm of popular music,

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52Ibid., 213.
53Ibid., 212.
54Ibid., 216, original emphasis.
55Melnick, 76.
56Ibid., 13.
57Ibid.
both Jews and African-Americans were bound together through their claims to music that was “uniquely American.” The Jews had a stronghold over Tin Pan Alley and, even with the rampant racism of the era, the American public cautiously accepted the African-American roots of jazz and ragtime. (The racial roots of jazz were part of the reason many Americans saw such music as dangerous, sexualized, and immoral.)

There was a sense that the raw “primitive” forms of African-American jazz needed to be tamed and distilled so as not to corrupt the American public. As jazz styles became increasingly popular, white entertainers searched for ways to “make a good woman out of jazz.”\textsuperscript{58} Because of their perceived racial position as “not quite white,” Jews were ideally positioned to accomplish this task: they were close enough to African-American culture to convey the “cultural stuff of ‘blackness’” while also sufficiently integrated into white America to “distance [jazz] from actual African-Americans.”\textsuperscript{59} This prescribed role for Jewish musicians was acknowledged, even by African-Americans, during Berlin’s era.\textsuperscript{60} As appalling as these racial constructions are today, 1920s society was ingrained with these cultural biases and Woollcott, writing for readers of his era, navigated a minefield of racism as he formed Berlin’s image in the most socially acceptable way possible.

For Berlin, the perceived connection between Jews and African-Americans was not always a positive one. By the 1920s, the composer’s public image was ready for a makeover. The success he enjoyed beginning in 1911 with the “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” phenomenon

\textsuperscript{58}Woollcott, 217.

\textsuperscript{59}Melnick, 43.

\textsuperscript{60}For example, in James Weldon John’s \textit{Book of American Negro Spirituals} he found it “interesting, if not curious that . . . those who have mastered [ragtime] rhythms most completely are Jewish-Americans. Indeed, Jewish musicians and composers are they who have carried [the rhythms] to their highest development in written form” (James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, eds., \textit{The Book of American Negro Spirituals}, in \textit{The Books of American Negro Spirituals} (New York: Viking, 1926; reprint, 1969, 28)
was accompanied by a backlash of accusations that Berlin was not writing his music at all. To America’s ears, his music perfectly epitomized jazz and ragtime, sparking allegations that perhaps the music was actually written by an African-American who a conniving Berlin had enslaved. The ugliest and most persistent permutation of this rumor was that Berlin kept a “little colored boy” in his closet. In response to the rumors, Berlin answered the accusations in a 1916 interview by stating: “If they could produce the Negro and he had another hit like ‘Alexander’ in his system, I would choke it out of him and give him twenty thousand dollars in the bargain.” When Berlin suffered a creative slump years later and was asked whether “the ‘little colored boy’ was sick; Berlin responded that he had died.” These defensive and combative responses reveal a terse side of Berlin that makes no appearance in Woollcott’s biography and also demonstrate the public relations struggles that the composer faced.

As a champion of Berlin’s career, Woollcott carefully balances the benefits of his Jewish heritage as a way of tapping into African-American idioms while delicately minimizing any perception of physical closeness to African-Americans. Aware of Berlin’s “particularly strong reasons for writing African-Americans out of his musical landscape,” there is a cautious distance between the two cultures in Woollcott’s explanation of Berlin’s ragtime music. He dwells for some time on “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” a song that very clearly derives its character “from the tradition of ‘coon songs’” and explicitly “communicates a sharp racial

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61 Melnick, 114.
62 Bergreen, 69.
63 Melnick, 118.
64 Ibid., 78.
message.”

In the biography of Berlin, however, Woollcott insists that the composer intended no racial connection. At the time, the name Alexander carried with it strong racial stereotypes—it was used in minstrelsy and in popular songs as a derogatory and comic name for an African-American. Woollcott, however, insists that Berlin “alone among the writers of the world seems to have no unpleasant associations with the name of Alexander.” He continues Berlin’s exoneration with this: “Usually when you see that name affixed to a character in a novel, you must be prepared to discover that character foreclosing a mortgage on some lorn widow, or, at the very least, assaulting an innocent country lass down some shady lane.”

However, in Woollcott’s interpretation of the song there is neither racial implication nor negative connotation. By eliminating African-American inspiration from the song, Woollcott quietly defends Berlin against rampant accusations that he had stolen “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.”

Woollcott also affirms Berlin’s authorship by tracing the song’s development. It was first “an instrumental melody with no words to guide it” that “gathered dust on the shelf” until Berlin, in a hurried attempt to piece a song together, added the lyrics. The result was a song style

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65Ibid., 43. Melnick believes that the American public would have seen “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” as a “prime example of a Jewish performer translating nearness to African Americans into a cultural metaphor about the Jewish man’s special access to black forms” (ibid., 44). Woollcott, however, does not seem to want the public to interpret the song as being so racially constructed.

66Berlin would later make a similar insistence, shrugging off a connection between African-American idioms and “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” stating that he “never knew what ragtime was anyway,” despite the fact that he wrote a number of songs in his early years that marked him as ragtime’s foremost interpreter (ibid., 44).

67Woollcott, 87.

68Ibid.

69One of the most interesting rumors is that Irving Berlin actually stole the ragtime melody from an original melody in Scott Joplin’s opera Treemonisha. In a compelling article, Edward Berlin concludes that there are reasons to suspect plagiarism, but that the evidence is not definitive enough to make a judgment call. See Edward Berlin, “Scott Joplin’s Treemonisha Years,” American Music 9 (1991): 260–76.

70Woollcott, 87.
“which no one had ever consciously heard before.” Woollcott does acknowledge African-American idioms as raw materials for the song’s composition, but makes sure to emphasize that “Alexander” is a good distance away from the “rhythm which had begun to take form in honky-tonks where pianists were dislocating old melodies to make them keep step with swaying hips and shoulders of spontaneous darky dancers.” Instead, the song is divorced from its roots and hailed as the piece that single-handedly “stamped a new character on American music.” Throughout the biography Woollcott depicts Berlin as the spiritual father of ragtime, using his Jewish ethnicity as a key to unlocking its rhythms, while removing associations with African-American culture.

Woollcott continually affirms Berlin as leader of the ragtime movement, a savior who purified syncopated rhythms from their origin in “rathskellers and bordellos.” When assessing his career, Woollcott wants readers to think of him “as the man who took ragtime when it was little more than a mannerism . . . and made it into a custom of the country.” Woollcott frees his composer-hero, however, from being party to jazz’s raw, immoral, and racial character by claiming that “he has within him as his dearest possession a fundamental sweet melody that is as remote from (and as defiantly independent of) all that is meant by the word jazz as anything in this world could be.” Berlin’s possession of sweet melody, then, separates him from the “ribald and rowdy . . . and debauch” roots of this new music.

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71 Ibid., 85.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid., 216.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
Another way Woollcott separates Berlin from connections to African-American culture is through his dismissal of Gilbert Seldes’s criticism. Aside from Seldes’s academic wording, his assessment of Berlin’s music included many of the negative implications the composer was seeking to avoid. In *The Seven Lively Arts* Berlin is introduced as “a neat, unobtrusive, little man with bright eyes and an unerring capacity for understanding, appropriating, and creating strange rhythms.” Seldes envisions a picture in which Berlin appears: “in the foreground, attended by negro slaves; behind him stands a rather majestic figure, pink and smooth, surrounded by devils with muted brass and saxophones. They are Irving Berlin and Paul Whiteman.” Here is the precisely the vision of Berlin as an uncomfortably close intermediary that Woollcott wanted to avoid. Seldes, through an “inappropriately comic invocation of slavery,” suggests that African-American music can be transferred through Berlin into the pure white jazz manifested in the music of Paul Whiteman. Using Berlin in this way adheres to the anti-Semitic view of Jews as a shrewd and exploitative people, ready to capture and profit from that which belongs to African-Americans. Woollcott, in his attempt to paint Berlin’s public image in the rosiest way possible, asserts that Seldes does not know what he is talking about in order to avoid negative public images. Woollcott prefers to construct Berlin as the originator of ragtime rather than as an exploiter of “primitive” jazz.

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77 Ibid., 217.
78 Seldes, 69.
79 Ibid., 69–70.
80 Evans, 130.
81 Ibid.
Descent-Based Readings

Between the mysticism associated with cantorial descent, the intrigue of Jewish gangster life, the ascribed powers of assimilation, and the resultant embodiment of American music, Woollcott’s construction of Berlin’s Jewish heritage served the purpose of its time. The final sentence in the biography seems to capture everything Woollcott might have wanted Americans to believe about Berlin’s character: “I am not free to put in words how deeply I honor the true and gentle American who was carried out of Russia by that refugee Rabbi and who served for a time the drinks and the songs at [Pelham Cafe].”

The composer is fully integrated into American culture, with none of the threatening, deceitful stereotypes commonly associated with Jews. He embodies the mystical inheritances of a Rabbi father and he assimilated American culture while humbly serving tables, waiting for his ticket to success. Woollcott crafted a Jewish composer who used the best of his heritage while rising above the perceived negative aspects of his ethnicity. However beneficial for Berlin’s reception during the 1920s, this early interpretation of Berlin has skewed a realistic assessment of the composer.

Subsequent authors who have written about Berlin reiterate Woollcott’s inheritance-based interpretation of his music. For example, in So This Is Jazz, a first attempt to analyze jazz music, Berlin has “a voice, inherited perhaps from the cantorial father.”

In another survey of American popular music, author Kathleen Little Bakeless mimics Woollcott’s prose by commenting that “in [Berlin’s] blood was the plaintive wail of his self-pitying race, lamenting the persecution from which his father had fled.” Berlin’s own daughter calls her father “the

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82 Woollcott, 223.
83 Osgood, 221.
84 Bakeless, 219.
immigrant cantor’s son from the Lower East Side who became America’s greatest songwriter,“85 all while acknowledging the uncertainty of Berlin’s inheritance by saying that his father, “the cantor, the scholarly and musical one, was a shadowy figure always.”86 In his catalogue of American songwriters, David Ewen attributes Berlin’s singing ability to a “heritage from his father”87 and in Robert Kimball and Linda Emmet’s The Complete Lyrics of Irving Berlin, the composer learned “singing with his father, who helped train a synagogue choir, gave Berlin his early involvement with music.”88 The New Grove Dictionary of Music article opens with “Irving Berlin, American composer of Russian birth. The son of an impoverished Jewish cantor . . . .”89 More recently, Charles Hamm summoned Woollcott’s opinion with “his first biographer agrees that the song was unusual and effective because of its ‘exultant’ nature, so unlike many of Berlin’s ‘lugubrious melodies’ that betray a heritage of ‘generations of wailing cantors.’”90

A number of biographical and musicological documents also tap into Woollcott’s theme of Jewishness as a talisman for popular song. In the most exhaustive biography of Berlin, Laurence Bergreen discusses how Woollcott believed that “at the core of this elusive songwriter’s being and talent lay his exotic Jewishness.”91 Bergreen reaffirms Woollcott’s conclusion by commenting that several of Berlin’s songs were “one-of-a-kind sob ballad[s]

85Barrett, 17.
86Ibid., 98.
90Hamm, 104.
91Bergreen, 197.
rooted in his isolation and melancholia.”

Woollcott’s description of Berlin’s ability to assimilate and embody America runs throughout Berlin scholarship. In Kimball and Emmet’s assessment, Berlin “heard and absorbed the sounds of the turbulent city and its teeming population of immigrants and poured them into all his songs.”

In a short biography by Barbara Salsini, who wrote in a style blatantly close to Woollcott, the author suggests that perhaps the reason Berlin could interpret the musical moods of Americans for so many years is because he had a “special education.” His lessons in human dignity and suffering had roots in an ancient religion and were reinforced in a terrifying pogrom, then were continued in the slums of New York’s Lower East Side. Here he also absorbed the sounds and vibrations, the music, of clashing cultures and had his first lessons in hard work, thrift and perseverance.

Assimilationist rhetoric enters scholarly criticism of Berlin as well. In a frustrated attempt to pinpoint stylistic characteristics of Berlin’s music, Alex Wilder concludes: “I have been searching assiduously for stylistic characteristics in Berlin, but I can’t find any. . . . I find no clue to a single, or even duple, point of view in the music.” He resolves problem by concluding that Berlin had “a way of writing which had its roots and sources in America.” As with Woollcott, attributing so much to Berlin’s inherited ability to merge musical styles denies him agency over his own music. Most attempts at analysis invoke Berlin’s Jewish ethnicity rather than discussing the music itself. In most cases, scholarly analysis does not apply to a composer who passively inherited his musical ability.

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92Ibid., 223.
93Kimball and Emmet, xvi.
94Salsini, 29.
95Wilder, 105.
96Ibid., 119.
97For a discussion of recent publications that are exceptions to this statement, see page 81–3.
As in Woollcott’s biography, many writings on Berlin attempt to exonerate the composer from any hints of racism or negative African-American connections. In one biography of the composer, the writer acknowledges that “the all-dancing, all-laughing, all-excited, chickened-out, water melon-gorged Negro was actually a marionette whose strings were wound tightly round the fingers of the songsmiths of America.” He absolves Berlin of taking unfair advantage of African-Americans, however, stating: “All Irving was doing was serving the public to the best of his abilities. The sooner this dancing coon could be eliminated the better! I like to believe Irving was thinking these good things.”

Stepping inside Berlin’s head to eliminate any hint of prejudice, the biographer acknowledges the racial elements of ragtime while assuring readers that Berlin was not exploiting African-Americans.

One of the most commonly invoked parts of Woollcott’s biography is the hyperbolic phrasing about Berlin as the embodiment of American music. As flattering and well-intentioned as the biography’s assessment may be, looking at the ripples of Kern’s declaration that Berlin “is American music” across the decades rouses the question of whether it is truly beneficial to be marketed as such. This sound byte makes its way into nearly every commentary on Berlin, often in lieu of realistic music criticism. *New Grove* references Berlin’s “chameleon-like ability to adapt to the latest trends and styles in popular music” and concludes with Kern’s famous quote.

Kimball asserts that “Berlin more than confirmed what Jerome Kern . . . said of him, ‘Irving Berlin has no place in American music: he is American music.’” Indirect references to the letter Kern wrote for Woollcott’s book also appear throughout Berlin scholarship. For example, readers are told: “Even more surprising is the fact that all the songs on this ‘all-American’ list

98 Whitcomb, 81–2.
99 Bordman and Hischak, “Irving Berlin.”
100 Kimball and Emmet, xvi.
represent the work of one man, a songwriter whose name itself is a synonym for American music: Irving Berlin.\textsuperscript{101} Certainly a man whose impact on American music was so profound deserves the justice of serious scholarly examination. Unfortunately, portraying Berlin as the embodiment of American music precludes an examination of what makes this music so exceptional. When Woollcott invoked Berlin’s ethnicity as a force for epitomizing America, he constructed a man who was more symbol than composer.

\textsuperscript{101}Salsini, 4.
CONCLUSION

Using a story-teller’s license to create the illusion of irrefutable fact, Woollcott codified both the grammar and the vocabulary of Berlin discourse, largely without discussing music. Because of the tendency to view musical style as an outgrowth of lifestyle, it has proven difficult to divorce assessment of Berlin’s music from the biographical constructs Woollcott formed. While contextualizing the biography is useful as a means to understand ideological trends in the 1920s, it does not provide a realistic depiction of the composer or his music. The image Woollcott set forth has been so pervasive that anyone approaching Berlin’s music must contend with his mythic interpretation. Berlin’s secluded tendencies and hesitance about giving copyright permission has compelled reliance upon Woollcott’s biography as a source document, resulting in a tendency to focus principally on the composer’s life story.

Since the composer’s death in 1989, several Berlin biographies have been published that, to varying degrees, perpetuate Woollcott’s myths. In As Thousands Cheer (1990), Laurence Bergreen uses Woollcott’s evaluation of Berlin as “a creative ignoramus” to assemble a patronizing interpretation of the composer’s skills. Bergreen’s biography generally avoids heroic superlatives, but takes a novelistic approach to the composer’s life by framing it as a series of melodramatic events and seasoning the narrative with invented dialogue. As a journalist and not a music scholar, Bergreen’s attempts to assess Berlin’s music are vague and often inaccurate.

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1 A similar fate was handed to George Gershwin, as assessed in Charles Hamm, “Towards a New Reading of Gershwin,” in The Gershwin Style, ed. Wayne Schneider (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3–11. Interestingly, both Berlin and Gershwin had wildly successful biographies written about them in their early thirties and serialized in popular magazines (see Isaac Goldberg, George Gershwin: A Study in American Music. [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1931]). Both written by close family friends and both dripping with hyperbole and mythological constructs, they are examples of how a first biography can affect future scholarly interpretation.
generalities. Mary Ellin Barrett’s 1994 publication, *Irving Berlin: A Daughter’s Memoir*, is a levelheaded personal account, but the shadow of Woolcott’s biography tints the facts about her father’s early years as well as her musical assessment. In 1998, Philip Furia published his version of Berlin’s life, which similarly relies on Woolcott and previous biographers. In a 1999 Berlin biography, music scholar Edward Jablonski frequently leans on Woolcott’s facts and interpretations, but, to the author’s credit, willingly acknowledges the problem with using Woolcott as an informant: “[Woolcott] was not above a bit of hyperbole if it contributed to a good yarn”; “[Information is documented] more romantically if perhaps less accurately by Woolcott in his biography.” Despite these disclaimers, such frequent invocation of Woolcott demonstrates that the new biography spirit which colored the first Berlin biography is alive and well. After surveying the other biographical writings on Berlin and finding them lacking, a reviewer for Jablonski’s biography commented with resignation: “Perhaps the problem is less with this particular biography than with the life itself.”

I do not believe, however, that such defeatism over Woolcott’s long shadow has a place in Berlin scholarship. Although no single biography yet offers a satisfying picture of the composer, recent years have brought several important contributions to the study of Berlin’s music. Scholars working on Berlin even use Woolcott’s mythology as motivation for their studies. For example, in the article “Gambling With Chromaticism? Extra-diatonic Melodic Expression in the Songs of Irving Berlin,” music theorist David Carson Berry sets out to

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3 Jablonski, 12.

4 Ibid., 372.

“explode the myth” of Berlin’s musical illiteracy. Through theoretical examination of Berlin’s chromaticism, Berry constructs a compelling argument against the composer’s alleged ineptness. Specifically, he demonstrates that Berlin could not have only played “helplessly in F-sharp,” as Woollcott contended, and that the composer’s harmonic sense was not bound to the services of his transposing piano. Both Berry and theorist Allen Forte have used Schenkerian analysis to examine Berlin’s music and have found structural sophistication in his melodies. Through their theoretical analyses, both demonstrate that the melodies Woollcott attributed to a mystical “melodic gift” are actually carefully crafted works of refinement.

Musicologist Charles Hamm’s exemplary scholarship on Berlin offers a promising future for work on the composer. His critical edition of Berlin’s early songs published in *Recent Researches in American Music* and his monograph *Songs from the Melting Pot: The Formative Years* mark tremendous strides in Berlin scholarship. Hamm’s edition of the 190 Berlin songs published before 1915 present “each song as Berlin wanted it to reach the public at the time of publication,” and Hamm’s preparation included meticulously consulting the earliest sheet music, recordings, and Berlin’s private papers to arrive at an authoritative representation. Both his prefatory essays to the edition and his monograph set the composer and his work in a rich cultural context. With hindsight that Woollcott could not have provided and scholarship that recent biographers have not attempted, Hamm uses both biography and musicological analysis to

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present a new perspective of the racial and ethnic issues in Berlin’s life and music. He confronts the heroic construction of Berlin’s life and thoughtfully considers the rumors about plagiarism (especially concerning “Alexander’s Ragtime Band”) that plagued Berlin. Affording Berlin’s music long-deserved scholarly attention, Hamm classifies Berlin’s early songs according to style and genre, neatly organizing them in a way that provides coherency to the composer’s prolific output. His work demonstrates that Berlin’s music is worthy of serious study and his methodology has served as a model for other scholars of vernacular music. For example, in a recent article published in *American Music*, Larry Hamberlin examines the text, music, performance practice and cultural context of “That Opera Rag,” a song by Berlin and Ted Snyder. By integrating nuanced musical analysis and sociological considerations, Hamberlin is another scholar contributing to Berlin scholarship without rehearsing Woollcott’s well-worn tropes.

Although Woollcott’s characterization of Berlin has persisted even in the most recent biographies on the composer, recent musicological and theoretical scholarship demonstrates how that early mythology might actually be inciting scholars to examine both Berlin and his music. By tackling Woollcott’s myths and digging for the fragments of truth they grew from, perhaps Berlin’s legacy can finally be interpreted and understood in a realistic light. We may in fact find a composer of true greatness behind the fictional façade.

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