The Conventional Lies and Paradoxes of Jewish Assimilation: Max Nordau's Pre-Zionist Answer to the Jewish Question
Author(s): Jay Geller
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The Conventional Lies and Paradoxes of Jewish Assimilation: Max Nordau's Pre-Zionist Answer to the Jewish Question

Jay Geller

“That antisemitism is a manifestation of a chief principle of the world-process, the struggle for existence, surely should not be disconcerting to a follower of Darwin [i.e. Nordau].”


A nalysis of the prospects for and implications of assimilation into modern European society for the cultured Jewish bourgeoisie has quite understandably focused upon the work of Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, Theodor Herzl, Franz Kafka, Karl Kraus, Arthur Schnitzler and Otto Weininger.² Discussion of the dilemmas intrinsic to their situation traversed their public writings as well as their private correspondence and journals. Indeed, they were more than observers; their efforts to mediate the Zweiheit, duality, of German (European) and Jewish identities in many ways shaped their work.

Yet their witness to and confrontation with the contradictions of Jewish existence was already anticipated by the early work of a figure several years their senior: Max Nordau. A belletrist, journalist, physician and social critic, Nordau was perhaps the foremost cultural icon of Jewish intellectual assimilation during the 1880s and early 1890s. When
Freud went off to Paris in 1885 to work with Charcot, his friends insisted that he make a pilgrimage to Nordau there. Contemporaries held Nordau in such high esteem that his 1895 endorsement of Zionism helped confer legitimacy upon Herzl’s idea. A further indication of his stature is his entry in the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901–12); it has more column inches than Herzl, let alone Freud, Schnitzler and these others whose careers were still developing. Ironically, his original prominence contributed to his virtual oblivion today; as Herzl’s champion he took the fall for the Zionist leader’s unpopular Uganda resettlement plan and as the author of the 1892 best-selling anti-modernist polemic *Entartung* (“Degeneration”) he disparaged Ibsen, Nietzsche, Wagner, Zola and others who today epitomize the heights of modern culture.

The appeal of this polyphonic was in fact his representativeness. The noted cultural historian George Mosse has remarked that Nordau “stood for . . . the beliefs and hopes which characterized so many of his class, profession and generation.” As a trained physician and well-read critic Nordau provided the authoritative voice that legitimized their claims to hegemony. He validated their rationalist science and their masculinist bourgeois values in an era of perceived social upheaval and feared breakdown of ethnic, gender and sexual identities. By diagnosing the new art forms and lifestyles of the modernists as symptoms of individual neuropathology Nordau confirmed the apocalyptic qualms of his fellow cultured bourgeoisie. But he offered them as well the solace of a scientific explanation (and hence opened the possibility of a cure) for society’s apparent degeneration.

Nordau also represented certain beliefs and hopes that some of his fellow Jews were less likely to acknowledge. In his life and in his writings he embodied the contradictions created by Jewish desires for assimilation. While his plenary speeches to the first Zionist congresses (1897 and 1898) and writings such as *Muskeljudentum* (Jewry of Muscle, 1903) clearly address the dilemmas of Jewish existence in postemancipation Europe, Nordau claimed that he had shunted aside any interest in, let alone identification with, Jewishness until his fortieth year (c. 1890); then, antisemitism’s intractability convinced him of the failure of assimilation as a modus vivendi for Jews in postemancipation Europe. Indeed, in his early cultural criticism, *Die conventionellen Lügen der Kulturmenschheit* (“The Conventional Lies of Our Civilization”) and its sequel *Paradoxe* (“Paradoxes”), explicit discussions of Jewish matters appear to be minimal. Consequently, it has been argued by the historian P. M. Baldwin that Nordau’s interest in antisemitism and Judaism was negligible in his pre-Zionist writings.
Yet since Leo Strauss’ *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, readers have plumbed conspicuous silences with critical sonar and recorded echoes of a subtextual response to the historical conditions and constraints under which authors wrote. Hence, Nordau’s self-representations to the contrary, his earlier writings can be seen as just as shaped by the problems of Jewish identity in European society as his later work, if less manifestly so. His pre-Zionist cultural criticism bears witness to his attempt to resolve the paradox of the assimilated male Jewish intellectual: to present a European persona to an audience, which included himself, that could only see a Jew. The rhetoric of *Lügen* and *Paradoxe*—the puns, wordplays, displacements, conspicuous omissions and inclusions—is replete with references to both Jewish attempts at assimilation and antisemitic depictions of Jews. In particular, examining his intentional use of a pun, “Mieselsucht,” a term that signifies both leprosy and gloominess, as a primary diagnostic category and investigating his continuous allusions to circumcision reveal Nordau’s persistent concern with western European Jewry. Further, such analysis demonstrates the manner by which the predominant gentile culture’s negative construction of the Jew conditioned Jewish self-identity.

Yet *Die conventionellen Lügen der Kulturmenschenheit* and *Paradoxe* are more than the products of a well-read and well-connected cultural critic who fancied himself a stylist and who had a passion for puns. In addition, like other texts they are conditioned by—as well as condition—the cultural grid that generated meaning in Nordau’s society. Upon this intertextual web of elite and popular culture, of images and narratives, of anthropological tracts and religious icons, of gender roles and racially inscribed bodies, the social discourse of antisemitism floated like a “miasma.” The everpresent assault of antisemitic images, attitudes and valuations were traumatizing; the ways of working through these trauma were just as numerous: not just consciously in life choices but also less consciously in the attempts to articulate the nature of one’s self, of the self, and of society. Further, by encoding the world, dirempting both words and things into series of hierarchically determined oppositions, the discourse of antisemitism left its trace upon, indeed helped produce, works such as *Lügen* and *Paradoxe*.

Recognizing that cultural products emerge from such networks of potential meanings, citations, associations and values, analysis of *Lügen* and *Paradoxe* thus requires an approach that precludes differentiating that late-nineteenth-century European culture into relatively autonomous totalities like science, literature, politics, popular culture, the antisemitic fringe, etc.; it also requires that influence not be understood through positivistic reiterations of a writer’s read-

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ing habits. Benjaminitian physiognomy provides such a way to understand those times and texts. A physiognomy seeks to represent “the context within which the unique and the extreme stands alongside its counterpart.”16 Picking among the collected litter of this time and Nordau’s work, this method dislodges phenomena from their surroundings and grasps them in a new “configuration pregnant with tensions.”17 Subjected to a shock—such as contact with Mieselsucht—the constellated moments “crystallize into a monad”18 and become a meaningful whole.

Before this act of appropriation, however, neither text nor society forms a totality: to speak of social discourse, of its pervasive antisemitism and of the structural position of the Jew as the other of the gentile European,19 is not to propose some all-consuming Zeitgeist. There is a hegemonic gentile bourgeois discourse (albeit with national variations), but hegemony by definition implies that there are other voices both in the culture and in the canonical texts. Hegemony can constrain both the production and interpretation of texts; it can devalue or repress the counterhegemonic elements. However, it cannot eliminate them.20 Hegemonic values and representations can also come into conflict with one another. Thus, the ostensive egalitarianism and the extensive negation of identity markers (because they interrupt the flow of capital) promulgated by the sometimes hegemonic liberalism would appear to oppose the hierarchical differentiations of antisemitism. Even when liberalism was not in ascendance, another bourgeois value, public discretion or modesty, would often conflict with the anxiety-generated pathos that colored so many antisemitic utterances. Similarly, while the dominant discourses defined appearance as a manifestation of essence, that same discretion precluded certain appearances, such as that of the (circumcised) penis, from being explicitly addressed.21 Other representations were consequently produced.22 While such social processes of displacement have led to the impression that antisemitic discourse was some separate and separated extreme opposed to the normative, it was in fact in the center.23

Adopting a physiognomic approach, this study examines how Nordau’s Die conventionellen Lügen der Kulturmenschenheit and Paradoxe form a diptych which hinged upon the “Jewish Question.” Out of a portrait of his times Nordau envisioned a utopian society governed by natural Darwinian truths and resolved cultural antinomies, a world in which all men are brothers, all women are wives, and all Jews have long since been radically assimilated.24 Nordau would project a future without Jews, but he was unable to overcome a present which was too filled with them.
The Conventional Lies of an Assimilated Jew

In 1883 Max Nordau published his critique of the religious, political, economic and sexual institutions of contemporary society, *Die conventionalen Lügen der Kulturmenschheit*. Banned in Russia, confiscated in Austria and included on the Vatican’s Index, it achieved a *succès de scandale* that eventually resulted in over seventy editions and numerous translations.\(^25\) Nordau continued his assault on the conventional wisdom of his age two years later with *Paradoxe*, an examination of the reigning antinomies of cultural understanding, such as optimism and pessimism, individual and social, genius and talent, nation and state.

In these works, Nordau brought his medical training and his Darwinist conviction to the analysis of the “civilized world” (*Kulturwelt*), which he viewed as “a single monstrous hospital ward” (CL1). He diagnosed the rampant pessimism afflicting European society as “Mieselsucht,” a term signifying both leprosy and gloominess (P12): “This disease comes to light in every manifestation of the human spirit. Literature and art, philosophy and the positive sciences, politics and economy, all are infected by its taint” (CL8). For Nordau the etiology of this plague lay in the failure of societal institutions to act in accordance with the evolutionary principles of natural selection (*Zuchtwahl*) and the struggle for existence (*Kampf ums Dasein*) (CL35). In the wake of Darwin, he found inexcusable and fatal to humanity the contravention of these natural laws; such action prevented the instincts of self- and species-preservation from attaining their ends.

According to Nordau the civilized world thwarted the natural, progressive development of humanity by blindly ignoring evolutionary insight. Instead, counterfeit institutions—such structures of social differentiation as religion, politics, economics and matrimony—produced the artificial identities of the priest, the monarch, the capitalist, the loveless prostitute-spouse and the virago. Nordau opposed these conventional lies and unnatural types with the natural differences engendered by obedience to evolutionary law, namely, the differences between the sexes and those among the races and nationalities. For Nordau, fixed, natural gender identities were the necessary vehicle for selection.\(^26\) Similarly, the telos of evolution was furthered by the struggle for survival, first between biologically differentiated higher and lower races (the lower races will be exterminated) and then among the linguistically differentiated nationalities of that higher, white race.

Nordau’s discussion of conventionally pathological versus evolutionarily healthy differences all but avoids what appears in the last half of the nineteenth century as a paradigm of natural identity: the Jew. He...
ignores the claims made by contemporary antisemitic writers about the Jewish role in economics, politics and the press. Further, he implicitly distinguishes himself and his fellow cosmopolitan Jews from those types most vulnerable to gentile criticism: the ancient, eastern and spießbürgerlich Jews.\textsuperscript{27} His apparently marginal references to Judentum (Judaism, Jewishness, the Jewish people) comport with the desire of a cosmopolitan European to avoid having the recognition of his Jewish descent interfere with his assimilation into gentile high society. Typical of the assimilated Jewry of his generation, Nordau seems to assume that extensive discussion of the Jewish Question would call attention to his Jewish particularity and thereby undermine his pretensions to speak from an objective, universal perspective. Worse, whether repeating the negative valuations of Jewish behavior or engaging in what would be perceived as an apologia, he risked being identified with regnant representations of the ethnic or racial Jew.\textsuperscript{28}

Yet omission of such discussion would be no less conspicuous in texts claiming a global interpretation of Europe’s malaise. Nordau is writing at the height of the Berlin antisemitic movement, the pogroms in Russia, the Rohling affair in Austria and the Tisza-Eszlar blood libel in his native Hungary. Hence, he acknowledges the Jewish Question, but he argues that it is in and of itself inconsequential. While he lists German antisemitism among the first symptoms of the Kulturwelt’s unhealthy state, he regards it as epiphenomenal; antisemitism is merely a pretext (\textit{Vorwand}) and a disguise (\textit{Verkleidung}) for specific class and age-group passions (such as envy, ressentiment) “which do not venture to show themselves under their true name” (CL2). He further defuses the question by not allowing one name to show itself in his discussion of German antisemitism: the Jews. Nordau’s strategy led one critic to retort that “With regard to antisemitism . . . all the reasons for its appearance are enumerated [in Nordau’s work]; only the chief one, the conduct of the Jews themselves, is not at all referred to.”\textsuperscript{29}

Nordau does mention contemporary western Jewry explicitly, but in these few passages Jewishness is a religious determination. Thus, according to the rationalist Nordau, for whom ritual is a primitive relic and belief in God a priestly trick, Jewishness is artificial or conventional and not a matter of a people or \textit{Volk}. In \textit{Lügen}, Nordau confines examination of contemporary Jewry to the chapter on the religious lie. Here Jews appear with Christians in his dismissal of their liturgies, because religious services are all interlaced with ancient barbaric cultic practices and beliefs (CL71).

In the chapter’s only other reference, Nordau evokes Jewish identity to exemplify how religious designations enforce what are in fact artificial
differentiations among people. He calls attention to those Austrians who choose the official designation “creedless” (Confessionlos); they “deluded themselves that they could escape the prejudices which follow after their tribe [Stamm], if they were no longer officially classed with the Jewish religious community.” He then relates that in Austria “creedless” became almost synonymous with “Jewish”.

"When some candidate for admission to the University replied ‘creedless’ to the then-usual question about his religion, the secretary of the University of Vienna used to remark with a good-natured smile, ‘Why don’t you say right out that you are a Jew!’" (CL40). Illustrating the artificiality of religious denomination with attempts by Jews to disguise, if not to repudiate, their origin, Nordau indicates that Judenm, like all conventional religions, has no positive content. Moreover, he differentiates himself from those self-deluding individuals who assume that designations such as “creedless” or “Jewish” refer to natural (i.e., real) identities. Nordau may also be differentiating himself from the stereotype of the sly or deceitful Jew.

Since in the diptych “Jewish” merely designates religious affiliation—it is an extrinsic attribute rather than some intrinsic national or racial character—Nordau can consistently avoid mention of Jews qua Jews in his treatment of the other conventional lies. On occasion he does invoke the ancient Hebrews, but modern Israelites like Nordau are not to be identified, pace Voltaire, with their alleged biblical forebears. Nordau describes the Hebrews as crude, lewd and uncreative (CL70). Further, in his comparison of French unpreparedness to inhabit the new world created by the Revolution to the incapacity of “that Egyptian-born generation” (CL97) to settle Canaan, they serve only as a negative example. And contemporary political leaders like Disraeli and Lassalle (CL204), whose Jewish descent was well-known but in these texts goes unremarked, are portrayed as motivated by individual not tribal psychology: they are unlike their purported Old Testament ancestors who were barbarically governed by “national-Jewish-patriotic” (nationaljüdischpatriotisch; CL70) sentiments.

Such biblical antecedents were of less concern to Jews desiring acceptance into European society than were the pervasive antisemitic representations of their “coreligionists.” Consequently, Nordau’s general omission of the Jews from the chapters on economics, marriage and the press is striking. Contemporary critiques of capitalism assigned Jews a fundamental role. During the 1870s Otto Glagau wrote a series of notorious articles in that widely read bastion of the German Mittelstand, Die Gartenlaube, which blamed Jewish speculators, middlemen and legislators for the crash of 1873 and for the ensuing travails.
of the peasantry and petit bourgeoisie: “Jewry is Manchesterism in the extreme. . . . Its center is the stock exchange. . . . As an alien tribe it fastens itself on the German people and sucks their marrow. The social question is essentially the Jewish question; everything else is swindle." But Nordau engages in neither apologetic for, nor vilification of, Jewish involvement in capitalism. Like the contributors to the antisemitic critique of finance capital, he describes speculators and the stock jobbers as villains and parasites (Schmarotzer, CL243), but he does not identify these professions as Jewish. He lists Baron Hirsch and Rothschild among the super-rich, but just as prominent are non-Jews like Krupp and Vanderbilt (CL230). When Rothschild returns to Nordau’s argument, it is not to personify perverse capitalism but to exemplify the inability of the wealthy to prevent the deserved descent into poverty of their incompetent descendants (CL296).

While Jews were also prominent in contemporary discourse on the commercialization of marriage and the relationship between marriage and racial preservation (for example, endogamy or inbreeding), they are absent from Nordau’s consideration of such aspects of the matrimonial lie. Finally, Nordau’s attacks on the new power of the press do not, unlike the diatribes of Hartmann, Stoecker and Treitschke, code the fourth estate as Jewish. Rather, he presents a general dissent with—without consideration of the “descent” of—journalistic practice and practitioners.

Such omissions were striking to the author of Anti-Nordau, Freiherr V. von Wasserschleben. For him, the rationale for antisemitism lay particularly in the Jews’ role in the economy and in their refusal to intermarry. But Nordau’s situation required this silence. Ascribing to Jews any specific responsibility for the objects of his critique would have been read as supporting the assumption of an essential Jewish nature. For Wasserschleben, as for many Jews and gentiles during this period, Jewishness was an essential not an accidental characteristic, whether the essence was grounded in an ontological or in a racial-anthropological definition of identity. The antisemitic critique of the social and economic crises of modernity did not blame individuals who happened to be Jewish; it blamed the indelible Jewish nature of those individuals. Thus conversion, let alone the statement of “creedlessness,” was usually insufficient for sloughing off Jewish identity. Had Nordau noted the Jewishness of the individuals in his critique, he would have, regardless of his intentions, recalled the antisemitic polemics and their assumptions about Jewish nature qua innate. Because such polemics branded the Jew as alien and incapable of either producing or representing European culture, assimilation—becoming a European—would be im-
possible. An apologia was an impossible alternative to silence; it would have been viewed as special pleading and thus would have compromised the universal perspective he claimed for himself as a scientist and as a member of the European bourgeoisie.

Although discussion of contemporary Jewry is largely anecdotal in Lügen, one particular Jewish type is extensively examined, albeit by allusion, in the sequel. There Nordau describes a group who unimaginatively and rather conventionally embody what they believe is proper European culture. His analysis of both “die Philister,” the modern-day philistines, and the genius deploys a number of Jewish markers to evoke a contrast between the spießbürgerlich destiny of the “creedless” students of his earlier anecdote and those creative individuals, perhaps like himself, whose insights further the natural development of humanity.

The modern-day philistines appear in Nordau’s analysis of the antinomy between majority and minority. They are introduced as the “bogeyman” (schwarze Mann) of the “genius” (wohlgeborene Seele; P33). Such characterization of the philistine as black (schwarz) resonates with Jewish associations. Jews were often depicted as black by nineteenth-century Europeans.36 A more direct connection between that stock figure of German folklore, the “schwarze Mann,” and the Jew arises in consideration of Nordau’s historical context: his work appeared during a time when Jews were being accused of ritually murdering gentle children; they were the archetypal bogeymen.37

Nordau next illustrates the opposition between the philistines and the genius by contrasting “the children of Israel” with the “talented Old Egyptian state engineer of the top rank” who designed the pyramids. Echoing long-standing Jewish stereotypes, he describes the former as “very vulgar” and connects their collective character to their “well-attested taste for onions and fleshpots” (P34). By conjoining the extended meanings of fleshpots—the biblical reference, Exodus 16:3, to a pot in which meat is cooked and so to a life of luxury back in Egypt—with folklore about Jewish culinary habits,38 this “well-attested” image identifies the children of Israel with a caricature of modern Jewry.

Nordau is doing more than distinguishing Jewish group from gentile individual. The pairing of the common Jew and the creative gentile initiates a series of hierarchical oppositions which mark the chapter. The children of Israel join the negatively valued determinations of the philistine, the group, the majority, the typical, the hackneyed, the species, the primitive and the female; the Egyptian architect is structurally affiliated with the genius, the individual, the minority, the special, the original, the individual, the civilized and
the male. The affiliations are more than structural. Their collective
definition, for example, associates the children of Israel with women;
in this chapter Nordau contrasts women and men by the same terms:
“Woman is as a rule typical, the man individual” (P50).\textsuperscript{39} By embed-
ding the Jews within this network, Nordau thereby draws upon other
contemporary images of the Jews.

With the addition of several nonbiblical stereotypes to his description
of the Hebrews, Nordau intensifies his critique of philistinism at the
expense of the Jews. Further, the overdetermined reference to the
construction of the pyramids indicates that Nordau is as concerned with
the stereotypical opposition between the gifted, first-rate gentile and
the very vulgar and rank Jews as he is with his contrast of the genius
and the philistine.

This conclusion is given added weight, ironically, by Nordau’s
periodic description of the genius in Jewish terms. While he contin-
ually parallels the opposition of Jew and gentile with that of philistine
and genius, the corresponding roles are sometimes reversed. In his
distribution of characteristic Jewish traits, he accords the genius those
that are universally desirable; this move would allow Nordau, without
the onus of Jewish descent, to identify with both the positive traits
and their bearer. The philistines, however, receive those traits which
an assimilated Jew would disavow. Thus Nordau displaces the Jews’
self-description as “chosen” (\textit{Auserwählten}; P35) onto the genius, while
the philistines retain one of the most troubling alleged characteristics
of the Jewish people, their “staying power” (\textit{Beharrungsvermögen}; P35),
their unchanging persistence. By making “chosenness” indicative of
the Egyptian engineer/genius rather than the Jews/philistines, Nor-
dau shifts it from a parochial, religiously based self-ascription to a
natural attribute; he thereby also renders ironic the stereotype that
genius is alien to Jewish nature.\textsuperscript{40}

Attribution of Jewish characteristics to the genius is repeated later in
the chapter; Nordau writes that: “In fact the philistine is thus the lord of
the land, and the obstinate odd one [\textit{der bockbeinige Sonderling}, i.e.,
the genius] has to dance in step when the compulsory waltz is played” (P60).
Combined within the description of the genius as \textit{bockbeinig} is a history of
Jewish caricature: the crooked, goat-footed, stubborn (\textit{krumme, bockfüßige,
hartnäckige}) odd-one-out.\textsuperscript{41} This genius is not a Jew; rather his situation in
philistine society mirrors that of the Jew in Christian Europe. The genius
is a member of a marginal minority that is the light unto the nations—
albeit one suppressed by the conventionality of the majority.

Nordau concludes the chapter by depicting a monument (\textit{Denkmal})
to the philistine (P74). The only specific aspect of its physiognomy he
describes is its “truncated nose” (verstümmelte Nase). This image condenses two particular traits that characterized the stereotypical Jewish man: the other-than-foreshortened “Jewish nose” and the circumcised-mutilated-penis.42 Nordau also depicts its dress: “I imagine the green turban over his sleeping cap, which marks him as a descendant of the Prophet” (P34). By picturing this philistine as a descendant of Mohammed, Nordau differentiates him from his biblical namesakes and marks him like the Jew as semitic and circumcised. Nordau then names this, as he facetiously puts it, “most honorable of philistines” (Ehrenphilister): “Tailor or Draper or something similar” (Er muβ dem Namen nach Schneider oder Tuchscherer oder etwas ähnliches werden; P74). In other words, this philistine would receive a name reflecting either a form of preeminently Jewish employment (tailoring) or the kind of labor which was historically held responsible for the sickly Jewish physiognomy (clothcutting or draping).43 Both tailor and draper also implicate one of the arch icons of circumcision: the scissor.44 Nordau was aware of the ascriptive and potentially stigmatizing power of names.45 He had redubbed himself simultaneously to effect and signify his assumption of a European rather than a manifestly Jewish identity: named at his bris Simon Maximilian Südfeld, Max Nordau shifted from an identification with a southern (südlich) people, the Jews, and a vulgar background (Feld, field) to one with a northern (nördlich) race, the Europeans, and more poetic surroundings (Aue, pasture).

Through this chapter’s rhetorical plays and ploys Nordau’s philistines represent the typical parvenu Jews who bear themselves like poorly preserved memorials of the European past. They are wrapped in the “uniform of banality” (P74), and they epitomize the values of Speißbürgertum. From such Jews the cosmopolitan Nordau chose to differentiate himself.

Paradoxes of the Conventional Lie of Assimilation

This analysis of the few explicit mentions in Lügen and one extensive if allusive discussion of Jewry in Paradoxe demonstrates how Nordau’s rhetoric mirrors the typical desires of liberal Jews to assimilate and to distinguish themselves from those Jewish types derided by the gentile majority. But such assimilationist desires were caught in the contradictions that framed the Jewish Question. The European society into which these Jews sought admission demanded complete assimilation of the dominant culture, even to the point of the obliterating of any traces of Jewishness or Judaism; yet, often accompanying the demand was the
assumption that Jews were constitutionally incapable of eliminating their difference.\textsuperscript{46} The unresolvable double bind that afflicted liberal Jewry also had its effects on Nordau.

A Plague of \textit{Mieselsüchtige Jews}

Both his antisemitic opponents like Wasserschleben and his latter-day commentators like Baldwin are wrong about the omission of a Jewish linchpin: the Jewish Question is, whether consciously or unconsciously, a structuring principle of Nordau’s texts. \textit{Lügen} and \textit{Paradoxe} constantly allude to the Jews and summon a network of Jewish representations that pervade European culture. For instance, Nordau’s opening litany in \textit{Lügen} codes most of the manifestations of the illness gripping Germany with Jewish markers. Antisemitism, the second symptom, of course has Jewish associations, as does the third: the flow of emigrants “pour\[ing\] forth from the German seaports like the lifstream from a deadly wound in the body of the nation” (CL2) consisted significantly of native Jews.\textsuperscript{47}

Copious Jewish references also infest the initial symptom: socialism. Many socialist Jewish leaders were of Jewish origin, and their descent was trumpeted by antisemitic agitators. Then, by drawing upon the figures of mice, Nordau connects this symptom to a broad range of anti-Jewish representations. He depicts socialism “gnaw\[ing\] at the pillars of all state and societal institutions with a hundred thousand mouse-teeth” (\textit{Mauszähnen}; CL2). Jewish socialists were already identified as mice a year earlier in the second number of Wilhelm Marr’s \textit{Antisemitische Hefte}. His 1881 \textit{Goldene Ratten und rothe Mäuse} (“Golden Rats and Red Mice”) also earmarks the growing social democratic movement, the red mice, as Jewish. Nordau’s description of the subversive gnawing of the mouse-teeth echoes Marr’s assertion that “the red mice must by natural necessity dig away the ground from under our feet.”\textsuperscript{48} The association of Jews and mice goes back at least to Martin Luther’s sermons and to medieval church inscriptions. On 25 September 1539, Luther preached about a converted Jew who

after his death . . . it was found that he had ordered the erection of the figures of a cat and a mouse on his grave, to indicate that a Jew can as little become a Christian as the two animals can live together on friendly terms. The same thought is expressed in the Freising cathedral, where there is a picture of the \textit{judensau} with the inscription: “As surely as the mouse never eats the cat so surely can the Jew never a true Christian become.”\textsuperscript{49}
Nordau’s evocation of mice also recalls the animal imagery that fill nineteenth-century anti-Jewish discourse. “Jewish” fauna menace the imaginations of anti-Jewish writers.50

They are small and thereby hard to grasp; they devour much and multiply themselves rapidly. . . . They are dangerous, because at the beginning they do not appear very threatening and their all-consuming and destructive character first unfolds in the course of time, so that a defense by the host organism is first started too late.

In addition, the “uncannily noiseless, underground work of destruction” (CL2) by these mouse-teeth echoes the alleged destructive action of “Jewish” vermin.51

Nordau’s reference to mice sows another field of anti-Jewish representation. “Maus” resonates with “Mauschel.” The term was applied to both the diseased, deficient and decadent language of the Jews, Yiddish, and the no-less diseased, deficient and decadent identity of the stereotypical Jews who speak that language.52 The orthographic connection between Maus and Mauschel is more than fortuitous since it is the absence of an indigenous language that denies nationality status to the Jews.53 Yiddish, Judendeutsch, Mauscheldeutsch is for Nordau but a degenerate form of German.

“Maus” points as well to “Mieselsucht” (P12). The affix Miesel of Mieselsucht denotes the blotches symptomatic of leprosy, but it can also refer to a Mäuschen (literally “little mouse”). The polysemy of Mieselsucht is recognized and exploited by Nordau from the beginning; he remarks that the practical or sentimental pessimism (praktischer Pessimismus) gripping his age “is called Mieselsucht in the vernacular” (P12, emphasis added). Besides its medical meaning of leprosy, in Austria Mieselsucht popularly connoted “gloominess, ill feeling” (unmütig).

Although Mieselsucht could be readily found in medical dictionaries of the time,54 its use as a diagnostic label was rare; the preferred term for leprosy was Aussatz. Heinrich Heine’s 1854 Geständnisse (“Confessions”) may well have been Nordau’s inspiration for the polysemic Mieselsucht. The Geständnisse conclude with a self-identifying evocation of the poet cleric whose Lieder fill the Limburger Chronik of 1480. Heine’s “Brother in Apollo” suffered from “Mieselsucht,” and the text continues in great detail about “what a horrifying malady leprosy [Mieselsucht] was in the Middle Ages and how the poor people who fell victim to such an incurable pestilence were expelled from every civil society. . . . [The] living dead, they wandered along, wrapped like mummies from head to foot . . . and in their hands carrying a
clapper, the so-called lazarus-clapper [Lazarusklapper].” With “the rattling sound of the lazarus-clapper” still echoing in his chambers, Heine brings Mieselsucht to the present by intoning that “there is nothing new under the sun.” Ascribing the familiar line from Ecclesiastes to “the life-weary king of Judah” Heine—who had enshrined Jewish skin diseases in his 1842 poem, “Das neue Israelitische Hospital zu Hamburg”—also perhaps retrieves the disease from the cleric and restores it to the Jews.55

Beyond its possible source in Heine, Nordau’s clinical term has other associations that intersect with largely negative representations of the Jews. Mieselsucht was the rarely used term for a disease rarely seen in Europe. But with the recent discovery of the mycobacterium leprae and the widely reported case of Father Damien, the Belgian missionary who contracted leprosy while caring for patients in Hawaii, Europeans again began to fear the disease not only as incurable and deforming but also now as contagious.56 Further, perceived as “prevalent among and specific to populations and races considered by Western nations . . . to be inferior,” leprosy stigmatized its victims as primitive, atavistic or degenerate.

And now leprosy threatened to return to Europe by two routes. The first path was imperial expansion into contaminated sites inhabited by so-called primitive peoples. This danger surfaces in Nordau’s concluding vision in which the Europeans overrun and colonize the tropics. The conquerors eventually degenerate because of an ailment indigenous to the region such as leprosy was imagined to be: “if through infertility and sickness [the white races] do not completely die out, they will nevertheless become so weak and withered, so stupid and cowardly, so defenseless against all vices and corrupt habits that they are soon hardly more than shadows of their fathers and ancestors” (P411).

The second entry point was the influx to the metropol of disease-bearing colonial peoples, especially the Chinese and the east European Jews. In the early 1880s cries rang out from the antisemitic press, government officials and academics to stop the immigration of those “Urjuden” from Poland and Russia.58 They sought to stem the invasion of those filthy, stinking sufferers of the leprosy-evoking skin disease clinically known as plica, but derogatively referred to as the Judenkrätze. The relationship of the Krätze to leprosy had been assumed at least since 1699 when B. Ramizzini described the Krätze as so characteristic of the Jews as to be considered “a Jewish disease” (eine Rassekrankheit); he then suggested that it may be a “legacy” (Erbschaft) of the earlier Jewish predisposition to “leprosy” (Aussatz).59 This European response marked the recrudescence of an anti-Jewish stigmatizing which originated with
ancient Egyptian writers and which had found a more recent manifestation in Voltaire’s “leprous Jews.”

Reinforcing leprosy’s relationship to the Jews is Nordau’s continuous interchange of Mieselsucht and syphilis throughout his diptych. The symptoms and consequences he ascribes to the former share much in common with those generally attributed to the latter. For instance, both were seen as threatening the future of the bourgeois order. Further, Nordau claims that Mieselsucht is “always the concomitant symptom of a brain disorder” (Begleiterscheinung einer Gehirnerkrankung, P12). The brain disorder he had in mind was that complication of syphilis, Gehirnerweichung or general paralysis. And during the course of the nineteenth century the Jews became increasingly associated with syphilis.

That a trained physician like Nordau would connect leprosy to syphilis is not surprising: similarities in skin eruptions and tissue decay made distinguishing between leprous and syphilitic symptoms one of the foremost functions of nineteenth-century dermatologists. Moreover, at the time of Nordau’s writing, there was still a raging controversy over whether syphilis was merely the modern form of leprosy, that biblical disease and medieval plague; some even attributed syphilis’ origin to the ancient Hebrews. Although Voltaire had earlier sided with those who denied any direct relationship between syphilis and leprosy, he opposed the two plagues in one of the most vituperative, anti-Jewish entries of his Dictionnaire philosophique. Leprosy, he wrote, was as emblematic of the Jews as were fanaticism and usury, and he associated it with other traits he coded as Jewish: dirtiness, the arbitrary rule of priests and women, culture reduced to the animal level. Syphilis by contrast was for Voltaire emblematic of Nature: beyond both human control and human morality. The philosopher thus constructed an analogy in which leprosy was to syphilis as the unnatural and immoral Jew was to the order of the world.

While for Voltaire bad leprosy suffered in its contrast with good syphilis, in Nordau’s time the venereal disease imparted its usual onus of immorality and degeneration to its constant companion: Jewish-identified leprosy. For example, Karl Marx connected leprosy and syphilis in an attack on his arch rival, the Jewish socialist leader mentioned by Nordau, Ferdinand Lassalle. “Lazarus the leper is the prototype of the Jews and of Lazarus-Lassalle. But in our Lazarus, the leprosy lies in the brain. His illness was originally a badly cured case of syphilis.”

Thus, Nordau’s diagnosis of Mieselsucht is a multifaceted evocation of Jewish representations. Ultimately, through the use of this pun Nordau continually returns to the Jewish Question. By insinuating a negative Jewish element into the understanding of the “malady of the century” he problematizes the possibility of successful assimilation.

Jay Geller

The Conventional Lies and Paradoxes of Jewish Assimilation: Max Nordau’s Pre-Zionist Answer to the Jewish Question

[143]
Studies

Jews

Social

Circumcising Apostates

The irresolvable antinomy between assimilationist desire and antisemitic repudiation asserts itself yet again in Nordau’s only explicit mention of modern Jewry in *Paradoxe*. In his discussion of race and nationality he reduces *Judentum* to a collection of easily-dispensed-with externalities: customs, laws and institutions that merely accrued through the centuries. Such a denial of any intrinsic relationship between *Judentum* and either the individual or the order of the world (whether understood as natural or divine) was a precondition for assimilation. But this move generates constant allusions to the one external sign that could not be sloughed off: circumcision.

Since the Jews appear in Nordau’s discussion of white European nationalities rather than in his examination of racial difference, they apparently do not constitute a race. For Nordau nationality is above all a linguistic category and race an anthropological (i.e., biological) one. Like Darwin, Nordau subscribed to the theory of polygenesis, which assumed that each race descended from a different biological ancestor rather than a common or monogenetic source. Hence, since he denies that blood determines national identity, the inclusion of the Jews within the examination of nationalities undercuts the familiar motif of racial antisemitism: befouled Jewish blood. Yet after deferring the question of whether the Jews constitute a nation, he eventually also denies this possibility. Numbers do not determine such recognition; he lists several nationalities, such as the Albanians and the Basques, whose population is significantly smaller than that of the still unmentioned European Jews (P403).

Nor does either shared territory or state membership define a nationality, and it is to illustrate this point that Nordau’s only explicit discussion of whether the Jews comprise a nationality occurs. For Nordau, the Jews’ alleged difference from surrounding populations is defined by externals and not by that expression of a nation’s soul, its language. Jewry is merely a collection of individuals defined by their self-deluding, stubborn and extrinsic attempts to keep themselves separate. These ties that separate preclude Jewish and Christian neighbors from claiming a single nationality; they also preclude the Jews taken as a whole from making such a claim:

Certainly common laws and institutions, namely habits, customs, and usages, occasion a closeness [among people], which could awaken a certain feeling of belonging together, although the opposite could also just as likely occur. Take for example the Jews, who are above all seen as alien from the people
among whom they live because they maintain with inconceivable blindness and stubbornness external customs, like time reckoning, the celebration of sabbaths and holidays, dietary rules, choice of first names, etc., which are wholly different from those of their Christian comrades and which must keep continually alive in their neighbors a feeling of antithesis and separation. But that common culture is in no case sufficient to create a folk out of a collection of people [um aus Völkern ein Volk zu bilden] and to confer nationality upon the members of a state (P383–84).73

What Nordau conceals behind the “etc.” is that custom which together with dietary laws and the elsewhere-mentioned endogamy had long been considered the chief cause of Jewish separatism: circumcision.74 The exclusion of this practice from his list of customs is curious, but understandable. Circumcision is certainly more emblematic of Jews, in any case of male Jews, than the choice of first names. However, unlike the various items on the list, circumcision could not be abandoned either by Nordau’s Jewish contemporaries or by himself, the former Simon Südfeld. For the cosmopolitan Nordau, Jewry could comprise neither an anthropological race nor a linguistic nationality; there could not be an inherent Jewish nature. Jewishness must consist rather of merely external attributes that can be discarded by any individual desiring assimilation. However, in a society which assumed that difference and pathology were inscribed upon the body, circumcision made the Jewish body unassimilable. It was the never-mentioned but always-alluded-to sign that Jewish dreams of becoming European could not be fulfilled.75

After foreclosing any possible Jewish nationhood, Nordau then expands on how language determines nationality. Throughout the discussion, he again draws upon analogies and images which insistently allude to circumcision and so to the Jewish Question. This series of references culminates in his diatribe against those individuals who believe they can abandon their linguistically determined nationality as if it were a mere collection of externalities, who view their nationality in the same way as Nordau views Judentum. Nordau’s overdetermined argument complicates, even undermines, his denial of a Jewish nationality and his assumptions about assimilation.

By tying nationality to language, Nordau joins the tradition first clearly articulated by Condillac, then redirected by Herder to form what in the nineteenth century would combine philosophic anthropology, religion, politics and philology in Ernest Renan’s grand opposition of Aryans to Semites.76 But for Nordau, the son of a Hebrew grammarian, the Jews apparently lack a language that is coeval with its group identity. Although neither the Jews nor their language(s) are mentioned in his
discussion of linguistic nationality, Nordau no doubt would have considered Hebrew to be a religious language and thus both a conventional lie and a primitive survival. He would have viewed Yiddish (Judendeutsch, Mauschel) at best as a hybrid and at worst as a degenerate offshoot of another people’s language. Nordau’s silence on Jewish language bespeaks a double distancing from Renan’s rather amorphous understanding of the Semites (i.e., the Jews) as a race: where for Renan they sometimes constitute a biological group and sometimes a linguistic one, for Nordau they form neither. This conclusion by the Hungarian-born Nordau appears to confirm the practice of his native multinational state:77 every nationality had the right to teach its children in the “language customary to the land”—Croat, Czech, German, Magyar, etc.78 Austria-Hungary recognized eleven national groups and their languages, but the state did not confer such status upon either Jews or their languages, Hebrew and Yiddish.79

Yet when Nordau pithily summarizes his argument on how language defines national membership, he employs an image that has Jewish resonance: “The individual extremely rarely has his corporeal descent [körperliche Abstammung] inscribed on his forehead . . . [whereas] language is in reality the man himself” (P384–85). Here Nordau argues against racial physiognomy in general, yet he chooses an image which evokes the mark of Cain and, by extension, the mark of Jewish difference: circumcision.80

Although, as Nordau’s text suggests, the Jews have no nationality and no language, his rhetoric draws upon the Jewish experience of post-emancipation Europe to describe “disgraceful apostates” (schmachvollen Überläufer, P391). To secure some advantage, such individuals deny their language; they thereby deny their nationality and so themselves. Nordau then employs an analogy which by alluding to that never-mentioned circumcision again undercuts his attempt both to deny Jews a linguistic nationality and to ensure himself and others the possibility of assimilation. If we bracket Nordau’s implicit denial of a Jewish national identity, then his description of the situation which might lead to the desertion of one’s nationality mirrors the situation of the Jews in his native land, the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Nordau’s depiction of a linguistic apostate can also be read as an inversion or denegation of his own valuation of his transformation from a Pest-born son of a Hebrew grammarian into a Paris-based author of French and German belles lettres. He posits an individual “who would be born in a country where his nationality is in the minority and oppressed, where his language is not the official language and where he sees himself compelled to learn an alien tongue, which he however would only be able to use as a foreigner [would]”
Nordau notes how as a consequence of such shackling an individual “feels himself crippled and mutilated” (fühlt sich gelähmt und verstimmt; P390). With this repetition of the codeword verstimmt, Nordau’s picture of the victim’s self-identity, like that of the philistine statue, incorporates the oppressive culture’s stereotypes of the Jewish body and soul.

After this account of apostasy and mutilation, Nordau compares those “unspeakably repugnant” (P390) individuals who would abandon their native language to the Russian-Christian sect of self-mutilators (Selbstverstümmler), the Skoptzi. While the Skoptzi “emasculate themselves” (entmannen sich; P391) out of religious conviction, the linguistic-national “renegades allow themselves to be castrated into intellectual eunuchs [geistigen Eunuchen] for the sake of gold” (P391). With the analogy between the renegade and the Skoptzi, Nordau inverts the traditional opposition between the Jewish assimilator and those who maintain their Jewish identification: he compares the (linguistic) apostate to those whose religious identity is determined by genital surgery.

The association of circumcised Jew and castrated Russian was not unfamiliar to Nordau’s contemporaries. In the third volume of his popular Darwinian ethnology of love, the 1885 Sexual Relations of Mankind, Paolo Mantegazza makes the connection explicit. He first describes in a chapter on the “Mutilation of Genitals” the rationale for Jewish circumcision: it is “felt to be necessary to imprint upon the human body a clear and indelible sign which would distinguish one people from another and, by putting a seal of consecration on nationality, would tend to impede the mixture of the races.” Mantegazza goes on to attack circumcision as “a sanguinary protest against universal brotherhood [which] to civilized peoples . . . is a shame and an infamy.” The practice of circumcision is what impedes gentile willingness to accede to Jewish desires for emancipation and assimilation; thus, Mantegazza apostrophizes the Jews: “Until you do this [i.e., cease ‘imprinting upon flesh’ an ‘odious brand’], you cannot pretend to be our equal.” He then moves to the Skoptzi. After describing in great detail the stages of genital mutilation, he portrays these sectarians with attributes usually associated with Jews: “von Stein asserts that the [Skoptzi’s] character is also profoundly modified by castration, the outstanding traits among them being selfishness, craftiness, hypocrisy, and a thirst for gold.” Despite what for Mantegazza is its gruesome cost, conversion to the Skoptzi is attractive because they are “in control of enormous wealth, and . . . they employ all manner of seduction in attracting to themselves the poor in spirit, and even more, the poor in pocketbook, who by mutilating a single
organ (however important it may be) of their body, thereby assure themselves of a lifelong [financial] competence." Mantegazza’s parallel of the Jews and Skoptzi is unmistakable.

Jewish Social Studies

A Future without Jews

As Nordau’s analogy of linguistic apostates and the Skoptzi implies, the Jews lack a nationality, and, by implication, they are at an evolutionary dead-end. Thus they fall from his picture of the destiny of the white race. In Nordau’s utopian vision of human solidarity, the Jews of Europe apparently would have shed the externalities which alone constitute Jewishness, and they would have completely assimilated into the dominant European nationalities. “One tosses away the worn out husks and disguises [Verkleidungen] which surround the true kernel [of religion]” (CL420). Instead of persisting in primitive ritual and irrational belief, the Jews would recognize the true source of religious feeling: the sense of belonging to humanity and its natural movement to higher development (CL63ff, 416).

This happy picture of “late-born generations [including the descendants of the former Jews], playfully tossed by the pure air of the future, bathed by its brighter sunshine, whose lot it will be [dienen es bescheiden sein wird] to live in this fraternal order, true, wise, free, and good” (CL421) concludes Lügen. But the vision turns dark at the end of Paradoxe. As Nordau developed his diagnosis of the times, his prognosis altered. Where the first volume predicted recognition of natural fellowship combining with evolutionary forces to lead humanity to greater heights, the second envisioned Malthusian limits combining with those same evolutionary forces to herald its demise. Nordau still posits a future of peace and solidarity among the white-raced nations, but the struggle for existence in a world of limited resources would find the white race exterminating peoples of color (P410). And when resources were again depleted, the new evolutionist religion of natural morality would degenerate into the child-sacrifice cult of Moloch, that religion which antisemitic writers since Ghillany and Daumer had conceived to be the origin and true kernel of Judaism. Nordau’s beatific vision of a future without Jews thus becomes a nightmarish simulacrum of an alleged Jewish past.

In his account of Europe’s present morass and future possibility, Nordau deploys two contemporary Jewish types: the assimilated Spießbürger who try to pass for gentiles and the Östjuden who are bound together by primitive religious beliefs and rank customs. He dismisses
the former as self-deluded philistines and depicts the latter with familiar stereotypes. Since Nordau denies religious Jews both a racial and a national identity, their primitivism is a function of external practices and not an atavism intrinsic to their being. Thus, without directly confronting racial antisemitism, Nordau renders it irrelevant to the Jewish Question.  

Moreover, since the Jews are but a social grouping bound together by inessential externalities, individuals like Nordau, who “from my sixteenth year until my fortieth . . . [b]y conviction, by emotion, and by philosophic conception . . . was German through and through,” can be among those model Germans (*Musterdeutschen*) whose embodiment of the national spirit belies both their origin and the general population’s assumption about their—his—racial descent (cf. P381–83). And by universalizing a Jewish-associated notion like chosenness and displacing it onto the genius, he can liberate the chosen (*Auserwählten*) from the conventional lie of inbreeding (*Inzucht*). They can thereby submit to the evolutionary law of natural selection (*Zuchtwahl*) and so further the development of humanity.

Entitling his introduction “Mene, Tekel, Upharsin,” Nordau invoked the writing on the wall that Daniel interpreted at Belshazzar’s feast. And like some modern-day Daniel, Nordau began his diptych by taking the measure of his times and showing where European society was heading. But there was one inscription that Nordau had tried to overlook; he, like the ancient prophet, was an alien Jew in a gentile court. Despite his persistent efforts to displace Jewishness in these texts—as in his life—Nordau’s vision of European destiny betrayed its tainted, Jewish origins. His assimilationist desires could not escape the strictures of Jewish representations. His evolutionary “fairy tale” (P414), indeed his entire diptych, is conditioned by the conventional lies and paradoxes of Jewish life in postemancipation Europe. Nordau’s work exemplified how European identity in the 1880s could not be extricated from the construction—if not yet the destruction—of the Jewish other.

Notes

* A version of this paper was presented at the Colloque International Max Nordau, 9 July 1992, Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, Paris. I thank Delphine Bechtel for recommending that I look at Nordau’s writings, Sander Gilman for suggesting these two works in particular, Jane Caplan for her thoughtful comments on an earlier draft, and Amy-Jill Levine for her thorough readings of
every draft. I am also grateful to Hans-Jakob Werlen for advice on translation.

1 Or acculturation: drawing upon Milton Gordon’s *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion and National Origins* (New York, 1964), historians of nineteenth-century European Jewry have adopted the distinction between acculturation and assimilation. See Marion Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class: Women, Family, and Identity, in Imperial Germany* (New York, 1991) and Jonathan Franckel and Steven J. Zipperstein, eds., *Assimilation and Community: The Jews in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, 1992). In contrast to the implied disavowal of Jewishness in assimilation’s mimetic appropriation of European identity, acculturation recognizes that numerous forms of Jewish communal cohesion and practice existed, indeed thrived, despite the public adoption of many of the manners, appearances and attitudes of the gentile majority. Synagogue attendance does not necessarily define a Jew; nor are the public practices and self-conceptions of male Jews necessarily normative for Jewish women. While “acculturated” Jews may have intermingled with other Jews professionally and socially, they sought before the gentile world to distance themselves from national, cultural and ethnic markers of Jewishness. For such Jews, Jewishness was a religious designation—“of the mosaic persuasion” or “of the Jewish faith”—and hence reserved for the private sphere. Jews like Nordau did not wish to disappear, quite the contrary—so long as their public visibility was not compromised by stereotyping. Since this article concerns the attempt by both acculturated and assimilated Jews to staunch the threat to their public “European” identity, I have adopted “assimilated” to cover both groups.


3 Cf. Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, 3 vols. (New York, 1953–57), vol. 1, 188. Freud, however, was disappointed
by the encounter; he described Nordau as “vain and stupid.”

Occasional references to his role in early Zionism dot histories of the movement, and brief mention of him routinely introduce discussions of fin-de-siècle European culture. On Nordau’s Zionist activities, see Shlomo Avineri, The Making of Modern Zionism (New York, 1981); David Vital, The Origins of Zionism (Oxford, 1975); idem, Zionism—The Formative Years (Oxford, 1982). Works employing Nordau to open analysis of the fin-de-siècle apocalyptic sensibility and medico-ethical rhetoric include Elaine Showalter, Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle (New York, 1990), 1–2; Daniel Pick, Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848–c. 1918 (Cambridge, 1989), 24–26. More typically, Nordau appears on those lists of names that often pass for thick description of the epoch: for example, “Within a few years of each other, we find Durkheim’s ‘suicide,’ Freud’s ‘unconscious’ and ‘dreams,’ Max Weber’s ‘charisma,’ Bergson’s ‘memory,’ Nordau’s ‘degeneration,’ . . . All these ideas were widely different from each other in implication and emphasis and yet nevertheless were associated with each other as part of the movement in opposition to ideas of scientific and material progress.” (Frederick R. Karl, Franz Kafka, Representative Man [New York, 1991], 103). Moreover, today Nordau’s fiction and drama are ignored, and his early cultural criticism is discussed only in nostalgic attempts to resuscitate a certain humanistic liberal ethic. Cf. Meir Ben-Horin, Max Nordau: Philosopher of Human Solidarity (New York, 1956); idem, “Watchman, What of the Lies—Nordau’s Lügen at 100,” Judaism 33 (1984): 330–42. One exception to the neglect of Nordau’s belletristic output is Hans-Peter Söder, “Disease and Health as Contexts of Modernity: Max Nordau as a Critic of Fin-de-Siècle Modernism,” German Studies Review 14 (1991): 473–87. I thank Jutta Birmele for the reference to Söder’s fine essay.


In an 1896 letter to Reuben Brainin, Nordau wrote that when he was forty “Anti-Semitism opened my eyes and turned me back to the Jewishness which I had forgotten. The hatred of others for us taught me to love our people”; cited by Louis Lipsky, A Gallery of Zionist Profiles (New York, 1956), 18. In their biography of Nordau, his widow and daughter argue that when he
learned of the 1882 Kishinev (sic) pogrom he "instantly grasped" that antisemitism was "an endemic illness old as the dispersion, always latent, prone to break out in bloody and fevered form at the slightest provocation"; but only when he himself became victim of an antisemitic assault in 1893 did he truly "awaken" to his Jewishness. While vacationing at the North Sea resort of Borkum, the cosmopolitan Nordau began receiving anonymous letters stating "We do not wish to see Jews here." See Anna and Maxa Nordau, Max Nordau: A Biography (New York, 1948), 115, 117–18.

Citations are from Die conventionellen Lügen der Kulturmenscheit (Leipzig, 1884); hereafter CL. All English translations in this paper are the author’s; for a full English translation see The Conventional Lies of Our Civilization, trans. Louis Schick (Chicago, 1895 [1886]; reprint, New York, 1975).

Citations from Paradoxe, 3d ed. (Leipzig, 1885); hereafter P. All English translations in this paper are the author’s; for a full English translation see Paradoxes, trans. J. R. McIlrath (London, 1896).

Nordau’s "references to the problem of anti-Semitism and to Judaism in general before he became a Zionist are few and of no particular importance"; P. M. Baldwin, "Liberalism, Nationalism, and Degeneration: The Case of Max Nordau," Central European History 13 (1980): 108. To support his claim, Baldwin cites Nordau’s friend Ludwig Stein ("They Have Prevailed: A Tribute to Herzl and Nordau from One Who Was Sceptical," in Theodor Herzl: A Memorial, ed. M. W. Weisgal [New York, 1929], 31), who dates his "conversion" to 1895, on or about his meeting with Herzl (109). For an alternative chronology of Nordau’s conversion, see n. 8 above.

Leo Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing (Glencoe, Ill., 1952).


Cf. the panorama of fin-de-siècle Viennese Jewry in Arthur Schnitzler’s Der Weg ins Frei.

Also see the work of Marc Angenot, Ce que l’on dit des Juifs en 1889: Antisémitisme et discours social (Saint-Denis, 1989).


Ibid., 262–63 (Thesis xvii).

The representation of the Jew as identity-determining and identity-threatening other has figured in Christian self-definition since Paul: see Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs’ collection “To See Ourselves As Others See Us”: Christians, Jews, “Others” in Late Antiquity (Chico, Calif., 1985); and in German self-definition since the modern period: see, for example, George Mosse, Germans and Jews: The Right, the Left, and the Search for a “Third Force” in Pre-Nazi Germany (New York, 1970). Jean-François Lyotard’s discussion of the “jews” in Heidegger and the “jews”, trans. A. Michel and M. S.


23 An intriguing instance of displacement surrounds the notion of modesty or *Bescheidenheit*. My “Blood Sin: Syphilis and the Construction of Jewish Identity,” *Faultline* 1 (1992): 34–35 and n. 64, discusses moments in the antisemitic work of Artur Dinter, Eduard Hartmann and Adolf Stoecker in which the transgression of modesty figures not only the Jew but that distinctive trope of Jewish identity: circumcision or *Bescheidenheit*. This displacement from *beschneiden* to *bescheiden* also occurs in Hitler’s notorious chapter on *Volk und Rasse* in *Mein Kampf*—“With this ‘modesty’ [Bescheidenheit; the translator appended the scare quotes, apparently to signal irony] that is inborn in [the Jew];” trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston, 1943), 313; (Munich, 1941), 344—as well as in neurologist P. J. Möbius’ attack on Otto Weininger’s no less notorious 1903 tractate of Jewish misogyny and antisemitism, *Geschlecht und Charakter*. Möbius’ critique bears the title *Geschlecht und Unbescheidenheit* (2d printing; Halle, 1907); emphasis added. Not only is immodesty displaced from the antisemite to the Jew, but the rules of linguistic discretion demand a displacement that doubly marks immodesty as Jewish.


25 Indicative both of the work’s popularity and its representativeness of a certain late nineteenth-century (Jewish) liberalism is an anecdote that significantly contrasts with the more familiar account of Sigmund Freud’s feelings about Nordau (see n. 3 above). Chaim Bloch reports that during a visit with Freud in 1925, some forty-two years after the first publication of *Lügen*, Freud not only favorably invoked Nordau’s discussion of the Bible in *Lügen* but also produced what he referred to as the latest edition of Nordau’s work. See Chaim Bloch, “An Encounter with Freud,” [Hebrew] *Bitzaron* 23 (1950): 101–108; cited in Ben-Horin, 87–89.

26 See, esp., the chapters *Zur Naturgeschichte der Liebe* (“On the Natural History of Love”; P272–289) and *Evolutionistische Ästhetik* (“Evolutionary Aesthetic”; P290–


34 On the commercialization of marriage, see Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in Early Writings, trans. R. Livingstone and G. Benton (New York, 1975), 239: “The species-relation itself, the relation between man and woman, etc., becomes a commercial object! Woman is put on the market.” On Jewish inbreeding/endogamy, see Richard Andree, Zur Volkskunde der Juden (Leipzig, 1881); and Joseph Jacobs, Studies in Jewish Statistics, Social, Vital and Anthropometric (London, 1891). For later discussions on the problematics of Jewish marriage, see Felix A. Theilhaber, Der Untergang der deutschen Juden: Eine volkswirtschaftliche Studie (Munich, 1911). On the conflation of Unzucht (sexual license), Inszucht (in-breeding) and Inzucht (incest) in


36 Sander Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* (New York, 1991), 99–101, 171–75. The widely disseminated image of the Jew as black or non-white may have shaded Nordau’s treatment of Jewish nationhood within the context of the different nationalities comprising the white race. See below.

37 A decade later one of the darkest of all bogeys would appear, coded Jewish: Dracula. See Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York, 1986), 343.

38 Cf. Andree, 68–69, on the so-called Jewish love of onions.

39 Nordau was quite cognizant of the image of the feminized male Jew. In his 1887 novel *Die Krankheit des Jahrhunderts* (“The Malady of the Century”), for example, his Jewish protagonist Wilhelm Eynhardt is called by “Aryan” comrades “Das Fräulein”; cited in Söder, 478. Conversely, after his turn from cosmopolitan to Zionist Nordau exhorted the Second Zionist Congress to “pull up your socks” (literally “make

men of yourselves”; *Ermannt euch*) and create again a “Jewry of muscle” (*Muskelfudentum*). See “II. Kongressrede” (1898), in Nordau’s *Zionistische Schriften*, 74, 75 (cf. 72). Then he set about organizing Jewish *Turnvereine* (gymnastic associations) to transform the nonvirile Jews who had long left the ghetto into “deep-chested, sturdy-limbed, sharp-eyed . . . muscle-Jews”; see “Muskelfudentum,” in ibid., 380. At the Colloque International Max Nordau, 9 July 1992, Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, Paris, John Hoberman, “Max Nordau and the *Fin-de-Siècle* Critique of the Jewish Male,” and Ingrid Spöhr, “Das Bild von Juden in Texten Nordaus,” provided fine analyses of the concerns about Jewish masculinity that mark Nordau’s speeches to the *Turnvereine* and elsewhere.

40 See among others, Richard Wagner, *Das Judentum in der Musik* (1850); and Ernest Renan, *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques* (1855).


Cf. B. Ramazzini’s 1699 discussion of the relationship between Jewish employment and illness in his De morbis artificum diatriba (“On the illnesses of artisans”) that appends Heinrich Singer, Allgemeine und spezielle Krankheitslehre der Juden (Leipzig, 1904), esp. 132–39. Ramazzini, like Nordau some two hundred years later, suggested that Jews take up physical exercise to remedy their historically conditioned weak physiognomy (139).

Moreover, Jews who fled the Russian pogroms but, because they were unable to remain in Germany, also departed from German harbors contributed to the impression of hemorrhaging emigration. The number of Jews leaving the port of Hamburg, while not the majority of all emigrants, increased fourfold from 1880 (8,000) to 1882 (31,000) according to Wladimir W. Kaplan-Kogan, Die jüdischen Wanderbewegungen in der neuesten Zeit (1880–1914) (Bonn, 1919), 20; cf. S. Adler-Rudel, Ostjuden in Deutschland 1880–1940 (Tübingen, 1959), 5. Also see Avraham Barkai, “German-Jewish Migration in the Nineteenth Century, 1830–1910,” in Migration across Time and Nations: Population Mobility in Historical Contexts, ed. Ira A. Glazer and Luigi De Rosa (New York, 1986), 207, against earlier studies, which because of a focus upon the movements of east European Jews claimed that German Jewish emigration declined rapidly during the 1880s.


Wilhelm Marr, Goldene Ratten und rothe Mäuse, Antisemitische Hefte 2 (Chemnitz, 1881), 32. The “golden rats” of Marr’s pamphlet refer to Jewish capitalists. While the historical identification of Jews with rats has often been noted (see, for example, Jürgen Bernatzky, “Der nationalsozialistische Antisemitismus im Spiegel des politischen Plakates: ’Juden-Läuse-Flecktyphus,’” in Antisemitismus: Erscheinungsformen der Judenfeindschaft gestern und heute, ed. Günther Ginzel [Bielefeld,

49 Joshua Trachtenberg, The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Antisemitism (New Haven, 1943), 218. The transformation of such figures into the mousefolk of Kafka’s “Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse,” and more recently into the Jewish mice of Art Spiegelman’s acclaimed Maus: A Survivor’s Tale (New York, 1986); and Maus: A Survivor’s Tale II (New York, 1991), make the Jewish aspect of Nordau’s Mausähne all the more striking.

50 Rainer Erb and Werner Bergmann, Die Nachtzeit der Judenemmanzipation: Der Widerstand gegen die Integration der Juden in Deutschland 1780–1860 (Berlin, 1989), 198–99. While Erb and Bergman do not explicitly refer to mice, Marr’s description of the plague of red mice “breeding in silence” (24) and desiring “to suck society dry” (15) in Goldene Ratten und rothe Mäuse clearly coincides with their typology.


53 See below.

54 For example, Max Höfler, Deutsches Krankheitsnamen-Buch (Munich, 1899; reprint, Hildesheim, 1970).

55 Heinrich Heines sämtliche Werke, ed. Oskar Walzel, 10 vols. (Leipzig, 1915), vol. 10, 208. I would like to thank Professor Hildegard Cancik-Lindemaier for calling my attention to this passage.

56 Zachary Gussow and George S. Tracy, “Stigma and the Leprosy Phenomenon: The Social History of a Disease in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” Bulletin of the History of Medicine 44 (1970): 430–47, describes how these events and others in the 1860s and 1870s brought leprosy into increasing prominence in the West.

57 Ibid., 442.


59 Cited in Singer, 135. Symptomatic of the long association of Jews and leprosy is Johann Christoph Wagenseil’s selection of Negaim, the mishnaic tractate on leprosy, as one of the two exemplary translations appended to his grammar Belehrung.

See Alain Corbin, “Le péril vénérien au début du siècle: prophylaxie sanitaire et prophylaxie morale,” Recherches 29 (1977): 245–83. In Paradoxe Nordau describes the “sickly degenerate individuals” (krankhaft entarteten Menschen) of the big city who die out after four or five generations; his references to Zola’s Nana and Ibsen’s Ghosts, both works in which syphilis plays a prominent role, signal the syphilitic origin of the degeneration of his mieselsächtigen contemporaries (P269–70; cf. P281 on sexual disturbances and illnesses).

In a preview of his later analyses in Entartung, he recounts the syphilitic fates of the great poets of Welt- schmerz: to buttress his diagnosis of the sickness of the age: Nikolaus Lenau “died mad.” Although unmentioned by Nordau, the syphilitic origin of Lenau’s illness was common knowledge. The second poet, Giacomo Leopardi, “suffered from certain sexual aberrations, which are well known to the alienist” (Irrenarzt). Heinrich Heine, the third in the series, “first became gloomy and overcast as his tabes [Rückenmarkskrankheit; i.e., tabes dorsalis, a symptom of tertiary syphilis] worked its never-failing effect upon his brain.” In the nineteenth century Heine figured the (Jewish) poet as syphilitic; cf. Manfred Windfuhr, Heinrich Heine: Revolution und Reflexion (Stuttgart, 1976), 109; Gerhard Höhn, Heine-Handbuch: Zeit, Person, Werk (Stuttgart, 1987), 114; and Sander Gilman, “Heine: Nietzsche’s Other,” in idem, Inscribing the Other (Lincoln, 1991), esp. 113–17. And finally, Lord Byron “had that eccentricity of character, which the psychiatrist labels as psychosis” (der Psychiater als Psychose etikettiert, P13). Byron, too, because of the licentiousness of his verse and of his life, did not escape suspicion of syphilis: see Leslie A. Marchand, Byron: A Biography, 3 vols. (New York, 1957), vol. 1, 276; vol. 2, 724; vol. 3, 1234, n. 3. See Geller, “Blood Sin.”


Rationalist morality dictates that the individual should be rewarded for performing what is necessary for the good of humanity and/or what is natural. As a venereal disease syphilis punishes for fulfilling what is necessary (for the reproduction of the species) and what is naturally pleasurable. Syphilis is a-moral.


An ironic consequence of Nordau's use of a term signifying both a moody pessimism and the Jewish-associated disease of leprosy is that, although Schopenhauer—for whom Nordau held no little contempt (cf. CL14, 47–49)—castigated the Jews as an optimistic people, Nordau implicitly codes them as the carriers of the leprous plague of pessimism.

Except by epispasm or the surgical reversal of circumcision which was all but never performed; cf. Nicholas Carter, *Routine Circumcision: The Tragic Myth* (London, 1979), 125–26.


On pre-Zionist Jewish nationalism, see Vital, *Origins of Zionism*.

In an official history of the Austro-Hungarian empire, published two years before *Paradoxe*, G. Wolf, *Die Jüden*, vol. 7 of *Die Völker Österreich-Ungarns* (Vienna, 1883), describes the Jews as a people but not a nation: "The Jews do not form a nation because not a single one of the ties that one recognizes as characteristics of a national community bind them with one another" (169); cited in Michael Pollak, *Vienne 1900: Une identité blessée* (Paris, 1984), 84.


A later example of the relationship between circumcision and Jewish identity is provided by the notorious self-hating Jew, Arthur Trebitsch. Trebitsch supports his claim for Aryan identity with the fact that, because his parents were not married according to Jewish law, he was not circumcised; Arthur Trebitsch, *Geist und Judentum: Eine grundlegende Untersuchung* (Vienna, 1919), 186.


Nordau was quite conscious of the nationality question in his native land; see P391–92, 400, on his concern about strife among nationalities in Austria and Europe.


On circumcision as the mark of Cain, see Ruth Mellinkoff, *The
Mark of Cain (Berkeley, 1981), esp. 92–98.

82 Nordau was more optimistic about the pace of assimilation than his contemporary, the famous theologian and Bible critic Julius Wellhausen. At the conclusion of his entry on Israel in the ninth edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Wellhausen states: “The persistency of the [Jewish] race may of course prove a harder thing to overcome than Spinoza [in the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus] has supposed; but nevertheless he will be found to have spoken truly in declaring that the so-called emancipation of the Jews must inevitably lead to the extinction of Judaism wherever the process is extended beyond the political to the social sphere. For the accomplishment of this centuries may be required.” The Britannica article was reprinted in the 1885 English edition of Wellhausen’s Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel, with a preface by W. Robertson Smith (Gloucester, Mass., 1973), 548.

83 The year before Paradoxe appeared, the French Blanquist Gustave Tridon published Du Molochisme juif: Etudes critiques et philosophiques (Paris, 1884). See also Friedrich Wilhelm Ghillany Die Menschenopfer der alten Hebräer (Nuremberg, 1842); and Georg Friedrich Daumer, Der Feuer- und Molochdienst der alten Hebräer als urväterlicher, legaler, orthodoxer Cultur der Nation, historisch-kritisch nachgewiesen (Braunschweig, 1842).

84 Nordau’s later Zionist turn may be understood, at least in part, as a recognition that the implicit strategy employed in Lügen and Paradoxe to combat modern anti-Semitism, i.e., his attempt to empty Judentum of either racial or national identity, was ineffective.