

Zionism and the Fin de Siècle

*Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism
from Nordau to Jabotinsky*

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Cosmopolitanism, Zionism, and Assimilation

The Case of Theodor Herzl

In 1890, roughly half a decade before he became a Zionist, Theodor Herzl wrote a short story entitled “Der Sohn” (The son).¹ This rather flimsy tale of a trial opens in the “dying afternoon light of a marbled courtroom,” in which the bored audience of unemployed lawyers, jaded court reporters, and drowsy stenographer and judges nods its collective head, barely keeping awake in the dark and overheated gloom of the fading winter day. Only the accused and the prosecutor stay awake, as the most intimate details of the former’s life are revealed and rehashed in all their prosaic ignominy: in order to live beyond his means, he swindled money from unsuspecting creditors, defrauded widows and orphans, lived the high life of a gentleman while in truth he was a dishonest and disreputable scoundrel, as uncouth as he was unctuous. He must be punished with the most stringent penalties available, argues the prosecutor, in order to protect the public from such crafty and zealous predators.

After a short break, the accused rises to mount his own defense. Slowly and grandiloquently, he presents his case: his son sitting here in this room, all innocent and pure—he is the guilty party! He is responsible for everything the father is accused of! But, the accused implores, don’t misunderstand me: my son is as pure as the driven snow, courageous, honest, brave:

From his first day he has brought me only joy, and only once—I will soon tell you of it—did he bring me any pain. He is the reason for my sitting here

today. When he was born, my life was fulfilled. . . . While still in the cradle he cured me of all my sarcasm and flippancy. Children are our best teachers. He taught me true love of life! . . . From his first day on I was totally in love with him, painfully, foolishly in love with him. I suffered, so to speak, from monomania regarding my son.²

He could not bear to tear himself away from his son, continued the accused: he was his first and most steadfast playmate, he accompanied him through every stage of childhood, fulfilling his every wish, though he was always, as now, a pure and unselfish soul. But the father was so besotted with him that he let his business ventures sink into disrepair. Soon he had to do everything the prosecutor charged him with: borrow in order to stay afloat, then borrow more against the loans, shifting from one creditor to the next until the bubble burst and he was bankrupt. No one would lend him another penny; his credit was sacrificed on the altar of his besotted love for his son! For days on end he wandered the streets, trying to find a solution to his plight, to no avail. Finally, he decided there was no way out, no solution but to bid farewell to life, to try to shield his family from the horror and disaster of his own making. On the appointed evening, he kissed his wife and daughter good night, as usual, and then stopped in his son's room, where he stood staring at him for a long time, then finally gave him a long, long kiss—"Now I know that that kiss was my traitor!"

I went into my room. I wanted to wait until they were all asleep. The revolver was ready. Then, my door opened suddenly: Hans! With one glance he took in the situation. I tried to grab the gun—he was quicker. He pushed me back, until I fell. Then he stood over me, with the gun in his hand:

"Give it to me!" I screamed.

"No! You're going to kill yourself!"

"Give it to me! Yes, if you must know, I have to; I have no other choice." And I tried to get closer to him.

"Not one inch closer Father!" And then he put the muzzle at his own temple. "One move and I'll fire!"

At this horrendous moment, we began to bargain: he demanded my word that I would not hurt myself, or else he would shoot himself immediately. He didn't want to lose his father.

And so, Your Honors, could I condemn to death my son, my only son? So I gave in to him once again, gave him my word that I would go on living. I'm alive. I'm sitting here. Declare me guilty!³

This slight tale, later published as one of Herzl's *Philosophische Erzählungen*, is by no means of great literary or biographical import, but

it can serve here to raise all the complex methodological issues that attend a serious scholarly analysis of Theodor Herzl before he became a Zionist and, as well, of the other figures in this study. First, there is the problem of biographical reductionism: how much one can relate any work of art (however slim the artistry) to its author's life and real views? In this specific context, moreover, what can one say responsibly and not anachronistically about how such a story illuminates its author's attitude to Jewishness at the time it was written? Can we learn anything from works such as this courtroom drama about Herzl's Jewish identity before he became a Zionist, without projecting backward our knowledge that he would soon become one?

The only citation of "Der Sohn" that I have been able to locate is in one of the earliest, and still in many ways the most insightful, biographies of Herzl, Alex Bein's *Theodor Herzl*, first published in German in Vienna in 1934 and then translated into many languages, including frequent reprints in English and Hebrew. Bein cites the passage about the effect on the father of the birth and childhood of his son and provides the following analysis of the connection between this story and Herzl's life:

His feuilletons became increasingly earnest and philosophic in the best sense. How much love and insight there is in that ripe product of his pen, "The Son," written in 1890. . . . The words were put in the mouth of a third person, but it needs no special insight to tell us what had happened: Herzl had become a father. On March 29, 1890, his daughter Pauline was born, and on June 10, 1891, there came a son. The effect of fatherhood is given us in the quoted feuilleton. But there was an outpouring in letters, too. He was no longer a mere spectator in the world. He was tied to tasks and to futurity. His life was to be changed by these facts; his outlook was to take on new clarity and depth.⁴

Before I pick apart this paragraph from Bein, it is crucial to understand its genre and context: Alex Bein was a talented and prolific historian who was employed at the Prussian State Archives in Potsdam until 1933, whereupon he moved to Palestine and held several positions at the Central Zionist Archives, becoming State Archivist of Israel from 1956 to 1971.⁵ His biography of Herzl, penned soon after his arrival in Palestine in the shadow of Nazism, understandably presented one particular version of the relationship between fact and fiction in Herzl's oeuvre. The problem for us is not only that this version was highly skewed to present a positive picture of its subject; more interestingly, it was based on an

obvious misreading of the plot of the story itself and—as Bein himself well knew—on a willful misrepresentation of essential aspects of Herzl's life.

In the story “Der Sohn,” before the defendant rises to deliver his own defense, he pauses, and we are allowed to read his mind:

There must be complete silence, lest even one of his precious words be lost. For the opening he has prepared an especially delicate first course, stirring appetizers for the epicure, saving the heavy stuff for the ending, thus assuring their proper effect: first, the sentimental slop, then the high-flown judicial prose; first, jerk their tears, then a quick jab of the dagger. An advertisement like this trial doesn't come too often.⁶

Rather than a paean to fatherly love, then, the protagonist's speech must be read as precisely the opposite, a cynical manipulation of paternal emotions and the audience's tears in order to extricate a dishonest and guilty man from his just punishment. The evocation of undying—indeed, obsessive—love for his son on the part of the father, we are told by the narrator, is but a coy and deliberately maudlin and melodramatic deceit, meant not only to shift attention away from the accused's crimes but to advance his career as well. While it may well be that the story is woven of autobiographical threads, to disentangle these from their avowedly fictional context requires, at the very least, fidelity to that life as we can reconstruct it. It is clear that “Der Sohn” was written either immediately before or soon after the birth of Herzl's daughter Pauline or during his wife's next pregnancy, which resulted in the birth of their only son, named, rather chillingly, Hans, as is the manipulated son in this story. Why would an author choose the same name for his real-life son after writing such a story? Herzl's letters and diaries (many of which were edited for publication by Alex Bein) do not answer that question, but they do reveal quite a different picture than Bein's description of blissful paternity resulting in a new clarity of purpose. Instead, we find Herzl expressing in his letters and diaries a tortured, totally self-absorbed ambivalence over his state of fatherhood within a terribly unhappy marriage. At the very same time that he wrote this story, Herzl seriously considered and repeatedly threatened to divorce his (probably pregnant) wife and abandon his newborn daughter. The couple decided nevertheless to remain married, however reluctantly, and their mutual antipathy remained intense long after Hans's birth and that of yet another child. Herzl's subsequent neglect of his children as well as his hatred of his wife were open secrets in the Zionist movement, to the extent that even the loyal Bein laconically quipped in another part of

the biography that “the Jewish people owed a great debt of gratitude to Herzl’s unhappy marriage.”⁷

Moreover, Bein knew all too well the ultimate, extraordinarily horrific biographical resonance of this story (which, to be sure, Herzl would not have been aware of): forty years later, in 1930, Hans Herzl committed suicide by shooting himself in the temple with a revolver, unable to cope with his father’s legacy and with his guilt over the recent death of his sister Pauline. As we shall see, Herzl’s art was frequently imitated in real life, but the conundrum of his “prescience” is not susceptible to linear explication, or to any rational analysis.

Still, it does seem safe to conclude that at the time “Der Sohn” was written, Herzl undoubtedly had the implications of fatherhood on his mind. But, rather than demonstrating his delighted embrace of parenthood, this story must in some measure have reflected and refracted his profound ambivalence over the nature and meaning of fatherhood. Whatever Herzl’s intentions, moreover, “Der Sohn” can be seen as an interesting literary meditation on the complex relationship between a father’s love for his son and the deeply repressed resentment fathers feel toward their children (and particularly their sons)—what one psychoanalyst has termed the “Laius Complex.”⁸

But there is more to be learned about Theodor Herzl in 1890 from “Der Sohn.” This story is an excellent example of Herzl’s cultural stance in the late 1880s and early 1890s, in that it is imbued with what Carl Schorske aptly characterized as “the personal frustration and aesthetic despair of the typical fin-de-siècle intellectual.” Using Herzl as the prime example of the feuilletonist—the author of the classic fin-de-siècle genre, a composition style frequently employed by the writers studied here—Schorske portrayed such a writer as an intellectual who

turned his appropriated aesthetic culture inward to the cultivation of the self, of his personal uniqueness. This tendency led to preoccupation with one’s own psychic life. . . . The subjective response of the reporter or critic to an experience, his feeling-tone, acquired clear primacy over the matter of his discourse. . . . his characteristics were narcissism and introversion, passive receptivity toward outer reality, and above all, sensitivity to psychic states. This bourgeois culture of feeling conditioned the mentality of its intellectuals and artists, refined their sensibilities, and created their problems.⁹

In this regard, then, “Der Sohn” is a remarkably pointed expression of its author’s narcissism, a rather disturbing manipulation of fatherly “feeling-tones” in the service of self-absorbed subjectivity. Theodor Herzl was not simply a fin-de-siècle Austrian-Jewish fop and writer of

light-hearted parlor romances, as he has often been lampooned. His sartorial and aesthetic dandyism merely externalized a deep-seated psychological complexity not truly susceptible to responsible retroactive analysis, however enthusiastic the analyst. For, beyond the problems of psychohistory, most of Herzl's most personal and intimate letters were deliberately destroyed, and both his diaries and his surviving correspondence have been heavily censored by editors. To some extent, Herzl's literary remains help to explicate his complex psyche, but they must be read without the tendentious and retrojected assumptions they have heretofore been subjected to.

What is far easier to deduce from Herzl's oeuvre, and is often misunderstood, is his antibourgeois aesthetic, which he shared—not so paradoxically—with other sons of the fin-de-siècle bourgeoisie. In the Habsburg Empire as well as in Germany and France, this antibourgeois and often faux-aristocratic stance was often maintained alongside a generally liberal political posture, without any clear recognition or resolution of the profound antagonism between these positions. In Russia, as we shall see, the typical fin-de-siècle intellectual would harbor a more radical political posture, one equally at odds with his or her aesthetic stance. Moreover, given socioeconomic realities, in Vienna or Budapest (or Odessa or Drohobycz), the antibourgeois but yet decidedly bourgeois liberal or radical aesthete was more likely than not to be Jewish, though deeply and unavoidably confused and uneasy, if not deeply resentful, about his relationship to Judaism and the Jewish community. (And such conflicted individuals were usually male—the fate of the antibourgeois, bourgeois Jewish woman took different routes and resulted in different psychic tolls.)

Indeed, although the protagonist of “Der Sohn” is nowhere identified by name or by community of origin, there hovers over this story a discernible waft of Viennese Jewish middle-class society, which Herzl repeatedly deplored and satirized in his writings both before and, equally notable, after he became a Zionist. The protagonist's financial misdeeds are those of the stereotypically Jewish parvenu, as is his sloppily sentimental speech about a father's love for a child—rather like “Sunrise, Sunset” *avant la lettre*. There will develop a complex Zionist discourse that attempts to appropriate and thus to subvert previous condemnations of Jewish rapaciousness or sentimentality through a peculiar nationalist dialectic.

Here we come to the crucial problem of the overused and imprecise concept of Jewish “assimilation.” In a deliberately provocative essay

entitled "The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History," the great Jewish historian and former chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America Gerson D. Cohen pointed out decades ago that in its most common usage—the acceptance on the part of Jews of non-Jewish cultures, languages, and ways of life—assimilation was a largely beneficial leitmotif of Jewish history from antiquity to the present, in many ways the major source of Jewish survival and adaptability through the ages; to conceive of an eternal Jewish essence unperturbed by foreign admixtures was precisely to misunderstand and profoundly to caricature Jewish life and culture, whether in ancient Palestine or in the Diaspora. If, for example, the rhetorical principles that undergird and define talmudic hermeneutics were "assimilated" from the Greeks, what more need be said about the relationship between Jewish culture and that of the nations with whom they came into contact?¹⁰ Cohen's point was that the slipshod (and largely derogatory) way in which the term "assimilation" has been used in modern Jewish internal polemics ought to be decoded and reconceived; though often cited by historians, Cohen's plea had little effect either within or, especially, outside of the academy. As a result, we do not yet have a history of the term as applied to the Jews nor in particular of its politicization as a term of opprobrium: it seems to have entered into discourse about Jews in the midst of the internal Jewish battle over Zionism in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, with each side accusing the other of being assimilated Jews or promoting assimilation. Thus, Zionists routinely denounced deeply committed but non-Zionist Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews as assimilated or assimilationist, and the latter returned the insult, decrying the largely secularist Zionist leaders as promoting Jewish assimilation. Thus, both "assimilation" and "assimilated Jew" became terms of opprobrium rather than of precise meaning; an "assimilated Jew" came to mean any Jew whose version of Jewishness one did not like.

In his autobiography, *Trial and Error*, Chaim Weizmann recounted his first trip to Germany, at the age of nineteen, to teach Hebrew and Russian at the prestigious Orthodox Jewish boarding school in Pfungstadt, near Darmstadt. Weizmann grew to hate this school for many reasons, but primarily because, as he explains,

Pfungstadt was my introduction to one of the queerest chapters in Jewish history: the assimilated Jews of Germany, then in the high summer of their illusory security and mightily proud of it. . . . The head of this school was a Dr. Barness, a man who in his own way was even more bewildering to me

than the German gentiles. He was pious in the extreme, that is to say, he practiced the rigid, formal piety of Frankfort Jewish Orthodoxy. The school was *kosher*; it had in constant attendance a *Mashgiach*, or overseer of the ritual purity of the food. There were no classes on the Sabbath; no writing was done on that day; prayers were said three times daily, morning, afternoon and evening, . . . Dr. Barness was completely assimilated, and described himself as "a German of the Mosaic persuasion." He took his Judaism to mean that in all respects save that of religious ritual he was as German, in culture, background and personality, as any descendant of the Cerusci.¹¹

Under no plausible reading could one assert that Weizmann was bemoaning the adoption of non-Jewish culture or language by Dr. Barness or the other Orthodox Jews of Germany, that is, their linguistic or cultural Germanization. By no means could Weizmann ever condemn such linguistic or cultural change—he himself was, after all, a graduate of the Pinsk gymnasium, spoke Russian fluently, and was preparing himself to become a chemist. Even more obvious, he could not have conceived that these strictly pious and observant Jews were dedicated to the self-obliteration of the Jews as a group. Rather, to Weizmann, the term "assimilation" was clearly a political epithet; it meant holding non-Zionist (or anti-Zionist) beliefs, in this case defining the Jews as members of a religious faith rather than of a nationalistically defined nation.

Recognizing this confusion, Jewish social historians in recent decades have adopted the terminology of an American sociologist, Milton Gordon, who distinguished between "assimilation," "acculturation," and "integration" to denote the different conditions of intergroup relations.¹² While to some extent useful in describing the nature of social change in Jewish society and the degree of receptivity to Jews by non-Jewish societies, this taxonomy is conceptually problematic because it projects an ostensibly linear progression from acculturation to "structural" assimilation, a teleology vastly overgeneralized from a stereotypical reading of American society in the 1950s and early 1960s. To describe subtle ideational and ideological phenomena—how, in this case, individual Jews in Vienna, Budapest, Paris, Berlin, or Odessa conceived of themselves and the Jews as a group and their relations to non-Jewish society and culture—Gordon's taxonomy is all but useless. Hence it is not surprising that one often finds the very same authors citing Gordon's sociological differentiations and yet retaining the vague, slippery, and polemically charged term "assimilation," ostensibly to denote cultural or intellectual stances.

"Assimilationism" is a less problematic term, though it too is often used in a slipshod way, as synonymous with "assimilation." Used pre-

cisely, the term denotes the belief in the desirability of the disappearance of a group, either by intermarriage, conversion, revolutionary reconstruction of society, or the like. Most Jews described (or decried) as assimilated or as believing in Jewish assimilation by no means advocated Jewish self-obliteration. As a result, the most careful students of modern Jewish politics have recently taken to using the more precise and neutral term "integrationist" to denote Jews who were committed to the future of Jewish life and faith in the Diaspora but who rejected or dissented from the Zionist movement.¹³

But neither Herzl nor the other figures studied here were truly "integrationists" before they became Zionists, for the most part because they had no clear, conscious, or sustained ideological position on the Jews or the so-called Jewish problem. As with thousands of other fin-de-siècle Jewish intellectuals and semi-intellectuals throughout Europe, their "identity" as Jews (to use an anachronistic term) was a complex and often semi-conscious web of action and inaction, beliefs and feelings, embarrassment and pride, always conditioned and complicated by familial, political, and social realities that varied from one individual to the next and from one society to the other. Rigorously to untangle this web requires not only a subtle understanding of both individual and collective lives, but also a refusal to confuse the prescriptive and the descriptive—a crucial distinction often ignored by even the most sophisticated scholars.

In the first place, then, figures such as Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau and the young Vladimir Jabotinsky acted as if their Jewishness had no bearing on their lives, their careers, their worldviews, their Kultur. They neither disavowed their Judaism nor proclaimed it publicly, believing (or pretending to believe) that it was essentially irrelevant to their lives. Moreover, in Germany or the Habsburg realm, it was possible formally to disavow one's Jewishness even without conversion to Christianity (legally to register as "konfessionslos," that is, without any religion). But Herzl and hundreds of thousands of other so-called assimilated Jews did not take this step, despite their distance from the Jewish community and from Judaism as a religious system. One of the most sophisticated analysts of this phenomenon, Carl Schorske, was aware of the paradox but both undervalued and overstated its content: "Their Judaism," he wrote, "amounted to little more than what Theodor Gompertz, the assimilated Jewish classicist, liked to call 'un pieux souvenir de famille.'" ¹⁴ Beyond its rather shocking dismissal of the effect of family ties on individuals' ideational and psychic worlds, Schorske's comment

crucially confuses the descriptive and the prescriptive even in the life story of Gomperz himself, who therefore merits a short digression here, as a “control,” as it were, to Herzl’s relationship with the Jewish community and with Judaism.

Born to a prominent and wealthy Jewish family with ties to both the Mendelssohns and the Rothschilds, Theodor Gomperz (1832–1912) underwent a dramatic transformation in his own relationship to Judaism during his long and productive life. A renowned professor of classical antiquity in Vienna—an academic ranking fully possible in the Habsburg Empire without baptism, despite the frequent but incorrect generalization from Sigmund Freud’s case—Gomperz was also an active and influential public figure and politician, a member of the Herrenhaus, the upper chamber of the Imperial parliament. As a lifelong Liberal and translator and friend of John Stuart Mill, Gomperz personified the unmitigated optimism and dedication to Enlightenment values of the generation of the fathers of Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, and Vladimir Jabotinsky. Despite his thoroughgoing religious skepticism, through his forties Gomperz regularly attended the Seitenstettengasse temple presided over by the famous preacher Adolf Jellinek; moreover, he privately regretted his lack of advanced training in Hebrew and Talmud, pledging that in his older years he would devote himself to renewing his knowledge of the language and literature of *unseres Volkes* (the German phrase has a far stronger resonance of Jewish peoplehood than its English equivalent, particularly in the mouth of a Viennese professor of Greek in 1878).¹⁵ To his wife he wrote that it was his wish that his sons, “with God’s help, and despite whatever views they might have about religion, ritual, etc., go to temple wherever it be . . . every year on the anniversary of my death to say Kaddish, although this seems to go against the grain of my high-minded, areligious, republican Enlightenment.”¹⁶

It was only in the 1880s, especially after the rise and success of antisemitic movements in Austria, Germany, and France threatened to undermine everything he held dear, that Gomperz increasingly began to believe that his profound faith in the possibility of a Jewish future in western European society was chimerical. Thus, in his will written in early 1887, he expressed his “emphatic desire that my children convert to Christianity, so that they bypass the transitional stage of *Konfessionslosigkeit* experienced by their parents.”¹⁷ He then went on at length about the problem of formal baptism in a faith one does not truly believe in and suggested (but did not demand) that his children choose Lutheranism over Catholicism, given the Jesuit domination of the Church in

Austria, despite his own personal love for Italy and aesthetic preference for the Roman dispensation. Indeed, he continued to worry about and to correspond with relatives about which denomination of Christianity his children should adopt and in his last years seems to have been all but obsessed by the unanticipated developments of the *Judenfrage*. Not surprisingly, he was a frequent opponent of Zionism in the pages of Herzl's newspaper, *Die Neue Freie Presse*, and was especially troubled by the Dreyfus Affair, following its every twist and turn with exceedingly careful scrutiny—in May 1902 he met personally with Alfred Dreyfus and his wife, confiding that "they both have very pronounced Jewish looks, I suppose his ultimate misfortune."¹⁸ In the end, moreover, even this avowed proponent of the dissolution of Judaism did not—or as he put it, could not—disavow his erstwhile faith and was buried with full religious ritual in the Jewish cemetery in Vienna. Though Gomperz may well have wished his Judaism to be but a marginal and irrelevant "pious memory of family," it was in fact a complex and ever changing defining aspect of his life and worldview, if ultimately in paradoxical and painful ways.

Gomperz, then, can be regarded as a typical exponent of "assimilationism" rather than "assimilation." And the comparison to Herzl is interesting, since in the late 1880s and early 1890s, Herzl too flirted with the notion of Jewish self-obliteration, either through socialism or, more provocatively, through a mass baptism to be held at St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna. More to the point, perhaps, Herzl deliberately did not have his son, Hans, circumcised at birth in 1891, as a visceral token of his own unease about Judaism. (Hans would be circumcised as a teenager, at the behest of Zionist leaders after Herzl's death.)¹⁹ But as several of his biographers have demonstrated, before he came to Zionism Herzl had already abandoned any hope in assimilationism as well, convinced that the rise of racist antisemitism in Germany, Austria, and France would not permit such a solution to the "Jewish problem," quite independent of the question of its desirability. Like Gomperz, Herzl brooded about the unanticipated nature of this antisemitism, convinced that it betokened a radical new phenomenon in the relationship between Jews and Europe.

Most western and central European Jews did not agree with either Herzl or Gomperz. They believed that the antisemitism they were witnessing was not new, but merely a recurrence of traditional Jew-hatred in a new guise, a retrograde obscurantism deliberately cultivated by scurrilous politicians supported by the reactionary forces of society,

particularly the Church. They thus committed themselves to re-emphasizing their fealty to the Enlightenment values of universal truth and the unstoppable march of progress: the good guys, they genuinely believed, would inevitably and eventually defeat the bad guys. Contrary to Herzl's and Gomperz's conviction in the eternity and unstoppable of Jew-hatred, even in the homeland of Enlightenment and Emancipation, and thus their search for a radical solution to the *Judenfrage*, the most common reaction of central and western European Jews to the Dreyfus Affair was a belief that, in the end, French justice would triumph. After the Affair, they knew they had been right all along—the good guys did vanquish the bad guys; the true France of *égalité*, *fraternité*, and *liberté* beat out the forces of reaction and hatred. This, most were convinced, was the verdict of History.

But in the aftermath of Vichy and worse, such a stance seemed to many to be tragically naive and even self-destructive. The American Jewish writer Cynthia Ozick expressed the resultant widespread wisdom by deriding the optimistic Enlightenment beliefs of such Jews and quipping that “universalism is the ultimate Jewish parochialism.”²⁰ Historically this is true only if one regards Christianity as the ultimate expression of Jewish parochialism, a position maintained most famously by both Voltaire and Nietzsche. But Ozick was on the mark in recognizing that most central and western European Jews in the nineteenth century did indeed believe in a universalist faith and that such a belief lay at the core of their rejection of the Zionist ideology. What Ozick and others do not sufficiently take into account, however, was that that faith was called Judaism—for decades, central and western European Jews had been taught by their rabbis and lay leaders (whether Orthodox, Liberal, or Reform) that Judaism as a creed was fully compatible not only with Emancipation and equal rights but also with Enlightenment conceptions of human equality and brotherhood. Their commitment to this worldview and hence their rejection of Zionism was not based on their assimilation or assimilationism but on their fundamental, dual self-conception as equal (or eventually equal) citizens of the states in which they lived and as Jews, adherents of a faith fully in accord with Enlightenment notions of the true and the just.

This was not the case for intellectuals such as Herzl or Nordau or later for Jabotinsky, on both spiritual and civil counts. Herzl and Nordau had long deliberately forgotten or rejected their rabbis' teachings, and Jabotinsky had never had any to forget or reject. Long before they became Zionists, they had equally rejected the conventional patriotism

of bourgeois society, which they despised, in favor of an ostensibly avant-garde cosmopolitanism, which regarded itself as pan-European in culture and not delimited by any national or communitarian ties. They defined themselves as intellectuals more than as Austrians, Germans, Frenchmen, Russians—as cultured citizens of the world rather than of one particular nation, state, or community of faith. They believed, moreover, that such a transnational, humanistic culture and politics transcended and rendered essentially superfluous class, national, ethnic, and religious boundaries. This particular version of cosmopolitanism (like Marxism and most other offspring of the Enlightenment) assumed the superiority of European civilization over that of the rest of the world, primarily the “Orient” and the so-called primitive races. Hence, it expected and worked to foment a “Westernization” or “modernization” of other cultures and civilizations in the image of the West. To expect otherwise from most nineteenth-century Europeans is to engage in ahistorical, wishful thinking. The profound challenge to such a European cosmopolitanism came not from a presumptively egalitarian multiculturalism but from the enemies and opponents of the Enlightenment itself, from those forces of tradition and reaction that sought to restore the Old Regime and its supposedly divinely ordained values and institutions. Fed by versions of Romanticism that privileged the “primitive” over the ostensibly hyper-rational “modern,” integral nationalists and their fellow travelers insisted on an exclusivist and increasingly biological definition of nationhood, rejecting the earlier inclusive and territorial definitions that had, not incidentally, rendered possible the Emancipation of the Jews. It was thus no coincidence that the new nationalist movements, as if by definition, tended to be antisemitic as well (at least outside of Italy).

In the face of the seeming dissolution of the cosmopolitan dream, Herzl began to obsess over the future of the Jews. Typically, of course, he is said to have come to Zionism as a result of the Dreyfus Affair, a claim he himself made repeatedly in later years. But in an important 1993 study, the historian Jacques Kornberg carefully analyzed Herzl's reportage on the Dreyfus Affair from the beginning of the case to its end and demonstrated that Herzl's reactions to the first stages of the Affair, well into 1897, were entirely typical of those of other writers in *Die Neue Freie Presse* or other liberal (and often Jewish-owned) newspapers, and indeed of most Jews in France and elsewhere.²¹ It was only after Herzl was a convinced Zionist, and the case itself was transformed in the late 1890s into a cause célèbre, that he began to interpret it through

Zionist lenses. Nordau also went through exactly the same stages of Dreyfusardism, to the extent that he, too, would later counterfactually insist that it was the Dreyfus Affair that made him a Zionist.

Instead, as documented by Kornberg and others, Herzl came slowly and gradually to his idea of Zionism. In late 1894 and early 1895 he began to articulate a new and still largely inchoate "solution to the Jewish problem": a conviction in the invincibility of antisemitism even in the face of Emancipation and Enlightenment, and consequently in the necessity of the Jews returning in some way to their ancient political autonomy. There is no reason to doubt that until this point Herzl was unaware that other thinkers had come to the same conclusions; no evidence has emerged to challenge his repeated assertion, for instance, that he had never heard of or read Leon Pinsker's "Autoemancipation," written in German in 1882, or known of the Love of Zion movement that had begun in the Russian Empire and Romania under Pinsker's and others' influence. Herzl seems indeed to have come to his views independently, on the basis of his own cogitation—a rare and remarkable instance of spontaneous intellectual generation.

Indeed, like Pinsker before him, Herzl at first did not care where the "Judenstaat" would be—Argentina, Palestine, Africa, wherever—as long as it both removed the Jews from Europe and enabled them to establish their own home on the basis of his conception of modern civilization. Only after he was convinced that Zionism without Zion would not be supported by the Jewish masses, particularly in eastern Europe, did he become what was then known as a "Palestinophile." But Herzl's conversion to Zionism did not necessitate a rejection of his cosmopolitanism; on the contrary, Zionism for him seemed to be the perfect solution to the crisis of European cosmopolitanism, for the world at large as much as for the Jews. Here we come to one of the most difficult nodes of Herzl's thought, and that of many subsequent Zionist thinkers as well: his conviction that modern antisemitism was not an irrational residue of medieval obscurantism but, as he put it in a letter to the *London Jewish Chronicle* in January 1896, "a highly complex movement. I consider it from a Jewish standpoint, yet without fear or hatred. I believe that I can see what elements there are in it of vulgar sport, of common trade, of jealousy, of inherited prejudice, of religious intolerance and also of legitimate self-defense."²²

It was this last phrase—antisemitism as "legitimate self-defense" on the part of Gentiles—that would put Herzl, Nordau, and later and most controversially, Jabotinsky, on a collision course with conventional Jew-

ish thought and politics, for Zionism seemed to be not only accepting the claims of antisemites about the impossibility of Jewish life in Europe and their criticisms of Jewish society and behavior in European society, but feeding and advancing these claims and criticisms as well. By the late 1930s, Jabotinsky's call for the evacuation to Palestine of Polish Jewry seemed to be playing into the hands of vicious antisemites who persecuted the Jews and called for their exclusion from Polish society—the motto “Zydzi do Palestyny” (Jews to Palestine) could have multiple resonances.

For Herzl, to be sure, such future complications were both unforeseeable and beside the point. He was convinced that the only future for the Jews was their removal from European society and transplantation in a new soil where they could thrive and build a society that combined the best of their millennial culture and modern European civilization. Such a surgery would in turn serve to cure the ills of Europe as a whole: on the one hand, an indigestible element—whose very indigestibility was often used as an excuse for reactionary opposition—would be removed from its midst; on the other, Europe would benefit immeasurably from the establishment in Palestine of a model European society. It was so simple.

In Herzl's time the term “assimilation” came to be used as a polemical sword in the arsenal of inter-Jewish verbal warfare, and so, in *Judenstaat*, Herzl tried to argue that Zionism would cure Jewish assimilation as well, both in the sense of advancing Jewish integration into European mores and culture and allowing those Jews who wished to cease being Jews to do so without hindrance, given the disappearance of antisemitism. And so the debate about Herzl's putative “assimilation” and “assimilationism” was put in motion, resulting in the semiotic promiscuity described above.

But as we shall see throughout the rest of this book, it is precisely on this question of the relationship between fin-de-siècle cosmopolitanism and Zionism that so many of the central debates and divides of the Zionist movement were (and to some extent still are) based. It was one thing for Herzl, Nordau, Lilien, and Jabotinsky to abandon their hopes in the future of the Jews in European society; it is quite another thing to expect them to have altered their personal cosmopolitanism or their fundamental belief in the superiority and transnational applicability of the cultural and intellectual norms and values of late nineteenth-century European civilization.

Nowhere, of course, was Herzl's merger of Zionism and cosmopol-

tanism more clearly articulated than in his Utopian novel *Altneuland*, written in 1902.²³ As scores of commentators have noted from the time of its composition to today, Herzl's vision of the Old-New Land was unabashedly premised on fin-de-siècle European culture and ideals: religion would be relegated entirely to the private realm, with no distinction whatsoever between Jew, Muslim, or Christian in any aspect of life, law, or social intercourse; there would be absolutely no Arab opposition to Zionism, since the Arab inhabitants of Palestine would only benefit from the technological advance of their society and hence would unilaterally welcome massive Jewish immigration; the return of the Jews to their ancient land would thus solve the "Jewish problem" everywhere else—antisemitism would disappear from the world, and the Old-New Land would be a beacon of peace, prosperity, and progress for the rest of the world. To symbolize this cosmopolitan dream, a beautiful Peace Palace with Terence's famous line "*Humani nihil a me alienum puto*" carved above its portals would stand next to the rebuilt Temple of Jerusalem. The Temple itself would somehow have been restored without destroying the Mosque of Omar and would resemble in its aesthetic and ritual a central European Reform temple—with no mention, to be sure, of animal sacrifices. So transnational would be Jewish Palestine that no revival of the Hebrew language would be necessary—each person would speak whatever language came naturally, and there would be no need for the development of a secular Jewish culture based on the Hebrew tongue. In Herzl's vision, the Jewish elite would behave like English ladies and gentlemen, playing cricket and dressing for dinner in formal evening attire, retiring afterward to their salons for port and cigars for the men and gossip for the women, while the farmers would speak Yiddish and follow traditional Judaism under the tutelage of pious, though thoroughly Zionist, rabbinic authority. Moreover, Herzl insisted throughout the novel that the Old-New Land would rid itself of what he considered the worst invention of the nineteenth century, the fetish of nation-statehood: Zionism would not be realized through the establishment of a state but through the creation of a commonwealth, which Herzl defined as "a large co-operative association composed of affiliated co-operatives" with no true executive, a minimal legislature, no formal judiciary, no trappings whatsoever of a modern nation-state.

Herzl's vision of Zionism was most famously attacked by Ahad Ha'am, the Russian Jewish ideologue of cultural or spiritual Zionism, who penned a furious review of *Altneuland*, deriding with uninhibited sarcasm its author's scandalous ignorance of and disregard for

the very fundamentals of Jewish history and faith, the Hebrew language, and the Jewish *Volksgeist*. Ahad Ha'am's ad hominem attack on Herzl was answered with even more furiously personalized venom by Nordau, who ridiculed Ahad Ha'am as an untutored ghetto Jew, oblivious of even the basics of modern European literature and culture, hopelessly mired in the obscurantist muck of the Pale of Settlement, despite his ostensible claims to modernity.²⁴ Though his Hebrew was allegedly elegant (a judgment, Nordau confessed, he could not make firsthand since he could not understand it), Ahad Ha'am's writings, when translated into German, revealed the fundamental emptiness and confusion of their author's uneducated Asiatic mind, according to Nordau. The characters in *Altneuland* speak German because the novel was written in German, Nordau explained, just as Shakespeare did not have Hamlet and Julius Caesar speak Danish or Latin; if Ahad Ha'am has never heard of Shakespeare, he can turn to his beloved Bible, where he will note that the Egyptians speak Hebrew, not Egyptian! In sum, Nordau concluded, Ahad Ha'am was not a Zionist but an enemy of Zionism, masquerading as a friend: he was a secular "Protestrabbiner"—the term Herzl invented to deride those German rabbis, Orthodox, Liberal, and Reform, who joined together to oppose the Zionist movement at its very origin. Ahad Ha'am's attack on Herzl from the standpoint of "secular Jewish culture" and "Hebraism" was merely a cover for his fundamentalist, if free-thinking, opposition to the very essence of the Zionist creed:

Altneuland is too European. There are newspapers, theater, opera-houses for which one dons white gloves. Everywhere Europeans, European mores, European inventions. Nowhere any specific Jewish traces.

Indeed! *Altneuland* is a piece of Europe in Asia. Here Herzl pointed precisely to what we want, what we are striving for. We want the reunified liberated Jewish Nation to be a modern cultured nation (*ein Kulturvolk*)—to remain as modern and cultured as we already are and as much as we can possibly become. In this we are not aping anyone, we are merely using and developing our own property: we have contributed more than our share to European culture, which is thus ours to the same degree it belongs to the Germans, French or English. We hold that there is no contradiction between what is Jewish—what is ours as Jews—and what is European. Ahad Ha'am might see European culture as foreign—we will make it accessible to him. But we will never concede that the return of the Jews to the land of their fathers is a return to barbarism, as our enemies slanderously claim. The Jewish people will develop its own culture alongside and within general Western culture, just like any other civilized nation, not from the outside in an uncultured Asiatic society, as Ahad Ha'am seems to desire.²⁵

Though misleading (perhaps deliberately) about Ahad Ha'am's beliefs, Nordau's emphatic diatribe was by far the clearest précis of the synthesis between fin-de-siècle cosmopolitanism and Zionism that lay at the heart of the Zionist movement as Herzl and his closest colleagues conceived it. But Max Nordau was hardly a run-of-the-mill exponent of late nineteenth-century European culture and civilization; paradoxically, he was fin-de-siècle cosmopolitanism's most ardent and controversial critic. To flesh out this paradox, we turn in chapter 2 to an investigation of this most curious Zionist leader, Dr. Max Nordau.

Max Nordau, the Improbable Bourgeois

In the summer of 1901, *Freiheit*, the London anarchist Yiddish press, published a series of brochures by Max Nordau, then the world's second most famous Zionist. This was hardly a signal of a softening of the intramural hatreds of Jewish political life on the cusp of a new century. On the contrary, although the stridently anti-Zionist Yiddish anarchist undoubtedly relished Nordau's words for their own sake, the fact that their author might be deeply embarrassed by their appearance at this moment could well have added a tinge of *schadenfreude* to *Freiheit's* decision to reprint Nordau's missives. For the first of these brochures, entitled in Yiddish *Der lign fun religyon* (The lie of religion), contained the following description of the Hebrew Bible:

Historical investigations have revealed to us the origin and growth of the Bible; we know that by this name we designate a collection of writings as radically unlike in origin, character and contents as if Wagner's *Nibelungen Lied*, Mirabeau's speeches, Heine's love poems, and a manual of zoology, had been printed and mixed up promiscuously and then bound into one volume. We find collected in this book the superstitious beliefs of the ancient inhabitants of Palestine, with indistinct echoes of Indian and Persian fables, mistaken imitations of Egyptian theories and customs, historical chronicles as dry as they are unreliable, and miscellaneous poems, amatory, human and Jewish national, which are rarely distinguished by beauties of the highest order but frequently by superfluity of expression, coarseness, bad taste, and genuine Oriental sensuality. As a literary monument the Bible is of much later origin than the Vedas; as a work of literary value it is surpassed by

everything written in the last 2000 years by authors even of second rank; and to compare it seriously with the productions of Homer, Sophocles, Dante, Shakespeare or Goethe would require a fanatized mind that had entirely lost its power of judgment. Its conception of the universe is childish and its morality revolting, as revealed in the malicious vengeance attributed to God in the Old Testament. . . . And yet men, cultivated and capable of forming a just estimate, pretend to reverence this ancient work, they refuse to allow it to be discussed and criticized like any other production of the human intellect . . . and they pretend to be edified and inspired when they read it.¹

This was a rendering into Yiddish of one of the chapters of Nordau's second most important work, *Die conventionellen Lügen der Kulturmenschheit*, first published in German in 1883 and imprecisely translated into English as *The Conventional Lies of Our Civilization*.² Today largely forgotten, this was an extremely popular and influential work in the fin de siècle, quickly translated into Italian, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Spanish, Rumanian, Czech, Hungarian, Hebrew, Russian, Japanese, Greek, Chinese, and Turkish, in addition to English and French. Banned not only by the Austrian and Russian governments but by the Vatican as well, *Conventional Lies* presaged Nordau's later and even more influential and controversial *Degeneration* by attacking contemporary European society as sick and rotten to its core, dominated not only by the lie of religion but also by the equally pernicious lies of monarchy, aristocracy, parliamentary democracy, free trade, capitalism, socialism, and, not least of all, marriage.

How to reconcile this worldview with Nordau's later Zionism has befuddled historians for the past several decades. Without entering into the details of the long-lived debate on this issue, it is only a slight oversimplification to claim that opinion has essentially been divided between those who see Nordau's Zionism as completely contradictory to his previous views and those who see his pre-Zionist views as seamlessly connected to his Zionism.³ Both categories can be subdivided into two sets: those authors who admire or abhor his stance before he became a Zionist, and those who admire or abhor his stance after he became a Zionist. Intellectual detachment, to say the least, is not the hallmark of the scholarship on Zionism as a whole, or on Nordau in particular.

What all these permutations and combinations share is a basic agreement about the nature of Nordau's politics and thought before he became a Zionist: that he was a liberal and indeed the quintessential liberal of the middle and late nineteenth century. Thus, one student of Nordau, Peter Baldwin, writes:

Liberalism was for Nordau, the prodigal Jew, his personal salvation, and it became, in his version and opinion, that of all people. Nordau's liberal worldview was formulated in extreme terms of a broad scope, without nuance. . . . Chauvinistic nationalism he rejected as conservative and illiberal. More importantly, however, he also shied away from any notion of nationalism which could not be reconciled with his cosmopolitan attitude. [Thus] although many of his contemporaries had no trouble combining nationalism and liberalism into an integrated scheme of thought, Nordau found the task ultimately impossible. He led a dual life, torn between a nationalist ideology that appealed to the basic features of his conception of the world and a commitment to liberalism which his rarely flagging rationalism never allowed him to repudiate.⁴

In perhaps the most often quoted study on the matter, George Mosse reached a totally opposite conclusion, starting from the same premise:

Nordau was a Liberal . . . a champion of individual rights and liberties. While . . . his liberalism and Zionism seem in conflict, in reality his ideal of the new Jew, as well as his Jewish nationalism, were adapted to liberal ends. There is no need to go into Nordau's liberal credentials. . . . [He] had to balance his commitment to the regeneration and survival of the Jewish people with his concern for the rights of the individual. Thus in his novel *The Right to Love*, which appeared in the same year as *Degeneration*, the rights of individuals are suspended only when the survival of the species is at stake. A husband and wife must live in an empty marriage rather than endanger the adaptability of their children. He wrote this novel to refute Henrik Ibsen's *Doll House* with its portrayal of the free run of passions and man's selfishness. Indeed his view of women was traditional, characteristic of his concept of sexual morality.⁵

Mosse was on the right track, though he had not read his sources very carefully: *The Right to Love* is not a novel but a play, as its title page announces—and even a cursory reading of this drama reveals that it by no means preaches what Mosse says it does.⁶ On the contrary, and fully in accord with Nordau's views on matrimony in *Conventional Lies*, his play is a satiric attack both on contemporary bourgeois conceptions of marriage and on the fashionable avant-garde alternatives to bourgeois marriage. I shall return to *The Right to Love* and Nordau's views on matrimony and sex below. But first, what is crucial to the overall proposition here is that to scholars on all sides of the Nordau-Zionism debate, Nordau was a prototypical liberal before he became a Zionist, a defender of bourgeois mores and politics who therefore either abandoned his liberalism when he became a nationalist or succeeded in synthesizing his liberalism with his nationalism.

But what is wrong with this conventional analysis is that Max Nordau was not a liberal, in any rational and historically apt sense of that term, before he became a Zionist. Rather, in both his pre-Zionist works and those written after he became a Zionist, he presented a cultural and political theory that was neither liberal nor conservative, neither radical nor reactionary, though it contained elements of all of these sensibilities. But neither was it especially idiosyncratic: Nordau's view of the world can only be understood through an examination of one of the most difficult thickets of fin-de-siècle European intellectual history, not to speak of fin-de-siècle Jewish intellectual history, Social Darwinism.

As Richard Hofstadter noted in 1944 when writing *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, although it is reflexive in our political culture to divide the world according to the architectural layout of the French National Assembly, the categories of Right, Left, and Center—or radical, liberal, and conservative—are totally unhelpful in describing the ideas of the mid- to late nineteenth-century heirs of positivism, the so-called Social Darwinists. Hofstadter, struggling with his own ideological contortions and with the implications of Social Darwinism on American society and politics, understood that Herbert Spencer and his devotees could perhaps be best understood not as liberals but as conservatives. However, Hofstadter questions the fit of this label:

we may wonder whether, in the entire history of thought, there was ever a conservatism so utterly progressive as this. . . . A conservatism that appealed more to the secularist than the pious mentality, it was a conservatism almost without religion. A body of belief whose chief conclusion was that the positive functions of the state should be kept to the barest minimum, it was almost anarchical, and it was devoid of that center of reverence and authority which the state provides in many conservative systems.⁷

Even more cogently, a recent British study of Spencer explains that his thought and that of the other Individualists and Social Darwinists cannot usefully be labeled liberal, even though they had their genesis in the fin-de-siècle crisis of liberalism caused by a society experiencing profound social, economic, and political dislocation. Differing sharply both from contemporary liberals, conservatives, and radicals, such thinkers found in evolutionary science a new, post-Comtian positivism that claimed that proposals for social reform proceeded in ignorance of the fundamental laws of the development of society: political institutions cannot be effectively modified faster than the characters of citizens are modified. While Auguste Comte had preached “Savoir pour prévoir,

prévoir pour pouvoir," the outlook of Spencer and his colleagues was more adequately expressed as "Prévoir pour rien faire."⁸

Nordau's variation on this theme was, simply put, to extend this analysis from sociology and political science to cultural criticism; to apply the slogan "ontology recapitulates phylogeny" to the aesthetic and ideological innovations of his time. He believed that from paleontology we can easily deduce that there were reptilian phases for cultures as well as for individuals and for species, and that these evolved through the fish to the mammalian and then to the human stage. In devolution, meanwhile, an individual, society, or species may propel itself, or be propelled, in just the opposite direction.

Here lie the keys to Nordau's thought, expressed in *Conventional Lies* as well as many other works both before and after *Degeneration*, and both before and after he became a Zionist—plays, short stories, novels, philosophical works, scientific (or as we would now say, pseudo-scientific) tracts, and reams of cultural criticism. Beyond the problem of controlling and analyzing the sheer mass of these materials, it would be extraordinarily difficult to order their mélange of crude determinism and anarchism, anti-aestheticism and reductionist pre-Freudian conceptions of the ego into a coherent ideology. As Peter Gay has put it, "nothing would be harder than to reduce . . . Social Darwinism to a consistent line of thinking, the confusions inherent in that doctrine as a cultural rationalization are beyond repair."⁹

But on most issues, Nordau was indeed both coherent and consistent from his first published works in the late 1870s to his death in 1923. Thus, for example, from *Conventional Lies* to his last major work, *The Interpretation of History*, Nordau hewed to the same evolutionary-psychological view of religion. After he became a leading Zionist ideologue, out of deference to some sensibilities he at times refrained from publicly condemning Judaism as pathetic and infantile and even claimed to regret his choice of words in the above-cited passage on the Hebrew Bible from *Conventional Lies*. In his highly inventive autobiographical writings, he even attempted to present himself as an admirer of the Scriptures and Talmud from the time he learned them at his father's knee. But this was purely a sop to his Zionist readers: many times after he became a Zionist Nordau authorized the reprinting of his attack on the Hebrew Bible in numerous editions and countless languages, and in his other books, stories, and tracts, and indeed in his personal life, he retained a thoroughgoing rejection of and disdain for all religious beliefs

and practices—Jewish, Christian, pagan—a disdain that proceeded from his basic conception of the universe and the place of human beings in the evolutionary chain.

Outdarwinizing Darwin, in *Conventional Lies* Nordau fervently and clearly explained that his view of the world

is from the standpoint of natural science. We look upon the universe as a vast aggregation of matter, possessing the attribute of motion which reveals itself to us in various physical laws, some of which we have discovered, defined, and proved, while we are as yet on the track of the rest. . . . If we descend from the universe to our race, to man, we see in him, as a necessary consequence of our conception of material nature, merely a living being, fitting perfectly into its allotted place in the ranks of living organisms, and governed *in all things* by the common laws of the organic world. We can discover no proofs of any special favors or privileges granted to man more than those enjoyed by every other living animal or vegetable organism. We believe that the development of the human as well as all other races, was perhaps first made possible by sexual selection, and certainly promoted by it; and that the struggle for existence, using the term in its most comprehensive sense, shapes the destinies of nations as well as of the most obscure individual and is the foundation for all forms of political and social life. . . . [A]ll individuals without exception are created, live out their lives and die in accordance with the same organic laws . . . every occurrence in this world is the result of certain irresistible and immutable physical laws. . . . We acknowledge the struggle for existence as the inevitable foundation for all law and morality.¹⁰

In line with this overarching theory, Nordau viewed all religions as a “functional weakness,” the “physical relic of the childhood of the human race.” Writing four years before the publication of Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* and twenty-four years before Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* but fully in line with Social Darwinist premises, Nordau explained that out of unresisting servitude to primitive conceptions of causality, in the course of their evolution human beings projected onto nature and thence onto a supernatural deity their own sense of actions emanating from will. They then collated the resulting fantasy of a superhuman will with their fear—infantile but understandable—of evil and death. Out of this cauldron of illogic and fear, what we call religion was born. Necessarily, this belief in a divine will, dispensing both life and death, good and evil, controlling nature and setting human beings at the zenith of the natural world, was rendered in anthropomorphic images by the Divinity’s all too human inventors. Reflecting and seeking to overcome their own feelings of fallibility, fragility, and ignorance,

men invented an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfect deity whom they could worship and in whom they could find hope and salvation.

Nordau could not quite decide if such a belief in God preceded or followed the belief in the immortality of the soul. In either case, the very concept of a soul was the consequence of the combination of fear and illogic that lay at the heart of religion: human intellect's inability to conceive of absolute nonexistence, and especially of its own nonexistence. Hence, the human intellect defined itself as an everliving I, an eternal Ego, an immortal thinking and feeling essence of itself separate and separable from its physical body, and subordinate to the will of an all-powerful, all-knowing, eternally living Creator. On this primitive base, Nordau continued, human cultures throughout time elaborated vast permutations of rites, rituals, theologies, and systems of power and oppression masked as theologies of grace and liberation. These filled the basic human need for community, our innate passion for solidarity, and a natural longing for emotional and aesthetic satisfaction. Thus the church, synagogue, mosque, or ashram became not only the main but often the only vehicle and venue of art, poetry, song, and intellectual accomplishment in their societies. At the heart of the "lie of religion," Nordau thus firmly believed, lay basic human drives and desires that could now, once correctly identified and analyzed by science, be channeled away from the primitive forms of religion to modern and socially useful expressions of culture and social organization.

This evolution from primitivity to modernity and from superstition to reason was inevitable and not dependent on human consciousness or agency. In due course, according to Nordau, secular poetry will inevitably replace sermons, and the theater and concert hall will do away with churches, synagogues, and mosques. To some extent, Nordau believed, this was already happening in his time, especially in countries with advanced, western European political forms, for to him political, cultural, economic, and social advance were not only connected, they were immutably intertwined in the evolutionary chain:

A time is coming and is perhaps near at hand, when we will see a civilization in which men will satisfy not transcendently but rationally, their need for rest and recreation, for elevation of the mind, for emotional release; when a solidarity of the human race will be the worship of a progressive and enlightened age.¹¹

The circle is then squared—a collectivist aesthetic and corporatist politics will emerge out of the superseded shards of religion and superstition:

Such is my idea of the civilization of the future. I am convinced that the day will come when even the humblest man will find his individual life merged into the fuller life of the community, and his isolated, circumscribed horizon broadened by means of festivals of poetry, music, art, thought and humanity, until it coincides with the horizon of the entire human race, thus leading him on to nobler standards of development and setting before him the grand ideal of a perfected humanity. Until this picture of the future becomes reality, however, the masses will continue to seek the ideal exaltation which they find nowhere else, in Religion.¹²

Nordau then follows this line of argument with the vitriolic denunciation of the Jewish Bible cited above, along with a denunciation of the New Testament and an all-out attack on the Papacy as the most deleterious force in human affairs. No wonder that *Conventional Lies* was placed on the Index! Not only did Nordau detest both the Old and New Testaments as childish and revolting; he saw no reason to differentiate between Judaism and Christianity, or for that matter between Judaism and Christianity and either non-European or ancient religions, except that the continued popularity of Christianity and Judaism in nineteenth-century Europe was even more of a scandal and a lie than the more understandable retention of belief in "primitive" religions in less developed parts of the world or eras of human history:

Every separate act of a religious ceremony becomes a fraud and a criminal satire when performed by a cultivated man of this Nineteenth Century. . . . The continued existence and growth of these ancient, partly prehistoric forms of worship in the midst of our modern civilization is a monstrous fact, and the position accorded to the clergyman, the European equivalent of an Indian medicine-man or African almay, is such an insolent triumph of cowardice, hypocrisy and mental indolence over truth and courage of opinion, as would be sufficient, taken alone, to characterize our civilization as a complete fraud, and our political and social order as necessarily temporary.¹³

This was hardly the attitude of a prototypical bourgeois liberal in the 1880s! Contrary to both pro- and anti-Zionist readings of Nordau, then, it is crucial to understand that when this diatribe was first published, in 1883, Nordau did not think of himself as a Jew in any meaningful sense of the term: he was a cosmopolitan intellectual, a German writer living in Paris, who neither denied nor acknowledged his Jewish origins. In the changed atmosphere of the late 1880s and early 1890s, when he was first identified in public as a Jew, Nordau exploded in furious indignation. As a cosmopolitan intellectual, he objected to all such attempts to categorize human beings by their origins, and thus he despised all the new nationalist movements he saw developing around him. Their "false

patriotism" was yet another outrageous lie of contemporary European civilization, a pernicious—indeed, degenerate—retreat from scientifically determined progress. It would be nearly a decade after the publication of *Conventional Lies* before Nordau would acknowledge his Jewishness even in private correspondence. And even after he became a Zionist he refused to entertain any link between his Zionism and Judaism as a religious faith. It was after he became not only a Zionist but a renowned leader of the Zionist movement that he married his Christian wife and allowed her to baptize their daughter, insisting that there was absolutely no reason to expect his wife or daughter to believe in a religion which he rejected.

Thus, those who attempt to read Nordau's (or Jabotinsky's) pre-Zionist writing as expressions of an unconscious though ineffable Jewish "discourse"—either from a traditional Zionist or supposedly postmodernist and critical perspective—are not only flawed historians but bad storytellers as well.

But back to Nordau in 1883: at this time, contrary to what George Mosse claimed, Nordau frontally attacked bourgeois conceptions of marriage and sexuality. His chapter on the lie of matrimony opened with the following lines:

Man has two powerful instincts which govern his life and determine all of his actions: the instinct for self-preservation and the sexual instinct. The former is expressed in hunger and the need to eat; the latter as love. The forces which produce the phenomena of nourishment and propagation are still obscure to us, but we can watch their operation clearly. . . . Paleontology gives us sufficient data to enable us without hesitation to announce as fact the parallelism of the laws governing the life and development of the individual and the species. . . . The act of sexual union between male and female, that most sublime function of the organism and with which are connected the most powerful sensations of the nervous system, cannot take place until it has reached its full maturity. . . . In our civilization as well as in its state of primitive development, the impulse for procreation must summon society to be a witness to its gratification and place itself under its protection. . . . Marriage is the only kind of union between man and woman countenanced by our society. But what have the lies of our corrupt civilization done to marriage? It has been diminished to a business agreement that gives as much place to love as the contract between two capitalists who form a commercial partnership. The pretext for marriage is still, as ever, the preservation of the species, but this is a pathetic lie, for contemporary marriage has nothing to do with the mutual biological attraction of two sexual beings but with common material interests. . . . When a wedding is planned, everything is considered—the living-room and the kitchen, the caterers and the honeymoon; only one thing is forgotten—the bedroom, in which the future of the family,

the nation, the human race is created. . . . Any nation that develops under these circumstances must inevitably face doom.¹⁴

In other words, Nordau took a stridently Darwinian position on the development of sexuality in human beings, arguing not only that sexual desire is as basic in humans as the desire for food and the fear of death, but that human society and history are essentially propelled by sexual selection. Sexual selection and thus sexual desire are as fundamental to women as to men—indeed, as a physician Nordau had long been interested in the problematics of women's sexuality; his thesis for his medical degree, awarded in Paris in 1882, was on female sterilization, a practice he deplored.¹⁵ In "primitive" societies or among the lower classes of "civilized" societies, he believed, both men and women are not especially concerned or discerning about their sexual partners' personalities, since these societies are by their nature less evolved, less differentiated than modern industrial societies. In more advanced contexts, however, the greater differentiation among humans leads irrevocably to a more evolved concept of sexual desire, which we call love:

Love is the instinctive recognition of the fact that one being, that it must be united with a certain other being of the opposite sex, so that its good qualities may be increased, its bad neutralized and its offspring prove at least no deterioration of its type, and if possible an improvement on it.¹⁶

This, Nordau continued, is primarily a chemical process, comparable to the affinity of the elements—a scientifically observable and determinable proposition, though at the same time, impervious to rational explication:

These are elementary properties inherent in matter, which we do not attempt to explain. Why does oxygen unite with potassium? Why will not nitrogen unite with platinum? Who can tell us? And why does a man love this woman and not this other? Why does a woman want this man and spurn all others? Evidently because this attraction and indifference are founded on the innermost chemical properties of the beings in question and proceed from the same sources as the organic processes of life itself.¹⁷

However, Nordau lamented, contemporary European society paid only lip service, at best, to the idea of love and by no means organized its fundamental social forms—marriage and family—on the basis of this scientifically based phenomenon. Contemporary marriage has nothing to do with the mutual biological attraction of two sexual beings but with common material or class interests. In the upper classes, this leads to dissolute behavior and hence to "degeneracy"—it is in large measure

the cause of the decay of aristocracy everywhere in Europe. But in the middle classes, the far more common result is loveless marriage, consummated for financial rather than sexual profit: the bourgeoisie has made marriage "a business agreement that gives as much place to love as the contract between two capitalists who form a commercial partnership." The disastrous consequences of this arrangement are manifold. First, it leads to mass unhappiness, which is manifestly unhealthy, psychological unhealth being as bad to society as physical illness. Second, it leads to avoidance of marriage on the part of large numbers of men who refuse to enter into a loveless marriage, much to the detriment of the species, since they and their genes are removed from the pool of potential propagators. While bachelors are in some way admired and even treated with kindness, unmarried women, on the other hand, are scorned and forbidden from pursuing even such nonsexual pleasures vouchsafed to unmarried men as travel and dining out. Third, it leads to an unhealthy and unnatural condemnation of sexuality per se, a preposterous Puritanism masquerading as morality. The most notorious promulgator of such a stance is at once the most influential—Christianity—and the most pernicious result of Christian antisexuality is the inhumane and immoral doctrine of celibacy.

But the most common victims of all of these sexual and social prohibitions are women: since humans are not naturally monogamous, society accedes to nature by institutionalizing duplicity among men, largely closing its eyes to the infidelity of both married and unmarried men while condemning women in loveless marriages to sexual dissatisfaction, and women outside of marriage to celibacy. The movement for the emancipation of women is not a solution to this problem, since it preaches the unscientific proposition of the equality of the sexes and would thus set men and women on an ostensibly equal plane, which inevitably would turn into a perpetual battlefield in which women would necessarily lose, given their biologically based physical inferiority. Moreover, as long as society is organized according to the "lie of matrimony," urging young women not to marry is to condemn them to a life not only of unhappiness but of poverty as well.

The solution, according to Nordau, is three-fold. First, recognize the scientifically necessary and natural universality of sexual desire in both men and women. Second, recognize that men are the natural breadwinners and women the natural preservers and defenders of future generations. Third, on this basis provide all women with free public education and guarantee them lifetime economic support, either in their parents'

home or their own: "Society should look upon it as a disgrace if any woman, young or old, beautiful or ugly, should feel the pangs of want in any civilized community."¹⁸ This plan would in one stroke eliminate the need for loveless marriages and for prostitution, proclaimed Nordau! The ideal, he concluded, is "[w]hen material considerations enter no longer into the contracting of a marriage, when woman is free to choose and is not compelled to sell herself, when man is obliged to compete for woman's favor with his personality and not with his social position and property; then the institution of matrimony will become a truth instead of the lie it now is."¹⁹

However preposterous or admirable, misogynistic or enlightened Nordau's view, it can hardly be considered a "traditional" nineteenth-century bourgeois or liberal stance on sex, women, and marriage. But Nordau hewed to this stance for decades, including in his play *The Right to Love*, published first in 1893, the same year as the publication of his most famous work, *Degeneration*. It is in some ways unfortunate that Nordau did not write more plays, since, unlike his favorite genres, the feuilleton and the novel, the drama was of a perfect length and nature for so didactic and yet imaginative a writer to manipulate successfully: in the shorter literary forms, Nordau was often either too cute or too pedantic, more committed to *épater les bourgeois* than to creating works of art. His novels, like most of his long philosophical and critical treatises, are horribly cumbersome, repetitive, and fundamentally unreadable today. But in his plays, Nordau was able to shine through as a gifted conversationalist and hence a rather good stylist. While his plots are either obvious or preposterous, and the dramatic development weak and labored, his characters come alive even on the written page. It is thus not surprising that, unlike Herzl, Nordau had some success with several of his plays on the German and Austrian stage, and in translation elsewhere in Europe and the United States.

There is no methodological danger in positing clear ideological stances from Nordau's plays. His views of the theater, often expressed, were both romantic and highly critical of contemporary fashion. He wanted theater once more to become, as it was in ancient Greece, the place of communal meeting and worship. But he thundered as early as 1883 that theater in his time was outrageous, with "its indecent plots, its street-song melodies, its idiotic laughter and its semi-nudity."²⁰ For Nordau, as for other synthesizers of radical and reactionary thought—one thinks invariably of Lenin—anti-aestheticism is masked as scientif-

ically based progressivism, and art is conceived as a spectacle subordinate to the collectivity. In Nordau's ideal theater,

we will see in beautiful corporate forms the passions struggling with the will, and personal greed conquered by the capability for self-denial, and where, with every word and action, like a grand accompaniment, we will hear a continual reference to the collective existence and development of the human race.²¹

The Right to Love followed this prescription—or so at least it appeared to its author. George Mosse is correct that this play was self-consciously Nordau's response to Ibsen's *Doll House*. For Nordau, the widespread admiration of Nora's abandonment of her husband and children in the name of love was regressive, not progressive, an act of selfishness rather than liberation. Nora was indeed unjustly condemned to a loveless marriage on the basis of hypocritical bourgeois norms, Nordau explained, but her solution was just as bad as the disease: egotistical satisfaction of one's desires is no way to combat hypocrisy. Moreover, Nordau insisted repeatedly and vocally, Ibsen's promotion of egocentrism was based not on a rejection of repressive Victorian mores, but unconsciously on his acceptance of Christianity, particularly the doctrines of original sin and the saving act of Christ, and thus on the most pernicious and antisensual forms of Christian mysticism. Hence, Ibsen—like Nietzsche, Wagner, Zola, Tolstoy, Whitman, Verlaine, and most other modernist authors of the fin de siècle—was diagnosed and decried as a “degenerate” by Nordau, at once victim and purveyor of the illness of psychological and moral degeneracy that was destroying European society.

This is not the place to analyze further Nordau's vulgar attack on fin-de-siècle culture, its crude Lombrosian psychology intermingled with equally reductionist positivist and Social Darwinist cultural criticism. Here it is only crucial to understand (*contra* Mosse et al.) that Nordau's attack on Ibsen and Nora was premised on his antipathy to what he termed the “egocentrism” of contemporary bourgeois society, that is, the selfish individualism of men or women putting their own needs and desires above those of society at large. Thus, the true villain of *The Right to Love* was not the haute-bourgeois wife, Bertha, who attempted to abandon her boring husband, the merchant Joseph Wahrmond, but rather her seducer, the philandering bachelor Otto Bardenholm. Otto was an amoral bureaucrat who lived off the largesse of his prey, the

unsatisfied wives of the upper middle class; he was thus the personification of all the vices of modernity. Poor Bertha thought that after she left her husband, her lover Otto would embrace her in gleeful rapture, marry her, and adopt her children. In the event, of course, he was horrified at the prospect of her being free and had no interest in marrying her or anyone else for that matter, not to speak of raising somebody else's children. Obviously encouraging the audience to ponder what really would happen to Nora *after* she slammed that famous door, Nordau led Bertha and also Joseph to their ultimate tragic denouement: a life together without either love or sex, a farcical pantomime of a happily married couple. Only they would know that at the core of their life henceforth there would be only misery and betrayal, hate and disgust. As for so many bourgeois couples who married for convenience and comfort rather than out of physical attraction and true love, there was no other way this drama could unfold.

Such a loveless bourgeois marriage, such a conventional bourgeois life was not for Max Nordau—not in theory and not in practice. To understand his transition from cosmopolitan antibourgeois Social Darwinist to Zionist, in chapter 3 we delve into a fascinating and previously unstudied chapter of Nordau's life, his romance with an antisemitic Russian noblewoman at the very same time that he was becoming a Zionist. But before doing so, it is crucial to skip ahead a quarter of a century from the publication of *Conventional Lies* to 1909, when Nordau's last major book, *Der Sinn der Geschichte*, was first published in Berlin. (The first English edition, titled *The Interpretation of History*, appeared in New York in 1910.)²² Although Nordau was at this time a very influential Zionist leader and ideologue, Zionism is not mentioned even once in *The Interpretation of History*, and it would be impossible for any reader who did not know of its author's Zionism even to guess that Nordau could be sympathetic to that movement. On most fronts, Nordau merely repeated the same basic views he had enunciated in the *Conventional Lies*: human vanity apart, the human species is no more unique or imbued with innate purpose or morality than flies or mosses. The law of history is not teleology, but causality—a highly complex causality that brings to bear upon every man, at every moment of his life, the whole past and present of the human species. Central to this past, and to the future, is the struggle for existence. Human history is thus merely the record of humans' historic attempts to master nature by means of the struggle for existence; to speak of a purpose of human life or a goal in the universe is to engage in errant, irrational nonsense. The only prog-

ress that has been achieved or that can be achieved is technological progress, that is, scientific mastery over the natural environment. Terms and concepts such as "moral progress" and innate "good and evil" are just twaddle, whether uttered by Plato or Schegel. Religion is but a primitive "epiphenomenon," an unscientific self-delusion used to mask men's fear of death and their consequent unfortunate need to subordinate themselves before their sense of powerlessness by means of "parasitism."

What is new in Nordau's *Interpretation of History* is not this crude Social Darwinism, but an extended attack on the idea of nationalism, from its origins in the thought of Herder to its latest exponents, the theorists of *Völkerpsychologie* (the psychology of nations). The latter were often cited by contemporary Zionists, including Vladimir Jabotinsky, but Nordau unilaterally rejects their claims as unscientific and hence fallacious:

the notion of a special national individuality and physiognomy is entirely in the air, one of the facile generalizations that lie at the root of so many errors and prejudices. . . . The idea of a "collective organism is a mystical delusion"—there is no such thing as an "organic nation" or an "organic state"—the real thing is the psychology of the individual. . . . Man is born with certain simple impulses, and grows completely into the external conditions around him. He therefore appears to display national characteristics so long as he bears the single impress of a certain set of conditions—so long, that is, as he remains at a stage of culture removed from the influence of active intercourse. . . . When complete intercommunication is established throughout all countries and races, and differences removed and universal similarity effected by the mutual interpenetration of civilizing forces, the conceptions of "nation," "race" and their psychology will cease to have semblance of significance.²³

Nor is language the source of innate national divides, as the nationalists claim. Slavic languages are spoken "natively" by non-Slavs, Germanic languages by those without roots in Germanic tribes. Language, then, is not essentially conditioned by the peculiar spirit of the group that created it, and hence "language is no proof of the existence of national character." The differences between what we call nations is thus merely superficial and "can be fully accounted for by the undeniable characteristics of individual psychology," claims Nordau.

Some peoples write from left to right, others from above downwards, others, again, from right to left; some burn their dead, others bury them, the position, again, varying between lying and squatting. . . . some house under one roof with their animals, others apart from them; some dwell in straggling villages, others build in a circle. The reason is that they have always done so, and not

otherwise, and see no reason for troubling to change their habits and discover new ones.²⁴

States, too, are not “organic” developments of national wills, either in the sense used by Herderians or Hegelians of any stripe, or as a result of Rousseauian or Socialist social contract theories: “The foundation of the State was neither a contract nor a recognition of the value of rational cooperation: it was organized parasitism, the exploitation of the weak many by a ruler.”²⁵ This is not to say, as anarchists do, that the state is an immoral form of political organization, for what is called morality is itself a mystification of power relations based on the struggle for existence between the strong and the weak, continues Nordau.

The famous saying “My country, right or wrong” recognizes this with cynical frankness. . . . the supreme control may commit all the enormities in the shape of massacres, robbery, fraud that mark every invasion. . . . yet, because all of this is done in the soul-stirring name of country, it is held to be the duty of every subject, even by the abuse of the honorable idea of “sacred duty,” to acclaim these base actions, to support that power that performs them through thick and thin, even to be proud of it. Such is the morality of the “organic moral personality” which the State is supposed to represent.²⁶

Thus, the old taxonomy of states and constitutions, from Plato and Aristotle to the present, is sheer nonsense: “The difference between the despot of the East and the Western community, with its constitutions, codes of law, legal procedure and questions of appurtenances, is only a difference of form.” The despot takes what he wants from his subject by means of naked force, the “legal State” by something called “law,” which is the same thing. When Louis XIV said “L’état c’est moi,” he expressed the truth with brutal brevity, as did Friedrich Engels in his definition of the state as “exclusively the State of the governing class, the machine whose essential purpose is to keep down the oppressed and the exploited.”²⁷ Where Engels was wrong was in his condemnation of this fact of life and the struggle for existence, on the basis of his own mystical delusions about human nature and the future of humanity. In the end, only knowledge gleaned from a truly scientific study of life and nature will triumph over poverty, sickness, and the self-obliterating and parasitical delusions of religion, asserts Nordau.

Knowledge, as it widens and deepens, will reduce almost to a vanishing point the evils that men impose on one another—evils which form the most horrible of their sufferings. The noble pleasure of art and science will become more general and more intense as the intellect and the nervous system become capable of more subtle enjoyment. Acute joy will be provided by the organic

impulses and kinestheses of youth, joy, love, health and the sense of vigor, which must certainly be richer and more robust when man is free from care, and lives in the lap of luxury, than when he was always restless and often starving. The beauty of the future will be different from that of the present—more natural, more lofty, more harmonious; and it certainly will not feel privation in the want of the Sadic alloy of poverty and sorrow, sin and cruelty.²⁸

In the present, however, Nordau counsels each individual and each group of individuals not to succumb to mystifications, either about the nation or the state or the downtrodden masses or the supernatural, but instead to strive to understand the brutal realities of human life and to act on the basis of a rational calculus of one's own place in the chain of the cosmic struggle for self-preservation.

As we shall now see, this restatement of individualistic Social Darwinism was neither the cause nor the effect of Nordau's turn to Zionism between the writing of *Conventional Lies* and *The Interpretation of History*. Even as a Zionist, Nordau could not fully accept the regnant theories of nationalism—his Jewish nationalism, one must conclude, was tactical rather than ontological, a concession to the unfortunate realities of life rather than a rejection of universalism in favor of an “organic” conception of national divides. Thus, the link between his Zionism and his general weltanschauung was neither “organic” nor “logical,” neither internally contradictory nor inevitable, but the result of a series of events and circumstances that we can trace most clearly in a previously unknown and untapped source—Nordau's correspondence with a bizarre and fascinating woman, the antisemitic and reactionary Russian Olga Novikova.