



# Introduction

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Theodor Lessing's (1872–1933) *Jewish Self-Hatred* (1930) is the classic study of the pitfalls (rather than the complexities) of acculturation. Growing out of his own experience as a middle-class, urban, marginally religious Jew in Imperial and then Weimar Germany, he used this study to reject the social integration of the Jews into Germany society, which had been his own experience, by tracking its most radical cases. This early awareness of the impossibility of acculturation into what he saw as an inherently antisemitic world led him early to become a Zionist (at least a cultural if not a political Zionist) and concomitantly a rabid opponent to the rise of German fascism. A failed academic (because of, in his view, the antisemitic attitudes of both the institutions and the faculty—he was not completely wrong), his writing before and after World War I spanned the widest readership in Germany, from theater criticism to works on the philosophy of history. As one of the most visible Jewish opponents of the Nazis, he had fled immediately after Hitler's appointment as chancellor in January 1933 to Czechoslovakia, where in March of that year he was assassinated by German-speaking Nazis. Certainly his work that most captured the attention of both his contemporaries and our own world is this study of Jewish antisemitism.<sup>1</sup>

Lessing's case studies reflect the idea that assimilation (the radical end of acculturation) is by definition a doomed project, at least for Jews (no matter how defined) in the age of political antisemitism. Lessing's popular book is in point of fact a summary of a massive critical literature, begun in the age of scientific racism with texts such as proto-Zionist physician Leon Pinsker's (1821–1891) *Mahnruf an seine Stammgenossen* (in English translated as *Auto-Emancipation*) (1882). Pinsker was the sort of Eastern Jew that Lessing evokes in his first chapter. (One can note that Lessing's first impulse as a student was to study medicine; institutional factors caused him to shift his interest to philosophy.) Pinsker was born in Polish Russia and educated at the University of Odessa, where he trained to be a physician. His training was "modern," which in the nineteenth century meant German and biologically

oriented. Horrified by the series of pogroms against the Jews beginning in 1871 in Odessa, Pinsker wrote in German his plea for a Jewish state, given the inherent nature of Jew-hatred (*Judenhass*) in Europe. As a physician he uses the category of mental illness to explain the collective hatred of the Jews. He sees this as an obsession of the European Christian: "To the living the Jew is a corpse, to the native a foreigner, to the homesteader a vagrant, to the proprietary a beggar, to the poor an exploiter and a millionaire, to the patriot a man without a country, for all a hated rival." He undertakes the first systematic attempt at analyzing "Judeophobia" as that disease of late nineteenth-century Europe that can never be cured:

Judeophobia, together with other symbols, superstitions and idiosyncrasies, has acquired legitimacy as a phobia among all the peoples of the earth with whom the Jews had intercourse. Judeophobia is a variety of demonopathy with the distinction that it is not peculiar to particular races but is common to the whole of mankind, and that this ghost is not disembodied like other ghosts but partakes of flesh and blood, must endure pain inflicted by the fearful mob who imagines itself endangered. Judeophobia is a psychic aberration. As a psychic aberration it is hereditary, and as a disease transmitted for two thousand years it is incurable.<sup>2</sup>

For Lessing the internalization of such hatred marks the pathology of Jewish modernism after the promises of the Enlightenment inherent in the Jewish tradition that grew out of it, the Haskalah. Pinsker, and somewhat later Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau, saw the separation of the Jew as the only "cure" for those who become infected with the bacteria of antisemitism in the form of self-hatred. (One might note that even the non-Jewish George Eliot in her own proto-Zionist work *Daniel Deronda* [1876] was unable to project such a mental state for acculturated Jews without the use of psychopathological language. Her Jewish characters seem, whether aware of their Jewish ancestry or deny it, to have their mental state shaped by the power of an antisemitic world.)

The general response to cultural antisemitism is a sense that the more acculturated one became, the less able one was to cope with the reality of the world in which one functioned. The novelist Jacob Wassermann (1873–1934) was born in Fürth in 1873, and thus a citizen of the new German state at the age of six. He worked unsuccessfully as a businessman in Vienna and then at the satirical magazine *Simplicissimus* in Munich, followed by a stint as a critic, and then hit his stride as a well-respected and very widely read novelist living in Vienna and Altensee in Austria.<sup>3</sup> A member of the Prussian Academy of the Arts, he was a Jew within the German-speaking world and in no way a Zionist, but he still deeply doubted acculturation as a modern project. In 1909

he defines being Jewish in the Diaspora in terms of neither a religious nor a Zionist project. Rather he distinguishes himself as a creative Jewish writer from the acculturated or assimilated Jew, who incorporates all negative antitheses:

There is a reason that there are so many literati among the Jews. He is the most atheistic or the most religious; the most socially aware, though in old, dead antiquated form or in the new utopian mode that wishes to destroy the old or he seeks anarchic solitude within himself. . . . All of this has damned the Jews as a people to the role of the literati. . . . The Jew as a European, as a cosmopolitan, is merely a literatus; the Jew as an Oriental, not in the ethnographic but in the mythic sense through which the contemporary creative drive is present makes him into a creator.<sup>4</sup>

The assimilated is therefore the culturally inauthentic Jew; the Oriental, the authentic and therefore the only possible true creator of art. The sole possibility is either sublimation (and some level of literary production) or repression (and the resultant self-loathing).

In his autobiography, *My Life as a German and a Jew* (1921), Wassermann like Lessing provides cases studies of the fragile nature of acculturated Jewish identity at the close of the long nineteenth century.

I have known many Jews who have languished with longing for the fair-haired and blue-eyed individual. They knelt before him, burned incense before him, believed his every word; every blink of his eye was heroic; and when he spoke of his native soil, when he beat his Aryan breast, they broke into a hysterical shriek of triumph. . . . I was once greatly diverted by a young Viennese Jew, elegant, full of suppressed ambition, rather melancholy, something of an artist, and something of a charlatan. Providence itself had given him fair hair and blue eyes; but lo, he had no confidence in his fair hair and blue eyes: in his heart of hearts he felt that they were spurious.<sup>5</sup>

But for Wassermann this is a form of superego deformation, a pathology of acculturation (or indeed, of assimilation). It is a Jewish disease developed in a modernity that allowed Jews to enter Western culture but undermined their sense of self.

For Wassermann it is “self-shame” that marks the relationship of the Jew to his own sense of self as a human being.

I was often overcome by discouragement, by a sense of shame at all those tumbling, stumbling selves among whom I too now was numbered, but who from far away had seemed to me superhuman creatures dwelling in an enchanted garden. At times I was moved to wonder whether the narrow spitefulness, the pecuniary squabbling combined with the striving toward universal goals, the provincial dullness and brutal ambition, the mistrust and stubborn misunderstanding where achievement and perfection, ideas and an exchange of impulses were at stake, where thoughts

and images were concerned—whether all this was a peculiarly German disease or a by-product of the metier as such, its somber lining, the same with us as in other lands.<sup>6</sup>

Wassermann notes the inauthenticity of such forms of identification and the concomitant rejection, evident to the outside observer, that destabilizes Jewish identity. It neither enables the Jew to become part of antisemitic culture, nor does it provide a positive Jewish identity for him.

Thus being adapted to being “Jewish” in this manner was seen as a psychological deformation. In his 1907 essay “Die Lösung der Judenfrage” (Solving the Jewish Question), the future Nobel Prize winner Thomas Mann, a non-Jew, saw the “Jewish question” as “purely psychological” because the Jew is “always recognized as a stranger, feeling the pathos of being excluded, he is an extraordinary form of life.”<sup>7</sup> Mann’s views paralleled the discussion of the deformed Jewish body as a central trope of the debates of the time. The progress of German culture, not Zionism, Mann argued, permitted—indeed, demanded—the spiritual integration of the Jews into Europe, and that resulted in the transformation of the Jewish body. Mann’s fantasy of the Jews imagines them primarily as crippled and malformed inhabitants of the ghettos of Eastern Europe. Their movement into European culture in Germany is not mere social acculturation but physical transformation.<sup>8</sup> Mann sees this movement as the replacement of the ghetto Jew, with his “hump back, crooked legs, and red, gesticulating hands,” by “young people who have grown up with English sports and all of the advantages without denying their type and with a degree of physical improvement.”<sup>9</sup>

We need here to remember that Mann’s very first successful attempt at the writing of fiction was his 1896 short story “Little Mr. Friedemann,” the tale of the disabled aesthete, “with his pigeon chest, his steeply humped back, and his disproportionately long skinny arms.”<sup>10</sup> After a life of self-imposed asceticism because of a youthful rejection, he falls in love with Frau Gerda von Rinnlingen, the homely wife of the military commander of the town in which he lives. She mocks him when he declares his love for her, and his only recourse is to commit suicide. Physical imperfection (even, indeed, the evocation in the late nineteenth century of Friedemann’s by then Jewish-sounding name) gestures toward the psychological self-doubt of those with imperfect posture, the physical manifestation of deformed Jewish identity.

The idea of self-hatred as a pathological response to the pressures of acculturation is in point of fact turned quite on its head by the mid-1930s. Just as Sigmund Freud had rejected the notion of any inherent Jewish racial psychopathology (as claimed in all of his medical text-

books from his time as a student in Vienna beginning in 1873, and which are still present in his library) in his claim for the universals of human psychology in the 1890s, so too did his daughter look at self-hatred after Theodor Lessing's study as a human rather than a Jewish response to a specific political setting and as a normal rather than a pathological response to being human.<sup>11</sup> In Anna Freud's *The Ego and Mechanisms of Defense* (1936), the varieties of ego defense mechanisms described by her father (repression, displacement, denial, projection, reaction formation, intellectualization, rationalization, undoing, sublimation) are augmented by a new category very much of the 1930s: identification with the aggressor. Much later she commented that this innovation, which she notes she borrowed from the child psychologist August Aichhorn, was not one "of the recognized defense mechanisms, and I felt modest about this new one. I didn't think it had a claim to be introduced yet."<sup>12</sup> Aichhorn, in his 1925 lectures on juvenile delinquency, stressed the role that the superego had in structuring our relationship to the world.<sup>13</sup> For him, it is "the father who represents to the child the demands of society, forces him to fulfill those demands through the child's identification with him" (220). It is Aichhorn who stresses the normal identification of the child with the same-sex parent. For him the ego retains the form into which it was structured by the demands of the father and by society. Thus we become ourselves through our own identification with the ideal represented by our parents. When this is faulty, delinquency results, and Aichhorn notes that such a pattern leads to a "renunciation of these wishes through the laying bare of unconscious relationships" (5). This is "a matter of reeducation" rather than psychotherapy (5). "Life forces him to conform to reality; education enables him to achieve culture" (7). Aichhorn provides case studies of such re-education through ridding the delinquent of his identification with the aggressive or destructive parent where the child had "identified himself with his father and doing as he did, escaped his own unpleasant situation" (30). Aichhorn postulates that a youth counselor can overcome such identification with the negative aspects of the parent and therefore of the superego through focusing the transference of the youth with the counselor. Thus the destructive forces are reformed and the negative identification modified.

Anna Freud transforms this, seeing that the child identifies with the parent "[by] impersonating the aggressor, assuming his attributes or imitating his aggression, the child transforms himself from the person threatening into the person making the threat."<sup>14</sup> Her focus is not, as was Reich's on the level of the constitution of superego formation, how and why capitalist society shapes the individual through its repressive

rule making, but rather on the individual's resistance to all such forces, a resistance that, however, can become the source of mental illness.

The pattern is one that she sees as a part of a normal course of human development, when the child mimics the adult in order to avoid punishment: In "'identification with the aggressor' we recognize a by no means uncommon stage in the normal development of the superego." Nevertheless, it can become pathological.<sup>15</sup>

It is possible that a number of people remain arrested at the intermediate stage in the development of the superego and never quite complete the internalization of the critical process. Although perceiving their own guilt, they continue to be peculiarly aggressive in their attitude toward other people. In such cases the behavior of the superego toward others is as ruthless as that of the superego toward the patient's own ego in melancholia.<sup>16</sup>

Thus psychopathology can result that is harmful to the ego: "If the child introjects both rebuke and punishment and then regularly projects this same punishment on another, 'then he is arrested at an intermediate stage in the development of the superego.'"<sup>17</sup> The key to what comes to be understood as projective identification is the image of "assimilation":

The German word is *Angleichung*. The child becomes like the teacher. "Assimilating himself" is a rather clumsy translation. But, you know, the best example I now have of this process is one which I didn't possess at the time. It came later at the Hampstead Nurseries from the little girl who had a small brother who was so afraid of dogs that she said to him, "You be doggie and no dog will bite you." That is a perfect expression of the whole thing.<sup>18</sup>

But it can also be the core of racism, for "vehement indignation at someone else's wrongdoing is the precursor of and substitute for guilty feelings on its own account." Intolerance of other people precedes intolerance toward the self.

Thus by the collapse of the European Jewish project, whether acculturated, assimilated, religious, political, or social, under the inexorable force of Nazi Germany, the idea that self-hatred was not an anomaly of the Jewish experience but a universal force that all human beings used to cope with the vagaries of daily experience had become a central feature of psychology. Indeed, it came to define the approach of social psychology and sociology to the manner by which minorities dealt with their marginal status. It became the core of the court case that ended segregation in American schools, *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). Together with his wife, Mamie Phipps Clark, the social psychologist Kenneth Clark had begun, in 1939, to work on

the etiology of black self-hatred. The Clarks famously substituted dolls for portraits in their version. They used four plastic, diaper-clad dolls, identical except for color. Almost all of the black children, ages three through seven, readily identified the race of the dolls. However, when asked which they preferred, the majority selected the white doll and attributed positive characteristics to it. The qualities ascribed to the dolls were aesthetic. Those choosing the white dolls did so “cause he’s pretty” or “cause he’s white” and rejecting the black doll “cause he’s ugly” or “cause it don’t look pretty.”<sup>19</sup> But these categories were also read by the children as having moral value: black dolls were “bad” and “mean,” while white dolls were “nice” and “good.” The Clarks argued that the children were “aware of the fact that to be colored in contemporary American society is a mark of inferior status.”<sup>20</sup>

Universal yes, but now also the experience of a wider range of marginalized groups, and not necessarily those who were offered entrance into society but also those self-consciously excluded. The debates about self-hatred became inexorably associated with the political by the 1950s, and Anna Freud’s understanding that all human beings used such devices became the guidelines for considering what was “in the best interest of the child.” From Jews in Imperial Germany to African Americans in postwar America, the ghost of self-hatred became a trope. But one needed to understand the breadth of this argument as expounded by modern psychoanalysis. For all individuals (and collectives) can identify with the oppressor in complex and difficult ways. Thus African Americans such as the Clarks clearly did not succumb to the process of self-hatred, nor did those in the NAACP who advocated against segregation.<sup>21</sup> Even those in relative positions of power fell into using such a means of ego maintenance. In contemporary Israel, the power relationship between Jews (as defined by the state) and Muslims clearly shifts toward the Jewish majority, especially in Jerusalem. Yet we have the example of Haredi Jewish women wearing full body covering, the Islamic burkas, like their most religious Muslim neighbors.<sup>22</sup> That such Jews see Muslims as the “enemy” is clear, but they also see them as presenting qualities that are worth emulating, even if at the end of the day, they appear to be overidentifying with a greater Islamic culture into which they are integrating. Certainly this is an example of identification with the aggressor, but in a much more complex and contradictory manner, than in Theodor Lessing’s account. What we can learn from the trajectory of the discourse of self-hatred is that it may well be a universal and complex phenomenon and is certainly not simply one of acculturated Jewry.

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## Notes

1. See Lawrence Baron, "Theodor Lessing: Between Jewish Self-Hatred and Zionism," *Yearbook of the Leo Baeck Institute* 26 (1981): 323–340; Rainer Marwedel, *Theodor Lessing 1872–1933. Eine Biographie* (Frankfurt am Main: Luchterhand Verlag, 1987).
2. Leon Pinsker, *Auto-Emancipation*, trans. D. S. Blondheim (New York: Maccabean Publishing, 1906), 3.
3. See Donna K. Heizer, *Jewish-German Identity in the Orientalist Literature of Else Lasker-Schüler, Friedrich Wolf, and Franz Werfel* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1996), 27–29; Hans Otto Horch, "'Verbrannt wird auf alle Fälle . . .': Juden und Judentum im Werk Jakob Wassermanns," in *Im Zeichen Hiobs: Jüdische Schriftsteller und deutsche Literatur im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Gunter E. Grimm, Hans-Peter Bayerdörfer, and Konrad Kwiet (Königstein/Ts.: Athenäum, 1985), 124–146.
4. Jakob Wassermann, *Der Literat oder Mythos und Persönlichkeit* (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1909), 78.
5. Jakob Wassermann, *My Life as German and Jew* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1933), 156.
6. Wassermann, *My Life as German and Jew*, 118–119.
7. In Mann's untitled contribution to Julius Moses, ed., *Die Lösung der Judenfrage: eine Rundfrage* (Berlin, 1907), 242–248. We are citing from the original edition as it presents the text in its original context. Reprinted in *Thomas Mann, "Zur jüdischen Frage," in Gesammelte Werke in 13 Bänden* (Frankfurt am Main, 1974), 7:466–475. All translations are mine.



8. Todd Kontje, *Thomas Mann's World: Empire, Race, and the Jewish Question* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 19–24.
9. Mann, *Die Lösung der Judenfrage*, 244–245.
10. Thomas Mann, *Tonio Kröger and other Stories*, trans. David Luke (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), 5.
11. See my *Freud, Race, and Gender* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
12. "Joseph Sandler in conversation with Anna Freud, Discussions in the Hampstead Index on *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*: IV. The Mechanisms of Defence, Part 1," *Bulletin of the Anna Freud Centre* 4 (1981): 151–199, here 155. On the present status of these defense mechanisms, see Nancy McWilliams, "Primary (Primitive) Defensive Processes," *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis* (New York: Guilford Press, 1994), 96–115.
13. August Aichhorn, *Verwahrloste Jugend: Die Psychoanalyse in der Fürsorgeerziehung. Zehn Vorträge zur ersten Einführung*. (Vienna: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1925); all references are to the translation *Wayward Youth* (New York: Viking Press, 1935).
14. Anna Freud, *Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, trans. Cecil Baines (New York: International Universities Press, 1946), 109ff.
15. Freud, *Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, 119.
16. Freud, *Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, 119.
17. Cited by Lisa Appignanesi and John Forrester, *Freud's Women* (London: Verso, 1993), 294.
18. "Joseph Sandler in Conversation with Anna Freud, Discussions in the Hampstead Index on *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*: X. Identification with the Aggressor," *Bulletin of the Anna Freud Centre* 6 (1983): 247–275, here 250.
19. Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie P. Clark, "Racial Identification and Preference in Negro Children," in *Readings in Social Psychology*, ed. Eleanor E. Maccoby, Theodore M. Newcomb, and Eugene L. Hartley (New York: Holt, 1958), 611.
20. Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie P. Clark, "Emotional Factors in Racial Identification and Preference in Negro Children," *Journal of Negro Education* 19 (1950): 341–350, here 348, 350.
21. William Cross, *Shades of Black: Diversity in African American Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 16–29.
22. "The Ultra Orthodox Jewish Sect Where Women Cover Themselves from Head to Toe," EFE, 9 March 2017, <https://www.efe.com/efe/english/life/the-ultra-orthodox-jewish-sect-where-women-cover-themselves-from-head-to-toe/50000263-3202449>.