CIVIL ANTISEMITISM, MODERNISM, AND BRITISH CULTURE, 1902-1939

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Lara Trubowitz

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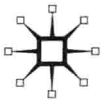

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Civil Antisemitism, Modernism, and British Culture, 1902–1939

To David and Leela
For my parents, Naomi and Sidney Trubowitz
And in memory of my grandparents,
Evelyn and Charles Klenetsky
and Anna and Louis Trubowitz

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Contents

Introduction

Conspiring to Be Civil: Jews, Antisemitism, and British Civility, 1881–1939

[H]atred as an overpowering passion, a great dramatic motive, introduced into the midst of studies of the civilized manners and morals of to-day, would make us uneasy, and shock us as bad art, because out of focus....

In a word, to be a "good hater" has ceased, in the most advanced view of the present to be a "picturesque" accomplishment. And that surely is significant.

—Anon. ("The Decline of Hatred" [1901])

This book is about "civil antisemitism" in British literature and culture from the early twentieth century through the start of World War II, a period during which the British nation was renegotiating both its imperial legacy and its long-standing traditions of courtesy and manners. What makes antisemitism "civil" in these years are the social and political pressures of a public sphere in which overt bigotry is seen as objectionable, and in which expressions of prejudice therefore require extraordinary degrees of complexity and obliquity. Antisemitism becomes a "style" of speech or writing, best understood and criticized in rhetorical and narrative terms, an elaborate or even tortuous compromise between rival traditions of hatred and politesse.

Punctuating and intensifying this trend are several key events in Anglo-Jewish history that repeatedly force the question of "the Jew" into the uneasy political foreground. These include the influx of Eastern European Jewish immigrants into Britain in the 1880s and 1890s, debates surrounding anti-immigration legislation in 1904 and 1905, the rise of a domestic protofascist publishing industry in the

1920s, and in the 1930s, the Jewish refugee crisis, prompted by the rise of the Third Reich. In such contexts, the presence at "home" of the "foreign" other, as well as the already fraught question of "Britishness" itself, gains an unusually elaborate significance.

The fact that modernist literature evolved during this same period makes its connections to the British encounter with Jewishness more intimate and more central than has sometimes been recognized. In one sense, the importance of "the Jew" in modernist texts is traceable to the wider import of this figure as a conduit for British self-reflection in the postimperial moment. But more crucially, as I argue, "Jewishness" enters modernism the same way it enters parliamentary debate, ethnography, and fascist literature, as an impetus and focus for highly "productive" forms of description, argumentation, and narration. In essence, "the Jew" becomes a prime modernist figure in the mode of "civil antisemitism," which is to say, on the level of style or technique itself, a repertoire of methods of indirection, occultation, and dissimulation, all highly fruitful for the experimentation of modernist writing. Let me offer some examples.

In the early 1930s, Virginia Woolf records in her diary a series of quasi-ethnographic observations about the British aristocrat Victor Rothschild, emphasizing his "vulgar" or "fleshy" Jewishness. Later, she resurrects these observations for her story "The Duchess and the Jeweller," adopting a highly conventional antisemitism as fodder for narrative experimentation—reiterating stereotypes about the threat of Jewishness to British culture, but distilling and refining the material until it appears not to be about Jews at all. In *Ulysses*, James Joyce describes Leopold Bloom's miscellaneous lusts, again playing on conventional stereotypes of the rapacious Jew in order to refigure both the restlessness and the decadence of the modern nation, and of literature itself. In George Orwell's "Marrakech," Jewish bodies become interchangeable with "clouds of flies," creating a chain of troubling but powerful images of the decomposition of empire (182–83). In T. S. Eliot's "Gerontion," the diseased, squatting Jew "[b]listered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London," prompts a series of images of illness—the "goat cough[ing] at night," a "woman sneez[ing] [as she] makes tea"—transmitting to the successive lines of the poem an "infection" now detached from the body of the Jew (22). In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a passing allusion to a Jewish "brick layer" establishes terms for a more elaborate figuration of the Jew as constructor of the colonial enterprise, laying the social and economic blocks of imperialism (92–94).

Such distillations of ethnic and racial stereotypes into style, and even into complex and subtle literary experiment, are well recognized among scholars of British modernism. For instance, in his study of Joyce, Ira Nadel writes that "Joyce's Judaism is textual and his understanding of the Jew is principally as the symbol of the Book" (5), a claim later supported by Neil Davison, who asserts that "*Ulysses* is [the Jewish] Leopold Bloom's book" (185). For Nadel, equivalences between narrative style and Jewish identity in *Ulysses* derive principally from Joyce's adaptation of "the practices of Rabbinic hermeneutics" (6). For Davison, who shifts away from the significance of Jewish exigetical praxes in Joyce's work, the "era's Jewish question" still aids in understanding the "narratological complexity" of *Ulysses* (5, 185); specifically, Davison argues that Joyce uses "the ambiguities of assimilated and marginal Jewish identity" within Europe to examine Irish nationalism and identity. Praising Joyce for "perform[ing] a small miracle," he adds, "in Bloom, one of the era's most prevalent stereotypes—'the degenerate Jew'—has been transformed into the great paradigm of complete characterization" (11).[1]

In recent years, critics such as Amy Feinstein and Maren Linett have broadened approaches like Nadel's and Davison's, combining social-historical analysis with textual exegesis to illustrate how less widely studied modernist authors such as Mina Loy "locate... Jewish identity at the intersection of questions of racial ideology, empire, colonialism, Judaism, and the language and aesthetics of the avant-garde, a combination that can only be called Jewish modernism" (Feinstein 336). Feinstein writes: "[T]he cultural and aesthetic force of what Loy considered to be her Jewish heritage drives her many autobiographical narratives" (335). Linett, adopting contemporary queer and feminist theory, shows how writers from Dorothy Richardson to Sylvia Townsend Warner "use Jewishness to create a modernism they tout... as feminist and spiritual in comparison with fiction by their male 'materialist' counterparts" (*Modernism* 2).

Research in transnationalism has enriched the field even further, bringing discourses surrounding Jews and the "Jewish question"—Zionism, socialism, the rise of "secularist concepts, narratives, and values"—directly to bear on both postcolonial and modernist studies (Mufti 8). For instance, Aamir Mufti examines how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social-political and literary treatments of European Jews "are displaced and reinscribed" by modernist writers from Conrad to E. M. Forster—and, later, in postcolonial literature of the subcontinent—in order to address changing relations between

Europe and its colonies, imperialist conceptions of collectivity and friendship, and, in the case of Forster, the emergence of a "new" modern Muslim identity oriented "to culture and history" rather than to nationalism (40). "[I]n the 'question' of the Jews' status in modern culture and society," writes Mufti, "what emerges are a set of paradigmatic narratives, conceptual frameworks, motifs, and formal relationships concerned with the question of minority existence, which are then disseminated globally in the emergence, under colonial and semicolonial conditions, of the forms of modern social, political, and cultural life" (2). Provocatively, Mufti concludes his work with a discussion of "the metaphorical possibilities of Jewishness for contemporary postcolonial culture," extending analyses of "Jewish" style within modernism to address configurations of "the metaphorics of Jewishness" in works by contemporary authors such as Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh, Hanif Kureishi, and Salman Rushdie (6, 245).

The result of these endeavors, in addition to their specific contributions to cultural history and Jewish studies, has been a reinvigoration of modernist scholarship's methods of interpretation, and even of its basic technical vocabulary.[2] Today, critics regularly approach what had once been viewed in primarily formalist and ahistorical terms—for instance, T. S. Eliot's famous "objective correlative" or Woolf's experiments in *The Years* with what she calls the "gold" of "externality" (*Diary* 4:133), as well as modernist experiments with metaphor and metonymy more generally—as potentially complex expressions of long-standing political and social negotiations surrounding the status of Jews within Europe.[3] Moreover, it is now easy to see that the centrality of Jewish identity in modernism is entirely consistent with the persistent marginality of actual Jewish characters. In the strongest and most provocative cases, we are prompted, by critics such as Bryan Cheyette, Jonathan Freedman, Anthony Julius, and Marilyn Reizbaum, to reconsider not only the formal operations at work when, say, Eliot famously writes "Rachel née Rabinovitch / Tears at the grapes with murderous paws"—a line that Julius describes as "a small piece of literary and anti-Semitic bravado" (*T. S. Eliot* 17)—but also why Jews figure in modernist fiction primarily as crucial yet minor characters, often serving as a kind of cultural or stylistic "backdrop."[4] Here we might note, for instance, Jean Rhys's brief but relatively sympathetic treatment of Serge Rubin, the "gentle" Jewish artist in *Good Morning, Midnight,* D. H. Lawrence's repeated allusions to "Jews of the wrong sort" in *The Captain's Doll,* and Virginia Woolf's descriptions of the Jewish identity of Ralph Manresa

in *Between the Acts,* a character who never actually appears in the novel (Lawrence 128, 140). As Linett and others have shown, despite these characters' dearth of "stage time," they are nonetheless central to each author's thematic and methodological concerns, providing a foundation for negotiating such topics as the dissolution of European colonial power, changing views of liberalism, new relations between the private and public spheres, and the disenfranchisement of women and workers. Indeed, the very "minorness" of these Jewish characters is often vital to the texts' narrative progressions, a point I discuss more fully in my analysis of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* in chapter 3. As I show, for Barnes, the stylistic or structural impact of Jewish identity is made possible only by the eventual excision of actual Jews from her text. This excision is no idiosyncratic effect of Barnes's particular formal experimentation, or of her elaborate but odd engagement with Jewish tradition and history, but is rather the outgrowth of a far more crucial development in twentieth-century representations of Jewish difference: instead of the emphasis on Jewish *characters* that informs, say, Charles Dickens's treatment of Fagin in *Oliver Twist* or George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda,* what we find in the modernists is an increasing preoccupation with Jewish*ness,* an agglomeration of traits that, although once associated primarily, even exclusively with Jews, are now potentially transferable to non-Jews and, in some of the most thought-provoking cases, even to material objects.

It is this subtle or shifting form of Jewish inclusion/exclusion within modernism that I consider in the chapters that follow. Borrowing from contemporary cultural studies, one might call such a formulation of Jewishness, with its characteristic manipulation of transferable traits, an "identity inflection," a term I adopt from Jon Stratton's analysis of post-World War II sitcoms and the rise of what he describes as "Jewish moments" (294, 291).[5] In television, Stratton writes,

> being Jewish is not a cultural mode limited to Jews.... Gentile characters can also have Jewish elements, and apparently gentile texts, such as *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, can have Jewish moments....
>
> From this point of view, Jewishness can be understood as a variable textual attribute not necessarily tied to characters identified as Jews. (300)

A few pages later, analyzing the Jewishness of *Seinfeld,* Stratton adds:

> To ask whether the main characters on *Seinfeld* are Jews is both foolish and instructive. It is foolish because it appeals to a reductionist and

> simplistic understanding of who is a Jew, but it is instructive because it enables us to appreciate just how blurred the category has become....
>
> In multicultural America *Seinfeld* was allowed to be more or less overtly Jewish, while the characters were only ambiguously Jews....
>
> Their ambiguous status as Jews is reworked diegetically in the show's...Jewish moments. (304–05, 307)

Stratton attributes these diegetic treatments to modern media's fraught negotiation with cultural pluralism and, more precisely, with the Jews' historically paradoxical position in America as both a white ethnic group and a racial other. For instance, in *The Dick Van Dyke Show,* we see "the transformation of an unacceptable...Jewishness into an acceptable white, Anglo-American" identity, in short, "invisibility as a tactic for enabling [Jews] access to the public sphere" (Stratton 295, 297). *Seinfeld,* on the other hand, "offers itself as, ambiguously, a Jewish program in an era of ethnic identification." Or, as Stratton suggests elsewhere, in *Seinfeld,* Jewish identity is "displaced into an apparently universal possibility of modern identification," generalized or diffused, but never lost (310).

In the modernist texts I examine, "Jewish moments" are also common, but emerge as instantiations of a particular and often contradictory set of pre-Holocaust, postempire discourses about Jews circulating in the arts, sciences, politics, and popular culture. These discourses include antisemitic figurations such as the following: (1) Jews as inherently diseased, with Jewish identity itself being a primary source of infection. The insidiousness of Jews is integrally tied to the idea that Jewishness can be transferred, even "caught," by others; (2) Jewish conversion. Such narratives invert the history of Christian proselytizing. Rather than Christians attempting to convert Jews, Jews now "convert" Christians, albeit with a quasi-science-fictional twist: Jews seek to turn Christians not simply *to* Judaism, but literally *into* Jews, an ontological or even biological metamorphosis;[6] (3) Demonic possession. This category is closely related to Jewish conversion and Jewish disease, although here the Jews' enmity or power is presented in more theological terms, as a satanic "taking over" of the non-Jewish body. Often it hardly matters whether that body is of an individual or of a nation; both are considered to be constituted a priori by a distinctly Christian worldview or faith; (4) Jewish consumption. Such narratives combine medieval notions of blood libel, the belief that Jews drink the blood of Christian children, with the idea of Jews as modern day vampiric financiers. In both cases, Jews

ingest everything in their midst, making what is not Jewish—non-Jewish people and objects—effectively Jewish by incorporating them into the Jewish body; (5) The hidden, secret, or clandestine Jew. In this figuration, anyone may be a Jew, even those who are not cognizant of their own Jewishness; thus, in a consummate paranoia, Jews appear to be everywhere. The figure of the clandestine Jew is closely linked to that of the conspiratorial Jew, who insidiously seeks, always undercover, to infiltrate and "take over" that which is not his or hers; (6) Jewish invasion. Evolving from colonial imagery of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this trope rewrites Britain's history as a colonial occupier in order to establish a narrative of Jewish incursion and domination, events imagined as already having begun.[7] Hence, specific colonial economic, social, and political relations are "displaced from their historical spaces," while both the underlying colonized-colonizer paradigm and colonialist power dynamics remain in play (Roy 4). Ironically, such emphases on invasion can be interpreted *both* as an anxious projection on the part of the colonizer—the colonial oppressor has now become the victim—and as a proteophobic response to the Jews' uncertain placement within British colonial history.[8] Providing a familiar model of native/non-native relations, narratives of Jewish invasion create a framework by which non-Jews can negotiate and adjudicate their interactions with Jews. The Jews' ostensible power, now cast as analogous or even equivalent to British imperial strength, is made more comprehensible, albeit something more to be feared. Thus, the putative threat posed by Jews, particularly immigrant Jews at the turn of the century, is underscored; whether those Jews are "empirical," to use Zygmunt Bauman's phrase, or imagined, again hardly matters (Bauman 148).

Civilizing Antisemitism

The elaborate discursive and narrative framing of Jews in modernist antisemitic rhetoric will indicate to us how closely tied the figurations I have outlined are to the most basic and central languages of British civil society, and indeed, how much they can coincide with political positions that quite disdain outright bigotry or antisemitism. In a departure from earlier critical work on "Jewish modernisms," I contend that the technical and stylistic appropriations of "the Jew" that we see in modernist literature are consistent with, and can only be understood in relation to, broader attempts in early twentieth-century

Britain to "civilize" traditional antisemitic discourses. By "civilize" I do not mean that antisemitic attitudes in this period are eliminated, or even diminished, but rather that discomfort about the prominence of virulent hate rhetoric in Britain's famously "civil" society gives rise to more subtle and rhetorically complex expressions of antisemitism—what I call "civil antisemitism," a form of speech shaped by early twentieth-century British preoccupations with civility and courteousness, or by what Anindyo Roy describes as a "crisis of civility" in modern political and social life (21).

Examining modernist literary representations of Jewishness through the lens of civil antisemitism, I discuss not only the importance of hate rhetoric—functioning in the form of a "civil" discourse—within modernism, but also the inability of current critical paradigms to account for the kind of "genteel" or "civil" expressions of prejudice that have so often defined non-Jews' attitudes toward Jews. I show that the history of antisemitism within modernism is directly connected to the pragmatic submergence, but not the disappearance, of antisemitism within the public and political domains through the late 1930s. Such practices of rhetorical self-concealment I illustrate through examinations of parliamentary debates on immigration, Victorian etiquette guides, ethnographic studies of London's Jewish community, proto-fascist literature and propaganda, and, finally, modernist technique itself. One goal of my book is to link more robustly the study of antisemitism within modernist literature to that of popular literature, public culture, and politics, and to show how the figure of "the Jew" effectively produces "styles" of argumentation—rather than shared sentiments—within each of these discourses. As my selection of documents implies, the "civility" of antisemitism is closely related to its "literariness," a connection that has been observed but not always fully understood by either literary critics or Jewish Studies scholars. In the process of elucidating this correspondence, I propose essential links between three categories that have not previously all been connected by critics: hate rhetoric, civility, and modernist literary experimentation. Let me begin with some brief comments on recent critical approaches to twentieth-century British antisemitism.

In 1905, the British parliament passed the infamous Aliens Act, legislation designed to restrict Jewish immigration into Britain. John Garrard, in one of the earliest and most extensive studies of the act, published in 1971, astutely describes the pressures experienced by advocates of the legislation to avoid assertions that could be deemed antisemitic.[9] Attuned to charges of antisemitism and to the

potential escalation of anti-Jewish sentiments in the culture at large, politicians, as Garrard explains, made few overt references to Jews, preferring instead to speak more generally in terms of the "alien" or "immigrant" classes. This eschewing of the Jews as a referent of discourse leads Garrard to conclude, paradoxically, that antisemitism did not impact debates surrounding the bill's passage. "[Q]uestion[s] of anti-Semitism," he states, are "irrelevant" (57). In direct contrast to Garrard's conclusion, I argue that it is precisely this kind of *awareness* of intolerance against Jews, coupled with the underlying intolerance itself, that provides a basic framework and grounding for twentieth-century British antisemitism and for its distinctly civil manifestations.

Such oddly civil configurations of hate discourse may be likened to what critics such as Dan Stone have called, variously, "genteel golf club prejudice," "social anti-Semitism," and "casual antisemitism," and what Tony Kushner refers to as "social dislike for Jews" (Stone, *Responses* 80, 93; Kushner, *Persistence* 2).[10] All are commonplace reactions to Jewish difference and assimilation, prompted ostensibly more by convention or peer pressure than by specific enmity toward Jews. For Stone, such a distinction is apropos of the intellectual and aristocratic classes, who, he argues, tend to give way "seemingly unwittingly or at least without malice, to antisemitic stereotypes" (81). Kushner, providing a crucial foundation for Stone's work, describes how these inadvertent or unmalicious forms of antagonism often operate, with seemingly little conflict, alongside a common insistence on what Michael Ragussis calls the nation's "profound investment . . . [in its] reputation for religious tolerance and political liberty" ("The 'Secret'" 298).[11] Thus, one might harbor a "social dislike for Jews" and nonetheless still feel, and even vociferously express, disdain for antisemitism, a paradox that Ragussis addresses in his discussion of late nineteenth-century articulations of anti-Jewish rhetoric and the prevalence of what he calls "unconscious prejudice" or "secret antisemitism." Prefacing his remarks with a quotation from an anonymous 1877 article in *Macmillan's Magazine,* Ragussis writes:

> "There yet remains a deep unconscious undercurrent of prejudice against the Jew which conscientious Englishmen have often to fight against as part of that lower nature, a survival of the less perfect development of our ancestors." The "secret" of English anti-Semitism—namely, the unconscious prejudice in the enlightened, conscientious English, a nation widely reputed for tolerance generally and for a centuries-old