

Unclean Lips: Obscenity and Jews in American Literature

by

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Abstract

Unclean Lips: Obscenity and Jews in American Literature

by

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This dissertation examines Jews' literary, social, and legal interventions in controversies about obscenity in the United States in the 20th century. Scholars acknowledge obscenity debates as crucial in the development of modern American literature, but the roles Jews played in this history as publishers, lawyers, judges, and authors have not yet been interrogated. Insisting that no single explanation adequately accounts for the range of American Jews' influential interventions, the dissertation proposes four ways in which obscenity mattered to American Jews, as Jews, given their specific historical circumstances. The production and defense of obscenity contributed to Jews' attempts to counter sexual anti-Semitism; to obtain cultural capital that was otherwise denied to them; to defend contraception; and to advocate for minority rights. The decentralization of authority in Diasporic societies and resulting diversity also helps to explain the vigor with which some American Jews intervened in these debates.

The body of the dissertation presents a series of literary case studies. Analysis of the legal, literary, and linguistic contexts of Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1935) clarifies that Roth's emphasis on dirtiness and use of "dirty words" represent an attempt to atone for his personal sexual deviance—which he, like other modern writers, understood as a Jewish trait—through the techniques of Anglo-American modernism. Close readings of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) and Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot* (1974) propose that these novels radicalize a set of sexual allegories common throughout Biblical, rabbinic, and ethnic American literature. Attention to visual and to legal sources reveal how in the late 1970s, Will Eisner and Jules Feiffer deployed explicit visual representations of sexual frustration to realign comic books in the field of cultural production and establish the "graphic novel" as a genre of literature suitable for adult readers. Through these case studies, the project proposes that obscenity and the debates surrounding it have been a crucial element in the development of contemporary Jewish culture in the U.S, and, no less strikingly, that the interventions of Jews have been vital in the development of American attitudes about, policies on, and treatments of obscenity.

CHAPTER 1.
Introduction: The Story of the *Shmutz*

One need not have read very deeply in the literature written by American Jews to notice the extensive attention these texts devote to sex. Indeed, at the end of a college course on American Jewish writing in the early 1980s, Mark Shechner's undergraduate students at the State University of New York, Buffalo, cited "sex" as one of the few "recurring themes of Jewish fiction."¹ These students' observation has regularly been affirmed by professional critics. Recently, for example, Ruth Franklin observed that "while the literature of eros has always been multicultural ... it is hard to think of another culture as consistently, persistently obsessed with the subject as Jewish America, circa 1950-2000." "What is it," Franklin wondered, in her review of the most recent novel by Philip Roth, "with Jews and sex?"² Half a century earlier another critic, Theodore Solotaroff, asked a similar question of Roth, who was his classmate in the doctoral program in English literature at the University of Chicago and had begun to publish fiction about American Jews. "When [Roth's] strong but over-the-top story, 'Epstein,' came out,"³ Solotaroff has recalled in a recent memoir, "I was put off by all the ugly

¹ Mark Shechner, *After the Revolution: Studies in the Contemporary Jewish American Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1. The other two themes, for the record, were "selfishness" and "misogyny."

² Ruth Franklin, "Back to School: Philip Roth's *Indignation*," *The New York Sun* (September 10, 2008) <<http://www.nysun.com/arts/back-to-school-philip-roths-indignation/85500/>>.

³ The story was first published in *The Paris Review* 19 (Summer 1958).

physical detail of this aging family man's first and last fling. As I put it, 'Why all the *shmutz*?' To which he snapped back, 'The *shmutz* is the story.'"⁴

The Yiddish word "*shmutz*" can be translated simply as "dirt" or "filth," but, especially in its American Yinglish⁵ usage, the word carries the connotation of its English etymological cousin "smut"—that is, a meaning of "indecent or obscene language."⁶

Thus, when Roth told an interviewer in 1969 apropos of his novel *Portnoy's Complaint* that he hoped "to raise obscenity *to the level of a subject*," he was reiterating in a more conventional English phrase his private remark to Solotaroff about "Epstein."⁷ For the sake of terminological clarity, it is worth stating outright that this dissertation selects the term "obscenity" to refer narrowly to taboo words and the graphic representation of sex.⁸

⁴ Theodore Solotaroff, *First Loves: A Memoir* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 209. For Roth's memory of being posed a similar question in a letter from a reader in Detroit, see Roth, "Writing About Jews," *Commentary* 36:6 (December 1963), 447.

⁵ On Yinglish (i.e., hybrid Yiddish-English), see James Loeffler, "Neither the King's English Nor the Rebbetzin's Yiddish: Yinglish Literature in the United States," *American Babel: Literatures of the United States from Abnaki to Zuni*, ed. Marc Shell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 133-62.

⁶ "Smut, n. 5," *OED Online*, <<http://dictionary.oed.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/cgi/entry/50228782>>. Uriel Weinreich, *Modern English-Yiddish/Yiddish-English Dictionary* (New York: Schocken/YIVO, 1977), 384/409. For an example of the two words being used interchangeably, see Wallace Markfield, *Teitelbaum's Window* (Champaign, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1999), 121-22.

⁷ George Plimpton, "Philip Roth's Exact Intent," *New York Times* (February 23, 1969), BR2. In the same interview, Roth recalls that "some people"—perhaps he was thinking particularly of Solotaroff?—found "Epstein" "very disgusting in its intimate sexual revelations."

⁸ It is a commonplace that obscenity is difficult, or impossible, to define. In fact, it has been a traditional legal argument that "obscenity" is impossible to define and thus too vague to be a constitutional exception to the First Amendment. See, among others, Theodore Schroeder, *'Obscene Literature' and Constitutional Law: A Forensic Defense of Freedom of the Press* (New York: Privately printed for forensic uses, 1911), in which Schroeder argues that "it has been, and always will be, impossible to state a definition or test of obscenity" (14), and Morris Ernst and William Seagle, *To the Pure...: A Study of Obscenity and the Censor* (New York: Viking Press, 1928), which proclaims that "it is quite impossible to clarify the intrinsic nature of obscenity by definition" (63) and that "there is no definition in the entire law that so clearly violates the fundamental principle that a criminal charge must be clear, precise, and definite in all its terms and details" (9). Justice Potter Stewart's remarks in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. 184 (1964)—i.e., that "perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly" defining "hard-core pornography," "but I know it when I see it"—have become a standard reference for writers who wish to convey the idea that a concept is impossible to define in precise terms, but nonetheless self-evident in its application.

That was what the term "obscene" signified in American law for much of the 20th century, from *Swearingen v. U.S.* (1895)—which affirmed that "the words 'obscene,' 'lewd,' and 'lascivious' ... signify that form of immorality which has relation to sexual impurity"—to Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield's explanation in 1959 that Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* was obscene and not fit for transmission by mail because of its "descriptions in minute detail of sexual acts" and use of "filthy, offensive and degrading words and terms."⁹ Obscenity, in this specific sense, has many synonyms and cognates¹⁰—including at least a couple in Yiddish beyond *shmutz*—and Solotaroff's discomfort has plenty of precedents in Jewish culture, stretching back to the prophet Isaiah, who protested that he was unfit for prophesy because he was "a man of unclean lips" living "among a people of unclean lips," and who characterized among the most egregious of his people's failings that "every mouth speaks impiety."¹¹ What I would like to emphasize particularly in the quotations from Roth's conversation is that in neither case does the author deny that his literary work consists of obscenity. Unlike Isaiah, he does not see the uncleanliness of his lips as a failing. On the contrary, he insists that his fiction is obscene and should be understood as such.

If the *shmutz* is the story, for Roth and other American Jewish writers, this dissertation addresses itself to the story of the *shmutz*, exploring what obscenity has

⁹ *Swearingen v. United States*, 161 U.S. 446 (1896); Charles Rembar, *The End of Obscenity: The Trials of Lady Chatterley, Tropic of Cancer, and Fanny Hill* (New York: Random House, 1968), 114.

¹⁰ For rich etymological histories of the terms "obscenity" and "pornography," see Joan DeJean, *The Reinvention of Obscenity: Sex, Lies, and Tabloids in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1-28, and Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking, 1987), 1-32.

¹¹ *Isaiah* 6:5, 9:16; *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures, The New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985). The latter quote is the translation of "כָּל-פִּיָּה דֹבֵר נִבְלָה"—a source of the term *nibul peh* that signifies "obscenity" in rabbinic and traditional Jewish texts, as well as in modern Yiddish.

meant, and why it has mattered, to American Jewish lawyers, publishers, and authors. What has been at stake for Jews, as Jews, in legal and literary debates about obscenity?¹² This question merits consideration not simply because obscenity has been a central concern in American Jewish culture—in the readings Shechner assigned to his students, in Roth's stories and novels, in the works of Norman Mailer, Allen Ginsberg, Lenny Bruce, Erica Jong, and many others—but also because pernicious stereotypes about Jewish sexuality contributed so lamentably to late 19th and 20th century history, and likewise because of the understudied interventions of Jews as critics, lawyers, judges, publishers, and other cultural agents in the development of modern American literary culture. In short, ethnic and religious affiliations often complicated the issue of literary obscenity for American Jews, and Jews' dynamic responses to these complications have profoundly affected American culture. The legitimization of the explicit representation of sex and the use of taboo words by authorities dramatizes how demographic and ideological shifts in culture are prompted by, and registered in, literary production, and this dissertation proposes that literary scholars and historians can better understand the story of these social and literary transformations in the United States by considering why it was that Jews were, so often, at the very center of that story.

In the last two decades, obscenity has developed into a major area of interest of literary and cultural studies, and more recently, a discrete subfield of "obscenity studies" has begun to cohere.¹³ In a broad sense, this has been one of the particular outgrowths of

¹² My formulation "Jews as Jews" here deliberately echoes Hannah Arendt's "The Jew as Pariah," *The Jew as Pariah*, ed. Ron H. Feldman (New York: Grove, 1978), 68.

¹³ For one scholar's efforts to recognize the study of pornography as a discrete field of inquiry, see Linda Williams, ed., *Porn Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). Collette Colligan, meanwhile, situates her research in relation to "the field of obscenity studies." See Colligan, *The Traffic in Obscenity from*

the academic turns to questions of gender and sexuality, on the one hand, and questions of popular and everyday culture, on the other, that have revolutionized virtually all humanities and social science disciplines since the 1970s. Linking literature, visual culture, law, gender, and the market, the question of obscenity—of what limits culture imposes on the representation of sex, and how those limits come to be transgressed—has thrived during a period of interdisciplinary scholarship in the academy, such that the subject has by now been addressed by scholars working in a wide range of periods and fields.¹⁴

The current phase of obscenity studies also owes its particular direction to a profound shift in academic thinking about censorship. Since the early 1920s, American trade publishers have regularly issued polemical or triumphant historical surveys of obscenity and pornography in modern culture and law that treat censorship as reactionary nonsense and freedom of speech as a paramount American virtue. The paradigm of this genre was Morris Ernst and William Seagle's *To the Pure...* (1928); excellent examples from more recent decades include Paul Boyer's *Purity in Print* (1968), Walter Kendrick's *The Secret Museum* (1987), and Edward De Grazia's richly documentary *Girls Lean Back Everywhere* (1992), whose subtitle, *The Law of Obscenity and the Assault on Genius*,

Byron to Beardsley: Sexuality and Exoticism in Nineteenth-Century Print Culture (Basingstoke, England, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 6.

¹⁴ Earlier academic studies that inform this field include Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978) and Steven Marcus's *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, 1966). Some of the more useful recent scholarly sources that treat obscenity and pornography in periods prior to the 20th century include Amy Richlin, ed., *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Lynn Hunt, ed., *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800* (New York: Zone Books, 1993); Joan DeJean, *The Reinvention of Obscenity*; and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Knopf, 2002).

offers a clear sense of the attitude that characterizes such works.¹⁵ In the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, a new round of controversies about art, censorship, and pornography arose, and while many of these arguments simply rehashed stale battles, some controversies—particularly, it seems to me, those that dealt with "political correctness" and campus speech codes—proved unsettling to many literary scholars. These debates tended to position liberal and progressive academics on the side of censorship (i.e., the regulation of abusive, misogynist, and racist expression), while cultural conservatives defended what they characterized as absolute freedom of speech, that beloved American value.¹⁶ This upending of conventional positions spurred influential literary theoreticians, including Judith Butler and Stanley Fish, to reconsider the question of censorship and free speech, applying the insights of Freud, Foucault, and Bourdieu on these topics to contemporary American law and culture. The results were subtle, complicated responses to controversies on campus and across the country that eschewed any simple notions of censorship as evil and free speech as unalloyed good.¹⁷

In the wake of these retheorizations of censorship and freedom of expression, literary scholars have reexamined the modern controversies about obscenity, bringing

¹⁵ Ernst and Seagle, *To the Pure*; Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*; Paul S. Boyer, *Purity in Print: The Vice Society Movement and Book Censorship in America* (New York: Scribner, 1968); Edward de Grazia, *Girls Lean Back Everywhere: The Law of Obscenity and the Assault on Genius* (New York: Random House, 1992). Rembar's *The End of Obscenity* is another worthwhile entry in this tradition.

¹⁶ The University of Michigan's speech codes sparked one such debate; see *John Doe v. The University of Michigan*, 721 F. Supp. 852 (E.D. Mich. 1989), and President George H. W. Bush's commencement address of May 4, 1991, http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=2949&year=&month=

¹⁷ See Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Stanley Fish, "There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It's a Good Thing, Too," *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It's a Good Thing, Too* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 102-19. A good, concise overview of how the censorship debates interacted with literary theory and scholarship in the early 1990s is Richard Burt, ed., *The Administration of Aesthetics: Censorship, Political Criticism, and the Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), which is based in part on panels that Burt organized at MLA conferences in 1990 and 1991.

more complicated models of textual production to bear in readings of novels including James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*.¹⁸ Many of these studies have investigated censorship as intertwined with discourses about cultural value and have drawn upon "book history" methodologies to demonstrate how the interactions between censors, legal professionals, and authors influence the production and circulation of texts. Not simply reproducing conventional blather about the dangers of censorship and the value of freedom, these studies reveal the ways in which literature benefits from the attention of censors. In an excellent and richly documented study of erotica publishing in early 20th-century America, Jay Gertzman emphasizes "the symbiotic relationship" between bookleggers (book smugglers and erotica publishers) and smuthounds (anti-vice crusaders);¹⁹ Celia Marshik argues that "in the context of British modernism, censorship was repressive and also had productive effects";²⁰ and Loren Glass proposes that obscenity trials in the United States served "as a mechanism ... whereby the champions of high modernism in the academic, journalistic, and publishing community could establish and affirm the authority of their aesthetic standards."²¹ *Unclean Lips* builds upon this body of work by addressing a question implicitly raised, but not satisfyingly answered, by any of these studies: why was it that so many Jews were involved in the major American controversies about obscenity in the 20th century?

¹⁸ Allison Pease, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Aesthetics of Obscenity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Katherine Mullin, *James Joyce, Sexuality and Social Purity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Florence Dore, *The Novel and the Obscene: Sexual Subjects in American Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Jay A. Gertzman, *Bookleggers and Smuthounds: The Trade in Erotica 1920-1940* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 1.

²⁰ Celia Marshik, *British Modernism and Censorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 4.

²¹ Loren Glass, "Redeeming Value: Obscenity and Anglo-American Modernism," *Critical Inquiry* 32:2 (Winter 2006): 344.

As I describe in fuller detail in Chapter 2, a striking number of the key players in the disputes about obscenity in 20th-century America were Jewish. The case of James Joyce's *Ulysses* provides one example of how prominently Jews could intervene in such controversies, in roles parallel to those of somewhat more frequently studied female editors and publishers.²² Ben Huebsch, a pioneering American Jewish publisher, had been the first person in the world willing to issue Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in 1916, after twelve English printers refused to set the book in type. But even Huebsch was not willing to publish an unexpurgated edition of *Ulysses* after the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice successfully prosecuted *The Little Review*, in 1920-21, for the serialization of the "Nausicaa" episode of that novel, in which Leopold Bloom masturbates in his pants while gazing at Gertie MacDowell. A couple of Jewish publishers expressed interest in publishing the novel in the U.S. during the 1920s²³—one, Samuel Roth, infamously went so far as to pirate the book—but it would not be until the early 1930s that a publisher would seek a court's assurance of the book's legality. The 1933 vindication of the novel in Judge John Woolsey's famed decision resulted from the collaboration of Bennett Cerf, a young Jewish publisher who bankrolled his operations with his inheritance, and Morris Ernst, a Jewish lawyer who had developed a specialty in free speech cases.²⁴ That decision made the novel available to thousands of readers of

²² Sources on the crucial female publishers of modernist literature include Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986) and Jayne E. Marek, *Women Editing Modernism: 'Little' Magazines and Literary History* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1995).

²³ Horace Liveright, for one, offered Joyce a contract in 1922 for an unexpurgated American edition of *Ulysses*, but the deal fell through because of hesitations and misgivings on both sides. See Tom Dardis, *Firebrand: The Life of Horace Liveright* (New York: Random House, 1995), 88-90.

²⁴ For the most focused history of the trials of *Ulysses*, see Paul Vanderham, *James Joyce and Censorship: The Trials of Ulysses* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

English worldwide. In 1934 and in the following decades, a person could walk into a bookstore in London or New York or Sydney or Toronto and purchase *Ulysses* without fear of arrest thanks to the interventions of these American Jews.

Other Jewish publishers were responsible for issuing and defending most of the infamously obscene novels of the 20th century. The defendants in many of the trials that established legal precedents about freedom of expression and censorship, from *Abrams v. New York* (1919) to *Roth v. U.S.* (1957) and *Cohen v. California* (1971), were also Jewish, as were the most influential lawyers specializing in the defense of obscenity, from the 1920s through the 1990s, and several key judges whose decisions redirected the course of obscenity law. These American Jewish men tended to succeed where the mostly Protestant-born free thinkers and anarchists who agitated against American obscenity laws in the late 19th century had failed,²⁵ and in areas from which women were still largely excluded,²⁶ but they were not uniquely or exclusively responsible for transforming American obscenity law. On the contrary, quite a few of the most influential civil libertarians and free speech advocates in the U.S. were Protestants and Catholics. Nor, as I argue, contrary to the stereotypes promulgated both by anti-Semitic demagogues and by well-meaning observers of Jewish culture, was there ever a singular or essential attitude toward obscenity or sexuality in American Jewish culture. Yet by interrogating the stakes of Jewish involvements and their literary complements, I hope to illuminate

²⁵ On these important free speech pioneers, see David Rabban, *Free Speech in Its Forgotten Years* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

²⁶ On the general exclusion of women from American law until the 1960s—in the mid-1960s, men still outnumbered women in law school classes 20 to 1—see Fred Strebeigh, *Equal: Women Reshape American Law* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009).

both the meaning of obscenity in American Jewish culture and to assert the centrality of Jews in the development of American literature as a cultural institution.

Historians and literary scholars have regularly treated as relevant the religious and ethnic backgrounds of figures who supported, or opposed, the censorship of obscenity in the U.S. when those figures were born and raised in Catholic families. The origins of Margaret Sanger and Justice William Brennan, for two prominent examples—not to speak of Cardinal Spellman—have been understood not as predetermining their actions, but as important data in understanding their contributions, given the outspoken and dramatic perspective of the Catholic Church on obscenity in literature.²⁷ I argue that the Jewishness of particular individuals often mattered in disputes about obscenity—it could inflect their opinions, encourage their convictions, or enrich their writing—even though, and partly because, Jewish communal and cultural authorities were never as consistent in their responses to these issues as the Catholic hierarchy was.

Indeed, while Morris Ernst, one of the most influential American Jewish voices on the question of obscenity in the first half of the century, often claimed that the sexual mores of America derive directly from the Biblical laws,²⁸ recent scholarship on Jews and sexuality presents a picture of dynamic, regular change in Jews' attitudes to sex. There is, in other words, no clear or essential Jewish sexual ethic. Impressively surveying thousands of years of history, David Biale's foundational *Eros and the Jews* highlights how differently Jews of various eras registered their own divergent theological and

²⁷ On these figures, see, for example, Samuel A. Mills, "Parochialism and the Abortion Decisions: Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan, Jr. versus the U.S. Catholic Hierarchy," *Journal of Church and State* 34:4 (1992): 751-74, and Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Anchor, 1993), 40, 135.

²⁸ See Ernst and Seagle, *To the Pure*, 252, and Morris Ernst and David Goldsmith Loth, *American Sexual Behavior and the Kinsey Report* (New York: Greystone Press, 1948), 12-14.

ideological principles and social circumstances in their textual accounts and representations of sexuality.²⁹ Other scholars, contributing to a vigorous and expanding field of interdisciplinary scholarship—a "corporeal turn in Jewish *textual* studies," if not, as some have noted, quite a turn away from the study of texts to the study of bodies qua bodies³⁰—complement Biale's broad survey by addressing in greater detail the dynamics of gender and sexuality in ancient, early modern, or modern Jewish cultures.³¹

By arguing that Jewish approaches to sexuality and its representation have been crucial in the development of the American laws and social conventions about how sexuality can be discussed and represented, then, I do not mean to suggest that some essential element of Jewish sexuality has flowered in modern America.³² Indeed, Nitsa

²⁹ David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

³⁰ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "The Corporeal Turn," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 95:3 (Summer 2005), 448. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's observations of the continued rootedness of most of Jewish Studies in texts and not bodies echo remarks by Naomi Seidman in a resonant review essay on this development in Jewish Studies scholarship. See Seidman, "Carnal Knowledge: Sex and the Body in Jewish Studies," *Jewish Social Studies* 1:1 (Fall 1994), 117.

³¹ For some of the more compelling and provocative contributions to this growing literature, see Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994); Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) and *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Sander L. Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); and Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representations of Women* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1995). Edited collections also continue to proliferate in this field; earlier examples included Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, ed. *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) and Jonathan Magonet, ed., *Jewish Explorations of Sexuality* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995), while recent additions have included Nathan Abrams, ed., *Jews & Sex* (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 2008) and Danya Ruttenberg, ed., *The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

³² To be specific on this point, Daniel Boyarin argues in *Carnal Israel* that "rabbinic Judaism invested significance in the body which in the other formations [i.e., Greek-speaking Jewish formations, including much of Christianity] was invested in the soul" (5). Whatever the merits of his argument as it applies to "Talmudic culture," it would be a mistake to claim that this dynamic played out in any concrete or direct or obvious sense in the behaviors, attitudes, and values of American Jews in the 20th century.

Ben-Ari's recent study of censorship and obscenity in modern Israeli literary culture demonstrates quite clearly how differently Jewish attitudes towards sexual representation could develop in a situation with other pressures and institutions.³³ Like Biale and other contemporary scholars of Jews and sexuality, I attend to the resonances of rabbinic and traditional sources as they play out in modern literature, and I emphasize that Jewish attitudes toward sexuality in general, and towards the textual representation of sex in specific, have always developed in conversation with social and demographic factors.

This project examines a series of such transformations, in which American Jews responded to and shaped American culture while grappling with their relations to Jewish traditions. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the issue, surveying both the involvements of American Jews in obscenity debates and various discourses, both anti-Semitic and well-meaning, that have posited an essential Jewish sexuality. Countering these essentialist perspectives, I propose that four factors made engagements with obscenity especially attractive to American Jews as Jews. Obscenity contributed to Jews' attempts to counter sexual anti-Semitism, to obtain cultural capital that was otherwise denied to them, to defend contraception, and to advocate for minority rights—all of which were concerns rooted in the particular historical experiences of Jews in 20th century America. In making these cases, the chapter also argues that the decentralization of authority in Diasporic societies helps to explain the vigorous interventions of American Jews in obscenity debates, and I contrast the model of sexual "modesty" that has operated within latitudinarian Diasporic Jewish communities with the "censorships" that tend to be imposed by hierarchical authorities.

³³ Nitsa Ben-Ari, *Suppression of the Erotic in Modern Hebrew Literature* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2006).

The remaining three chapters deal in chronological order with a series of American Jewish texts that dramatize, in finer detail, how these engagements with obscenity functioned. Chapter 3 rereads Henry Roth's American Jewish classic, *Call It Sleep* (1934) as an obscene novel. The chapter situates Roth's novel in the moments of its publication and circulation, analyzes its multilingual text closely, and compares the trajectory of Roth's career to those of Henry Miller and Sam Roth to argue that Henry Roth's emphasis on dirtiness and purification represented his own struggle to atone for his personal sexual guilt, and Jewish sexuality generally, through the techniques of Anglo-American modernism. Chapter 4 presents close readings of two novels drafted during the legal transformations of the 1960s—Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) and Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot* (1974)—which radicalize a set of sexual allegories common in Biblical, rabbinic, and ethnic American literature. *Portnoy's Complaint* wears its allegory on its sleeve ("to me," Portnoy announces, "... America is a *shikse*") and anticipates A. B. Yehoshua's infamous remark that "Diaspora Judaism is masturbation," while *Crackpot* rewrites this gendered allegorical tradition from a radical feminist perspective, representing the problematic of Jewish communal reproduction as mother-son incest. Shutting ahead to the late 1970s, Chapter 5 recuperates the role played by Jews and by explicit representations of sexuality in the inauguration of a literary tradition for the comic book. Sketching the history of anti-comics activism that perceived the medium as appropriate only for children, and concentrating on pioneering graphic novels by Will Eisner and Jules Feiffer, the chapter argues that Jews used explicit representations of sex to realign the position of comics in the field of cultural production and to establish the graphic novel as a genre of literature for adult readers.

The individual studies contained in these chapters do not, by any means, exhaust the subject of the representation of sex in the literature written by American Jews or the encounters of American Jews with the American law of obscenity. It would have been possible, with more time and space, to devote greater attention to any number of other American Jewish authors and performers whose more or less explicit representations of sexuality brought them into conflict with American legal suppression and social protest, from Sholem Asch and David Pinski, to Ludwig Lewisohn and Maxwell Bodenheim, to Belle Barth and Allen Ginsberg, or even Annie Sprinkle and Ron Jeremy. Yet I hope that the readings and historical sketches I have gathered here collectively demonstrate that obscenity and the debates surrounding it have been a crucial element in the development of contemporary Jewish culture in America, and, no less strikingly, that the interventions of Jews have been vital in the development of American attitudes about, policies on, and treatments of obscenity. In assembling this project, I have kept in mind David Hollinger's important caution about the "booster-bigot trap" that bedevils studies of Jewish prominence and "tempts the scholar to choose between the uncritical celebration of 'Jewish contributions' and the malevolent complaint about 'Jewish influence.'"³⁴ The story of Jews, obscenity, and American literature is emphatically not a tale of Jews perverting America, nor one of sexual Jews rescuing the country from its worst puritan tendencies. It is, as I hope will be clear from the pages that follow, a story of individuals struggling to reconcile shifting, contradictory values about art, culture, ethnicity, and sexuality.

³⁴ David Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture: Studies in Mid-Twentieth Century American Intellectual History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 11.

CHAPTER 2.
Unorthodox Jews: Decentralized Authority and the Stakes of Obscenity

I. The Prominence of Jews in American Obscenity Disputes

In late April 1893, a letter arrived at the offices of *Broadway*, a "witty New York society journal,"¹ from a frustrated subscriber named George Edwards. "Upon my return from Cincinnati yesterday I received your paper," Edwards wrote. "Some boy or printer's devil has been playing a joke on you, as the paper on three pages is marred with a black substance marked over them. ... Please see that this is made right."²

A young assistant on the *Broadway* staff named Arthur T. Seymour knew exactly how to respond, thanks to instructions from his boss, Lew Rosen. "There has been no practical joke played on you at all," Seymour wrote, "as we were compelled to black the whole addition [sic] up in the same manner. It is only lamp black, however, and is easily removed with a piece of bread."³ If Edwards had been a loyal subscriber to the magazine, Seymour's advice should have amused him: when he scrubbed away the lamp-black, he

¹ Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, vol. 4, 1885-1905 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 386n15. This *Broadway*, which Mott records as having run from 1892 to 1894, should not be confused with later weekly and monthly periodicals of the same name. See Mott, 67, 152.

² *Rosen v. United States*, 161 U.S. 29 (1896), Transcript of Record, 16.

³ *Rosen* Transcript, 14.

would have found beneath it "pictures of females, in different attitudes of indecency."⁴ Alas, Edwards was a pseudonym for Anthony Comstock, America's most notorious anti-vice crusader, and the letter he had sent was a stratagem for accruing evidence against the publication. Soon, Rosen, the publisher of *Broadway* and thus the responsible party, was tried, convicted, and sentenced to thirteen months at hard labor for sending obscenity through the mail, the lamp black notwithstanding. Though Rosen appealed his conviction all the way up the judicial ladder, in 1896 the U.S. Supreme Court upheld his sentence.

Rosen's trial has often been mentioned, at least briefly, in histories of obscenity in American law and culture. The literary scholar Walter Kendrick, for one example, refers to it to illustrate how powerfully the Hicklin test—the standard for determining obscenity established in the British case *Regina v. Hicklin* (1868), that is, whether the material tends "to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences"—was in force in turn-of-the-century America, and how emphatically and clearly the courts drew a line between pornography, including Rosen's magazine, and legitimate art.⁵ Yet Rosen's larger story has not been told, and attending to a few details of this publisher's background complicates the picture Kendrick and other scholars have painted.

Rosen was born Lewis Rosenthal in Baltimore, Maryland, on September 10, 1856. After graduating from Dartmouth College in 1877, he relocated to Paris, where he tutored an American diplomat's son and contributed to newspapers. He published a book, *America and France: The Influence of the United States in France in the Eighteenth Century*, with the respectable firm Henry Holt and Company in 1882, and he contributed

⁴ *Rosen v. United States*, 161 U. S. 29 (1896).

⁵ Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking, 1987), 175-76.

essays to major publications on what we might refer to today as transnational literature (examples included "Poe in Paris," "Rousseau in Philadelphia," and "Bret Harte in Germany").⁶ Like an increasing number of the men arrested for obscenity in New York City in those decades, Rosen was Jewish, and the foreignness this conferred on him in the eyes of his accusers did not go unmentioned during his trial. At one point, a prosecutor asked an employee of Rosen's whether he and his boss had gotten "the idea of blacking [the magazine's pages] from the system of press censorship in Russia."⁷ Despite his being a native-born American, then, Rosen was seen as suspiciously foreign.

Rosen's story contradicts assumptions scholars tend to bring to the data about Jews and obscenity in the U.S. Though many impoverished immigrant Jews arrived in New York City in the 1880s and 1890s, and while it was from their ranks that some of the most influential Jewish book-leggers and smut-peddlers of the following decades would emerge, Rosen was hardly one of them. He does not seem to have been a "pariah capitalist," to use Jay Gertzman's term, willing to break the laws and print pornography out of institutionalized economic desperation.⁸ Rather, Rosen held a prestigious college degree, had published serious criticism widely, and maintained personal relationships with many respectable professionals and politicians.⁹ He nonetheless became one of the many Jews who left their marks on the legal, literary, and social history of obscenity in

⁶ This biographical information is drawn from Isaac Markens, *The Hebrews in America: A Series of Historical and Biographical Sketches* (New York: Published by the author, 1888), 244-45.

⁷ *Rosen Transcript*, 17.

⁸ Jay A. Gertzman, *Bookleggers and Smuthounds: The Trade in Erotica 1920-1940* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

⁹ See the testimony of Charles M. Hough, Herbert H. Walker, and Marcus Stine, *Rosen Transcript*, 12-13.

the U.S., suggesting that the role of Jews in determining the course of these developments cannot be understood as a simple socioeconomic phenomenon.

In fact, American Jews from many backgrounds participated in debates about obscenity. If one were to ask a lawyer or legal historian to list the five or ten most important cases on the question of obscenity decided by the U.S. Supreme Court before 1980, for example, the resulting list would certainly include *Winters v. New York* (1948), *Roth v. U.S.* (1957), *Cohen v. California* (1971), and *Miller v. California* (1973). Murray Winters (né Wishengrad) was arrested for selling sensational magazines, Samuel Roth for marketing erotica including works by Aubrey Beardsley, Paul Robert Cohen for wearing a jacket with the words "Fuck the Draft" on it into a courthouse, and Marvin Miller for a wide range of pornographic publications.¹⁰ All of these men were Jewish, as were the defendants in other infamous obscenity trials of the period, including *Burstyn v. Wilson* (1952), *Freedman v. Maryland* (1965), *Mishkin v. New York* (1966), *Ginzburg v. U.S.* (1966), and *Ginsberg v. New York* (1968).¹¹ In short, the American obscenity trials that set the most authoritative legal precedents frequently concerned the criminality or legality of the cultural and business practices of American Jews.

In a more general sense, American Jews were also among the leading publishers, writers, social activists, and artists whose work occasioned obscenity controversies. Though the novelists associated with the history of literary obscenity in America include non-Jewish writers like James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Radclyffe Hall, Henry Miller, and

¹⁰ *Winters v. New York*, 333 U.S. 507 (1948); *Roth v. U.S.*, 354 U.S. 476 (1957); *Cohen v. California*, 403 U.S. 15 (1971); and *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15 (1973).

¹¹ *Burstyn v. Wilson*, 343 U.S. 495 (1952), *Freedman v. Maryland*, 380 U.S. 51 (1965), *Mishkin v. New York*, 383 US 502 (1966), *Ginzburg v. U.S.*, 383 U.S. 463 (1966), *Ginsberg v. New York*, 390 U.S. 629 (1968).

William S. Burroughs, virtually all of the pioneering American publishers of those authors—Ben Huebsch, Bennet Cerf and Donald Klopfer, Alfred and Blanche Knopf, Thomas and Adele Seltzer, and Barney Rosset, as well as Edward Titus, Jack Kahane, and Kahane's son Maurice Girodias, who published banned English-language books in Paris¹²—were Jewish, as were a great many of the bookstore owners and clerks who were prosecuted when the obscenity of literary works was called into question. Gertzman calculates that Jews were arrested for obscenity in New York City more frequently than anyone else in the early 20th century, at least according to the record kept by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (NYSSV): in 1905, 54 out of the 90 people arrested for obscenity there were identified in the organization's ledgers as Jewish; in 1933, 29 out of 35; and in 1939, 28 out of 32.¹³ Long before figures like Philip Roth, Woody Allen, Lenny Bruce, and Erica Jong intertwined frank sexuality and Jewishness in many observers' impressions of post-World War II American culture, the explicit representation of sex already constituted a crucial and controversial concern in literary works in Yiddish and English by American Jewish authors including Sholem Asch, David Pinski, and Ludwig Lewisohn. As political activists, too, from Emma Goldman at the turn of the 20th century to the young leaders of the so-called "Filthy Speech Movement" at UC Berkeley in the 1960s, American Jews have frequently led the charge for freedom of speech, particularly with respect to the question of obscenity.

¹² On these publishers, see Charles A. Madison, *Jewish Publishing in America: The Impact of Jewish Writing on American Culture* (New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1976); Neil Pearson, *Obelisk: The History of Jack Kahane and the Obelisk Press* (Liverpool : Liverpool University Press, 2007); John De St. Jorre, *Venus Bound: The Erotic Voyage of the Olympia Press and Its Writers* (New York: Random House, 1996); Hugh Ford, *Published in Paris American and British Writers, Printers, and Publishers in Paris, 1920-1939* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 117-167.

¹³ Gertzman, 28-29.

Jews participated in these obscenity trials not only as defendants, but also in key juridical roles. Rarely did Jewish judges write pivotal obscenity opinions at the highest level of American jurisprudence. In a few cases Jewish Supreme Court justices Benjamin Cardozo, Louis Brandeis, Felix Frankfurter, Arthur Goldberg, and Abe Fortas wrote decisions, concurrences, or dissenting opinions in obscenity cases—of particular note was Frankfurter's quip, for the majority, in *Butler v. Michigan* (1957) that to prohibit the circulation of all material deemed inappropriate for minors would "burn the house to roast the pig," a major early strike against the central tenet of the Hicklin test¹⁴—but more often these judges simply signed onto the opinions written by their non-Jewish colleagues. Brandeis, for example, joined the crucial dissent in which Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. inaugurated the modern tradition of defending speech through the First Amendment, in a case involving Yiddish-speaking anti-war activists in 1919, before going on to write a series of dissents himself that refined and elaborated Holmes's reasoning and extended the legal principle of free speech.¹⁵ Goldberg and Fortas concurred regularly with William Brennan's transformative obscenity decisions in the 1960s. With subtly anti-Semitic undertones, conservative U.S. senators and anti-vice crusaders claimed in 1968 that Fortas was personally responsible, more than any of his colleagues on the bench, for the court's decriminalization of explicit sexual representation (see figure 2.1). Yet legal historians have dismissed this canard as unfounded in Fortas's

¹⁴ *Butler v. Michigan*, 352 U.S. 380 (1957). Also frequently quoted is Cardozo's remark in *Palko v. Connecticut*, 302 U.S. 319 (1937) that "freedom of thought, and speech ... is the matrix, the indispensable condition, of nearly every other form of freedom."

¹⁵ For the Holmes dissent in which Brandeis joined, see *Abrams v. U.S.* 250 U.S. 616 (1919); "the *Abrams* dissent marked the transformation of Holmes and Brandeis into defenders of free speech," David Rabban, *Free Speech in Its Forgotten Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 343.

record, and credited the crucial string of decisions to Brennan, a practicing Catholic.¹⁶ Living in distant eras, shaped by radically different backgrounds, opportunities, and experiences, these influential judges were hardly of one mind on the question of obscenity.

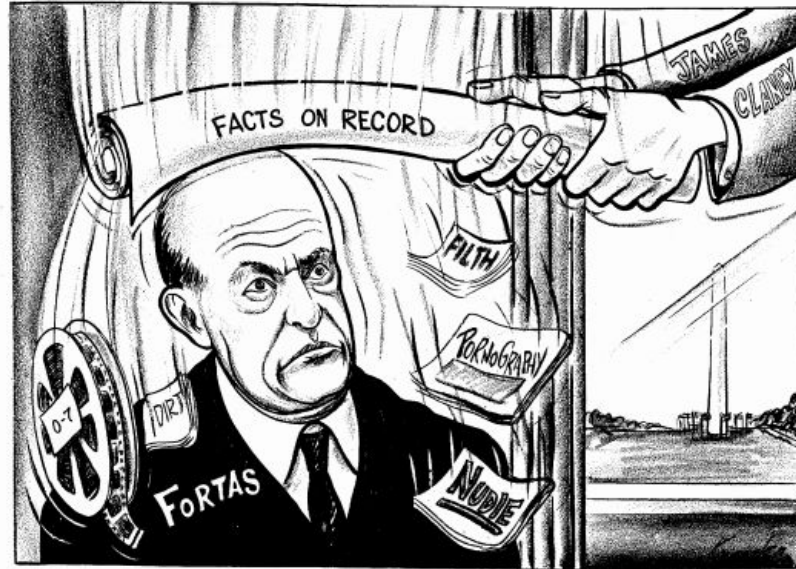


Figure 2.1. In fighting Justice Abe Fortas's nomination to the position of Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, his political opponents linked him, without any particular justification, to "pornography" and "filth."

Still, several Jewish lower court judges exerted substantial influence on the development of the law of obscenity. A decade after Woolsey's famed 1933 decision freeing *Ulysses*, the legal suppression of literature remained fairly common. In 1946, the New York City courts suppressed Edmund Wilson's collection of short stories *Memoirs of Hecate County*. Oddly, neither the original court, nor any of the three successive courts that examined the book on appeal—all of which affirmed the suppression—deigned to

¹⁶ "Clancy Lowers the Boom," *National Decency Reporter* 5:7-8 (July-August 1968): 1. See De Grazia, 525-50, for the accusations against Fortas and De Grazia's refutation of them.

issue a written decision justifying their rulings. The single opinion to emerge from all four trials was a dissent by Justice Nathan D. Perlman, who presided along with two other judges over the book's first trial in New York.¹⁷ The transcript reveals that trial to have consisted largely of Lionel Trilling's testimony regarding the merits of Wilson's fiction and the nature of literary obscenity more broadly. More than a judicial proceeding, the discussion resembles a literary seminar in which Perlman listened with particular care. After reading some objectionable passages from Wilson's book, the prosecuting attorney asked Trilling, "Now, do you think it is necessary to describe people's movements and parts of sex organs to make a book great literature?" Trilling answered, "Literary necessity is very hard to define. . . . What is necessary is what it is that will give the effect that the writer intends." A few moments later, as a defense attorney attempted to clarify this point regarding literary "necessity," Perlman interrupted to reiterate Trilling's observation, sounding almost like a dutiful student.¹⁸ In his dissent Perlman insisted on the point again, affirming the importance of authorial intent in his observation that Wilson "is evidently and honestly concerned with the complex influences of sex and of class consciousness on man's relentless search for happiness."¹⁹ Perlman also concretely anticipated Frankfurter's dismissal, with his roasted pig metaphor, of the central tenet of the Hicklin test, when he argued that "to adopt a standard of obscenity

¹⁷ Prior to his judicial appointment, Perlman (1887-1952), a Polish-Jewish immigrant, had served as a Republican New York State Congressman from 1920-1927, and among his philanthropic involvements in the Jewish community, he served as Vice President of the American Jewish Congress and President of Beth Israel Hospital in New York. In the 1940s, he hired Meyer Lansky to disrupt the meetings of the anti-Semitic German-American Bund. See Kurt F. Stone, *The Congressional Minyan: The Jews of Capitol Hill* (Jersey City: Ktav Publishing House, 2000), 376-77.

¹⁸ *Doubleday and Company, Inc. v. People of the State of New York*, 335 U.S. 848 (1948), Transcript of Record, 36.

¹⁹ *Doubleday v. New York* Transcript, 48.

which would disregard the interests of the mature and ignore the positive and vital contribution which books can make in their lives, is to needlessly sacrifice the welfare of a vast portion of our community."²⁰

In the 1950s, a dissent by another Jewish judge, Jerome Frank, in the case of Samuel Roth (which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3) called for the Supreme Court to reexamine the law of obscenity. The resulting decision, *Roth v. U.S.* (1957), began in earnest the transformation of American obscenity law. In Chicago in 1960, Judge Julius Hoffman, who would preside over the trial of Abbie Hoffman and the Chicago Seven later in the decade, acknowledged the consequences of the *Roth* decision in a decision about *Big Table*, a literary journal that had been founded by Irving Rosenthal and Paul Carroll, with the help of Allen Ginsberg, after the University of Chicago refused to let them print pieces by Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs in the *Chicago Review*. Freeing the journal from suppression, Hoffman opined that judges "should observe, without prejudice, what is going on in our changing society, averting through such alertness treating law as a petrified body of shibboleths."²¹ These Jewish lower court judges were hardly alone in countering the suppression of books for obscenity and in laying the groundwork in jurisprudence and legal theory for a First Amendment defense of the representation of sexuality in literature. Non-Jewish judges including Learned Hand, Augustus Hand, and John Woolsey had also been crucial contributors, as were non-Jewish legal scholars including Theodore Schroeder, Zechariah Chafee, Jr., and

²⁰ *Doubleday v. New York* Transcript, 47.

²¹ *Big Table, Inc. v. Schroeder*, 186 F. Supp. 254 (N.D. Ill. 1960). On this trial, see De Grazia, 343-65.

Harry Kalven, Jr. But Jewish judges contributed in substantial, resonant ways to the freeing of virtually all books from obscenity prosecutions in the mid-1960s.²²

As lawyers, Jews often defended artistic obscenity even when other free speech advocates would not. The leading legal defenders of obscene literature and freedom of artistic expression in America included Jews such as Harry Weinberger, who defended Emma Goldman and maintained ties with the Free Speech League; Arthur Garfield Hays, an early ACLU stalwart who defended H. L. Mencken and Theodore Dreiser in Boston; Morris Ernst, who defended *Ulysses* and served for decades as a board member and, after Hays, as the general counsel of the ACLU; Ernst's associate Harriet Pilpel, who advised Planned Parenthood and won Alfred Kinsey the right to import sexually explicit materials for his research, while also contributing a regular column on legal affairs to *Publisher's Weekly*; Charles Rembar, who told his cousin Norman Mailer to bowdlerize "fuck" to "fug" in *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and served as lead counsel for Barney Rosset's Grove Press in its publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Tropic of Cancer*; Ephraim London, who tried and won key film censorship cases in front of the Supreme Court and defended Lenny Bruce; and Martin Garbus, a contemporary leader in First Amendment law and energetic spokesman on the subject. Aside from their legal work, these figures wrote and edited popular books that agitated forcefully against the suppression of literature for obscenity, introducing the relevant arguments to audiences outside of the

²² Another example is that of Judge Benjamin Greenspan, who founded the Wall Street Synagogue in 1929 and served as its first president, and also ruled against the suppression of Erskine Caldwell's *God's Little Acre* in *People v. Viking Press, Inc.*, 147 N.Y. Misc. 813 (Magistrate's Ct., 1933). On Greenspan and the synagogue, see Marvin Greisman, "The Orthodox Spirit of Wall Street Since 1929," *Downtown Express* 18:9 (July 22-28, 2005) <http://www.downtownexpress.com/de_115/theorthodoxspiritof.html>.

legal profession.²³ Along with their non-Jewish peers, most notably Edward De Grazia, these lawyers insisted on the rights of authors, publishers, and filmmakers to represent sex explicitly. They facilitated the legal and social transformations that were concretized first by judicial decisions and then by the novels and films that brought home those decisions to American audiences.

In short, as lawyers, judges, witnesses, and defendants—authors, publishers, booksellers, film distributors and exhibitors, protesters, and performers—Jews have been central to the history of obscenity in the U.S. The question of why American Jews were so prominent, or "overrepresented," in the use and defense of obscenity, seems like an obvious one to ask. Yet serious scholars of obscenity have typically not asked it, because doing so leads straight to what David Hollinger, analyzing the role of Jews in the development of American university culture, has called the "booster-bigot trap." As mentioned in the Introduction, Hollinger construes this trap as "tempt[ing] the scholar to choose between the uncritical celebration of 'Jewish contributions' and the malevolent complaint about 'Jewish influence.'" It explains why Jewish prominence in some fields of American culture, such as the natural and social sciences, has generally not been taken up by the most serious historians of those fields. "The best way to avoid both boosterism and

²³ For Hays, see his *Let Freedom Ring* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1928), *Trial by Prejudice* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1933), and *City Lawyers: The Autobiography of a Law Practice* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1942). For Ernst, see his *To the Pure...: A Study of Obscenity and the Censor* (New York: The Viking Press, 1928), *Censorship: The Search for the Obscene* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), and his memoirs, *The Best Is Yet* (New York: Harper, 1945) and *So Far So Good* (New York: Harper, 1948). For Rembar, see *The End of Obscenity: The Trials of Lady Chatterley, Tropic of Cancer, and Fanny Hill* (New York: Random House, 1968). For London, see his anthology *The World of Law* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960). For Garbus, see his *Ready for the Defense* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971) and *Traitors and Heroes: A Lawyer's Memoir* (New York: Atheneum, 1987). Pilpel's biography and career are discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

bigotry," Hollinger observes, "was, and is, to avoid talking about Jews."²⁴ The finest histories of obscenity to date have done precisely that, treating many of the figures listed above—and, more specifically, the basic details of Lew Rosen's case—but rarely, if ever, mentioning that they were Jewish.²⁵

Rejecting silence, bigotry, and boosterism in equal measure, this chapter describes and analyzes the key roles that Jews played in the history of obscenity in the U.S. As Hollinger suggests, the rejection of essentialism—that is, a vision of the group in question as timeless and unchanging—facilitates avoidance of the booster-bigot trap. Indeed, as Rosen's story helps to demonstrate, and as the sheer number of Jews involved affirms, it was never one particular type of American Jew who played a role in obscenity disputes. Nor did Jews find themselves involved in these controversies for any single or consistent reason—because, as historians have shown time and again, American Jews have never formed a coherent, homogeneous demographic group.²⁶

²⁴ David Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture: Studies in Mid-Twentieth Century American Intellectual History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 11.

²⁵ Typically, histories of obscenity mention that a participant in these debates was Jewish only when quoting someone. Paul S. Boyer's *Purity in Print: The Vice Society Movement and Book Censorship in America* (New York: Scribner, 1968), for one example, quotes Mary Austin's remark, in June 1923, that the contemporary "muddled stream of sex literature" could be blamed on the influence of "the Russian" and "the Jew" (111), but Boyer does not address the question of how Austin formed that opinion or what, if any, truth there was to it. Edward De Grazia's *Girls Lean Back Everywhere: The Law of Obscenity and the Assault on Genius* (New York: Random House, 1992), for another example, quotes Edmund Wilson to the effect that the only judge to write "a highly intelligent opinion" in the trial of *Memoirs of Hecate County* was "the Jewish one, Perlman" (226), but does not suggest whether Wilson was right to think of Perlman's Jewishness as relevant to his dissent. Gertzman's *Bookleggers and Smuthounds*, an excellently researched and richly detailed study, does confront the question of Jewishness in American obscenity at least in terms of the erotica producers and dealers, though it devotes less attention to lawyers, judges, and authors.

²⁶ Hollinger offers a useful thumbnail sketch of the diversity of American Jews, arguing that they cannot be considered a homogeneous group because "(1) Jews were of diverse origin within the Jewish Diaspora... (2) [they] oriented themselves in a variety of different ways to Jewish ethnicity and to Judaism... (3) generational differences [among them] could be profound... (4) [they] absorbed greatly differing amounts of the prevailing culture of educated Americans that owed much to Protestant Christianity." Other historians would doubtlessly add other factors to this list, such as class, gender, and regional differences. Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture*, 13-14.

There has never been a single Jewish perspective on literary obscenity, then, but rather a number of different values that attracted both Jews and non-Jews from different walks of life to the use and defense of obscenity. Instead of asking why Jews were so prominent in these disputes, this chapter investigates what has been at stake for Jews, *as Jews*, in the debates and controversies about literary obscenity in American culture. Why has the explicit representation of sexuality and the freedom to use taboo words mattered to American Jews like, and very much unlike, Lew Rosen?

II. Bigots, Boosters, and Scholars: Obscenity, Anti-Semitism, and Anti-Essentialism

Before I turn to a series of case studies with which I answer this question, the following two sections of this chapter elaborate its historical and theoretical grounding. First, this section advocates for an anti-essentialist approach by demonstrating how the booster-bigot trap stymies scholarship about the Jewish role in the development of modern obscenity. As Hollinger remarks, "the booster-bigot trap is ... potentially a problem for scholars studying virtually any cultural enterprise in which any group marked by a history of prejudice has attained a presence." Yet "multiculturalist scholars have proven much more willing to accept the risks of appearing akin to the booster than the risks of appearing akin to the bigot," and quite sensibly so.²⁷ In recent decades, scholars studying the roles played by Jews in particular subfields of American popular culture (e.g., movies, Broadway, comic books) have been particularly willing to embrace the booster role, redressing the neglect of Jewishness in previous studies by boldly

²⁷ Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture*, 11.

asserting, for one powerful example, that "the Jews invented Hollywood."²⁸ Anti-Semitic groups, meanwhile, continue to see the Jewish control of these industries as nefarious, so boosters and bigots continue to agree about the facts and disagree about their interpretations. Because the issue of obscenity continues to provoke controversy and discomfort, it provides perhaps the sharpest example of how bigots and boosters can dominate the perception of the contributions made by Jews to American life.

The bigot's view of Jews and obscenity in the U.S. has a long and unpleasant history. Having originated in the ancient Middle East,²⁹ sexual Judeophobia resurfaced powerfully in the works of the European and American demagogues who founded modern anti-Semitism in the 19th century. As a subset of the accusations of Jewish sexual deviance during the *fin de siècle* that have been carefully catalogued by scholars

²⁸ Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown, 1988).

²⁹ Circumcision was understood by ancient Jews and non-Jews to be the primary marker of Jewish difference. As Peter Schäfer reports, the Roman satirist Rutilius Namatianus referred to "the *obscena gens* ('obscene, filthy people') of the Jews 'that shamefully cuts off the genital head' (*quae genitale caput propudiosa metit*), that is, practices circumcision." Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes Toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 102. As early as the 5th century, then, many centuries before the "reinvention of obscenity" that would bring that concept to bear on the culture of early modern Europe—see Joan DeJean, *The Reinvention of Obscenity: Sex, Lies, and Tabloids in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002)—Jews were already regarded as an "obscene people." Aside from circumcision, the characteristics ascribed to Jews by Romans and early Christians that contributed to this perception included their alleged sexual aggression and theological comfort with both marriage and polygamy. In one poem revealing in its portrait of Jewish sexual aggression, Martial criticizes a Jewish colleague who has seduced his own young lover: "... even though you were born in Jerusalem itself, / you bugger my boy, circumcised poet." Schäfer, 96. On the topic of marriage, meanwhile, Justin Martyr attacked Jewish polygamy and the license that the Torah's narratives offered for men's lust: "If anyone see a beautiful woman and desire to have her, they quote the doings of Jacob," he complained. The Reverend Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Anti-Nicene Christian Library 2* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1868), 269. Moreover, according to the 18th demonstration of Aphrahat, written in 4th-century Persia, some Jews attempted to convince early Christians to eschew celibacy: "I have written to you, my beloved ones, on the issue of virginity and sanctity," Aphrahat explained, "because I heard of a Jew who embarrassed one of our brethren of our community and said to him: 'You are impure because you take no wives, whereas we who procreate and increase the world are holy and excellent.'" Quoted in Isaiah M. Gafni, "The Institution of Marriage in Rabbinic Times," *The Jewish Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 20. Publius Cornelius Tacitus effectively captured the spirit of these views in his description of Jews as "prone to lust," and Augustine concurred in his characterization of "the Jews" as "indisputably carnal." See Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 43, and Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 1.

including Sander Gilman and George Mosse,³⁰ Jews were also accused specifically of smut-mongering. Gilman demonstrates how an abjuration of interest-bearing loans as an unnatural form of reproduction led anti-Semites to characterize Jews as the bearers of unnatural lusts,³¹ and, as Allison Pease has suggested, because "pornography was and still is characterized by interest, both in the sense of sensual desire and commercial profit," some anti-Semites perceived "both the pornographic and the Jew [as] always 'interested,' always commercial in relationship to the separate, symbolic economy of the aesthetic."³² *Fin de siècle* anti-Semitism concretized this affinity in the accusation that Jews were responsible for the production and distribution of pornography.

One prominent proponent of this view, Édouard Drumont, fumed for example in *La France Juive* (1886) about a "guerre pornographique" ["pornographic war"] waged by avaricious Jews against Christian France.³³ Telemachus T. Timayensis, Drumont's American counterpart, plagiarized much of Drumont's work in an American edition, *The Original Mr. Jacobs* (1888), published by his own Minerva Publishing Company in Manhattan.³⁴ According to Timayensis's translation and plagiarism of Drumont,

³⁰ See, for example, Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991) and George Mosse, "Race and Sexuality: The Role of the Outsider," *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985), 133-53.

³¹ Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, 124.

³² Allison Pease, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Aesthetics of Obscenity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3, 22, 86.

³³ Édouard Drumont, *La France Juive: Essai d'Histoire Contemporaine* (Paris: C. Marpon and E. Flammarion, 1886), 2:458.

³⁴ For brief descriptions of Timayensis's career, see Jacob Rader Marcus, *United States Jewry, 1776-1985* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 170; Naomi W. Cohen, "American Jewish Reactions to Anti-Semitism in Western Europe, 1875-1900," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 45 (1978): 33-34; and John Higham, "Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age: A Reinterpretation," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 43:4 (March 1957): 576.

Nearly all obscene publications are the work of the Jews. . . . The historian of the future who shall attempt to describe the catalogue of the filthy publications issued by the Jews during the last ten years will scarcely believe the evidence of his own eyes. Scenes of gross debauchery, representing drunken monks in the society of girls, priests lashing nude women, filthy groups, and other outrageous pictures, are displayed on all sides, with Jewish effrontery, in the windows and stores.³⁵

Paraphrasing Drumont's attacks more broadly, and adding a crucial detail peculiar to the American scene, Timayensis remarked in another passage that "If Anthony Comstock . . . instead of treading upon the sacred domains of art, of which he is entirely ignorant, would try to bring to justice the Jew editors that disgrace public morals by their filthy articles, he would be applauded by the entire Christian community, and would win public esteem instead of censure and ridicule."³⁶ Indeed, as mentioned above, under Comstock and his successor, John Sumner, the NYSSV arrested Jewish printers, authors, and publishers for obscenity much more frequently than their non-Jewish peers. Yet far from supporting Timayensis's claim, these records demonstrate that Comstock and Sumner had the sense to follow Timayensis's implicit logic: while arresting a college professor or wealthy Protestant publisher ("the sacred domains of art") often resulted in the NYSSV's looking foolish, few Americans seemed to object when Comstock harassed and persecuted socially vulnerable Jewish immigrants.³⁷

The NYSSV was not alone in its crusade against alleged Jewish smut. By the early 1920s, the editors of Henry Ford's *Dearborn Independent* were elaborating on the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* with charges that, in the United States, Jews "have

³⁵ Telemachus T. Timayensis, *The Original Mr. Jacobs* (New York: Minerva Press, 1888), 288-89. For the corresponding passage, see Drumont, 456.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 280-81.

³⁷ See Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 29-30.

degenerated the movies and debauched the popular song movement," as well as the theater.³⁸ Like *Timayensis*, the paper characterized Comstock as a victim of Jewish perfidy: "There was once a man named Anthony Comstock who was the enemy of public lewdness. ... It was a very familiar triangle—the morally indignant non-Jew fighting against public lechery, and the Jewish instigators of it hiding behind ribald Gentiles and Gentile newspapers."³⁹ The attacks consistently linked Jewish sexual immorality with Jews' lust for money. As the *Independent* phrased it, "the men who profited from the commercializing of much of the vice which [Comstock] fought, were Jews."⁴⁰

These bigoted visions of Jews as essentially hypersexual offer nothing of value to a responsible scholar of American sexuality or history, of course. Yet even sympathetic observers of Jews and sexuality in the U.S., taking on the role of boosters, have often relied on a structurally similar essentialism. Take Hugh Hefner, whose abiding respect for Jewish intellectuals can be traced back to a college class with Samson Raphaelson, and whose *Playboy* magazine hired and promoted many Jewish editors including A. C. Spector, Nat Lehrman, Arthur Kretchmer, and Sheldon Wax.⁴¹ In the "Playboy Philosophy," a ponderous series of articles that he published to air his beliefs about sexual morality in the early 1960s, Hefner asserted admiringly that American Jews "while not nearly as sexually permissive as the Hebrews of the Old Testament—are more liberal

³⁸ *Jewish Influences in American Life: Volume III of the International Jew* (Dearborn, Michigan: The Dearborn Publishing Co., 1921), 79.

³⁹ *Jewish Activities in the United States, Volume II of the International Jew* (Dearborn, Michigan: The Dearborn Publishing Company, 1921), 79, 117.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁴¹ On Hefner's attitude toward Jews, see Steven Watts, *Mr. Playboy: Hugh Hefner and the American Dream* (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2008), especially 37, 40, 50.

than either American Catholics or the mainstream of American Protestantism."⁴² Hefner's claim suggests that sexual permissiveness and toleration is not a personal or familial characteristic, but a cultural one, and he conflates Orthodox rabbis with members of the Ethical Culture Society as essentially Jewish in their openness to sex.

Similarly, when the celebrity sexologist Dr. Ruth Westheimer claimed, more recently, that "Judaism is intensely sexual" and that "sex, in and of itself, has never been a sin for Jews, or something not to discuss," she reveals how self-conscious Jewish pride can enforce an essentialist perspective that runs in parallel to that of anti-Semitism. In describing rabbinic Judaism as a monolithic entity and the lives of Jews as lived entirely within the boundaries of that tradition, Westheimer, like Hefner, neglects the tensions and diversity that exist among Jews.⁴³ Even in a study that admirably insists on "differences between Jews of different national origins—that is, between Russian Jews and German Jews, Spanish Jews and Polish Jews, and so on," the amateur sociologist Enrique Hank Lopez nonchalantly compliments "Jewish men and women" as "far more willing to discuss their sexual behavior than either Catholics or Protestants."⁴⁴ Such boosterism, complimentary as its intentions may be, not only smacks of parochialism in many cases, but also reproduces the structure of thought that enables racism.

These visions of Jews, whether positively or negatively charged, err grievously in their essentialism—that is, in their assertion that all Jews share the essential feature of

⁴² Reprinted on *Playboy.com* <<http://www.playboy.com/worldofplayboy/hmh/philosophy/195.html>>.

⁴³ Dr. Ruth K. Westheimer and Jonathan Mark, *Heavenly Sex: Sexuality in the Jewish Tradition* (New York: NYU Press, 1995), 5, 11.

⁴⁴ Enrique Hank Lopez, *Eros and Ethos: A Comparative Study of Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish Sex Behavior* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1979), xi, ix.

hypersexuality.⁴⁵ The structurally parallel and mutually reinforcing dynamics of philo-Semitism and anti-Semitism in general have been effectively theorized by Zygmunt Bauman and analyzed by Bryan Cheyette,⁴⁶ and the case of obscenity provides a highly concrete and pernicious example of those dynamics in operation. In 2004, for example, a British scholar of American Jewish culture published a somewhat boosterish article arguing that "secular Jews have played (and still continue to play) a disproportionate role throughout the adult film industry in America." Immediately contemporary anti-Semitic publications leapt on the story and folded it into their accusations about an "international Jewish child porn/murder operation," grimly evocative of the accusations that circulated in Europe and the U.S. in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁴⁷

Recognizing the pitfalls of both bigotry and boosterism, serious scholars have, as Hollinger observed and as mentioned above, usually remained silent about Jews in histories of obscenity in the U.S. In a few cases, a parenthetical comment within a larger work speculates on this question, but not in a way that provides much enlightenment. In passing, for example, Irving Howe characterizes the embrace of "vulgarity" by Jewish "comics and entertainers" in the early 20th century as the reaction of "ill-lettered Jews, those condescended to in Yiddish as *di proste*," to freedom from "the repressiveness of

⁴⁵ As Bourdieu has remarked, "Every racism is an essentialism." Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage, 1993), 177.

⁴⁶ Cheyette, *Constructions of 'the Jew' in English Literature and Society, 1875-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and Zygmunt Bauman, "Allosemitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern" in *Modernity, Culture and 'the Jew'*, ed. Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 143-57.

⁴⁷ For the scholar's article, see Nathan Abrams, "Triple-exthnics," *Jewish Quarterly* 196 (Winter 2004) <<http://www.jewishquarterly.org/article.asp?articleid=38>>. While mostly responsible in his claims, Abrams occasionally slips into generalizations, such as "The adult entertainment business required something that Jews possessed in abundance: *chutzpah*"—as if Jews are any more prone to brazenness than any other people, simply because the Yenglish word for the concept has become popular in America! Following the scholarly convention, I will not dignify anti-Semitic websites with citations.

old-world moralism." But, as he points out, "old-world moralism" had little purchase in America, and many of the American Jews who used or defended obscenity had virtually no exposure to the social dogmatism of religious authorities. Did men and women pursue forty-year-long careers, sometimes going to jail repeatedly, to repudiate moral strictures that had never influenced their lives in any concrete or immediate way?⁴⁸

Gertzman's *Bookleggers and Smuthounds* comes closest to addressing the question effectively. Yet while his conceptual category of "pariah capitalists" accounts sensibly for the "German and eastern European Jews" who marketed or created erotica after being barred from other opportunities and branded as "cunning social climbers,"⁴⁹ it does not offer much insight into Jewish judges, like Felix Frankfurter or Jerome Frank—who responded to genuine anti-Semitism in their environments not through aggressive rebellion or gleeful transgression, but by positioning themselves in respectable industries to defend the rights of minority groups—or, for that matter, into authors who wrote in Yiddish rather than English and represented sexuality graphically in that language. In one chapter of his admirable *Eros and the Jews*, David Biale sensibly emphasizes the "tensions, contradictions, and conflicts" in American Jewish attitudes toward sexuality. But Biale's suggestion that these multiple forces can be understood as "all dedicated to a common struggle: to harmonize the Jewish experience with American culture and thus to negotiate the integration of Jews in American society," likewise applies only partially.⁵⁰

To posit a desire for harmony at the center of American Jewish engagements with

⁴⁸ Irving Howe with the assistance of Kenneth Libo, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1976), 558.

⁴⁹ Gertzman, 312n19, 46.

⁵⁰ David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 205.

obscenity does not adequately account for the vehemence with which some Jews battled against the government's regulation of expression as part of their fight to bring the revolution to America, as in the case of Emma Goldman, or to repudiate American values.⁵¹

To assert that Howe, Gertzman, and Biale's books do not comprehensively address the roles of Jews in the obscenity debates in America is not to devalue these important studies, since none of them set out to do so.⁵² While appreciating the work of these scholars, and acknowledging the degree of stylization that is often unavoidable in cultural analysis, I argue that is impossible to discover and unproductive to propose or conjecture any essential consistency in the lives, behaviors, or ideologies of all Jews who

⁵¹ The case of David Gordan (a.k.a. Gordon), briefly mentioned by Gertzman (115), furnishes a stunning example of how vehement this rejection of America could be. Gordan published a poem, "America," in the "New Magazine" section of *The Daily Worker* (March 12, 1927), 2, while still a student at DeWitt Clinton High School. The poem pulls no punches in its rejection of American values: "America is a land of censored opportunity / Lick spit; eat dirt. / There's your opportunity ... Hell, / America, / You can't be liked, spreading hot-air stink. / You're everything, aren't you, America? / Of course. / You're even a neat whore house ... A fleshy woman / To make you feel you're giving away your life water / For a healthy bastard." Gordan was charged with publishing an obscene poem under the Comstock Act. According to the *New York Times*, the police "denied that the economic views of the editors had anything to do with the case," insisting that this was purely a case of literary obscenity. Gordon received a sentence of 13 months in the New York City Reformatory. One of the judges pointed out that Gordan's original name was "Goronefsky," and another remarked that "it is too bad we cannot sentence you to Russia," where the young poet was born. While an appeal was pending, Gordan received a scholarship to the University of Wisconsin. He spent a year in Madison, but had to leave the school in April of 1928 to serve out his sentence. A campus protest followed, and Gordan was released after 35 days in jail, though the Parole Board emphasized that its decision did not contradict the original verdict, affirming again Gordan's guilt in "writing a very bad and vulgar piece of poetry" and threatening harsh consequences if he wrote any more obscene poems. See "Poem in Red Paper Is Called Indecent," *New York Times* (April 1, 1927), 13; "Red Poet Gets 13 Months," *New York Times* (June 11, 1927), 34; "Young Poet Freed By Parole Board," *New York Times* (May 11, 1928), 21.

⁵² A more troublesome case is John Murray Cuddihy's *The Ordeal of Civility* (New York: Basic Books, 1974) a fascinating and influential but deeply problematic book. Cuddihy suggests, for one example, that the clash between Abbie Hoffman and Judge Julius Hoffman can be reduced to a confrontation between "the socially unassimilated Eastern European Jew versus the assimilated German Jew who 'passes' among the *goyim*" (191). What then of the many highly educated and respected Jews (sometimes of German descent), like Lew Rosen or Arthur Garfield Hays, who had abjured censorship and embraced obscenity just as forcefully as Abbie Hoffman or any other of their coreligionists? For a critique of Cuddihy and his sources, see Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 39-51.

made crucial contributions to obscenity debates in the 20th century. Yet I propose that this Jewish diversity does not render a consideration of Jewishness irrelevant to the history of obscenity, as previous histories have silently implied. No one motivation or quirk of culture can sensibly account for figures as richly diverse and contradictory as Adele Seltzer, Samuel Roth, Harry Kahan, Harriet Pilpel, Maurice Girodias, Belle Barth, Paul Goodman, Gershon Legman, Abe Fortas, Ruth Westheimer, and Annie Sprinkle, but considering them as Jews does often offer insights into their interventions.

III. Hierarchy, Censorship, and Modesty

An anti-essentialist approach to the question of Jews and obscenity makes sense because of the one relatively static feature of Jewish culture in the U.S. throughout the 20th century: an absence of consistent and centralized Jewish authority. In *The Temple of Culture*, Jonathan Freedman remarks, parenthetically, of the Jews who revolutionized American publishing early in the 20th century, that "if there is a common denominator among these figures, linking Horace Liveright, [Emanuel] Haldeman-Julius, Bennett Cerf, and later Jewish publishers like Barney Rosset of Grove Press, it would be a strong antipathy to censorship and a questioning of authority over the dispersion of words, which has been a strong impulse in Jewish culture from the Haskalah forward."⁵³ Bearing out this striking insight, Freedman's study demonstrates one particular set of motivations that encouraged Jews' employment and defense of obscenity in America, a point that I

⁵³ Jonathan Freedman, *The Temple of Culture: Assimilation and Anti-Semitism in Literary Anglo-America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 175.

will discuss in greater detail below, when I analyze four particular motivations that drew American Jews to engagements in obscenity disputes. First, though, the following section proposes an explanation for the "antipathy to censorship" that Freedman observes in Jewish culture. It would not be reasonable to argue that the attitude toward censorship of a figure like Cerf, for one example, stemmed in any concrete sense from knowledge of, attention to, or loyalty to the values of the Haskala. If not, then why and how did this "antipathy to censorship" arise in so many, very different, American Jews?

To answer this question, it is necessary to propose a definition for "censorship," and to explore briefly the relationship of that key concept to the hierarchical organization of institutional and communal authorities. For, simple and familiar as it seems, censorship has been so widely discussed in literary and cultural theory that it has become powerfully overdetermined and generalized to the point of confusion.

It is provocative to understand censorship, as Freud does, as a process that operates within an individual psyche, or, as Bourdieu does, as an effect of the forces that structure social, economic, and linguistic institutions and behaviors.⁵⁴ Yet to the extent that censorship has come in cultural theory to refer to any curbing of behavior by internal or external forces—as it begins to do in Freud and Bourdieu, and certainly does in much of the scholarship that elaborates upon their approaches to the subject—the concept of censorship blurs and loses its specific usefulness for literary historians. Is it censorship when you walk into a bookstore, browse a number of titles, and choose to buy and read only one of them? Yes, in the Freudian and Bourdieuan senses, this certainly constitutes

⁵⁴ On Freud's use of the analogy of censorship in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, see Michael G. Levine, "Censorship's Self-Administration," *Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Thought* 9 (1986): 605-40. Pierre Bourdieu, "Censorship and the Imposition of Form," *Language and Symbolic Power*, eds., Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson, trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 137-59.

ensorship, and likewise censorship occurs every time an editor at a publishing house chooses to publish one manuscript and not another, or when that editor corrects the spelling of a word in a manuscript before publication. As Stanley Fish has insightfully noted, in an essay informed both by deconstructionist theory and by the American political correctness debates of the 1990s, censorship operates every time anyone speaks, as a person always chooses to utter specific words and not others.⁵⁵

Yet, useful as it may be for theorists and cultural critics to employ the term "censorship" to interrogate the intertwined operations of discourse and power in these broad and resonant senses, it seems worthwhile to retain in selected contexts the distinctions that such work purposefully obscures.⁵⁶ While Foucault's "repressive hypothesis" subsumes censorship as only one of the "negative elements" that are only "component parts" in the discourse of sexuality he analyzes,⁵⁷ this should not prevent us from attending to the history of censorship itself. While censorship of a sort may operate every time a person speaks or buys a book, it remains worthwhile, in other words, to distinguish between those subtle forms of censorship and others that, for example, result

⁵⁵ Fish, "There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It's a Good Thing, Too," *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It's a Good Thing, Too* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 102-19. Fish proposes that "restriction, in the form of an underlying articulation of the world that necessarily (if silently) negates alternatively possible articulations, is constitutive of expression. Without restriction, without an inbuilt sense of what it would be meaningless to say or wrong to say, there could be no assertion and no reason for asserting it" (103).

⁵⁶ For an articulate and thoughtful defense of "a different, much more encompassing definition of censorship" that develops the insights of Freud, Foucault, and Bourdieu, among others, see Richard Burt, *Licensed by Authority: Ben Jonson and the Discourses of Censorship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), especially the "Preface" (ix-xv). Other important entries in this tradition include Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), which owes a debt to Burt (see 178n3), as well as a work by Butler's student Florence Dore, *The Novel and the Obscene* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), in which Dore argues that censorship was "reproduce[d]" and "render[ed] ... symbolic at the very moment of its legal demise" (2).

⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, Volume 1: An Introduction (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 12.

in the brutal murder of poets or the locking of novelists in prisons for years along with thieves and murderers—or, more prosaically, the mass burning of books.

Bourdieu himself suggests caution in this regard: "The metaphor of censorship should not mislead," he writes, emphasizing that it is only a metaphor to say, as he does, that censorship "is the structure of the field itself which governs expression by governing both access to expression and the form of expression." He makes clear that he distinguishes his own metaphorical use of the term from a more literal understanding of censorship as "some legal proceeding which has been specially adapted to designate and repress the transgression of a kind of linguistic code."⁵⁸ Again, the figurative censorship identified by Bourdieu matters, but it should not obscure the importance of literal censorship, that is, the formal, legal, and institutional enactment of censorship. This dissertation, and this chapter in particular, concerns itself much more with the latter, more literal, censorship, established through a formal proceeding and enforced by a central authority over a dispersed population as per the etymological source of the term "censor" as a government office in ancient Rome. For the censorships that Freud and Bourdieu describe are inevitable: one cannot imagine a functioning society without Freudian psychological censorship, nor one without a system of relations that conditions speech and behavior in Bourdieu's sense. As Fish demonstrates, a world without censorship, in these wider senses, would be a world in which utterances are made at random, yielding no meaning. "Some form of speech is always being restricted, else there could be no meaningful assertion," as he phrases it.⁵⁹ Yet, on the contrary, one can easily imagine—and hope to create and inhabit—communities that avoid or minimize censorship in the

⁵⁸ Bourdieu, "Censorship," 138.

⁵⁹ Fish, "There's No Such Thing," 111.

narrower, more specific, sense of the term. The difference, for literature and culture, between a community in which this narrow and literal form of censorship controls the production and dissemination of literature and culture, in addition to the inevitable, more subtle, psychological or structural forms of censorship, and a community in which the only battles of censorship to be fought are the ones against structural and psychological censorships is deeply significant. Just ask any publisher who has spent a few months in jail, or any writer whose books have been burned.

If there is an "antipathy to censorship" in Jewish culture, it is an opposition to censorship in this formal, institutional sense. This narrower type of censorship is dependent for its existence on the hierarchical organization of a society, and particularly on the ability of a central power—a government, a religious group, a professional association—to exert authority over the channels and technologies of literary communication. To ban a book, an authority must assert its influence over at least one node in the "communications circuit" that Robert Darnton has influentially described as characterizing the system of literary production.⁶⁰ American courts, for example, could wind up playing the role of book censors because of the enforcement of their pronouncements by customs agents, postal service employees, and police officers. The Catholic Church could censor books and films in America with considerably less, but still significant efficacy, because of the hierarchical organization of Catholic religious authorities in the U.S.⁶¹ While neither the American courts nor the Catholic religious

⁶⁰ Robert Darnton, "What is the History of Books?" in *Books and Society in History*, ed. Kenneth E. Carpenter (New York: Bowker, 1983), 3-26.

⁶¹ On the Catholic Church and its attempts, occasionally but not always successful, to enforce censorships on the U.S. film industry, see Frank Walsh, *Sin and Censorship: The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) and Gergory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

hierarchy ever established complete control over the populations under their authority, the vigor of the censorships they managed to impose can be understood as directly proportional to, or symptomatic of, the strength of their hierarchies.

In stark contrast to the organizational structure of the Catholic Church and the American legal system, centralized Jewish authorities have rarely established much control over the lives of individual Jews. Raphael Patai asserts this emphatically:

Judaism has never developed a monolithic structure which could superimpose its authority upon all Jewish communities in the many lands of their diaspora. ... Jewish doctrine and practice, although derived from one ultimate source, the Bible, differed from place to place, because, lacking a coordinating and sanctifying central authority, their precise formulation was left to local religious leadership.⁶²

Patai may overstate the case somewhat in his effort to correct the view, commonly accepted in traditional Jewish circles, of Judaism as a monolithic and unified culture. Recently, David Biale has nuanced Patai's line of argument, describing "a dialectic between, on the one hand, the *idea* of one Jewish people and of a unified Jewish culture, and, on the other, the history of multiple communities and cultures." Biale asserts that "on both the elite and popular levels ... the Jewish people were, at once, one *and* diverse."⁶³ There have been cases throughout Jewish history when the aspiration toward unity and centralization of authority has been powerful, though it has not resulted in an extension of hierarchical authority on the same scale as the Catholic church.⁶⁴

⁶² Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 3rd edition (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 26.

⁶³ David Biale, *Cultures of the Jews* (New York: Schocken, 2002), xxiii-xxv.

⁶⁴ Haym Soloveitchik, for one example, has described "a dramatic centralization of a previously diffused authority" in Orthodox Judaism after WWII; see "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy," *Tradition* 28 (1994), 97. Another interesting comparison case is that of the

Modern America serves as the paradigmatic example of Jewish heterodoxy and a lateral, anti-hierarchical structure of Jewish communities. Jonathan Sarna's *American Judaism*, a recent overview of American Jewish history, returns again and again to this quality of American Jewish life. Even in the 17th and 18th centuries, when the relatively hierarchical "synagogue-community" model dominated American Jewish society, Sarna describes "the determined congregationalism of American Jews and their reluctance to cede authority to any single congregation," and notes that "Jews in the new nation resisted the hierarchic model of organization that characterized" local Anglican and Presbyterian communities.⁶⁵ As early as 1791, a Jewish immigrant wrote to her parents in Hamburg that "there is no rabbi in all of America to excommunicate anyone" (45). This feature of Jewish communal organization, Sarna explains, developed in parallel to the latitudinarianism that characterized American religious life more generally. Contrary to "the Western European pattern where church and synagogue hierarchies persisted ... in free and democratic America, congregational autonomy largely became the rule" (59). Even as latitudinarianism typified American Christian churches, though, Jewish communities were particularly prone to this form of organization; the debate about slavery within the American Jewish community, Sarna argues, reveals "the difference between Judaism and hierarchically organized Christian denominations," and notes that "the Jewish community did not speak with a single voice" (112). By the late 19th century, "latitudinarianism reigned supreme in Jewish immigrant circles," and as "courts, for the

Amsterdam Jewish community in the 17th century, which exerted authority—to some degree, at least—not only over Dutch Jews, but also over communities throughout the far-flung Sephardic diaspora. See Yosef Kaplan, "The Social Function of the 'Herem' in the Portugese Jewish Community in Amsterdam in the 17th Century," *Dutch Jewish History* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1984): 111-55. I'd like to thank Hilit Surowitz for pointing me to this source.

⁶⁵ Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 39. Further references to this work, in this paragraph, will be cited parenthetically.

most part, refused to intervene in internal synagogue affairs," American Jewish life continued to manifest an extraordinary latitudinarianism in contrast to "the hierarchic British model of Judaism" (161, 242, 239). Summarizing and synthesizing these observations, Sarna insists that a defining feature of American Jewish life has been that "no ultimate authority in American Judaism—no rabbi, no court, no lay body—makes religious decisions that are ever broadly accepted as final" (368).

The degree of hierarchical community organization, on the one hand, or latitudinarianism, on the other, determines the amount of censorship that can be imposed by a particular communal authority.⁶⁶ Thus American Jewish communities have provided particularly poor support for censorship. In an admirable study, *Censorship and Freedom of Expression in Jewish History*, Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger argues a similar point with reference to Jewish communities in early modern Europe: "There was no single supreme authority whose decisions were accepted by all Jews everywhere in matters of internal censorship," he observes. "If a rabbi in a certain country was moved to ban or forbid the reading of a book, even if he succeeded in persuading other rabbis to join him in this stand, his ban did not automatically apply everywhere."⁶⁷ In fact, as Carmilly-Weinberger demonstrates, the *Shulkhan Arukh* [*Set Table*]—the textual codification of Jewish law produced by Joseph Caro in the 16th century, which has become by far the most

⁶⁶ Horace Kallen noted insightfully that for censorship to be effective, it needs to be unified. "The conflict of the censors is the liberation of the censored," he remarked in a 1928 address at the Fourth Annual Motion Picture Conference. "The impact of diverse authoritative standards upon each other takes the attention of their several beneficiaries and champions from the private citizen and leaves his spirit free." Reprinted in Kallen, *Indecency and the Seven Arts and Other Adventures of a Pragmatist in Aesthetics* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1930), 25. This seems to be a special case of Paul DiMaggio's important observation that "artists are likely to be most productive and creative if they are collectively subject to a variety of constraints rather than just one." DiMaggio, "Social Structure, Institutions, and Cultural Goods: The Case of the United States," in *Social Theory for a Changing Society*, eds. Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman (Boulder and New York: Westview Press and Russell Sage Foundation, 1991), 58.

⁶⁷ Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger, *Censorship and Freedom of Expression in Jewish History* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, Inc. with Yeshiva University Press, 1977), 5.

authoritative guide to *halakha*, or the traditional regulations governing Jewish life⁶⁸— specifies a single book that is "forbidden for reading on the Sabbath day" and "even on weekdays" because it is filled with "erotic remarks." Yet even this unmistakable attempt to impose textual censorship did not prevent that scandalous book, Immanuel of Rome's *Makhbarot* [*Cantos*] (1491), from being permitted and even recommended by some rabbis, including Rabbi Joseph Delmedigo (1591-1655). "If one rabbi felt free to express a view opposing that contained in the *Shulhan Arukh* itself," Carmilly-Weinberger argues, "that is a clear indication of the degree to which freedom of speech was practiced by the Jews"⁶⁹—or, more precisely, how inimical the organizational structures of Jewish communities have been to censorship.

This does not mean, of course, that traditional Jewish culture has never imposed limits on acceptable speech. On the contrary, a rich *halakhic* tradition prohibits *l'shon hara* [evil speech], including categories such as *rekhilut* [gossip] and *nibul peh* [obscenity]. In *B. Shabbos* 33a, in words ascribed to R. Hanan b. Rabbah, the Talmud insists that although everyone knows why "a bride enters the bridal canopy," it is a punishable offense to speak "obscenely" about what follows. Thus the central text of normative Judaism forbids quite clearly an explicit representation of sex and favors euphemism. An affirmation of this stance appears also in Maimonides's *Moreh nevukhim*

⁶⁸ The *Shulkhan Arukh* was itself bowdlerized by early modern Catholic censors, not only in its representation of non-Jews but also, in one example, in its discussion of sex. See Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, *The Censor, the Editor, and the Text: The Catholic Church and the Shaping of the Jewish Canon in the Sixteenth Century*, trans. Jackie Feldman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 162.

⁶⁹ Carmilly-Weinberger, *Censorship and Freedom of Expression*, 5.

[*Guide of the Perplexed*], one of the most influential Jewish texts of the medieval period.⁷⁰ Later rabbinic texts have also decried obscene speech as sinful.⁷¹

In America, too, Jewish institutions have imposed limits on speech. Sarna has pointed out, for one example, that in the 1940s, the editors of the Jewish Publication Society of America were so sensitive about offending their readers' delicate sensibilities that they asked the Canadian poet A. M. Klein to remove the phrase "nine months" from one of his poems, perceiving that as an overly explicit reference to pregnancy. Klein stood his ground, but similar cuts had been made in both the Reform and Reconstructionist Passover haggadot.⁷² More famously, the American Union of Orthodox Rabbis excommunicated Mordecai Kaplan and gathered to burn copies of the Reconstructionist *Sabbath Prayer Book* in 1945.⁷³ Still, rabbis rarely have had the power to enforce pronouncements about proper speech on wide populations or on publications outside their personal control. In the U.S., rabbinic authority was weak at best, and with very few exceptions, no Jew's ability to publish could be decisively restricted by a Jewish authority. Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis could not control the dissemination of

⁷⁰ See *Moreh nevuchim* 3:8. "You know how we condemn lowness of speech, and justly so, for speech is likewise peculiar to man and a boon which God granted him that he may be distinguished from the rest of living creatures. . . . This gift, therefore, which God gave us in order to enable us to perfect ourselves, to learn and to teach, must not be employed in doing that which is for us most degrading and perfectly disgraceful; we must not imitate the songs and tales of ignorant and lascivious people." *The Guide of the Perplexed of Maimonides*, vol. 3, trans. Michael Friedlander (London: Trubner and Co., 1885), 29.

⁷¹ See, e.g., Elias A. Artom and Humbertus M. D. Cassuto, *Takanot Kandia v'Zikhronoteyha* (Jerusalem: Mekitse nirdamim, 1943), 128-29.

⁷² Jonathan Sarna, "In Search of Authentic Anglo-Jewish Poetry: The Debate over A. M. Klein's *Poems* (1944)," in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox* 4 (1989): 133. For the bowdlerized haggadot, see Mordecai Kaplan et al., *The New Haggadah for the Pesah Seder* (New York: Behrman House, 1944), and *The Union Haggadah* (Cincinnati: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1908).

⁷³ "Orthodox Rabbis 'Excommunicate' Author Of Prayer Book Though He Is Not a Member," *New York Times* (June 15, 1945), 11.

haggadot with the phrase "nine months" in them any more than the Union of Orthodox Rabbis could compel "all Jewry," as they hoped to do, to shun Kaplan and Reconstructionist Judaism. Even to the extent that some such censorships have been imaginable, they reinforce the general principle: only because of the hierarchical organization of contemporary *haredi* [ultra-Orthodox] communities, which concentrate religious and communal authority in the hands of few major rabbis, for example, have their attempts to ban books raised concerns.⁷⁴

For the most part, diasporic Jewish communal leaders, as a consequence of their powerlessness to impose censorship, have emphasized the value of modesty (*tsnius* in Yiddish or *tsniyut* in Hebrew). This practice shifts the burden of enforcement from a central authority—that is, the imposition of censorship in the formal or governmental sense—to the conscience of the individual (that is, censorship in the Freudian or Bourdieuan senses). "Modesty" can, of course, become a euphemism for brutal impositions of censorship, as has happened to some degree in contemporary Israel with the advent of *haredi* "modesty patrols" who roam the streets imposing their beliefs about acceptable norms of behavior through violence and intimidation.⁷⁵ At least in the United States, though, Jewish calls for "modesty" have implicitly acknowledged community leaders' inability to impose their preferred standards formally on the population. A group of recent tracts advocating modesty, written by Orthodox Jews in America and England—by Manis Friedman, Wendy Shalit, and, to a somewhat lesser degree, Ruth Westheimer and Shmueli Boteach—never go so far as to suggest, or wish, that modesty

⁷⁴ On a recent example of book banning in the contemporary *haredi* world, see, e.g., "Orthodox Rabbis Launch Book Ban," *The Forward* (January 21, 2005) and Alex Mindlin, "Religion and Natural History Clash Among the Ultra-Orthodox," *New York Times* (March 22, 2005).

⁷⁵ "Jewish 'Modesty Patrols' Sow Fear in Israel," *Associated Press* (October 6, 2008).

be imposed on Jews by U.S. courts or other government agencies.⁷⁶ These authors expound upon the benefits of modesty, conceived according to their lights; and indeed, for modesty to be construed as a personal virtue, its practice cannot be imposed by the police. These modesty advocates do not tend to appreciate that the difference between their "traditional" calls for modesty and other "revolutionary" ones inheres entirely in the definition of the term and one's beliefs about whence the principles of modesty should derive. A more detailed discussion of such calls for modesty would benefit from attention to Freud, Bourdieu, Foucault, and other theorists who have attended to the repressive and constructive operations of culture. In terms of the current discussion, these calls for modesty simply emphasize the diversity of attitudes toward obscenity in the American Jewish community, and the absence of any one view imposed on all Jews by a central religious, judicial, or communal authority.

The latitudinarianism and anti-hierarchical structure of Jewish culture, and particularly of American Jewish culture, did not in itself impel individuals toward any particular course of action or principles on the question of obscenity. As much as it may have allowed some American Jews and Jewish institutions to use and to defend obscenity, it equally allowed others to agitate against obscenity and in favor of censorship. Prior to WWII, for example, Reform rabbis regularly joined and supported

⁷⁶ In *Why Doesn't Anyone Blush Anymore?: Reclaiming Intimacy, Modesty, and Sexuality* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), Friedman proclaims, "For immorality, there is a moral answer: Modesty. Modesty is the only answer" (95)—and not, say, the law. Boteach argues that "without modesty there can be no intimacy" (52) in *Kosher Sex: A Recipe for Passion and Intimacy* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), while Westheimer notes, seeming to approve of the sentiment, that "there is a sense among many who live traditional Jewish lives that just as a corral is built to keep in the cattle, a fence of physical and verbal modesty must be built as well, to corral our coarser selves" (51). See also Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

local and national anti-vice organizations.⁷⁷ Individual American Jews who have intervened on the side of the censorship of sexual expression include Harry Kahan, a member of the Committee of Fourteen and operative for the NYSSV; Andrea Dworkin, who with Catharine MacKinnon famously campaigned against pornography in the 1980s and 1990s; Judith Reisman, who has described Kinsey as a pervert, testified in favor of censorship, and decried homosexuality; and Irving Kristol, who articulated the neoconservative case for censorship of pornography in 1971.⁷⁸ As much as other Jews might contest the arguments of these figures, no one could sensibly claim that in holding such views, these men and women vitiate their Jewishness or contradict Jewish theology or legal practice. Moreover, in no way did being Jewish mean that any American was less subject to American law, which for much of the 20th century roundly proscribed the

⁷⁷ In a 1918 Rosh Hashana sermon, a Louisiana rabbi, Maximilian Heller, fulminated: "In the name of Judaism ... I deem it my duty to denounce this irreligion of a pleasure-mad generation; it is not only pleasure and pastime and unwholesome excitement which must not figure as serious ends of life; but even to be happy and to make others happy, be that achievement ever so desirable, even this is not the end and aim of human existence" (4). See "The Religion of Having a Good Time," a sermon in the collection of the American Jewish Historical Society. In her study of obscenity activism, *Prurient Interests: Gender, Democracy, and Obscenity in New York City, 1909-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), Andrea Friedman argues quite convincingly that "Rabbis entered into anti-obscenity activism in the attempt to counter Christians' perceptions of Jews as a different, alien, and more primitive people, by demonstrating that they shared the 'Christian' morals of their Protestant and Catholic brethren and by trying to control the behavior of other Jews" (141). Felicia Herman dramatizes and elaborates upon Friedman's point in the context of film industry reform in "American Jews and the Effort to Reform Motion Pictures, 1933-1935," *The American Jewish Archives Journal* 53:1-2 (2001): 11-44. See also Leigh Ann Wheeler, *Against Obscenity: Reform and the Politics of Womanhood in America, 1873-1935* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 170-71.

⁷⁸ Cases in which Kahan testified include *Doubleday v. New York* (1948) and *Winters v. New York* (1948); for some of his earlier activities as an anti-vice crusader, see Thomas C. Mackey, *Pursuing Johns: Criminal Law Reform, Defending Character, and New York City's Committee of Fourteen, 1920-1930* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), 48-49; Burton William Peretti, *Nightclub City: Politics and Amusement in Manhattan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 32, 40-44; Rachel Shteir, *Striptease: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 102. On Andrea Dworkin, see Andrew Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Putnam, 1981), and Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, *Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day for Women's Equality* (Minneapolis: Organizing Against Pornography, 1988). On Reisman's activities, see Isabel Wilkerson, "Witness in Obscenity Trial Calls Explicit Photographs 'Destructive,'" *New York Times* (October 5, 1990) and Dagmar Herzog, *Sex in Crisis: The New Sexual Revolution and the Future of American Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 20, 70-71. For Kristol, see Irving Kristol, "Pornography, Obscenity, and the Case for Censorship," *New York Times Magazine* (March 28, 1971), 24.

representation of sex. Yet, unlike the Americans from Catholic backgrounds who made brave and crucial contributions to the repeal of obscenity strictures, like Margaret Sanger and William Brennan, the American Jews involved in obscenity disputes never had to suffer the indignities of excommunication by their religious leaders or peers, nor did rabbis or Jewish leaders usually wield much influence over publishing or publicity.⁷⁹ This, I suggest, helps to explain why some Jews responded with such alacrity to the factors that have tended to motivate people in America to use and defend obscenity.

IV. The Universal Stakes of Obscenity

Fewer restraints on engagements with obscenity are one thing; having a motivation for such engagement is quite another. To understand the different ways in which the use and defense of obscenity could be meaningful to American Jews, particularly as Jews, we must acknowledge that some motivations for doing so were universal and not, in any meaningful way, Jewish. Among the most common and most

⁷⁹ The case of Philip Roth might seem to contradict my claim here, but I would argue that Roth's experiences epitomize the powerlessness of American rabbis. Roth has described, at length, the angry letters he received in 1959 from rabbis and Jewish community professionals in response to his stories "Defender of the Faith" and "Esptein." See Philip Roth, "Writing About Jews," *Commentary* 36:6 (December 1963), 446-52, and "Letters from Readers," *Commentary* 37:4 (April 1964): 6-19. Roth's responses suggest how very little authority these rabbis possessed. In "Writing About Jews," for example, he notes that Rabbi Emmanuel Rackman, one of the letter writers, sees himself in "competition" with authors, and Roth ends the piece suggesting that "the novelists" are winning (452). Roth went on to use these attacks by prominent Jews as fuel for his essays and fiction, of course, but in doing so he has also tended to downplay the vast number of supportive letters he received from rabbis and communal leaders as well as individual Jewish and non-Jewish readers. Most striking, though, on this point, is the first, unpublished response Roth sent to Rabbi Rackman on April 30, 1959, before *Goodbye, Columbus* was published, and certainly before the 26-year-old Roth won any of the awards that established him as a literary authority. The young author concludes his indignant letter by asserting, "It was presumptuous of you, Rabbi Rackman, to speak of yourself to me as 'a leader of his people.' You are not my leader, and I can only thank God for it." Philip Roth Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Box 101. It would seem much more difficult for a Catholic to deny a Bishop's right to call himself "a leader of his people."

personal reasons that Americans of any background have engaged with obscenity, for example, were to make money or to be offensive purely for the sake of being offensive.

Obscenity charges generate enormous attention for works of literature and art, often leading to phenomenal sales.⁸⁰ Though this is by no means a modern phenomenon—Tacitus remarked as early as the second century CE that "banned writings are eagerly sought and read"⁸¹—the classic but apocryphal American anecdote on this theme concerns a publicist, Harry Reichenbach, and lithographs of Paul Chabas' painting "September Morn." As Reichenbach told it, the story goes that an art dealer in New York had imported thousands of these lithographs and had not been able to sell them. Reichenbach claims that he cannily posted the print in the shop window, hired a group of young children to stand outside and ogle it, and then anonymously informed Anthony Comstock of the situation. Comstock arrested the dealer, newspapers reported on the event, and the print sold like hotcakes forever after. Reichenbach's story isn't quite true—the painting's obscenity was adjudicated in Chicago before it aroused controversy in New York, and while Comstock complained about it, he never took any action⁸²—but it is clear that such tactics have worked in other instances. Esar Levine, an American dealer in mail order erotica, exploited such marketing strategies for his publications. In a 1930 letter, he suggested to the wife of a cash-strapped author, "Have a French printer set up

⁸⁰ For examples, see Kendrick, 99, 114, and 161.

⁸¹ Quoted in Keith Allen and Kate Burridge, "Taboos and their Origins," *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 23.

⁸² For Reichenbach's version see his *Phantom Fame: The Anatomy of Ballyhoo* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), 103-04. For the real controversy over the painting, in Chicago—and not in New York, where Reichenbach claims to have participated—see "When is Art Art? When Wicked?" *Chicago Daily Tribune* (March 14, 1913), 3; "September Morn Pits Her Beauty Against Censors," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (March 21, 1913), 1. Comstock did complain about the painting, but he did not attempt to arrest the art dealer; see "Comstock Dooms September Morning," *New York Times* (May 11, 1913), 1, and "Wearies of Waiting a Comstock Arrest," *New York Times* (May 15, 1913), 7.

the ... volume of short stories. Have it 'privately printed' by the author. ... If you do this, the public will buy hundreds of copies. ... You have no idea ... what a magic effect 'privately printed' on the title page of a book of snappy stories would have!"⁸³

Some American Jews, having been excluded from mainstream industries and denied economic opportunities through quotas and anti-Semitic hiring practices, found the remarkable selling power of obscenity attractive, but there have always been plenty of Americans from other ethnic and religious backgrounds, like Larry Flynt and Gerard Damiano, for whom obscenity has held exactly the same promise.⁸⁴ In the memoirs, histories, and reports of Jews who produced and defended obscenity in the United States, I have not been able to discover anything that makes their interest in these fields as financially rewarding meaningful or distinctive for them as Jews.⁸⁵

Similarly, some Jews have embraced obscenity as a means for venting their personal rage, for expressing anger about their lives that does not seem to have any particular stakes or resonances for them as American Jews. Anti-social anger is by no means uniquely Jewish, even if its literary expression can be construed as embracing rhetorical techniques discernible in various Jewish textual traditions, from the Biblical

⁸³ Quoted in Gertzman, 66.

⁸⁴ On Flynt, see Larry Flynt with Kenneth Ross, *An Unseemly Man: My Life as Pornographer, Pundit, and Social Outcast* (Los Angeles: Dove Books, 1996); for Damiano, see Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato's documentary, *Inside Deep Throat* (Universal City: Universal Studios, 2005).

⁸⁵ See Gertzman, 289. Eric Schlosser's useful if breezy account of Reuben Sturman's activities in the pornography industry emphasizes this point; Sturman was Jewish and perhaps the most successful distributor of pornography in America for a decade or so, but his approach to his work does not seem to have been any different than those of Michael Thevis, Robert DiBernardo, Harry Virgil Mohny, and other non-Jewish pornography distributors. See Schlosser, "An Empire of the Obscene," *Reefer Madness: Sex, Drugs, and Cheap Labor in the American Black Market* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 109-210.

prophets to modern Yiddish poetry.⁸⁶ Moreover, what distinguishes obscenity in this mode is its frank and self-conscious uselessness: generally, an embrace of obscenity as transgression for its own sake, for the simple pleasure of catharsis and violence, implicitly acknowledges its own lack of instrumentality. The shouting of a four-letter word in a moment of sudden pain or loss does not, as far as I have been able to tell, mean anything more or different for American Jews than for any other English speakers.

Al Goldstein, publisher of a pornographic newspaper called *Screw*, furnishes a more elaborate example of obscenity-as-rage. He published the first issue of his tabloid on November 4, 1968, at a point when publishing pornography was no longer a particularly revolutionary or culturally meaningful gesture—indeed, the years between 1966 and 1973 are generally recognized as the most favorable for the producers and publishers of sexually explicit materials in American history—and it is unclear to what degree, if any, *Screw* innovated in specifics of representation, Goldstein's many self-aggrandizing claims notwithstanding.⁸⁷ Goldstein has regularly referred to the money and prestige he earned from his publishing activities, and he has often cited with pride his many trials and arrests, though few of these were for obscenity per se; he has also frequently invoked the language of Judeophobia, as when he describes himself proudly as "a walking caricature of anti-Semitism."⁸⁸ Yet in the tone of Goldstein's editorials and interviews and in later reflections on his work, his signature has not been any of these

⁸⁶ See Janet Hadda, "The Transmission of Poetic Anger: An Unexploded Shell in the Jewish Canon," *Arguing the Modern Jewish Canon: A Festschrift in Honor of Ruth R. Wisse*, eds. Justin Cammy et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 505-15.

⁸⁷ Al Goldstein and Josh Alan Freidman, *I, Goldstein: My Screwed Life* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006). Goldstein claims to have published photos of pubic hair before any other magazine (92), and to have been "responsible for making *Deep Throat* the most profitable movie ever made" (112).

⁸⁸ *I, Goldstein*, 101.

concerns, but an obsession with his own implacable anger. "What motivates me is not love, but hatred," he remarks in his autobiography. "*Screw* was always fueled by anger. Unlike others who reach success, I was not warmed or tempered by it. I remained angry and only got crazier."⁸⁹

Philip Roth captures Goldstein's attitude perfectly, ventriloquizing him, in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983). In a couple of memorable scenes, Roth's protagonist, Nathan Zuckerman, introduces himself to strangers as "the pornographer Milton Appel," impersonating a respected Jewish literary critic who has attacked Zuckerman's fiction and questioned his commitments. Roth does not attempt to disguise that he has based Appel on Irving Howe, who published attacks on Roth's mid-career work, as many scholars have noted.⁹⁰ It is equally transparent, though less remarked upon, that the dialogue Zuckerman-as-Appel spews derives from three days Roth spent observing and interviewing Goldstein.⁹¹ Referring to himself as a "kike-pornographer" and noting that "Jews gravitate to pornography," Zuckerman-as-Appel emphasizes that his aim is not financial, not cultural, and not political. "With me money is not the paramount issue," he insists. "The defiance is. The hatred is. The outrage is."⁹²

One cannot easily distinguish the use of obscenity as personal, apolitical rage from its use as either a political or aesthetic tool. Indeed, dickering over whether value inheres in a particular allegedly obscene text or speech act has often made judges look

⁸⁹ Ibid., 2.

⁹⁰ See, e.g., Edward Alexander, *Irving Howe: Socialist, Critic, Jew* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 165-77.

⁹¹ See *I, Goldstein*, 16.

⁹² Philip Roth, *The Anatomy Lesson*, in *Zuckerman Unbound* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), 600, 590, 597.

ridiculous. An apposite sample case occurred in March 1965 in Berkeley, where the insistence of a few students that "free speech" included obscenity troubled the leaders of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement (FSM). On March 3, John Thompson, an aspiring poet from New York who had been hanging around the campus, decided he was bored. "Nothing was happening in my life worth writing about (or so I thought), and what's a writer without a story to tell?" he has recalled, describing that fateful day. "Well, maybe if I got put in jail overnight, or for a few days, I'd have a story." He wrote the word "FUCK" on a piece of paper and sat on the corner of Bancroft Way and Telegraph Avenue, at the edge of campus. After a few uneventful hours, a local policeman arrested him. That night, having been bailed out by a friend, Thompson attended a party at the house of a graduate student in education named Art Goldberg. Goldberg had been a "high-profile spokesman" for the FSM during the previous semester, and was delighted with what Thompson had done. He organized a rally for March 5 in which students asserted their right to use the word "fuck" as much as they liked. Thomson, Goldberg, and others spoke, as did the professor of English and literary critic Mark Schorer, a frequent witness in obscenity trials and the author of the foreword to the Grove Press edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. One student read from *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Nine arrests followed, and Goldberg was arrested twice on the same day.⁹³

Goldberg's cause was not sympathetic to the majority of the Free Speech Movement's leaders, because the defense of obscene speech did not seem sufficiently worthy an issue to them. As David Goines explains, "most FSM veterans, prudish as dedicated politicians often are, were dismayed" by what came to be dubbed as the Filthy

⁹³ David Lance Goines, *The Free Speech Movement: Coming of Age in the 1960s* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1993), 480-508.

Speech Movement. Mario Savio, a leader of the FSM, recalled, "somehow the issue seemed too abstract to people. People didn't want to associate themselves with the problem of obscenity."⁹⁴ "Most of us thought the whole thing was silly, not political," another member of the movement recalls.⁹⁵ The FSM emphatically distanced itself from Goldberg's rally and from the issue of obscenity in general, releasing a statement the following Monday, March 10, to insist that "only in the recent controversy over 'obscene' words can students be said not to have acted responsibly. The FSM did not initiate or support this controversy."⁹⁶ Finally, Art Goldberg received a sentence of 90 days in jail, and was expelled from the university. Just a few years later, the U.S. Supreme Court declared in its ruling in *Cohen v. California* (1971) that "the State may not . . . make the simple public display here involved of this single four-letter expletive a criminal offense," speaking to the facts of Goldberg's and Thomson's cases almost directly, and seeming to efface the distinction that the FSM leaders and others made between Goldberg's protest, which focused on the word "fuck" in isolation, and a political one, like Cohen's wearing a "Fuck the Draft" jacket in a courthouse. Was Goldberg's gesture apolitical and Cohen's political? On some level, the distinction is moot, as Goines argues, from a rather absolutist perspective, as "all forms of speech become political when they are restricted or forbidden."⁹⁷ For the purposes of this dissertation, though, speech like Goldberg's or Goldstein's—obscenity for thrills or catharsis, divorced from its contexts

⁹⁴ Goines, 490.

⁹⁵ Jo Freeman, *At Berkeley in the Sixties: The Education of an Activist, 1961-1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 235.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Goines, 489.

⁹⁷ Goines, 508. The absolutism of this formulation seems to propose that shouting fire in a crowded theater can be seen as a protest against speech regulation and thus a defensible act.

and consequences—is so universal that, like obscenity motivated purely by profit, it is not of central concern.

Instead, the following sections of this chapter focus on four ways in which obscenity has been meaningful to American Jews *as* Jews. Obscenity could (1) disarm sexual prejudice in dramatizing, through sexological and psychoanalytic discourses, that all human groups share the same basic sexual characteristics; (2) confer cultural capital on its users and defenders as members of an artistic *avant garde*; (3) accompany a fight for birth control and contraception that was especially relevant to the Jewish community in the early 20th century; and (4) form part of a defense of minority rights, and particularly of a legal defense of such rights. None of these motivations for or values of obscenity mattered uniquely to American Jews, nor can they be said to have applied to all Jews in America. Yet they were relevant to significant numbers of American Jews given specific historical or cultural contingencies. These factors did not operate in isolation, either, but often intertwined, in unexpected ways, in the cases of individual artists and cultural agents. Nonetheless, each section below deliberately highlights one particular value of obscenity in order to clarify the stakes of obscenity for Jews in a broader sense.

V. (1) Obscenity and Sexual Anti-Semitism

As noted above, anti-Semitic views of Jewish sexuality circulated widely in Europe and America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. What became known as the "white slavery panic," cresting between 1909 and 1914, for example, consisted of

fear that Jewish pimps sold Jewish and non-Jewish young women into sexual slavery.⁹⁸ As observers have pointed out, such claims were consistent with older notions about Jewish difference, money-lust, and sexual immorality.⁹⁹ An even purer expression of the sexual anti-Semitism of the period was the claim, echoing Tacitus's contention that Jews are "prone to lust," that Jewish men are extraordinarily likely to harbor uncontrolled sexual desires. In the U.S., Timayensis led the hateful charge, as usual, proclaiming in his follow-up to *The Original Mr. Jacobs*, titled *The American Jew* (1888), that, "Next to his lust for money, the strongest passion in the Jew is his licentiousness." He closes his chapter on "The Licentious Jew" suggesting that "such is the insatiability of [the Jew's] carnal appetites, and to such an extent does he give rein to his lasciviousness, that his debauches only too frequently exceed the ordinary limits of lust."¹⁰⁰ In other words, Timayensis implied, Jewish hypersexuality leads to rape and murder. In Timayensis's vision, a stereotypical Jewish economic exploiter, the sweatshop owner, could quickly be

⁹⁸ Before the turn of the century, anti-Semites could already locate evidence, in the work of a medical historian, that "the Hebrew people were one of the agents in propagating syphilis and prostitution in times of antiquity ... Numerous documents, in fact, prove that prostitution enjoyed the greatest liberty among the Israelites, and was not even considered infamous." Quoting from an unidentified source, this writer goes on to remark that "the plague of prostitution always remained attached like leprosy to the Jewish nation." Dr. Edmond Dupouy, "Prostitution in Antiquity," *The Cincinnati Lancet Clinic: A Weekly Journal of Medicine and Surgery* 35 (August 31, 1895), 226. Even earlier, Dr. William Sanger's *History of Prostitution* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1858) asserted that "prostitutes were common among Jews in the eighteenth century before Christ" (35-36) and that "at Babylon, the Jewish maidens, whose large expressive eyes, voluptuous mouth, slender and graceful figure, with well-developed bust and limbs ... peopled the houses of prostitution" (40). See also Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 96-98; Edward Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight Against White Slavery* (New York: Schocken, 1983); and, on the boom of white slavery films that thrilled and terrified audiences, see Shelly Stamp, "Is Any Girl Safe? Motion Pictures, Women's Leisure, and the White Slavery Scare," in *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 41-101. Yiddish writers also responded to the white slavery panic during this period; see, e.g., Sholem Aleichem's short story "The Man from Buenos Aires"—first published in 1909, and available in English in *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*, trans. Hillel Halkin (New York: Schocken Books, 1987)—and Sholem Asch's infamous play, "The God of Vengeance," which is discussed below.

⁹⁹ See, particularly, Jonathan Freedman, *Klezmer America: Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 45-48.

¹⁰⁰ *The American Jew: An Exposé of His Career* (New York: Minerva Publishing Co., 1888), 81, 87.

transformed into a sexual exploiter: "Not long ago," he claimed, "in New York, the officers of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children neatly trapped a Jew employer who was in the habit of inducing little girls under fourteen to remain after work-hours, and debauching them."¹⁰¹ Two decades later, in an infamous case with uncannily similar details, Leo Frank, the superintendent of the National Pencil Factory in Atlanta, Georgia, was accused of the murder of a 13-year-old employee named Mary Phagan. The suggestion that Frank was a sexual deviant, possibly a homosexual, whose lust for young girls led him to murder Phagan, constituted a major tenet of his accusers' case and his unjust conviction, and played a large part in the organization of a mob of Atlanta residents to kidnap and lynch him after he was granted clemency by the governor.

These lamentable events have been discussed by historians of American Jewry in detail.¹⁰² What I would like to emphasize is that such visions of Jews as sexual deviants—as sexual predators and child molesters—appeared not only in the rantings of populist anti-Semitic demagogues, but also in popular and literary fiction written by European and American authors in the same period. H. Rider Haggard's adventure tale *Benita: An African Romance* (1906), for example, features a German Jew, Jacob Meyer, whose "insane passions" for riches and for the heroine drive the novel's plot. Like Svengali, the frightening Jewish antagonist of the wildly popular *Trilby* (1894), Meyer practices a form of mind-control that could gain him access to the body of vulnerable Benita. "In the beginning," she explains fearfully to her father, "Mr. Meyer only wanted the gold. Now he wants more, me as well as the gold. ... I have read a good deal about

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 87.

¹⁰² For histories and analyses of the Frank case, see Leonard Dinnerstein, *The Leo Frank Case* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), and Paul Jeffrey Melnick, *Black-Jewish Relations on Trial: Leo Frank and Jim Conley in the New South* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000).

this mesmerism, and seen it once or twice, and who knows? If once I allowed his mind to master my mind, although I hate him so much, I might become his slave."¹⁰³ Linking such visions of Jewish mind-control to the white slavery panic, Reginald Wright Kauffman's muckraking *House of Bondage* (1910) features a Hungarian Jewish sexual exploiter of an innocent non-Jewish girl. In the novel's first chapter, Max Crossman ("not my real name, because I was born in Hungary and nobody could say my real name over here") lures sixteen-year-old Mary Denbigh away from her parents' small-town home with promises of urban luxury, and sells her as a "slave" to a brothel keeper.¹⁰⁴

In more prestigious literary culture of the period, the same Jewish sexual deviance tended to be subtly represented or simply implied. This was not only a matter of delicacy or subtlety on the part of writers, of course, but also an imposition of anti-vice societies like the NYSSV. Still, many novels featured Jews who, like Haggard's Jacob Meyer and Kauffman's Max Crossman, combine acquisitiveness, vulgarity of one sort or another, and an extraordinary lust for non-Jewish women. Émile Zola's *Nana* (1880), for one very prominent example, features a German Jewish banker, Steiner, whose desire for wealth, and skill for acquiring it, is trumped only by his insatiable sexual lust:

The terrible German Jew, the great hatcher of businesses whose hands founded millions, became quite a fool whenever he had a hankering after a woman; and he wanted them all. One could never appear at a theatre but he secured her, no matter

¹⁰³ H. Rider Haggard, *Benita: An African Romance* (New York: Cassell and Co., 1906), 292, 237. On fears of mesmerism as a means of sexual control, see Daniel Pick, *Svengali's Web: The Alien Enchanter in Modern Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 92-111.

¹⁰⁴ Reginald Wright Kauffman, *House of Bondage* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1910), 20, 68. Hardly a literary masterpiece, Kauffman's novel nonetheless went through 16 printings in just two years, and was translated into French, German, Swedish, Finnish, and Japanese. See Laura Hapke, *Girls Who Went Wrong: Prostitutes in American Fiction, 1885-1917* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1989), 4, 122.

at what price. The most incredible amounts were mentioned. Twice during his life had his furious appetite for the fair sex ruined him.¹⁰⁵

Zola does not particularly distinguish Steiner's "*furieux appétit des filles*" from those of other non-Jewish characters entranced by Nana—and, of course, other portraits of Jews in Zola's fiction, and his reaction to the Dreyfus affair, exculpate him from any claims of simplistic anti-Semitism—but Steiner, as a Jew prone to lust, nevertheless reproduces the common stereotype of Jewish sexual deviance.

Other characters followed suit in naturalist American fiction. Simon Rosedale, the "plump rosy man of the blond Jewish type" in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), for example, conflates economic desires with sexual ones ("if I could get Paul Morpeth to paint [Lily Bart] like that," he is reported to say, "the picture'd appreciate a hundred per cent in ten years"). Of course, Rosedale, unlike Steiner, finally prioritizes his financial and social aspirations over his sexual needs, agreeing with Lily that his "idea of good friends" would be "making love to [her] without asking [her] to marry [him]."¹⁰⁶ While it must be noted that Zola's and Wharton's complex literary characters can be read in multiple ways, and to dismiss Rosedale or Steiner as anti-Semitic caricatures would be a reductive mistake,¹⁰⁷ it is only sensible to acknowledge that these authors traffic in

¹⁰⁵ "Ce terrible juif allemand, ce brasseur d'affaires dont les mains fondaient les millions, devenait imbécile, lorsqu'il se toquait d'une femme; et il les voulait toutes, il n'en pouvait paraître une au théâtre, sans qu'il l'achetât, si chère qu'elle fût. On citait des sommes. A deux reprises, son furieux appétit des filles l'avait ruiné." Though first translated to English in 1890, *Nana* reached many more American readers in a 1922 edition, with a preface by Burton Rascoe, published by Alfred A. Knopf, which is quoted here in a reprint edition (Mineola: Dover Thrift Editions, 2007), 73.

¹⁰⁶ Edith Wharton, *House of Mirth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), 255, 410.

¹⁰⁷ For a thoughtful reading of Rosedale's character, see Meredith Goldsmith, "The Year of the Rose: Jewish Masculinity in *The House of Mirth*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 51:2 (Summer 2005): 374-92.

representations of Jewish lust that share features with the stereotyped characters of Haggard's *Benita*, Kauffman's *House of Bondage*, and even Timayensis's screeds.¹⁰⁸

These stereotypes did not disappear with the ascension of literary modernism, but the works of some celebrated modernist authors defanged the stereotypes with the assertion, underwritten by attention to sexologists including Freud and Havelock Ellis, that sexual deviance is not the particular burden of any single demographic group. Most famously, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, as scholars have often discussed, presents Leopold Bloom's nominal Jewishness with sympathy, if characteristic ambivalence. Joyce's evident identification with Jews throughout his life, and with Bloom as a character, intimate that far from a despised sexual deviant, the masturbating, cuckolded, fantasizing quasi-Jew who is represented explicitly and controversially in the novel represents Joyce's thoughtful portrait of what Judge Woolsey referred to as an "*homme moyen sensuel*"—that is, "a person with average sex instincts"—in his decision on *Ulysses*. As Neil Davidson phrases it, "in Bloom, one of the era's most prevalent stereotypes—the degenerate Jew—has been transformed into the great paradigm of complete

¹⁰⁸ Such stereotypes were not uniquely the province of non-Jewish writers, either, of course. Somewhat later, Ben Hecht's notorious *A Jew in Love* (1931) describes Jo Boshere as a "dark-skinned little Jew" whose sexual attention to his wife resembles "that of a rapist," and whose pursuit of sexual affairs outside his marriage Hecht describes in such a way as to link him to one of the most well-known monsters of late 19th-century literature: "Although he began each of his wooings with passionate, rapist pretenses," Hecht's narrator notes, "his ardor in this direction was no more than a mask for his real purpose which was that of a deeper and more inner seduction, a Dracula-like hunger for the life blood of his victim." Once again, in Hecht's novel the sexually aberrant Jew figures as a lusty monster with supernatural powers of coercion and seduction. Ben Hecht, *A Jew in Love* (New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1931), 3, 10, 17.

characterization."¹⁰⁹ Joyce's election of Bloom as the exemplar of modern sexuality implies that Jews are no more or less lustful, or "degenerate," than anyone else.¹¹⁰

Theodore Dreiser's play, "The Hand of the Potter" (1919), serves as an even starker, and much less well-known, example of how the stereotype was both reproduced and undermined by a leading writer. Composed during WWI, based on sensational newspaper stories and a research trip to Jewish neighborhoods that Dreiser took with Mike Gold as his guide,¹¹¹ this four-act tragedy centers on Isadore Berchansky, a young Jewish man who has returned from two years at the state penitentiary to his parents' apartment at 1727 First Avenue, in East Harlem.¹¹² He had been arrested for "assaultin' a little girl" (21), and his time away has not dampened his unhealthy sexuality: "It's their faces an' their nice make-ups an' the way they do their hair," he says, describing the lure of young women he sees on the street. "That's what's the matter with me. It's their stockin's an' their open shirtwaists an' their shoulders an' arms. I can't stand it no more. I can't seem to think of nothin' else..." (34). Isadore's "uncontrolled and unnatural sex-

¹⁰⁹ Neil Davidson, *James Joyce, Ulysses, and the Construction of Jewish Identity: Culture, Biography, and 'the Jew' in Modernist Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11.

¹¹⁰ The bibliography on Joyce and Jewishness is vast and growing; see also Marilyn Reizbaum, *James Joyce's Judaic Other* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) and Ira Nadel, *Joyce and the Jews: Culture and Texts* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1989).

¹¹¹ Dreiser was apparently inspired by a couple of other sensational cases. One involved Ruth Wheeler, a 15-year-old girl who, in March of 1910, had been lured to an apartment on 75th Street in Manhattan with a promise of employment, then brutally murdered and disfigured by a 20-year-old German immigrant named Albert Wolter. There is no evidence that Wolter was Jewish; if he was, that fact does not seem to have been mentioned in any of the articles about the case. See, for example, "Pander Slayer: Burns Girl in Oil," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (March 27, 1910), 1; "Lost Girl Strangled, Burned Body Hidden," *New York Times* (March 27, 1910), 1. Dreiser relied even more directly on the case of 12-year-old Julia Connors, who was murdered in July 1912 by Nathan Swartz. Swartz confessed his guilt and committed suicide, and many of the details of his story match those in the play. For details on Dreiser's sources, see Keith Newlin and Frederick E. Rusch, eds., *The Collected Plays of Theodore Dreiser* (Albany: Whitston, 2000), xx-xxii. On Gold's trip with Dreiser, see Alan Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 51.

¹¹² Theodore Dreiser, *The Hand of the Potter* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1918). Further citations to this play will be given parenthetically in the text.

interest" (42) so overwhelms him that he makes overtures to his own sister (36). Dreiser's stage directions have him stare at an 11-year-old neighbor in a "a greedy, savage, half-insane way" (49), and these adjectives link Isadore's uncontrollable lusts to the stereotypes of Jewish avariciousness, primitiveness, and mental illness that were common during the *fin de siècle*.¹¹³ The drama's first act ends with Isadore raping and killing the 11-year-old girl, offstage, and the remaining acts detail the police investigation and Isadore's suicide. Combining sexual stereotypes that surfaced during the Leo Frank trial (Jewish perversion leading to rape and murder), and, earlier, during the Jack the Ripper scandals in England (the notion that Jack's poor Jewish peers shielded him from the police),¹¹⁴ and folding these in with conventional trappings of literary representations of Jews in the period, including dialect speech and a reference to a "*mezuze*," "The Hand of the Potter" presents a concise literary embodiment of the sexual anti-Semitism that had been popular in the previous decades.

Yet Dreiser's play does not demonize lustful Jews. On the contrary, the author didactically expounds his theory that sexual perversion can be understood as a medical illness that needs to be studied and treated by doctors, like any other malady. "I've been readin' up on these cases for some time," Quinn, a reporter for *The Sun*, remarks about Isadore's crime,

an' from what I can make out they're no more guilty than any other person with a disease. Did ye know ... that there's something they've called harmones which the body manufactures ... which excites us to the m'aning ave beauty an' thim things ... Now if a felly is so constituted that he has more ave than an' less ave

¹¹³ In addition to Gilman and Mosse, on the "Jew as Savage," see Derek Penslar, *Shylock's Children: Economics and Jewish Identity in Modern Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 38-42.

¹¹⁴ Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, 115-16.

something' else—something' which balances him a little an' makes his less sensitive to the beauty of women or girls—he's likely to be like that. He can't help it. ... If ye'd ever made a study ave the passion ave love in the sense that Freud an' some others have ye'd understand it well enough. It's a great force about which we know naathing as yet an' which we're just beginnin' to look into ... (193, 200)¹¹⁵

Importing into this character's rather ham-handed speech an explicitly Freudian perspective on human sexuality, Dreiser implies that Jews are no more "prone to lust" than anyone else. Ascribing Isadore's lust to hormones, rather than to his environment or culture suggests that his problem is a human one, no more likely to befall a Jewish family than any other—a view expressed in Dreiser's contemporaneous work.¹¹⁶ The play's relatively explicit discussion of abnormal sexuality raised the hackles of some critics, including Mencken, despite Dreiser's careful elision of the most violent and sexual scene. Some reviewers felt that a written or staged play was not the forum for an analysis of sexual abnormality.¹¹⁷ Those objections notwithstanding, Dreiser aimed with *The Hand of the Potter* to present modern sexology on the stage.

One of the relatively few reviewers to appreciate what Dreiser had accomplished when the Provincetown Playhouse briefly staged *The Hand of the Potter* in 1921 was

¹¹⁵ On the addition of these speeches at a late stage in the play's composition, and on Dreiser's sources on hormones and Freud, see Newlin and Rusch, xxix-xxx.

¹¹⁶ Dreiser's *The Bulwark*, not published until 1944 but conceived in 1914, features a non-Jewish young man "cursed with an overwhelming hunger for physical sex gratification," demonstrating that Dreiser did not ascribe this characteristic particularly to Jews. See Newlin and Rusch, xxiv. Similarly, Dreiser's *The Financier*, written not long before *The Hand of the Potter*, features "Judge Rafalsky, a meditative and yet practical man of Jewish extraction but peculiarly American appearance" whose somewhat unconventional sexual behavior mirrors that of the book's solidly American protagonist, Frank Cowperwood. Cowperwood's extramarital affair becomes an element in his trial for "semi-legitimate financial subtlety" and in this context, Dreiser mentions that Rafalsky sympathizes with him because of "a similar event in his own life in so far as a girl was concerned." *The Financier* (New York: Meridian, 1995), 351-54.

¹¹⁷ Capturing a popular sentiment among the play's reviewers, Fanny Butcher remarked, "Ugh! It's a horrible thing. ... Science may deal with perversions of sex, but surely we needn't be asked to watch or read plays about them. If I were a censor I would bar 'The Hand of the Potter' from circulation and turn Mr. Dreiser over to the psychiatric ward." "Tabloid Book Review," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (October 5, 1919), D5. Mencken recommended that Dreiser "put the ms. behind the clock and thank me and God for saving you from a mess." Quoted in De Grazia, 127.

Ludwig Lewisohn, the most prominent Jewish writer in interwar America.¹¹⁸ That Lewisohn appreciated this controversial play accords perfectly with his own views of sexuality. Even more directly and emphatically than Dreiser or Joyce, Lewisohn predicated his fiction on modern sexological theory, and his fiction advocates Jewish sexuality as not simply unremarkable, but as uniquely healthy.

Lewisohn had been analyzed briefly by Freud and counted Otto Rank among his close friends, and in his fiction sexual dysfunction mirrors and reflects social dysfunction. Lewisohn's most well-known novel, *The Island Within* (1928), for example, deals in its final third with the failing marriage of Arthur Levy, a Jewish psychologist, and his Christian wife, Elizabeth. Lewisohn emphasizes that the couple's cultural disaffection manifests itself as sexual malaise and frustration, reporting how sex becomes a "weary and deliberate and joyless process" for them.¹¹⁹ In Lewisohn's next two novels, Jews turn out to have remarkable insights into sexuality. *Stephen Escott* (1930) features David Sampson, a Russian Jewish lawyer who specializes in procuring "freedom" for married couples suffering miserably from "the lack of sexual satisfaction," despite the

¹¹⁸ See "Drama: Year's End," *The Nation* 113:2947 (December 28, 1921): 762-63. Notable among the other supportive reviews was Abraham Cahan's, in the *Forverts* (December 4, 1921), 4; on Cahan's reaction, see Donald Pizer, *American Naturalism and the Jews* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 34-35. On Lewisohn's career generally, see Julian Levinson, *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 56-75, and Ralph Melnick, *The Life and Works of Ludwig Lewisohn* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 2 vols.

¹¹⁹ Ludwig Lewisohn, *The Island Within* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1928), 258-59. Lewisohn generally managed to write about sex without quite crossing the line of propriety of the literature of the 1920s. He uses no more offensive words than "hell" and "damn." Given his claim that the NYSSV had confiscated and destroyed all copies of his second novel, and the fact that his 1926 roman à clef *The Case of Mr. Crump* had not been published in America (though out of concerns about libeling his first wife rather than obscenity), Lewisohn would, like most other writers of the day, have been aware of the risks of publishing fiction that was sexually explicit. See Melnick 1:136, 1:416.

extraordinary strictures of New York's divorce laws;¹²⁰ as a *New York Times* reviewer pointed out, "one gets the effect from the book that [his firm] is a firm of psychoanalysts, not a firm of lawyers."¹²¹ In *An Altar in the Field* (1934), the wise advisor to a couple of unhappily married American bohemians is an "up-to-the-minute psychologist," Dr. Weyl, a German Jew who rejects assimilation for Zionism.¹²²

Deeply familiar with the discourses of modern sexology—Sampson has heard all of Greenwich Village's sexually "libertarian theories ... years ago expressed in Russian and Yiddish at the old Café Monopole on Second Avenue"¹²³—these two Jewish gurus bemoan the current state of American sexuality and offer a singular prognosis of it. According to their theories, modern women's feminism and Jews' assimilationism are parallel and similarly misguided pursuits, flawed because they contradict the essential nature of the Jew and the woman. "What ailed Elizabeth," Lewisohn notes in *The Island Within*, "as it ailed many women of her type and precise period, was not wholly unlike the thing that ailed so many Jews. She had an inferiority complex as a woman."¹²⁴ Lewisohn's theory quite directly echoes Rank's short essay "The Essence of Judaism" (1905), which proclaims that Jews "are, so to speak, women among the people."¹²⁵ As if

¹²⁰ Lewisohn, *Stephen Escott* (New York: Harper and Bros. 1930), 106. Under an 1813 statute that remained virtually "unchanged for 150 years," "only proof of adultery justified a full divorce" in New York, and those guilty of adultery were prohibited from remarrying "during the lifetime of the 'innocent' spouse." Hendrik Hartog, *Man and Wife in America: A History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 72.

¹²¹ "'Ella' and Some Other Recent Works of Fiction," *New York Times* (March 9, 1930), 67.

¹²² *An Altar in the Fields* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1934), 268.

¹²³ Lewisohn, *Stephen Escott*, 131-32.

¹²⁴ *Island Within*, 285.

¹²⁵ Otto Rank, "The Essence of Judaism," in *The Jewish Origins of the Psychoanalytic Movement*, ed., Dennis B. Klein (New York: Praeger, 1981), 171. More obliquely, of course, this comparison should call to mind Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character*; on Rank's reversal of Weininger, see Sander Gilman, "Otto

echoing this statement, Dr. Weyl remarks that "so-called modern women often remind me of Jews."¹²⁶ In reaction to the oppression they have each suffered, both feminist women and assimilationist Jews in this view deny their essential natures and, in doing so, they erode their natural sexual vitality and strength. This odd and frankly disturbing theory—speaking for Lewisohn, Weyl anticipates being criticized as "reactionary"¹²⁷—cannot be treated in the detail it deserves here, but I would emphasize Lewisohn's adoption of modern sexology to portray traditional, unassimilated Jewish sexuality as uniquely healthy. Rank wrote that "the essence of Judaism is its stress on primitive sexuality,"¹²⁸ and for Lewisohn, this Jewish "essence" positioned American Jews perfectly to defeat anti-Semitism and cure the sexual ills of their society by embracing their own healthily "primitive sexuality."

An even more dramatic case—one Mark Shechner has shown to be of utmost importance to an understanding of American Jewish literature in the years after World War II¹²⁹—is that of Wilhelm Reich. Particularly relevant is his *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1934).¹³⁰ As Reich's associate and biographer Myron Sharaf has written, "Reich believed that the only political answer to the distorted 'sex-politics' of Hitler was his own positive sex-politics. One did not answer Hitler's use of the Jews as scapegoats by pointing out the intellectual fallacies of his argument or its function as a diversion from

Weininger and Sigmund Freud: Race and Gender in the Shaping of Psychoanalysis," in *Jews and Gender: Responses to Otto Weininger*, eds. Nancy A. Harrowitz and Barbara Hyams (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 112.

¹²⁶ Lewisohn, *Altar in the Fields*, 273.

¹²⁷ In *Altar in the Fields*, 197-98.

¹²⁸ Rank, 117. On the friendship between Lewisohn and Rank, see Melnick, 600.

¹²⁹ Mark Shechner, *After the Revolution: Studies in the Contemporary Jewish American Imagination*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 91-101 and passim.

¹³⁰ See Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970).

other issues. One countered by directly dealing with the people's sexual longings."¹³¹

Much of the sexual utopianism and amateur sexology that appeared in the fiction and essays of Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, Allen Ginsberg, and Isaac Rosenfeld in the 1940s and 1950s elaborated upon Reich's attempt to cure the sexual ills of all of Western civilization, and, in so doing, to relieve Jews of their role as scapegoats. As Rosenfeld put it in 1949, as if transcribing from Reich, "I regard anti-Semitism as a symptom of a serious, underlying psycho-sexual disease of epidemic proportion in our society."¹³²

Whether or not other writers and sexologists have articulated a treatment of such "disease" as an aim for their criticism and fiction, this has been one of the stakes of their involvements in obscenity disputes, which can be understood as running parallel to the debates about forms of therapy more generally in the postwar United States.¹³³ Cure the sexual ills of America, the argument goes, and one cures its anti-Semitic tendencies.¹³⁴

V. (2) Obscenity and the *Avant Garde*

¹³¹ Myron Sharaf, *Fury on Earth: A Biography of Wilhelm Reich* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 166.

¹³² "Symposium: The Jewish Writer and the English Literary Tradition," *Commentary* 8 (1949): 213-14. On Rosenfeld's particular fascination with Reich, see Steven Zipperstein, *Rosenfeld's Lives: Fame, Oblivion, and the Furies of Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 116-21 and passim.

¹³³ For apposite discussions of the larger context of Jews and Jewishness in the development of American discourses on psychology and therapy, see Andrew Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul: Human Nature in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), particularly chapters 11 and 12.

¹³⁴ The claim in Alfred Kinsey's famous study of male sexuality that American Jews are essentially no more or less sexual than their peers from other religious groups—despite conventional wisdom that Jews are more likely to discuss sex openly—was read with relief by many Jewish observers. See *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 485.

A second way in which obscenity could be meaningful to American Jews was in its ability to confer artistic prestige and to position them within a cultural *avant garde*. This function of obscenity is suggested by Michel Foucault's observation, in *The History of Sexuality*, that the representation of sex carries a "speaker's benefit." Noting how one's willingness to speak about sex has come to confer advantages, Foucault describes, somewhat skeptically, the development of "a discourse in which sex, the revelation of truth, the overturning of global laws, the proclamation of a new day to come, and the promise of a certain felicity are linked together."¹³⁵ In other words, artists and theorists who discuss sex, simply by doing so appear to be undertaking brave, unexpected, and deeply valuable tasks. The automatic ascription of these qualities to the artist or critic who treats the question of sex is what Foucault refers to as the speaker's benefit.

Recent scholarship has more thoughtfully exhibited how directly Foucault's insight can be applied to literary history. Celia Marshik, for one example, has argued that in the case of British modernism, while "censorship was repressive," it "also had productive effects," one of which was to enable "writers to construct public personae—such as that of martyr (in the case of Rossetti) or *enfant terrible* (as in the case of Joyce)—that exercise a strong hold on the imagination of readers even today."¹³⁶ Rossetti and Joyce, in other words, enjoyed the speaker's benefit—their engagements with sex burnished their images as trend-setting and risk-taking artists. Speaking to this point in somewhat broader fashion in her excellent study *Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Aesthetics of Obscenity* (2000), Allison Pease details how "in the hands of modern artists," particularly Beardsley, Joyce, and Lawrence, "the body of pornography is

¹³⁵ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 7.

¹³⁶ Celia Marshik, *British Modernism and Censorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 4.

transubstantiated into high art," and how effecting this transformation was crucial to the development of these authors' prestige.¹³⁷ Pease and Marshik demonstrate that one of the ways to assert oneself as an artist in the 20th century—to manifest the inspiration, truth-telling, and rebelliousness expected of artists—was to represent sex frankly and to be branded by cultural conservatives as having produced obscenity.¹³⁸ Literary scholars have not yet described in much detail, however, the degree to which this dynamic operated for publishers in addition to writers. For many American Jewish editors and publishers, this "speaker's benefit" made engagement with literary obscenity a worthwhile risk.

Freedman has described the appeal that "high literary culture" held for American Jews in the early 20th century: "What marks Jewish assimilation," he suggests, "and differentiates it from that of other immigrant groups before or after is the crucial role that engagement with the canonical tradition of high Western literature—especially the literature of England and America—played in this process."¹³⁹ This engagement with high culture appeared particularly in the group of Jewish men and women, children and grandchildren of immigrants, who revolutionized American publishing in the 20th century.¹⁴⁰ Of these influential publishers, perhaps the most iconic and fascinating was Horace Liveright, and brief attention to his career dramatizes how an engagement with obscenity could help to establish one as part of the American cultural *avant garde*.

¹³⁷ Allison Pease, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Aesthetics of Obscenity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 71.

¹³⁸ On this point, also see Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 293.

¹³⁹ Freedman, *Temple of Culture*, 159.

¹⁴⁰ On this group, see Freedman, *Temple of Culture*, 168-75, and Charles Madison, *Jewish Publishing in America: The Impact of Jewish Writing on American Culture* (New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1976), 246-85.

When he was a young man, Liveright found his attraction to high culture, which had been inculcated during his childhood, frustrated by his lack of talent, persistence, and money. His father, Henry Liveright, a German-Jewish immigrant, owned Pennsylvanian coal mines that were only intermittently profitable, so the family's aspirations toward wealth tended to outstrip their purchasing power. While Henry maintained an exemplary personal library and exposed his son to the classics of English and American literature, there was not enough money to send Horace to a college preparatory school, which his cousins attended. Horace considered his parents "poor relations" compared to his extended family, remembering later, "not dimly but clearly," how his family bought ice cream at a second-rate store, while his wealthier cousins ate the very best. Even as a teenager Liveright understood writing as a less expensive avenue—than, say, college—to cultural respectability. At age 16, in 1900, Liveright had a popular song that he had written published, and by 1902, he had interested a Broadway producer in staging an operetta he had written in the style of Gilbert and Sullivan. The production fell through due to a lack of funding that the young Liveright could secure from his relatives. For the next 14 years, Liveright's cultural aspirations were shunted aside as he attempted to make a respectable living in finance and, after marrying the daughter of a wealthy paper manufacturer, in the sale and the development of consumer products. Only after displaying general ineptness in many such endeavors, Liveright, at a loose end and having met another young Jewish literary entrepreneur Alfred Boni through one of his cousins, secured funds from his father-in-law to found a publishing house.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ For these facts about Liveright's early life, see Tom Dardis, *Firebrand: The Life of Horace Liveright* (New York: Random House, 1995).

From the very start of this venture, Liveright was willing to publish risky material. He promised Dreiser in 1917, for example, that he would publish *The Genius*, the suppression of which by Sumner and the NYSSV had been widely reported in newspapers the previous year.¹⁴² This seems to have been less a matter of Liveright's bravery, though, than desperation. Alfred and Blanche Knopf had begun their publishing line in 1915 with ten translations from European languages, and only five books written in English, as they had been at first unable to attract a robust list of English-language authors. How could Liveright—unable to outbid the venerable American houses or even upstarts like Knopf and Ben Huebsch, and with no cultural capital of his own with which to lure well-known authors away from their current publishers—attract top literary talent? As late as 1920, H. L. Mencken noted in a letter that Liveright had "offered" him and George Jean Nathan "a blank contract, including even 50% royalty. But we are too comfortable with Knopf."¹⁴³ To establish his or her list, an aspiring publisher needed, among other things, to search for respected authors who were *not* comfortable with their current publishers. One reason that authors, like Dreiser, were uncomfortable in those years was that their publishers were not willing to endure harassment and legal battles in order to publish unexpurgated works.

A remark by Adele Seltzer, who with her husband Thomas published and then defended in court D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1922) after several publishers had blanched at publishing the author's work unexpurgated,¹⁴⁴ makes clear how far a

¹⁴² See, e.g., "Vice Society Assails Book," *New York Times* (August 21, 1916), 20.

¹⁴³ Quoted in Dardis, 79.

¹⁴⁴ George Doran—a Canadian-born, New York-based publisher comfortable with his increasingly conservative outlook in the 'teens, who remarked that while he was "less puritan than Doubleday, [he] was not broad enough for Knopf"—refused Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915), despite the acclaim for *Sons and*

willingness to publish a controversial but critically acclaimed novelist could take a newly established publisher: "Lawrence is a Titan," Seltzer wrote, "and I go about with an ever-present sense of wonder that we, Thomas and I, little, little Jews, should be the publishers of the great English giant of this age, publishers of him, not because with Jewish shrewdness we outwitted some other publishers & got Lawrence first, but because Lawrence's *Women in Love* went begging for a publisher."¹⁴⁵ Seltzer's "wonder" is understandable: publishing Lawrence in 1922 was somewhat of a financial and legal risk for the Seltzers, but not by any means a cultural one, given Lawrence's reputation. Likewise, Liveright's offer to publish *The Genius* can be understood given the respect Dreiser commanded in American cultural circles. The Authors League of America had stated, clearly and unequivocally, their opposition to the ban on that novel,¹⁴⁶ so a publisher willing to finance a legal defense, and risk a possible jail term, had the opportunity of earning the regard of a vast number of American writers. There was, in other words, a powerful speaker's benefit to be had by publishers in the defense of allegedly obscene works, especially if they were written by critically acclaimed authors.

The 1923 "Clean Books crusade," and Liveright's response to it, can also be understood in this light. In late 1922, the outrage of several Christian religious groups at the "immorality" and "coarseness" of contemporary fiction swelled, and Sumner, responding to these outcries, ramped up the NYSSV for a more aggressive than usual

Lovers (1913); Lawrence's "art took the form of the vulgar nudity of intellectualism," Doran later wrote, congratulating himself on his refusal. Huebsch published *The Rainbow*, after expurgating it without Lawrence's consent, and he distributed the book gingerly, letting it "dribble out to the trade" so as to avoid the attention of the NYSSV. See John Tebbel, *Between Covers: The Rise and Transformation of Book Publishing in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 146; De Grazia, 68-71.

¹⁴⁵ Quoted in De Grazia, 79.

¹⁴⁶ See, e.g., "Authors Oppose 'Vicious' Society," *Los Angeles Times* (October 1, 1916), III:21.

bout of book suppression directed against "a certain element in the publishing business."¹⁴⁷ The nascent coalition responded with censorious enthusiasm when Judge John Ford of the New York State Supreme Court discovered to his horror that his 16-year-old daughter had been given a copy of the Seltzers' edition of Lawrence's *Women in Love*. In February 1923, with Sumner's assistance, Ford gathered the support of more than a dozen religious and social groups to form the Clean Books League, which drew up a bill to revise the state's obscenity law so as to ease the conviction and punishment of publishers.¹⁴⁸ Given how drastically it would have ceded editorial authority to the NYSSV, the bill received surprisingly little opposition from established publishers and writers. The National Association of Book Publishers, for example, refused to oppose the bill (while Sumner claimed that several of the city's "reputable" publishers had helped to draft it), and fading literary eminences of the late 19th century welcomed the bill in the nativist spirit of the day. Henry Walcott Boynton criticized the cultural influence of "persons with alien names and frankly alien standards," while Mary Austin complained that "neither the Russian nor the Jew has ever been able to understand ... that not to have had any seriously upsetting sex adventures may be the end of an intelligently achieved life standard."¹⁴⁹ Major authors and critics, such as Hamlin Garland and Bliss Perry, came out explicitly for censorship, viewing the Clean Books League's bill as salutary.

¹⁴⁷ Boyer, *Purity in Print*, 100-02.

¹⁴⁸ The bill clarified that a book would not be judged as a whole, but that any line or paragraph considered in isolation could render an entire book obscene; that "filthy" and "disgusting" books were obscene even if they were not sexual in their nature; that all obscenity cases would have to be tried by juries, and not decided by judges; and that expert testimony, from literary scholars or psychologists, for example, would never be admissible in such trials. Boyer, 104-05.

¹⁴⁹ Boyer, 110-11.

Liveright manifested considerable courage in opposing the Clean Books League bill with little support from his colleagues, but it should also be clear what he stood to gain in the dispute. In a short article published on March 17, 1923, Liveright compared would-be censors with "little, if any, sense of value in literature, drama, and art generally," to publishers, who display "the highest quality of intellect and understanding" and who can be "severe and competent censors [who] judge by intelligent standards."¹⁵⁰ Opposing the Clean Books League was Liveright's opportunity to assert his position among the latter. While national opinion did not necessarily support him, he did have some cultural authorities on his side: the bill had been opposed by literary eminences like D. H. Lawrence and Henry Seidel Canby, and the *New York Times* never vacillated in deploring it.¹⁵¹

Liveright, who unlike some of his fellow Jewish publishers never seems to have obscured his ethnicity, could also count on support from the Jewish community. While the name of Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, the most prominent Jewish leader in the country, had been mentioned as one of the founders of the Clean Books League in March 1923, by late April of that same year, Wise had changed his mind and attacked the bill in a sermon quoted at length in the *New York Times*. "If we assent to censorship, we will find all our freedom gone," Wise said, and in a remark consistent with the tradition of Jewish latitudinarianism described above, added, "It is the easiest and cheapest way out of an obligation to ask the State to do everything for us, and censorship is one of the stupid

¹⁵⁰ Horace Liveright, "The Absurdity of Censorship," *Independent* (March 17, 1923), 92-93.

¹⁵¹ Boyer, 105; "Censoring Books Again," *New York Times* (February 27, 1923), 18; "Advertising Bad Books," *New York Times* (March 15, 1923), 18.

strategies of democracy to find a way out of responsibility."¹⁵² Knowing that both cultural authorities and Jewish communal ones would support him, Liveright devoted time, energy, and money to defeating the bill, and when it was voted down in May, he reaped his reward: a congratulatory dinner in his honor attended by literary celebrities including Carl Van Vechten and Mencken, who just a few years earlier had said he would not publish with Liveright even for a 50% royalty. Senator James J. Walker, who had given a widely quoted speech against the bill, credited Liveright as having been "solely responsible for defending the freedom of the press."¹⁵³

In half a decade, Liveright transformed himself from an unknown parvenu to one of the most admired publishers in the country, and while his defeat of the Clean Books League bill was not the singular stimulant to his growing reputation—before that episode, he had, after all, already published T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" (1922) and Freud's *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (1920), two of the most influential books of the decade—it certainly helped the cause. In the following years, Waldo Frank featured Liveright in an exuberantly celebratory profile in the *New Yorker*,¹⁵⁴ and Liveright soon added Sherwood Anderson to his stable of writers and published the first book-length works of fiction by both William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway.

Liveright's commitment to freedom of expression parallels Huebsch's publishing of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* a decade earlier, Seltzer's defense of Lawrence, Bennett Cerf's later defense of *Ulysses*, and, to shuttle ahead to the late 1950s, Barney Rosset's defense of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and of Henry Miller's *Tropic of*

¹⁵² "Rabbi Wise Scores Book Censorship," *New York Times* (April 23, 1923), 19.

¹⁵³ "Liveright Quits Other Publishers," *New York Times* (June 15, 1923), 6.

¹⁵⁴ "100% American," *New Yorker* (October 10, 1925), 9-10.

Cancer. In most of these cases, the funds that covered the legal defenses of these important novels came not from within a publishing operation, but from Jewish families who earned it in other trades, including tobacco, finance, and, in Liveright's case, paper goods.¹⁵⁵ The publishing of obscenity, in other words, was one available means for converting financial capital into a very precious form of cultural capital, and it was a technique often pursued by American Jews after they had been stymied in attempts to embrace Anglo-American high culture on the terms of its conservative authorities.

V. (3) Obscenity and Contraception

The pursuit of cultural capital was often, though not exclusively, the province of Jews with money, but the stark poverty of Jewish immigrants in the U.S. in the early 20th century provided a wholly different motivation for an engagement with obscenity. The so-called Comstock Act of 1873 criminalized, along with any "obscene, lewd, or lascivious book, pamphlet, picture, paper, print, or other publication of an indecent character," the dissemination of information about birth control. To be precise, the act prohibited the mailing of "any article or thing designed or intended for the prevention of conception or producing an abortion ... [and] any written or printed card, circular, book,

¹⁵⁵ Liveright's publishing house was owned, at least on paper and at least until 1924, by his wife, Lucille Elsas, whose father founded the International Paper Company; see Dardis, 209, 224, 37. Cerf bought into Liveright's company, and later founded Random House, using some of the \$125,000 he inherited at the age of 16 from his grandfather Nathan Wise, who "owned a tobacco-distributing business called the Metropolitan Tobacco Company" *At Random: The Reminiscences of Bennet Cerf* (New York: Random House, 1977), 27, 29, 11, 3. Barney Rosset, meanwhile, "fought the bans in court with his own money"; though his Grove Press struggled financially in its early years, Rosset had "inherited enough money"—"over a million"—from his father, "a Russian Jew" and "wealthy bank president," to stay afloat. Gerald Jonas, "The Story of Grove," *The New York Times Magazine* (Jan. 21, 1968).

pamphlet, advertisement or notice of any kind giving information, directly or indirectly, where, or how, or of whom, or by what means either of the things mentioned may be obtained or made."¹⁵⁶ The Comstock Act, in other words, yoked literary explicitness, birth control, and abortion together into a single category.¹⁵⁷

For economic and social reasons, contraception was a central issue for the American Jewish community in the early 20th century. Hundreds of thousands of impoverished Jewish immigrants lived in desperate conditions in urban ghettos, and no absolute opposition to contraception inhered in traditional Jewish culture.¹⁵⁸ Many Jews felt responsible for disseminating birth control information to alleviate the suffering of their co-religionists and particularly of poor Jewish women. Emma Goldman, for one, felt that information about birth control was particularly relevant to Jewish immigrants. In her autobiography, she recalls that she decided "to make public the knowledge of contraceptives, particularly at my Yiddish meetings, because the women on the East Side needed that information most."¹⁵⁹ Goldman's many clashes with the Comstock Act were not limited to her dissemination of birth control information, of course, as the act had been tailored in 1908 to target anarchist publications, but the illegalization of birth

¹⁵⁶ Comstock Act, chap. 258, 17 Stat. 598 (1873).

¹⁵⁷ See Tone, 3-25.

¹⁵⁸ While birth control and abortion were by no means accepted unanimously and across the board in traditional Jewish culture, rabbinic texts have agreed that if physical harm threatens the mother, then birth control of some sort is acceptable. This distinguishes the Jewish from the Catholic tradition, in which contraception is not permissible even in situations where the mother's life is in danger. Beyond that, rabbinic authorities have differed on the questions of when and what forms of birth control are permissible. See David M. Feldman, *Birth Control in Jewish Law* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), 301. On the lack of consensus regarding abortion at the turn of the 20th century in traditional Jewish circles, see David Schiff, *Abortion in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 116.

¹⁵⁹ Emma Goldman, *Living My Life* (New York: Dover, 1970), 569.

control by the Act offered her another reason to oppose it.¹⁶⁰ Goldman's associate Margaret Sanger, the famed Catholic-born crusader for birth control in America, often explained that her inspiration to devote her life to disseminating birth control information was the tragic experience of "a small, slight Russian Jewess, about twenty-eight years old," named Sadie Sachs, who died from complications related to pregnancy after being refused information about contraception by a doctor.¹⁶¹ While historians have raised doubts about the historical veracity of this anecdote,¹⁶² that Sanger chose repeatedly to tell it this way, with a Jewish rather than an Italian or Irish immigrant woman as her representative martyr to Comstockery, reflects the prominence of Jewish women in her thinking. Sanger founded the first birth control clinic in the country in Brownsville, Brooklyn, on October 16, 1916, later noting that she selected the neighborhood because "here in this Jewish community I need have no misgivings over breaking of windows or hurling of insults."¹⁶³

The receptivity of the American Jewish community to the discussion of birth control can also be observed in the range of Yiddish-language texts and plays that treated the subject. Ben-Zion Liber's *Dos geshlekhts lebn fun man un froy* [*The Sexual Life of Man and Woman*], for example, devotes attention to topics including anatomy, venereal diseases, and birth control. Having begun its life in articles, and as a pamphlet in 1915,

¹⁶⁰ For the targeting of anarchists under obscenity statutes, and for an example of Goldman deploring the Comstock Act directly, see Candace Falk, ed., *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years*, volume 2, *Making Speech Free, 1902-1909* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 76, 177.

¹⁶¹ Margaret Sanger, *Autobiography* (New York: Cooper Square, 1999; originally 1938), 89-92.

¹⁶² Ellen Chesler expresses doubt that Sachs existed; see Chesler, *A Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 63.

¹⁶³ Sanger, *Autobiography*, 215.

the book was reprinted several times in the following decade.¹⁶⁴ Liber noted that he could have simply translated a book on the subject—indeed, Sanger's *What Every Girl Should Know* and August Forel's *The Sexual Question* were both translated into Yiddish¹⁶⁵—but he had instead written his own book because his goal was "to speak from the perspective of the Yiddish reader, and for the Yiddish reader, whose needs I know so well."¹⁶⁶ The Yiddish theater likewise treated birth control in several productions. A play titled *Birth Control or Race Suicide* premiered in New York in July 1916, while Chicago's Yiddish-speaking audiences could attend *A Woman's Duty in Birth Control*.¹⁶⁷ As I will discuss below, except for one brief attempt to censor Liber's book, these books and plays, like virtually all American Yiddish texts, seem to have been spared from censorship.

The need for birth control in the American Jewish community may have encouraged Jewish entrepreneurs, doctors, midwives, and scientists to contribute to the production and distribution of contraceptives, and to advocate their use, even though doing so placed them in opposition to the Comstock Act's prohibitions of obscenity. The leading American producer of condoms in the first half of the 20th century and the creator of the Ramses brand¹⁶⁸ was a German-Jewish immigrant, Julius Schmid, who began to manufacture condoms in 1883 as a black-market sideline while earning seven

¹⁶⁴ For a recent appraisal of Liber, see Eli Lederhendler, "Guides for the Perplexed: Sex, Manners, and Mores for the Yiddish Reader in America," *Modern Judaism* 11:3 (October, 1991): 321-41.

¹⁶⁵ August Forel, *Di geshlekhts frage*, trans. Dr. D. Borukhson (New York: Farlag Selbst-Bildung, 1920); Margaret Sanger, *Vos yede maydl darf visn*, trans. K. Teper (New York: Max N. Mayzel, 1916).

¹⁶⁶ *Dos geshlekts lebn fun man un froy: a populer-visenshaftlikh bukh* (1919), 17.

¹⁶⁷ Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 63-64.

¹⁶⁸ It is unclear whether or not the comedienne Belle Barth knew about the Jewish origins of the Ramses brand when she joked about discovering in Israel a Ramses condom on which "it is inscribed, in Hebraic letters, *kum gezunterheyt* [come in good health]." Belle Barth, *If I Embarrass You, Tell Your Friends* (Miami: After Hours Records, 1960).

dollars a month cleaning animal intestines at a sausage-casing factory. Schmid's workshop was raided by Comstock in 1890 and he was arrested, convicted, and fined for his activities, but by WWI he had become the official vendor of prophylactics to the U.S. military.¹⁶⁹ On the far other end of the spectrum of respectability was Dr. Abraham Jacobi, likewise a German-Jewish immigrant. Rather than a black-market entrepreneur, though, Jacobi was a recognized leader of the American pediatrics movement. As the president of the American Medical Association in 1912-1913, he became one of the first leaders of the profession to speak out for birth control. Later, in his introduction to a book on the subject of contraception, Jacobi derided the Comstock Act, remarking that "our Federal and state laws on the subject of prevention are grievously wrong and unjust. It is important that these laws be repealed at the earliest possible moment."¹⁷⁰ Decades later, a Jewish physiologist, Gregory Pincus, led the development of the birth control pill, alongside a conservative, devoutly Roman Catholic colleague, John Rock.¹⁷¹ These medical professionals and entrepreneurs may, of course, have been motivated in their work by any number of considerations, but the Jewish community's relatively welcoming attitude toward contraception may have played a role for them, as it did for Sanger.

As social conditions in the Jewish community improved, and as access to information about birth control and to contraceptives themselves spread, birth control would no longer be thought of as a topic of special relevance to the American Jewish

¹⁶⁹ Tone, 50-51, 184-88.

¹⁷⁰ William J. Robinson, *Fewer and Better Babies: The Limitation of Offspring by the Prevention of Conception*, 6th edition (New York: The Critic and Guide Co., 1916), 18. On Jacobi's role in the birth control movement, see William J. Robinson, *Pioneers of Birth Control in England and America* (New York: Voluntary Parenthood League, 1919), 72-76; and, on his career more generally, Russell Viner, "Abraham Jacobi and German Medical Radicalism in Antebellum New York," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 72:3 (1998): 434-63.

¹⁷¹ On the development of the birth control pill, see Tone, 203-31.

community, though the subject remained prominent in works of fiction by major American Jewish writers at midcentury.¹⁷² Yet the association between obscenity and women's reproductive rights established in the Comstock Act could not so easily be broken, and their persisting link is reflected by the career of Harriet F. Pilpel (1911-1991), whose influence in both areas was at least in some institutional sense the result of previous efforts by Jews.¹⁷³ Pilpel graduated Vassar in 1932, having written a senior thesis on censorship, and went on to Columbia Law School, where she stood second in her class and served as the articles editor of the *Columbia Law Review*. After she received her J.D., the New York judge who regularly hired Columbia's second-best student told her that he refused to work with a female clerk. Most New York law firms also discriminated against both women and Jews at the time. Though these rebuffs dismayed her, Pilpel's sights had long been set on joining the Jewish firm of Greenbaum, Wolff, and Ernst, where Morris Ernst had made a name for himself through his successful defenses against obscenity charges, both for authors and publishers—most famously in the *Ulysses* case—and for birth control advocates like Mary Ware Dennett.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² For example, a diaphragm figures centrally in the title story of Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), as do abortions in Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (New York: Viking, 1953) and Roth's *Letting Go* (New York: Random House, 1962). Of course, birth control was a prominent subject in much American fiction; on contraception in earlier American literature (and "Goodbye, Columbus"), see Beth Widmaier Capo, *Textual Contraception: Birth Control and Modern American Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007), and in later American fiction, Judith Wilt, *Abortion, Choice, and Contemporary Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

¹⁷³ It must be noted in a literary study that Charles Dickens himself could not have invented a better name for a Jewish lawyer than "Pilpel." Literally meaning "spice" or "pepper," *pilpul* as applied to Talmud study can be translated as "intellectual sharpness and acumen," though occasionally it carries a connotation of sophistry. My own high school Talmud teacher loved to tell his classes that *pilpul* was the best preparation for law school they could receive. For an introduction, see Jeffrey Rubinstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 48-51.

¹⁷⁴ On Ernst's career, in addition to the autobiographical texts cited above, see Joel Matthew Silverman, "Pursuing Celebrity, Ensuing Masculinity: Morris Ernst, Obscenity, and the Search for Recognition," PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2006.

Pilpel devoted herself to defending obscenity, in both senses, for the rest of an impressive career. She is mostly remembered now for serving as general counsel to Planned Parenthood during the decades in which abortion was legalized, as well as for her leadership role at the ACLU, which she insisted, in a 1964 address, should concern itself with abortion and with gay rights.¹⁷⁵ Yet she was also an early and tireless anti-censorship advocate in professional and popular forums. She argued against movie censorship of any kind in the *New York Times* in 1946, anticipating explicitly that the Supreme Court would reverse an important 1915 decision and offer First Amendment protection to film, as it did some years later.¹⁷⁶ In 1957, she won the Kinsey Institute the right to import sexually explicit materials for scholarly study.¹⁷⁷ As a monthly columnist for *Publisher's Weekly* for decades, she informed the publishing industry about relevant developments in law, including the changes in the enforcement and meaning of obscenity.¹⁷⁸ One indicator of Pilpel's prominence within the cultural as well as legal sphere was her article, "Lady Chatterley and the Courts," which appeared in the highly respected literary journal *New World Writing* alongside an early story by Thomas Pynchon and the first publication of Tillie Olsen's "Tell Me a Riddle."¹⁷⁹

Unlike some legal crusaders against literary censorship, who quailed or prevaricated when they considered the consequences of their victories—such as her

¹⁷⁵ Samuel Walker, *In Defense of American Liberties: A History of the ACLU* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 301-02, 312.

¹⁷⁶ Harriet Fleischl Pilpel, "Is It Legal?," *New York Times* (January 20, 1946), 49.

¹⁷⁷ *United States v. 31 Photographs*, 156 F. Supp. 350 (S.D.N.Y. 1957). For Pilpel's account of the case, see "But Can You Do That?: Federal Court Makes Important Ruling in Kinsey Case," *Publisher's Weekly* (November 25, 1957), 29-30.

¹⁷⁸ See, for example, Pilpel, "But Can You Do That?: Some Obscenity Battles Yet to Be Fought in Court," *Publisher's Weekly* 194 (December 30, 1968), 42-43.

¹⁷⁹ See *New World Writing* 16 (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1960).

former partner, Morris Ernst, who in 1970 decried the use of "the four-letter word, out of context," as well as "sodomy on the stage and masturbation in the public arena," or Charles Rembar, who was, in the words of Norman Mailer, "troubled just a hint by the liberties won"¹⁸⁰—Pilpel remained steadfastly opposed to censorship throughout her career, without any cavil. In *Obscenity and the Constitution*, a lecture she gave to publishing executives in 1973, Pilpel outlined the challenges to free expression imposed by recent decisions (most prominently, *Miller v. California*) and argued for a continued commitment to First Amendment protections, broadly interpreted. "There should be as free a marketplace for sexual ideas and descriptions," she argued, "as we have now with reference to other kinds of ideas and descriptions."¹⁸¹ Speculating on why the court had recently retreated from the more liberal positions of the 1960s, Pilpel suggested that this may have come about because "the Court majority consists of middle-aged or elderly gentlemen of the upper middle class ... [who] are not completely comfortable about sex and therefore objectify their subjective concerns" and who display "conventional middle class distaste for the vulgar and profane." In contrast, she remarked, "I'm all in favor of good taste, but I don't think it should be enshrined as a matter of constitutional law."¹⁸²

Raised as a Reform Jew, active as an adult in the Ethical Culture Society, and married to a man who worked for decades for a nonprofit Jewish agency, the Joint Distribution Committee, Pilpel never posited her own cultural background as a motivation for her commitment to anti-censorship, or, for that matter, to women's

¹⁸⁰ Irving Spiegel, "Censors' Foe Sees Need for Limits to Freedom," *New York Times* (January 5, 1970), 46; Rembar, 484-85.

¹⁸¹ Harriet Pilpel, *Obscenity and the Constitution* (New York: R. R. Bowker and Co., 1973), 22.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 23-24.

reproductive rights. But her writings and comments on the subject often emphasize the way that prosecutors use "obscenity charges as a means of suppressing views which are dissident, satirical, irreverent, or merely unpopular,"¹⁸³ and that "censorship of obscenity ... sets the stage for a censorship or censorious mentality which can pour over from obscenity to other things we may not like."¹⁸⁴ In other words, the censorship of literature and the control of women's reproductive health remained related for Pilpel even after the law sundered them. Given her own personal and professional commitment to the dissemination of information on contraception—she remarked that birth control had been crucial for her, personally, in committing both to a career and to motherhood¹⁸⁵—it does not seem an exaggeration to state that Pilpel's legacy was the dismantling of both prongs of the 1873 Comstock Act. Even if Pilpel did not conceive of this as a task with particular Jewish resonance, it seems fitting, especially because of the role a Jewish law firm played in enabling her career, that the battles started by Goldman and Sanger to deliver contraception to Jewish immigrants at the turn of the century would be fought and won, decades later, by another Jewish woman. Pilpel's lifelong insistence on a connection between the protection of rights to contraception and obscenity in literature reveals another way in which obscenity could be meaningful to American Jews.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁸⁴ Harriet Pilpel Oral History (New York: American Jewish Committee, Oral History Library, 1975), held at the New York Public Library, 57.

¹⁸⁵ "Birth control and the freedom of women to choose whether or not to have children was of burning interest to me. This may have been partly because I always wanted to have a career and children, but if I had no control over when I had the children it wouldn't have been possible for me to plan my career." Harriet Pilpel Oral History, 30-31.

V. (4) Obscenity and Minority Rights

Just as obscenity mattered to Jewish women because of contraception, and to rich Jews because of its ability to transform financial into cultural capital, obscenity also interested many American Jews who identified as Jews because of its relation to the rights of demographic minorities. Legal debates over free speech in America have often rested on the question of to what degree a political majority can impose its beliefs and values on a minority group or, for that matter, on an individual.¹⁸⁶ In a recent overview of freedom of speech issues, a legal scholar summarizes the argument that "free speech is a means of protecting the liberty of minorities and minority arguments and ideas" as follows:

People in the majority are unlikely to encounter legal restrictions on what they can say [but] people who belong to unpopular social groups, such as ethnic and religious minorities ... cannot look with any assurance to majoritarian institutions to protect their right to speak as they wish on matters of great controversy and of great anxiety. ... Pluralism goes hand in hand with vigorous protection of the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech.¹⁸⁷

As members of a religious minority, many American Jews have committed to practices and behaviors that do not find favor with the majority of Americans, such as Saturday Sabbath observance or a refusal to eat pork. For this reason, American Jews and Jewish institutions have regularly defended the civil rights of minorities.¹⁸⁸ At its extreme, this

¹⁸⁶ See Rabban, 126-28.

¹⁸⁷ Kenneth Ira Kersch, *Freedom of Speech: Rights and Liberties Under the Law* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 20-21.

¹⁸⁸ For the importance of "minority rights" discourse in American Jewish attempts to aid persecuted Jews in other countries, for example, see Oscar I. Janowsky, *The Jews and Minority Rights (1898-1919)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933).

sensitivity to the necessity of safeguarding minority culture and rights has manifested itself in the commitments of American Jews to individualist anarchism,¹⁸⁹ and indeed Jewish anarchists joined their non-Jewish peers in the protests against the repression of obscenity and political dissent in the early decades of the 20th century.¹⁹⁰ Yet an American Jew need not have gone so far as to embrace anarchism to defend the rights of minority groups. The proximity of the free speech provisions of the First Amendment to the clause about the "free exercise" of religion has been enough to convince many American Jews who are simply committed to the maintenance of Jewish religious traditions and cultural practices that the exercise of speech, thought, and religious behavior should not be determined by majority rule. For many American Jews, then, the fight against the criminalization of obscenity has constituted part of their defense of their freedom to practice and live as one of the country's major non-Christian minority groups.

This reasoning can be observed at work in a legal treatise written by an important American Jewish legal theoretician, Ernst Freund. An early faculty member at the University of Chicago Law School and a widely respected scholar, Freund insisted in *The Police Power* (1904) that "the idea of a public welfare bought at the cost of suppressing individual liberty and right is ... inadmissible."¹⁹¹ Following this principle, Freund asserted that legitimate scientific and artistic expression should not be subject to

¹⁸⁹ Paul Avrich's excellent *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) contains dozens of accounts of Jewish anarchists.

¹⁹⁰ On Emma Goldman and Harry Weinberger and the Free Speech League, see Rabban, 65-67, 72. Decades later, another Jewish anarchist, Paul Goodman, would argue against sexual repression and literary censorship on idiosyncratically anarchist grounds; see, for example, Paul Goodman, "Pornography, Art, and Censorship," *Commentary* 31:3 (March 1961), 203-12; "Censorship and Mass Media," *Yale Political* 3:1 (Autumn 1963): 23; "Censorship and Pornography on the Stage," *Creator Spirit Come!: The Literary Essays of Paul Goodman* (New York: Free Life Editions, 1977), 100-10.

¹⁹¹ Ernst Freund, *The Police Power: Public Policy and Constitutional Rights* (Chicago: Callaghan and Company, 1904), 12.

ensorship, noting that "moral, intellectual and political movements, in which our constitutions proclaim the principle of individual liberty," must be "exempt" from "police power."¹⁹² Freund was by no means a radical, at this point in his career, on the question of obscenity; he acknowledged that while "religion and speech and press are primarily free," they still should be "subjected to restraints in the interest of good order and morality"—and he somewhat idealistically observed that "very little difficulty has so far been encountered in the mutual adjustments of these interests."¹⁹³ Yet Freund's general principle of exempting "'moral, intellectual and political movements" from governmental control included a sensitivity to the rights of minority groups, including Jews, to maintain traditions that do not conform to the majority's. Freund opposed a Louisiana court's ruling denying Jews the right to work on Sundays (pursuant to the Sunday laws that generally prohibited work on that day) if they observe their Sabbath on Saturdays. Freund asserts that "such a prohibition creates a special burden" for Jews: under the Louisiana ruling, Jews who observed the Sabbath would have to close their businesses for two days every week, rather than the one day of their Christian competitors, at a significant loss of income. "All laws should scrupulously respect the principle of religious equality," Freund wrote, which "should be recognized as a constitutional right."¹⁹⁴

Freund remained active in defending freedom of speech in the years after WWI,¹⁹⁵ and his attention to the balancing of interests between the state and minority groups may account, in part, for his insistence that art be protected as free speech as a

¹⁹² Ibid., 11; see also 220-25.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 11.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 502.

¹⁹⁵ See his articles, "The Debs Case and Freedom of Speech," *New Republic* (May 3, 1919), 13-15; "Freedom of Speech and Press," *New Republic* (February 16, 1921), 344-46.

First Amendment doctrine began to evolve in the years after WWI. Responding to Harvard law professor Zechariah Chafee, Jr., whose influential advocacy for freedom of speech concentrated on political rather than artistic speech, Freund insisted in a letter to Chafee that "if you consider Freedom of Speech socially as well as politically," then Theodore Schroeder, author of *'Obscene' Literature and Constitutional Law* (1911), "deserves a place in your bibliography."¹⁹⁶ That the progressive but august Freund commended the work of Schroeder—the most outspoken and vehement critic of censorship and the criminalization of obscenity in early 20th-century America—suggests the degree to which he prioritized a defense of literature and the arts.

Yet defenders of free speech as a defense of minority rights did not typically extend their efforts to literature in the following decades. After Roger Nash Baldwin founded the American Civil Liberties Union in 1920, for example, many of its leading members were not interested in obscenity and were much more concerned with distancing themselves from the anarchists and libertarians of the Free Speech League. The ACLU opted not to aid Harry Weinberger in his defense of the Broadway version of Sholem Asch's *God of Vengeance* in 1923, for example, though Weinberger was not only the producer of that controversial show, but also a highly regarded trial lawyer who had been involved with the Free Speech League and had argued *Abrams v. U.S.*, the most important free speech case of that period, in front of the Supreme Court. By 1927, the situation had not dramatically improved, as the acting director of the ACLU wrote to a Boston librarian, "We cannot go into the 'anti-obscenity' campaign ... That is a phase of free speech we have kept clear of ... to avoid complicating our main issues."¹⁹⁷ Samuel

¹⁹⁶ Quoted in Rabban, 303.

¹⁹⁷ Quoted in Walker, 83.

Walker, a historian of the ACLU, suggests that this reticence resulted from the "extremely puritanical" inclinations of Baldwin and his closest associates. Thus, as Walker puts it, "the fight for a broader ACLU attack on censorship," including the defense of literature, was led by two "highly secularized Jews," Morris Ernst and Arthur Garfield Hays, who "shared none of the puritanism of the ACLU Protestants."¹⁹⁸ These two lawyers manufactured trials of Dreiser's *American Tragedy* and of an issue of Mencken's *American Mercury*, of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, and, most famously, of Joyce's *Ulysses*. But while the *Ulysses* decision represents the great triumph against censorship of those years, it established a troublesome precedent with its assertion that the obscenity of a book must be judged on the basis of the book's effect on the "homme moyen sensuel," the "person with average sex instincts."¹⁹⁹

At the time, this seemed like a sensible enough refutation of the Hicklin test, but the problem became apparent when Charles Rembar set out to defend books for Grove Press in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Of course, from a publisher's or author's perspective, it was much more reasonable for the question of whether or not a book is obscene to be decided with regard to the "average person," rather than, as the Hicklin test demanded, by the work's tendency to deprave or corrupt the most vulnerable members of

¹⁹⁸ Walker, 83.

¹⁹⁹ In retrospect, at least, Woolsey's famous decision was not as forward-thinking as Benjamin Greenspan's in *People v. Viking Press, Inc.*, 147 N.Y. Misc. 813 (Magistrate's Ct., 1933). In that case, Sumner suggested that the "literati" who had written letters in support of Erskine Caldwell's *God's Little Acre* were "abnormal people" and that, following the statement in *People v. Pesky*, 243 N.Y.S. 193 (N.Y. App. Div. 1930) that "these matters must be judged by normal people and not by the abnormal," their opinions should not be considered by the court. Rejecting Sumner's argument, Greenspan listed a few of the people in question—including "Horace M. Kallen, honorary vice-president of the American Jewish Congress" (as if that were Kallen's claim to fame in 1933!) and "Solomon Lowenstein, executive and director of the Federation for the Support of Jewish Philanthropic Societies"—and, in a dig at Sumner's absurd philistinism, proclaimed that this group of intellectuals and literary professionals "has a better capacity to judge of the value of a literary production than one who is more apt to search for obscene passages in a book than to regard the book as a whole."

society. That was why Woolsey brought the "average person" to bear, and why, in the *Roth* decision of 1957, the court asserted that "the standard for judging obscenity ... is whether, *to the average person*, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material, taken as a whole, appeals to prurient interest."²⁰⁰

Yet Rembar confronted the problem that some of the books he was asked to defend, including *Tropic of Cancer* and William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, were too extreme to find favor with the average person. Contemplating this challenge, Rembar followed up on an idea in Justice Douglas's dissent in *Roth*, emphasizing that giving to the "average person" the power to determine whether a book is obscene and thus fit for suppression, or not, is a disastrous policy for minority groups. As Rembar puts it, "the First Amendment is a cheap thing if all it provides is the assurance that one may say what a current majority is willing to hear."²⁰¹ Rembar argued that in the *Roth* decision

The negation of the *Hicklin* test expressed in the phrases 'average person' and 'contemporary community standards' does not mean that the rights guaranteed by the First Amendment are to be determined by conducting a Gallup Poll among the population at large. The phrases were not meant to limit writers and publishers to the average person's conception of the kind of writing that ought to be published, *or to limit a minority of readers to the kind of reading that a majority might think good for them.*²⁰²

²⁰⁰ *Roth v. U.S.* (1957), emphasis added.

²⁰¹ Rembar, 119. Justice Douglas, dissenting in *Roth*, anticipated this argument: "Any test that turns on what is offensive to the community's standards is too loose, too capricious, too destructive of freedom of expression to be squared with the First Amendment. Under that test, juries can censor, suppress, and punish what they don't like, provided the matter relates to 'sexual impurity' or has a tendency 'to excite lustful thoughts.' This is community censorship in one of its worst forms. It creates a regime where, in the battle between the literati and the Philistines, the Philistines are certain to win."

²⁰² Rembar, 122. My emphasis.

As Justice Douglas had pointed out, it had become an accepted tenet by this time that even if one person in a thousand in America supported a particular political program, it would be unconstitutional to restrict that person's speech on that subject because it does not conform to the average thought. Rembar effectively argued that the same should apply to sex, and Brennan's crucial 1966 formulation, that "a book cannot be proscribed unless it is found to be utterly without redeeming social value,"²⁰³ embraces the argument: even if only the tiniest minority of Americans finds a book compelling and worthwhile, how could anyone claim it is "utterly without redeeming social value"? The result of this approach to obscenity was to grant virtually unlimited protection to speech precisely because it is the minority's right to speech that is being protected, even to the extent that the protected speech contradicts the beliefs of the political majority. "It cannot be stressed too often," Rembar remarked, "that it was the United States Constitution that saved these books, and not the will of the people."²⁰⁴

Rembar himself did not ascribe his defense of obscenity as a minority rights issue to a personal concern for the minority rights of Jews, but one of the most influential First Amendment lawyers of the next generation, Martin Garbus, does precisely that. In a memoir, *Traitors and Heroes* (1987), Garbus explains his remarkable commitment to First Amendment law—he served as the Associate Director of the ACLU, and, among other things, defended Lenny Bruce—in terms of his family background. As Garbus tells the story, his father had been crippled in a pogrom in Poland as a child and lost many relatives in the Holocaust. Garbus lived through his boyhood in the Bronx, during World War II, "terrified both by the people who ran this country and by the specters of Nazism

²⁰³ *Memoirs v. Massachusetts* (1966).

²⁰⁴ Rembar, 169.

and anti-Semitism." Precisely because of his resulting sensitivity to the precarious position of minority groups, he staunchly defends free speech. He explains: "The only alternative to freedom for any group is power. But minority groups will rarely have the means sufficient to avoid injustice." Thus, in Garbus's view, free speech protects minorities from the persecution and hatred that led to the Holocaust. "Does an absolute commitment to the protection of free speech ensure that there will not be another era of mass killings?" he asks. "Of course not. But on balance there is a better chance of its not happening again if the government is not given the power to decide what we can say."²⁰⁵ Garbus makes explicit what many of his colleagues do not, which is that a consciousness of minority status that comes with his being an American Jew—of being a part of one of the "minority groups" without "the means sufficient to avoid injustice"—is one key reason he defends civil liberties generally and freedom of speech in particular.²⁰⁶

American Jews have not universally felt themselves to be excluded minorities, of course. Many of the Jewish critics and scholars who have forthrightly advocated censorship—such as Irving Kristol and Harry Clor—have done so by implicitly or explicitly claiming an affinity with the values of the American majority and insisting that those majoritarian values deserve protection.²⁰⁷ This attitude is captured well in the testimony that the American Jewish writer Leon Uris gave at a Los Angeles trial of

²⁰⁵ Garbus, *Traitors and Heroes*, xiii-xv.

²⁰⁶ One of the more direct ways that consciousness of the Holocaust impinged upon the question of obscenity in America was that the Nazis transformed the burning of books into an unsympathetic practice in the U.S. In the 1930s, the NYSSV cheerfully burned books on a regular basis and Sumner welcomed the press to photograph him tossing books into a raging furnace. The organization's seal featured an image of a man in a top hat throwing books on a bonfire, an image that would become considerably less sympathetic after newsreels of Nazi book burnings. See Gertzman, 135-36. For an overview of book burning in Jewish culture, see Stephen Whitfield, "Where They Burn Books," *Modern Judaism* 22:3 (2002): 213-33.

²⁰⁷ Kristol, "Pornography, Obscenity, and the Case for Censorship"; Harry Clor, *Obscenity and Public Morality: Censorship in a Liberal Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. "We have codes that we live by," Uris testified. "They were started in Mount Sinai, and we have traditions of ethics. . . . I believe we have a right to defend ourselves against this type of garbage [Miller's book] the same way we would any other ordinary criminal or any pervert walking the streets of Los Angeles. I think we have a community duty to defend ourselves against this type of thing."²⁰⁸ Asserting that "traditions of ethics" unite all Americans—and claiming that these ethics "started in Mount Sinai," rather than, say, with the Sermon on the Mount—Uris identifies himself as part of a majority, as a member of a putative Judeo-Christian "we" with a "community duty" to uphold its values.²⁰⁹ An embrace of censorship seems eminently reasonable coming from a member of the majority, concerned with preserving that group's status and values.²¹⁰ But to the extent that other American Jews have continued to identify as members of a minority group, or kept alive a sensitivity to minority concerns based on previous experiences of exclusion, they have had a powerful motivation to defend free speech, including the use of obscenity, as a means for protecting minority rights.²¹¹

²⁰⁸ Quoted in Stanley Fleischman, "Obscenity and Witchcraft," *Wilson Library Bulletin* (April 1965), 642.

²⁰⁹ On the creation of a "Judeo-Christian" tradition during WWII, see Deborah Dash Moore, "Worshipping Together," *G. I. Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 188-155.

²¹⁰ A more recent, nuanced, and formidable elaboration of the arguments made earlier by Clor, Kristol, and Uris is Rochelle Gurstein's *The Repeal of Reticence: A History of America's Cultural and Legal Struggles over Free Speech, Obscenity, Sexual Liberation, and Modern Art* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996). An able and resourceful historian, Gurstein sounds very much like her predecessors—and she quotes Kristol and Clor approvingly—in her calls for "judgment and taste," and in her lamentation of "the impoverishment of our public conversation and the debasement of our common world" (304, 261). Her concern with changing cultural standards is certainly sympathetic, but her suggestion that all Americans must share values about which discussions should be made public seems remarkably dismissive of the cultural and intellectual diversity that exists within American culture.

²¹¹ One good reason for traditional Jews to defend obscenity, per se, as part of a defense of their rights as a minority group is that the Talmud itself has often been banned and called obscene. On the well-known censorship and burning of the Talmud in early modern Europe, see Raz-Krakotzkin, *The Censor*, 32-56. It may be more surprising that the Talmud has regularly been deemed obscene by Anglo-American observers. At the beginning of the 19th century, John Allen asserted, in his *Modern Judaism: Or, a Brief Account of the Opinions, Traditions, Rites, and Ceremonies of the Jews in Modern Times* (London: T. Hamilton,

VI. *Tsnius*, or Yiddish in America

The various stakes of an engagement with obscenity rarely, if ever, operate in isolation. Over the course of a long career and in many written statements, Morris Ernst, for one example, seems to have found meaning in his defense of obscenity in all four of the ways described above, not to mention the vast sums he earned in his legal practice or the satisfaction he derived from rejecting and then transforming a facet of the legal system. Attending to a few other American Jews famous or infamous for their uses and defenses of obscenity clarifies that a determination of the stakes of a particular figure's engagement with obscenity as a Jew requires a thoughtful treatment of that individual's

1816), that "there are multitudes [of traditions] in the Talmud, of which some cannot but disgust by their *filthiness*, and others must excite detestation by their *obscenity*." Not wanting to "offend the chaste reader," Allen quoted a single example of the former, from *Berachot* 62a, in Latin, so that "the filthiness" will be "partly concealed under the veil of a dead language" (144-45). Many decades later, obscenity was still understood to be one of the features of the Talmud: *The Century* magazine quoted Jewish convert to Christianity and missionary to Jews Alfred Edersheim (1825-1889) to the effect that "if . . . we imagine something containing law reports, a rabbinical 'Hansard,' and notes of a theological debating club—all thoroughly Oriental, full of discussions, anecdotes, quaint sayings, fancies, legends, and too often of what from its profanity, superstition, and even obscenity, could scarcely be quoted—we may form some general idea of what the Talmud is." Richard Wheatly, "The Jews in New York—II," *The Century* 43:4 (February 1892): 512-32. Quotation at 520. A few years later, Zebulun Baird Vance, a former governor of North Carolina and U.S. Senator, in a short lecture on the history and culture of Jews and Judaism, referred to the Talmud as "the most remarkable collection of oriental wisdom, obstruse learning, piety, blasphemy and obscenity ever got together in the world." *The Scattered Nation* (New York: J. J. Little and Co., 1904), 23. While the suppression of David Pinski's *Temptations*, discussed below in this chapter, was essentially a suppression of Pinski's loose translations and adaptations of Talmudic and midrashic narratives, as far as I know the Talmud itself has never been successfully censored in the U.S. One relatively recent case, *Graydon Snyder v. Chicago Theological Seminary*, 94 L 1423 (Cir. Ct., Cook Co., Ill. 1994), ended with the awarding of damages to a Chicago Theological Seminary professor who had been disciplined for sexual harassment for referring to *B. Yevamot* 54a. See Dirk Johnson, "A Sexual Harassment Case to Test Academic Freedom," *New York Times* (May 11, 1994), D23. Still, given the "local community standards" test established in *Miller* (1973), and the precedent of *Bethel School District v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675 (1986), which established the constitutionality of a public school punishing a student for a speech that contained vague sexual innuendo, it is not impossible to imagine that given the right circumstances a U.S. court could allow a school district to ban as illegal obscenity the teaching of the Talmud to children.

work and life within its historical contexts. To take perhaps the most celebrated example, we might ask what drove Lenny Bruce's engagements with obscenity.

The answers differ depending on which Bruce routine we listen to, or which biography we read, but it seems clear that Bruce's attraction to obscenity was part speaker's benefit, part a defense of minority rights, part rage—and in his famed quip that "rabbis and priests both s-h-i-t, but only one f-u-c-k-s ... You see, in Jewish culture, there's no merit badge for not doing that," Bruce invokes obscenity to argue, in Lewisohnian fashion, that a Jewish approach to sexuality is healthier, more natural, and less hypocritical than its non-Jewish counterpart.²¹² It can be argued that Bruce's obscenity was meaningful to him, as a Jew, in any number of ways. Similar observations could be made about figures ranging from Bruce's fellow comedians—Belle Barth and Sarah Silverman leap immediately to mind—to a translator like Isaac Goldberg, a bookseller like Frances Steloff, a poet like Allen Ginsberg, a publisher like Ralph Ginzburg, a librarian like Judith Krug, or porn stars like Ron Jeremy, Annie Sprinkle, and Joanna Angel.²¹³ What bears emphasis about Bruce's case is that while he shocked and

²¹² John Cohen, ed., *The Essential Lenny Bruce* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967), 44.

²¹³ For an introduction to Barth, see Sarah Blacher Cohen, "The Unkosher Comediennes: From Sophie Tucker to Joan Rivers," in *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 105-24. For Silverman, Dana Goodyear, "Quiet Depravity," *New Yorker* (October 24, 2005). For Goldberg, see my "American *Shmutz*: Isaac Goldberg and the Idea of Obscene Yiddish," in *Choosing Yiddish: Studies in Yiddish Literature, Culture, and History*, eds. Lara Rabinovitch, Hannah Pressman, and Shiri Goren (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), forthcoming. For Steloff, William Garland Rogers, *Wise Men Fish Here: Frances Steloff and the Gotham Book Mart* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965). For Ginsberg, Bill Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: Viking, 2006). For Ginzburg, Steven Heller, "Ralph Ginzburg, 76, Publisher in Obscenity Case, Dies," *New York Times* (July 7, 2006). For Krug, Douglas Martin, "Judith Krug, Who Fought Ban on Books, Dies at 69," *New York Times* (April 14, 2009). For Jeremy, Dena Ross, "That Jewish Porn Star," *Beliefnet.org* (n/d) <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Celebrities/That-Jewish-Porn-Star.aspx>. For Annie Sprinkle, Linda Williams, "A Provoking Agent: The Pornography and Performance of Annie Sprinkle," in *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power*, ed. Pamela Gibson and Roma Gibson (London: BFI Publishing, 1993), 46-61. For Angel, Robert Lanham, "Wearing Nothing But Attitude," *New York Times* (May 1, 2005), and Arye Dworken, "Kiss Your Mother with That Mouth? Part 1," *Jewcy.com* (November 15, 2006).

appalled many, he was by no means rejected by the Jewish community. On the contrary, like many modernist authors he benefited from a petition signed by more than a hundred major cultural figures that affirmed not only his right to produce his art, but also, if less directly, his individual importance as an artist. What other stand-up comedian could boast that his work was formally endorsed by a coalition of American Jewish cultural arbiters as impressive and varied as Bruce's, which included among others Theodor Reik, Bob Dylan, Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, Lillian Helman, Norman Mailer, Arthur Miller, Susan Sontag, Jules Feiffer, Nat Hentoff, Alfred Kazin, Philip Rahv, Harvey Swados, Lionel Trilling, Richard Gilman, Robert Gottlieb, Irving Howe, William Phillips, Norman Podhoretz, and Barney Rosset?²¹⁴

That the American Jewish community supported Bruce seems to have been highly meaningful to him. In a performance on "The Steve Allen Show," on May 10, 1959, he intimated as much with his opening joke. Bruce first quoted two unsympathetic critics, holding up newspapers and reading aloud from their reviews of his last television appearance. "The bad taste award should be given to Lenny Bruce, who outshattered every other comedian on television this year," one wrote. "But then," Bruce continued, getting to his punchline, "finally, a newspaper with some integrity came forth." Brandishing a copy of the *Forverts*, America's best-known Yiddish newspaper (see figure 2.2), he pretended to quote from it (in English): "Last night, a star was born." The

²¹⁴ On this petition, see Thomas Buckley, "100 Fight Arrest of Lenny Bruce," *New York Times* (June 14, 1964), 75.

audience roared.²¹⁵ His implication was, of course, that in Jewish circles, his art met no resistance—an exaggeration, certainly, but not one without a hint of truth to it.



Figure 2.2. Lenny Bruce using the *Forverts* as a prop on "The Steve Allen Show."

Picking up on one implication of Bruce's joke, I would like to conclude by circling back to the topics of hierarchy, censorship, and modesty. The extraordinary latitudinarianism of American Jewish culture did not, as mentioned above, in and of itself impel any American Jews to engage with obscenity, nor did being Jewish exempt American Jews from the penalties that American law imposed on the authors and publishers of obscenity. What American Jewish latitudinarianism provided was, first, the security that one's engagements with obscenity would not result in complete alienation from Jewish communities or culture. Second, American Yiddish culture, for those who had linguistic access to it, offered reassurance that representational and moral standards

²¹⁵ This performance is replayed in the 1972 documentary *Lenny Bruce Without Tears*, DVD, directed by Fred Baker (New York: First Run Features, 2005).

could be maintained in a literary marketplace without state censorship—or, in short, that a model of modesty, rather than censorship, could work. For if it was not exactly true, as Bruce's joke suggested, that Yiddish readers unanimously applauded his naughty bits, it was true that whether his Yiddish-speaking audiences found his work funny or reprehensible, they had power to express those responses only through their roles as audience members or cultural professionals, and not through the American courts.

In stark contrast to Russia, where the Tsarist regime and the Soviets censored Yiddish literature intensely and sometimes brutally,²¹⁶ American authorities rarely, if ever, censored Yiddish publications. I have discovered only two examples of American Yiddish texts being formally suppressed, both at the high point of the American political censorship, during and after WWI. Ben-Zion Liber's *Dos geshlekhts lebn* [*The Sexual Life*], mentioned above, was suppressed by the U.S. Postal Service in 1917. Liber claimed that the text was censored not for its sexual content but because of its socialist politics, but it seems equally likely that a non-Yiddish-speaking post office employee had flipped to the back of the book and blanched at the anatomical diagrams that Liber included. In any case, after Liber protested the suppression with an article in the *New Republic*, the Postal Service relented, imposing a few silly emendations on the text and allowing the book to be mailed.²¹⁷ The other case, *Abrams v. U.S.* (1919), also mentioned above, concerned anarchist pamphlets published in both Yiddish and English, but it is unclear

²¹⁶ On the censorship of Yiddish under the Tsar, see David Fishman, "The Politics of Yiddish in Tsarist Russia," in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Intellect in Quest of Understanding: Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox*, 155-71. For an overview of Yiddish censorship under the Soviets, see David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture, 1918-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 125-31.

²¹⁷ See "This Book and the Post Office" in the fourth edition (New York: Rational Living, 1927), 5, and B. Liber, "Dr. Liber and the Post Office," *The New Republic* 20:249 (August 13, 1919): 61.

whether the texts would have attracted attention and been vulnerable to prosecution if they had been distributed in Yiddish only.²¹⁸ (The same could be said about the role of taboo Yiddish words in Bruce's arrests.)²¹⁹ I have not discovered a single case in which the suppression of Yiddish *belles lettres* was upheld by a U.S. court. Contrary to the facile suggestion of the editors of *The Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature*, though, that "the First Amendment assured the [Yiddish] press freedom from censorship,"²²⁰ it should be clear that the freedom of expression enjoyed by Yiddish writers and publishers in America beginning in the 19th century was hardly the American norm, nor had it anything to do with the First Amendment, which did little to protect politically and sexually radical publications in English at that time.

Reflecting the differential standards for the two languages, Yiddish texts were occasionally bowdlerized upon translation into English, or they attracted the censors when they were not carefully revised. Aviva Taubenfeld has shown that Abraham Cahan included taboo English words in the Yiddish version of his first novel, *Yankl der Yankee* (serialized from October 18, 1895 to January 31, 1896) that do not appear in the English

²¹⁸ On this case generally, see Richard Polenberg, *Fighting Faiths: The Abrams Case, the Supreme Court, and Free Speech* (New York: Viking, 1987), and on the belated and questionable translation of the Yiddish leaflet, 51-55.

²¹⁹ Bruce's biographers love to point out that one of the Los Angeles policemen who arrested Bruce in October 1962 translated his Yiddish profanities for the court. The policeman, Sherman Block—who, incidentally, later became the first Jewish sheriff of Los Angeles County—apparently reported that Bruce "uttered obscene and offensive words including a reference to his ex-wife as being the type that became upset when he entered the bathroom while she was 'fressing' the maid. The term 'fressing' is Yiddish and means 'eating.' To 'eat' a person is a reference to committing an act of oral copulation upon that person. Throughout his narration suspect interjected the terms 'shmuck' and 'putz,' which are Yiddish, and mean 'penis.' Suspect also used the word 'shtup,' a Yiddish word meaning sexual intercourse when used in the context that the suspect used it." Albert Goldman, from the journalism of Lawrence Schiller, *Ladies and Gentlemen, Lenny Bruce!!* (New York: Random House, 1974), 388. While the use of these Yiddish words (the actual offensiveness or even explicitness of which is hardly clear) may not have helped Bruce's case, it seems unlikely he would have been targeted by police if he had not also used English taboo words. See also Ronald Collins, *The Trials of Lenny Bruce* (Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks, 2002), 100-01.

²²⁰ Jules Chametzky et al., eds., *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* (New York: Norton, 2001), 115.

version, *Yekl* (1896). Cahan replaced the words "hell" and "damn" (which he rendered phonetically as English words in the Yiddish text) with dashes in the English version.²²¹

This move demonstrates Cahan's canniness; he knew what to expect from the two different linguistic markets. Others were not as careful. In 1920, the NYSSV requested that Lowell Brentano stop distributing copies of a book of translations of David Pinski's short stories, *Temptations*, which Brentano had published the previous year, citing "the alleged immorality" of the first three stories.²²² Brentano apparently complied with the request rather than engage in a costly legal defense.²²³ More famously, Sholem Asch's play *Got fun nekome* occasioned no legal attacks or suppression in its Yiddish iterations in 1907 or 1908, but when it was translated into English as *God of Vengeance* and performed on Broadway in 1923, the producer and actors were arrested for immorality.²²⁴

²²¹ Aviva Taubenfeld, "'Only an 'L'": Linguistic Borders and the Immigrant Author in Abraham Cahan's *Yekl* and *Yankl der Yankee*," in *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 157-58.

²²² Lowell Brentano to Isaac Goldberg, April 2, 1920. Isaac Goldberg Papers, New York Public Library, Box 1. For the composition dates and Yiddish texts, see *Beruriah un andere dertseylungen* (Warsaw: Farlag Ch. Brzoza, 1938). "The Temptations of Rabbi Akiva," which, according to Goldberg, was most offensive to readers, simply elaborates narratives from traditional texts; for Pinski's sources, see *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, trans. Judah Goldin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 84, and *B. Kuddishin* 81a.

²²³ Goldberg indicates as much in his brief account of the suppression in "Anomalies of Censorship," *Reflex* 1:2 (August 1927): 56-57.

²²⁴ Detailing the earliest controversies, Nina Warnke remarks that "despite the fervent passions on both sides, their fight did not create the public spectacle that the 1923 production would later do, because performance and debate were kept largely within the linguistic realm of Yiddish and the geographical confines of the immigrant quarters—that is, on the periphery of American society" (64). "*Got fun nekome*: The 1907 Controversy over Art and Morality," *Sholem Asch Reconsidered*, ed. Nanette Stahl (New Haven: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, 2004), 63-77. In the best article to date on the 1923 trial, Harley Erdman emphasizes that the controversy resulted from a "conflict between American Jewish communities in that transitional ground between the margins and the mainstream," and was not simply a case in which Jews were the "free-speakers [pitted] against the moralistic forces of censorship and status quo." What bears mentioning, in response to Erdman, is that the controversy in 1907-1908 was *also* largely contained within the Jewish community; the difference was that in the earlier, Yiddish controversy, those Jews who wished to see the play censored could not convince the state authorities—the police and courts—to act as their enforcers, whereas when the play was produced in English, such state cooperation was obtainable. Harley Erdman, "Jewish Anxiety in 'Days of Judgment': Community Conflict, Anti-Semitism,

What in a Yiddish text passed unnoticed by vice societies and postal censors, and unenforced by police and the courts, in other words, regularly stirred up considerable trouble when translated into English. Why the double standard? The simplest explanation is not, of course, that the government had any special respect for Yiddish freedom of expression in contrast to its censorious approach to English. More simply, the government and vice societies did not care to hire Yiddish-speaking censors.²²⁵

Aside from complicating the life of translators and publishers somewhat, the differential standard of obscenity for Yiddish literary production in America did not lead to dire consequences. There was no resulting boom in Yiddish literary pornography. There may have been plenty of *shund*—trashy Yiddish melodrama—on American stages and pages, but this genre did not generally compete with *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or *Ulysses* in representing sex explicitly or using taboo words, and, more to the point, *shund*, like all literature, operates under constraints imposed by markets and publishers.²²⁶ The important difference from the English-language situation was that in American Yiddish, such limits and restraints were imposed not by the government or the postal service, but

and the *God of Vengeance* Obscenity Case," *Theatre Survey* 40:1 (May 1999): 51-74. Decades later, in London, the government deputized a rabbi to decide which Yiddish plays could and could not be performed, again ending a Jewish community controversy by giving state support to one of the contesting parties. See Leonard Prager, "The Censorship of Sholem Asch's *Got fun nekome*, London, 1946," in *Yiddish Theater: New Approaches*, ed. Joel Berkowitz (Oxford, Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003), 175-87.

²²⁵ A comprehensive comparative analysis of whether other languages with major presences in the United States in the early 20th century were similarly exempted from censorship, though beyond the scope of this chapter, would be a worthwhile project. My impression is that, with some exceptions, works in other languages, like those in Yiddish, would have usually not been the subject of censorship—especially if written in a non-Roman alphabet that postal censors could not easily recognize and read. On the particular effort to suppress French erotica in the mid-1920s, see Boyer, 209.

²²⁶ While the terms "pornography" and "pornographic" were bandied about frequently with reference to *shund* in the Yiddish press in both Europe and America, Nathan Cohen's observation about the Polish example, that "the novels in the newspapers were usually far from pornographic, limiting themselves to sporadic hints of eroticism," would seem to apply equally well to American *shund*. Nathan Cohen, "*Shund* and the Tabloids: Jewish Popular Reading in Inter-War Poland," *Polin* 16 (2003), 205.

by the authors, editors, publishers, reviewers, booksellers, and audience members—the direct participants in the "communications circuit" that constitutes literary production.²²⁷

The Yiddish language sphere roiled with debates about what constituted acceptable literature, but such debates did not reach the courts.

Perhaps the most dramatic marker of the difference between Yiddish and English literary disputes is Sholem Aleichem's *Shomers mishpet* [*The Judgement of Shomer*] (1888), a classic work of Yiddish literary critique presented in the form of a trial transcript. Sholem Aleichem attacks the most popular Yiddish novelist of the late 19th century, Shomer (Nahum-Meir Shaykevitch), arguing through the voice of a prosecuting attorney that Shomer "is not truly a Yiddish writer" and that his work does not deserve to be read. Sholem Aleichem's selection of a literary trial as the form for his critique is suggestive: especially as "*nibul peh*" ["obscenity"] is one of the features of Shomer's prose that Sholem Aleichem repeatedly castigates, it seems likely that he drew inspiration from the notorious trials of Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and other *belles lettres* in mid-19th-century France.²²⁸ Unlike those cases, of course, and the literary trials held in America in the 20th century, *Shomers mishpet* is only a metaphor. Influential as the work may have been, unlike Comstock and Sumner, Sholem Aleichem had no authority to arrest booksellers or confiscate books. All he could do was attempt to persuade his readers—including the editors and booksellers that enabled

²²⁷ Darnton, "What Is the History of Books?"

²²⁸ Sholem Aleichem, *Shomers mishpet* (Berdichev: Yakov Sheptil, 1888); Sholem Aleichem, "The Judgment of Shomer, or The Jury Trial of All of Shomer's Novels," trans. Justin Cammy, in *Arguing the Modern Jewish Canon: Essays on Literature and Culture in Honor of Ruth R. Wisse*, eds. Justin Cammy et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies, 2009), 129-85. See pages 8, 23, 24 in the Yiddish, 135, 142, 143 in the English. For a recent study of the French trials and their consequences, see Elizabeth Ladenson, *Dirt for Art's Sake: Books on Trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 1-77.

Shomer's success—that his judgment should be theirs. Shomer was free not only to respond, but also to continue publishing his work to the extent the market supported it. "You empty critics can say what you want," he wrote in response to Sholem Aleichem, "scream in the streets that my novels are foolish, pass verdicts against me as much as your hearts desire ... [but] I will continue to write fairy tales for my readers which, thank God, are helpful to thousands of people."²²⁹

Similar controversies weren't unusual in American Yiddish. One contretemps, in 1908-1909, focused on the Russian novel *Sanin* and its translation to Yiddish by Leon Kobrin and serialization in the *Varheynt*, one of New York's daily Yiddish newspapers.²³⁰ Another, in the early 1920s, concerned "*grobe verter un sheyne literatur*" ["vulgar speech and *belles-lettres*"] in the poetry of Moshe-Leyb Halpern.²³¹ Even more controversially, in the 1930s Sholem Asch began to write a trilogy of Yiddish novels dealing sympathetically with the lives of Jesus, Mary, and Paul. Many Yiddish readers were appalled. Abraham Cahan, who had regularly published Asch's work in the *Forverts*, refused to publish anything by the author. Mock trials were held and Asch was judged guilty. Yet thanks to the latitudinarianism of the Yiddish literary market and its frank competitiveness, Asch soon found a new venue and saw his work in print despite the

²²⁹ Quoted in Justin Cammy, "Judging *The Judgment of Shomer*: Jewish Literature versus Jewish Reading," in *Arguing the Modern Jewish Canon*, 103.

²³⁰ Ellen Kellman, "Educating 'Moyshe' or Corrupting Him?: Polemics around the Novel *Sanin* in the American Yiddish Press circa 1908," Workmen's Circle/Emanuel Patt Lecture, YIVO/Center for Jewish History, March 30, 2009.

²³¹ On this debate, see Ruth Wisse, *A Little Love in Big Manhattan: Two Yiddish Poets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 125-28; Julian Levinson, "Modernism from Below: Moyshe-Leyb Halpern and the Situation of Yiddish Poetry," *Jewish Social Studies* 10:3 (Spring/Summer 2004): 143-60; and Yankev Glatshteyn, "'Grobe reyde' in literatur" ["'Coarse Speech' in Literature"], *Yidisher kempfer* (December 4, 1964), reprinted in *Prost un poshet: Literarische esayen* (New York: Knight Printing Corporation, 1978), 39-40.

vigorous opposition to him.²³² If not quite rising to the level of the Asch debacle, such controversies occurred so commonly that they could devolve into absurdity; one newspaper critic pointed out in 1964 that while under one pseudonym, the writer known in English as Isaac Bashevis Singer railed against the dirtiness of modern literature, under another he produced precisely the sort of fiction to which he had objected.²³³ Such literary disputes and controversies were not unique to American Yiddish, of course, but in American Yiddish the means of suppression internal to the literary system, including vehement critiques, boycotts, and refusals to publish, were the only forms of literary suppression available. The police, the post office, the courts, and the customs department were not, in the cases of Yiddish writing, willing or able to lend a hand.

Attention to this characteristic of the American Yiddish literary market helps to resolve an odd contradiction in the remarks of two knowledgeable Yiddish critics. One, Isaac Goldberg, a Harvard PhD in modern languages who energetically promoted American Yiddish literature in the 1910s and 1920s, observed in 1918 that "the theme of sex ... is treated by Yiddish writers with far greater freedom than would be permitted to their American confrères. ... The Yiddish public will listen to and read, without hiding it, much of what the American public would affect not to care for, only to read it surreptitiously."²³⁴ A few years later, Goldberg waxed enthusiastic about "Yiddish sex in art," noting the vigorous eroticism of American Yiddish writers: "It may flow deep and strong, as in Pinski; it may seethe and burst all bonds of social restraint, as in Ash; it may

²³² Anita Norich, *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish American Culture During the Holocaust* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 88.

²³³ See Janet Hadda, *Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 138.

²³⁴ Isaac Goldberg, "New York's Yiddish Writers," *The Bookman* 46:6 (February 1918), 687.

turn harsh and brutal, as in Kobrin; it may frisk about and tease, as in Hirschbein; it may blossom as an exotic, as in Opatoshu; but always it is there."²³⁵ Yiddish literature, according to Goldberg, dealt resonantly and directly with sex. Yet a half-century later, the poet and critic Yankev Glatshiteyn (Jacob Glatstein) asserted that Yiddish had become "one of the most modest [*tsniusdikste*] languages in world literature."²³⁶ How could Glatshiteyn, a leading authority on Yiddish literature, have made such a claim?

On the simplest level, the answer is that Glatshiteyn's vision of Yiddish literature, like Sholem Aleichem's before him, was a polemical one. Sholem Aleichem had declared that Shomer simply didn't count as Yiddish literature, while Glatshiteyn implies the same thing about his rivals, in not so many words. He declares that "Yiddish possesses many 'healthy' vulgar expressions, with sexual insinuations" [*"grobe oysdrukn, mit geshlekhthlekher ontsuherenish"*] but claims that the language "bears simply no coarse expressions—certainly not in the literature—and no writer ventures to break this bridle, except those who are sure that they write in the first place for the translation market."²³⁷ Any reader familiar with American Yiddish literature should recognize that Glatshiteyn's reference to the "translation market" constitutes a dig at Asch and especially Bashevis Singer, who was by the time of Glatshiteyn's essay famous worldwide because of the English translations of his work. The truth was emphatically not that Yiddish literature

²³⁵ Isaac Goldberg, *The Spirit of Yiddish Literature*, Little Blue Book No. 732 (Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Co., 1925), 42-43.

²³⁶ Glatshiteyn, "*Grobe reyde*" in *literatur*," 39. My translation.

²³⁷ Glatshiteyn, "*Grobe reyde*" in *literatur*," 39.

"bears simply no coarse expressions"—Bashevis's *Der sotn in goray* (1935) bears plenty²³⁸—but that Yiddish literature *as Glatshiteyn construes it* refuses to do so.

In Glatshiteyn's attempt to reshape the boundaries of his literary tradition, he demonstrates that tradition's reliance on *tsnius* (modesty). As discussed above, since American Jewish authorities have not regularly been able to impose their beliefs on other Jews through coercion or legislation, they have relied on discourses of modesty to shift the burden of choosing proper conduct and speech onto the individual and onto publishers and literary professionals. Glatshiteyn's essay tacitly acknowledges that he cannot suppress or prohibit Bashevis's work except by convincing his readers to agree with his judgments about Yiddish literature and what they should read.

What the publishers, editors, lawyers, judges, sexologists, and writers whose stories have been told in this chapter accomplished was to bring English-language American culture much closer to this American Yiddish situation—though the vast majority of them remained ignorant that Yiddish American culture anticipated them and few would have thought of themselves as promoting modesty. By repealing or undermining the enforcement of laws that allowed the post office, custom agents, and vice societies to determine which texts can or cannot circulate, the American Jews who produced and defended obscenity did not argue that four-letter words or graphic representations of sexuality should be ubiquitous in our culture. In a sense, they placed the burden of modesty on individual Americans. To the extent that they have been successful, it is now the role of readers, publishers, and critics to decide what is and is not fit for reading. Inevitably some readers disagree with others, and some publishers ascribe tremendous value to material that others reject as worthless or harmful, but under the

²³⁸ See, e.g., Yitshok Bashevis, *Sotn in goray un andere dertseylungen* (New York: Matones, 1943), 166.

Brennan doctrine, at least, all are free to abide by the standards of their personal modesty.

Isaac Goldberg phrased this well, in one of his many essays on censorship and obscenity:

The Censor ... may not always be wrong in wishing to do away with the object of his disapproval. The wrong lies in his method. He is a King who can do no wrong. His wish must be law. There is no argument; no discussion. There is only obedience.

This is obviously preposterous.

Let him believe what he pleases to believe; let him work in the interests of that belief. But why seek, by law and other compulsion, to tie his opponent hand and foot? Why deny to ideas different from his own the right to death—or life—in the open field?²³⁹

This was not, for Goldberg, a sneaky way of foisting perversion on America. He tended to prudery in his personal affairs, especially when it came to speaking or writing taboo words.²⁴⁰ But "what we ourselves do not like, we can abstain from, without visiting our fears or our dislikes upon others," he wrote.²⁴¹ Latitudinarianism and freedom of expression, as Goldberg understood, does not mean accepting the equal validity of all positions and beliefs: it means taking the power of taste and decision-making out of the hands of politicians and officials. In this narrow sense, Irving Howe is correct in his observation that "over the centuries the Jews had developed a cultural style encouraging prudishness and self-censorship: there were things everyone knew, had no choice but to

²³⁹ Isaac Goldberg, *The New Immorality: A Little Dictionary of Unorthodox Opinion*, Little Blue Book No. 1481 (Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Co., 1929), 25. I would like to thank Thomas M. Whitehead of the Special Collections Department at Temple University Libraries for providing me with a copy of this source.

²⁴⁰ Referring to himself in the third person in one essay, Goldberg noted that he "finds it difficult to endure, even from close friends, the type of humor that originates in digestion, elimination and their various functions, and even the common words that describe those functions. His habitual vocabulary, in fact, with only occasional expressions, is as pure as dreamless sleep." Isaac Goldberg, "Index Librorum Prohibitorum," *Panorama* (May 1934), 5.

²⁴¹ "Index Librorum Prohibitorum," *Panorama* (April 1934), 5. See also Goldberg, "Smut and Pornography," *Panorama* (January 1934), 4.

know, yet only rarely was it deemed proper to speak or write about them."²⁴² Howe's passive voice obscures a crucial element of his observation. The people who deemed it proper or improper to "speak or write about" particularly sensitive "things" in Jewish culture were, most often, individual Jews—and they did so on the basis of their instincts and principles about propriety, informed by Jewish tradition as well as a wide number of factors in their environments and historical contingencies.

In the 1960s, thanks to the interventions discussed in this chapter, the English-language literary sphere in America became more like the Yiddish-language literary sphere that thrived in America for decades. That is, it became a communications circuit in which people continued to disagree about what should be published and discussed, about how best to represent sexuality, and about which words and images should be displayed in public; in which some people were motivated to cross boundaries of propriety and to transgress conventional morality because of their preferences, beliefs, values, and desires; but in which centralized authorities of state and church very rarely intervened directly in publishing and literary production with any formal, institutional power.

VII. Lew Rosen, Obscenity, and Jewishness

What, then, of Lew Rosen, the publisher sentenced to 13 months at hard labor for mailing a copy of *Broadway* with pictures of naked women covered over with lamp black—why did *he* do it? What were the stakes, for him, in that engagement with obscenity? Was he desperate for money that month? Did he find it funny to undermine

²⁴² Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 96.

Comstock and his associates? Was he committed to pornography as an aid to sexual health? Were the pictures representative of trends in the theater that he thought valid as art? As it happens, the historical record does not offer enough information to answer these questions with any clarity. It is clear that by the time Rosen's sentence was upheld by the Supreme Court, he had left the country and moved to London, England. From there, he contributed a breezy weekly column of literary and cultural gossip and chat to the *Washington Post* at least until January of 1902. I have not been able to discover what happened to him after that, except for one indication he died in 1909.²⁴³

Does it matter, then, that Lew Rosen was Jewish? Was his commitment to fighting his conviction for obscenity all the way up to the U.S. Supreme Court somehow related to his ethnic or religious identity? The answer, in this case, is that we do not know. We can only speculate, because there is no inevitable link between his, or anyone else's, Jewishness and the use of obscenity, and in Rosen's case not enough historical evidence is available from which to make a persuasive argument (at least not yet; perhaps another researcher will turn up sources that I have missed). The brief studies of various American Jews' involvements with obscenity in this chapter dramatize a number of the major ways in which obscenity contained meaning and value for various American Jews, as Jews, but these motivations cannot be ascribed, without further consideration, to any individual American Jew and certainly not to American Jews as a demographic group or cultural collective. The chapters that follow focus more intently on literature, closely examining selected engagements of obscenity by American Jewish writers to reveal, in

²⁴³ Harold S. Sharp, *Handbook of Pseudonyms and Personal Nicknames*, First Supplement (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1975), 1115.

more detail than I have been able to do here, what was at stake for them, and for American literature as a field of cultural production, in these controversial engagements.

CHAPTER 3.
Unclean Lips: Taboo Words, *Call It Sleep*, and the Beginning of the 1960s

"Roth was Jewish. You should think about that."
— Lenny Bruce¹

I. The Moment of *Call It Sleep*

On September 14th, 1933, Henry Roth completed a draft of the manuscript that would become *Call It Sleep* (1935). "The novel is finished," he wrote in his journal, marking the event.² Three months later, on December 6th, Federal Judge John Woolsey announced his verdict on a case that would have interested Roth, *U.S. v. One Book Called 'Ulysses'*. Woolsey's hotly anticipated decision would "determine whether James Joyce's famous novel was 'immoral and licentious,'" as *The New York Times* put it.³ Roth had read *Ulysses* back in 1925, having borrowed the copy of Sylvia Beach's edition that his friend and future patron, the NYU English professor Eda Lou Walton, had purchased in

¹ John Cohen, ed., *The Essential Lenny Bruce* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967), 44.

² Steven G. Kellman, *Redemption: The Life of Henry Roth* (New York: Norton, 2005), 114.

³ "To Pass on 'Ulysses,'" *New York Times* (August 30, 1933), 16.

Paris and smuggled through U.S. customs. Joyce's novel fascinated Roth,⁴ and he and Walton and their literary friends would have known exactly what was at stake in the *Ulysses* trial, which received plenty of coverage in the news: would an internationally acknowledged literary masterpiece, a darling of the critics written by an artist of the first rank, continue to be suppressed by the U.S. government because it included a few graphic descriptions of sex and a smattering of taboo (so-called "four-letter") words?⁵

We know, now, how Woolsey ruled. But consider Roth's perspective in the summer of 1933, when he was 27 years old. He may have laughed at the boorishness and philistinism of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice and its prudish director, John Sumner, but he could not have been certain that *Ulysses* would finally, after a decade, be freed by the courts. As far as Roth and his friends knew, it was possible—if somewhat unlikely, given Woolsey's liberal reputation—that *Ulysses* would be declared obscene once again, meaning not only that no reputable American publisher would print it and no American bookstore would display it, but also that Joyce's work could still not be copyrighted and protected from literary pirates. Roth, it should be remembered, had published virtually nothing at this point in his life. He had no book contract for the novel

⁴ Kellman, 88-89. Roth discusses Joyce and *Ulysses* frequently in his tetralogy, *Mercy of a Rude Stream* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994-1998), the four volumes of which are titled *A Star Shines over Mt. Morris Park*; *A Diving Rock on the Hudson*; *From Bondage*; and *Requiem for Harlem*. References to these works will be cited in parentheses, by volume and page number. On *Ulysses*, see particularly 3:61-77. Roth also regularly discussed Joyce's influence in interviews; see, for example, Bonnie Lyons, "Interview with Henry Roth," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 5:1 (1979): 50-58.

⁵ For concise discussions of the trial, see Paul Boyer, *Purity in Print: The Vice-Society Movement and Book Censorship in America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1968), 252-59; Edward De Grazia, *Girls Lean Back Everywhere: The Law of Obscenity and the Assault on Genius* (New York: Random House, 1992), 20-39; and Elizabeth Landenson, *Dirt for Art's Sake: Books on Trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2007), 78-106. For further detail, see also Michael Moscato and Leslie LeBlanc's *The United States of America v. One Book Entitled Ulysses by James Joyce* (Frederick, Maryland: University Publications of America, 1984), which provides a selection of documents and commentaries on the case. For the censorship of *Ulysses* more generally, see Paul Vanderham, *James Joyce and Censorship: The Trials of Ulysses* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

that he had dedicated nearly four years, most of his adult life, to writing. Imagine, then, the courage, or brazenness, or foolhardiness—depending on one's perspective—required for Roth to include, in his manuscript, graphic representations of sex and four-letter words as objectionable as the ones that had turned Joyce's novel into contraband. If Joyce couldn't get away with obscenity, what made Roth dream that the authorities would allow the words "shit," "fuck," and "cunt" to stand in the first novel of an unknown like him?

This chapter analyzes Roth's deployment of obscenity, and particularly of taboo words, and situates that analysis in *Call It Sleep's* two crucial historical contexts: at the moment of its composition in the early 1930s, the peak of European modernism's hegemony in American letters, and at the moment of the book's most significant reception, in the early 1960s, just as a group of banned modernist texts reemerged as American bestsellers in a series of interactions between literary culture and law. The trajectory of Roth's career has been frequently rehearsed by his critics—so regularly, in fact, that its details have been stylized to the point of distortion even by the most thoughtful scholars of his work.⁶ With the benefit of Steven Kellman's assiduous biography, *Redemption* (2006), and Roth's autobiographical saga *Mercy of a Rude Stream* (1994-98), the time is ripe for a thoroughgoing examination of Roth's first novel within its multiple contexts. Close analysis of Roth's taboo words not only facilitates this

⁶ Harold U. Ribalow, an energetic advocate of American Jewish literature and one of the primary forces in the rediscovery of *Call It Sleep*, wrote in his introduction to the 1960 hardcover reprint of the novel that, after its initial publication, "*Call It Sleep* vanished, and so did its author." A volume of Roth's writings, *Shifting Landscape: A Composite, 1925-1987*, edited with an introduction by Mario Materassi (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), and Kellman's biography, have helped show that Roth did not exactly "vanish"; indeed, he continued to submit short stories to publications, including the *New Yorker*, on regular basis throughout his alleged decades of silence. A couple of these stories were published; see "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple" (1940) and "Peter and Yotsee and Mario" (1956) in *Shifting Landscape* and, on Roth's rejected submissions, Kellman, 178-79. That Hana Wirth-Nesher, one of the strongest and most committed critics of Roth's work, quotes Ribalow's pronouncement uncritically at the outset of *New Essays on Call It Sleep* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3, demonstrates how valuable Kellman's biography is for unsettling the accepted myths about the trajectory of Roth's career.

revision of a crucial, exemplary case in the dynamics of sexual suppression and expression in American literary history, but it also dramatically encapsulates elements of the relationship between Jews and obscenity in American literature.

Roth demonstrates how the marginalization of Jews by the larger culture inclined—or, we might say, lured—some Jews to the artistic and cultural *avant garde*. Roth's life and novel reveal that the Jewish difference that drove this attraction was not simply one of class or religion. Class and religion mattered, but the crucial Jewish difference for Roth was sexual deviance. And so the modernism to which he tied his fate was what we might refer to as obscene modernism: the literary movement that brought writers including James Joyce, Theodore Dreiser, and Henry Miller into conflict with anti-vice crusaders. A close reading of Roth's engagement of "dirty words" in his text clarifies the novel's relation to modernism, and also facilitates a discussion of the place of Jews and Jewishness in the epochal transformation of American literature in the early 1960s. It likewise elucidates some of the cruelest machinations of the literary circuit, which can send one *litterateur* to prison and enshrine another as a classic. Situating Roth's novel in relation to the obscenity debates of the 1930s and 1960s also enriches our understanding of why this powerful novel remained obscure for several decades.

II. When Did the 1960s Begin?: The Cases of Sam Roth and Henry Miller

American literature of the 1960s began in the 1920s and 1930s—and not only metaphorically or ideologically. Aside from any common features of atmosphere or

temper that can be ascribed in retrospect to these two periods, from a mundane perspective the most influential novels of the early 1960s had been written thirty years earlier.⁷ D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, in particular, sold millions of copies in the early 1960s and, as literary historians have acknowledged, marked the beginning of a new era in American literature.⁸ Reading Roth's *Call It Sleep* after 1964, as most critics and readers have done, has made it too easy to forget the courage, bordering on foolhardiness, of Roth's engagement with literary obscenity. Before turning to a close reading of this engagement in *Call It Sleep*, the following two sections of this chapter locate that novel in its two historical moments to establish the stakes of Roth's project. To understand how the literary radicalism of the 1920s and early 1930s was inextricable from the treatment of Jewishness and obscenity, and how these elements inaugurated the literary scene of the early 1960s, I will sketch the careers of two literary figures, Samuel Roth and Henry Miller, not often associated with Henry Roth, although each of them shares one of his names, and, more substantially, both of their careers mirror his, either in its success or failure.

Samuel Roth might be the most fascinating forgotten figure of 20th century American letters; he is certainly one of the strangest. Like Henry Roth, he was born in a

⁷ One example of how these periods have been related by cultural historians was Morris Dickstein's argument in 1977 that "the fifties were the seedbed of our present cultural situation and the ground against which the upheavals of the sixties sought to define themselves," and that "the fifties were less a distinct cultural period than the last phase, the decadent, academic phase, of the modernist sensibility of the twenties." *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 27, 62.

⁸ On Miller's influence on postmodernism, see, e.g., Wendy Steiner, "Postmodern Fictions, 1970-1990," in *The Cambridge History of American Literature: Prose Writing, 1940-1990*, eds. Sacvan Berkovitch and Cyrus R. K. Patell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 448-49, and on the place of the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* trial in the development of postmodern literature, see Ihab Hassan, *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 57. That both novels reached American readers first—only winning approval from the British courts, and unexpurgated translations into many other languages, after having been authorized by the U.S. courts—also signaled the strengthening leadership of the United States in the world republic of letters.

small town in the Austro-Hungarian empire. Ten years older than Henry, he arrived in New York four years before him, in 1903. According to one of the few detailed biographical sources on Sam Roth's life, he lived for literature as a young man, and spent two years reading all day at the public library and sleeping on the street at night.⁹ Roth may or may not have sold a few of his stories, written under pseudonyms, to H. L. Mencken's *Smart Set* in 1914,¹⁰ and that same year, Roth edited his first anthology, *New Songs of Zion*, which reprinted poetry from magazines including *The Maccabean*, *The Jewish Chronicle*, and the *Young Judean*. The collection included verses by Israel Zangwill and Emma Lazarus, as well as translations of Morris Rosenfeld, Shimon Frug, and Chaim Nachman Bialik (Roth claims to have translated Bialik's classic "The City of Slaughter" himself, not realizing that Helena Frank had already done so). Roth aimed to show, as he remarked in an editor's note, "that here in America, Zionism is a living movement the substance of which is of the very purest rock of human emotion."¹¹

Roth earned a fellowship to Columbia University, but soon dropped out to found a poetry bookshop in Greenwich Village, through which he befriended many emerging and established writers, including the Yiddish poet and translator Yehoash. Roth's first collection of his own verse, *First Offering: A Book of Sonnets and Lyrics*, appeared in 1917. He reached a higher level of visibility and respectability when the ambitious house of Boni and Liveright published his next collection, *Europe: A Book for America* (1919), which was reviewed sympathetically alongside Waldo Frank's *Our America* (1919) in the

⁹ Leo Hamalian, "Nobody Knows My Names: Samuel Roth and the Underside of Modern Letters," *Journal of Modern Literature* 3 (1974): 890.

¹⁰ Hamalian reports, "According to [Roth's] own not always reliable account . . . H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan accepted one of his stories for *Smart Set* in 1914 (it must have been published under a pseudonym, because a search of all numbers for that year did not turn up a Roth story)" (890-91).

¹¹ Samuel Roth, ed., *New Songs of Zion: A Zionist Anthology* (New York: Judean Press, 1914), 64.

important American Jewish monthly, *Menorah Journal*.¹² Not all Roth's readers were impressed—Louis Untermeyer, in *The Dial*, wrote that his "chief impression" was "that of an honest, unflinching, and almost inspired triteness"¹³—but as his poems and essays appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, *The Nation*, and *Poetry*, Roth seemed poised for a role, whether major or minor, in the embrace of literary modernism by American Jews in the 1920s, as a colleague of Waldo Frank, Ludwig Lewisohn, and Anzia Yeziarska.¹⁴

Something soon went drastically wrong for Roth, though, and in the few biographical sketches of his career, this early phase, when he was a promising Zionist poet, has been entirely overshadowed by the bizarre and unfortunate paths he trod in the following decades.¹⁵ In the mid-1920s, Roth founded a literary journal, *Two Worlds*, in which he included excerpts of James Joyce's "Work in Progress," which would become *Finnegans Wake*; later Roth printed expurgated chapters of *Ulysses*. While Roth claimed that he had received permission from Joyce, through Ezra Pound, to print the first of these excerpts (and while Roth's daughter has letters that retroactively support this claim), the literary establishment collectively condemned him.¹⁶ In 1927, Ludwig Lewisohn and Archibald MacLeish drafted a protest on Joyce's behalf, and a remarkable international

¹² Lithmus, "America and Europe," *Menorah Journal* 6:4 (April 1920): 116-20.

¹³ Louis Untermeyer, "Sweetness and Light," *The Dial* 68:4 (April 1920), 530.

¹⁴ On Frank, Lewisohn, and Yeziarska, see Julian Levinson, *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008).

¹⁵ For biographical sketches of Sam Roth that dismiss his Zionist poetry in a line or two, see Gay Talese, *Thy Neighbor's Wife* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1980), 92-111, and Hamalian. The best available study of Samuel Roth's career is Gertzman, "The Two Worlds of Samuel Roth: Man of Letters and Entrepreneur of Erotica," in *Bookleggers and Smuthounds: The Trade in Erotica, 1920-1940* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 219-282, which provides somewhat more treatment of Roth's Zionist poetry than Hamalian or Talese; Gertzman's full-length biography of Roth, in process, will answer many questions about this extraordinary figure.

¹⁶ On the controversy, see Roth's daughter, Adelaide Kugel's "'Wroth Wrackt Joyce': Samuel Roth and the 'Not Quite Unauthorized Edition of Ulysses,'" *Joyce Studies Annual* 3 (Summer 1992): 242-48.

coalition of 167 writers, critics, and philosophers signed on to it. At the same time, Roth's local *landsmen* formed a group, "The Clean Books Committee of the Federation of Hungarian Jews in America," to accuse him of obscenity, condemning his publication of Joyce's *Ulysses* in particular.¹⁷ The criticism rang out loud and clear, as if the collective discomfort that many modernist writers had been feeling about the rise of Jewish publishers in New York—and the discomfort that some American Jewish literary types and businessmen felt about themselves as *parvenus*—were projected onto "The King of the Jews," as the headline of a vituperative attack by Waverly Root in *transition* baptized Roth.¹⁸ In a letter to Joyce, the British poet Richard Aldington expressed his hope that the protest would succeed in "the confounding and suppression of Mr. Roth," but acknowledged that "the skin of the commercial person is hard, and he does not mind scorn if he can collect money." Aldington's language emphasizes how Roth was transformed from a minor poet into a "commercial person," a dehumanized caricature of a stereotypical Jewish publisher who bankrolled modern literary production to attain prestige, but who, like Shylock, lusted for money first and foremost.¹⁹

Sumner and the NYSSV were astute enough to realize that once a minor, immigrant publisher had been disavowed by the literary establishment, he was fair game for harassment and arrest as a pornographer and scurrilous degrader of American culture. By 1928, Roth's offices were being raided on a regular basis by agents of the NYSSV.

¹⁷ "Roth's Magazine Accused," *The New York Times* (March 10, 1927), 2.

¹⁸ Waverly Root, "The King of the Jews," *transition* 9 (December 1927): 178-84. Root accuses Roth of plagiarizing Yiddish poets, a claim I have not been able to verify or deny; and, while claiming to be "no anti-Semite," in a spirit of fun, Root offers up a sort of proto-Nazi dehumanizing prejudice: "Galicia is reputed to produce probably the lowest recognizable specimens of the human race extant" (180).

¹⁹ Norman T. Gates, ed., *Richard Aldington: An Autobiography in Letters* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State Press, 1992), 79.

Probation followed, then further arrests. After a raid on October 29, 1929, in which Sumner discovered copies of banned books including *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Ulysses*, Roth served four months in prison at Welfare Island; that stint was followed by two months at Moyamensing Prison in Pennsylvania, as punishment for Roth's having sold a single copy of *Ulysses* to a resident of Philadelphia. If anything, Roth's sojourn in prison only increased his commitment to, and involvement in, the literary black market. By the early 1930s, while Henry Roth was scrawling a novel at Eda Lou Walton's apartment, Sam Roth was off and running as a full-fledged publisher of banned books, erotica, and sensational political satires. He blamed Jews, and only Jews, for his misfortunes, and expressed bitterness and ire against them in passionately anti-Semitic screeds,²⁰ but he continued in the business for decades, enduring bankruptcies and long jail terms and characteristically echoing a resonant phrase from *Pirke Avot* to explain his commitment to the publication of obscenity: "There must, under the circumstances, be someone courageous enough to publish such things. If not I, who?"²¹

I present this sketch of Samuel Roth's early career to emphasize the ways in which it parallels, and diverges from, Henry Roth's: while the two men shared the immigrant experience and an abiding commitment to Joycean modernism, they manifested their admiration for Joyce and *Ulysses* in very different ways, and with drastically different results. The case of Sam Roth shows that the transgression of legal

²⁰ In *Jews Must Live: An Account of the Persecution of the World by Israel on All the Frontiers of Civilization* (New York: The Golden Hind Press, 1934), which continues to be circulated by anti-Semitic websites on the internet, Roth insisted that "all the evils of my life had been perpetrated by Jews," and resents in particular "the Jews whose machinations had three times sent me to prison" and "that clique of Jewish journalists which built up about my name the libel that I was unfair to the authors of the books I published." As a result, Roth says he has become a "Jew who has been brought to the point where he so loathes his people that he thinks in terms of their destruction."

²¹ Quoted in Gertzman, 253. For the traditional source, see *M. Avot* 15.

and social standards for obscene literature was hardly a lark for an impoverished immigrant without savings and a social network to fall back on. But an engagement with obscenity in those years was not inevitably doomed to failure, either, a point illustrated well by the contrasting story of Henry Miller's career. And though Miller was not himself Jewish, his works present Jewishness, art, and obscenity as intersecting categories.

Henry Miller's biography has been frequently recounted, so I will only rehearse the few facts and passages from *Tropic of Cancer* that are most illuminating for insight into Roth's achievement in *Call It Sleep*.²² First, it is worth pointing out that Henry Miller's *Cancer*, the widely acknowledged apotheosis of obscenity in modernism, was composed during precisely the same years as Roth's *Call It Sleep*. Miller recognized that his use of taboo language rendered his book unpublishable in the U.S.: "America will call me the lowest of the low when they see *Cancer*," he wrote, after having arranged for the book's publication in Paris.²³ Miller's self-consciousness provides another strong indicator of just how brave or foolhardy Henry Roth's project was, given that he, unlike Miller and Joyce, had no connection to the publishers, in Paris or elsewhere who operated outside the legal control of the American and British law of obscenity.

Moreover, as a few critics have noted, Miller's *Cancer* reflects its author's complex relationships to Jewishness and to Jews—an intense fascination both positively and negatively charged, a simultaneous identification and repulsion—and the inextricability of this "semitic discourse" or "allosemitism" from his embrace of literary

²² Useful biographies of Miller include Mary Dearborn, *The Happiest Man Alive: A Biography of Henry Miller* (New York: Touchstone, 1991), and Jay Martin, *Always Merry and Bright: The Life of Henry Miller* (Santa Barbara, California: Capra Press, 1978).

²³ Dearborn, 157.

obscurity.²⁴ One hardly needs to speculate, or to troll deeply in Miller's prose, to discover his engagements with Jewishness. At the very outset of *Cancer*, Miller describes the social milieu in which he lived and worked during the writing of that book: "Almost all Montparnasse is Jewish, or half-Jewish, which is worse," he asserts, and then lists fourteen of his Jewish friends by their (pseudonymous) names, and continues, "The Jews then are snowing me under. I am writing this for my friend Carl whose father is a Jew. All this is important to understand."²⁵ Among other possible reasons, the prevalence of Jews in Miller's social circle on Paris's Left Bank is "important to understand" because, like the books written by several other modernists, Miller's transgressive work would likely not have been published at all without the intercession of Jews. In fact, Miller depended on the friends he lists for favors and patronage. As he recounts in *Cancer*, while composing the book, he even earned cash ghostwriting articles that were apparently translated and published in the Yiddish press:

a retired fur merchant who had an itch to see his name in the papers ... proposed that I write a series of articles under his name for a Jewish daily in New York. I had to scout around the Dome and Coupole searching for prominent Jews. ... When I saw my articles in the newspaper I couldn't read them; but they looked impressive, just the same, especially with the pseudonym of the fur merchant attached. (187)

²⁴ Miller's case serves as a sharp illustration of Bryan Cheyette's observation that the terms "semitic discourse" or "allosemitism" capture the "protean instability or ambivalence" of the "'the Jew' as a cultural signifier" better than the more common "anti-Semitism" or "philo-Semitism." See Cheyette, "Neither Excuse nor Accuse: T.S. Eliot's Semitic Discourse," *Modernism/modernity* 10:3 (September 2003): 433-34 for a brief introduction to these terms, and, for further discussion, see Cheyette, *Constructions of 'the Jew' in English Literature and Society, 1875-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and Zygmunt Bauman, "Allosemitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern" in *Modernity, Culture and 'the Jew'*, ed. Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 143-57.

²⁵ Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 3. All further references to this book will be included parenthetically in the text.

"Impressive," indeed, to publish in a language that Miller neither spoke nor read! Like his lifelong fascination with Yiddish, this brief anecdote from the pages of *Cancer* indicates Miller's intimacy with Jewish intellectuals and writers and their work.²⁶

Cancer itself, like many other modernist works, was published by a Jewish entrepreneur and literary enthusiast eager to transgress the bounds of conventional American and British literary propriety. The publisher in this case was Jack Kahane, who like Sam Roth aspired to authorship before turning his energy to the publication, in Paris, of books that had been banned in the U.S. and England as obscene. Kahane had been raised by Romanian Jewish immigrants in Manchester, England, and the list he built at his Obelisk Press in Paris eventually included Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928)—which Knopf had cancelled in the U.S. after pressure from the NYSSV—and a slim volume of Joyce's verse, *Pomes Penyeach*; his son, Maurice Girodias, would continue the family business after WWII, publishing the first editions of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) and Terry Southern and Mason Hoffenberg's *Candy* (1958), among other celebrated works, through his Olympia Press.²⁷ When he encountered Miller's *Cancer* in the early 1930s, Kahane realized he had found exactly the book he had been waiting for: "At last!" he wrote, "I had read the most terrible, the most sordid, the

²⁶ Miller often praised the novels of Isaac Bashevis Singer, and he even claimed to have consciously stolen a title from Moshe Nadir, whose pseudonym he liked because of its English homophone, "like nadir, you know, the lowest point." See Frank L. Kersnowski and Alice Hughes, eds., *Conversations with Henry Miller* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 27, 138. I have not yet been able to find the Yiddish articles that Miller ghostwrote; they may have been commissioned by and published under the name of Louis Atlas in one of the New York Yiddish dailies. It is possible that Miller only imagined doing this, but his biographers have accepted it as true (without, however, citing the resulting articles).

²⁷ On Kahane's life and career, see Neil Pearson, *Obelisk: The History of Jack Kahane and the Obelisk Press* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007); on Girodias's, see John De St. Jorre, *Venus Bound: The Erotic Voyage of the Olympia Press and Its Writers* (New York: Random House, 1996).

most magnificent manuscript that had ever fallen into my hands."²⁸ Kahane's situation differed from those of his American counterparts, as interwar French law did not prohibit the publication of obscene texts as long as they were not written in French. Kahane could sell obscene English books without incurring the wrath of the authorities.²⁹

Like many other modernists who depended on Jewish publishers, Miller had a highly ambivalent attitude toward Jewishness: he remarked in a letter to a non-Jewish friend that he hoped *Cancer* would be pirated in America by one of his friends, and not by "some crummy Jew," and complained that American publishing was run by "a bunch of kikes." Miller's antipathy was fueled, at least in part, by his tempestuous relationship with his Jewish wife, June, to whom Miller often referred as "the Jewish cunt."³⁰ As Kingsley Widmer phrases it in his study of Miller's *oeuvre*, "Miller's fascination with Jewishness contains, like the Jewish heritage, odd mixtures of love and hatred."³¹ Indeed, in *Cancer*, Miller figures himself as a symbolic Jew driven to create art by Jewish impulses—and, crucially, he characterizes his own obscene speech as Jewish speech.

Miller construes his artistic project in *Cancer* as the creation of high art by crossing all boundaries of propriety, and he envisions this risky art as itself Jewish in character. "There is only one thing which interests me vitally now, and that is the recording of all that which is omitted in books" (11), he writes, and later he proposes that

²⁸ Quoted in De Grazia, 365.

²⁹ Nitsa Ben-Ari, *Suppression of the Erotic in Modern Hebrew Literature* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2006), 33; it was only after Miller's *Tropics* were translated into French, in 1946, that French authorities objected to them under a 1939 law, resulting in *l'affaire Miller*—a committee was formed to defend the novel, which included Albert Camus, André Gide, and Jean-Paul Sartre, among others, and Girodias prevailed—and Miller's becoming "a household name in France." See Ladenson, 179.

³⁰ Dearborn, 157, 161.

³¹ Kingsley Widmer, *Henry Miller* (New York: Twayne, 1963), 88.

"art consists in going the full length" (76). These statements, and many others, suggest the degree to which Miller's project aims to undermine the literary censorship and self-censorship that was prevalent in England and America during the 1920s. In another powerful and less frequently quoted passage, also near the beginning of *Cancer*, Miller ascribes the courage to fight against anti-intellectualism and censorship, which is his own most prized attribute as a writer, as a trait particularly characteristic of Jews:

There are people who cannot resist the desire to get into a cage with wild beasts and be mangled. They go in even without revolver or whip. Fear makes them fearless... . For the Jew the world is a cage filled with wild beasts. The door is locked and he is there without whip or revolver. His courage is so great that he does not even smell the dung in the corner. The spectators applaud but he does not hear. The drama, he thinks, is going on inside the cage. The cage, he thinks, is the world. Standing there alone and helpless, the door locked, he finds that the lions do not understand his language. Not one lion has ever heard of Spinoza. (9-10)

This passage describes quite precisely the predicament of a Sam Roth or Jack Kahane, who might trot out Spinoza's *Tractatus* (e.g., "utter failure will attend any attempt ... to force men to speak only as prescribed by the sovereign") as a defense of his publications, much to the bewilderment of the harassing prudes at the NYSSV.³² In a more general sense, Miller represents the field of artistic production as the cage of a circus performer, and figures "the Jew" as the paradigmatic artist whose commitment to his craft overcomes fear and threat. The passage is ambiguous about whether the Jew opts to fight this battle or is thrust into it: the simple predicational statements, "the world is a cage" and "the door is locked," suggest that the situation has been imposed upon him by forces outside his control. A few sentences later, by contrast, Miller intimates that the

³² Benedictus de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley (New York: Hackett Publishing, 2001), 223.

Jew only "thinks" that "the cage . . . is the world," implying his complicity in the arrangement, and that the Jew's involvement in this dangerous situation results from his irresistible "desire." Characteristic of Miller's intense ambivalence about Jews, this contradiction does not detract from the powerful sense of his identification with them, even if the passage goes on to suggest that the lions overpower the Jew ("A single blow of the lion's jaw and his cosmogony is smashed") and then digresses elsewhere. What remains clear is that Miller associates his own fear and fearlessness with that of Jews.

As Widmer phrases it, "Miller longed to be a Jew, to transcend *goyische* America."³³ The clearest indicator of this identification appears at the beginning of *Cancer*, where Miller asserts that, of all his Jewish friends, "the loveliest is Tania, and for her sake I too would become a Jew. Why not? I already speak like a Jew. And I am as ugly as a Jew. Besides, who hates the Jews more than the Jew?" (3). The final lines, about ugliness and hatred, correspond with Widmer's argument that as blistering as Miller's private and published anti-Semitic remarks may seem, they result more from a feeling of identification with Jews than an insistence on irreconcilable Jewish difference.³⁴ Most importantly, for the purposes of this chapter, Miller asserts that he "already speak[s] like a Jew," demonstrating his basic acceptance of the notion that Jews are willing to speak more obscenities than non-Jews are. That idea circulated widely throughout the literature and culture of the turn of the 20th century, as discussed in Chapter 2, and was articulated in precise terms by the demagogue Telemachus Timayensis, who noted that "the average

³³ Widmer, 93. George Wickes likewise writes, "Miller wants to become a Jew, to escape the respectable, bourgeois, Gentile America of his birth." *Henry Miller* (St. Paul, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1966), 39.

³⁴ In *Cancer*, it is one of the narrator's Jewish friends, Van Norden, who exhibits the most classically and typically anti-Semitic sentiment when he remarks that "these dirty little Jews who hang around the Dome, Jesus, they give me the creeps" (132).

Jew is disgustingly bawdy in his talk, and interlards his conversation with filthy expressions and obscene words."³⁵ Unlike Timayensis, Miller *embraces* such Jewish speech as necessary, important, and profound. He engages with obscene Jewish speech in the most concrete sense, in fact, employing the Yiddishism "putz" to refer to a penis. This marked the first time the word appeared with this meaning in an English language text, at least according to the lexicographers at the *Oxford English Dictionary*, who list *Cancer* as the first historical source for putz meaning "penis," "esp. in Jewish usage."³⁶

Though there is no evidence that the two men knew each other, the names of Sam Roth and Henry Miller regularly appear nearby each other in histories of literary obscenity, in connection with the legal developments of the late 1950s and early 1960s in which one of them triumphed and the other met ruin. Legal and literary historians have agreed that the transformative Supreme Court obscenity decisions of the 1960s began, in a very direct sense, in April 1954, when Sam Roth was indicted for 26 counts of obscenity. In early 1956, a jury found him guilty on just four of these counts, including one for reprinting Aubrey Beardsley's "Venus and Tannhäuser," and Roth, then 62, was sentenced to five years in prison and a \$5,000 fine. Roth's appeal to the Second Circuit Court, later in 1956, "was given short shrift," according to Edward De Grazia, though one of the appellate court judges, Jerome Frank, did contribute an important concurring opinion, which called for the Supreme Court to reopen the question of the constitutionality of the Comstock statute under which Roth had been convicted. It does not seem a stretch to suggest that Frank's opinion on the *Roth* case reflects, to some degree, the influence of the judge's Jewish background in, for example, his defense of

³⁵ Telemachus Timayensis, *The American Jew* (New York: The Minerva Publishing Company, 1888), 81.

³⁶ "Putz, n.²," *OED Online* <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50293802>>.

minority rights against the will of the majority. "Some few men stubbornly fight for the right to write or publish or distribute books which the great majority at the time consider loathsome," Frank wrote. "If we jail those few, the community may appear to have suffered nothing. The appearance is deceptive." Frank supported his arguments with quotations from a Jewish psychiatrist—and he is known for introducing psychoanalytic thought into American legal discourse—and also, uncannily echoing Miller's *Cancer* itself, from Spinoza.³⁷

Spurred on by Frank's opinion, the Supreme Court agreed to examine Roth's case in 1957. Its decision affirmed his conviction and dispatched Roth to jail—incidentally, to the same penitentiary, in Lewisburg, where Wilhelm Reich was imprisoned—but by following up on one aspect of Frank's suggestions about the harmful censorship of literature, the *Roth* decision opened the door to the extraordinary liberalization of

³⁷ For Frank's introduction of psychoanalysis into American legal theory, see his *Law and the Modern Mind* (New York: Brentano's, 1930). It is worth mentioning that Frank had literary inclinations of his own. As a young man he reviewed books and befriended Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis, among other writers. He wrote two-thirds of a novel that he submitted to Houghton Mifflin; the editors there informed him that they feared that one chapter of the novel would lead to its suppression in Boston, presumably by the Watch and Ward Society. Later, Frank decided not to complete or publish the book for fear that doing so would jeopardize his legal career. See the transcripts of interviews with Frank, conducted between 1950 and 1952, in the Oral History Collection of Columbia University, 1:6-7. An excellent source for understanding Frank's Jewish identity and how he felt it influenced his politics is "Red, White, and Blue Herring," *The Saturday Evening Post* (December 6, 1941): 9. As Frank explains, he had written a book, *Save America First* (New York: Harper, 1938) that articulated a committed isolationist position regarding WWII, but he notes that after Hitler's "rapid victory over France," he and many other American Jews, like many non-Jewish Americans, became "ex-isolationists" (10). Of course, many more Americans would join the interventionist camp immediately after the publication of Frank's article—not because of the article, ironically, but because of the attack on Pearl Harbor that occurred the day after it appeared. In the essay, Frank explains that he had encountered some anti-Semitism, but nothing that deeply disturbed him: "When, because I was a Jew, I was barred from fraternities in college, or when I found I was not wanted in a hotel or a club, I didn't like it, of course. But, as I understood the roots of the prejudice, I accepted such social disabilities with a sense of humor" (11). In his oral history transcripts, Frank also claims that it was rare but not completely unknown for him to encounter anti-Semitism in his career (see 2:128, 2:145). In the *Saturday Evening Post* article, Frank emphasizes "the overwhelming majority of American Jews are devoted, above all, to America" (84), with the exception of a few Jewish Communists, extreme Zionists, and "Jewish fascists" (10). He describes "Reformed Judaism" as "actually closer to liberal Protestantism than to Jewish orthodoxy" and "stresses the fundamental identity of the ethical ideals of Judaism—ancient and modern—and those of America" (83). At the same time, in a remark relevant to his defense of minority speech in his *Roth* opinion, Frank also insists that "it is part of the great American tradition—a tradition which makes American Jews deeply grateful to America—that minority groups be respected" (83).

obscenity law that followed, so much so that a later commentator could refer to it as "the celebrated *Roth* opinion of 1957 that had countered the legacy of Comstock in America."³⁸ Frank had titled one section of his opinion with the assertion that "the fine arts are within the First Amendment's protection." While Justice Brennan's majority decision upheld Roth's conviction and affirmed that obscenity remained outside of First Amendment protection, he redefined obscenity, arguing that it could not, by definition, contain "even the slightest redeeming social importance" (because if it did, it would deserve protection), and, furthermore, that "sex and obscenity are not synonymous." In the wake of this crucial decision, as De Grazia puts it, to win their cases for publishers and authors, "liberal lawyers and judges would only have to locate 'ideas having even the slightest social importance' in the literary works they acted to free."³⁹

Soon, cases began to be won following this logic, with crucial consequences for American literature. First, a famed criminal lawyer named Jake Ehrlich and a couple of ACLU staffers convinced a San Francisco judge that, under Brennan's statements in *Roth*, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* could not be proscribed as obscene. Then, in Chicago, Judge Julius Hoffman, who would later become infamous as Abbie Hoffman's antagonist in the Chicago Seven trial, ruled similarly in a case on the breakaway University of Chicago student magazine *Big Table*, which had printed work by William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac. Then, most famously, Charles Rembar—a lawyer, literary agent, and cousin of Norman Mailer—constructed a *Roth*-based defense of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which he undertook at Barney Rosset's request in 1959.

³⁸ Talese, 347.

³⁹ De Grazia, 325.

As had been the case in the *Ulysses* decision a quarter-century earlier, when Bennett Cerf and Morris Ernst teamed up to free Joyce's novel, the freedom to publish *Lady Chatterley* in the U.S. was won finally by a Jewish publisher, Rosset, backed by inherited money, who hired a Jewish lawyer, Rembar. In the *Lady Chatterley* case, a starring role would also be played by a Jewish critic, Alfred Kazin, by then well-known not only as the author of an influential study of modern American literature, *On Native Grounds* (1942), but also *A Walker in the City* (1951), his elegiac homage to his Jewish boyhood in Brooklyn. When, during Kazin's testimony, Rembar asked him whether there was any taboo language in *Chatterley* that he had "not seen in reputable and publicly accepted novels of the last several decades," Kazin answered, somewhat cryptically, "I know of a book which has not been banned and in which each one of these words occur." While it is of course possible Kazin was referring to some other book, it seems likely that he had in mind Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, which includes every taboo word that appears in *Cancer* (including "fuck," "shit," "cunt" and "putz") and which, just a few years earlier, he had praised enthusiastically in an *American Scholar* symposium.⁴⁰

Rosset and Rembar won their *Lady Chatterley* case, and in the following years, Lawrence's book sold over six million copies in its various editions.⁴¹ They moved on, next, to publishing and defending Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, about which Rosset had written a term paper when he was a freshman at Swarthmore.⁴² Rembar, who served as a

⁴⁰ For the testimony, see Rembar, 98. On Kazin's knowledge of *Call It Sleep*—and his use of it as a model for *A Walker in the City*, whether consciously or not—see Levinson, *Exiles on Main Street*, 164.

⁴¹ Charles Rembar, *The End of Obscenity: The Trials of Lady Chatterley, Tropic of Cancer, and Fanny Hill* (New York: Random House, 1968), 117.

⁴² On Rosset's year at Swarthmore and his paper on Miller, see Al Silverman, *The Time of Their Lives: The Golden Age of Great American Book Publishers, Their Editors and Authors* (New York: Macmillan, 2008), 45-46.

general legal manager for the many local proceedings against *Cancer*, advised the ACLU lawyers who took the cases nationwide to employ a defense based on *Roth*. De Grazia singles out the Chicago trial of *Cancer* as "one of the best examples of this sort of creative application by lawyer and judge of Brennan's dicta in *Roth* to allegedly obscene literature,"⁴³ and the trial also serves as a fascinating ratification of Henry Miller's statement, in *Cancer*, that "the first people to turn to when you're down and out are the Jews," and his description of Jews as "sympathetic souls."⁴⁴ If Miller had been surrounded by Jews in late 1920s and early 1930s Montparnasse, so too was his book at its Chicago trial: Rosset's edition carried a preface by Karl Shapiro, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet of *V-Letter and Other Poems* (1945) and *Poems of a Jew* (1950), and almost every important player in the book's defense was Jewish: the plaintiff who initiated the proceedings against the police who had intimidated booksellers into taking the book off their shelves was Franklyn S. Haiman, a Northwestern University professor and future leader of the ACLU;⁴⁵ the lawyer representing *Cancer* was Elmer Gertz;⁴⁶ the witnesses included the Joyce scholar Richard Ellmann as well as Rosset himself; and, finally, the judge who decided in favor of *Cancer* was Samuel B. Epstein, son of "the

⁴³ De Grazia, 325.

⁴⁴ Also in *Cancer*, Miller remarks that he has "always had more faith in the Jews than the Gentiles" (264). For similar sentiments, see Henry Miller, *Plexus* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), 208-09.

⁴⁵ The finding aid for the Franklyn S. Haiman Papers, housed at Northwestern University, (see: <www.library.northwestern.edu/archives/findingaids/franklyn_haiman.pdf>), contains a short biography of this impressive scholar and teacher.

⁴⁶ For short biography of Gertz, see Eric Pace, "Elmer Gertz, a Top Lawyer, Is Dead at 93," *New York Times* (April 29, 2000), C20. For Gertz's short memoir of his childhood in a B'nai B'rith orphanage in Cleveland, see "Poor Little Orphan," *Panorama* (January 1935), 6-7. *Panorama* was a fascinating, short-lived monthly published and edited by Isaac Goldberg that railed against censorship and Nazism.

dean of the Orthodox rabbis of Chicago," and an associate of Rosset's father.⁴⁷ Not consistently liberal in his opinions, Epstein was under considerable political pressure to declare Miller's work obscene. Yet Epstein, whose son David was a blacklisted Hollywood screenwriter, wrote in his decision that "recent history has proven the evil of an attempt at controlling the utterances and thoughts of our population,"⁴⁸ alluding to the McCarthyist purges and possibly to the burning of books in Nazi Germany. Epstein's decision to free the book was reversed in 1964 by the Illinois Supreme Court, and then reversed by that court again when the Supreme Court rejected a judgment of obscenity against the novel a few days later, establishing, in effect, that *Cancer* could not be banned in the U.S. Miller's book, in which he "speak[s] like a Jew," became legal largely thanks to the efforts of a group of Jews in publishing and the law, not to mention Sam Roth himself, and sold more than two million copies in paperback in the early 1960s.

This brief history suggests how high the stakes were for Henry Roth in his use of obscenity in *Call It Sleep*. Like Sam Roth and Henry Miller, Henry Roth followed Joyce in yoking obscenity to modernism, in the hopes of attaining prestige and a place within literary modernism. Like them, he pursued this goal desperately and took a significant risk. As I will argue below, the atmosphere of instability around literary obscenity in the 1940s and 1950s—in which Henry Miller could be widely celebrated, while Sam Roth languished in prison, and in which publishers could not be sure whether an author would earn them a huge fortune or land them in jail—helps to clarify how a novel as powerful and critically acclaimed as *Call It Sleep* remained unavailable for three decades. First, though, a reading of Roth's autobiographical tetralogy as a prologue to *Call It Sleep*

⁴⁷ De Grazia, 373, 375.

⁴⁸ De Grazia, 379.

reveals how his project in that novel paralleled those of Sam Roth and Henry Miller in its engagement with literary obscenity and with the techniques of modernism.

III. Henry Roth's 1990s and 1920s: *Mercy of a Rude Stream* as Prelude

Morris Dickstein, a shrewd critic of both 1960s culture and American Jewish writing, has recently argued that "instead of straining to situate [Henry Roth's] *Mercy* [*of a Rude Stream*] as an imperfect sequel to *Call It Sleep*, we need to understand it as a long, rambling preamble to the earlier novel, showing us how Roth came to be the troubled man who would write it."⁴⁹ Such a reading of *Mercy*, as an "autobiographical prelude" to the earlier novel, sheds light on the relationships between Roth's attitudes towards Jewishness, sexuality, and modernism. *Mercy* reveals how Roth projected a sense of his own sexual guilt onto David Schearl's sexual terrors, and, more specifically, onto the "dirty words" that appear in *Call It Sleep*, and that he did so in the hopes that the modernist engagement with obscenity could purify them, and him.

For readers unfamiliar with *Mercy* and the related revelations about Roth's life publicized in the late 1990s and described in Kellman's biography, a brief survey of these books will explain how Roth described and imagined the development of extraordinary sexual guilt in a young man, an aspiring writer very much modeled on himself. The four autobiographical novels of *Mercy* describe the adolescence and early twenties of Ira Stigman, whose name suggests the character's guilt. (With characteristic wordplay, Roth's

⁴⁹ Morris Dickstein, "Memory Unbound," *The Threepenny Review* (Summer 2007) <http://www.threepennyreview.com/samples/dickstein_su07.html>.

choice of name for his protagonist, as Wirth-Nesher points out, echoes "stigma" and puns bilingually on "I-evil": "ra" means evil in Hebrew.)⁵⁰ While we should be careful about facilely reading this late work marketed as a novel as Roth's autobiography, there is every reason to credit the majority of Ira's perceptions, experiences, and attitudes as Roth's.⁵¹

Mercy tracks Ira's sexual miseducation, picking up in the summer of 1914, when the boy is eight years old, around the age of David Schearl at the end of *Call It Sleep*.⁵² That summer, a stranger attempts to molest Ira in a public park. Though a couple of passersby foil the man's first attempt to touch Ira, he goes on to lead "Ira behind a clump of trees ... [and] began a tranced pumping of the swollen thing he had in his hand—until—his breath became animal audible—he suddenly grabbed Ira's buttock, and began squirting a pale, glairy substance against the bark of the tree" (1:57). Horrified and ashamed by his part in this masturbation, Ira does not report it to anyone, internalizing his disgust: "everything was steeped in something sinister, sinister, diluted by deliverance [i.e., by the passerby, who saved him from being raped], but ineradicable, an inescapable smut" (1:58). As Ira grows older, he regards masturbation as a fundamentally repulsive act, associating it with this traumatic moment from his childhood. A few years later, when a friend tries "to show Ira how to 'pull off'" on the roof of a building, Ira refuses, overcome by memories of that "lanky individual in a pork-pie hat and rusty-neat clothes,

⁵⁰ Hana Wirth-Nesher, "Facing the Fictions: Henry Roth's and Philip Roth's Meta-Memoirs," *Prooftexts* 18:3 (1998): 267.

⁵¹ Most critics, including Materassi, Kellman, Dickstein, and Wirth-Nesher, have accepted *Mercy* as a fundamentally autobiographical text. Alisa Braun has validated this critical practice by analyzing the manuscripts of *Mercy*; as she puts it, "materials in Roth's papers indicate that the memoir is a pastiche of passages from his correspondence, journals, and interviews Roth conducted with peers while preparing the manuscript. ... When I analyzed the manuscripts in the Roth collection I was struck by how Roth repeatedly replaced 'I' with 'Ira' and 'Eda' with 'Edith.'" Alisa Braun, "Jews, Writing and the Dynamics of Literary Affiliation, 1880-1940," PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 154-55.

⁵² See *Call It Sleep*, 437.

of what he wanted to do to Ira, and of what he did afterward against a tree trunk. ... How could anything be good that was as loathsome as that?" (1:64).

Refusing to masturbate, Ira finds himself in a difficult position as he reaches puberty and his sexual urges develop. He is horrified, one day, to discover he has an erection while napping next to, and rubbing up against, his mother (1:104). The solution, he tells himself, would be to find a girl with whom he can satisfy his desire:

Where could he try it out, when a *petzel* stiffened into a peg? ... that was lousy, sitting down pulling your own peg, like that rusty bum. It had to be somebody to pry into: living warm, like Mom's thighs, a girl it had to be, like Rosy S, Louie's daughter, who showed him she was a girl, with a fire-red slit instead of a *petzel*. Who liked it, who wanted it the same way he did, who got the same wonderful feeling between her thighs he almost got with Mom, when she woke up and laughed. What girls? Where? (1:117)

This passage affirms Dickstein's argument that *Mercy* be read as prelude, and not sequel, to *Call It Sleep*, as it anticipates the diction ("*petzel*") of that novel and alludes directly to its Oedipal tensions. As an awkward and self-conscious teen, Ira does not find sexual partners, and another trauma occurs when a high school Spanish teacher detains Ira after class and attempts to masturbate him. Trying, unsuccessfully, to arouse the student, the teacher asks Ira to "make believe" that he is seeing "a nice big ass ... Like your mother's or your sister's" (1:242-43), linking sexual satisfaction and incest. Once again, Ira cannot bring himself to report this abuse to an adult, internalizing his disgust: he "already felt guilty," he recalls, and feared "he might betray something even more heinous than Mr. Lennard's molestation" (1:249). Masturbation repulses him, because of these two early experiences of abuse, even into the young man's twenties, when he occasionally masturbates, as Roth's narrator explains: "having seen when he was eight that rusty

pervert pull off, his scum dripping from the tree, he just fought it [the urge to masturbate]; he wasn't going to do it. Nearly every time he did, he felt like cutting his prick off afterward, as if he'd sunk to something worse than he already was..." (3:53-54). Ira's case offers a brutal, unusually pointed example of the more general Schopenhauerian experience in which shame naturally follows lust.⁵³

As an alternative to masturbation, Ira discovers incest. He develops a method of mutual masturbation with his younger sister that consists of rubbing his penis against her inner thighs and vagina without penetration. (Roth's narrator describes this, later in *Mercy*, as "the way he used to do it before ... Sandwiched it, the way it tickled her, the way that wouldn't let him go in. ... " [2:159].) Then, after a minor windfall enables him to pay a prostitute for sex, and she exposes him to the mechanics of intercourse, Ira has intercourse first with his younger sister and, later, with his cousin. For Ira, incest substitutes for masturbation, gratifying his sexual urges without exposing him to any of the vulnerability of a relationship with a woman. "He just wanted to get in and get out" (2:317), the narrator remarks, and Ira berates himself, "You were already incapacitated as far as passing encounters with mature women were concerned. Is that the truth or not? ... you were incapacitated, as I say: frightened, timid, puerile" (2:380).⁵⁴ Incest functions as the teenager's sole sexual release, and it is also a problematic one.

Indeed, the practice soon increases the "shame and self-loathing" (3:15) Ira developed after being abused. Horrifying to himself, and seemingly immutable, Ira's

⁵³ According to Karl Stern's reading of Schopenhauer, sex "is an act which, in sombre reflection, one usually recalls with repugnance, in a more exalted mood even with abhorrence" See *The Flight from Woman* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), 111.

⁵⁴ Roth returns to such questions repeatedly, describing the young Ira as wondering "how to muster a hard-on for an adult woman, for a real lady, when libido, except for a single encounter with a black streetwalker, had functioned only with minors ...?" (3:371)

sexuality leads him on to self-defeating behaviors. He declines a scholarship to Cornell, for example, that would have taken him away from the targets of his lust—and, as the story is told in *Mercy*, he sits down to write to the university, informing them of his decision, just a few hours after having sex with his sister: "fresh from this very Sunday morning's skulking, nasty lechery gratified on Minnie, he would rather stay home," matriculate locally, and continue to seek "sordid gratifications" (2:251). Roth conveys Ira's self-loathing emphatically, characterizing Ira as "perverted, what else but perverted? He had fucked his sister, and when he no longer could, his kid cousin. ... He ravened, he lusted for the prohibited, the proscribed... Jesus, no question he was ruined..." (3:120). The narrative conveys Ira's guilt powerfully through simple repetition, representing it as a crippling and seemingly irreversible stain on his character: "he couldn't dispel it, budge it. Guilt, guilt, guilt ... Guilt, guilt, and more guilt" (3:115).

Crucially, Ira conflates his overwhelming and ineradicable self-loathing with his sense of what he calls "his inescapable East Side Jewishness" (3:157).⁵⁵ At one point, Ira records his reaction to his bar mitzvah: "he hated being a Jew; he didn't want to be one, saw no virtue in being one, and realized he was caught, imprisoned in an identity from which there was no chance of his ever freeing himself. ... He loathed the ceremony; he loathed himself in it. Becoming a Jew, becoming a man, a member of the community was

⁵⁵ Further evidence that Ira's sense of himself as a Jew and as a sexual deviant resonate with each other appears in reflections on the topic of Ira's bar mitzvah: "he hated being a Jew; he didn't want to be one, saw no virtue in being one, and realized he was caught, imprisoned in an identity from which there was no chance of his ever freeing himself. ... He loathed the ceremony; he loathed himself in it. Becoming a Jew, becoming a man, a member of the community was a sick mockery, became a sick memory." Ira's usual interlocutor, a voice ascribed to his computer and named Eccleasias, immediately points out the relevance of these reactions to Ira's feelings of shame and self-loathing about his incest, which are regularly described in similar terms throughout *Mercy*; the third volume is titled, for example, *From Bondage*. Ira responds, agreeing, but alluding to the incest only obliquely, because it has not been revealed yet in this volume of *Mercy*, but establishing the correspondence: "It was like a resonance, Eccleasias, a reinforcement within the psyche. As you can see: a self overt, a self covert, a self candid, a self stealthy" (1:161). Whether the incest reinforces Ira's sense of Jewishness within his psyche, or vice versa, is not entirely clear.

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At another moment, employing a classically stereotypical image of the Jewish peddler, Roth's narrator describes Ira as feeling "as if he carried a tremendous pack on the back of his brain: a pack-Jew carrying a skull crammed with ugly articles he couldn't display" (3:183). Echoing popular turn-of-the-century texts that Roth may have read as a child, such as H. Rider Haggard's *Benita* (1906), Ira envisions himself not only as a lecher, but as a lecher in stereotypically Jewish guise.⁵⁶ It follows that Ira conflates his sexual transgressions with the sins of all Jewry. "Look at the scum these Jews are," he remarks, "Why should they not be annihilated? How else could he say it? It was in the old sense, in the Biblical sense, that they suffered—because they had sinned, because he had sinned. He had been guilty of abomination" (3:116). Ira's guilt devolves onto all Jews, and the syntax obscures the relationship between them. Does Ira mean that "they had sinned, *because* he had sinned"—that Ira's "abomination" has somehow led other Jews to transgression? Or does the sentence set up a parallel, in which Ira's

⁵⁶ *Mercy* describes Ira's "initiation into realistic fiction," his reading of Haggard's *She*, and his recollection that "the more he was taken with a book, the more he prayed that Jews would be overlooked" (1:148-51).

"abomination" represents or symbolizes the sins of all Jews? In either case, Ira's frequent characterization of his incest as "sin" and "abomination" (e.g., 2:209) reveal that he understands it in the context of Leviticus and of his Jewish identity.⁵⁷

As inseparable as Ira's sexual guilt is from his self-perception as a Jew, so too can neither of these be distinguished from his obscene speech. Losing control of himself, overwhelmed by shame, Ira at one point unleashes a tirade of taboo speech: "Ira had suddenly let loose a string of goddamns and fucks..." the narrator notes, "a barrage of profanity and obscenity," which is the "first manifestation of the flaw, first definite, tangible manifestation of his emerging neurosis," an exposure of "the loathsome pit within himself" and "the hideous disfigurement under the mask" (2:211-12).⁵⁸ Roth makes clear that this barrage of four-letter words results from Ira's failure at self-suppression; and, indeed, at this point in the novel, Roth has not yet explicitly revealed Ira's incest with his sister, hinting at it but hiding it (to the point that the sister does not appear as a character until the moment the incest is revealed, thirty pages later). When the narrative does introduce the incest, it also clarifies the link between Ira's "neurosis" and "a string of goddamns and fucks." The first textual representation of the incestuous intercourse, in which Ira shows his sister what he learned about penetration from a prostitute, emphasizes, more than any other element of the experience, the prevalence of taboo words in this experience, and their power:

⁵⁷ Leviticus 20:17 explicitly states the prohibition of sex between a brother and his sister, and though it does not refer to that act as a "תוֹעֵבָה," which is the most familiar Hebrew term translated as "abomination"—e.g., a few verses earlier, in an infamous verse about homosexuality—but as "דָּוָה," which can be translated as "disgrace, shame, abomination." See "דָּוָה," Reuben Alcalay, *The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary* (Bridgeport, Connecticut: The Prayerbook Press/Hartmore House, 1974), 796.

⁵⁸ Again, this passage anticipates one in *Call It Sleep*, which I will discuss in the following section.

[Ira's sister] said all kinds of dirty words at first; where did she learn them? After he showed her how different it was, "Fuck me, fuck me good!" He wished she wouldn't, though he liked it. He wished she wouldn't, because it incited him, spurred him on too much. He wished she wouldn't, though he grinned about it afterward: so *prust*, as they would say in Yiddish, so coarse: "Fuck me, fuck me good." It made him come before he wanted to, though he knew he ought to come fast to be safe, but not so fast as her dirty words made him, that and her crying out, "Ah, ah, oooh wah, ooowah!" Still, it made him feel proud too, and even prouder when she almost whooped with rapture, "Oooh, you're a good fucker. Oooh, don't get off yet!" (2:140)

What dirty words she greeted him with: "Fuck me like a hoor. No, no kisses. I don't want no kisses. Just fuck me good." (2:142)

Repeating the phrase "dirty words"—one of the phrases that his character, David Schearl, uses to speculate about taboo language and the nature of the prophet Isaiah's sin in *Call It Sleep*—Roth links taboo words to incestuous sex. For Ira, "profanity and obscenity" form both a crucial element of his incest and an uncontrollable "manifestation" of it. In other words, taboo words function as metonymy for Ira's illicit sexual activities, which explains why, when he loses control and spews obscenities in front of a friend, he feels he has exposed "the hideous disfigurement under the mask."

Roth also suggests that Ira's "disfigurement"—his incestuous urges, as represented by a tendency to obscene speech—accord with his identity as a Jew. Referring to his sister's obscene speech as "*prust*," for example, Roth evokes the earthiness of his Jewish family and community, as in standard Yiddish, unpretentious and unlearned folk like Ira's family are generally referred to as "*proste yidn*," "plain Jews." Throughout *Mercy*, Roth reinforces the notion that his obscene speech is rooted in his background and childhood. Ira explains, "my cussin', my profanity ... That's the Harlem street where I was dug up" (3:379). His Uncle Louie asks, "Do you know the first words you learned to speak in English? ... Goddemfuckenbestit" (1:171): significantly, Ira would have learned these

first English words during his years "on the homogeneous Lower East Side" (2:65), that "holistic, Jewish" environment (3:20). Although these references might be read as suggesting that Ira's tendency to speak obscenely results from his exposure to American culture (life on a "Harlem street," learning "English"), Roth never suggests that Ira's incestuous sexuality, or the way that he speaks, result from the influence of his exposure to America. On the contrary, Ira's understanding of his obscene speech reflects the conventional belief of that period that Jews speak obscenely. If, unlike Miller and Timayensis, Roth does not go so far as to claim that the "average Jew" speaks obscenely and practices deviant sexuality, still, as dramatized by the examples cited earlier, Ira understands himself not as a sexually deviant American, or resident of Harlem, or man—but specifically as a sexually deviant, vulgar Jew.

Ira's guilt and self-perception matters, as Dickstein points out, because it clarifies a central and mostly unasked question about *Call It Sleep*. Why, exactly, is David Schearl so guilty and fearful about sex? Many critics of that novel note David's extraordinary hypersensitivity—David "reacts with extreme revulsion" even to "innocent sex play," and has an "extraordinarily delicate sensibility"; he is "hypersensitive," or "sensitive to a fault, fearful, dreamy, and easily traumatized," and has "an unshakeable sense of his own sinfulness"⁵⁹—and *Mercy* helps to explain this feature of the novel. As Dickstein points out, "the self-loathing that bedeviled the young man in *Mercy*, especially his feelings of sexual guilt, carried over into his writing of *Call It Sleep*, where it was projected back

⁵⁹ Bonnie Lyons, "The Symbolic Structure of Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*," *Contemporary Literature* 13:2 (Spring 1972): 189, 195; Steven G. Kellman, "Living on Writer's Block: Henry Roth and American Literature," *Shofar* 26:3 (2008): 31; Werner Sollors, "'A World Somewhere, Somewhere Else': Language, Nostalgic Mourning, and Urban Immigrant Family Romance in *Call It Sleep*," in *New Essays on Call It Sleep* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 141; William Freedman, "Mystical Initiation and Experience in *Call It Sleep*," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 5:1 (1979): 27.

onto his precocious childhood."⁶⁰ To this important insight, one must add that *Mercy* also describes Ira's discovery of literary modernism as a means of purging this sexual guilt—which is likewise a crucial realization for a reading of obscenity in *Call It Sleep*.

Ira discovers that there is only one way for him to assuage the "shame and self-loathing" he attaches to his Jewish upbringing, to his poverty, and to his sexual deviance. That solution parallels closely what Jonathan Freedman describes as "assimilation-by-culture," or a pursuit of the "temple of culture." In *Mercy*, Roth repeatedly calls it a "gateway to esteem, to prestige" (3:65-66).⁶¹ Indeed, *Mercy* provides a vivid portrait of a young Jew's cathexis to high culture, particularly the nascent and yet already authoritative field of Anglo-American literary modernism, as a mechanism for self-transformation. As a child, Ira encounters the luxurious interior of a Fifth Avenue mansion, which makes him yearn to have "taste" and "manners," "to be that way—not Jewish. Not just rich, but with that special luster, that style." "Where," he asks himself, "was there a world like that for him?" (1:196-97). Though Ira has been an intensely committed reader throughout his childhood years, his first glimpse of his own passageway to the temple of culture occurs when his well-to-do friend Larry, a highly cultured German Jew who, when they first meet, Ira imagines must be Protestant, reads him selections from Louis Untermeyer's

⁶⁰ Dickstein, "Memory Unbound."

⁶¹ Freedman describes assimilation-by-culture as one avenue available to Jews in post-Enlightenment Europe and America: "Assimilating (and traditionalist) Western Jews adopted many differing stances and responses to this dismayingly complex, bracingly open brave new world. And for many of those Jews who sought purchase in such a world, 'culture,' in the highest and most exclusive sense of the word, played a crucial role. The ideal of culture, not to mention its practices—the practice or knowledge or both of art, music, writing, journalism—promised the rapid conferral of social acceptance through the acquisition of cultural legitimacy." Jonathan Freedman, *The Temple of Culture: Assimilation and Anti-Semitism in Literary Anglo-America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 32. In his introduction, Freedman describes, as a concrete example of this phenomenon, Phelps Gate on the Yale University campus, which he refers to as "the portals of anti-Semitic high culture" (4), echoing Roth's metaphor even more precisely.

anthology of *Modern American Verse* (1919) on the street in Manhattan. As he listens to a bit of Vachel Lindsay's "Congo," Ira feels

the familiar, the commonplace, become puzzling. The street opened up toward him, throbbing, as if he were at the flaring end of a great horn, overwhelmed by an unexpected confusing crescendo. Buildings seemed to skew about. Wearisome perspectives shed their gadding and humdrum crusts. What did it mean? It was something like the way Larry transformed from gentile to Jew; only this went the other way. (2:200)

In this scene, Ira listens to a cultured Jewish kid reading from a prestigious literary anthology edited by a respected Jewish poet, and particularly to an aristocratic non-Jewish poet's transformation of faux-African sounds into art. Through these intermediaries, Ira begins to understand the power of modernism to defamiliarize its objects (as Roth puts it, "the commonplace, become puzzling") and to elevate the prestige of its practitioners and subject matter.⁶² Just as the practice of modernism could transform the nonsense sounds of Lindsay's poem into art, it promises to transform Ira "the other way," from an impoverished Jew into a worldly non-Jew. In other words, as he later muses, through art, "the *cosmopolitan* world displaced the *parochial* one" (3:28).

It is because of Ira's deep entrenchment in his incestuous relationships that he becomes desperate to attain the "gateway of esteem, of prestige"—a "wide corridor toward something like salvation, toward something that could lead him from bondage" (3:286). Pascale Casanova sensibly observes that "Roth describes almost in its raw state the principle of literary 'transmutation,'" and she remarks that "his economic vocabulary ... reveals the actual mechanisms of *littérisation*, stripped of the usual literary

⁶² On the uses of African dialect in American modernism, see Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

euphemisms."⁶³ Yet Casanova neglects to note that Ira desires to transform not just "economic and literary poverty" into literary capital, but his very personal sexual shame. Roth makes this eminently clear in comparing Ira's "need" to embrace modern literature with the lesser needs of his Jewish friends and classmates.

Why did he need to? On account of what he himself had become, had done to himself, damage inflicted on himself, that had never scathed Larry. . . . It came back to the same thing, some kind of spasmodic, dumb determination he was going to find a way out of *himself*, out of what he had gotten himself into, cost what it might. Larry didn't have to pay that kind of price. He didn't need to. Neither did most everybody else, classmates Ira had begun to hobnob with: Aaron, Ivan, Iz, Sol. They didn't need to either. Ira did. He needed to, and he was willing to pay the price. That was the only way he could put it into words for himself. What other way was there? What other gateway? (3:65-66)

It is Ira's sexual guilt that urges him on, this passage clarifies, to a cathexis with high culture, one fundamentally stronger than those of his Jewish buddies, whether they are wealthy NYU students like Larry or poor strivers like his CCNY classmates ("Aaron, Ivan, Iz, Sol"). As Roth's autobiographical novel describes the situation, Ira's extraordinary sexual situation—the experience of abuse that has led him to abuse others in a way that has deeply informed his sense of self, or, as he puts it, "what he himself had become"—compels Ira's desperate pursuit of a purifying "way out of *himself*"—both as a sexual deviant and as a Jew. He realizes that the technique for doing so consists of "put[ting] it"—his sexually tinged self-loathing—"into words," into literature.

More than any other literary work, Joyce's *Ulysses* provides Ira with a sense of how transformation-through-culture can be accomplished. Though he admits to a great deal of confusion and incomprehension upon first reading of the novel in 1925, Ira

⁶³ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 335.

discovers in *Ulysses* what he so fervently "need[s]." Noting particularly the sexual and scatological inclusions that resulted in Joyce's book being censored, Ira comes to recognize the immanent value of his own distasteful childhood memories:

If Bloom knew the hour when his wife cuckolded him, what did that compare to Ira's knowing the equatorial hour on Sunday morning when Mom and Pop were gone? And worse, worse than anything Bloom ever suffered: that agonizing afternoon when murder flapped bat wings over his plane geometry text, because Minnie hadn't menstruated. And talk about the nastiness of the diurnal—talk about the absolute vertigo of furore of a chance weekday break, what was looking up a statue's buttocks compared to that... or the colossal jape of compassionate Mamie's sentimentally "forcing" a greenback on him, a buck, right after he had hoisted her drippy kid daughter, Stella, on his petard. Hell, of nastiness, of sordidness, perversity, and squalor—compared to anyone in *Ulysses*, he had loads, he had droves, he had troves. But it was language, language, that could magically transmogrify the baseness of his days and ways into precious literature... (3:74)

In Ira's analysis, his guilt-inducing, unusual sexual practices, "worse than anything Bloom ever suffered," constitute, in a literary context, an unusual treasure.⁶⁴ Through Ira's introduction to Joyce, his most terrifying moments—knowing his parents were having sex "on Sunday morning"; contemplating the murder of his sister, when he feared he had impregnated her; accepting small gifts from his aunt after seducing her daughter—become resources for the creation of "precious literature." The passage even models Joyce's formal influence, in the rhyming wordplay of "loads," "droves," and "troves" to describe Ira's "nastiness," "sordidness," "perversity," and "squalor." While "loads" and "droves" are ambivalent colloquialisms meaning "a large quantity," in neither a positive nor negative sense—in the 19th century, "loads" often figured in phrases like "loads of

⁶⁴ Roth repeatedly returns to alchemical conceits for describing this process, noting that "all those myriad, myriad squalid impressions he took for granted, all were convertible from base to precious, from pig iron to gold ingot" (3:75), or that "... sordidness and Jew-baiting, penury and persecution, one's own enormities, one's own callousness and cowardice, everything was convertible to universal literary currency" (3:145).

fun," but it also commonly appeared as "loads of trouble"—the final term, "troves" is "short for TREASURE-TROVE ... in sense 'a valuable find.'"⁶⁵ As Roth proceeds through off-rhyme from word to word, then, Ira's potentially troublesome possessions transform into treasures, demonstrating on the level of diction how "language ... could magically transmogrify" "baseness" into something "precious." In its modeling of the wordplay found in Joyce's work, this passage vivifies Roth's claim that "the *Ulysses* demonstrated to [Ira] not only that it was possible to commute the dross of the mundane and the sordid into literary treasure, but *how* it was done. It showed him how to address whole slag heaps of squalor, and make them available for exploitation in art" (3:73).⁶⁶

Joycean wordplay is one of the crucial modernist techniques Ira discovers through which literature can mitigate his self-loathing by transforming its objects into prestigious and respected art. The furious mixing of registers typical of Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and modernism generally, is another. Ira first attends to this artistic model early in *Mercy*, listening to a modern performance of Romantic music:

When did [Ira] begin to recognize and enjoy that—that blend of pure and ... and nasty? Yeah, yeah, instead of the one or maybe the other by itself. Like a dissonance in music maybe that repelled him at first, a perverse dissonance, like Wagner, like *The Meistersinger* when he first heard Mischa Elman play it in Izzy's house, and was so fond of it afterward. ... But wasn't it something, Jesus, wild, when you joined the two together: sardonics? (2:291)

⁶⁵ "Trove," *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed (1989), *OED Online* <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50258855>>.

⁶⁶ In a sense, then, Roth fulfilled the prediction F. Scott Fitzgerald had made, unsympathetically, several years earlier, that soon "the novel of the Jewish tenement block will be festooned with wreaths from '*Ulysses*' and the later Gertrude Stein." See F. Scott Fitzgerald, "How to Waste Material: A Note on My Generation," *Bookman* 63 (May 1926), 262-63.

As in his mediated exposure to Lindsay's "Congo," in this passage Ira reflects upon his encounter of Wagner, that paragon of high art anti-Semitism, through a performance by a world famous Jewish prodigy, played on the phonograph at the house of one of his poor, music-loving Jewish friends.⁶⁷ He finds himself enjoying the "perverse dissonance," the "blend of pure and ... nasty" that he discerns in the music itself and in its circulation.

Ira discovers in Joyce, and in T. S. Eliot's poetry, how this technique works on the page, but it is Henry Miller who offers the most apposite contemporary description of the mixing of registers in *Cancer*, the book in which Miller claims to "speak like a Jew."⁶⁸ Miller alludes to Walt Whitman in a *tour de force* passage that expounds an artistic credo linking the energetic juxtaposition of levels of discourse that fascinates Ira, and characterizes modernism generally, with Miller's quintessential concern of speaking the unspeakable: "I love everything that flows," Miller writes,

even the menstrual flow that carries away the seed unfecund. I love scripts that flow, be they hieratic, esoteric, perverse, polymorph, or unilateral. I love everything that flows ... the violence of the prophets, the obscenity that is ecstasy, the wisdom of the fanatic, the priest with his rubber litany, the foul words of the whore, the spittle that floats away in the gutter, the milk of the breast and the bitter honey that pours from the womb, all that is fluid, melting, dissolute and dissolvent, all the pus and dirt that in flowing is purified ... (258)

Juxtaposing the ancient and the modern, sacred and profane—"hieratic" and "perverse" writing, "priest" and "whore"—Miller declares that it is precisely the convergence between these opposites, the recognition of their inseparability, that constitutes modern

⁶⁷ On Jews, violins, and high culture—including treatment of Wagner and Elman—see Sander Gilman, "Einstein's Violin: Jews and the Performance of Identity," *Modern Judaism* 25.3 (2005): 219-236.

⁶⁸ On T. S. Eliot's influence on Ira and on Roth, see *Mercy* 3:137-39; Mark Schoening, "T. S. Eliot Meets Michael Gold: Modernism and Radicalism in Depression-Era American Literature," *Modernism/Modernity* 3.3 (1996): 51-68; and Bonnie Lyons, "Interview with Henry Roth."

literature. In this sense, he shares in Eliot's and Joyce's poetics.⁶⁹ Moreover, in a gesture that exhibits continuities between his work and Roth's, Miller asserts that "in flowing"—in this enthusiastic mixture of what Roth calls "pure" and "nasty"—"pus and dirt [are] purified." For Miller "obscenity"—the supposedly Jewish use of taboo words being one form of the obscenity he embraces—"is," or at least *can be*, transformed into "ecstasy." Miller finally made good on this program, gaining recognition not only as an artist, but as a bestselling American one, while Sam Roth's engagements with obscenity and high art foundered miserably, earning him prison terms and financial ruin. Turning to *Call It Sleep* itself, the following section explores how the engagement with taboo words in that novel constitute Henry Roth's own gambit for sexual purification. With taboo words standing metonymically for sexual guilt, *Call It Sleep* figures modernism as the alchemical solvent that promises to purify, and thus redeem, both character and author.

IV. "Dirty Words" in *Call It Sleep*

The plot of *Call It Sleep* is familiar enough that I will rehearse it only very briefly here: David Schearl arrives in New York City as a toddler, and he grows up in Brooklyn and then on the Lower East Side in a Yiddish-speaking family beset by extreme tensions. Adoring his mother and fearing his father, he wonders about the mysteries of the adult

⁶⁹ Compare, also, Mikhail Bahktin's contemporaneous essay, "Discourse in the Novel" (1934-35), in which Bahktin describes "the novelistic hybrid ... [i.e.,] an artistically organized system for bringing different languages in contact with one another, a system having as its goal the illumination of one language by means of another..." (361) and asserts that "the novel must represent all the social and ideological voices of its era" (411). In M. M. Bahktin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259-422.

world—death, faith, and sex primary among them—and discovers mostly complexities and terrors. David suffers beatings at his father's hand, learns that his mother had a non-Jewish lover before immigrating, and imagines that he might be the product of that miscegenation. As his fears develop, he pieces together bits of theology and eschatology from Jewish and Christian sources, learning to associate cleanliness and purification with light. After an especially explosive confrontation with his father, David escapes to the streetcar tracks a few blocks from his house, and thrusts a metal milk dipper into the casing that houses an electrified rail. In so doing, he produces the massive spark that he hopes will provide the cleansing light he needs, and nearly dies by electrocution. Such a summary cannot do justice, of course, to the richly detailed world Roth creates, to the masterful symbolic structure he constructs, or to the linguistic complexity of his prose. These characteristics, more than its plot, have earned the book plaudits as the finest available specimen of proletarian fiction, American Joyceanism, and American Jewish fiction.⁷⁰ My reading of the novel models itself on a handful of excellent studies that attend scrupulously to Roth's linguistic and symbolic techniques and analyze the patterns within the narrative as providing a record of David's "semiotic initiation."⁷¹

⁷⁰ The most authoritative recommendations of the novel in these categories include Walter B. Rideout's lauding of *Call It Sleep* as "the most distinguished single proletarian novel," the *Columbia History of the American Novel's* proclaiming it "arguably the most Joycean of a novel written by an American," and Leslie Fiedler's praise of the novel as "the best single book by a Jew about Jewishness written by an American, certainly in the 'thirties and perhaps ever." Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900-1954* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 186; Emory Elliott, ed., *The Columbia History of the American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 394-95; Fiedler, "The Breakthrough: The American Jewish Novelist and the Fictional Image of the Jew," *Midstream* 4.1 (Winter 1958): 23.

⁷¹ James Ferguson offers perhaps the most impressive of the many readings of the novel's deployment of symbols; Ferguson carefully tracks not just the four main symbols Roth identifies in the titles of the novel's four books—i.e., *The Cellar*, *The Picture*, *The Coal*, and *The Rail*—but also, for example, the canary or "yellow bird" that "serves as a kind of link between the warmth and security afforded by his mother, the threat of her sexual nature, the motif of time, and the Christ figure on the tugboat" (215). See "Symbolic Patterns in *Call It Sleep*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 14:4 (January 1969): 211-20. A more basic, but still

The crucial role of "dirty words" in this "semiotic initiation" becomes clear through a close reading of one scene that most critics of *Call It Sleep* have appreciated as central to the novel's project: the one in which David, in *cheder*, has Isaiah 6 read to him, introducing him to the crucial ritual of purification he will later enact. In the scene, Reb Pankower, David's *melamed*, glosses the biblical passage in Yiddish, rendered into English in Roth's narrative. Notably, Roth does not produce or reproduce a literal or standard translation of the Tanakh, but elaborates upon the original for the sake of his narrative. For example, Pankower's gloss explains that "Isaiah saw the Almighty in His majesty and His terrible light," adding the phrase "His terrible light," nothing even resembling which appears anywhere in this chapter of Isaiah, but which functions in Roth's novel to connect this passage more directly to the "integrative motif" of light and darkness.⁷² (David thinks, "Clean? Light?" [227], relating cleanliness to light, and anticipating his pursuit of the purifying power of an electrical spark.) Similarly, Pankower has the angel tell Isaiah "You are clean!": a very loose and simplified translation of Isaiah 6:7, in which the angel declares "וְחַטָּאתֶךָ תִּכַּפֵּר, וְיִסֵּר עֲוֹנֶךָ, וְיִסֵּר עֲוֹנֶךָ" ["and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin expiated"] that introduces another of the crucial terms

valuable reading of the novel's symbolic structure can be found in Bonnie Lyons, "The Symbolic Structure of Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*," *Contemporary Literature* 13:2 (Spring 1972): 186-203.

For studies of the novel's macaronic prose and linguistic complexity, see Naomi Diamant, "Linguistic Universes in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*," *Contemporary Literature* 27:3 (Autumn 1986): 336-55; Frances D. Farber, "Encounters with an Alien Culture: Thematic Functions of Dialect in *Call It Sleep*," *Yiddish* 7:4 (1990): 49-56; and Hana Wirth-Nesher's most recent and comprehensive essay on the novel, "Christ—It's a Kid!: Jewish Writing and Modernism: Henry Roth," in *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 76-99.

On the novel as a "semiotic initiation" or "semiotic *Bildungsroman*," see Wayne Lesser, "A Narrative's Revolutionary Energy: The Example of Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*," *Criticism* (Spring 1981): 162; Naomi Sokoloff, *Imagining the Child in Modern Jewish Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 103; and Diamant, 337.

⁷² Indeed, no expression that would translate sensibly to "terrible light" appears anywhere in the Torah; the closest equivalent that I can find is Isaiah 9:1's "אור גדול" or "great light."

("clean") that Roth has been deploying throughout the novel.⁷³ Compare the original and King James versions of Isaiah 6:5 to Pankower's gloss:

וְאָמַר אֹי-לִי כִי-נִדְמִיתִי, כִּי אִישׁ טָמֵא-שִׁפְתָּיִם אָנֹכִי, וּבִתְוֹךְ עַם-טָמֵא שִׁפְתָּיִם
אָנֹכִי יוֹשֵׁב: כִּי, אֶת-הַמֶּלֶךְ יְהוָה צָבָאוֹת--רָאוּ עֵינָי

King James edition:

Then said I: Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

Call It Sleep:

Woe me! he cried, What shall I do! I am lost! ... I, common man, have seen the Almighty, I, unclean one have seen him! Behold, my lips are unclean and I live in a land unclean ... (227)

Pankower's gloss emphasizes Isaiah's description of himself as "unclean": while the Torah only has Isaiah call himself "a man of unclean lips," Pankower's version assumes that "unclean lips" metonymically represent Isaiah's entire person; the prophet, in this retelling, refers to himself as "I, unclean one." The difference between a tainted mouth and a tainted person surely matters, especially to a sensitive child like David; and, in fact, David does not immediately accompany Pankower on the metonymic slide that equates "lips" with "I." At first, he focuses on the precise wording of the text wondering "Why wasn't it clean, anyway?" (230), with this "it" evidently referring to Isaiah's mouth, and not to Isaiah himself, who would be referred to as "he." David quickly answers his own question in the most literal, childish way: "He didn't wash it, I bet" (230). But within a

⁷³ These cannot be considered flagrant mistranslations; Torah was glossed in *cheders*, through exactly this sort of oral, on-the-fly translation; but it is worth noting what elements of the Hebrew text Roth felt it necessary to have Pankower exaggerate or emphasize. Also, of course, recall that Pankower is translating the Hebrew of the Torah into Yiddish, which is then being retranslated into English by Roth's narrator.

few paragraphs, which represents a few seconds of his stream-of-consciousness, David has moved on from that simple idea to the realization that Isaiah's problem was more than physical dirt. "He said dirty words, I bet," David muses (231). This is a sensible insight for the child. Roth has carefully introduced "dirty words" into the text of the novel up to this point, as we will see, demonstrating both how David comes to learn them and why the boy understands them as linked with sex and grievously sinful.

As critics have noted, the novel records David's encounters with the tremendous power of language. Indeed, in the oft-quoted scene in which he learns a couple of slang terms for genitalia ("knish" and "petzel"), David receives an almost textbook lesson on speech act theory.⁷⁴ In the following exchanges with Annie, the experienced neighbor who leads David into a closet and initiates him into sex play, the boy learns that his words have a mysterious power. The conversation begins with David telling Annie that they cannot play any games until Annie's brother Yussie returns, and I quote it at some length to exhibit how David learns language, and its power, by parroting her. She replies:

"Yes, we can."

"Wot?"

"Wotcha want."

"I don't know wot."

"Yuh know wot."

"Wot?"

"Yuh know," she said mysteriously.

That was the game then. David congratulated himself on discovering its rules so quickly.

⁷⁴ It's worth noting that in his use of "petzel," a standard Yiddish diminutive of "putz," Roth follows Miller in introducing that term, in its meaning of "penis," into English language texts. One early and one recent critic of the novel strangely misquote this scene. John Chamberlain, reviewing the book in the *New York Times* (February 18, 1935), 13, wrote that "a little girl wants [David] to 'play dirty,'" while in his recent *American Talmud: The Cultural Work of American Jewish Fiction* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), Ezra Cappell refers to "sticking a 'petzel in a knish' as the act is memorably called in Roth's first novel" (33). Neither of these quoted phrases ("play dirty" or "petzel in a knish") appears anywhere in *Call It Sleep* (though the phrase "play bad" and the words "petzel" and "knish" do).

"Yea, I know," he answered in the same tone of mystery.
"Yea?" she peered at him eagerly.
"Yea!" he peered at her in the same way.
"Yuh wanna?"
"Yea!"
"Yuh wanna den?"
"Yea, I wanna."

Annie leads David into a closet, and the conversation continues. She tells him:

"Yuh must say, Yuh wanna play bad? Say it!"
He trembled. "Yuh wanna play bad?"
"Now, *you* said it," she whispered. "Don' forget, you said it."
By the emphasis of her words, David knew he had crossed some awful threshold.
(53)

Learning language by repeating Annie's words, David stumbles into a speech act. The utterance of the words "Yuh wanna play bad?" constitutes David's illocutionary act, the crossing of an "awful threshold." Annie informs David that anything that they do ("put yuh han' in my knish," she commands a moment later), has been summoned by David's own speech, intentionally or not.

Through this exchange, David discovers that even the most innocuous words contain sexual meanings he does not want them to have. Later, sitting in a police station and musing guiltily about his encounter with Annie, he thinks, "Everything shifted. Everything changed. Even words. Words, you said. Wanna, you said. I wanna. Yea. I wanna. What? You know what. They were something else, something horrible!" (102). Simple words, "I wanna," can, David realizes, lead to "horrible" and frightening circumstances, if one isn't careful with them. The closet scene is a masterful dramatization of a child's realization of the important truth that language, in and of itself,

tends to transgression if not carefully regulated—an insight not incidentally related to the period in which Roth wrote, during which a lapse in self-censorship could easily lead to prosecution, harassment, loss of copyright, and jail.

The sharpest example in *Call It Sleep* of how David struggles to control language's transgressive potential is the word "shit." This is a brilliant gesture by Roth, for while defecation constitutes an inevitable, regular practice for children, and the tactile, visual, and olfactory perception of feces is one of the few universal human experiences, the most common and traditional word for "feces" and "defecation" was taboo in American literature at the time. While sex remains a mystery to many children for at least some portion of their lives, and while celibacy exists as a practice, the suppression of the word "shit" is a pure and—following Roland Barthes's observation that "when written, shit does not have an odour"—a virtually senseless practice.⁷⁵

Throughout the course of the novel, Roth skillfully demonstrates how David learns the word "shit" and its Yiddish equivalent. The word is first spoken in the novel, in English, by David's neighbor Yussie, who "mutter[s]" it "sullenly" in response to his sister, Annie: "Aa, shit on you" (49). The next time David hears it, again in English, the word is spoken by an adult carriage driver, who says, "Now wouldn't dat give yuh de shits?" (60). The word's third appearance is more complex: it is reproduced in the text in English, but represents Yiddish speech. David's aunt Bertha asks his father, "How long is it since you shit on the ocean?" (151). The actual word she speaks would presumably be

⁷⁵ Barthes, *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, Richard Miller, trans. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1974), 137. See also Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit*, trans. Nadia Benabid and Rodolphe El-Khoury (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

the standard Yiddish verb, "קאַקן"/"kahn" (in its past participle, "געקאַקט"/"gekakt.")⁷⁶ David knows how to relate the Yiddish "kahn" and the English "shit," too; the novel explains—presumably as a service to Roth's readers who do not understand Yiddish—that "'kockin,' as David learned long ago, was a Yiddish word meaning to sit on the toilet" (160). And from listening to his father's angry responses to Bertha, David also learns that his aunt's speech is sinful and wrong, as Albert refers to it as "fishwives' lip" (151), a "vile mouth," and a "filthy, clapping tongue," and proclaims that "a million bath-tubs couldn't clean her" (188-89). The last phrase foreshadows David's realization that Isaiah must have spoken very dirty words to become so unclean.

Through these condemnations of Bertha's speech and presumably other, unrepresented lessons about proper and improper speech, David learns to repress taboo words even in his own thoughts. As H. W. Boynton observed in a 1935 review of the novel, "though [David] learns to speak filth, it is always with a sense of sin, and this becomes in time an obsession."⁷⁷ The first time David himself employs the word "shit" occurs in a stream-of-consciousness passage, the language of which is indeterminate. The novel regularly translates spoken Yiddish into English, but also includes free indirect discourse in English, so this could be either English or Yiddish or some combination:

Funny, birds were. In the park on Avenue C. Eat brown. Shit green. On the benches is green. On the railings. So how? Don't you? Apples is red and white. Chicken is white. Bread, watermelon, gum-drops, all different colors. But—Don't say. Is bad. But everybody says. Is bad though. ... (174)

⁷⁶ The remark echoes the ubiquitous Yiddish jeer, "*Gay kahn afn yam*" ["go shit on the ocean"].

⁷⁷ H. W. Boynton, "The Story of a Ghetto Childhood," *New York Times* (Feb 17, 1935), BR7.

In a brief dramatization of how unnatural language taboos can be, observation of nature leads David to contemplate his own biology, when he encounters the bizarre impermissibility of describing excretion. Birds eat brown-colored food, and their feces are green, he notices, while he, by contrast, eats red, white, and multicolored foods, and his excrement turns out brown. By this point, David has internalized enough of the language taboos that operate in his family and society that he stops himself from articulating this simple observation, cutting himself off with the words, "Don't say. Is bad." Unfamiliar with any of the acceptably Latinate or scientific synonyms that could be substituted as euphemisms for "shit," David recognizes that "everybody says" "shit" and "*kakn*"—his aunt, Yussie, non-Jewish adults on the street—but still recognizes his responsibility not to utter, or even cognitively countenance, what he refers to a moment later as "bad words" (174). One critic has pointed out that for David, "excretion and sex are so evil that even thinking words that describe them is sinful";⁷⁸ yet David's feeling about these words is not a personal eccentricity. Rather he submits to a taboo imposed by his society on him, and equally on Roth by American law. Even if David—or Jake Barnes, or Lily Bart, or any of the characters of early 20th century American fiction—felt comfortable speaking or thinking the word "shit," it would have been a crime for the authors of the novels in which these characters appear to represent that comfort.

Throughout the novel, David discovers a few other "dirty words." He hears a shopkeeper call someone "bestit" (91), and his aunt and *melamed* both use the Yiddish verb "*pishn*" (which the narrator translates to "piss" [157, 216]). It is "shit," though, once again, that becomes central to David's thinking in the scene in which Pankower glosses Isaiah 6, and which helps David to understand why exactly Isaiah's lips were unclean.

⁷⁸ Fred A. Roth, "Roth's *Call It Sleep*," *Explicator*, 48:3 (Spring 1990), 219.

Indeed, one of David's classmates speaks the word "shid" (229)—"shit," slightly accented, that is—just a moment after Reb Pankower translates a line from Isaiah 6:1 ("וַאֲרָאָה אֶת-אֱלֹהִים וְיָשַׁב עַל-כִּסֵּא רָם וַיִּנָּשָׂא") more or less accurately as "Isaiah saw God. And God was sitting on his throne, high in heaven" (226-27). As David ponders this image, his knowledge of the meaning of "kockin" and the word "shit" lead him to a series of thoughts that trouble him deeply: "Some place Isaiah saw Him, just like that. I bet! He was sitting on a chair. So he's got chairs, so he can sit. Gee! Sit Shit! Sh! Please God, I didn't mean it! Please God, somebody else said it! Please—" (230).

Here, once again, Roth demonstrates how language has an inherent tendency toward transgression (as Wirth-Nesher observes, in the manuscript draft of this scene, Roth notes that "recklessness ... is indispensable to a gift of tongues"), and how troubling that instability becomes for David.⁷⁹ The passage also reveals that David's internal monologue, at least at this moment in the novel, occurs in English, contrary to Wirth-Nesher's generalization that David's thoughts "are experienced in Yiddish."⁸⁰ The transformation of the innocent "sit" to the sinful "shit" through their near homophony relies on the English words. The Yiddish equivalents, "zitsn/zetsn" (to sit) and "kahn" (to shit), would be difficult to confuse. Furthermore, as Kellman explains, the "post-alveolar pronunciation of 's'—almost as if it were 'sh'—was a shibboleth that stigmatized and handicapped Ashkenazic Jews" in the early 20th century, and "Roth's own sister, Rose, would be denied employment in the New York City public schools for this reason."⁸¹ So

⁷⁹ Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English*, 77.

⁸⁰ Hana Wirth-Nesher, "Afterword," in *Call It Sleep* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 448.

⁸¹ Kellman, 75; see *Mercy* 3:202-03. This speech impediment is not uniquely Jewish, of course; Roth also mocks the speech of a non-Jewish teacher in a similar way—"shtand up, shit down"—in *Mercy* (4:187). For

the threatening intrusion of the taboo word here depends both on David's rendering of Reb Pankower's Yiddish translation of Hebrew into his own English stream-of-consciousness and on the particular challenges in the Americanization of Ashkenazic Jewish speech, which rendered "sit" and "shit" phonetically indistinguishable for many speakers. In exhibiting this frightening linguistic slip, the passage demonstrates a crucial source of David's terror: his recognition of just how close at hand the prohibited "dirty words" lurk, and how unavoidable they are for him. Even in print, only a single letter distinguishes the innocent "sit" from the sinful "shit"—and just two letters separate "shit" from the catch-all corrective "Sh!" Most revealing here is the vehemence of David's suppression of his "fleeting obscenity," as we might anachronistically refer to it.⁸² He pleads with God that he didn't "mean it," returning to his earlier realization that "words ... were something else, something horrible!" At around the same time that Ferdinand de Saussure was first lecturing on the arbitrariness of the relationship between the signifier and the signified, David struggles with the arbitrariness of language, in a context where the penalties for linguistic transgression could be dire.⁸³

This linguistic misstep must be on David's mind a few moments and paragraphs later, when he answers his own question about why Isaiah's lips were unclean. Fresh from his second self-repression of the word "shit," David understands Isaiah's "unclean lips" as they relate to his own struggle with words, and, in doing so, encounters a typical

the origin story of the modern term "shibboleth," in which a mispronunciation of the "s" and "sh" sounds was used to distinguish Jews from non-Jews, see Judges 12:6.

⁸² In April 2009, the Supreme Court upheld the FCC's right to impose heavy fines on broadcasters for "fleeting expletives"—taboo words spoken, unpredictably, on live broadcasts—though not on First Amendment grounds. See *Fox v. FCC*, No. 489 F.3d 444; 2007 U.S. App. LEXIS 12868 (2nd Cir. June 4, 2007) and *FCC v. Fox* 556 U.S. ____ (2009).

⁸³ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (Paris: Payot, 1916).

challenge facing anti-obscenity crusaders: how can one demonstrate what is obscene in a text or speech without on some level or other reproducing that text or speech, and thus disseminating it?⁸⁴ "He said dirty words, I bet," David thinks, and then thinks first of the dirty word he knows best, the one he has repeatedly had to censor in his own thoughts, before expanding the series: "Shit, pee, fuckenbestit—Stop! You're sayin' it yourself. It's a sin again! That's why he—Gee! I didn't mean it" (231). In analyzing what he imagines to be Isaiah's grievous sin, David mimics the proscribed behavior, and turns himself into one of the prophet's "people of unclean lips." As the passage continues, David conjectures—very much in line with what the NYSSV and other purity crusaders would have wanted him to think—that obscenity constitutes a special category of speech act that degrades and defiles the person who uses it. "But your mouth don't get dirty," he muses. "I don't feel no dirt. (He rolled his tongue about) Maybe inside. Way, way in, where you can't taste it" (231). Bewildered by the abstraction of obscenity—the fact that saying "shit" or "fuckenbestit" does not produce physical dirt or harm—David, like generations of anti-smut crusaders, assumes that obscenity must then have the power to defile him in some vague but fundamental way. He asks himself, "What did Isaiah say that made his mouth dirty? Real dirty, so he'd know it was?" (231), wondering what words Isaiah spoke to require the radical purification visited on him by a coal-bearing angel.

As the novel continues, David becomes increasingly self-conscious about sin, and not only in relation to sex and language. In a frequently discussed scene from the novel, for one example, David lights the gas on Sabbath for an old woman, a task that he

⁸⁴ Thus the transcripts of Lenny Bruce's trials are full of the taboo words he was arrested for speaking; when judges try to avoid this paradox—talking around the potentially obscene words, or keeping the potentially obscene images out of sight—the result is often farcical; see, e.g., "Court Avoids Dirty Words During TV Indecency Hearing," *Associated Press* (November 5, 2008).

realizes is, technically, sinful (though she tells him he is "not old enough to sin"—that is, that because he is not yet bar mitzvah, or at the age of adulthood, he is exempt from the *halakha*, or Jewish laws) (237-38). David experiences a qualm about this—"something made his heart heavy" (238)—and arriving at home, he overhears a few boys discussing sin in greater detail, as one claims it is a "double sin" to rip newspaper on the Sabbath if that newspaper is printed in Hebrew characters (238-39). Yet, reacting to these prompts, David's resulting thoughts about sin quickly turn back to sex and language, via God.

Indeed, in the paragraph that follows, David wonders if God, whom he associates with light, might not be able to perceive him and his sinfulness in the dark ("Maybe He won't get mad"). David asks himself, "What's real dark?" and this thought leads quickly back to David's sexual concerns, which are the most powerful sins David knows. "Real dark. Gee! That time—Annie—closet. Cellar—Luter. Sh! Don't! Gee! Sin it was" (240). In moments like these, David's struggles to contain "dirty words" are regularly marked by his self-censoring "Sh!" His conjectures about sin and frightening memories become unspeakable, even unthinkable, not only because actions themselves would be sinful, but because representing them with words in speech or thought would itself be a sin.⁸⁵ Gazing up at smokestacks a few pages later, David associates shapes naturally: "Like forks they stick up. Like for—Fu— Sh! Was good today. Look other place" (247). Based on what we can assume is vague knowledge that penises "stick up" for sexual intercourse, David almost slips here and thinks the word "fuck," the most threatening and forbidden of the basic English taboo words, not only in the years of David's childhood, but also in

⁸⁵ Dr. Abraham Myerson noted, around the time of novel's composition, that "obscenity has come to reside in the word, and not the deed." Myerson, "Annotations on Obscenity," *Panorama* (November 1933), 2.

the 1930s, when Roth was writing the novel.⁸⁶ David represses his own speech characteristically: he disavows the taboo word with "Sh," reminds himself not to ruin his success at keeping his thoughts and speech clean ("Was good today"), and then tries to distract his thoughts ("Look other place"). As such, the passage reflects what Michael Holquist has called "the paradox of censorship," studies of which have often pointed out that humans will inevitably fail to fulfill a command such as "Don't think the word 'fuck,'" which is a sort of cognitive impossibility.⁸⁷ To construe the problem in convoluted language that reflects the paradox: how can David avoid thinking taboo words without thinking of them at the moment when he thinks he shouldn't think them?

As David encounters more obscene speech, including repetitions of the words he already knows and new specimens (e.g., "bullshit" [249], "hosschit" [251]), he reaches the point at which he can no longer effectively stem the tide of obscene speech within himself. His self-censorship fails. He continues to fear the sexualized words "play bad," stopping himself from uttering them ("You mean you wanna do—yuh wanna play—" [326]), but he has less success repressing "shit." Having overheard a kid say "Aaa, shit" (264), David reproduces that exact expression in his stream of consciousness, letter-for-letter, when he imagines himself falling during one of his rambling, fearful internal monologues. "Aaa, shit—slipped," (278) he thinks, without apology or a silencing "Sh!" Contemplating the spot from which a few neighborhood kids spied on his mother and saw her naked body, he lets slip the words "Son-of-a-bitch" (329), again without any sign of

⁸⁶ Allen Walker Reade, a contemporary linguist, called it "the most disreputable of all English words" at the end of 1934, weeks before *Call It Sleep* was published. "An Obscenity Symbol," *American Speech* 9:4 (December 1934), 264-278; Reade manages to provide an illuminating etymological history of the word "fuck" and an excellent general discussion of linguistic obscenity without once printing a taboo word.

⁸⁷ Michael Holquist, "Introduction: Corrupt Originals: The Paradox of Censorship," *PMLA* 109:1 (January 1994), 14.

guilt. And as the novel approaches its climax—as David's guilty attraction to Christianity mounts, coupled with his confusion and shame about his parents and sexuality generally—obscene speech figures powerfully, centrally, in the novel's discourse. Having revealed to Reb Pankower his tortured fantasy about his genealogy (i.e., that the woman he calls his mother is really his aunt, that his biological mother is dead, and that his father was an organist in Europe [368-69]), David cannot restrain his inner monologue:

A strange chaotic sensation was taking hold of him—a tumultuous, giddy freedom, a cruel caprice that made him want to caper, to skip, to claw at his hands, to pinch himself until he screamed. A secret wanton laughter kept arising to his lips, but never issued, gurgled in his throat instead with a gurgle of pain. ... "Fugimbestit! Fugimbestit!" The pressure of his frenzy, too great to be contained seethed from his lips. (370-71)

This tirade represents the failure of David's self-censorship; whereas he had succeeded, earlier, in stopping himself from saying "fuck," here he unleashes the entire taboo phrase "fugimbestit!"—in which Roth substitutes a "g" for the "ck" of "fuck" (just as Mailer would do, at Charles Rembar's suggestion, a little more than a decade later), and renders "bastard" phonetically. That term resonates, of course, with David's imagined genealogy and guilt. Pankower refers to David as a "bastard" (presumably, he speaks the Hebrew and Yiddish *mamzer*, which Roth renders into its English equivalent in the text) just a few pages earlier (369). Fascinatingly, Roth's description of David's tantrum evokes three discourses: the disdainful language of the anti-obscenity crusaders, who would not be surprised to hear of a child falling into a "frenzy" because of exposure to obscenity; the text of Isaiah, and its concern with unclean "lips"; and the modernist literary cacophony, which promises both "strange chaotic sensation" and "tumultuous, giddy freedom."

David's fit continues, embracing the Joycean linguistic play that David self-censored, earlier, when he cut off the aural association of "Sit Shit" with the repressive "Sh." In his frenzy, by contrast, David gleefully switches the vowel of "Fox" to form "fix" and then "fux," the latter being a homophone for the taboo "fucks"; similarly, he rhymes "Hee," the sound of his laughter, first with the Hebrew "V y'hee" ["and will be"], then with the innocuous "wee," and finally with "pee," one of the "dirty words" David earlier imagined Isaiah must have said along with "shit" and "fuckenbestit" to make his lips unclean. He continues to imagine that he will expose his penis ("Take id oud! See! Look!") to "all de goils," and rejects his own silencing "Sh!" with a more aggressive rejoinder, "Shattop! Wot I care" (371). He then turns attention to non-Jews, whom he describes as "Goy sonn'vabitch!" (371) and of whose "goy-beads" he says "no good shitten them!" (378).⁸⁸ These explicit representations of David's exuberant utterances of taboo words—hardly a trivial textual feature, either for David or Roth, at a time when printing such words were grounds for a novel's suppression and a publisher's arrest under U.S. law—signal that the novel approaches its programmatically modernist climax, in which Roth presents a wide range of taboo words, equaling *Ulysses* and even *Tropic of Cancer* in their variety and vehemence and exceeding by far, in this regard, any other uncensored or unbawdlerized American novel until that time.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ "Shitten" here seems to be a hybrid Yiddish-English coinage that connects the English verb "shit" and the typical Yiddish infinitive suffix, *n*, approximating both the meanings "to shit" and "shitting." David might also be saying "no good, shit on them!" Or, since "*shittn*" in Yiddish means "to pour (dry material)," David might have some other, more obscure bilingual meaning of this phrase in mind.

⁸⁹ Unlike other novels of the period—even John Dos Passos's similarly heteroglossic *USA* trilogy, which reproduces only the first and last letters of taboo words separated by what Reade calls "the euphemistic dash" (278n82)—the typographical poetics of *Call It Sleep* would have made it difficult to expurgate. The representations of English and other languages in *Call It Sleep*, and Roth's enthusiastic use of all of the available typographical symbols for conveying the movements of consciousness (including dashes, spaces,

In its climactic Chapter XXI, as many critics have noted, *Call It Sleep* juxtaposes images and language sacred and profane, evoking Biblical prophecy but resonating even more forcefully with literary modernism and particularly with Miller's call for writing that is at once "hieratic, esoteric, perverse, polymorph, [and] unilateral." The crowd's taboo exclamations include "cunt," "gash," "fuck," "fuckin'," "balls," "ass," "pecker," "putz," "prick," "shit," and "jerkin' off," as well as the culmination of the novel's treatment of the word "shit," in an evocative and exuberant phrase, as "shit-hemorrhage [sic]." This taboo language appears in and around discussions of graphic sexuality and blasphemy, such as Mary the prostitute's anecdote about finding a used condom on a plate when she was a young waitress (411), and O'Toole's fundamental profanity, "Shit on de pope" (413). Self-consciously modeled on both Joyce and Eliot—the layout suggests that Roth composed the section as a combination of blank verse and prose—this set piece incorporates taboo words as a crucial element in its modernist poetics, also including elaborate Joycean wordplay and, of course, a furious mixing of registers. Words that if spoken aloud, even today, might be offensive or vulgar, take part, in *Call It Sleep*, in the larger project of modernist defamiliarization and representation. These words are, as Miller would have it, "the pus and dirt that in flowing is purified."

The novel bestows a kind of purification upon David, in oblique and lyrical language: after his electrocution, the boy experiences a version of Isaiah's initiation in which a coal ("one ember") is extended to him ("Nothingness beati- / fied reached out its hands"). Afterwards, not another taboo word appears in David's thoughts. This purification mirrors, or stands for, the purification that the author hoped to achieve for

and italics to render breaks, pauses, and emphases in thought) would have made any typographical bowdlerizations appear to be part of a character's speech or consciousness, and not a publisher's imposition.

himself.⁹⁰ The promise Roth saw in modernism was that after having written and published a book like *Call It Sleep*, no longer would he be the type of poor Jew who "speak[s] like a Jew," in Miller's phrase. Having channeled his sexual guilt into David Schearl, and transformed them in the process into modern art, he would no longer suffer from them. Critics have continued to debate whether the novel's ending implies a redemption or failure for David, whether his return to his parents' home represents a newfound comfort in his environment or an acceptance of his disillusionment, but such arguments miss the point.⁹¹ A reading of the novel after *Mercy* and attending to its engagement with obscenity and modernism clarifies that the muted ambiguity of the novel's close is intrinsic to Roth's project, both because such ambiguity is a self-consciously modernist gesture and thus an end in itself, and because David's redemption simply isn't the goal of *Call It Sleep*. The point of the book, as Kellman and Dickstein would agree, was the redemption of Henry Roth. And among the primary means of that redemption was Roth's denuding taboo words—and the transgressive sexual acts,

⁹⁰ While in an important sense Roth relies in this scene on the Biblical promise of purification and redemption through the prophetic call, I contend that it is not the authority of Judaism or Christianity or ancient prophecy per se that makes the imagery from Isaiah 6 meaningful within *Call It Sleep*, but its appropriateness as source material within modernist practice. Roth sought out Isaiah as a myth that he could use, as Joyce had used *The Odyssey* and Eliot material from *The Golden Bough*. The simplest evidence that Roth was not primarily interested in Isaiah itself is that in Roth's many autobiographical reflections on his literary education and the composition of *Call It Sleep*, he does not dwell at any length on the impact that reading Isaiah, or other Biblical texts, had on him. He concentrates instead on the transformative power of Joyce and Eliot, as discussed above. For a thoughtful consideration of the "Jewish American 'prophetic mode,'" though, see Levinson, *Exiles on Main Street*, especially 192-200.

⁹¹ On this debate, see, for example, Tom Samet's 1975 essay, "Henry Roth's Bull Story: Guilt and Betrayal in *Call It Sleep*," which summarizes the "unanimous agreement among critics," including Rideout, Fiedler, Ferguson, Allen Guttman, and Lyons, who "argue that *Call It Sleep* traces a movement from terror and alienation to tranquility and reconciliation" (569-70), before articulating his own contrarian contention that "David's moments of illumination are essentially bogus" (570) and that the novel "witnesses neither transfiguration nor redemption, but strategic retreat" (581). *Studies in the Novel* (Winter 1975): 569-83. Samet is joined in his minority position by Gary Epstein in "Auto-Obituary: The Death of the Artist in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 5:1 (1979): 37-45, and by Gert G. Buelens in "The Multi-Voiced Basis of Henry Roth's Literary Success in *Call It Sleep*," in Winfried Siemerling and Katrin Schwenk, eds., *Cultural Difference and the Literary Text: Pluralism and the Limits of Authenticity in North American Literature* (Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1996), 142-50.

excretory functions, and genitalia that they represent—of their fearsome linguistic power, through their incorporation into a modernist literary project.

V. Modernism and Beyond: Roth and *Roth* and Roth

The history of literary obscenity is rife with ironies. Some of these ironies are, at least in retrospect, amusing: Anthony Comstock, the architect of sexual censorship and prudery in 20th century America, is said to have been revealed by his posthumously examined diaries as a compulsive masturbator, for example. Other ironies are bitter, or even tragic; Sam Roth spent years in a federal prison in the early 1960s, while publishers, having hired sharp lawyers who could exploit the legal decision that bore Roth's name, earned fortunes selling the very products he had been jailed for distributing. Henry Roth, meanwhile, suffered thirty years of bizarre and grisly penury. To read his descriptions of slaughtering waterfowl in Maine is to understand just how distant from literary celebrity Roth found himself.⁹² Strangely, though, the critical acclaim and fortune he eventually received—and the redemption that the novel was written to achieve—might have reached him earlier, and more fully, if his novel had been suppressed as obscene.

Indeed, trials and censorship controversies have been among the major means through which modernist authors established their reputations. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault explains how easily critics and artists slip into the convenient pose of the sexual revolutionary, and how that pose validates their efforts:

⁹² See, e.g., *Shifting Landscape*, 78-81.

we are conscious of defying established power, our tone of voice shows that we know we are being subversive, and we ardently conjure away the present and appeal to the future, whose day will be hastened by the contribution we believe we are making. Something that smacks of revolt, of promised freedom, of the coming age of a different law, slips easily into this discourse on sexual oppression. Some of the ancient functions of prophecy are reactivated therein.⁹³

Foucault's description, down to the allusion to "prophecy," efficiently captures the tone of many of the modernist authors whose subversions of literary propriety earned them a place in the canon of modern culture, including Lawrence, Joyce, and Miller, and their critics. Complementing Foucault's crucial insight, Celia Marshik has recently shown, as mentioned above, that "in the context of British modernism, censorship was repressive and also had productive effects. Individual texts were enhanced as a result of the threat of censorship, and this threat enabled writers to construct public personae—such as that of martyr (as in the case of Rossetti) or *enfant terrible* (as in the case of Joyce)—that exercise a strong hold on the imaginations of readers even today."⁹⁴ Treating the American case, Loren Glass has meanwhile demonstrated how obscenity trials in the United States served "as a mechanism . . . whereby the champions of high modernism in the academic, journalistic, and publishing community could establish and affirm the authority of their aesthetic standards."⁹⁵ All of these analyses echo the ancient observation by Tacitus that "banned writings are eagerly sought and read"⁹⁶—with the additional proviso that, in the age of mechanical reproduction, such writings are read

⁹³ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 6-7.

⁹⁴ Celia Marshik, *British Modernism and Censorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 4.

⁹⁵ Loren Glass, "Redeeming Value: Obscenity and Anglo-American Modernism," *Critical Inquiry* 32:2 (Winter 2006): 344.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Keith Allen and Kate Burridge, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2006), 23.

even more eagerly immediately after the celebrated lifting of the ban establishes them as not only revolutionary, but replete with "redeeming value." Sam Roth reminds us that there was a lot to lose, playing the game of literary obscenity, while Henry Miller demonstrates just how much one could win.

Published on February 15, 1935, *Call It Sleep* appeared at an inauspicious moment in American literary history, given its particular project and technique. Not primarily, as Kellman suggests, because of the effects of the Depression on the book industry and a relative indifference to Jewish writing at that time⁹⁷—but rather because the *Ulysses* decision remained so fresh in everyone's memories. Only half a year earlier, on August 7, 1934, Woolsey's celebrated 1933 decision had been affirmed by the Second Circuit Court of New York, in an eloquent decision by Judge Augustus Hand.⁹⁸ Hand observed that *Ulysses*, "has such portentous length, is written with such evident truthfulness in its depiction of certain types of humanity, and is so little erotic in its result, that it does not fall within the forbidden class"⁹⁹—and he could have been describing Roth's novel with the same words. As if they were writing directly in response to Hand's decision, *Call It Sleep*'s reviewers frequently remarked upon the book's use of taboo words, but also its portentous length, its truthfulness, and its emetic, rather than erotic, effects. Frequently explicit comparisons to *Ulysses* strengthened the sense that *Call It*

⁹⁷ There were certainly plenty of writers who sold enough books to survive on their income in that decade. *Call It Sleep* itself managed to sell well enough that Ballou proudly advertised in the *New York Times* that the novel was "SELLING 600 WEEKLY." See *New York Times* (April 7, 1935), BR23. As for an indifference to Jewishness, while Kellman's points about the virtual mania for things Jewish in 1964 cannot be gainsaid, plenty of Jewish books were written and published in the 1930s: only two years after *Call It Sleep* appeared, Jerome Weidman had a certified American Jewish bestseller with *I Can Get It for You Wholesale* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1937), so popular it occasioned a sequel.

⁹⁸ Kellman mistakenly dates Woolsey's *Ulysses* decision to 1932 (88), and does not mention the affirmation by Hand, thus unintentionally obscuring the relevance of these decisions to the reception of Roth's novel.

⁹⁹ Edward De Grazia, ed., *Censorship Landmarks* (New York: Bowker, 1969), 97.

Sleep needed to be understood in relation to Joyce's recently freed novel.¹⁰⁰ An unsympathetic *New Masses* staff reviewer complained, for example, not only that "the sex phobias of [Roth's] six year-old Proust are over-emphasized" but also that "the book is too long by at least two hundred pages," while the book was defended in the same publication as having shown "honestly and greatly exactly what that experience [of a working-class childhood] consisted of."¹⁰¹ Writing in the *New York Times*, H. W. Boynton dealt with the novel's obscenity directly, noting that Roth's readers

are spared nothing of what [David] hears and sees. In this and other connections the book lays all possible stress on the nastiness of the human animal. It is the fashion, and we must make the best of the spectacle of a fine book deliberately and as it were doggedly smeared with verbal filthiness.¹⁰²

Boynton's concession to "fashion"—the one represented by the recent *Ulysses* decision, and that book's resulting popularity, no doubt—suggests how difficult it would have been for the NYSSV to mount a case against Roth in 1935. As Boynton wrote, "you find yourself conceding, against all qualms, the rightness as well as the (you would have said) unspeakable grossness of [the book's] human ingredients."

The impact of the *Ulysses* decision on Roth's career can be glimpsed in a letter written by Maxwell Perkins, the famed editor at Scribners who a few years earlier had

¹⁰⁰ For an explicit comparison to *Ulysses* in an early review, see John Chamberlain, "Books of the Times," *New York Times* (February 18, 1935), 13.

¹⁰¹ *New Masses* 14 (Feb 12, 1935): 27; Seaver. On the discussions of accuracy in the first reviews of the novel, see Mario Materassi, "Shifting Urbanscape: Roth's 'Private' New York," in Hana Wirth-Nesher, ed., *New Essays on Call It Sleep*, 34-35.

¹⁰² Boynton, "The Story of a Ghetto Childhood."

infamously blanched at Hemingway's use of taboo language and bowdlerized it.¹⁰³ In a letter dated July 29, 1935, Perkins predicted that publishing Henry Roth "would make no end of trouble for me on account of his contempt for conventional restraint—much worse than any one we have published. Still," Perkins continued, "I wrote encouragingly and sent for [his next] book. We are publishers after all."¹⁰⁴ In one breath, Perkins affirms that *Call It Sleep* is "worse" in terms of its "contempt for conventional restraint" than Hemingway, or any other writer he had edited, had been, and he shrugs his shoulders. The atmosphere of tolerance in which even a cautious editor like Perkins could accept Roth's obscenity is the same one that would prevent the NYSSV from mounting a campaign against the novel. Indeed, the president of the NYSSV admitted in 1935 that "we cannot, in this age, when former notions of propriety and decency have so radically changed, attempt to take restraining steps which might not meet with broader views now taken by our courts. ... Times have changed and we must change with them."¹⁰⁵

This was a loss for Roth: an attack by the NYSSV might have spurred authors, publishers, and literary critics to join together to defend the merit and importance of his work, valorizing and publicizing it. At the same time, until the *Roth* decision in 1957, publishers could not be entirely sure that they would not be prosecuted for a book like *Call It Sleep*. The uncertainty about *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and the Supreme Court's upholding of a ban on Edmund Wilson's *Memoirs of Hecate County* (1948) reminded them that anything less than *Ulysses* itself could not be guaranteed legal freedom.

¹⁰³ For a recent discussion of Perkins, obscenity, and American modernism, see Loren Glass, "#\$%^&*!?: Modernism and Dirty Words," *modernism/modernity* 14:2 (April 2007): 209-23.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Kellman, 140.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Rochelle Gurstein, *The Repeal of Reticence: A History of America's Cultural and Legal Struggles over Free Speech, Obscenity, Sexual Liberation, and Modern Art* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 210.

As Kazin seems to have noted under oath, unlike *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterley*, and *Cancer*, Roth's debut novel has never been censored or tried. When it reappeared in the early 1960s, it did so not under the banner of daring modernism triumphant over prudish Victorianism, like those books, but as a contribution to the postwar white ethnic revival influentially analyzed by Matthew Frye Jacobson.¹⁰⁶ Kellman's biography dutifully chronicles the events that led up to the reappearance of *Call It Sleep* in 1960, and its phenomenal sales as a paperback in 1964, including the efforts of Harold U. Ribalow and Peter Mayer to rescue the novel from obscurity at a moment when Roth had no interest in or hope of doing so. Kellman's careful recounting of this process demonstrates that the transformation of the novel into a classic was the work of a coalition of Jewish critics (i.e., Fiedler, Kazin, Howe), publishers, and literary journalists. While I contend that it is worthwhile to reconsider *Call It Sleep* as an obscene novel, I do not mean to suggest that those readers were wrong to receive *Call It Sleep* as a Jewish book. It's clear by now that arguments about whether *Call It Sleep* should be read as fundamentally or essentially a proletarian, psychological, or ethnic novel reveal more about the arguers' narrow views of literature than about Roth's deliberately overdetermined book. On the contrary, my reading of Roth's daring and productive treatment of obscenity proposes the inextricability of the novel's engagements with literary modernism and with Jewishness.

Mention the name "Roth" and the word "obscenity" to a lawyer or law student nowadays, and she'll know, as Lenny Bruce did, that the Roth you mean is the 1957 Supreme Court case that led to the decriminalization of literary obscenity. Say these same words to a reader of contemporary American fiction, and she'll know you're talking about

¹⁰⁶ Jacobson reads both *Call It Sleep* and *Mercy* into this ethnic revival; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 171-75.

the author of *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). Both Sam Roth's and Philip Roth's names appear, at least briefly, in just about every study of literary obscenity, whether written by lawyers, historians, or literary scholars. Henry Roth's name never has. The point of recuperating the latter Roth into this history is not only to recover a lost chapter of American literary history, though that seems a worthwhile goal. It also asserts how deeply the questions of obscenity and Jewishness resonated in American modernism.

CHAPTER 4.

Other Fucker or Motherfucker: Philip Roth, Adele Wiseman, and Obscene Allegory

I. The New Possibilities of Literary Obscenity

The judicial decisions of the 1950s and 1960s discussed in the previous chapter culminated in the U.S. Supreme Court's emphatic statement, in its March 21, 1966, decision in *Memoirs v. Massachusetts*, that "a book cannot be proscribed as obscene unless found to be *utterly* without redeeming social value."¹ While this formulation might seem simply to have shifted the burden from defining "obscenity" to defining "utterly," "redeeming," "social," and/or "value," in practical terms the result was clear: as Justice White phrased the issue in his dissent, "obscene material, however far beyond customary limits of candor, is immune [from prosecution] if it has any literary style, if it contains any historical references or language characteristic of a bygone day, or even if it is printed or bound in an interesting way."² White wasn't pleased, but this was the truth.

In effect, this development decriminalized the two types of literary expression previously forbidden as obscene: in the words Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield

¹ *Memoirs v. Massachusetts* 383 U.S. 413 (1966). For an overview of these developments, see Charles Rembar, *The End of Obscenity: The Trials of Lady Chatterley, Tropic of Cancer, and Fanny Hill* (New York: Random House, 1968).

² Quoted in Edward De Grazia, *Girls Lean Back Everywhere: The Law of Obscenity and the Assault on Genius* (New York: Random House, 1992), 442.

had used to explain why he felt that *Tropic of Cancer* was not fit for transmission by mail, these were (i) "descriptions in minute detail of sexual acts" and (ii) "filthy, offensive and degrading words and terms."³ In Canada, the legal developments were considerably less definite, but because of the close interrelations between American and Canadian publishing, and the significant overlap in legal policies toward literary obscenity, Canadian writers found themselves by the mid-1960s in virtually the same positions as their American peers.⁴ Unlike previous generations of writers in English in the U.S., Canada, and Europe—unlike Henry Roth, Henry Miller, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Radclyffe Hall, Vladimir Nabokov, and their lesser-known peers in the first half of the twentieth century—novelists in Canada and the U.S. could now use any word, and describe any imaginable sexual interaction in whatever terms they chose, without risking fines or jail time, postal suppression, or forfeiture of copyright protection.⁵

The question facing writers immediately became, what exactly can one *accomplish* with obscenity? Answers came fast and furious.⁶ You could, for one thing,

³ Rembar, 114.

⁴ On Canadian obscenity law during this period, see L. H. Leigh, "Aspects of the Control of Obscene Literature in Canada," *Modern Law Review* 27:6 (November 1964): 669-81. In the 1950s and 1960s, Canadian publishers often required that a novel be published in the U.S. to offset costs; Adele Wiseman's first novel, *The Sacrifice* (1957), for example, was first accepted for publication by Macmillan in Canada, but the firm "could proceed with Canadian publication" only after Viking Press in the U.S. had also agreed to publish the novel; in fact, Viking "prepared the Canadian edition" themselves. This economic situation implies that a change in the U.S. legal standards of literary obscenity would very directly impact the ability of Canadians to publish works that might be judged obscene. Ruth Panofsky, *The Force of Vocation: The Literary Career of Adele Wiseman* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006), 44, 48.

⁵ On the lawsuits, copyright disasters, and other results of the pre-1960s obscenity laws as they constrained and terrorized authors and artists, see De Grazia.

⁶ Even before the legal dust had settled, Bernard Keith Waldrop was already attempting, in an admirably wide-ranging dissertation, to theorize obscenity, differentiate it from pornography, and outline its traditional uses; he asserts, for example, that "the obscene writer deals in shocks that tend to disrupt our sense of reality" (16) and approvingly quotes Northrop Frye's assertion that "obscenity is an essential characteristic of the satirist" (73). Waldrop, "Aesthetic Uses of Obscenity in Literature," PhD dissertation, Comparative Literature, University of Michigan, 1964.

still earn a quick buck: racy paperbacks, which had already been appearing in massive numbers throughout the decade, could now venture even racier descriptions of sex.⁷ More interestingly, though, one could now write "Fuck the draft" (or rap "Fuck tha Police"); one could, in other words, exploit obscenity to foment political dissent or to express social protest.⁸ A couple of Jewish writers, Norman Mailer and Raymond Federman, found obscenity helped them to establish their bona fides as Americans: Mailer observed that he "never felt more like an American than when he was naturally obscene," while Federman, a French immigrant, noted that it "takes years before you can say fuck you like an American."⁹ Second-wave feminists put obscenity to work in elaborating their political programs, too: authors from Germaine Greer to Eve Ensler seized on the word "cunt," for example, as an aid in the articulation of their visions of feminism.¹⁰

The point here, simply put, is that taboo words like "fuck" and "shit" have manifold uses, and likewise literary representations of sex can be sweet or sad, funny or offensive, persuasive or repulsive. In an environment where there is no legal restraint on these forms of expression, it is up to cultural producers—writers, publishers, critics, and

⁷ See Brittany A. Daley, et al., *Sin-A-Rama: Sleaze Sex Paperbacks of the Sixties* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2005). Stephen J. Gertz's essay in this fascinating resource, titled "West Coast Blue," discusses Milton Luros's 1966 founding, "in the wake of the new Supreme Court decisions," of "Brandon House Library Editions," an imprint which "reprinted vintage erotica, much of which had never been translated into English" (29), one example of a commercial publication venture inspired by the *Memoirs* decision.

⁸ See *Cohen v. California*, 403 U.S. 15 (1971) for the source of the first of these slogans, and the classic N.W.A. protest song by Ice Cube, MC Ren, Easy-E, and Dr. Dre, "Fuck Tha Police," *Straight Outta Compton* (Los Angeles: Ruthless Records/Priority Records, 1988), for the second. On the FBI's mostly unsuccessful attempt to censor "Fuck Tha Police," see Peter Blecha, *Taboo Tunes: A History of Banned Bands and Censored Songs* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2004), 127-28.

⁹ Norman Mailer, *Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History* (New York: New American Library, 1968), 47-48; Raymond Federman, *Double or Nothing: A Real Fictitious Discourse* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1971), 233-34.

¹⁰ Germaine Greer, "Lady Love Your Cunt," *Suck* (1971), reprinted in *The Madwoman's Underclothes: Essays and Occasional Writings* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987), 74-77; Eve Ensler, "Reclaiming Cunt," *The Vagina Monologues* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1998), 30; see also Inga Muscio, *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1998).

readers—to determine what their uses can be. To point this out is to echo literary and cultural critics who have analyzed the literature of this period, beginning with Kate Millet's assertion in *Sexual Politics* (1970) that "sex has a frequently neglected political aspect."¹¹ As Richard Ellis has more recently argued, with more perspective on the period's developments, "whereas previously [before the mid-1960s] censorship had been at the core of the political controversy, eroticism and its uses now [by the late 1960s] assumed center-stage in a clear process of 'politicisation' of the erotic."¹²

This chapter focuses on two novels composed during the momentous changes of the 1960s in which Jewish writers, one American and one Canadian, seized upon the newly available obscenity as a means for exploring signal problems in modern Jewish culture. The connections between these two very different books—Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) and Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot* (1974)—are manifold: both were meticulously and repeatedly drafted throughout the 1960s, and both were represented by star literary agent Candida Donadio. More importantly, both books brilliantly play out allegorical tropes that have been common features of Jewish narratives for millennia, and both select obscenity as their primary means of doing so.

As several scholars have noted, Jewish stories about individuals' sexual desires have often been written and read as commentaries on relations among Jews, and between Jewish and non-Jewish communities. Briefly treating ancient, modern, and specifically North American narratives, this chapter demonstrates how the allegorical representation of sex, and particularly sex with non-Jewish partners, has been a consistent feature of

¹¹ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), xi.

¹² Richard Ellis, "Disseminating Desire: Grove Press and the End[s] of Obscenity," in *Perspectives on Pornography: Sexuality in Film and Literature* (New York: St. Martin's, 1988), 40.

Jewish storytelling. Situating *Portnoy* and *Crackpot* within this long allegorical tradition—with the new latitude of representation allowing them a more thorough, and in Wiseman's case one could say radically traditional, probing of those tropes—the chapter argues that not only the so-called *shikse* and *sheygets*, but also masturbation and mother-son incest, can fruitfully be read in these texts as allegorical tropes addressing fundamental challenges and exigencies of modern Jewish "communal reproduction."¹³

II. The *Shikse* as Allegory

Among the various figures of sexual allegory that appear in traditional Jewish culture, the one that resonates most in modern Jewish literature is doubtless the so-called *shikse*, or non-Jewish woman.¹⁴ According to Biblical scholars, narratives in the Torah dealing with the relations between Jewish men and non-Jewish women, including Jezebel, Cozbi, Ruth, and Samson's Philistine lover, can be read as commentaries on the potential and actual communal relationships between Israelites and other groups.¹⁵ Tikva

¹³ I use Michal Walzer's term "communal reproduction" as shorthand for the process through which a specific community perpetuates a set of shared values, beliefs, and practices from one generation to the next. For Walzer's analysis of the conflict between "communal reproduction" and "individual rights," see *On Toleration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 65.

¹⁴ The other major use of sexual allegory in traditional Jewish culture is in texts that represent, or are read as representing, God's relation to Jews as a sexual one. On the traditional readings of the Song of Songs along these lines, and the use of such sexual allegories in ecstatic Kabbalah, see David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 59, 109.

¹⁵ Of Samson's relationship with a Philistine woman, chronicled in Judges 14, David Biale writes that "the narrator depicts sexual relations with the foreigner as covertly orchestrated by God to serve Israel's political ends." Biale, 22. Additionally, Biale argues that the story of Ruth "may have been primarily ideological in intent"—the emphasis on her Moabite origins serving "the political end of helping to solidify the Davidic empire" (16). Christine Benvenuto's breezy survey of representations and experiences of non-Jewish women in the Jewish world includes figures like Jezebel (who "represents the ultimate threat of

Frymer-Kensky, for one prominent example, argues that "Crucial national issues of survival and self-definition were raised every time a woman was 'taken in marriage.' The biblical stories about marriages to outside women and their consequences were the natural vehicle with which Israel expressed and explored the dimensions of this perennial issue." When it comes to narratives of marriage in the Torah, Frymer-Kensky observes, "there can be no doubt that the personal is political."¹⁶

This insight helps to explain the genesis of the epithet "shiksa" (or "shikse"), employed widely in Yiddish and English to refer to non-Jewish women.¹⁷ The word's etymological origin is the Biblical Hebrew שקץ (*sheketz*), which is translated into English as "'unclean creature', reptile; abomination, detestation, uncleanness."¹⁸ In the elaboration of dietary laws in the Torah, this word denotes creatures unfit for consumption, like shellfish and insects, and Leviticus 7:21 limns the consequences of consorting with such objects for Israelites involved with Temple sacrifice: "Should a person touch ... any unclean abominable creature [בְּכֹל-שֶׁקֶץ טְמֵאָה] ... that person shall be cut off from his kin."¹⁹ The perspective implicit in the modern term "shikse," then, is that just as detestations taint the ritual purity of a Jew and require that he be "cut off from his kin," so too would a non-Jewish spouse, sexual partner, and mother for his children

assimilation through intermarriage") and Cozbi (a Midianite whose presence in her Israelite lover Zimri's tent is "an act of war, designed to destroy the Jewish people at the highest level."). Christine Benevenuto, *Shiksa: The Gentile Woman in the Jewish World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), 52, 67.

¹⁶ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken, 2002), 335, xx. The echo of a second-wave feminist slogan here is hardly accidental; the discussion that follows, of Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot*, explores one second-wave feminist response to these standard literary tropes.

¹⁷ See, for example, Leo Rosten's *The Joys of Yiddish* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968), 346.

¹⁸ See "שֶׁקֶץ," Reuben Alcalay, *The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary* (Bridgeport, Connecticut: The Prayerbook Press/Hartmore House, 1974), 2711.

¹⁹ English translation from Robert Alter, tr. and ed., *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 569.

irreversibly detach him from the Jewish community. Early rabbinic literature frequently promotes such a vision of non-Jewish women (sometimes specifically because of their association with nonkosher food; a story in *Avot de'Rabbi Natan*, for example, has Rabbi Akiva rejecting two non-Jewish women sent to seduce him, explaining, "I was overcome by their breath because of the forbidden meats they ate.")²⁰ The Talmud does not mince words, moreover, in establishing that it is specifically intercourse with non-Jewish women in and of itself that threatens Jewish identity at its embodied core: in *B. Eruvin* 19a, we learn that "our father Abraham" will prevent Jewish sinners from ending up in *Gehenna* [hell] "except such an Israelite as had immoral intercourse with the daughter of an idolator, since his foreskin is drawn and so he cannot be discovered."²¹ According to this text, a Jew who has slept with a non-Jewish woman can no longer be identified as Jewish, even by a prophet with superhuman faculties of perception. Less literally, other ancient and rabbinic Jewish narratives use non-Jewish female characters to represent the potential for the attenuation of Jewish identity.

Allegorical representations of the non-Jewish woman as an embodiment and transmitter of non-Jewish culture, consonant with this etymological and textual history, recur in a variety of modern Jewish narratives. I. L. Peretz's classic Yiddish ballad, "Monish" (1888), with what S. Niger called its "אלעגאָריזם ... אומדירעקטער" ["direct and indirect allegorism"], provides one excellent example: explicitly introduced with a parable ("די וועלט איז אַ ים / מיר זענען פֿיש" ["The world is a sea / We are fish"]) that

²⁰ For further discussion of these associations, and many examples from early rabbinic literature, see Sacha Stern, *Jewish Identity in Early Rabbinic Writings* (Leiden, New York: Brill, 1994), especially 51-63, 162-67. For the complete story about Akiva in English, see *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, translated by Judah Goldin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 84.

²¹ English translation from *The Soncino Talmud* (Brooklyn: Soncino Press, 1990), accessed through the digital Judaic Classics Library (Davka Corporation, 2001).

announces its allegorical intentions, Peretz's poem relates the tale of a prodigy, the pride of his pious generation, who is tempted away from Jewish tradition and into sin by a golden-haired temptress named Marie who represents the lure of western culture.²²

The Nobel laureate S. Y. Agnon's Hebrew fable, "*Ha-Adonit v'ha-Rokhel*" ["The Lady and the Peddler"], first published in Hebrew in 1943, provides an even more powerful example of the continuity between ancient and modern Jewish narrative traditions in their engagement with this allegorical trope. Agnon's story centers on Joseph, who while peddling in an unidentified wooded region arrives at a lady's manor. He sells this woman a hunting knife and takes his leave, but, having lost his way in the woods, returns. The lady, Helen, permits him to sleep in her barn, and within days Joseph and Helen have established an intimate relationship. They cohabit comfortably for some time, though Joseph finds it strange that Helen never eats anything in his presence, and she mentions, chillingly, that she has had more husbands than she can count, all of whom have been murdered. One night, Joseph is seized by an impulse to recite a prayer outdoors. When he returns to his room, he finds his bedding shredded and Helen "sprawled on the floor with a knife in her hand." The narrator then reveals that "it was her practice to eat the flesh of her husbands whom she slaughtered and to drink their blood."²³

²² Yiddish quotations from "Monish" and Nizer's essay "I. L. Peretz and His Nigun" in *Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk* [*The Complete Works of I. L. Peretz*], volume 1 (New York: CYCO, 1947), 3-27, LIII. For Seymour Levitan's translation of Peretz's 1908 version, see Ruth Wisse, ed., *The I. L. Peretz Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 3-15. Wisse calls "Monish" a "painful parable"; for her analysis of this ballad, see *I. L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1991), 12-17.

²³ S. Y. Agnon, "The Lady and the Peddler," in Robert Alter, ed., *Modern Hebrew Literature* (New York: Behrman House, 1975), 212. The Hebrew quotations included here are taken from "*Ha-Adonit v'ha-Rokhel*," volume 6 of *Kol sipurav shel Shai Agnon* [*The Complete Stories of S. Y. Agnon*] (Tel Aviv:

The allegorical referent of Agnon's story should be obvious enough. As Robert Alter explains, the narrative "was written at the very moment when Hitler was murdering millions of Jews, by a writer who had grown up in the German-language cultural sphere where assimilation had been considered a beckoning adventure."²⁴ In Baruch Kurzweil's words, Agnon's story explores

יחס של עם ישראל לאומות העולם, בעיית ההתבוללות ונסיון לתיאור "סמלי" של המשבר בתקופתנו

[the relations between the people of Israel and the nations of the world, the problem of assimilation and the attempt at a "symbolic" description of the destruction in our age].²⁵

Helen's name evokes, of course, ancient Greece—the classic example of a society that threatened Jewish identity because of its allure. Meanwhile, Agnon links his fiction to traditional texts through overt allusions to the stories of Joseph and Potiphar's wife and to Samson and Delilah, two narratives likely to inform any traditional Jewish treatment of the attractions and dangers of a non-Jewish woman.²⁶

Somewhat less learned but nonetheless revealing iterations of this trope pervade the texts of American Jewish fiction. In fact, to posit sexual relationships between Jews and non-Jews as the most consistently invoked plot point in this literary tradition would be a substantial understatement. Between them, Frederic Cople Jaher and Adam Sol

Schocken, 1966), 92-102. The story was originally published in Jacob Fichman's collection *Ba'sa'ar* [*In the Storm*] (Tel Aviv: Agudat ha-sofrim ha-Ivrim, 1943).

²⁴ Robert Alter, "Introduction," *Modern Hebrew Literature* (New York: Behrman House, 1975), 197.

²⁵ Baruch Kurzweil, "Ha-Adonit v'ha-Rokhel" ["The Lady and the Peddler"], *Masot al Sipurav shel Shai Agnon* [*Essays on the Stories of S. Y. Agnon*] (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1962), 125-26. The translation is mine.

²⁶ As Alter explains, in Agnon's story "there is an actual verbal echo of a verse from the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39:6): 'everything she had she put in his hands, except for the bread which she did not eat at the same table with him.'" Alter, 198. On the allusion to this story, also see Kurzweil, 128. Agnon's story states that "even if a man loves a woman as Samson loved Delilah, in the end she will mock him, in the end she will oppress him, until he wishes he were dead" (209).

catalog nearly three dozen examples of novels or short stories by American Jews that concern themselves primarily or substantially with interfaith relationships.²⁷ This is barely the tip of an iceberg, as readers of American Jewish fiction will recognize.

Why do Jewish writers tell the *shikse* or *sheygets* love story again and again? The simplest and most plausible explanation for this trend is that, as in Agnon's fable and in ancient texts, American Jewish writing has employed narratives of intercultural romance²⁸ as a means of addressing central questions about identity, continuity, and communal reproduction that have been posed simultaneously by Jewish sociologists, theologians, and other communal leaders.²⁹ This suggestion contradicts the casual and pervasive assumption that Jewish writers' obsessions with the *shikse* and *sheygets* reflect

²⁷ Frederic Cople Jaher, "The Quest for the Ultimate Shiksa," *American Quarterly* 35:5 (Winter 1983): 518-42; Adam Sol, "Longings and Renunciations: Attitudes toward Inter-marriage in Early Twentieth Century Jewish American Novels," *American Jewish History* 89:2 (June 2001): 215-30. Sol and Jaher discuss or at least mention in this context Henry Harland/Sidney Luska, Mary Antin, Elias Tobenkin, Ezra Brudno, John Cournos, M. E. Ravage, Fanny Hurst, Bruno Lessing, Ludwig Lewisohn, Edna Ferber, Sidney Nyburg, Anzia Yezierska, Ben Hecht, Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, Philip Roth, Sholem Asch, Jerome Weidman, Bernard Malamud, Budd Schulberg, Richard Stern, Herbert Gold, Leslie Fiedler, Myron Brinig, Norman Katkov, Alan Lelchuk, and Gerald Rosen; Jaher also notes that Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977), and *The Heartbreak Kid* (1972), based on Bruce Jay Friedman short story, are the best-known films that treat this subject. Other examples mentioned by Jenna Wiessman Joselit in *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950* (New York: Macmillan, 2002), 43-54, include Leah Morton's *I am a Woman—and a Jew* (1926), Marion Spitzer's *Who Would Be Free* (1924), and the Broadway smash *Abie's Irish Rose*.

²⁸ I use the term "intercultural" here, and elsewhere in this chapter, as a catch-all term to refer to relations between Jews and non-Jews across various historical periods; at different points in history, and in specific cases, "interracial" applies much more accurately (and I have retained that term in the moments when it is most germane). I use "intercultural" not to underemphasize the stakes of such relationships or their genealogical and reproductive resonances, but to avoid a general reinscription of Jewish racial otherness.

²⁹ For a dated but nonetheless useful introduction to the massive and ever-growing sociological, theological, and psychological literature on this issue, see Jaher, 518n2. It would be difficult to find a recent volume of a Jewish sociological journal, like *Contemporary Jewry* or the *Jewish Journal of Sociology*, that does not touch on the question of intermarriage in one or more of its articles; Eric H. Cohen's "A Questionable Connection: Community Involvement and Attitudes to Intermarriage of Young American Jews," *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 45:1-2 (2003): 5-19, and Gerald Cromer's "Inter-marriage Handbooks," *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 47:1-2 (2005): 48-53, present some of the more recent developments in social scientists' thinking on the question. On the history of sociological approaches to intermarriage, see Lila Corwin Berman, "Sociology, Jews, and Intermarriage in Twentieth-Century America," *Jewish Social Studies* 14:2 (Winter 2008): 32-60. The most recent major scholarly intervention on this subject at the time of writing is Karen McGinity's *Still Jewish: A History of Women and Intermarriage in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

their personal desires. In some cases, authors were as likely to pursue a non-Jewish partner in real life as their were in fiction. Norman Mailer, for one, famously chased non-Jewish women voraciously, trying out the "whole spectrum of possible *shikse* types," as Cynthia Ozick put it; Mailer himself cheerfully acknowledged this.³⁰ But what about a novelist like Mailer's college classmate and friend, Myron S. Kaufmann, who told me that he "never dated a girl who was not Jewish"—and yet devoted more than 600 pages of his neglected 1958 bestseller, *Remember Me to God*, to dissecting the affair between a Jewish Harvard undergraduate and a Radcliffe blue-blood?³¹ Evidently, for Kaufmann, as for a host of his colleagues, narratives of interfaith relationships have provided unparalleled opportunities for exploring the dimensions of Jewishness in fiction.³²

Novels themselves explicitly endorse such a hermeneutic. Ludwig Lewisohn's *The Island Within* (1928) has its *shikse* memorably describe her failed marriage to Arthur Levy abstractly, as "an argument ... against mixed marriages"—rather than, say, the result of two people's psychological and sexual incompatibility.³³ Further back in American Jewish literary history one finds an even more obvious statement to this effect.

³⁰ Cynthia Ozick, "Ethnic Joke," *Commentary* (November 1970), 108. For Mailer's assessment of his wives and how "one appropriated a culture with a wife, at least so far as one loved a wife," see *Armies of the Night*, 170. Jonathan Freedman's "Arthur Miller, Marilyn Monroe, and the Making of Ethnic Masculinity," in *Klezmer America: Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 94-139, provides an extraordinarily fine analysis of the role a real non-Jewish woman could play in the imaginations of Jews (and other "white ethnics"), including Mailer.

³¹ See my interview with and essay about Kaufmann, "Regatta Land," *Nextbook.org* (September 12, 2007) <<http://www.nextbook.org/cultural/feature.html?id=680>>; and Kaufmann's novel, *Remember Me to God* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1957).

³² Jaher states this effectively: "Belletristic treatment of this subject usually takes the form of an extended metaphor for the problematic existence of the American Jew. The authors who focus on *shiksas* and their attractions to and for Jewish males deploy a variety of traditional perceptions, symbols, stereotypes, and fantasies of Christian women and Jewish men to make interfaith courtship emblemize the experience and concerns of a people long engaged in a desperate struggle for survival" (519).

³³ Ludwig Lewisohn, *The Island Within* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1928), 346.

The Jewish protagonist of Ezra Brudno's *The Tether* (1908), David, falls in love with a Baptist girl, Mildred, and though the novel details the couple's courtship expansively, Brudno's narrator eventually explains that "instead of a personal matter, [David's] love for Mildred presented itself to him in the form of a general question, a problem to be solved—the problem that had faced his race in all lands and at all times."³⁴ Rather than an individual romantic dilemma, in other words, the affair is understood—even by the character himself—as an allegory for the challenges facing the Jewish community.

Responding to novels like these, Leslie Fiedler noted in a foundational 1958 essay that it is not surprising that the American Jewish novel

must be a problem novel, and its essential problems must be identity and assimilation. ... What is unexpected is that these problems be posed in terms of sexual symbols. ... it is in the role of passionate lover that the American-Jewish novelist sees himself ... and the community with which he seeks to unite himself he sees as the *shikse*.³⁵

Fiedler, with characteristic perspicacity, put his finger on this critical feature of the genre even before the boom of the late 1950s and 1960s that would come to define American Jewish fiction for decades to come—and which confirmed, over and over, the wisdom of his insight.³⁶ Fiedler is mistaken only in incorrectly gendering this reading: in fact,

³⁴ Brudno, *The Tether* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1908), 273. It's fascinating, *derekh agav*, that after the relationship dissolves, David becomes a Zionist, but while attending a Zionist Congress in Switzerland finds the movement hopeless, too, and finally, in despair, loses his mind and dies—making him an interesting precursor of Alexander Portnoy, whose failure to find happiness with *shikses* similarly impels him, as will be discussed below, to consider and ultimately reject Zionism.

³⁵ Leslie Fiedler, "Genesis: The American-Jewish Novel Through the Twenties," *Midstream* 4:3 (Summer 1958): 27-28.

³⁶ I am not the first critic to have read *Portnoy's Complaint*, in particular, through Fiedler's insight; Allen Guttman, having roughly summarized Fiedler's view, asserts that "whether or not the argument holds for Abraham Cahan and Ludwig Lewisohn, none can doubt that Alexander Portnoy's sexual adventure is

American Jewish women have written *shaygets* novels just as frequently (and just as allegorically) as their male counterparts wrote *shikse* novels, beginning with Emma Wolf's *Other Things Being Equal* in 1892.³⁷ Matrilineal descent and its consequences notwithstanding, the *shaygets* has proved every bit as useful as the *shikse* in providing an allegorical figure for Jewish writers, and he is deployed in nearly identical ways.

By the 1960s and 1970s, writers may have been consciously responding to Fiedler's trenchant analysis when they trotted out *shikses* and *shkotsim*³⁸ in their fictions. It is not inconceivable that Roth or Wiseman, in particular, had internalized this insight from Fiedler's foundational essay. But as the history sketched above makes clear, the use of exogamy as an allegorical trope has been available to storytellers and critics, Jewish and non-Jewish, for centuries. With or without reading Fiedler, Jewish writers in virtually every modern generation have rediscovered allegorical exogamy for themselves.³⁹

freighted with social significance" (61). Guttman does not, however, develop the insight much further. "Philip Roth and the Rabbis," in *Philip Roth*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 53-62.

³⁷ Emma Wolf, *Other Things Being Equal* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1892). See also Ann R. Shapiro, "The Ultimate Shaygets and the Fiction of Anzia Yezierska," *MELUS* 21:2 (Summer 1996): 79-88.

³⁸ Plural form of *shaygets*.

³⁹ I can speak to this point from personal experience: long before I had read widely on this subject, one of my first published short stories, which appeared in the *Harvard Advocate* in June 1999, adapted this trope—quite naively and with limited success, I'd be the first to admit—to address the fraught situation of Montreal's Jews. One could also trace this trope through a series of 1980s novels about Jewish women and their lovers or husbands from other American minority groups, including Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Mainland* (New York: Linden Press/Simon & Schuster, 1985), Lore Segal's *Her First American* (New York: Knopf, 1985), and, later still, Binnie Kirshenbaum's *A Disturbance in One Place* (New York: Fromm International, 1994) and Allegra Goodman's *Paradise Park* (New York: Dial, 2001). Lara Vapnyar's *Memoirs of a Muse* (New York: Pantheon, 2006) is perhaps the clearest example of an engagement with this trope by a member of the current generation of young post-Soviet writers; Vapnyar pairs a young Russian immigrant with an established Jewish American writer so as to explore the relations between the post-Soviet immigrants and their second-, third- and fourth-generation American predecessors.

III. Sexual Allegories without, and then with, the Sex

The importance of *Portnoy's Complaint* and Wiseman's *Crackpot* in a discussion of Jewish sexual allegories is that they were among the first and most resonant texts in English to engage this allegorical hermeneutic after the transformation of American and Canadian obscenity laws in the 1960s. Earlier, legal or social restraints had limited writers' opportunities: if the attraction between the Jew and the *shikse* or *shaygets* represents the assimilationist drive, wouldn't coitus between a Jew and a non-Jew stand, fascinatingly, for the apotheosis of that urge? Yet Jewish authors in North America could not legally describe that resonant interaction prior to the 1960s.

Agnon's "The Lady and the Peddler," published in Mandate Palestine and thus at least technically subject to obscenity statutes derived from British law,⁴⁰ serves once again as an example of how even the most obvious of allegorical fictions shied away from sexual explicitness. Agnon describes his characters' intimacy as follows: "[Joseph] stayed in the lady's room, and slept in her husband's bed, while she waited upon him [משמשת לפניו] as though he were her lord."⁴¹ The English translation deemphasizes the sexual implication here, but Helen's "wait[ing] upon" Joseph is unmistakably suggestive of sexual relations in the original Hebrew: Agnon plays on the frequent Talmudic use of "משמשת" as a euphemism for intercourse.⁴² Consistent with traditional Jewish sources,

⁴⁰ On Israeli obscenity law at the time of the publication of Agnon's story, see Nitsa Ben-Ari, *Suppression of the Erotic in Modern Hebrew Literature* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2006), 46. Note that Ben-Ari argues that obscenity laws were not enforced in Mandate Palestine or early Israel with any real zeal, and that "'cleansing' Hebrew formal literature of erotica was more of a self-censorious process" (73).

⁴¹ Agnon, 204-05.

⁴² See Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: Chobot, 1926), 1601-02.

Agnon also substitutes food for sex, alluding to intimacy without offending propriety:

"Every day [Helen] prepared [Joseph] a feast from all that she had."⁴³ These innuendoes and double entendres are as far as Agnon was willing or able to go, at least in this particular story, towards presenting allegorically resonant interracial sex.

Similarly oblique approaches to the representation of intercourse were legally necessary in American Jewish texts before the 1960s. In Mary Antin's memoir *The Promised Land* (1912), the author's sexual relationship with a non-Jewish man is skillfully elided; in its place, Antin relates in substantial physical and psychological detail her first experience chewing and swallowing "a pink piece of pig's flesh"—like Agnon employing, according to at least one available reading, the well-worn substitution of food for sex.⁴⁴ Anzia Yezierska seizes on much less concrete metaphors, and more stilted language, to describe the sexual intimacy of the interracial lovers at the center of her

⁴³ Agnon, 205. As one context for Agnon's (and Antin's, and Roth's) associations of food with sex, it is worth noting that, as Sacha Stern points out, the Talmud specifically prohibits non-Jewish food and drinks more than once explicitly because they are presumed to lead to (or symbolize?) marriage with non-Jews. See the discussions in *B. Avodah Zara* 31b, 35b, and 36b.

⁴⁴ A page before she describes her fateful nonkosher meal, Antin describes herself as a person "whose heart is heavy with revelations it has not made. . . . That part of my life which contains the climax of my personal drama I must leave to my grandchildren to record." Antin has one obvious secret—her marriage to a non-Jewish man—and the "climax" she refers to is undoubtedly this marriage (and perhaps its sexual component), with her intimate acceptance by a non-Jewish American standing as the fulfillment of her quest for Americanization. A couple of pages after the description of the trayf meal, Antin writes, strangely, "I know a man who fills a chair at a great university." Antin's husband, Amadeus William Grabau, is never explicitly mentioned outside of the book's "Acknowledgements" page (where he is thanked as "my husband who opened the door of the greater life for me"); yet in these two textual moments she alludes to him—he was a paleontologist with a professorship at Columbia—and presumably also to the conflict that erupted within her family when she married him, which she perhaps hints at as an "extreme test" of her father's "avowed irreligion." The dramatic scene sandwiched between these allusions to her husband, of a young girl's tentative first encounter with "a pink piece of pig's flesh," thus evokes not only a dietary encounter with trayf, but also Antin's transgression of the sexual prohibitions against exogamic sexual relations that various commentators, and the Talmud itself, have related to the dietary laws. *The Promised Land* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 195, 200, 303, 287. Isaac Rosenfeld's "Adam and Eve on Delancey Street," *Commentary* 8 (1949): 385-87, articulates the specific link between kosher taboos and sexual taboos, and this link would later be played out brilliantly in *Portnoy's Complaint*. Hermione Lee is one of Roth's many readers who note that "Eating and sex . . . are parallel activities in *Portnoy's Complaint*." Hermione Lee, *Philip Roth* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), 14.

novel *Salome of the Tenements* (1923): "It was as if their spirit had found expression at last," she writes, "through the flesh merging their hearts into one consuming flame of love."⁴⁵ This mess of mixed metaphor and cliché conveys the vaguest idea of sex with only a slight hint of concreteness or specificity, in the word "flesh."⁴⁶

Other writers dodged the issue. Sholem Asch's Yiddish novel *Ist River* (1946) narrates the courtship of Irving Davidowsky and Mary McCarthy in three brief glimpses: first she's "איינגעקנאַטן אין אים און אַטעמט מיט איר הייסן אַטעם, און באַדעקט אים מיט קושן" ["pressed close to him, breathing her hot breath on him, covering him with kisses"]; then, in passing, their "באַציאונג" is mentioned (which the novel's English translator renders as "affair," though literally it would be the even flatter and more euphemistic "relation"); and soon, with no further ado, Mary announces to Irving that she's "טראַגעדיק" ["pregnant"], without any reference to the activities that may have led her to this state.⁴⁷ Even Lewisohn, though he was deeply committed to sexual openness in his writing, wasn't any more explicit than Asch or Yeziarska in representing the physical intimacy of Arthur Levy and his non-Jewish virgin lover, Elizabeth, in *The Island Within*.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Anzia Yeziarska, *Salome of the Tenements* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 107.

⁴⁶ To be fair, the word "flesh" did have powerfully sexual connotations in the 1920s: in 1927, the critic and translator Isaac Goldberg proclaimed in one of his pamphlets that "'the flesh' is a metaphor, signifying not only materiality, but sex." Goldberg, *The Sexual Life of Man, Woman, and Child: Notes on a Changing Valuation of Behavior*, Big Blue Book No. B-46 (Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Co., 1927), 12.

⁴⁷ Sholem Asch, *Ist River* (New York: Elias Laub Publishing, 1946), 223, 239, 246; English translations from *East River*, translated by A. H. Gross (New York: Putnam, 1946), 189, 203, 210.

⁴⁸ As Ralph Melnick tells it, Lewisohn insisted "that he needed to live 'among people whose minds were free on the central subject of his preoccupations (the problem of sex, of human relations ... the actual experiments in life) ...'" Melnick, *The Life and Work of Ludwig Lewisohn, Volume 1: A Touch of Wildness* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 349; see also, on Lewisohn's resistance to sexual repression, Lewisohn's memoir *Upstream: An American Chronicle* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922), in which he proclaims, "If I had a son I should say to him: 'Dismiss from your mind all the cant you hear on the subject of sex. The passion of love is the central passion of human life. It should be humanized; it should be made beautiful. It should never be debased by a sense that it is in itself sinful...' (117). Of course, Lewisohn also knew the potential consequences of crossing the line of literary obscenity: he

The world of reality was drowned for the hour in another world that was magical and mad and overwhelmingly tangible, too He was not surprised that she went back to his apartment with him, nor that she entered, nor at her white, scared face, nor at her utter yielding, nor at her straining to him, nor at her sweet ways or beauty of body Then the magic snapped She sat on the edge of the bed, wrapping a silk coverlet about her, her face haggard with pain and a touch of brooding horror. "Is that all?"⁴⁹

The ellipses, it should be noted, all belong to Lewisohn, as do the oblique and euphemistic phrases. They signal Lewisohn's struggle to describe a sexual experience in concrete detail. Elizabeth's "utter yielding," "straining," and "sweet ways" all refer obliquely to sexual behaviors or actions; and her "beauty of body" is, of course, an allusion to the arousal Levy experiences in seeing her naked. But nothing here conveys the "overwhelmingly tangible" nature of sexual contact, instead referring repeatedly to the opposite of concrete experience, "magic." Later Lewisohn's reader learns that Elizabeth is pregnant with Arthur's child, and the conversation touches on whether or not Arthur "had taken proper precautions" without, of course, clarifying what exactly constitute precautions for swinging interracial couples of the WWI era.⁵⁰ While such elisions of sex are explicitly endorsed in the Talmud—recall that in *B. Shabbos* 33a, R. Hanan b. Rabbah insists that although of course everyone knows why "a bride enters the bridal canopy," it is still a punishable offense to speak "obscenely" about what follows—the recourse to innuendo, florid language, asterisks, ellipses, and well-placed paragraph breaks to euphemize intercourse in fiction was hardly unique to Jewish writers. Ellipses

claimed that he wrote a novel that was completely destroyed by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, on the grounds of obscenity. See *Up Stream*, 145.

⁴⁹ Lewisohn, *Island Within*, 213.

⁵⁰ Lewisohn, *Island Within*, 227.

serving this purpose were so widely recognizable that Philip Wylie's 1928 novel *Heavy Laden* could jokingly interrupt a love scene with the exclamation, "Now, damn you, take your row of dots!"⁵¹ When the law changed in the 1960s, however, a handful of Jewish writers reacted with particular alacrity, and, in doing so, reached massive audiences.⁵²

In *Portnoy's Complaint*, in particular, the allegorical tradition adumbrated above collides with the new linguistic opportunities of the late 1960s. (Not to the exclusion of the earlier tactics, of course: as many critics have noted, the substitution of food for sex and vice versa in *Portnoy* remains rampant.)⁵³ Portnoy's famous obsession with *shiksese* clearly constitutes Roth's deliberately obscene rewriting of the allegory of exogamic desire as representing communal affiliation. One needn't scour Roth's archive for proof of this contention, either, as Portnoy all but shouts it from the rooftops:

O America! America! it may have been gold in the streets to my grandparents, it may have been a chicken in every pot to my father and mother, but to me, a child whose earliest movie memories are of Ann Rutherford and Alice Faye, America is a *shikse* nestling under your arm whispering love love love love love!⁵⁴

⁵¹ Philip Wylie, *Heavy Laden* (New York: Knopf, 1928), 143. See Gershon Legman, *Love & Death: A Study in Censorship* (New York: 1949), 91. Similarly, Charles Reznikoff's *By the Waters of Manhattan* (New York: Charles Boni, 1930) notes, of a sexual encounter that didn't happen, "There should have been asterisks across that part of the story" (236). Less self-reflective elisions were extremely common, even in the work of daring and frequently censored American writers like Sinclair Lewis; see, for instance, Lewis's *Elmer Gantry* (New York: Signet Classics, 1967), 115-16, 284, and 294.

⁵² To take *Portnoy's Complaint* as an example: in the 1970s, Roth reported 420,000 hardcover copies of the book had sold, "half of them within the first ten weeks the book was on sale," and, according to his publisher, over 3.2 million paperback copies had been printed as early as 1970. See Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1975), 276, and Kenneth C. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 338.

⁵³ See Charney, 124-25.

⁵⁴ Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Random House, 1969), 146. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

In a sharp reading of this passage and other related moments in the novel, Sam Girgus cites Annette Kolodny to contextualize *Portnoy* within an allegorical tradition in which America has been represented as a "feminine pastoral image," and then asserts that the novel's "Gentile women ... are not merely Americans; they embody America."⁵⁵ As if stating outright that "America is a *shikse*" did not render this allegory quite clear enough, it seems worthwhile to remark that Portnoy's opening exclamation here seems to be a sly evocation of John Donne's Elegy 19, "To His Mistress Going to Bed," in which the poet compares his lover to the newly discovered continent:

License my roving hands, and let them go
Before, behind, between, above, below.
O my America! my new-found-land,
My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned,
My Mine of precious stones, my empery,
How blest am I in this discovering thee!⁵⁶

Whereas for Donne's speaker the analogy of woman-as-country serves to concretize sensual desire ("before, behind, between" being a fairly precise description of where a lover might want to place his "roving hands"), Roth works the allegory forcefully in the other direction, intensifying it with the obscenity that is available to him.⁵⁷ In one of the

⁵⁵ Sam B. Girgus, "Portnoy's Prayer: Philip Roth and the American Unconscious," in Asher Z. Milbauer and Donald G. Watston, eds., *Reading Philip Roth* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1988), 129, 130.

⁵⁶ Reprinted in Clay Hunt, *Donne's Poetry: Essays in Literary Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 17.

⁵⁷ See Hunt's standard reading of this passage as "a detailed parallel between the lover's sexual advances and the discovery and political subjugation of a new land" which "dramatizes vividly not only the lover's passionate excitement but also his exultant sense of power in his sexual mastery of his mistress." Notably, Hunt emphasizes that the conceit itself is "one of the commonplaces of Elizabethan love poetry"—he cites examples in Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare—but that Donne's particular achievement is that he "works this routine material to sharp concreteness in the treatment of both the metaphor itself and the sexual experience it describes, which is presented with an almost anatomical precision." Hunt, 20-21. Roth's subtle

book's most frequently cited passages, Portnoy remarks: "I don't seem to stick my dick up these girls, as much as I stick it up their backgrounds—as though through fucking I will discover America. *Conquer America*—maybe that's more like it" (235). Here, it is literally "fucking" that is the means of discovery and conquering, and which has consequences for Portnoy's communal affiliations, and Portnoy's "dick" is the medium through which he embarks on his adventures of identity and disaffection. To invoke another one of Portnoy's enthusiastically obscene phrases, his obsession is not with sex in and of itself, but with "the cunt in country-'tis-of thee" (236)—the sexual figuration of communal and political identifications. With obscene language made available in the 1960s, then, *Portnoy's Complaint* extends the allegorical tradition found throughout the history of Jewish narrative and applies it strikingly to the American Jewish experience.

Many readers of *Portnoy's Complaint* have recognized what Roth is up to when it comes to the allegorical resonances of Portnoy's *shikses*. Portnoy's "relations with women approximate those with society," one critic notes; another explains that "'The Pumpkin, 'The Pilgrim,' and 'The Monkey' [are] all the forbidden *shiksa* in her respective guises as Middle-American wholesome, old New England establishment, and blue-collar ex-hillbilly."⁵⁸ And, of course Roth's book, like any outstanding work of literature, doesn't deserve to be read reductively as allegory. Much of *Portnoy's* charm inheres in the texture of cultural detail and linguistic rhythm it captures, neither of which can be justified or sufficiently appreciated by a purely allegorical analysis. Yet, Roth himself has

allusion here would be picked up a decade later, for a substantially similar purpose, in the title and epigraph of Johanna Kaplan's excellent novel *O My America!* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

⁵⁸ Estelle Gershgoren Novak, "Strangers in a Strange Land: The Homeless of Roth's Protagonists," in Asher Z. Milbauer and Donald G. Watston, eds., *Reading Philip Roth* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1988), 62. Alan Cooper, *Philip Roth and the Jews* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 102.

acknowledged his allegorical intentions, noting that his method in *Portnoy* was "to ground the mythological in the recognizable"; the Portnoys were the "legendary Jewish family dwelling on high, whose squabbles over French-fried potatoes, synagogue attendance, and shikshas were, admittedly, of an Olympian magnitude and splendor, but by whose terrifying kitchen lightning storms were illuminated the values, dreams, fears, and aspirations by which we mortal Jews lived somewhat less vividly down below."⁵⁹

It is by no means unfaithful to the text's spirit to note, moreover, how strikingly a cliché of American ethnic relations could be rewritten through the use of obscenity. It was no news to American Jews by 1969, for example, that the entrenched Protestant elite, despite their rhetoric of tolerance and equality, often couldn't embrace the embodied presence of Jews, especially when it came to social intimacy in country clubs and other prestigious institutions.⁶⁰ But the scene in which Portnoy's representative WASP, Sarah Abbott Maulsby, gags on his erect penis—"It's getting big. I'll suffocate," she cries (240)—extends this critique in terms completely inappropriate for a social scientist. "My father couldn't rise at Boston & Northeastern," Portnoy rants, making the metaphor as explicit as possible, "for the very same reason Sally Maulsby wouldn't deign to go down on me!" (238). By reframing an evident dynamic of social life in sexual terms, Roth transforms it into something both hilarious and deeply resonant; the scene lampoons both

⁵⁹ Philip Roth, "How Did You Come to Write that Book, Anyway?" in *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 39-40.

⁶⁰ They could have read all about this phenomenon as early as 1959 in Albert Gordon's *Jews in Suburbia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), 170, where a woman is quoted as saying "Out husbands do business with them. We see them in the town's shopping area. [But] Jews and Christians do not meet socially even in suburbia." Quoted by Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1999), 159. A fairly broad study of the phenomenon was available in "A Study of Religious Discrimination by Social Clubs," reprinted in Raymond W. Mack, ed., *Race, Class and Power*, 2nd ed. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1968), 106-14. Kaufmann's *Remember Me to God* goes almost, but not quite, as far as Roth in playing out these interethnic interactions in both symbolic and realistic situations.

the discrimination itself and, less overtly, the tepid protests of social scientists who describe it. Roth's scene makes out the fear of Protestants with their closed country clubs and preferential promotions as the ultimate in absurdity—has anyone ever actually been suffocated by an erect penis?—while clarifying just how deeply it hurts to be rejected in such social situations on the basis of one's Jewishness. Contrary, then, to Jane Gerhard's reading of Portnoy's emphasis on fellatio as "the height of narcissistic liberation" and "the ultimate replacement for the masturbating hand," in this scene the graphic representation of oral sex serves to concretize and riotously vivify an analysis of American ethnic relations in a way that would have been impossible under pre-1960s obscenity statutes.⁶¹

IV. The Allegorical Resonances of Other "Libidinal Investments"

If Portnoy's *shiksies* can be read as allegorical figures, why not read his other potential and actual sexual partners the same way? Several influential critics have endorsed just such reading strategies. In the 1980s, Frederic Jameson infamously proposed that in fictions of the Third World, "psychology, or more specifically, libidinal investment, is to be read in primarily political and social terms."⁶² The central questions raised by Jameson's statement—which cultures count as "Third World," and why should this reading strategy apply only, and inevitably, to narratives produced by or about

⁶¹ Jane Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought, 1920 to 1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 125.

⁶² Frederic Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (Autumn 1986): 72.

them?⁶³—can be side-stepped here, seeing as how other critics have applied similar approaches to U.S. literary sources with no less plausibility.⁶⁴

Werner Sollors' typological readings of fictions by Charles Chestnutt and Abraham Cahan in his classic study, *Beyond Ethnicity*, provide a particularly apposite example. Explicating his emphasis on "consent" and "descent" in his analyses of American literature, Sollors notes that in a wide range of narratives, "American identity is often imagined as volitional consent, as love and marriage, ethnicity as seemingly immutable ancestry and descent."⁶⁵ Applying this insight, Sollors convincingly reads Cahan's *Yekl* and Chestnutt's "The Wife of His Youth" as confronting protagonists with alternatives of cultural identification personified in the choice between two potential wives or sexual partners. The option in these two fictions is not between a sexual partner within the protagonist's ethnic group and another outside of it (like a *shikse*), rather between a partner linked to descent and the "old world"—in Cahan's case, Eastern European Jewry, and in Chestnutt's, the American South—and another suggestive of consent, or the "new world" of urban, modernizing America. Like Jameson, Sollors offers a reminder that the allegorical hermeneutic with which we can read the non-Jewish women of the Torah and of modern Jewish fiction can just as sensibly be applied to narratives in various traditions: it may be an old Jewish trope, but it is by no means

⁶³ Aijaz Ahmad's "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" *Social Text* 17 (October 1987): 3-25, is the first of many correctives to Jameson's essay by a postcolonial critic.

⁶⁴ An even more audaciously broad statement than Jameson's on the relevance of allegorical readings, which I find compelling, is E. D. Hirsch's argument that "allegorical intentions are always implicit in the most typical form of literature, the story. Why should anyone be interested in a story that lacks analogical applications to his or her own experience?" See E. D. Hirsch, Jr., "Transhistorical Intentions and the Persistence of Allegory," *New Literary History* 25:3 (Summer 1994): 549-67.

⁶⁵ Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 151.

exclusively Jewish. And crucially, Sollors' and Jameson's readings also suggest that an allegorical reading can be fruitful not only with regards to the representation of exogamic romance, but to all the varying possibilities of what Jameson calls "libidinal investment," which I take to mean any form of sexual desire for an object or person, whether consciously recognized or sublimated.⁶⁶ Just as Portnoy's attraction to and rejection of three representative *shiksas* can be read as the author's playful commentary on the relations between Jews and established American communities, then, so too can his sexual relations with a *sabra* and his hand be understood as figures allegorizing his relation to various segments of the Jewish community.

Portnoy's *sabra* would be difficult, in fact, to read otherwise: no more sympathetically drawn, and no less allegorical than the *shiksas*, the Israeli, Naomi, is a so-called "ideological hunk of a girl" (258), and, indeed, she is more "ideological hunk" than "girl." Within minutes of meeting her, Portnoy is contemplating marriage (259), parodying the intense attraction of post-1967 Zionism to American Jews, seeming, as it did, to offer a dramatic solution to the instabilities of Jewish identity and an antidote to the depredations of assimilation personified in Roth's text by *shiksas*.⁶⁷ Portnoy's passion for Naomi is clearly a reaction to the threat of assimilation; as he remarks, in a sentence

⁶⁶ It might be added here that Sollors does not mention that "wife of his youth" stories appear, with added complexities, in many other American texts—including I. B. Singer's *Enemies, a Love Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972) and Maxine Hong Kingston's "At the Western Palace" chapter from *The Woman Warrior* (1976)—filling similar functions: in each case, these narratives can be read as analogies for the possibilities and problems faced by immigrant communities. This is not to say, though, that the trope is always already allegorical; a "wife of his youth" story is exploited quite simply for suspense and sensation in Edward King's *Joseph Zalmonah* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1893), 269.

⁶⁷ This embrace of Zionism was particularly prominent among younger Jews: in the wake of the war, the B'Nai B'Rith Hillel Foundation reported "the most striking expression of Jewish identification and responsibility that ever welled up on university and college campuses," while "some 10,000 American Jewish students had traveled to Israel to fill spots on kibbutzim and in factories left unmanned by the general mobilization." Joshua Michael Zeitz, "'If I Am Not for Myself . . .': The American Jewish Establishment in the Aftermath of the Six Day War," *American Jewish History* 88:2 (2000): 259-60.

Roth added after the relevant section was excerpted in *Esquire* in 1967—as if to emphasize even more forcefully the political resonances of Portnoy's *shiksaphilia*—"We are not a family that takes defection lightly" (58). A Zionist perspective bubbles up throughout the novel, as in a piece of advice Portnoy remembers his Uncle Hymie offering him: "The only place for a Jew to live is among Jews, *especially* . . . when children are growing up with people from the other sex" (52).⁶⁸ But it is Naomi who represents Zionism as an ideology Portnoy might embrace, as a strikingly endogamic corrective to his failed attempts at exogamy. The scribbled notes that Roth made while planning and drafting this novel suggest how deeply he considered positioning Zionism, in the person of Naomi, as the effective solution of Portnoy's problems. One snippet in one of Roth's notebook reads, "ends in Israel—return," while a second reads, "In Israel—here don't have to fight the goy. The issue is resolved."⁶⁹

Roth apparently decided that Naomi and Zionism would not be Portnoy's answer; at least in this allegorical fiction, Zionism would not be proclaimed the salvation of the American Jew, counter to much post-1967 ebullience. Finally ready for commitment—"Be my wife," he begs Naomi, "Mother my children" (263)—Portnoy discovers to his dismay that, aside from Naomi's complete antipathy to his overtures, he "can't get a hard-on in this place": he's "Im-po-tent in Is-rael" (268). Roth doesn't leave his readers guessing as to what might cause this case of the "most prevalent form of degradation in erotic life," either, but spells it out as if copying directly from Karl Abraham's neglected

⁶⁸ Compare Uncle Hymie's perspective to those of early European Zionists, like Hans Goslar and Rafael Becker, who regarded "Zionism as the only solution to the endemic sexual and demographic diseases of Jewish life in modern Europe." David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 181.

⁶⁹ Philip Roth Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Box 188.

1913 essay "On Neurotic Exogamy," which reports on the type of Jewish neurotic who, like Portnoy, "takes flight from women who typify his mother."⁷⁰ Portnoy reports of Naomi that "in physical type she is, of course, my mother" (259), later calling her a "mother-substitute" and "offspring of the same pale Polish strain of Jews" as "the lady of [his] past," i.e., his mom (266). That Naomi the Zionist resembles (or "is") Portnoy's mother likewise accords well with standard analyses of the role of mothers in American Jewish culture. According to one not very plausible psycho-mythological reading—Margaret Mead quoting Erik Erikson and Martha Wolfenstein—"the mother's body is intensified in importance because of the lack of one's own soil, and the mother's body becomes motherland."⁷¹ More convincingly, Paula Hyman has shown that American Jewish mothers in postwar America assumed responsibility for "Jewish survival broadly conceived."⁷² Since the Jewish Mother had come to represent the passing on of

⁷⁰ Karl Abraham, "On Neurotic Exogamy," in *Clinical Papers and Essays on Psycho-analysis: The Selected Papers of Karl Abraham*, ed. Hilda Abraham, trans. Hilda Abraham and D. R. Elison (New York: Basic Books, 1955), 48-50. Abraham's essay is a stunning anticipation of Portnoy's complaint. Abraham diagnoses "neurotic exogamy," which "occurs where a man experiences an insuperable aversion to any close relationship with a woman of his own people or nation. Or, to put it more correctly, of his mother's people." Abraham refers to three Jewish patients who say they "could never marry a Jewess," one of whom "repeatedly fell in love with girls whose appearance was in complete contrast to that of Jewish girls, one being, for instance, a blonde Danish girl." The specifics of these cases mirror *Portnoy* almost eerily, particularly Abraham's observation that "in all the cases I investigated closely a pronounced hatred against the patient's nearest relatives existed side by side with an exaggerated love for these same relatives. This hatred may be directed mainly against the mother, in which case the explanation for it is to be found in disappointed incestuous love. . . . Such hatred leads a son to turn his back first upon his kinsfolk and the upon all who belong to the same people." Abraham goes on to link this condition specifically to "the so-called mixed marriages . . . between Gentiles and Jews, being brought about sometimes by the fear of incest and sometimes as a result of the hostile rejection of the family."

⁷¹ Quoted in Joyce Antler, *You Never Write, You Never Call: A History of the Jewish Mother* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 89.

⁷² Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representations of Women* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1995), 164. While acknowledging the brilliance of Hyman's reading, it seems crucial to emphasize, as she does not, the distinction between the representational and the real in the cultural history she discusses. That the Jewish mother *allegorized* communal continuity and ambivalence about assimilation in texts of this era, as she argues, is certain; but it does not seem clear that Jewish mothers in reality did more or less than fathers, individually and as a group, to pass on Jewish culture to their children in this generation.

Jewishness,⁷³ an embrace of one's Jewish identity in form of Zionism naturally meant embracing one's mother: the endogamic alternative to Portnoy's exogamic misadventures smacks, as all endogamy on some level does, of incest. And, as Freud would predict—in the 1912 essay that is the most fundamental intertext of Roth's novel—the "culmination of the Oedipal drama" (266) for Portnoy is not, as in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, copulation with his mother, but as in the cases of Freud's patients, "psychic impotence." Zionism, in this allegory, means forgoing the insider-outsider positioning of Diasporic life that has been celebrated by theorists of Jewishness since at least the early 20th century, in favor of an incestuous and suffocating Jewish community.⁷⁴ Portnoy can't do it.

Ruling out both exogamy and endogamy—and concluding on an ambivalently manic note—*Portnoy's Complaint* famously reserves its protagonist one sexual experience, the one that has always been most associated with the novel by its readers: masturbation. If an allegorical reading of Portnoy's "libidinal investments" in *shiksas* and a *sabra* stands, then his masturbation might similarly be read as representing a path

It's worthwhile to emphasize, also, against the all-too-persistent misreadings of *Portnoy's Complaint* as Roth's mean-spirited autobiography, that Roth's novel, including its biting portrait of a Jewish mother, was a fictional construct deliberately designed to handle a set of themes and not a report on life; Hyman's lumping of Roth in with "Jewish men [who] displaced their self-hatred ... [and] directed their critique at Jewish women" implies that she might read *Portnoy*, as others did, as a document of Jewish self-hatred (157). Among other evidence that this is not the case—that Roth is, in fact, an excellent analyst of self-hatred and not a sufferer from that condition—are the sweet letters Roth's parents sent him as the novel's fame spread. These letters display the kindness and rapport between Roth and his parents, and convey the Roths' amusement that people would ever confuse the Portnoys for themselves ("People who don't even know us insist you have a sister"), as well as their support for their son's fictional project ("So you ask how we are bearing up. Nothing but Nachos [i.e., *nakhes*, pride]"). Letter from Herman and Bess Roth to Philip Roth, March 15, 1969, Philip Roth Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Box 30.

⁷³ For sources that demonstrate the beginning of this belief in the Jewish mother's responsibility for Jewish continuity in America in the interwar years, see Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 70-73.

⁷⁴ A sharp and influential statement of this perspective is Thorstein Veblen's "The Intellectual Pre-Eminence of Jews in Modern Europe," *Political Science Quarterly* 34:1 (March 1919): 33-42, in which Veblen refers to the Zionist project as "an experiment in isolation and in-breeding" (33) and posits that it is "only when the gifted Jew ... becomes a naturalized, though hyphenate, citizen in the gentile republic of learning, that he comes into his own as a creative leader in the world's intellectual enterprise" (38).

between the Scylla of exogamy/assimilation and the Charybdis of endogamy/Zionism. As Maurice Charney notes (punning unconsciously?), Portnoy's masturbation is "intimately related to incestuous impulses toward his mother and sister"⁷⁵—yet unlike sex with Naomi, which proves impossible in the text because of its incestuous resonances, masturbation remains viable even when it verges on incest (as when Portnoy ejaculates into his sister's bra [22]). Portnoy's masturbation, like the fictional ideology Roth would dub "Diasporism" later in his career, depends on fantasies and unconscious urges both endogamic and exogamic, though it never, in and of itself, impels Portnoy to act in a way that could lead to reproduction.⁷⁶ While the text suggests a nascent consciousness of Diasporism in Portnoy—he identifies with Holocaust victims as "Diaspora Jews just like myself" (265), and proclaims that he is a "patriot," "only" in a place where he doesn't "feel at home!" (271), a fair description of the Diasporist philosophy—and while it is easy to hear a masturbating Diasporist's manifesto in the offing in Portnoy's speeches ("Just leave us alone, God damn it," he pleads, "to pull our little dongos in peace and think our little selfish thoughts" [122]), it doesn't seem necessary to rest too much weight on a reading that ultimately just demonstrates that there is more at stake in Portnoy's compulsive masturbation than what is typically found in a bawdy teen comedy. Roth's later novels on Zionism and the Diaspora, *The Counterlife* (1986) and *Operation: Shylock*

⁷⁵ Charney, 119.

⁷⁶ On Diasporism, particularly as it is articulated in *Operation: Shylock* and *The Counterlife*—as an extension of the Israel section of *Portnoy*, see Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, "The Grapes of Roth: Diasporism from Portnoy to Shylock," *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 221-33, and Ranen Omer-Sherman, "'No Coherence': Philip Roth's Lamentations for Diaspora," *Diaspora and Zionism in Jewish American Literature: Lazarus, Syrkin, Reznikoff, and Roth* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2002), 191-233. Debra Shostak argues, along similar lines, that "Portnoy's exile from the flesh finally signifies his geographical and metaphysical homelessness as a Jew in the Diaspora, together composing the set of conditions at the root of his hysteria." Debra Shostak, *Philip Roth: Countertexts, Counterlives* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 84.

(1993) elaborate his thoughts on these subjects in brilliant and bewildering detail. Yet it seems worth emphasizing that when A. B. Yehoshua, a leading Israeli novelist and cultural critic, proclaimed to an interviewer in March 2003 that "Diaspora Judaism is masturbation," he was simply echoing the well-known but not entirely understood trope that constitutes the core of Roth's most widely read novel.⁷⁷

V. Jewish Feminist Pornography: Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot*

So far, this chapter has explored how in *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth employs obscenity to expand a suite of allegories that had been common throughout Jewish textual history, in which sex stands in for communal reproduction or for what Fiedler called "identity and assimilation." In doing so, Roth enlivened some conventional analyses of American Jewish culture, but he did not present a vision of Jewish life, allegorical or literal, that was radical in its implications. Psycho-sexual and political and personal confusion: that's the picture *Portnoy* paints of American Jews. And it is a valid, if exaggerated, portrait, consistent with the one conveyed in Karl Abraham's "On Neurotic Exogamy." But the novel's sudden conclusion—which excises a chapter Roth drafted in fragments and then "discarded"—signals Roth's unwillingness to play out his family romance to its logical, and uncomfortable, extreme.⁷⁸ Mother-son intercourse, to be

⁷⁷ Though it was spoken to the staff of the *Jerusalem Post*, I found this quip, as reported by newswires, in *j.*, *The Jewish News Weekly of Northern California* (March 21, 2003) <http://www.jewishsf.com/content/2-0-/module/displaystory/story_id/19949/edition_id/407/format/html/displaystory.html>.

⁷⁸ Titled "The Masochistic Plunge," the discarded final chapter begins with Portnoy having promised to marry Mary Jane after she announces she's pregnant. Box 185, Philip Roth Papers. The scene, though unfinished and undeveloped, is reminiscent of the one that eventually appeared in *My Life as a Man*, where

specific, is one avenue of potential allegorical resonance that Roth leaves unexplored. This is, as a passing remark by Werner Sollors suggests, a lost opportunity.

In his discussion of Chestnutt's "The Wife of His Youth" and Cahan's *Yekl*, Sollors notes that "we might have expected Ryder's and Yekl's choice to be one between parent and spouse (to make it a pure case of descent versus consent)."⁷⁹ Who could argue? It would be a striking fictional effect indeed if Yekl were forced to choose not between two unmarried women, or between his wife and a new girlfriend, but between a young American girl and his own mother as his potential sexual partners. Jewish protagonists had faced such a choice, between their mothers and *shiksas*, before, certainly—Jackie Robin, in *The Jazz Singer* (1927), is one well-known example—but never had sexual intercourse with a character's mother been a viable narrative or representational possibility. It would have been illegal to represent parent-child incest explicitly when Cahan and Chestnutt were writing, in the *Jazz Singer*, or at any time up to 1966. In fact, the very term that succinctly captures this potential relation, "mother-fucker," was among the most proscribed words in the English language, and one of the very last to make its way into literature.⁸⁰ By the late 1960s, though, thanks to the developments in obscenity law, it had become legal, if not socially advisable, to describe in explicit terms even such an unconventional "libidinal investment" as mother-fucking.

Peter Tarnopol is confronted by his wife-to-be, Maureen, with the news that she is two months pregnant. *My Life as a Man* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 186.

⁷⁹ Sollors, 165.

⁸⁰ James B. Twitchell suggests that "we reserve our linguistic wrath for the most abhorrent act: mother-son incest," raising the question of whether mother-son incest is less common because it is more abhorrent, or more abhorrent because it is less common. *Forbidden Partners: The Incest Taboo in Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 54. For dates of the appearances in print of the various uses of "motherfucker," and its near euphemisms, see Jesse Sheidlower's impressive resource, *The F Word* (New York: Random House, 1995), 196-214. It's worth noting that two American Jewish classics, Meyer Levin's *The Old Bunch* (1937) and Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), feature prominently among the earliest texts to employ this taboo word's less elaborately euphemized forms.

This critique—that Roth did not, in *Portnoy*, stretch himself quite far enough—is not the usual one leveled at this controversial novel. The most lasting critiques of *Portnoy's Complaint* have also not been those that labeled it as anti-Semitic propaganda (as Marie Syrkin, Irving Howe, Robert Kirsch, and others did), but rather those that have protested the representation of women in the novel as patriarchal and misogynist. That *Portnoy* is, and should be, anathema to feminists quickly became a critical commonplace.⁸¹ A reading of the characters in *Portnoy* as deliberately allegorical figures helps to explain why "no woman in a Roth novel could ever be confused with a three-dimensional figure who might walk off the page into real life," as one critic complained, and it suggests that Roth's caricatures are not necessarily reason enough to dismiss the novel as hopelessly misogynist.⁸² But I remain sympathetic with a feminist critique of *Portnoy* to the extent that there is no reason that the allegorical ethnic subject needs to be gendered male. While women were often excluded from participating in literary activity in earlier periods, it is one of the salutary achievements of literary modernity that the

⁸¹ Although Kate Millett accepts *Portnoy* as "hilarious" (325), other feminists have been less sanguine about Roth's novel. Vivian Gornick's "Why Do These Men Hate Women?" originally printed in the *Village Voice*, and reprinted in her *Essays in Feminism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 189-199, is one case in point: while she regards *Portnoy* as somewhat less depraved than Roth's later novel, *My Life as a Man* (1974), she characterizes "the hatred of women" as "the chief element" in the "self-absorption" that dominates his *oeuvre* (196), and refers in passing to "hateful caricatures of women in" *Portnoy* (196). Gornick also restated much of this influential critique in a talk at the Radcliffe Institute on February 4, 2008, titled "The Rise and Fall of Jewish American Literature." A much younger Jewish writer, Elisa Albert recalls (albeit in a metafictional essay that ends with her adoring and propositioning Roth) the disgust she felt at the "shiksa-obsession and sexual dysfunction and casual dismissal of Jewish women and mockery of everything religious, spiritually meaningful in Judaism" she found in Roth's work and particularly in *Portnoy*. "Etta or Bessie or Dora or Rose," *How This Night Is Different* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 181-82.

⁸² Benevenuto, 55. As Prell points out, "stereotypes are not neutral; as they constitute American Jewish identity at-a-glance, they create injury even when framed as humor." Having said that, Prell also rightly notes that "Roth was most likely simply a lightning rod for women's frustrations with their representation by comics, writers and other commentators on American Jewish life"—a sensible view, especially considering that *Portnoy's Complaint* "came considerably later," as Prell remarks, than most of the popular vehicles for the Jewish Mother stereotype. Roth, it seems quite clear, was not promulgating and forming stereotypes, but rather responding to them. Prell, *Fighting*, 5, 210, 288n9.

story of ethnic and minority groups need not constantly be allegorized as the story of a man's selection of his sexual partner, with women playing passive, if crucial, roles.

One response to this critique of Roth would be that, as mentioned above, women have written *sheygets* novels—in which the male characters, as flat, cartoony representatives of particular communities, are selected or rejected by a female protagonist—almost as frequently as men like Roth have written *shikse* novels like *Portnoy*.⁸³ But worthy as they are of our attention, books like Emma Wolf's *Other Things Being Equal*, Edna Ferber's *Fanny Herself*, and Anzia Yeziarska's *Salome of the Tenements* do not satisfactorily resolve this problem simply by gendering the allegorical ethnic subject female. They reproduce the traditional semiotic structure with the genders reversed. Several novelists responded to *Portnoy* in exactly this way, none more prominently than Erica Jong, whose *Fear of Flying* has not inaccurately been described as "the female answer" to *Portnoy*.⁸⁴ Jong's Jewish heroine, Isadora Wing, selects her lovers from various communities, and can certainly be read as representing a particular experience of American Jewish life in enthusiastically obscene terms. But, as Susan

⁸³ It is true, of course, that the *shikse* novels written by Jewish men have tended to attract more attention than the *sheygets* novels written by Jewish women—if not at their moment of publication, then in literary criticism and scholarship. And it would be a mistake not to recognize that the positions of female Jewish novelists in American culture and American Jewish communities differed markedly from those of male Jewish novelists. It is somewhat surprising, then, to discover just how similarly these two sorts of novels repeatedly turned out. As Ann R. Shapiro has noted, "relationships between *shaygets* and Jew fail for the same reasons as relationships between *shiksa* and Jew" (86). The question of why literary critics have not devoted more attention to *shaygets* novels—books like Edna Ferber's *Fanny Herself* (New York: F. A. Stokes, 1917), which attracted plenty of attention upon its original publication—remains to be answered.

⁸⁴ In his review of Jong's novel upon its first publication, Benjamin Stein noted that *Fear of Flying* "has been described by some as the female answer to 'Portnoy's Complaint.' But it begins at the point where 'Portnoy's Complaint' ends." Stein, "The Painful Acquisition of Self-Esteem," *Wall Street Journal* (May 8, 1974), 20. John Updike, writing in the *New Yorker*, asserted that Jong's novel "belongs to, and hilariously extends, the tradition of *Catcher in the Rye* and *Portnoy's Complaint*"—a phrase trumpeted by Jong's publishers in their marketing; see, e.g., the advertisement in the *New York Times* (December 19, 1973), 40. In a more expansive study, *Sexual Fiction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1981), Maurice Charney asserts that "Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973) is conceived on the model of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* " and that "Portnoy and Isadora seem mirror images of each other" (113).

Suleiman has argued, Jong's novel ultimately adds up to "merely the usurpation of old narrative structures and the old words by new speakers"—a women's version of a man's obscene novel, just as Emma Wolf's and Anzia Yeziarska's *shaygets* novels could be read as women's iterations of men's *shikse* novels (or vice versa). As Suleiman argues, such usurpation is at most an "important ... first step" towards radical feminist fiction.⁸⁵

Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot* addresses both of these concerns: it drives the allegorical tradition to its extreme, and does so in a pioneering work of radical feminist fiction that takes the further step, as Suleiman construes it, of "inventing ... new structures, new words, a new syntax that will shake up and *transform* old habits of thought and old ways of seeing."⁸⁶ One might go so far as to suggest that if, as Suleiman claims, the "continuing popularity" of *Fear of Flying* signals that the novel does not "imply a genuine threat to existing ways of seeing and being between the sexes," the extraordinary difficulties Wiseman had in placing her novel with a publisher, and the continued sense that it has not received its due from critics and readers, may reflect the radically "unsettling" quality of a novel that inverts the Oedipal myth by narrating it from the perspective of the mother, and portrays the sexual intimacy between a woman and her son as a profoundly ethical and necessary, if heartbreaking, act.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 123. See also Rosalind Coward, "'This Novel Changes Lives': Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels? A Response to Rebecca O'Rourke's Article 'Summer Reading,'" *Feminist Review* 5 (1980): 53-64, in which Coward warns "against any simple designation of" novels like *Fear of Flying* "as feminist" (60).

⁸⁶ In this sense, and many others, *Crackpot* is a distinct and radical counterpart to the "feminist sex novels of the seventies," which "told the story of white middle-class educated women and their journeys into feminism" (Gerhard, 120) and to the contemporaneous popular novels that focused on "the specificity of middle-class Jewish experience" which were "created by middle-class feminists" (Prell, 212-28, 303n8).

⁸⁷ J. M. Kertzer remarks that "reading the novel is itself an unsettling experience" (28), a suggestion quoted, and affirmed, by Marcia Mack. See Kertzer, "Beginnings and Endings: Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot*," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 58 (Spring 1996): 15-35, and Mack, "*The Sacrifice* and *Crackpot*: What a

The inordinate difficulty Wiseman had in placing *Crackpot* with a publisher came as a surprise to her, and for good reason. Wiseman conceived *Crackpot* in 1961, in New York, around the time of the first crucial obscenity cases in both the U.S. and Canada that heralded the upcoming legal developments, and she drafted the book repeatedly throughout the ensuing decade.⁸⁸ She must have been aware that these legal advances would substantially improve her chances of publishing a novel that is pornographic in the etymological sense (i.e., it is writing about a prostitute), and obscene in the modern legal sense (i.e., *inter alia*, it includes more than a dozen instances of the word "fuck").

Given the legal situation, Wiseman had no cause to fear that *Crackpot* would be suppressed because of its obscenity, and she had, at the same time, every reason to be confident that the manuscript would receive sympathetic attention. Her first novel, *The Sacrifice* (1956) had been published to considerable critical acclaim in Canada, the U.S., and England, generating more pre-publication sales, according to one source, than any Canadian novel in history.⁸⁹ For that debut, Wiseman won the Governor General's Award for Fiction, Canada's most prestigious literary prize; was granted residencies at Yaddo and the MacDowell Colony, the two most prominent American artists' colonies; and received a Guggenheim fellowship based on recommendations from an astonishing group of Jewish cultural and literary authorities: Saul Bellow, David Daiches, Irving Howe, and

Woman Can Learn by Rewriting a Fairy Tale and Clarifying Its Meaning," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 68 (Summer 1999), 134-58.

⁸⁸ The crucial case in the U.S. was *Roth v. United States* 354 U.S. 476 (1957); in Canada, the emendation of the Criminal Code in 1959, and a case on *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Brodie v. The Queen*, [1962] SCR 681, were the crucial developments. The chapter on *Crackpot* in Ruth Panofsky's excellent study of Wiseman's literary career describes in detail Wiseman's process of drafting and submitting the novel. "Strange, Daring," in Panofsky, *Vocation*, 55-94.

⁸⁹ Panofsky, *Vocation*, 50.

Meyer Levin.⁹⁰ Wiseman's second novel did not promise to be any less a success than the first: drafts of *Crackpot* had been praised by Margaret Laurence, herself a major Canadian author, and by Malcolm Ross, one of the country's most famous literary impresarios.⁹¹ Mordecai Richler, who had made an international name for himself with novels like *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959) and *Cocksure* (1968), solicited an excerpt from *Crackpot* for a 1970 anthology of contemporary Canadian fiction he edited.⁹² Moreover, Wiseman's book was submitted to publishers by perhaps the most prominent literary agent in the U.S. at the time, Candida Donadio, who represented an astounding list of American writers, among whom were included the most impressive of American Jewish novelists. Wondering if she might represent Wiseman, Donadio wrote that her clients included "Algren, Bellow, Malamud, Welty, Roth, Heller, Pynchon, Bruce Friedman, Wallace Markfield, John Cheever, Harvey Swados, etc.etc and of course Hannah Green" (the last of whom Wiseman had befriended years earlier at Yaddo and who had suggested to Donadio that she contact Wiseman). *Crackpot* was not a case of an agent being disappointed by her client's follow-up to a successful debut, either: Donadio agreed to represent *Crackpot* after reading an excerpt from the novel ("I LOVE IT," she wrote), but without having yet read *The Sacrifice*.⁹³ In short, *Crackpot* was submitted for consideration to publishers with the highest possible pedigree and expectations. It came as a shock, then, when the U.S. publisher of *The Sacrifice*, Viking, rejected *Crackpot*

⁹⁰ Panofsky, *Vocation*, 19.

⁹¹ Panofsky, *Vocation*, 79.

⁹² Adele Wiseman, "From Crackpot" in Mordecai Richler, ed., *Canadian Writing Today* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1970), 233-45.

⁹³ Candida Donadio to Adele Wiseman, March 4, 1968, May 20, 1968, and November 25, 1968, by which point Donadio finally did read *The Sacrifice*; box 23, folder 19, Adele Wiseman Fonds, York University.

summarily in 1968, and as a startling disappointment when, over the next several years, twenty-five other major publishers in the U.S., Canada, and England also passed on it.⁹⁴

These rejections of a celebrated novelist's sophomore project, while surprising, are not difficult to explain. As Panofsky and Marcia Mack have pointed out, and as Wiseman herself seems to have agreed, *Crackpot* is a radical feminist departure from, and rewriting of, the fairly conventional, patriarchal themes of *The Sacrifice*⁹⁵—and I would add to this analysis the fact that *Crackpot* happens to be a work of *obscene* radical feminism (as opposed to Jong's *Fear of Flying*, which I would classify as an obscene novel by a woman, or even an obscene feminist novel, but not radical fiction).⁹⁶

Somewhat suggestive in this regard was Wiseman's experience with Longmans Canada, a publishing house that in 1970 offered her a contract for *Crackpot* on the condition that she submit to revisions to be suggested by Phyllis Grosskurth, an English professor at the University of Toronto whose views of literature, according to Grosskurth's own recollection, Wiseman considered "very prudish."⁹⁷ Even if not every rejection rested on the novel's engagement with obscenity—Grosskurth, for one, claims that Longman main

⁹⁴ For the full list of publishers who rejected *Crackpot*, see Panofsky, *Vocation*, 168n90.

⁹⁵ Panofsky, "From Complicity to Subversion: The Female Subject in Adele Wiseman's Novels," *Canadian Literature* 137 (July 1993): 41-48. Wiseman is paraphrased on this issue in Christl Verduyn, *Lifelines: Marian Engel's Writings* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1995): "Adele Wiseman once reflected upon her successful novel *The Sacrifice* as a book she had written almost by formula for her (male) professor Malcolm Ross. At times, it did not even seem like her book. *Crackpot*, on the other hand, felt entirely hers. Wiseman worked on this offbeat novel for many years, shaping it after a vision that was uniquely hers as a woman (Comments made during a classroom visit, Trent University, 1985)." 223n63. See also Mack, "*The Sacrifice* and *Crackpot*."

⁹⁶ As Elaine Showalter puts it, "the task of a radical women's literature should be to replace the secondary and artificial images women receive from a male chauvinist society with authentic and primary identities." *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 314-15.

⁹⁷ Panofsky, 82.

objection was to the book's length⁹⁸—it demonstrates the unconventional character of *Crackpot* that this book inspired concerns about propriety at a time when, as a lawyer pointed out in the oral arguments of *Cohen v. California* (1971), seven out of the ten bestselling U.S. novels of 1969 contained the word "fuck."⁹⁹ Finally released in 1974 by McClelland and Stewart—then, as now, among the most prestigious of Canadian publishing houses—through the intercession of the founder's son, the book received mixed reviews, but was celebrated by at least a few reviewers as a creative triumph from a major talent. The book was called "one of the more important novels in recent literature" by a radio critic, while an early academic respondent characterized the novel as "the most alive, daring, and tempestuously human literary creation in Canadian storytelling."¹⁰⁰ *Crackpot* did receive, however, at least one scathing review that baldly reflected the reactionary response to Wiseman's book that publishers may have feared; the reviewer, E. G. Mardon, expressed "horror and disgust" in finding *Crackpot* "pornographic," "a modern Canadian version of the notorious Fanny Hill."¹⁰¹ That

⁹⁸ According to Grosskurth, Longmans did not expect or want her to tone down the treatment of sexuality in the novel, and indeed it seems somewhat unlikely that Grosskurth, who was then primarily known as the biographer of John Addington Symonds, would be the person chosen to bowdlerize a book. Yet apparently Wiseman suspected that Grosskurth was "prissy" and "would object to the main character," which, Grosskurth says, "was absurd." Telephone interview with Phyllis Grosskurth, March 31, 2009.

⁹⁹ The oral arguments of this case, 403 U.S. 15 (1971), have been made available online, in MP3 format, at <http://www.oyez.org/cases/1970-1979/1970/1970_299/argument/299_19710222-lq-argument.mp3>. The remark about the 1969 bestsellers occurs at 22:05.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Panofsky, *Force of Vocation*, 89-90; Helene Rosenthal, "Comedy of Survival," *Canadian Literature* 64 (Spring 1975): 115.

¹⁰¹ E. G. Mardon, "Revolt Second Novel by Wiseman," *Lethbridge Herald* (Nov. 12, 1974), clipping in Box 20 of the Adele Wiseman Fonds, York University. Praising *The Sacrifice* as "one of the best Canadian novels to appear in many a long year," Mardon goes on to complain about "page after page of revolting and degenerating description," states his belief that "Crackpot will deprave or corrupt the reader," and calls it "offensive" and "obscene." Most interestingly, he quotes from *Miller v. California* (1973), a U.S. Supreme Court case—a case, notably, with no direct bearing on Canadian obscenity law—to suggest that *Crackpot* is "prurient" according to "contemporary community standards," which he claims should be "ascertained ... through the Herald, and the personal opinions expressed in this review." Rarely has a would-be censor so

Crackpot unsettled publishers and disturbed a reviewer so deeply testifies to what Tamara Palmer calls "*Crackpot's* complex and profoundly radical nature," as well as Wiseman's commitment to writing "what was hardest and most important to [her]." ¹⁰²

VI. "A Sheltered Workshop": Wiseman and Obscenity

I do not mean to suggest that Wiseman was an innocent victim of censors. Like Roth, she knew what she was getting into when she wrote an obscene novel. ¹⁰³ Her memoirs make clear that the power of obscenity in literature and speech was among her earliest literary insights. In her "Memoirs of a Book-Molesting Childhood" (1986), Wiseman recalls discovering a pornographic poem written by her brother when she was "nine or ten." Wiseman asserts that the effect on her was not "corruption," but rather that her "early exposure to schoolboy porn and the curiosity it excited was more like finding a sheltered workshop." This evocative phrase, "sheltered workshop"—Wiseman's own version, it appears, of what Virginia Woolf famously called a "room of one's own"—suggests that pornographic verse inspired in her the possibilities of composition. That Wiseman devotes two pages of her short memoir of childhood reading to this single "crudely hectic piece of doggerel" (while dispensing with "the Dr Doolittles, the Bobbsey

boldly admitted that when he refers to "community standards," he means no more and no less than his own personal inclinations.

¹⁰² Tamara Palmer, "Elements of Jewish Culture in Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot*," *Prairie Forum* 16:2 (1991): 265, and Wiseman, quoted in Panofsky, 35.

¹⁰³ In fact, an unpublished letter in response to an article on censorship and in defense of her friend Margaret Laurence's novel *The Diviners* (1974), which Wiseman drafted and redrafted many times in 1978, shows how deeply she had considered the question of literary obscenity and censorship. See Adele Wiseman Fonds, York University, Box 18, Folder 16.

(and other) Twins, the Oz books, Pooh, Heidi, the Swiss Family Robinson, the works of Louisa May Alcott, Gene Stratton Porter" in a single sentence) strikingly emphasizes what she refers to as her "ongoing response" to it.¹⁰⁴

In a more general sense, Wiseman remembered herself as being "sinfully precocious in this matter of wanting to read books they considered too old for me," and she became conscious, early on, of how important it would be to use taboo words in her own writing if she wanted that writing to be of the highest caliber:¹⁰⁵

There were certain words that had such strong feelings attached to them that I had a hard time using them. But I knew that if I was going to be a writer I would have to have the whole world of words at my disposal, in spite of how my upbringing had taught me to feel about them. ... So I stood in front of the mirror and practised saying "shit" out loud, "shit shit SHIT", trying not to cringe inside. I still get a little twinge when I hear or use certain words, though publicly I can certainly pass for a familiar.¹⁰⁶

This self-description of Wiseman's "training" (23) is fascinating enough as a declaration of the importance of taboo words to a novelist, but two other points bear emphasizing. First, the passage has an uncanny retrospective quality: when Wiseman was a teenager, in the 1940s, it would have been relatively difficult for a young woman of her age to get her hands on a novel with the word "shit" in it, like *Ulysses* or *Call It Sleep* or *Tropic of Cancer*. This passage, then, if accurate—and not a retrospectively embellished memory—suggests that Wiseman had a precociously *avant garde* vision of the literature

¹⁰⁴ Adele Wiseman, "Memoirs of a Book Molesting Childhood," reprinted in *Memoirs of a Book Molesting Childhood* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987), 9-11. Similarly, in another essay, Wiseman fills two pages recounting the bawdy peddlers' stories she enjoyed listening to her uncle and other peddlers tell (*Memoirs*, 36-38).

¹⁰⁵ Wiseman, *Memoirs*, 13.

¹⁰⁶ Wiseman, *Memoirs*, 23.

she would one day write. The persistence of euphemism in Wiseman's recollection is also noteworthy: she repeats the phrase "certain words" to avoid spelling out exactly which words these were. And though she was writing in the 1980s, when she does offer a concrete example, she chooses "shit," and not the more dramatically offensive "fuck," suggesting that she does still feel a bit uncomfortable using that word, even though the instances of "fuck" outnumber those of "shit" in *Crackpot* at a ratio of about two to one.

Given Wiseman's attention to taboo words and their euphemisms in her memoirs, it should not be surprising that they not only appear, but are explicitly discussed, in *Crackpot* (as in *Portnoy's Complaint*, where Portnoy admits, "Sure, I say *fuck* a lot ..." [124]). As the novel's protagonist, Hoda, grows up in North Winnipeg, she quickly learns "the bad language of the natives [i.e., Protestant Canadians]" and curses in response to the disapproval of teachers and other children: "When they said nasty things ... you could say hot things like 'fuck you' under your breath." After a fight with children who won't play with her, Hoda sobs, "I hate you fuck you I won't play with you either."¹⁰⁷ She knows that these words have unusual powers; when a couple of the prim Evangelical Christians who are teaching her blind father to weave baskets in the basement of their church visit Hoda's house, she knows not to say such things to them: "She would have died ... rather than say 'fuck' or 'shit' in their hearing" (94). She manages to offend them nonetheless, however, as she doesn't realize that "hell" would be equally disturbing to them (92). What Wiseman illustrates, in these brief scenes, is the education of a child in taboo language. Hoda learns taboo words without quite knowing what they mean, and she is also "learning caution" (58), i.e., when not to use them. *Crackpot* can be described, in

¹⁰⁷ Adele Wiseman, *Crackpot* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1974), 99, 46-47. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

Roth's terms, as a novel that raises "obscenity to the level of a subject,"¹⁰⁸ in that the novel closely tracks Hoda's education as a user and enactor of obscenity.¹⁰⁹

Crackpot also raises "obscenity to the level of a subject" on a linguistic level, as Wiseman's prose deploys both taboo words and euphemisms to represent Hoda's developing consciousness. As various men in Hoda's community initiate her into sex, Wiseman carefully marshals euphemistic pronouns to signal the covertness, the hiddenness, of her gradually acquired sexual knowledge. Follow, for example, the referents of the pronoun "it," which I italicize in the following passage. At this juncture, Hoda has her first sexual interaction with an older man, the neighborhood butcher, Yankl, who provides scraps of meat for her poor family in exchange for a particular act:

Yankl himself didn't seem to think *it* mattered much afterwards, and when she was behind the counter with him he acted as though *it* was just something that happened to happen while something else important, like cleaning the counter top, was going on, even though he really showed he liked her when he was coaxing her. He didn't even look at her when she did what he'd begged her for, and talked rapidly about all kinds of different things as though he were talking to himself, and rubbed vigorously at the hollowed-out wooden chipping block, and kept glancing angrily at the door, so that every now and then when he said "hard" in a sharper voice, if *it* weren't for the particularly urgent sound of *it* she wouldn't have known he was giving her an order. She never talked to anyone about *it*, of course, because Yankl said *it* was a secret. His wife wouldn't like *it* if she knew he was giving meat scraps away, because she liked him to bring them home; but if someone had asked her Hoda couldn't honestly have said that she minded the feel of *it*; on the contrary, though *it* disturbed her when *it* went down like that, suddenly, after all that. But Yankl liked *it* so *it* must be all right. Anyway *it* was worth *it* to have him for their friend. (107, italics added)

¹⁰⁸ Plimpton, George. "Philip Roth's Exact Intent." Reprinted in George Searles, ed., *Conversations with Philip Roth* (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 37-38.

¹⁰⁹ C.f. Marco LoVerso, "Language Private and Public: A Study of Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot*," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 9:1 (1984)
<http://www.lib.unb.ca/Texts/SCL/bin/get.cgi?directory=vol9_1/&filename=Loverso.htm>.

In the space of a page, and without clarification, the word "it" appears fourteen times, referring to Yankl's voice, to Hoda's act of masturbating Yankl, and to Yankl's penis itself; muddying the waters even further, the same word occurs more than once as a grammatical place-holder with no particular referent (i.e., "if it weren't for the particularly urgent sound..."). That Hoda does not have a term for what she is doing conveys her innocence, and the grammatical vagueness here also—crucially, if the reader is to identify with Hoda—defamiliarizes manual sex to the point where it can be at least considered as something other than the callous and revolting sexual abuse of a child. The act may be repulsive, and even Hoda has a vague sense of wrongdoing—"she really was not quite sure it was completely all right" (107)—but, on the other hand, Hoda enjoys bringing pleasure to Yankl, whom she pities as a lonely, angry man ("she felt sorry for him" [108]). Additionally, as is made clear in the quoted passage, "the feel of it"—the sensation of masturbating Yankl—is much less unpleasant than what Hoda endures at school as "a grossly fat adolescent" (89) and at home. Only years later, as an adult, does Hoda realize that Yankl's act exploited her naïveté, and, when she does, the narrative offers a considerably less euphemistic retelling of the same scene (277).¹¹⁰

The euphemistic representation and graphic retelling of Hoda's liaison with Yankl offer one example of how Wiseman employs euphemism throughout the novel, not to obscure the narrative action but to impress upon the reader Hoda's essential innocence.

¹¹⁰ The issue of whether Hoda has been harmed by Yankl comes up when Hoda learns from her wealthy uncle, who sits on the board of the Jewish orphanage, that the director of that institution, Mr. Limprig, has been sexually abusing the children in his care. Hoda thinks: "Limprig had not actually harmed the kids. Where would she and Daddy be if Yankl hadn't helped out that first while?" (276). The narrative retells Hoda's experience with Yankl in considerably more graphic terms (though "it" still appears euphemistically as a stand-in for the word "penis"): "the soft, elastic film of skin working over the hard, slightly granular tube to its rubbery knob and back to the hair ... back and forth, 'Hard, *hard*. FASTER!' The spasm, the sudden, disturbing limpness..." (277). Remembering her experience in this way, Hoda reaches a new adult understanding of her experience: "It had simply never occurred to her before. *He could have given me the scraps. You don't do that to children*" (278).

How does Hoda know that "three big boys from the dumb class" like her? Because "they kept talking like that about her things" (108). Some of these boys "did that" with Hoda's friend Seraphina, while "the other girls ... said it was a bad thing to do, even though they kept talking about it and who did it and read those poems the boys passed around" (108).¹¹¹ Hoda longs for a boy to "put his hands on her that way" (109). "It" and "that" and "things," in these passages, express obliquely what U.S. and Canadian obscenity standards before the 1960s prevented authors from representing directly. Displaying the sort of precocious insight one expects in a novel about an unusual child, Hoda is aware of the strangeness of euphemisms being used to discuss such fundamental and important aspects of human experience as sex and the relationships that arise around it: "It always seemed funny to Hoda that you had to love each other in such strange disguises" (109).

It is a dispute about obscenity—a disagreement about what can be said in public—that drives the plot of *Crackpot*, too: the confrontation with authority that pushes Hoda out of school and into intercourse with a classmate, starting her on the path that leads to her becoming a prostitute, has almost nothing to do with sex itself and everything to do with the alleged obscenity of a Jewish story. Hoda's censorious teacher, Mrs. Boltholmsup, stands for institutional authority: her internal monologues introduce the words "obscene," "unclean," and "profane" into the novel's discourse, and she views her poor immigrant students as "gross creatures" who are sexual freaks because of their ethnic heritage: "It's where they come from," she thinks, "those backward places ... Really, I sometimes think that's all there is to them, all they think about" (128-29). In the novel's fourth chapter, this teacher informs Hoda's class that, as an exercise in "Oral

¹¹¹ Here Wiseman seems to have been thinking of pornographic doggerel on the model of the poem she recalled, in her memoirs, finding in her older brother's handwriting, as discussed above. *Memoirs*, 9-11.

Expression" (which has been, not coincidentally, one of the major motifs of Hoda's life),¹¹² each student will present a short speech about "some special aspect of himself that he considered most interesting, like a hobby or a dream or an event that had most affected him" (129). For Hoda, this means that "the time had come to reveal herself at last" (131)—she will offer a full accounting of her family history and receive the admiration and acceptance that she deserves, but has not yet been given by classmates or teachers. The story she wants to tell is the one that her father recounts to her, repeatedly, and is the subject of the first chapter of Wiseman's novel. In short: Hoda's father was blind and her mother had a slight hunchback, so they were married off almost by force in their shtetl according to the folk wisdom that such a marriage carries favor with God and prevents a plague from spreading and a pogrom from engulfing the town.¹¹³ In her father's *gam zu l'tovah* telling, these tragedies, and the death in infancy of the couple's first child, comprise their extraordinary good fortune, as they led to Hoda's birth (14).¹¹⁴

When her turn in class arrives, Hoda relays this family history to her classmates and teacher without a single taboo word or graphic description of sex: "You have to get

¹¹² As many studies of the novel have noted, there is sustained attention to Hoda's orality beginning with the book's first paragraph, in which Hoda's mother feeds her in order to keep her quiet: "Things can't go in and out of the same little mouth simultaneously" (9).

¹¹³ Danile tells it this way: "...they take the two poorest, most unfortunate, witless creatures, man and woman, who exist under the tables of the community; they dig them up, he out of his burrow in the woods, she from the heap of rags in which she crouches, and they bring them together to the field of death. It is the tradition to take the craziest and the most helpless you can find. Who else would go?" (24). This is a traditional Jewish folk motif familiar from fiction including Mendele Mokher Sforim's *Fishke der krumer* (1869) as well as Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Gimpel Tam," in which the title character is married off during "a dysentery epidemic" in a ceremony "held at the cemetery gates." For English translations, see *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982) and "Fishke the Lame," *Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), 1-298. A description and painting of such a "black wedding" held during a cholera epidemic in 1892, can be found in Mayer Kirshenblatt and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *They Called Me Meyer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 13-15.

¹¹⁴ The phrase "gam zu l'tovah" ["This also is for the best"], a commonplace in traditional Jewish culture, derives from *B. Ta'an* 21a.

two very poor people who can't help themselves . . . ," she explains, "And you have to take them to the graveyard, the Jewish graveyard. . . . and they get married, right there in the graveyard, with everyone watching" (138). From Miss Boltholmsup's perspective, however, Hoda's description is the very definition of obscenity:

What did [Hoda] mean by "married"? What exactly did she mean? . . . Suddenly [Miss Boltholmsup] knew exactly where Hoda was leading, saw in disgusting detail the whole obscene picture, the wretched couple of cripples copulating in the graveyard while a bearded, black-robed, fierce-eyed rabbi stood over them, uttering God knows what blasphemies . . . Miss Boltholmsup was positively sick to the stomach with the vividness of it. (138)

To describe people "copulating" in "disgusting detail"—especially if a few "blasphemies" are thrown in for good measure—is precisely, according to a century's worth of legal precedent, to transgress the standards of obscenity. The irony, of course, is that "the whole obscene picture" is not painted by Hoda, but supplied by Miss Boltholmsup's imagination, as if to furnish a precise illustration of a point made about obscenity by the free speech pioneer Theodore Schroeder, that "obscenity and indecency are not sense-perceived qualities of a book, but are solely and exclusively a condition or effect in the reading mind."¹¹⁵ Indeed, there is no way that Hoda could tell her family's story without offending her teacher if the words "very poor people . . . get married" are going to be heard as "cripples copulating"; her history is, then, inevitably obscene. Moreover, since Hoda knows these stories from her pious father, and since they constitute her knowledge

¹¹⁵ Theodore Schroeder, *'Obscene Literature' and Constitutional Law: A Forensic Defense of Freedom of the Press* (New York: Privately printed for forensic uses, 1911), 13-14.

of Jewish culture—one critic has called them her "personal holy scripture"¹¹⁶—their being interpreted here as obscenity resonates powerfully with an infamous line from the Talmud, "Whoever teaches his daughter Torah teaches her obscenity."¹¹⁷

The teacher criticizes Hoda at length ("you have to know what not to talk about ... some things are best to remain buried in the past" [139, 141]) and dismisses her, and it is in the wake of this fiasco that Hoda has sexual intercourse for the first time. Having been dismissed as a vulgarian despite her refined intentions and because of her Jewish story, Hoda takes comfort in the punning, slang-heavy speech of a few of the disaffected neighborhood boys, and encourages one of them to initiate her into sex. Hoda understands this explicitly as an act of rebellion against her teacher's unfair standards: "To hell with Miss Bottoms-Up," she thinks, "... To hell with any of them who didn't like her. ... Nobody was going to tell her what to do. If she wanted to she'd even fuck them all!" (150). This sudden appearance of the word "fuck"—referring to sex for the first time in the novel—signals that Hoda's transformation is a linguistic, as well as physical, one. For Hoda, saying "fuck" and fucking are related, if not identical; Wiseman suggests that Hoda's insistence on speaking "fuck" matters even more to her than the act of sex itself (which she still doesn't understand: "Had she really done it? What was it she had done? Is that what it was?" [150]). Having been censored unfairly, Hoda speaks and acts obscenely, and this experience is the beginning of her prostitution—another example of the ancient truism that prohibition and transgression feed off of each other.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ As Palmer puts it, "for Hoda her family's story, and her father's telling of it, is a kind of sacred text, a personal holy scripture of origins" (269).

¹¹⁷ *B. Sotah* 20a.

¹¹⁸ In Hoda's embrace of prostitution as a result of being silenced, one might also read a vague echo of the Biblical story of Tamar, who disguises herself as a harlot and seduces her father-in-law, Judah, after he has

More even than *Portnoy* (or *Fear of Flying*), then, *Crackpot* is a novel about obscenity: it tells a story about how a child learns linguistic taboos and breaks them, and about the motivations for and consequences of their enforcement and transgression. That the novel "accommodates, even privileges, the viewpoint of the prostitute . . .," Marcia Mack suggests, "goes a long way toward explaining Canadian critics' difficulty in responding to the work";¹¹⁹ and I would add that in privileging Hoda's perspective, Wiseman created in *Crackpot* a fiction that is more pornographic (in the etymological sense) and more radical than the mainstream feminist novels of the early 1970s.¹²⁰ Given the typical emphasis on the experiences of middle- and upper-middle-class white women in those novels, *Crackpot's* radicalism could also be located in its investment in kabbalistic imagery and Jewish culture generally, or in Hoda's poverty, commitment to communism, and class consciousness.¹²¹ Nowhere was the book more revolutionary, or more disturbing to some of its readers, though, than in its emphasis on incest.

prevented her from marrying (Genesis 38). The crucial difference seems to be that Tamar's foray into prostitution is brief and well-planned, while Hoda's is impulsive and more or less permanent.

¹¹⁹ Mack, 135.

¹²⁰ In and of itself, centering a novel on a prostitute is hardly an unprecedented gesture, and even Jewish prostitutes have appeared frequently in fiction. Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) comes to mind as an early first-person novel starring a prostitute; in Jewish texts, prostitutes figure in, among others, Sholem Asch's widely discussed, translated, and produced play *Got fun Nekome* [*God of Vengeance*] (Boston: The Stratford Company, 1918), and Hugh Nissenson's *My Own Ground* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976). Sholem Aleichem's "Der mentsh fun Buenos Aires" ["The Man from Buenos Aires"] (1909) suggests how familiar Yiddish readers were with prostitution. For a fascinating account of Jewish prostitutes in 19th-century French literature, see Maurice Samuels, "Metaphors of Modernity: Prostitutes, Bankers, and Other Jews in Balzac's *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*," *Romanic Review* 97:2 (March 2006): 169-84.

¹²¹ While Hoda's class consciousness is often mentioned by scholars of the novel, I have not yet found an analysis that treats this issue in the context of the class dynamics of other feminist works of this period. For readings of the novel's kabbalistic elements, see Kenneth Sherman, "Crackpot: A Lurianic Myth," *Waves* 3:1 (Autumn 1974): 5-11; Palmer; Kertzer; Francis Zichy, "The Lurianic Background: Myths of Fragmentation and Wholeness in Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot*," in Ruth Panofsky, ed., *Adele Wiseman: Essays on Her Works* (Toronto: Guernica, 2001), 31-54; and Julie Spergel, "'To Err Is Human, To Recline

VII. "Like the world in miniature": Wiseman's Allegorical Motherfucker

Crackpot's plot climaxes, in the book's eleventh chapter, with Hoda's decision to have sex with her son. The boy, David, has been raised in an orphanage. His nickname Pipick (from the Yiddish for "bellybutton") derives from his dis severed connection with his mother: having delivered the baby herself, alone, Hoda "gnawed" through the umbilical cord, leaving him with a bellybutton of unusual size and shape (211, 234).¹²² Pipick does not know that Hoda, the neighborhood whore, "a legend in the district ... the girl who had broken in just about every mother's son of them" (198-9), is actually *his* mother, nor does Hoda realize who Pipick is when he visits her. They have sex once; an overexcited virgin, Pipick ejaculates prematurely ("he'd barely crossed the threshold when he tripped his load" [330]), but he lingers on in Hoda's home after her other customers have left, hoping she will offer him a second opportunity. As he talks to her, she realizes that he is the son she abandoned years earlier and has often observed from a distance. Understanding this, Hoda reacts violently when Pipick tries to initiate coitus a second time: she "fetche[s] him a wallop that sen[ds] him thumping off the mattress and smack up against the wall" (342). She begs him not to sleep with her—asking him, "What do you want stale old sold meat for?" (350)—without letting on what she has realized.

Divine': Harlot as Hebrew Goddess in Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot*," *The Student Journal of Canadian Jewish Studies* (2008) <<http://web2.concordia.ca/canadianjewishjournal/pdf/JulieFinalDraft.pdf>>.

¹²² As Greenstein puts this, "his informal tag is Pipick because of his odd lump of navel—a curious knotted tail testifying to his origins" (113). Wiseman's Pipick bears no relation to "Moshe Pipik" in Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993) as far as I can tell.

Saying "I'm old enough to be your mother" is the closest she comes to revealing their kinship, for fear of traumatizing him (347-49). Unfortunately, Pipick desperately desires to have sex again—he yearns to prove his virility and compensate himself for his earlier embarrassment—and he receives Hoda's rejection as cruelty of a piece with his lifelong humiliation: "Why don't you tell me, 'You're a freak; I don't want to fuck you!'," he asks her, drowning in his self-pity. "No one wants to fuck a freak, even if he pays you!" (351). Hoda hates to see the boy suffer—she has committed herself to a life of prostitution in part because of her unwillingness to spurn the advances of pathetic, lonely men, and her relation to Pipick means that she cares even more about him than about any stranger—and the novel's crisis finally boils down to her dilemma: "What was it she herself had to do?" (349).

What purpose is served by Wiseman's representation of this disturbing conflict over mother-son incest, which more than any other element of the novel horrified the book's least sympathetic reviewer? In his review of *Crackpot*, E. G. Mardon singles out the "'incest' scenes" as being "especially" "obscene," and regards Wiseman's novel generally as a text that plumbs the darkest depths of social and sexual experience purely for the sake of disgusting, disturbing, and shocking its readers.¹²³ Not to dignify Mardon's reactionary vituperation with a response it does not merit, but to address the concerns of more sympathetic readers of the novel who still find the scene troublesome or odd, this chapter will conclude by proposing an allegorical reading of Hoda's incest, and situating it as a radical feminist response to the narrative traditions sketched above.

First, it is noteworthy that like *Portnoy*, "The Lady and the Peddler," and *The Tether*, Wiseman's novel subtly alludes to an allegorical hermeneutic in which family

¹²³ Mardon, "Revolting Second Novel by Wiseman."

relations stand for socio-political ones. Hoda's teacher describes the first World War, for example, as a "family quarrel" (51) between the English, Germans, and Russians, and when Hoda relays this concept to her mother, she's informed that as Jews, she and her family "belong to another branch altogether" (53). Hoda's fascination with the Prince of Wales concretizes this allegory. Hoda fantasizes that she and the prince will fall in love, breaking off their affair only because of the impact their relationship would have on the masses: "Only when Daddy wept because she was marrying a gentile, and his mother the Queen begged him to prevent the civil war that was threatening, did they give each other up ... and he promised to be good to the Jews forever, though his heart was broken" (178). This fantasy reproduces the formula of the classic *shaygets* novel—for instance, Yeziarska's *Salome of the Tenements*, in which the protagonist's attractions compel her non-Jewish beau to want "To save—together—our East Side" (77), though she finally rejects him—while evoking the formula's powerful precedent, *Megillat Esther*, in which a Jewish girl's ability to attract a powerful non-Jew produces salvation for the entire community, thereby justifying, retroactively, her distressing exogamy.¹²⁴ The novel's suggestion that Hoda has no intention of "letting it go too far with Morgan," the boy who initiates her into sex, because "he was neither a Jew nor ... a prince" (147) exhibits the strong impression that such stories have made on her. At one point the novel notes that Hoda concerns herself "with very personal things on the one hand, and with large, universal political and humanitarian problems on the other" (294), which can be read as an indicator of Wiseman's self-conscious participation in a literary tradition in which

¹²⁴ See Rashi on *Esther* 2:11: "It did not happen to this righteous woman that she should be taken to the bed of a gentile but (for the reason) that she is destined to arise and bring salvation to Israel." Rabbi Avraham Schwartz and Rabbi Yisroel Schwartz, trans., *The Megilloth and Rashi's Commentary with Linear Translation* (New York: Hebrew Linear Classics, 1983), 13.

"very personal things" can matter, at least partly, precisely because they symbolize, and offer insights into, "large, universal political and humanitarian problems."

Wiseman similarly identifies Pipick as a potentially allegorical figure; like Chestnut's and Cahan's protagonists in Sollors' reading, Hoda's son can be understood as the representative ethnic subject whose actions stand allegorically for the social and political direction of his community. Hoda's reference to Pipick as a "prince, to save the Jews" in the note she leaves with him at the Jewish orphanage, and the name the boy is given by the staff of that institution, David Ben Zion (234), both loosely link him to Jewish messianic hopes.¹²⁵ Pipick also tellingly refers to himself at precisely the moment before his first unknowing sexual intercourse with his mother as being "like the hero of a goddam book" (329): an allegorical representative of a Jew. He's aware of his role, if not entirely pleased with the situation: "It was as if," David thinks at one point, "they really wanted and needed somebody to hang all kinds of scraps of thoughts and ideas and hopes onto, things they wanted for themselves, and sometimes things they didn't want for themselves, their nightmares, so they hung you with them" (368). Having "thoughts and ideas and hopes" projected onto one's choices is exactly what happens to "the hero of a goddam book."

The first radical twist that Wiseman applies to the traditional allegory, however, is precisely to displace Pipick—the typical young man (or woman) in the process of choosing a sexual partner, who serves as representative ethnic subject—from the central role as protagonist, and to replace him with his mother, who represents not the ethnic

¹²⁵ On Pipick as a potential messiah, see Kertzer; Spergel, 21.

individual, but the ethnic community.¹²⁶ The book's primary concern is not with David's sexual practices, but Hoda's. To her, sex is a means of intense personal connection and a "gift" that she can give to everyone. According to her father's advice, "When you discover you have a gift, it means you have been given a gift, and it also means that you should give your gift" (60). Hoda's gift, in all three senses, is sex. She recognizes that by being generous with her body, she can set a precedent of ethical behavior: "If she wasn't going to be nice when her turn came," she reasons, "how could she blame other people when they were mean? Somebody had to start off being nice, at least a little" (152). Hoda's approach to sex thus constitutes a sort of utopian cosmopolitanism; she refuses to reject anyone who genuinely wants to have sex with her in a peaceful and respectful way, whether he is rich or poor, Jew or gentile, healthy or ill.¹²⁷ Yet this practice never undermines Hoda's identity as a Jew: in contrast to the typical hero of a *sheygets* or *shikse* novel—or the hypothetical Jew in the Talmud who is rendered physically non-Jewish because of sexual intercourse with a non-Jewish woman—Hoda's Jewishness is the unshakeable product of her history. In an unpublished and undated essay on the subject of "Jewishness," Wiseman once wrote:

¹²⁶ It could, in fact, be argued that Hoda's prostitution aligns her with Yiddish language and culture, given the availability of a Jewish representational tradition that figured Yiddish as a harlot and Hebrew as a respectable lady. See Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 35, 45.

¹²⁷ Along these lines, Michael Greenstein proposes apropos of *Crackpot* that "the sexual activities of a prostitute are metaphors for a higher level of awareness, an epistemology of sudden revelation for the dislocated and ostracized." Michael Greenstein, *Third Solitudes: Tradition and Discontinuity in Jewish-Canadian Literature* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989). It is only fair to point out that Wiseman could have, but didn't, allow Hoda to welcome women as well as men as sexual partners, privileging heterosexuality in her text in the same way that other feminist novels of the early 1970s did.

The tone of my felt Jewishness is so positive that no alternate model with which life has presented me has ever looked even tempting, in spite of the possible perks attached, and notwithstanding my real affection, and even, in some cases, love, for some alternate model practitioners. Conversely, my sense of myself as a Jew and of the value of that identification has never wavered in spite of the fact that I have occasionally found myself in absolute disagreement with and even enraged by some of the stances, whether considered official or otherwise, taken by other Jews. ... I don't wear my Jewishness; I am my Jewishness.¹²⁸

Hoda herself embodies this theory of Jewishness, in that her Jewishness also "never waver[s]," despite her "love" for non-Jews; she embraces both Jews and non-Jews while remaining steadfastly Jewish. At no moment in the text is there any suggestion that she could ever be anything other than Jewish. By positioning Hoda, with her hundreds of sexual partners, at the center of this allegorical narrative, Wiseman eschews the pernicious either/or logic that propels most novels of exogamy: to wit, either you are a Jew and sleep with a Jew, or you sleep with a non-Jew and are therefore not Jewish.

Hoda's capaciousness leads sensibly to the second radical twist that Wiseman applies to the traditional allegory, one that pushes further than Roth had gone: Hoda chooses to fuck her son. She deliberately commits what has been called "the most abhorrent act," and the novel emphasizes her consciousness of her agency in making this choice: "When they did it by accident, before she knew, that was nothing, just a dirty trick. But knowing, if she chose to do it again, it was for a reason" (352).¹²⁹ She has sex with him not just once, but as many times as he can afford to pay her (366). And *Crackpot* endorses, rather than rejects, Hoda's choice; in the following chapters, Hoda secures a job that is more comfortable for her, as hostess at a *kibitzarina*, and even finds a husband, a Holocaust survivor named Lazar whom she can rejuvenate. Far from being

¹²⁸ Adele Wiseman Fonds, York University, Toronto, Box 16.

¹²⁹ Twitchell, 54.

punished for this incest, Hoda receives every conceivable reward—except proximity to Pipick, whom the novel dispatches to WWII and does not later reintroduce.

The novel's toleration, even endorsement, of mother-son incest demands to be read allegorically, not only because the narrative fits so perfectly into the Jewish narrative tradition adumbrated above, and not simply in response to the markers of allegorical intention in the text. Also, studies of human sexuality have shown that mother-son incest is quite rare in practice, unlike the woefully common phenomena of father-daughter and sibling incest, which have received considerably more attention by both social scientists, novelists, and literary critics. The rareness of actual, as opposed to imagined, mother-son incest suggests that Wiseman was almost certainly not, in *Crackpot*, responding to a real-life story she had heard (as she responded to a newspaper account of a murder in crafting her first novel, *The Sacrifice*), but rather employing the plot device that best served the narrative, aesthetic, and political requirements of the novel.¹³⁰ In *Crackpot*, Wiseman writes back to the wave of Jewish mother jokes and tales of smothering Jewish mothers that crested in the 1960s, and to the ambivalence at the center of *Portnoy*, answering them by following their logic through to its conclusion. *Crackpot* offers a decided embrace of the Jewish mother and of the Jewish communal reproduction that she represents.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Twitchell reports that 70% of reported incest is "father-daughter or surrogate father-figure incest," 20% is "brother-sister, including adopted or 'rem' siblings ... and the remainder is uncle-niece or in-law activity, and finally in much smaller numbers mother-son" (13). Mother-son incest does, of course, sometimes happen, as in the case of Mary Ann Bass and Danny James Sullivan, cited by Twitchell (261n6). See "Tennessean Unwillingly Was Wed to His Mother," *The Washington Post* (September 12, 1984): A2.

¹³¹ On Jewish mother jokes and their increasing prominence in the years of WWII, see Gladys Rothbell, "The Jewish Mother: Social Construction of a Popular Image," in Steven M. Cohen and Paula E. Hyman, eds., *The Jewish Family: Myths and Reality* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1986), 118-28. On the Jewish Mother as "the nerve center of the Jewish novel of the sixties," see Melvin J. Friedman, "Jewish Mothers

In doing so, Wiseman's novel diverges sharply from almost all previous literary treatments of incest. Peter Thorslev argues brother-sister incest was "made sympathetic" or even "idealized" as "a metaphor for human perfectability" in Byron and Shelley, while Marc Shell reads brother-sister incest more broadly as a sympathetic symbol for the revolutionary ideal of "universal siblinghood" in a dizzying array of texts.¹³² Father-daughter incest has typically provided the counterpoint to such utopian images. As Karl Zender phrases it, father-daughter incest has been understood to stand allegorically for the "hierarchical and patriarchal structures of episcopal and secular authority" or "the tyrannical power of the ancien régime": sensibly, representations of the rape or sexual abuse of a girl by her father evokes the abuse of authority.¹³³ According to Anne Dalke's study of incest in American novels before 1830, meanwhile, both father-daughter and sibling incest "symboliz[e] ... the absence of a well defined social system."¹³⁴ In general, a survey of incest in literature and its critical reception reveals that while the Oedipal myth has exerted enormous influence over modern fiction, it is quite difficult to track down novels or stories that feature specific, explicit acts of mother-son incest. And it is almost impossible to find one that, like *Crackpot*, conforms to the structure of an incest tragedy—in Shell's terms, this is an incest story with "a protagonist who mates with someone he wrongly believes not to be kin"—but which disavows the "tragic recognition

and Sons: The Expense of Chutzpah," in Irving Malin, ed., *Contemporary American Jewish Literature: Critical Essays* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1973), 156-74.

¹³² See Peter L. Thorslev Jr., "Incest as Romantic Symbol," *Comparative Literature Studies* 2 (1965): 47; Marc Shell, *The End of Kinship: "Measure for Measure," Incest, and the Idea of Universal Siblinghood* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

¹³³ Karl F. Zender, "Faulkner and the Politics of Incest," *American Literature* 70:4 (December 1998): 739-65. Zender's essay, aside from its fascinating revaluation of incest in Faulkner's work, provides an excellent introduction to Thorslev, Shell, and American post-Freudians perspectives on incest.

¹³⁴ Anne Dalke, "Original Vice: The Political Implications of Incest in the Early American Novel," *Early American Literature*, 23:2 (1988): 188-201.

scene" that "shows an act thought to be chaste to be incestuous," and instead represents the continuing sexual interactions between mother and son in a positive light.¹³⁵ Mardon, Wiseman's unsympathetic reviewer, had good reason to be shocked by *Crackpot* and its "'incest' scenes," then, in that they are virtually unprecedented.¹³⁶

Crackpot's incest, read into the tradition of Jewish sexual allegory, resembles, to some degree, sibling incest as analyzed by Shell and Thorslev more than typical literary father-daughter incest, in that it conveys Wiseman's utopian vision of what a Jewish community could be and how it could reproduce itself.

If, according to an allegorical reading, David represents the paradigmatic ethnic subject whose choice of exogamy or endogamy stands for the success or failure of Jewish communal reproduction, Hoda, as his mother, represents what Sollors calls "descent": the traditional Jewish community, which is genealogically and historically Jewish. Such an allegorical scheme is, of course, completely consistent with the representational patterns found in modern Jewish literature, and particularly with those of American Jewish culture

¹³⁵ Shell, 11. For a survey of versions of the Oedipus myth in world literature, see Otto Rank, *The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend: Fundamentals of a Psychology of Literary Creation*, trans. Gregory C. Richter (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 189-98. One example of a novel, cited by Rank, that dramatizes the sexual relations between a mother and son as "sinful bliss" is Stefan Vacano's *Sündige Seligkeit* (Berlin: Fontane, 1909); see Rank, 567-69. Another apposite example, cited by Shell, is the thirtieth story of Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron*, in which "a young man ... unknowingly has sexual intercourse with his mother and then marries the offspring of this union" (67); but the emphasis there is ultimately on the resulting sibling incest, albeit sibling incest raised to a higher power, "for she was his daughter, his sister, and his wife, while he was her father, her brother, and her husband." The mother character is meanwhile criticized by the narrator as a "fool." *Heptameron*, George Saintsbury, trans. (London: Society of English Bibliophiles, 1894), 3:200-01. For a more recent study of Oedipus and modern literature, see Debra Modellmog, *Readers and Mythic Signs: The Oedipus Myth in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993).

¹³⁶ C.f. Zichy, who notes that Wiseman's "variation on the Oedipus story" is "scandalously told with the focus on the mother" (35) and Panofsky, who suggests that "*Crackpot* turns the tale of Jocasta and Oedipus on its head" ("From Complicity," 64).

in the 1960s.¹³⁷ As Hyman notes, Jewish writers concerned about "assimilation and identity" in the decades after WWII, "linked the Jewish mother to two elements of Jewish identity that constrained masculine behavior and especially the Jewish man's free choice of sexual partner: the psychosocial, ethnic aspects of identity, as manifested in the family, and the religiocultural dimensions of Jewishness as expressed in the female sphere of the home."¹³⁸ As Riv-Ellen Prell phrases it, the stereotype of the Jewish Mother in this period "personified ... an American Jewish culture in transition"; the figure "marked difference" and was parochial."¹³⁹ As early as 1967, Zena Smith Blau anticipated such readings, arguing that "the well-known ambivalence of the Jew toward his mother ... is part and parcel of his ambivalence about remaining a Jew," while, Alain Finkielkraut, writing in 1980, agreed with all these analyses, capturing the phenomenon in an admirably succinct formulation: "Juif, de nos jours, on l'est plus que jamais par la mère" ["Whether one is a Jew, in our time, is more than ever determined by the mother"].¹⁴⁰

Hoda, as a Jewish mother, embodies Jewish continuity as these analyses predict. She aspires to "achieve a proper, loving friendship with [Pipick] in which she could work for him as she did for Daddy, and teach him their stories, and protect him and help him avoid all those traps that she knew were waiting for him in life" (363). She wants to mother him, aid his progress, and—crucially—expose him to the Jewish culture she

¹³⁷ There are, of course, traditional textual precedents, too; *Isaiah* 66:10-11 allegorizes Jerusalem as a comforting mother: "Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all ye that love her; rejoice for joy with her, all ye that mourn for her. That ye may suck, and be satisfied with the breast of her consolations; that ye may drink deeply with delight of the abundance of her glory."

¹³⁸ Hyman, 160. Note that Hyman's terms, "assimilation and identity," are precisely the ones that Fiedler used to characterize the referents for sexual allegory in early American Jewish literature.

¹³⁹ Prell, *Fighting*, 150, 163.

¹⁴⁰ See Zena Smith Blau, "In Defense of the Jewish Mother," *Midstream* 13:2 (February 1967): 44, and Alain Finkielkraut, *Le juif imaginaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), 22; English translation from *The Imaginary Jew*, trans. Kevin O'Neill and David Suchoff (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 14.

knows, in the form of her father's "stories": precisely the "Torah" that, in its transmission from Danile to Hoda was transformed—at least in the mind of Hoda's teacher—into obscenity. The chain of Jewish knowledge dramatized in *Crackpot*, with Torah passing from Hoda's father to Hoda to her son, accords perfectly with the sociocultural pattern described by Hyman, Finkelkraut and others, in which mothers displaced fathers as the primary conveyors of Jewish identity after WWII. Simply put, Hoda being a mother is not at all incidental; if she'd been a father, a story about the sexual relationship between her and her child would reflect an entirely different perspective on Jewish continuity.¹⁴¹

In the novel, sex is one of the ways, perhaps the "only" way, that Hoda can connect with Pipick: "he was fragile and she held him tenderly, and tried in the only way she knew how to make up for all the harm she had done" (353). Indeed, she feels that her sexual connection to him may allow her to pass on to Pipick her father's stories, which constitute her personal connection to the Jewish past (Pipick "must learn what was important in the stories still," Hoda feels [362]): as Panofsky has argued, "Hoda reclaims her son through incest."¹⁴² In presenting this dynamic, in which mother-son sex is part and parcel of, or a resonant symbol for, the potential for Jewish communal reproduction, Wiseman concretizes the challenge of endogamy—that is, the taint of incestuous insularity that marrying in, and figuratively embracing the culture of one's own group to the exclusion of others, carries with it. This is a real obstacle that *shikse* and *shaygets*

¹⁴¹ Obviously this sort of hypothetical suggestion is limited in its usefulness; we'll never know what Wiseman's novel would have been if it had been different. But it is suggestive to consider that the interaction at the root of the chaos in a more recent major novel on Jewish parent-child interactions in the 1960s, Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997), is a single erotically charged kiss a father gives his daughter.

¹⁴² "From Complicity," 64.

novels like *Fanny Herself*, *Salome of the Tenements*, and *The Island Within* never quite acknowledge, even as they didactically reject exogamy.

By taking mother-son incest seriously and by embracing it, *Crackpot* extends Roth's exploration of the family romance in *Portnoy*. In Prell's analysis, "the Jewishness represented by the Jewish Mother/Wife offered a parochial, suffocating identity of excess" (and, not incidentally, "parochial," "suffering," and "excess" provide a perfect description of Hoda); without rejecting that overwhelming and frightening Jewish identity, *Crackpot* dramatizes, more sympathetically than any previous portrait of the American Jewish mother, what would be required for a Jewish child to embrace it.¹⁴³ *Crackpot* declares it an unavoidable necessity for Pipick, or any Jew, to follow Freud's advice that in order "to be really free and happy in love" a man must "come to terms with the idea of incest with mother or sister," only slightly modified: in order to be really free and happy as a Jew, a man must come to terms with the idea of incest with his mother.¹⁴⁴ Importantly, it is not the "universal siblinghood" usually symbolized by brother-sister incest that Wiseman proffers as a model for progressive Jewish communities—the revolutionary, universalist idea that all humans are siblings is not Wiseman's primary concern—but rather mother-child incest that allegorizes the desire for generational continuity even at the cost of isolationism, exclusivity, and inwardness.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Prell, 172.

¹⁴⁴ "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life," in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (NY: Collier Books, 1963), 65.

¹⁴⁵ For a classic analysis of the fundamental tension between continuity (or "survival") and openness to non-Jewish culture in American Jewish life—a portrait, that is, of "a Jewish community torn between survival and integration"—see Charles S. Liebman, "Integration and Survival," *The Ambivalent American Jew: Politics, Religion, and Family in American Jewish Life* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), 23-41.

Pipick more or less vanishes at the end of the novel—after taking the blame, magnanimously, for a sexual scandal at the orphanage for which he was not responsible, he runs away, and eventually joins the army—and this suggests that he, very much like Portnoy, cannot join the Jewish community, which would be allegorized by his acknowledging his mother and their sexual intercourse. The novel does suggest that Pipick will one day return to Winnipeg (382), and Hoda fantasizes, at the end of the book, about "reveal[ing] the truth to a young man of the world on whom, at twenty-three, it could not possibly have the shattering effect it might have had on him at fifteen" (403). In the novel's dreamlike concluding passage, moreover, David reappears to pronounce an obscure but positive judgment on his mother ("She occupies her past; she inhabits her life," he says [427]), and then to be included in *Crackpot*'s final image of community. Unlike Roth's novel, which ends with Portnoy's alienation and grief and emphasizes the protagonist's alienation from his inheritance, *Crackpot* ultimately focuses on Hoda and on her reconstitution of a Jewish community on her own terms. She has created a community through the *kibitzarina* and her Holocaust survivor, Lazar, one that is neither wholly predicated on descent nor on consent, but created through a fluid mixture of both forms of affiliation: in Hoda's vague but affirmative vision, Hoda, Lazar, Danile, and Pipick "would all be stirring the muddy waters of the brimming pot together" (427). Not based exclusively on genealogy—indeed, it counters the notion of a racial Judaism, in which identity is determined purely by a relationship to one's ancestors¹⁴⁶—neither does

¹⁴⁶ For a recent suggestion that literary critics accept "genealogy as the definitive criterion [of Jewishness]"—that is, that "a Jew is a person born a Jew"—see Michael Kramer, "Race, Literary History, and the 'Jewish' Question," *Prooftexts* 21:3 (Fall 2001): 292. Building upon Walter Benn Michaels' argument in *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) that "the modern concept of culture is ... a form of racism" (129), Kramer suggests that "race—i.e., the sense of filiation, of blood relation, the belief in common ancestry, that birth confers identity—has always been a central element of Jewish culture ... Race continues to define Jews as Jews even when, as Boyarin

Hoda's community eschew genealogical relationships. She would, Wiseman makes very clear, welcome Pipick back whenever he is ready to rejoin her. While Pipick's disappearance signals that Portnoy's anxieties continue to afflict the individual ethnic subject in Wiseman's novel, that does not undermine the strength of the Jewish community envisioned in it. Wiseman's vision, frankly utopian, is of a Jewish community generous and resilient enough not to be troubled by the temporary disaffection of its Pipicks and Portnoys—not, in other words, wholly dependent on genealogical reproduction—yet always prepared to gather them back into its ample bosom.

One cannot expect, of course, that the model of Jewish community Wiseman represents through Hoda and her incest would be easy for Jewish traditionalists to embrace, but it is not coincidentally parallel to the one that appealed to radical young Jews in the years leading up to *Crackpot's* publication. During the crucial paragraph that represents the second, and knowing, intercourse between Hoda and Pipick, the narrator retrospectively relates that in their first encounter, "Hoda had spread herself out before him like the whole world in miniature" (353), and this phrase perfectly captures the vision of a potential North American Jewish community that Wiseman expresses in the character of Hoda: "miniature," and thus limited in scope, but sharing in the wide

suggests, Jewishness is 'nearly empty of any content other than itself' (292-93). Many of Michaels' formulations on this subject—e.g., "without race, culture could be nothing more than one's actual practices and therefore could never be lost or recovered, defended or betrayed" (141)—seem nonsensical to me in their denial of culture as very often a matter of consent. At times, this line of reasoning becomes downright offensive; to pose the rhetorical question, as Michaels does, "What makes Jewish history your history unless your grandparents were Jews?" (138) is callously to dismiss the experiences of converts to Judaism. This line of racial thinking undermines Kramer's account of Jewish literary history in excluding from the category of Jewish literature any texts written by non-Jews, like George Eliot or John Updike, whose books have engaged in a meaningful way with the lives of Jews (see Kramer, 340).

possibilities of the "whole world."¹⁴⁷ It is a vision of community strikingly similar to the ones being worked out by the young Jews who founded *havurot* (i.e., prayer fellowships) in the late 1960s and early 1970s, precisely while Donadio shopped Wiseman's novel around to publishers. Uncannily, Arthur Waskow echoed the central tropes of Wiseman's novel in 1971—well before *Crackpot's* publication—arguing that in the 1960s, "the melting pot ... shattered," and calling for "the building of a new society and the dismantling of the old, with loving care," with "the other peoples of the Earth ... rising alongside us."¹⁴⁸ While this rhetoric might evoke the universal siblinghood that Shell argues has often been represented as sibling incest, the *havura* movement was in fact a return to Jewish affiliation by young Jews who had been allied with the New Left but disheartened by its antipathy to Jewish causes and concerns, not least among which was Zionism.¹⁴⁹ Note that Waskow refers to Jews as "us" and to "other peoples" as separate constituencies; this is not an image, as Wiseman's is not, of universal siblinghood. As Prell observes in her study of the Jewish counterculture and the *havurot*, that as "Havurah members wove together tradition and innovation as essential components of an authentic Judaism," they shunned simple accounts of Jewishness as passing genealogically from parents to children. Such countercultural Jews "sought their mythological past, one that

¹⁴⁷ Compare Wiseman's comment that "in metaphor, what you have is a ... very compressed figure for all of the world," quoted in Mack, 139.

¹⁴⁸ Arthur Waskow, "Judaism and Revolution Today" *Judaism* 20:4 (Fall 1971), reprinted in *Jewish Radicalism* (New York: Grove Press, 1973), 11-28. 15, 18.

¹⁴⁹ See Riv-Ellen Prell, *Prayer and Community: The Havurah in American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 86-87.

would inform, though not control, their present and future ... [and] yearned for continuity even as they separated themselves from their parents' and grandparents' lives."¹⁵⁰

Wiseman's novel constitutes a model for how communities like this might function, in its studious attention to history and theology and its unflagging commitment to rewriting and reshaping Jewish traditions according to its own politics. The following passage describes Hoda's exemplary response to her father's stories, which have stood throughout the novel as her primary connection to the Jewish past, as her Torah, which she begins to listen to again after her sexual encounter with Pipick:

If she had hoped to hear those stories once again as a child hears, she was disappointed. But she was not aware of such a hope, nor of the disappointment of being barred from a return to innocence. She simply felt the old stories, felt her emptiness filled with resonance, transformed to resonance. She saw the old stories, saw through the old stories, saw beyond the old stories to what the man her father was and what the woman her mother must have been; she heard the stories and knew them all, and gathered them back into herself and knew herself as well, not as she had once known herself, in a sudden, comprehensive flash of revelation, a simultaneity of multiple Hodas, but as she flowed in the sequence of her days. (362)

Eschewing a conservative desire to "hear those stories once again as a child hears," to recreate precisely her past experience, Hoda seeks a more creative and intense engagement with them. The careful Biblical mimicry of this passage—the repetition, parataxis, and faux-archaic phrasing of "flowed in the sequence of her days," for example—and the emphasis on the repurposing (seeing "through" and "beyond") of "old stories" anticipates some of the formal gestures of second-wave feminist literature and theology that would be produced in the later 1970s, especially as undertaken by feminist

¹⁵⁰ Prell, *Prayer and Community*, 71.

Jewish women.¹⁵¹ Tellingly, Wiseman selects the same verb to capture Hoda's comfort in her multiplicity that Robert Greenblatt did, in a polemic on his place in the Jewish counterculture published in 1971: "I am a Jew, an American, a Revolutionary," he wrote, "I am all three at once because each flows out of and merges into one life history."¹⁵² Considering when *Crackpot* was drafted—years before the women's movement garnered national attention in 1969 and 1970, and even before the first countercultural *havurah* was founded in 1968¹⁵³—Wiseman's perspicacity is stunning. As a response to crises of "identity and assimilation," i.e., the conflicts between Jews' desires to remain Jewish and their desires to integrate into non-Jewish social and political communities, Hoda's openness to incest with her son allegorically represents the path pursued by feminists and the countercultural *havurah* movement, but with a more nuanced understanding of one major challenge facing progressive Jews than some in these groups had.

Can Jews remain Jewish, and reproduce Jewishness in their offspring, without affirming retrograde standards of what exactly it means to be Jewish (a vision of Jews, as Deborah Dash Moore has suggested, as a "tribe"), and without isolating the Jewish community from the wider North American population and its causes?¹⁵⁴ Yes, *Crackpot* insists, though the book remains adamant through its representation of incest that this communal reproduction will perforce involve the community's uncomfortable demand

¹⁵¹ Greenstein is one of the critics who have noted the "parodic echo of Genesis" in *Crackpot's* epigraphic opening (110). E. M. Broner's 1978 novel, *A Weave of Women* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston) is perhaps the best example of a more widely recognized feminist classic that mimics the syntax and diction of (standard translations of) Jewish scriptures.

¹⁵² Robert Greenblatt, "Out of the Melting Pot, Into the Fire," in James A. Sleeper and Alan L. Mintz, eds., *The New Jews* (New York: Vintage, 1971), 37-47.

¹⁵³ Lisa Maria Hogeland, *Feminism and Its Fictions: The Consciousness-Raising Novel and the Women's Liberation Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 2; Prell, 92.

¹⁵⁴ Moore's "Intermarriage and the Politics of Identity" is a powerful and brief statement on this question. *The Reconstructionist* 44 (Fall 2001): 44-51. 49.

that individuals embrace endogamy, that they love their own before any other. Wiseman's novel promises that even a Portnoy and a Pipick could find lasting love, as did Sonya Vrunsky and Arthur Levy and all the other protagonists of the *shikse* and *sheygets* novels, but that to do so, they must "come to terms with the idea of incest."

VIII. Allegory and Interpretation

By no means does every work of literature with a masturbating hero tell a story about the Diaspora, nor can every novel featuring mother-son incest be read as figuring communal continuity. Writers themselves warn us of the dangers of too facilely reading their novels as allegories.¹⁵⁵ Jameson, too, offers a reminder that reading such allegories into fiction need not undercut, but should rather strengthen, our attention to the narrative content of a text, to the stories explicitly being told: it is the "optional" or "floating" nature of allegorical structures that prevent robust narratives like *Portnoy* and *Crackpot* from being reducible to didactic fables. Discussing a Spanish novel, Jameson explains that "we can ... convert the entire situation of the novel into an allegorical commentary on the destiny of Spain, but we are also free to reverse its priorities and to read the political analogy as a metaphorical decoration for the individual drama, and as a mere

¹⁵⁵ Wiseman, for example, has Pipick reflect about the myths that have collected around him, suggesting her awareness of the ways that creative exegesis ("made-up stuff") has a tendency to undermine one function of literature, which is to communicate particular and plausible human stories: "Made-up stuff attracted more made-up stuff, and he began to wonder whether it would matter to anybody if the real person disappeared altogether, for all they knew him, or cared, or for that matter if he never even emerged, but remained smothered under everybody's make-believe, including his own" (369).

figural intensification of this last."¹⁵⁶ Such a flexible hermeneutic approach is the one I want to endorse here, and it is thoroughly supported throughout traditional Jewish textual practice: Jews have traditionally modeled such flexible hermenutics in interpreting their sacred texts on four levels of meaning—*pshat* [simple meaning], *drash* [interpretation], *remez* [allusive meaning], and *sod* [esoteric or mystical meaning]—with each of these levels of meaning enhancing, rather than undermining, the others.¹⁵⁷ Reading a concern for communal dynamics into Portnoy's rantings or Hoda's prostitution may only intensify a concern for these characters as characters and for their experiences in themselves.

Yet I hope that attention to the allegorical resonances of these fictions, and to their roots in the Jewish tradition, will help readers to understand why a novel about a masturbating sex fiend and an incestuous prostitute have been celebrated, by several critics, as among the most crucial texts in the North American Jewish literary canon.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Jameson, 79. Ranen Omer-Sherman suggests something similar when he proposes that "one needs to approach to Roth's novels with an awareness of their double status as 'faithful' representations of the condition of the American Diaspora and as portraits of an altogether interior drama that, at times, has very little to do with the public reality of Jewish American culture" (192).

¹⁵⁷ For a concise explanation of this approach to reading, see "Pardes: The Levels of Meaning," in Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book: Reading the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 65-69.

¹⁵⁸ Marie Syrkin, one of the bitterest early attackers of the novel, spoke for all those readers who feel *Portnoy* is at best irrelevant to any serious consideration of modern Jewishness (and at worst a vicious anti-Semitic attack on American Jews), when she asserted that she found the book "Jewish only in its unabashed collection of Jewish jokes as well as stereotypes." Marie Syrkin, "The Fun of Self-Abuse," *Midstream* (April 1969): 64. See also Arthur J. Lelyveld, "Diagnosing 'Portnoy's Complaint,'" *The Jewish Digest* (Summer 1969): 1-4, and Robert Kirsch, "Roth Novel: More of His Sour, Limited Statement," *Los Angeles Times* (February 16, 1969): 34. Of course, literary history belies the assertion that the novel has nothing particular to offer Jewish readers; even before the book appeared its Jewish critics have been vastly outnumbered by its defenders and champions. Recent tributes to *Portnoy*—indicating, if nothing else, its continued popularity among Jewish writers and critics—include a celebration in advance of the book's 40th anniversary, Eric Weiner, "*Portnoy's Complaint*: Self-Love and Self-Loathing," *All Things Considered* (April 7, 2008) <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88787165>>, as well as a 75th birthday tribute to Philip Roth hosted by Columbia University and the Library of America, on April 11, 2008, during which panelists recounted the revolutionary experience of discovering Roth through a copy of *Portnoy* tucked away on their parents' bookshelves. Audio of the proceedings can be found here: <<http://blogs.wnyc.org/culture/2008/04/13/celebrating-philip-roths-75th-birthday/>>. As for *Crackpot*, it earns a mention in the "Suggested Reading" section of Ruth R. Wisse's *The Modern Jewish Canon* (New

That Roth and Wiseman could tell such stories in explicit terms without risking jail time or loss of their copyrights was a privilege conferred on them by the historical moment in which they lived and wrote (and, equally, by the Jewish and non-Jewish defenders of literary freedom of expression discussed in previous chapters). That they invented rich and deeply resonant ways to capitalize on these opportunities is a mark of their brilliance. Thanks to their books, and many others less fruitfully engaged with Jewish history and culture, by the mid-1970s readers had become adjusted to seeing what had previously been defined as obscenity in the pages of the most respectable literature. Obscenity had become literary. The next chapter examines how the very literariness of obscenity, in the hands of Jewish artists, could be used to "literarize" a genre, comic books, consistently associated with children, an audience thought to be simple-minded and non-literary.

York: The Free Press, 2000), 384—one of only three works of fiction published in English after 1970 to be so honored—though, oddly enough, Wiseman goes entirely unmentioned in the main text of that work.

CHAPTER 5.

Graphic Novels and Dirty Pictures: Will Eisner, Jules Feiffer, and the *Littérisation* of Comic Books through Obscenity

I. The Rise of the Graphic Novel

In December 2006, *Time* magazine deemed Alison Bechdel's memoir *Fun Home* the best book published that year, selecting it for this honor over works by highly esteemed novelists including Cormac McCarthy, Richard Ford, and David Mitchell.¹ By March 2007, the literary scholar Nancy K. Miller was summarizing *Fun Home*, at length, in *PMLA*, alongside autobiographies by Joan Didion and Amos Oz.² Endorsed by both the mainstream of the popular literary press and the house organ of academic literary criticism, Bechdel's extraordinary memoir was an immediate, unqualified, and undeniable literary success. No one seemed to mind that it was a comic book.

This state of literary affairs, in which a comic book could be considered fit reading for intelligent adults in America, as such books have been in Europe and Japan for several decades,³ has a relatively short history. It was as recently as the late 1970s that

¹ Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006). "10 Best Books," *Time* (December 17, 2006) <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1570801,00.html>>. I mention Bechdel's book here as an exemplary graphic novel, but not as Jewish one; her family was Roman Catholic.

² Nancy K. Miller, "The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of Memoir," *PMLA* 122:2 (March 2007): 537-48.

³ Manga has been widely read by and marketed to adults since the decades after World War II; in the mid-1980s, the circulation of a biweekly manga magazine for adults was reported to be more than a million, and

a number of Jewish artists employed obscenity to foment what we can call the *littérisation* of the comic book, which would eventually enable Bechdel's achievements and the growth of a massive American industry devoted to the production of similar works. Pascale Casanova defines *littérisation* as "any operation ... by means of which a text ... comes to be regarded as literary by the legitimate authorities."⁴ Such *littérisation* matters, of course, because the designation of cultural productions as literature has almost always determined authors' eligibility for prizes, teaching positions, critical attention, and even sales; if it had been dismissed as non-literary *a priori*, Bechdel's memoir may still have achieved success, but it would not have been a contender for the honors it won and the critical acclaim it has received.⁵ Richard Brodhead, who has produced exemplary studies of *littérisation* in the late 19th-century, refers to his scholarship as a "history of literary access," and his language emphasizes that no writing or art is automatically or inevitably what he calls "high-literary"; to accrue prestige, cultural productions must

there were eighteen monthly magazines for adult women readers. Frederick L. Schodt, *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics* (Tokyo, New York: Kodansha International, 1986), 13, 17. On the development of album comics for adults in France and Belgium in the 1980s, see Bart Beaty, *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 24-27.

⁴ Unlike Casanova, I am not interested here in the literary inequalities between languages, but between forms, but her terms are still relevant; my use of "literariness," which I intend to mean "the quality of being literary," later in this chapter, is likewise a direct borrowing from Casanova. Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 135-36.

Raymond Williams offers a crucial etymology of "literature"; the sense with which this chapter is concerned is the one according to which "most poems and plays and novels are not seen as *literature*; they fall below its level, in a sense related to the old distinction of *polite learning*; they are not 'substantial' or 'important' enough to be called *works of literature*." Williams, "Literature," *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, revised and expanded edition (London: Fontana Press, 1988), 183-88.

⁵ For an example of how the "literary" designation is crucial in one organ of the book trade, see Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 66-72. Michael Chabon's recent polemics in favor of breaking down the boundaries between "genre fiction" and "literary fiction"—see particularly "Trickster in a Suit of Lights: Thoughts on the Modern Short Story" in Chabon's *Maps and Legends: Reading and Writing Along the Borderlands* (San Francisco, California: McSweeney's, 2008), 13-26—are perhaps the best recent evidence of the cultural capital that continues to this day to be reserved for the sort of writing that manages to earn the designation of "literary" for itself.

successfully secure higher positions in the literary field.⁶ As Lawrence Levine and Paul DiMaggio have demonstrated in classic analyses of cultural hierarchy, even those cultural productions now most powerfully imbued with prestige, including Shakespearean drama, opera, and classical music, did not possess such prestige inherently, but were endowed with it through a series of historical developments.⁷ The *littérisation* of comic books, in its potential to transform reading habits and critical practices, portends to be one of the most important developments in American literature for the 21st century. This chapter aims to reveal the crucial role that obscenity, as a trope and as a formal device, played in the *littérisation* of the comic book form wrought by Jews in the late 1970s, and to explore what it means that American Jews, in particular, led this development.

As the form under discussion here is the comic book or graphic novel, a brief note about nomenclature—which will be revisited later on—is necessary. Virtually every critic who has written about comic books in the past decade has acknowledged that this category of cultural production experienced a dramatic shift in its status over the past quarter-century. Scholars have fruitfully analyzed this transformation of the field as a result of changes in the production, distribution, and economics of comics, and as necessitating new, more sophisticated reading practices from its audiences.⁸ Frequently, such studies have marked this cultural development, and their analysis of it, through

⁶ Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 9, 109-10.

⁷ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Paul DiMaggio, "Social Structure, Institutions, and Cultural Goods: The Case of the United States," in *Social Theory for a Changing Society* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991), 133-55.

⁸ The most useful of these studies—the most attuned to the changes in the way comics are produced and consumed, and the relations between these developments—is Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005). On the latter, see also Hillary Chute, "Comics as Literature: Reading Graphic Narrative," *PMLA* 123:2 (March 2008): 452-65.

nomenclatural innovation, applying a new term to their object of study. Names for literary comic books have consequently proliferated: "art comics," "adult comics," "alternative comics," "graphic narrative," "graphic fiction" and "sequential art" are a few of the more or less reasonable suggestions that have not caught on widely; "graphic novel" is the awkward one that has stuck. Without ignoring the manifest problems with this term, this chapter employs the term "graphic novels" to refer to literary comic books (and not to the manga, superhero adventures, and other genre fiction also widely marketed under that rubric).⁹ Focusing on pioneering works by Will Eisner and Jules Feiffer, and complementing a growing body of work on the development of sophisticated comics in the last quarter century, this chapter offers a detailed account of one heretofore unstudied technique through which disreputable comic books became respectable graphic novels, which is a paradigmatic case of *littérisation* through obscenity by American Jews.

II. Comic Books and the Literary

Not every artist or writer wants his or her work to be considered literary, and this is especially true for the creators of comic books. Quite the contrary: whether because

⁹ On "sequential art," see Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art* (Tamarac, Florida: Poorhouse Press, 1985), and Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Northampton, Massachusetts: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993), 2-23. For "art comics," see Douglas Wolk, *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2007), 29-36. For "graphic narrative," see Chute. For "graphic fiction," see Ivan Brunetti, ed., *An Anthology of Graphic Fiction, Cartoons, and True Stories* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 10. For "adult comics," see Roger Sabin, *Adult Comics: An Introduction* (New York, London: Routledge, 1993). For "alternative comics," see Hatfield. The problems with the term "graphic novel" are discussed in most of these sources, most insightfully by Chute, Wolk, and Hatfield. For a breathless, informative survey of the field of the graphic novel at the time of writing, see Shirrel Rhoades, "Graphic Novels Find the Bookstores," in *Comic Books: How the Industry Works* (New York, Peter Lang, 2008), 209-25.

they did not think it was possible, or because they dismissed literary prestige as a potential corruption, the vast majority of comics creators before the 1980s never thought about their work as literature, not only because of the connotation of that term with verbal rather than pictorial communication, but also because of its connotation of cultural prestige.¹⁰ As Feiffer phrases it in an essay on Golden Era superhero comics, "There are certain inherent privileges in second-class citizenship. Irresponsibility is one. Not being taken seriously is another. Junk, like the drunk at the wedding, can get away with doing or saying anything because, by its very appearance, it is already in disgrace. It has no one's respect to lose; no image to endanger."¹¹ Most comics creators were happy to have an outlet for their talents, the loyalty of an audience, and a steady income, and to leave prestige of cultural prizes and course syllabi to novelists and poets. Eisner and Feiffer were the unusual participants in this genre who unreservedly desired to produce prestigious comic books, a nascent form they both referred to in the late 1970s as the "graphic novel."¹² Fascinatingly, these two artists embarked at virtually the same moment on pioneering projects in this field. The results were published as Eisner's *A Contract*

¹⁰ Wolk raises the important issue that referring to comics as "literary" obscures their generic uniqueness, in that it underemphasizes their visual aspect (14).

¹¹ *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (Seattle, Washington: Fantagraphics Books, 2003), 73.

¹² The term "graphic novel" famously appeared on the trade paperback edition of Eisner's *A Contract with God*. Feiffer, on the other hand, did not use the term "graphic novel" in printed sources—*Tantrum* is referred to, on its dust jacket and in early reviews, as a "novel-in-cartoons"—and in an interview on August 29, 2008, he told me that, "I don't think I ever used the phrase graphic novel, except ironically or pejoratively, because I've always hated the term. A novel-in-cartoons is what I considered it." Yet the term does appear in Feiffer's handwritten notes for a speech he gave in late 1979 and 1980, without any indication of irony: "'Tantrum' is a combination of the cartoon form, the play form, & the screenplay form," he scribbled. "Therefore it is called a novel. A graphic novel. Let me tell u a little about it." See Box 56, Jules Feiffer Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. It seems probable that Feiffer's opposition to the term developed in the mid-1980s, as it became more popular.

with *God* (1978) and Feiffer's *Tantrum* (1980), and despite the authors' having collaborated in the 1940s, they seem to have come to these projects independently.¹³

Both projects were self-conscious attempts to literarize the comic book form. Eisner, who believed he coined the term "graphic novel" when pitching *Contract* to book publishers, famously emphasized, in speeches he gave in the following decades, that he seized on these words specifically in the hopes they would assist him "to develop ... viable literature in this medium."¹⁴ And, in fact, beginning in the 1940s, and until his death, he continually selected the words "novel" and "literature" to capture what he hoped to achieve in the medium of comics.¹⁵ Feiffer's handwritten notes for a speech promoting *Tantrum* in 1980 clarify what Eisner meant when he referred to "literature":

All my life victim

¹³ Will Eisner, *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (New York: Baronet, 1978); Jules Feiffer, *Tantrum* (New York: Knopf, 1979). Several recent academic articles provide introductions to *Contract* by Jewish Studies scholars; see Jeremy Dauber, "Comic Books, Tragic Stories: Will Eisner's American Jewish History" *AJS Review* 30:2 (2006): 277-304; Laurence Roth, "Drawing Contracts: Will Eisner's Legacy," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 97:3 (Summer 2007): 463-84; and Susanne Klingenstein, "The Long Roots of Will Eisner's Quarrel with God," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 26 (2007): 81-88. For the best introduction to Feiffer's career, though it emphasizes his work as a playwright almost to the exclusion of his long-form comics, see Stephen Whitfield, "Jules Feiffer and the Comedy of Disenchantment," in Sarah Blacher Cohen, ed., *From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish American Stage and Screen* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 167-82.

On the personal and working relationship between Eisner and Feiffer, see Jon B. Cooke, "Jules Feiffer: His Early Years with Will Eisner" *Comic Book Artist* 2:6 (November 2005): 117-21. Feiffer remarks, "We maintained, not so much a friendship, because we were never friends ... but I knew he was interested in me, I knew he liked me, with mixed feelings, and I felt the same way toward him" (121).

¹⁴ Will Eisner, "Keynote Address, Will Eisner Symposium," *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* 1.1 (2004): 16 Jul 2008. <http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v1_1/eisner/index.shtml>. For uses of the term "graphic novel" to refer to longform comics, which predated Eisner's, see Chute, 453.

¹⁵ "The comic strip is no longer a comic strip but in reality an illustrated novel. It is new and raw just now, but material for a limitless, intelligent development. And eventually, and inevitably, it will be a legitimate medium for the best of writers and artists." Dated as having been written in 1942, this statement is quoted in Jon B. Cooke, "Blithe Spirit," *Comic Book Artist* 2:6 (November 2005): 4-5. Eisner's use of the term "literature" was certainly not incidental: "I don't want my work to be bought because it's a graphic novel. I want it to be bought because it's a piece of literature—visual literature or graphic literature, maybe. But I want it to be thought of as literature." David Hajdu, "Good Will," *Comic Book Artist* 2:6 (November 2005): 30.

Conflicting ambitions.

1. 2 b cartoonist
other, 2 b writer.

Cartooning was fun
Writing was prestigious

Feiffer's notes go on to say that he "learned all about [the] seriousness of writers" from the interviews in the *Paris Review*, which he "devoured." He jokingly describes the life of the writer who is typically featured in *Paris Review* interviews, lampooning it down to the "lunch with student acolytes from Harvard, Duke + UCLA all doing phds on him." With characteristic acuity, Feiffer then put his finger on exactly what he, and Eisner, lacked in their careers as successful creators of comics, and why they dedicated themselves to *Tantrum* and *A Contract with God*: "I had the ambitions of a cartoonist & class pretensions of s.w. [serious writer]," Feiffer noted. "4 20 yrs or more I suspected I knew the answer 2 this dilemma Write a cartoon novel."¹⁶ Prestige, class pretensions, attention in respected journals and from earnest doctoral candidates: this is a veritable laundry list of markers of cultural capital. Eisner and Feiffer hoped to yoke the trappings of literary prestige to the form of the comic book, just as Shakespearean drama had been transformed from a popular entertainment to a refined art a century earlier. Feiffer had already received literary recognition when he wrote novels, plays, and screenplays, but, having stuck to comics, Eisner mostly had not. Both decided in the mid-1970s that the time was ripe for comic books that no one could approach as anything but literature.

The question was how to accomplish this. Knowing as well as they did the history of comics, and particularly their own extraordinary contributions to the field, Eisner and Feiffer would have understood that technical brilliance—such as the extraordinary title

¹⁶ Box 56, Jules Feiffer Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

design and layout innovations of Eisner's *The Spirit*, or the unparalleled draftsmanship of Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland*—would not suffice to set a comic apart as literary art. Neither, apparently, would the mystifying absurdism of George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, or the sophisticated irony of Charles Schultz's *Peanuts*. Though Herriman and Schulz had been acclaimed by critics of art and literature, neither had been firmly embraced by the institutions of American literary prestige and success; in his speech notes, Feiffer singles out Schultz, in particular, as the "Most successful Amer. cartoonist in history," noting drolly that even *he* doesn't live the life described in *Paris Review* interviews. Cartoonists—makers of one-panel Op-Ed or *New Yorker* cartoons—and occasionally the creator of a thoughtful newspaper comic strip, like Feiffer himself, garnered general regard, but this tended to be the same respect paid to successful journalists and not the sacralization bestowed on literary authors.¹⁷ The obstacle to the *littérisation* of comic books, as Eisner and Feiffer would have recognized, was not a lack of skill or humor or insight on the part of creators, but rather the persistent dogma that comic books are best suited for children and halfwits, and thus cannot be literary.

Or, to put the point another way, the barrier to the *littérisation* of the comic book was the form's status as what Levine calls "shared culture"—"the property of many groups, the companion to a wide spectrum of other cultural genres"—which has the

¹⁷ As will be discussed in the following paragraph, it is the accessibility and popularity of journalistic works, and likewise of one-panel cartoons, that disqualify them from elite prestige. Comparing journalism to literature in terms of prestige, Pierre Bourdieu remarks that journalism is one of "the seemingly most heteronomous forms of cultural production," having already explained that by "the most heteronomous cultural producers" he means "those with least symbolic capital." Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 45, 41. See also Kate Campbell, "Introduction: On Perceptions of Journalism," in Kate Campbell, ed., *Journalism, Literature, and Modernity: From Hazlitt to Modernism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2004); she notes that "for approximately a century, journalism tended to make up the devalued, diametrically opposing column on which literature's identity was based—roughly speaking, a factual, conventional, heavy-handed commercial practice, the antithesis of literature's integrity and creativity" (1).

consequence, in Levine's formulation, that "their power to bestow distinction [is] diminished." Newspaper comics, and even comic books, attracted plenty of adult readers, but they were "shared" between children and adults and thus they bestowed little distinction on their audiences. What had happened to "Shakespeare, opera, art, and music," according to Levine, is that "they were in effect 'rescued' from the marketplace, and therefore from the mixed audience."¹⁸ In these examples, the audiences that needed to be excluded were immigrants and the poor; in the case of comics, it was primarily another culturally disempowered and disrespected group: children. Eisner's official biographer emphasizes this when he notes that in the mid-1970s Eisner decided that he "would only return to the medium [of comics] if he could find a subject that would appeal to an adult readership."¹⁹ Feiffer, again in his speech notes, acknowledges the same dynamic when he refers to *Tantrum* as a book that "looks like it's for children, but [is] for grownups." The problem, though, was precisely that comic books had always looked like they were "for children."

III. Comic Books and Immaturity

¹⁸ Levine, 231.

¹⁹ Bob Andleman, *Will Eisner: A Spirited Life* (Milwaukee: M Press, 2005), 288. Eisner often connected the literary audience for the graphic novel with an adult audience: "There is an audience for this material [i.e., graphic novels]. Along comes Art Spiegelman with *Maus* and has an audience that consists of adults. Jules Feiffer, shortly afterwards [sic], did a thing called *Tantrum*, which was addressed to adults. And so, we now have, today, the graphic novel." Jon B. Cooke, "Will Eisner: The Creative Life of a Master," *Comic Book Artist* 2:6 (November 2005): 44.

Why did comic books once look—and to some people, why do they still look—a priori, like they are meant for children? The simplest answer is that despite copious protestations to the contrary, printed narratives emphasizing images over words have always been associated with people who cannot read comfortably, specifically young inexperienced readers and partially or wholly illiterate adults.²⁰ As the recent *Norton Anthology of Children's Literature* explains, picturebooks ("in which pictures dominate the verbal text") "are the form of literature that more than any other is designed specifically for children."²¹ Of course, such consignment of all texts with pictures to audiences of children grossly underestimates the appeal of images to humans.

Senseless as it was, an automatic association of children and illustrated narratives determined the reception of comic strips as they developed in American newspapers in the 1890s and afterwards. Social reformers critical of the comics assumed that children were the strips' primary audiences; a contributor to the *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1909 famously called the Sunday comics supplement "an influence for repulsive and often depraving vulgarity so colossal that it is rapidly taking on the dimensions of nothing short

²⁰ This notion can be traced as far back as the pronouncement by Pope Gregory the Great, around the year 600 CE, that "What writing does for the literate, a picture does for the illiterate looking at it, because the ignorant see in it what they ought to do; those who do not know letters read in it." Lawrence G. Duggan traces this dictum's remarkable acceptance throughout the ensuing centuries and assesses its validity, concluding that "Gregory and his many disciples erred in regarding art as the book of the illiterate," in "Was Art Really the 'Book of the Illiterate'?" *Word & Image* 5:3 (July-September 1989): 227-51.

²¹ Jack Zipes, et al., *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature: The Traditions in English* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 1051. See also Barbara Bader, *American Picturebooks: From Noah's Ark to the Beast Within* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 2-3. Scott McCloud quotes Rudolphe Topffer, writing in 1845: "the picture story appeals mainly to children and the lower classes..." (201). The visual nature of cinema was also seen as making it a dangerously powerful medium, especially for children, in the early years of the motion picture industry; see Lee Grievson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 64.

of a national crime against our children."²² Repulsive as the comics might be in this reformer's view, adults were simply not endangered by them; only children were. Despite numerous adults who asserted themselves members of the comic strips' audience—such as Gilbert Seldes, who in 1924 called Herriman's *Krazy Kat* "easily the most amusing and fantastic and satisfactory work of art produced in America to-day"—and despite demographic studies revealing that the majority of adult Americans read comic strips regularly, this association lived on into the so-called Golden Era of comic books.²³ As Eisner later recalled, "Between 1940 and the early sixties the industry commonly accepted the profile of the comic book reader as that of a '10-year-old from Iowa.'"²⁴

In the 1940s and 1950s, the German Jewish psychologist Frederic Wertham infamously argued that "the basic ingredients of the most numerous and widely read comic books" are "violence," "sadism," and "cruelty"; he also presented the less tendentious claim that "comic books are most widely read by children."²⁵ No one could refute the validity of this pronouncement, but the industry reforms enacted in response to Wertham's campaign ignored the substantial audience of adults who also read comic books. Publishers might have acknowledged an audience ranging in age, sorted comic books into age-appropriate categories, and marketed them accordingly (i.e., the strategy

²² "A Crime Against American Children," *The Ladies' Home Journal* (January, 1909): 5. Two years later, *The Outlook* reported on the founding of the "League for the Improvement of the Children's Comic Supplement," the goal of which was not to "destroy" the comics, but "To Improve the Comic Supplement for the Children." "The Comic Supplement," *The Outlook* (April 15, 1911): 802.

²³ Gilbert Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1924), 309. For demographic studies demonstrating widespread adult readership of comic strips, see Ian Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 89.

²⁴ Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art* (originally 1985; Tamarac, Florida: Poorhouse Press, 2000), 141.

²⁵ See Amy Kiste Nyberg, "Comics, Critics, and Children's Culture" in *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 1-21, and Frederic Wertham, MD, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York, Toronto: Rinehart & Company, 1953), 14-15.

undertaken in later years by the film and video game industries). Instead, the Comics Code, established in 1954 by the industry's leaders to defuse Wertham's protests, targeted its self-censorship on the absolute elimination of "Crimes," "horror," and "Illicit sex relations" from comics so as to protect young readers.²⁶ The publishers implicitly acceded to Wertham's notion that comic books are and should be read only by juveniles, and in response they created a powerful mainstream comics industry that severely limited creators' freedom to produce works for adult readers. For comparison's sake, imagine a film industry in which the only movies that could be produced, released, or sold were the ones rated "G" or "PG" under the current ratings system.²⁷

Eisner and Feiffer were not the first comics creators to embrace obscenity as a reaction to the stultifying effects of the Comics Code. The underground comix tradition of the 1960s and 1970s, which developed in response both to the self-censorship of the mainstream and to the larger cultural currents of the period, also did so, but because of its vigorous antipathy to mainstream culture, it came to be associated with unliterary "young people"—not quite the children presumed to read picturebooks and comic strips, but adolescents and immature post-adolescents. Although the underground creators asserted, with "Adult Only" banners on the covers of their comic books, that their work was not for children, and though scholars have rightly credited them as having "established the idea of comics as a form for adults," comix were often dismissed by literary authorities as a

²⁶ "Comics Magazine Association of America Comics Code, 1954." Reprinted in Nyberg, 166-69.

²⁷ Of course, the films produced under Hollywood's Hays code give some sense of what this would look like.

junky phenomenon for an immature audience.²⁸ It didn't help that they were cheaply produced and sold inexpensively in head shops, or that the underground creators were in their twenties, often fresh out of the colleges where they had cut their teeth on campus humor magazines. Robert Crumb, who became "synonymous . . . with the underground as a whole," was all of 27 at the height of the comix boom in 1970.²⁹ Both opponents and supporters of the comix regularly invoked the phrase "young people" to characterize the genre's audiences, as in a 1971 *Los Angeles Times* article quoting critic Jacob Brackman to the effect that "comix will come to define where large numbers of young people stand in relation to our maniac culture."³⁰ In their heyday, the comix were an important indicator of young people's taste, then, but not part of the world of letters; Crumb wasn't exactly a regular on the Pulitzer Prize shortlist, and it is difficult to imagine him having been offered a teaching position at Yale or Stanford in those years. To establish their work as literature, Eisner and Feiffer needed to distance themselves from the perceived immaturity of the comix *and* to slough off the association with childhood that dogged comic strips and books throughout their history in North America.³¹

²⁸ "Adult Only" banners were legal necessities in the wake of the decision handed down in *Ginsberg v. New York* (1968), which will be discussed below. See also Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005), 7.

²⁹ Sabin, *Comics*, 94; Patrick Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions: The Underground Comix Revolutions, 1963-1975* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2002), 20, 22.

³⁰ Earl Gottschalk, Jr., "Who Put the X in Comix?" *Los Angeles Times* (December 12, 1971): X47. A similar formulation appeared as recently as 2003 in a short review by Steven Heller of a history of the comix movement in the *New York Times*. "They Kept on Truckin'" (February 16, 2003): 20.

³¹ It is crucial in this context to note that even Eisner and Feiffer's pioneering works were encouraged and enabled by the comix movement. See Hatfield, 16-18. Eisner's late career as a graphic novelist was at least partially the result of his interactions with comix creators. In the late 1960s, Eisner—a middle-aged civilian employee of the U.S. military—was as far from the emerging counterculture as he could be, but his encounters with Denis Kitchen and the underground proved decisive: in the mid-1970s, Kitchen reprinted Eisner's pre-war *Spirit* strips successfully, and Eisner occasionally drew new covers for these and even, on at least one occasion, for an underground comic. Subsequently, he began to work on what would become *Contract*. Andelman, *Will Eisner*, 103, 93-94, 183-84, 192, 185. Feiffer, meanwhile, has said: "I knew

IV. Children and the Law of Obscenity in the 1970s

By the mid-1970s, the laws of literary obscenity in the U.S. had undergone a stunning transformation. While the court's decision in *Miller v. California* in 1973 took a significant step backwards from the *carte blanche* that had been offered to writers by the statement that "a book cannot be proscribed as obscene unless found to be *utterly* without redeeming social value" in 1966's landmark *Memoirs v Massachusetts*, the proliferation of hardcore and softcore pornography in the intervening years drew reformers' attention away from literary obscenity. What censor could get worked up by Nabokov or Philip Roth when *Hustler* was peddling photographs of intercourse on the newsstands? The ubiquity of obscenity in contemporary print and visual culture, with Henry Miller's novels available at any bookstore and *Deep Throat* smashing box office records at neighborhood movie theaters, meant that four-letter words and descriptions of sex were no longer an exciting or dramatic feature to include in a novel. What obscenity could still accomplish, however, was to establish a work's address to adults.

In *Ginsberg v. New York* (1968), the Supreme Court clarified that while its recent decisions had made the police or postal censorship of novels, magazines, and films for sexual explicitness nigh impossible, these decisions did not imply that explicit material could be freely distributed to children. The Ginsberg case involved a Long Island

about Gilbert Shelton, I knew about Bill Griffith, and I knew about Robert Crumb. ... Art Spiegelman wrote like a dream... still does, so I am far more interested in his work." Cooke, "Jules Feiffer," 121. Feiffer is mentioned as one of the "major influences" on comix creators in Dez Skinn, *Comix: The Underground Revolution* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2004), 13.

stationery store owner who had sold "girlie magazines" to a teenage boy. Delivering the majority opinion, which upheld the conviction, Justice Brennan noted that while the magazines in question were "not obscene for adults ... the State has power to adjust the definition of obscenity as applied to minors." In other words, as Justice Fortas concurred, "what is not obscene for an adult may be obscene for a child." In a characteristically extreme dissent, Justice Douglas noted sagely that the ridiculous and pernicious Anthony Comstock himself had found in the protection of youth a widely sympathetic justification for his censorship campaigns—as reflected in the title of his book *Traps for the Young* (1883)—and so, Douglas argued, it would be a senseless step backwards to censor art in the name of protecting children. Douglas's was not a popular position, though; even Fortas in dissenting had signed on with Brennan's general proposition that the state can and should "make proper and careful differentiation between adults and children."³²

Most Americans seem to have agreed. In the same year that the *Ginsberg* decision was handed down, the Motion Picture Association of America began to rate movies in terms of appropriateness by age, their "primary objective" being the protection of children from smut—and they drew the strictest line almost exactly where the court had in *Ginsberg*, at seventeen-year-olds.³³ According to film historian Jon Lewis, this ratings system "did not save Hollywood, at least not all on its own and not right away," but it

³² *Ginsberg v. New York*, 390 U.S. 629 (1968). A year earlier, Richard H. Kuh, an Assistant District Attorney of New York County who led the prosecution of Lenny Bruce, dusted off all the old chestnuts of anti-pornography and anti-vice activists and argued that whatever else the courts decided, minors must be protected from obscenity. See Kuh, *Foolish Figleaves?: Pornography in—and out of—Court* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 232-68. "Children are society's most precious resource," Kuh wrote, and thus "all of our errors—if any—should be on the side of caution" (247).

³³ Jon Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core: How the Struggle over Censorship Saved the Modern Film Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 140-41.

also did not inspire major protests against the industry: moviegoers, and even XXX filmmakers, tended to agree that children require special protection.³⁴

Even while arguing for freedom of expression and against the enforcement of obscenity laws, newspaper editorialists in the 1970s regularly endorsed the principle of the *Ginsberg* holding; in a piece arguing for "decriminaliz[ing] the distribution of explicit material" in the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, the Los Angeles city attorney reiterated that "it is proper for criminal sanctions to be retained for distribution of obscenity to minors."³⁵ The same newspaper's editorial board put the point clearly again in 1978, arguing against the enforcement of obscenity laws in general but noting that "Common sense dictates that children should be protected from obscenity."³⁶ The Supreme Court ratified such "common sense" perspectives repeatedly at the end of the decade. In *FCC v. Pacifica Foundation* (1978)—famous as the trial of George Carlin's "Seven Dirty Words" routine that established the constitutionality of television and radio censorship by the FCC—the court emphasized that its "narrow" decision was intended primarily to keep four-letter words from being heard by children.³⁷ Meanwhile in *Pinkus v. United States* (1978), the court reminded anyone who might have forgotten that "children are not to be included ... as part of the 'community' as that term relates to the 'obscene materials'

³⁴ Lewis, 151, 193.

³⁵ Burt Pines, "War on Obscenity a Wasteful Effort," *Los Angeles Times* (September 1, 1974): F1.

³⁶ "Pornography and Common Sense," *Los Angeles Times* (March 3, 1978): C4.

³⁷ *FCC v. Pacifica Foundation* 438 U.S. 726 (1978); in oral arguments, Joseph A. Marino, speaking for the FCC, emphasized that the fact that children were in the audience was "at the heart of the commission's decision." "FCC v. Pacifica Foundation—Oral Argument" <http://www.oyez.org/cases/1970-1979/1977/1977_77_528/argument/>.

proscribed" in various state statutes enacted in the wake of *Miller*.³⁸ Again and again the court hammered home a message that most Americans were very pleased to hear: there is a differential standard of obscenity for children and adults, with children deserving extra protection.³⁹ If a novel or a film featured any graphic sex, in other words, a legal and social consensus held that children should be barred from seeing or reading it.

It was not coincidental, then, that obscenity cropped up in comics at the same moment as they were being turned into literature. As Levine notes, "exoteric or popular art is transformed into esoteric or high art precisely at that time when it in fact *becomes* esoteric, that is, when it becomes or is rendered inaccessible to the types of people who appreciated it earlier."⁴⁰ By including obscenity in their work, Eisner and Feiffer could ensure to the fullest extent of the law that their comic books would be "inaccessible" to children and young teens: since these comics included graphic representations of sex it would, in fact, be a crime in most states to sell them or give them to any person under eighteen years of age.

³⁸ *Pinkus v. United States* 436 U.S. 293 (1978).

³⁹ It is worth noting, though outside the scope of the discussion here, that in recent decades, free speech in public schools (i.e., in environments designed for the education of children) has become one of the central areas of containing controversy in First Amendment law. In *Bethel v. Fraser* 478 U.S. 675 (1986), the Supreme Court declared that even broad and ridiculous sexual innuendo ("I know a man who is firm—he's firm in his pants, he's firm in his shirt, his character is firm—but most . . . of all, his belief in you, the students of Bethel, is firm") could be criminalized as obscene within a school, so as to protect vulnerable minors. On the use of "harm-to-minors" logic in more recent censorship decisions, see Marjorie Heins, *Not in Front of the Children: "Indecency," Censorship, and the Innocence of Youth* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001). An important area for further study would be the tacit and implicit links between two discourses that developed more or less simultaneously in the 1970s and 1980s in both newspapers and the courts: the legal and social consensus about a differential standard of obscenity, on the one hand, and the concern about the sexual and physical abuse of children by pedophiles and in the creation of child pornography, on the other. On the latter, see Judith Levine, *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), James R. Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molestering* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), and Philip Jenkins, *Moral Panic: Changing Concepts of the Child Molester in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

⁴⁰ Levine, 234.

Of course, the same could be said of many of the underground comix; what must be emphasized in a discussion of Eisner and Feiffer is that the underground creators had emphatically rejected the promise of literary prestige in favor of an unrelenting shattering of taboos that included an embrace of both overtly racist imagery and hardcore pornography. Crumb recalled: "You had to break every taboo first and get that over with ... y'know, doing racist images, any sexual perversion that came into your mind" ⁴¹ As such the underground continued the tradition of Tijuana Bibles or Tillie-and-Mac books, exuberantly pornographic parodies of newspaper comics that had been produced cheaply and published illegally from the 1930s to the 1960s, as well as the obscene doodles that anecdotal evidence suggests have long appeared in young boys' notebooks. ⁴² The gleefully pornographic and largely misogynistic images of spurting erections and bulging breasts that one finds throughout the underground comix (e.g., figures 5.1 and 5.2) disqualified them from literary prestige along with *sui generis* productions like Harvey Kurtzman and Will Elder's *Little Annie Fanny*—a satirical strip whose cultural critiques were undermined by its pandering to the visual tastes of *Playboy's* readers. ⁴³ Both Feiffer and Eisner had had plenty of opportunities to draw pornography. But Feiffer,

⁴¹ Quoted in Sabin, *Adult Comics*, 38.

⁴² For an introduction to the Tijuana Bibles, see Bob Andleman, *Tijuana Bibles: Art and Wit in America's Forbidden Funnies* (New York, London: Simon & Schuster, 2004). Direct descendents of the Tijuana Bibles, the three issues of Wally Wood's *Gang Bang* (Van Nuys, California: Nuance, Inc., 1980, 1981, and 1983) augmented the production values of pornographic comic strip and comic book parodies, offering gleefully pornotopic renditions of *Li'l Abner*, *Terry and the Pirates*, *Superman*, *Flash Gordon*, and famous Walt Disney animations.

Incredibly, at least one of the young Ludwig Lewisohn's doodles of a "large ejaculating penis" has survived in his personal notebooks; see Ralph Melnick, *The Life and Work of Ludwig Lewisohn* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 1:95. For a recent collection of examples of this odd genre of what might be called folk sexuality, see David Goldberg, *Superbad: The Drawings* (New York: Newmarket, 2008).

⁴³ Harvey Kurtzman and Will Elder, *Playboy's Little Annie Fanny*, 2 vols. (Milwaukie, Oregon: Dark Horse Comics, 2000, 2001).

a longtime contributor of comic strips to *Playboy*, never embraced the visual emphasis on women as sex objects that suffuses *Little Annie Fanny*. And while Eisner's work always eroticized the female form, he had been courted both by the producers of Tijuana Bibles and underground comix and in neither case did he represent intercourse graphically or produce deliberately pornographic comics.⁴⁴ To achieve literariness, Eisner and Feiffer would tread a fine line: they would create comics obscene enough to exclude children according to *Ginsberg*, but not so pornographic as to repulse literary critics and the other arbiters of high culture. The next three sections of this chapter describe the tactics through which Eisner and Feiffer established this balance in their work.



Figure 5.1. Detail from R. Crumb, "Honeybunch Kaminski The Drug-Crazed Runaway," *Uneeda Comix* (1970). Reprinted in Patrick Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions*, 180.

⁴⁴ Feiffer remarked that Eisner's *The Spirit* "was kind of a sexy comic book version based very much on movie heroines of the day." Cooke, "Jules Feiffer," 120. On Eisner's invitations to draw Tijuana Bibles, see his autobiographical *The Dreamer* (Northampton, Massachusetts: Kitchen Sink, 1986), 4, and Art Spiegelman, "Those Dirty Little Comics," in Andelman, *Tijuana Bibles*, 6-7. Denis Kitchen's recollection of Eisner's introduction to the underground comix is illustrative of his ambivalent reaction to them: "[Eisner's] introduction to complete artistic freedom was none other than S. Clay Wilson. I winced. Will blanched. Then he scowled. He expected to see the rules broken. He didn't expect to see them shattered." Denis Kitchen, "A Kindred Spirit: How Denis Kitchen Met Will Eisner and Signed His First Contract," *Comic Book Artist* 2:6 (November 2005): 153.



Figure 5.2. Detail from Art Spiegelman, "Jolly Jack Jack-Off," *Gothic Blimp Works #7* (1969). Reprinted in Rosenkranz, 104.

V. Distinguishing the Graphic Novel I: Explicit Sexual Frustration

Distinguishing between sexual obscenity and hard-core pornography has been notoriously difficult for the law, but Eisner and Feiffer independently arrived at the same approaches for doing so, demonstrating how much better artists implicitly understand the workings of the obscene than judges do. First, they employed a tactic that had a precedent, as David Beronä has demonstrated, in the "wordless novels" of the 1930s and 1940s, which Eisner has often acknowledged as inspirations for *Contract*.⁴⁵ They represented sexual failure and frustration: previously prohibited visual images appear, but

⁴⁵ David A. Beronä, "Breaking Taboos: Sexuality in the Work of Will Eisner and the Early Wordless Novels," *International Journal of Comic Art* (Spring-Summer 1999): 90-103.

in narrative contexts of disappointment, deceit, and despair that eschew the idealizations of pornotopia.⁴⁶ So prevalently does sexual failure figure in these works, in fact, that they resemble "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life" or *Ulysses* much more than an issue of *Hustler*—and that is precisely the point: obscenity in *Contract* and *Tantrum* does not pander or titillate, then; it establishes these works' seriousness as art.⁴⁷

A few examples will clarify how explicitness in Eisner's *Contract* emphasizes sexual failure and frustration. In "The Street Singer," one of the four stories included in the collection, a washed-up diva offers to promote a male beggar's singing career in exchange for sexual attention. The narrative explicitly records the diva's seduction of Eddie, the singer; both of the characters are represented naked, with their buttocks clearly delineated, during intercourse. The story does not emphasize their sexual pleasure, though, but the relationship's breakdown when, the following day, Eddie forgets the diva's address. So, rather than a fantasy of sexual exchange come true, "The Street Singer" offers a tale of botched exploitation. Similarly, in "Cookalein," a longer and more complex story in *Contract* set at a Jewish summer resort—a *kokhaleyn* (literally, "cook-alone") was a cabin with a kitchen included, a popular form of accommodation in the Catskills in the interwar years—the sexual escapades turn out to be disillusioning experiences. Characters who have seduced each other under false pretences discover the sad truth at the moment of physical intimacy. When Willie, a 15-year-old claiming to be

⁴⁶ Steven Marcus coins "pornotopia" and defines it at length, elaborating on its timeless and placeless character as well as the plenitude that characterizes it: "Pornotopia is literally a world of grace abounding to the chief of sinners. All men in it are always and infinitely potent; all women fecundate with lust and flow inexhaustibly with sap or juice or both. Everyone is always ready for anything, and everyone is infinitely generous with his substance." Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 268-74.

⁴⁷ Sigmund Freud, "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life," *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York: Collier Books, 1973), 58-70.

19, is seduced by a married woman, Missis Minkis, their coupling ends abruptly before it has begun; Willie's premature ejaculation is represented in an abstract but evocative dialogue bubble containing a set of weakly wavering lines, and he has to admit his inexperience (see figure 5.3). In another plotline, a young couple named Benny and Goldie court while pretending to be a "rich manufacturer" (148) and an heiress "from the dress business" (150), respectively. It is while petting in the woods that they discover that neither one of them has any money. Benny then attempts to rape Goldie, tearing her clothes—but even this violent attempt for sexual satisfaction fails: Herbie, a medical student who cares for Goldie after the incident, informs Benny that he "didn't even penetrate" and that he is "sick ... I mean, sexually" (175). Throughout *Contract* sexual desire—adulterous, violent, and based on deception—leads to disappointment and disaster rather than fruition or satisfaction.



Figure 5.3. Detail from Will Eisner, *A Contract with God* (161).

Feiffer's "novel-in-cartoons" similarly presents nudity only at narrative moments of sexual frustration or failure. In *Tantrum's* first chapter, during an introductory montage of scenes limning the depression of the protagonist, Leo Quog, one panel depicts him

gazing distractedly at the exaggerated curves of a secretary's clothed body (5). Though the panel's emphasis on her breasts, waist, and buttocks suggests Leo's desire, that desire is at best ambivalent (Leo muses, "No danger, no mystery"), and it is in any case associated with the fully-clothed, non-obscene female form. Two pages later, Feiffer depicts Leo's wife Carol in their bed naked, a nipple and the cleavage of her buttocks clearly delineated (see figure 5.4). In this panel, Carol reaches out to Leo lovingly while he cowers, turned away from her, his eyes wild and unfocused. Feiffer's illustration of Carol's naked body does not function as titillation for Leo or for the reader—indeed, her bare breast and nipple disturbingly echo, in size and shape, her unmet eye—but rather signals Leo's isolation and inability to derive sexual satisfaction from his marriage.



Figure 5.4. Detail from Jules Feiffer, *Tantrum* (7).

Tantrum's plot focuses on Leo's transformation, in response to his depression, into a two-year-old: a literal rendering of the midlife crisis as infantile regression, and a comic book-style elaboration of Feiffer's extremely popular one-act play, "Crawling Arnold" (1963).⁴⁸ The climax of this narrative occurs when the two-year-old Leo approaches the sexual contact he has been pining for, and when Feiffer, narrating this approach, represents genitalia explicitly again. The infant Leo, having insinuated himself with his brother's buxom secretary, joins her for a bath. In preparing for it, she undresses, exciting Leo's desires; he gazes up at her bare chest wide-eyed and expectant. In the bathtub, she proceeds to wash his "face," "arms," and "chest," but as her hands descend lower on his body her dialogue breaks off ("... then we wash—"). At this moment, the narrative premise collapses, denying Leo the sexual satisfaction that he desires. Leo reverts to adult form, and dashes naked away from the bathtub. As he does, his limp penis and his testicles dangle prominently at the center of a page, clearly visible despite Feiffer's typically sketchy lines (see figure 5.5). As in Eisner's *Contract*, the explicit representation of genitals functions here in the context—and, in this case, as an emphatic icon—of sexual failure.

⁴⁸ *Crawling Arnold* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1998). The premise of *Tantrum* can also be understood as an inversion of Feiffer's longform comic, "Munro" (1959), in which a four-year-old is inducted into the army. "Munro," in *Feiffer: The Collected Works 2* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 1989), 19-70.

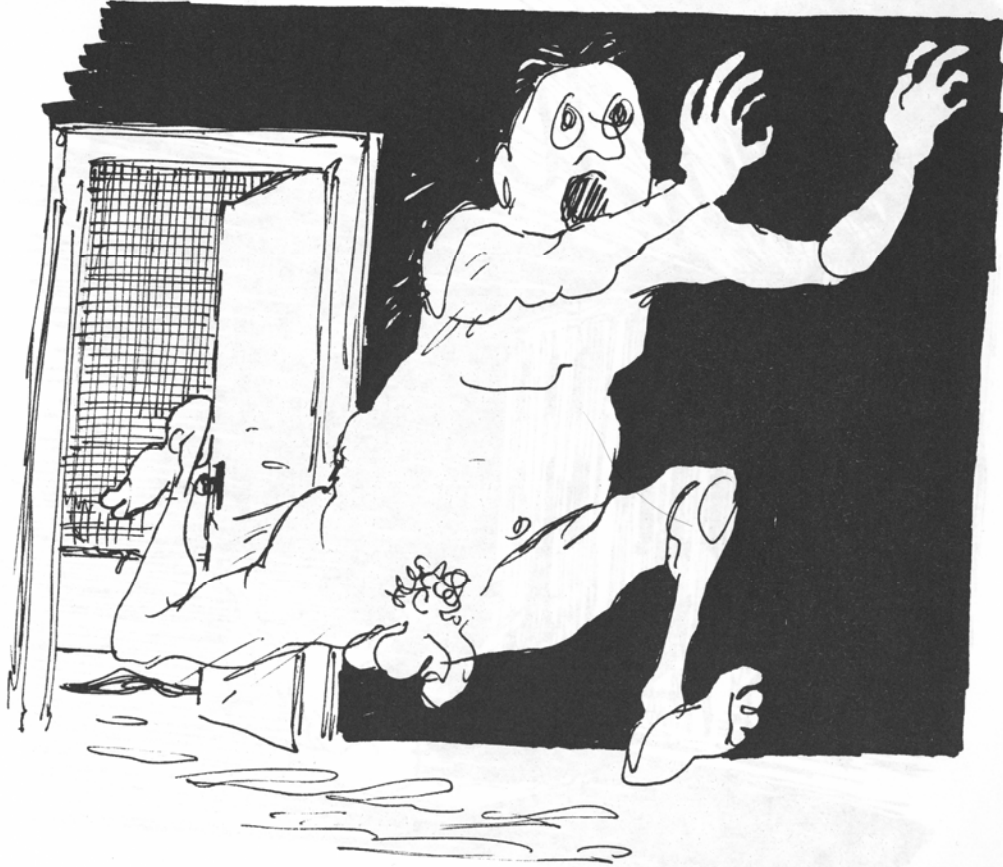


Figure 5.5. Detail from *Tantrum* (165).

An emphasis on sexual failure is, of course, absolutely inimical to pornotopic fantasy. Under the standard established in the famous *Ulysses* case, it would be hard to imagine any *hommes moyen sensuels* becoming aroused while reading either of these comic books.⁴⁹ Yet there is no question that by drawing genitalia, Eisner and Feiffer were treading close to a line recently established by the courts. In a case regarding the film *Carnal Knowledge* (1971), for which Feiffer wrote the screenplay, Justice Rehnquist had

⁴⁹ See *United States v. One Book Called "Ulysses" (1934)* and *United States v. One Book Entitled Ulysses by James Joyce (1934)* in *Censorship Landmarks* (New York and London: R. R. Bowker & Co., 1969), 94-101.

a few years earlier stated that since "the camera does not focus on the bodies of actors during scenes of 'ultimate sexual acts,' nor are the actors' genitals exhibited during those scenes," the film cannot be considered "patently offensive 'hard core' sexual conduct" (which it would need to be in order to be declared criminally obscene under the 1973 *Miller* standard).⁵⁰ *Contract* and *Tantrum* do not cross Rehnquist's line, as they represent their characters' genitals not during "scenes of 'ultimate sexual acts,'" but scenes of the *failure* of ultimate sexual acts—of, in other words, attempted sex. Feiffer, who followed the *Carnal Knowledge* case very closely, knew that his comic book for adults just barely skirted this definition of "'hard core' sexual conduct," and he knew from Lenny Bruce's 1964 trial, and from his experiences with syndication, that the four-letter words he included in *Tantrum* would not have been printable in his newspaper work.⁵¹ Eisner would likewise have been aware at least that in *Contract* he was representing interactions, and drawing body parts, that would never have been acceptable in his newspaper comics

⁵⁰ *Jenkins v Georgia* 418 U.S. 153 (1974).

⁵¹ In Feiffer's testimony in Lenny Bruce's 1964 obscenity trial, he was asked about his avoidance of four-letter words in "Sick, Sick, Sick" and "Feiffer," his strips produced for the *Village Voice* and syndication:

Kuh: ... have you, in all these years, found it necessary in any of your cartoons to use, and my apologies for using these words, "cocksucker," "motherfucker," "fuck," "shit," "piss"?

Feiffer: At the moment, Mr. Kuh, I'm working on a novel ...

Kuh: No, please answer my question first, Mr. Feiffer. In eight years of "Sick, Sick, Sick," now called "Feiffer," have you found it necessary to use any of those words?

Feiffer: I've found it at—I've found at times that I thought, not those words but other strong words might—would have been necessary, had I been able to get them in a newspaper, yes.

Unfortunately, I also know what you can and cannot get in newspapers, so I haven't gotten them in.

Quoted in Martin Garbus, "The People Against Lenny Bruce," in *Ready for the Defense* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 81-142. For more evidence of Feiffer's awareness of debates about obscenity and their relation to comic books, see his *Village Voice* strips from December 31, 1958, and August 20, 1964, reprinted in Feiffer, *The Explainers* (Seattle, Washington: Fantagraphics Books, 2008), 112, 415.

supplements.⁵² With their use of obscenity to describe sexual failure, they ensured that no one could ever think of *Contract* or *Tantrum* as intended for children.

VI. Distinguishing the Graphic Novel II: Anti-Pornography

The explicit images of penises and breasts, of rape and seduction, in *Contract* and *Tantrum* ensured that these comic books could not be sold to, read by, or thought of as appropriate for children, while the plots of sexual failure in which these explicit images appeared distinguished these books from the underground comix considered adolescent trash. Eisner went further, though, in distinguishing his work from the underground's productions, in that his graphic novel critiques the enthusiastic sexual displays that had proliferated in the work of comix artists and in the culture at large.

Eisner critiques excessive representation of sexuality both on the level of plot and in his own visual style. In "The Super," the second of the four stories in *Contract*, Eisner tells a story of sexual impropriety: Mr. Scuggs, the lonely superintendent of 55 Dropsie Avenue, papers his walls with pornographic posters and pin-up calendars; a ten-year-old tenant named Rosie notices Scuggs' lecherous gaze and offers him a glance at her genitals in exchange for a nickel. After briefly lifting her dress, the precociously malevolent Rosie poisons Scuggs' dog, steals his cash box, and then threatens to expose him as a pervert. Soon, Scuggs has been characterized as a "sex maniac" by an unidentified tenant (116)

⁵² As mentioned above, Eisner was very familiar with the taboo-breaking content of the comix, thanks to his business relationship with Denis Kitchen; the new covers and panels he created for Kitchen's *Spirit* reprints and Kitchen's anthology *Snarf* reflect his awareness of, and his discomfort with, the explicit sexual images and exuberant violence of the comix. See *Snarf* 3 (Princeton, Wisconsin, Kitchen Sink Enterprises, 1973) and *The Spirit*, 1-2 (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Kitchen Sink Enterprises, 1973).

and someone summons the police. Rather than face arrest as a child molester, and life without his dog, Scuggs shoots himself. The story, then, is a simple fable about how addiction to pornography leads directly to death.

Even more revealing, though, is the way Eisner tells this story. Reflecting his abhorrence of Scuggs' desires, Eisner represents the super's lust while keeping its objects deliberately off-scene. Eisner crops his frame at Rosie's waist, for example, as she lifts her dress, illustrating Scuggs in the act of looking rather than the object of his gaze (see figure 5.6). These panels provide a classic example of closure in comics, as described by Scott McCloud, in which "nothing is *seen* between the two panels, but *experience* tells you something *must* be there"—and here the image withheld is specifically the taboo object of Scuggs' lust.⁵³ Though his style is otherwise notable for its clarity and precision, Eisner renders the pin-up posters on the super's walls abstractly and indistinctly (105, 107-10), again ensuring that the objects of Scuggs' desire remain decidedly unavailable as titillations for the reader. The story's concern with the dangerous power of sexual spectacle is thus mirrored in Eisner's management of obscenity within the narrative.

⁵³ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 66.



Figure 5.6. Detail from *Contract* (111).

A similar dynamic obtains in "Cookalein," in which one of Eisner's youngest characters asks another, "Wanna watch the grown-ups doin' *dirty* things?" (167), one of the clearest references to Eisner's concern with the relations between children, adults, and obscenity. Throughout "Cookalein," the spectators of "*dirty* things" encounter highly disturbing images rather than the erotic or arousing ones they may expect. Instead of a titillating display of adult coupling, the two young children who spy on "grown-ups"

from the bushes witness Benny's attempted rape—not only a brutal and criminal act, but one that does not achieve sexual fruition (seeing as how Benny "didn't even penetrate"). Though they are thrilled for having indeed witnessed something "dirty," the spectacle does not inspire them to further their own sexual exploration, and it is not clear that they even understand what they have seen (172). Even more powerfully, after Willie's premature ejaculation, Missis Minkis's husband Irving appears, slaps her twice in the face, and then the couple proceeds to copulate enthusiastically while a stunned Willie, naked but for a blanket, looks on in wide-eyed terror (see figure 5.7). Far from the sexual pleasure that Willie hoped to enjoy, he sustains a lasting trauma: he bites down on a blanket to silence himself as he watches their sexual display. And his silence is permanent: he never speaks again in the story, which ends with him isolated on the fire escape of his family's apartment (179-80). Especially considering Eisner's acknowledgment that "Willie's story ... is essentially autobiographical" (xix), this scene can be read as dramatizing Eisner's deep unease with the pervasive display of graphic sexuality that he would encounter in 1960s and 1970s culture.



Figure 5.7. Detail from *Contract* (164).

Like Eisner's characters, all of his readers become, intentionally or not, spectators of graphic sexuality, and all of the exhibitions provided remain emetic, rather than aphrodisiacal, in intention and effect; Eisner's stories and drawings consistently associate the desire to view explicit sexuality with, in the words of his characters, the "sick" and the "dirty." Eisner also includes a brief critique of the other form of obscenity defined by the law of the 1960s, i.e., four-letter words; one character admonishes another for uttering the word "sex": "Shhah," she rebukes him, "Don't use dirty words!" (159). While it would be silly to simply equate this character's perspective with the author's, it is revealing that Eisner himself avoids "dirty words," limiting his vocabulary throughout *Contract* to tame expletives such as "shaddap" and "bum" (84-85).

Feiffer does not critique sexual display as Eisner does, but the fact that *Tantrum* ends happily with Leo and his wife Carol scampering off in the bodies of two-year-olds suggests obliquely the narrative's eschewing of the pornographic gaze in favor of presexual innocence. In both graphic novels, the artists represent sex as a crucial phenomenon of contemporary life without shying away from explicit imagery but rejecting the pornotopic, whether implicitly or explicitly. Feiffer reported as much to an interviewer just after the publication of *Tantrum*: "What I was interested in," he said, "was ... dealing with sexual life as one knew it to be."⁵⁴

VII. Distinguishing the Graphic Novel III: Maturity and Parenthood

⁵⁴ Henry Allen, "The Ever Dissenting Cartoonist at 50: Still Drawing on Bronx Angst," *Washington Post* (November 17, 1979): B1.

While neither *Contract* nor *Tantrum* can be characterized as strictly autobiographical, Eisner and Feiffer treat issues of fatherhood that dramatize their expectation of reaching an audience of middle-aged readers. Throughout his book, Feiffer focuses on Leo's resistance to adult duties—when Carol reminds him he has "responsibilities," he says, "Don't say that word! I hate it! *I hate it!*" (75). Later he advises a fellow baby, "Don't mature! Mature people do the shit work!" (107). While these jokes may be typical of Feiffer's *oeuvre*, the graphic novel diverges sharply from most of Feiffer's earlier work—and particularly from his closest model for *Tantrum*, the one-act play "Crawling Arnold," in which he first explored the joke of regression to infancy as a rejection of adulthood—in its emphasis on Leo's paternity.⁵⁵

Leo's teenaged son and daughter surface early on, as a source of his depression (6). He later complains, "At forty-two I hardly ever got my way. My kids got their way much more than I" (51). When he returns home briefly from his adventures as a two-year-old, Carol informs him not of her own reaction to his disappearance from her life, but of the ways his abandonment has affected their kids—"Your daughter is dealing hashish. . . . Your son has impregnated the girl next door" (68-69)—suggesting that his neglect of his responsibility to the family has impacted primarily their children. Though

⁵⁵ In his newspaper strips, Feiffer frequently satirized overbearing parents either implicitly or explicitly from a child's perspective—see the December 17, 1958, June 30, 1960, September 20, 1946, and July 2, 1964 strips for examples (reprinted in *The Explainers*, 109, 191, 314, 408)—but it is truly rare to find Feiffer strips that sympathize or identify with the challenges of parenthood. A few proto-*Tantrum* examples do exist, of course: one strip from November 15, 1962 jokes about how motherhood prevents a woman from achieving her professional ambitions ("I had grown up to be the one thing I never wanted to be—a mother"); the December 19, 1963 strip shows children plotting to punish their parents for buying the wrong Christmas presents; and the September 29, 1962 strip lampoons a father's disempowerment by his children. Reprinted in *The Explainers*, 322, 380, 529.

Parenthood is not much of an issue, either, in Feiffer's two novels, *Harry the Rat with Women* and *Ackroyd*; in neither is the protagonist a father, and when a parent-child relationship is discussed, as in the relationship between Otis Kaufman and his daughter in *Ackroyd*, the novel stays faithful to the child's perspective and not the parent's. See *Harry, the Rat with Women* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963) and *Ackroyd* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977). In "Crawling Arnold," the regressed title character is 35 and single, while in *Tantrum* Leo is 42, married, and the father of two children.

he ignores them through most of the action that ensues, Feiffer returns to Leo's children in the final pages: as Leo and Carol, both now represented as two-year-olds, toddle arm-in-arm toward a redemptive sunset, the children call to them from a third-story window. "But what about the children, Leo?" Carol asks, and Leo replies, closing the novel on a note of freedom, "We'll send 'em a check" (182-83). The most disabling stresses of adulthood, as Feiffer humorously represents them, are the demands made by one's children. That Leo solicits his parents' assistance early on, to no avail (21-42), suggests that the crisis animating *Tantrum* is Leo's struggle to accept that he is now a parent and no longer a child.

Eisner's title story, "A Contract with God," also concentrates on paternity; it opens on "the day Frimme Hersh buried Rachele, his daughter" (7). Eisner noted that he intended this story to explore "the subject of man's relationship with his God" (xvi) as expressed in the concrete terms of a legal contract. Frimme's contract takes material form—vaguely reminiscent of the Biblical tablets of the law, Frimme etches it on a stone—but Eisner never renders that text legibly, nor does he quote from it, and so the precise terms of Frimme's contract remain obscure. The story implies, however, that the crux of Frimme's contract has almost nothing to do with Judaism⁵⁶ and everything to do with his being a father: Frimme interprets the appearance of an abandoned baby on his doorstep as "part of his pact with God" (20), and the death of that child prompts Frimme to announce that God "violated [their] contract" (24). When, after abandoning his religion and living a dissolute life, Frimme has a new contract with God drawn up, he immediately imagines, as tears well in his eyes, that this new agreement will allow him to

⁵⁶ As Susanne Klingenstein rightly points out, individual contracts with God are not a feature of traditional Jewish culture (85); Eisner is not drawing upon *halakha*, but possibly on a folk tradition.

become a father again (51). In other words, Frimme's contracts are precisely coterminous with his fatherhood. Even aside from the revelation that Eisner based Frimme's story on the loss of his daughter, Alice, to leukemia (xvi), Frimme obviously suffers a type of tragedy—the death of a child—that is unique to parents. In differing respects, then, both *Tantrum* and *Contract* concern themselves with struggles endemic to parenthood. One cannot reject the duties of fatherhood, as Leo does, or suffer the loss of one's child, as Frimme does, without having been a parent in the first place.⁵⁷

Of course, parenthood had been a regular motif in newspaper comic strips since the 1920s, and, more importantly, the age and experience of a literary work's protagonist do not determine the age of its audiences: novels featuring parents are not read exclusively by parents any more than novels about African-Americans are read exclusively by African-Americans. Moreover, many undeniably literary novels, throughout the twentieth century, have featured children as their main characters. Still, the central attention to the crises of parenthood in Eisner's and Feiffer's pioneering graphic novels reflects these creators' artistic and imaginative responses to their own experiences as middle-aged fathers, as well as their hope of appealing to a mature audience—of parents rather than children—that would empathize with such conflicts. It's not an accident that a search through the massive stacks of underground comix will turn up dozens of acrimonious portraits of the conflict between teens and their abusive or insensitive parents, but precious few sensitive engagements with the challenge of raising

⁵⁷ On Eisner's struggles with his children, see Jon B. Cooke, "Just My Will: An Interview with Ann Eisner," *Comic Book Artist* 2:6 (November 2005): 54.

a teenage child.⁵⁸ Through a combination of their careful use of obscenity formally and within their plots, and in the stories of adulthood they chose to tell, Eisner and Feiffer strenuously distinguished their work from the underground comix, the mainstream comic book industry, and the newspaper comic strips.

VIII. Literary Comic Books as "Graphic" Novels

The strategies used by Eisner and Feiffer produced results immediately—*Tantrum*, in particular, was reviewed alongside novels in literary journals and trade publications⁵⁹—and since the rise of the graphic novel to prominence, *Contract* and *Tantrum* have certainly received some of the credit they deserve for pioneering in that field. Eisner is always mentioned in histories and bibliographies of comics and graphic novels, and although Feiffer has often been ignored, *Tantrum* is occasionally mentioned as an important early contribution.⁶⁰ Without overstating the quality of Eisner's and

⁵⁸ For an example of the former, see Joel Beck's "Father and Son, 1972," *Teenage Horizons of Shangrila* #2 (1972), reproduced in Rosenkranz, 176.

⁵⁹ See, e.g., Russell Davies, "The Cradle Falls," *Times Literary Supplement* (May 16, 1980): 552; Joseph Epstein, "Too Much Even of Kreplach," *The Hudson Review* (Spring 1980): 97-110; and "Tantrum," *Publisher's Weekly* 216 (July 23, 1979): 154.

⁶⁰ Histories and bibliographies of the graphic novel that feature *Contract* as a pioneering graphic novel and ignore *Tantrum* completely include Aviva D. Rothschild, *Graphic Novels: A Bibliographic Guide to Book-Length Comic* (Englewood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, 1995); Francisca Goldsmith, *Graphic Novels Now: Building, Managing, and Marketing a Dynamic Collection* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2005); Roger Sabin, *Adult Comics: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) and *Comics, Comix, and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* (New York, London: Phaidon, 1996).

Scott McCloud refers to *Tantrum* as one of the "inspired and innovative comics of our century" that "have never received recognition as comics, not so much in spite of their superior qualities as because of them" (18). Paul Gravett, in *Graphic Novels: Everything You Need to Know* (New York: Collins Design, 2005), mentions *Tantrum* briefly and devotes several pages to *Contract*, 38-41, 146. Steven Weiner's *Faster Than a Speeding Bullet: The Rise of the Graphic Novel* (New York: Nantier, Beall, Minoustchine, 2003), highlights both Eisner and Feiffer, 17-20, 22-24. Weiner also includes both *Contract* and *Tantrum* in

Feiffer's books—they are hardly the finest graphic novels ever published, nor are they even the sharpest work done by these authors—what bears emphasizing here is the precise nature of their contribution, in contrast to other pioneering graphic novels typically mentioned by both fan-historians and academic scholars as inaugurating this literary tradition. All of these pioneering works, like Eisner's and Feiffer's, attempted to establish an address to a sophisticated audience of adults; but they used different techniques to do so, and in some cases were less invested than Eisner or Feiffer in literary recognition. Whereas Eisner and Feiffer seized on obscenity as a means for literarizing their work, the other creators relied on violence or postmodernism to distinguish their work from children's comics.

Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), for one crucial example, brought ultraviolence to the superhero genre, stripping a classic Golden Era hero, Batman, of both the simplifications of the Comics Code and of the camp silliness ascribed to the character by the 1960s *Batman* sitcom. While Miller is rightly credited in histories of the graphic novel as a pioneer of the form, both in terms of the quality of his work and its reception in bookstores and the mainstream press, it is nonetheless important to note that his contribution was to reinvigorate an established genre within the mainstream comic book industry, what Pierre Bourdieu would call a "field of large-scale production," rather than

his *The 101 Best Graphic Novels* (New York: Nantier, Beall, Minoustchine, 2001), 26-29. Respected comics creator Neil Gaiman calls *Tantrum* his "all-time favorite graphic novel" in an essay titled "Read it Kid, It's Good for You," *Entertainment Weekly* 760 (April 16, 2004): L21. Eisner himself asserted in 1990 that "Feiffer's graphic novel 'Tantrum' ... is perhaps the most remarkable of all the efforts in modern years." "Getting the Last Laugh: My Life in Comics," *The New York Times* (January 14, 1990): BR26.

It's important to mention that to the extent that a collection of comic book-style stories, for adults, published by a mainstream book publisher in a format standardly used for literary fiction counts as a graphic novel, Feiffer had actually been publishing graphic novels since 1959, when the collection *Passionella* first appeared (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959). The distinctions that can be made between *Passionella* on the one hand and *Contract* and *Tantrum* on the other is that the former was a collection of stories that had appeared in serials, while the latter were originally produced for publication as books.

to establish a new position in the literary field, i.e., "the field of restricted production."⁶¹ Miller's violent comics—as well as the many imitations and adaptations of them now rampant throughout the comics and movie industries—returned the comic book to its pre-Code fascination with gore and pain, a development enabled by the shift to the direct market for comic books in the 1980s, but they have certainly not led the charge of comic books into American literary prestige.⁶² And, on the subject of nomenclature, a newspaper reporter has noted, "Some people call what Frank Miller creates graphic novels. But Miller himself proudly calls them 'big fat comic books.'"⁶³

The other pioneering graphic novel that tells a superhero story, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen* (1987) shucks off the legacy of the Comics Code and of unsophisticated audiences with a different tactic than Miller's.⁶⁴ The book marvelously deconstructs the conventions of a classic pop culture genre, undermining its premises and expanding its resonance with all the tricks of postmodernist fiction.⁶⁵ Moore's gift for pastiche, parody, and contrapuntal narrative structure suggest debts to great literary innovators, from Joyce to Nabokov, and his refinement of a lowbrow genre into

⁶¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 39; for an introduction to these terms, see Randal Johnson's introduction to the volume, "Pierre Bourdieu on Art, Literature and Culture," 15-16.

⁶² On the economics of the comic book industry as it privileged and determined the boundaries of superhero comics, see Mark C. Rogers, "Beyond Bang! Pow! Zap!: Genre and the Evolution of the American Comic Book Industry," PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1997.

⁶³ Quoted in Rhoades, 210.

⁶⁴ Moore doesn't embrace the term "graphic novel," either: "It's a marketing term ... it was one that I never had any sympathy with" Quoted in Rhoades, 216.

⁶⁵ The curators of a museum exhibit on superheroes and contemporary fashion have recently grouped *Watchmen* with *Dark Knight Returns*, remarking that "through their concatenation of Postmodernist preoccupations, *Dark Knight* and *Watchmen* are conscious attempts to elevate the cultural prestige of comic books." There's room for argument about whether *Dark Knight Returns* fits this description, but *Watchmen* certainly does. "The Postmodern Body," *Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy*, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (from May 7 to September 1, 2008), text reproduced online at <<http://www.metmuseum.org/special/superheroes/postmodern.asp>>, n/p.

complex narrative art has more in common with Jean-Luc Goddard's or Paul Auster's self-conscious revisions of the hardboiled detective story than with Miller's ultraviolent take on Batman. In fact, though the differences between them are significant, one could say that *Watchmen* approached the problem of comics' association with children in almost exactly the same way—i.e., through the gate of high-prestige intellectual postmodernism—as Art Spiegelman did in *Arcade*, *RAW*, and, most famously, *Maus*.

Beginning with his editorship of *Arcade*, in 1975, continuing with his founding of *RAW* in 1980, and culminating in *Maus*, first published as a book in 1986, Spiegelman did more than anyone to bridge the gap between the energy and inventiveness of the underground comix and prestigious institutions of high culture. With extraordinary talent and a never-flagging sense of irony and self-critique, Spiegelman brilliantly imported the core techniques of literary postmodernism and art into the arena of comics. He abandoned or sharply undermined the straightforward telling of linear narratives, insisted on pastiche and parody as central to his project, and integrated history—both formal and social—into his work in equal measures with a madcap silliness. Visually, as Douglas Wolk points out, the *Arcade* and *RAW* group of creators "incorporate a lot of distortion and avoid conventional prettiness."⁶⁶ *Maus* was the culmination of these efforts, certainly, and it is no coincidence that the author of *Maus* had always published the least predictable comics in *Arcade* and *RAW*, and insisted in all of his publications on the reintroduction of lost classics from the archive. Spiegelman was and continues to be the leading proponent of

⁶⁶ Wolk, *Reading Comics*, 52.

postmodernism in comics, and he was clear from the beginning about his desire for the difficulty and strangeness of his work to interpolate a sophisticated "adult" audience.⁶⁷

Maus, as everyone already knows, succeeded: it gained shelf space in bookstores for graphic novels; it inspired a whole generation of graphic novelists; its success at Pantheon made possible the investment in graphic novel publishing by traditional book publishers in recent years. A list of the literary honors bestowed on *Maus* could stretch on for pages, from the Pulitzer, to a passionate embrace by the literary academy, to recognition by the press. If anyone, anywhere, dares to suggest that a comic book cannot be literary, just give them *Maus*!

Without in any way impugning the literariness of the world's most hypercanonized graphic novel, it is worth mentioning the irony that Spiegelman's adult masterpiece has become fit and sometimes assigned reading for many teenagers and children. The relative absence of obscenity from *Maus* means that despite the horrifying violence it contains and the conceptual complexity of both its narrative strategies and representational choices, the book can be and has been mistaken as appropriate even for middle school students.⁶⁸ Note Spiegelman's profound dismay at discovering that the central conceit of his innovative graphic novel—"the specific use of mice to sympathetically portray Jews combined with the concept of cats as anti-Semitic oppressors"—had been taken on by an animated film for children, revealing that the

⁶⁷ "Arcade is gonna be a comics magazine for adults!" "Editorial: An Introduction," *Arcade* 1:1 (Spring 1975): 4.

⁶⁸ For the deliberate avoidance of obscenity in Spiegelman's work see, e.g., *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), 15.

premise, in and of itself, did not necessitate a sophisticated audience.⁶⁹ It is equally telling that Stephen Weiner, a children's librarian who has written enthusiastically about *Contract* and *Tantrum* in two book-length surveys of the graphic novel field, strongly recommended *Maus* and Eisner's *Fagin the Jew* but not *Contract* or *Tantrum* when he contributed to *The English Journal*, which is aimed at an audience of "English language arts teachers in junior and senior high schools and middle schools."⁷⁰ Another children's librarian, Michele Gorman, has warned her colleagues in *School Library Journal* that "there are several critically acclaimed graphic novels essential for building a core adult collection but inappropriate for your library's children or young adult section"—but then recommended both *Maus* and Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* enthusiastically for younger readers, reporting with regards to Miller's ultraviolent graphic novel, "I've never met a reader who didn't love this book, especially preteen and teenage boys."⁷¹

Some of the comics that supposedly weren't "just for kids anymore," then, and specifically the ones that relied on strategies other than obscenity for distinguishing themselves from traditional comics, have turned out to be acceptable reading for

⁶⁹ Spiegelman recalled: "I read an interview with Steven Spielberg that he was producing an animated feature film entitled *An American Tail*, involving a family of Jewish mice living in Russia a hundred years ago named the Mousekowitzes, who were being persecuted by Katsacks, and how eventually they fled to America for shelter. . . . I was appalled, shattered. . . . I went sleepless for nights on end, and then, when I finally did sleep, I began confusing our names in my dreams: Spiegelberg, Spielman. . . ." Quoted in Michael G. Levine, "Necessary Stains: Spiegelman's *Maus* and the Bleeding of History," *American Imago* 59:3 (Fall 2002): 330.

⁷⁰ Stephen Weiner, "Show, Don't Tell: Graphic Novels in the Classroom," *The English Journal* 94:2 (November 2004): 114-17.

⁷¹ Michele Gorman, "What Teens Want," *School Library Journal* (August 1, 2002) <<http://www.schoollibraryjournal.com/article/CA236064.html>>, n/p. For fascinating, provocative commentary on the still-relevant question of what it means that Americans have generally been willing to expose children to extreme violence but not to frank sexuality, see Gershon Legman, *Love and Death: A Study in Censorship* (New York: Breaking Point, 1949).

children.⁷² Eisner and Feiffer themselves went on to produce work that most observers would consider significantly more appropriate for children, but it seems unlikely that anyone would confuse *Contract* or *Tantrum* with this later work.⁷³ Perhaps revealing his self-consciousness about the effectiveness of obscenity for ensuring an adult audience, Eisner regularly told a story about what happened when Brentano's bookstore shelved *Contract* alongside reprints of newspaper comic strips in 1978. A father complained to the manager: "You have a comic book that shows a naked lady in with the *Beetle Bailey* books! ... I don't want my kid being exposed to that kind of stuff."⁷⁴ And unlike those employed by Miller, Moore, and Spiegelman, the tactics for establishing an adult audience that Eisner and Feiffer chose have not weakened with time.

A brief look at the work of another Jewish comics creator, Harvey Pekar, reinforces this analysis. Pekar self-published his *American Splendor* comic books beginning in 1976, and his series wasn't collected in book form until 1986, and then only

⁷² "Not just for kids anymore" has been something of a motto for the graphic novel boom since at least the early 1980s. It is repeated in dozens, if not hundreds, of articles and books about the industry's development; for one example, see Eric Bailey, "Golly Gee! Comic Books Aren't Just for Kids Anymore," *Los Angeles Times* (August 2, 1986), A1.

⁷³ A sharp decrease of graphic sexuality, slight increase in the use of four-letter words, and general tendency toward increasing appropriateness for children is a marked pattern in Eisner's post-*Contract* output. *The Dreamer* (1986) features a set of scenes consistent with those in *Contract*, in which a young comic book creator, Bill, meets a girl named Laverne at a party and their intercourse is represented more or less explicitly; the next day, after telling himself that "She's got class! ... That girl's real sensitive... we had something special together" Bill learns that Laverne is a prostitute. 36-37. Only brief glimpses of graphic sex appear in *Will Eisner's New York: Life in the Big City* (Princeton, Wisconsin: Kitchen Sink Press, 1986), e.g., 32, and in *City People Notebook* (Princeton, Wisconsin: Kitchen Sink Press, 1989), 31—though the word "shit" does appear in the former, 93. While *A Life Force* (Princeton Wisconsin: Kitchen Sink Press, 1988) tells tales of adultery and other liaisons, it does so with minimal explicitness, and later works like *Fagin the Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 2003) contain no obscenity at all.

It is interesting to note that aside from the famous *The Phantom Tollboth* (New York: Random House, 1964), on which Feiffer collaborated with his roommate Norton Juster, Feiffer did not turn to writing expressly for children until after *Tantrum*; since then, he has published mainly picturebooks that are marketed primarily to children. On his transition to this field, his relationship with Juster, and related topics, see Adams, "Jules Feiffer."

⁷⁴ Andelman, 292.

as a paperback—so in a sense Pekar's literary ambitions weren't as evident from the start as those of Eisner and Feiffer, who would've been disappointed to see their graphic novels printed in any format other than between the cloth covers of literary fiction. But from the first self-published issue of his comic, in the spring of 1976, Pekar was already anticipating what Eisner and Feiffer would produce in book form just a few years later; and, because the comics he wrote were illustrated by R. Crumb and other well-known comix artists, they serve, like Spiegelman's, as a bridge between the underground comix and the literary sensibilities of the nascent graphic novel. Pekar knew what he was doing, too: in an autobiographical story published in the fourth issue of *American Splendor*, in 1979, he states his ambitions, paralleling Eisner's and Feiffer's similar pronouncements from this period and in effect predicting the development of the literary graphic novel:

The guys who do that animal comic an' super-hero stuff for straight comics are really limited because they gotta try t'appeal to kids. Th' guys who do underground comics have really opened things up, but there are still plenty more things that can be done with 'em. They got great potential. You c'n do as much with comics as the novel or movies or plays or anything. Comics are words and pictures; you c'n do anything with words and pictures!⁷⁵

This insight, expressed in Pekar's characteristically casual diction, not only mirrors Eisner's and Feiffer's ambitions for their graphic novels, but also anticipates the opening salvo of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*.⁷⁶ It is not a coincidence, then, that Pekar's comics embrace a perspective on sex very similar to the one found in *Contract* and *Tantrum*: that is, the same willingness to depict sex explicitly, coupled with an

⁷⁵ Harvey Pekar, illustrated by R. Crumb, "The Young Crumb Story," *American Splendor* 1:4 (October 1979): n/p.

⁷⁶ McCloud, 5.

emphasis on sexual confusion, failure, and strangeness (as in, for example, Pekar's early stories "How I Spent My Summer Vacation: 1972" and "Love Story.")⁷⁷ Like Eisner and Feiffer, and unlike Spiegelman, Moore, or Miller, Pekar created in *American Splendor* a comic book that no one could mistake as kids' stuff—and when a publisher agreed to gather his comics into a book, the resulting anthology received an enthusiastic review, replete with comparisons to Raymond Carver, by none other than famed book reviewer Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times*.⁷⁸ And, like Eisner's and Feiffer's, Pekar's early obscene comics still have not been recommended to children.

An awareness of the role obscenity played in establishing the graphic novel's literariness in the work of Eisner, Feiffer, and Pekar might productively be reinscribed into the commonplace, if troublesome, name given to the form. Eisner hoped that the term "graphic novel" would lend legitimacy to book-length comics, and historians have mostly understood the term accordingly. What has not typically been remarked upon is the phrase's currency in American literary circles at least since the mid-19th century. By 1856 "graphic" could be taken to mean, among other things, "explicit, esp. in the depiction of sex or violence,"⁷⁹ and the term was often used to refer to novels with explicit content: in 1879, *The Washington Post* reported that the Russian government objected to Ivan Turgenev's "graphic novels."⁸⁰ "Graphic novel," in this historical usage

⁷⁷ *American Splendor* 1 (May 1976): n/p.

⁷⁸ Michiko Kakutani, "Picasso's Documented Imagination," *New York Times* (May 26, 1986), 13. For an excellent academic study of Pekar's work, see Joseph Witek, "'You Can Do Anything With Words and Pictures': Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*," in *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 121-56.

⁷⁹ "Graphic," Draft Additions June 2003, *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

⁸⁰ "Personal," *Washington Post* (July 2, 1879): 2.

as a noun with a modifying adjective, differs grammatically from the contemporary use of the term as a compound noun, of course, but for whatever reason many people continue to recall the older or more literal sense of the phrase when they hear about graphic novels today, especially because of the powerful contemporary association of the word "graphic" with its occasional prefix "porno-." Both editor Charles McGrath and librarian Aviva Rothschild have reported such confusion; Rothschild writes, "When I told noncomics readers that I was compiling a bibliography of graphic novels, the invariable response was, 'You're doing a bibliography of pornographic fiction?'"⁸¹ Such misunderstandings amuse knowledgeable comics readers, of course, because in recent years, publishers have successfully marketed superhero tales, poignant memoirs, historical fictions, and war reportage as graphic novels, but only in rare cases erotica.⁸²

Etymology is, in this instance, by no means a clear indicator of meaning: the "graphic" in "pornographic" stems from the Greek *graphos*, that is, "writing" (as in "writing about prostitutes"), which has little to do with either of the senses of "graphic"

⁸¹ Rothschild, xiii. McGrath's anecdote is very similar: "When I mentioned to a friend that I was working on an article about graphic novels, he said, hopefully, 'You mean porn?'" Spiegelman plays on words once again in his remark that, "Personally, I always thought that Nathanael West's *Day of the Locusts* was an extraordinarily graphic novel"—referring, presumably, to West's attention to classical painting and illustration as well as to the book's gruesome scenes of violence and sex. Cited in Sabin, *Adult*, 235. Don Gallo, editor of *English Journal*, makes precisely the same point in introducing Stephen Weiner's recommendations: "There was a time when calling a novel graphic meant the book was either sexually explicit or filled with gore, or both. Today, graphic novels are something else entirely: elaborately illustrated stories that look like high-class, book-length comics." "Bold Books for Innovative Teaching," *English Journal* 94:2 (November 2004): 114.

⁸² Alan Moore's and Melinda Gebbie's *Lost Girls* (Marietta, Georgia: Top Shelf Productions, 2006), which has been marketed as pornography, is a noteworthy recent exception. On contemporary erotic comics, see also Rhoades, 223. Hatfield observes that "ironically, Eisner's term"—which, when referring to non-literary comics wasn't originally Eisner's—"would eventually serve to legitimize a new, costlier way of selling comics to the initiated direct market fan," and that the comics and book industries' contemporary, somewhat "haphazard" use of the term to sell everything from "compilations of popular superhero comic book stories, to translated volumes of Japanese *manga*, to the rare original graphic novel designed for a non-fan audience"—the last being Eisner's vision of the graphic novel—makes for strange bedfellows on bookstore shelves. Hatfield, 29-30.

that are invoked in McGrath's and Rothschild's stories.⁸³ And those who discuss the origins and usefulness of the term "graphic novel" have generally avoided mentioning its obscene connotation, possibly because they assume artistic legitimacy and graphic explicitness are intrinsically contradictory.⁸⁴ As in American modernism as analyzed by Loren Glass and British modernism analyzed by Celia Marshik, though, an engagement with obscenity was itself central to the artistic and cultural project of the graphic novel.⁸⁵ Thus, while Eisner and the publishers who have embraced the term did not intend it as such, and while strict etymology does not demand it, maybe it is not just a terminological joke to suggest that we keep obscenity in mind when discussing graphic novels.

IX. Jews, the Literary Field, and the Invention of the Graphic Novel

If an engagement with obscenity was one significant technique through which lowbrow comic books were transformed into literary graphic novels, why was it that Jews, in particular, put this tactic to work in the late 1970s? Eisner thrusts his Jewish identity forward in *A Contract with God*, beginning it with images of a stereotypically religious Jew and sprinkling Yinglish throughout the collection. The very font in which

⁸³ Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking, 1987), 1-2.

⁸⁴ This perspective, however misguided, has a long history. Allison Pease notes that "the discourses of aesthetics and pornography became publicly recognized at the same historical moment and were in many ways considered mutually exclusive." Allison Pease, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Aesthetics of Obscenity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), xii. In Walter Kendrick's formulation, one "trend of public opinion" since at least the 1930s has been that "whatever 'pornography' might be, it was not 'art': whatever 'art' might be, it was not 'pornography.'" Kendrick, 188.

⁸⁵ Loren Glass, "#\$%^&*!?: Modernism and Dirty Words," *Modernism/Modernity* 14:2 (April 2007): 209–23. Celia Marshik, *British Modernism and Censorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Eisner renders the word "God" in the title of the book evokes classic Hebrew script, kitschily but unmistakably, with its pointed serifs and thick, curved strokes. Eisner himself remarked in the introduction to the 1984 Yiddish translation of the title story, "אָן אַבמאַך מיט גאָט' במילא געווען ייִדישע" ["[that] the pictures in 'A Contract with God' were, of necessity, Jewish"].⁸⁶

Feiffer, by contrast, does not identify any of the characters in *Tantrum* as Jewish; as is true throughout most of his *oeuvre*—including his *Village Voice* strips, his fiction, and screenplays—he universalizes the narrative and downplays its rootedness in any personal experience, whether Jewish or otherwise.⁸⁷ "It's everybody's story," the book jacket of *Tantrum* proclaims. When the book's protagonist returns to the "old neighborhood" to see his parents, his memories are not of Passover seders or Yiddish conversations, but of how his father "got drunk one Christmas and tried to burn down the

⁸⁶ Will Eisner, "Hakdome," *An Opmakh Mit Got* (Amsterdam: Stripantiquariaat, Lambiek, 1984), n/p.

⁸⁷ Feiffer's *Village Voice* strips are notable for the way they avoid mentioning Jewishness even when discussing Jewish issues; the Holocaust, Israel, and anti-Zionism are discussed without using any of these terms in one exemplary strip (June 20, 1963, reprinted in *The Explainers*, 355), while in a strip on protest marchers, Feiffer cuts off a character when he is about to utter the word "Jew" (December 9, 1965, reprinted in *The Explainers*, 484). Jews are mentioned explicitly in only a few strips, like one about anti-Semitic sororities (January 7, 1965, reprinted in *The Explainers*, 437). Feiffer's novel *Ackroyd* (1977) is one of his few works that identifies some of its characters—Otis Kaufman, a UJA fundraiser, and his wife Esther and daughter Tina—as Jews; in most of his work Jewishness is joked about as a fungible identity that can be slipped into or out of. In "Crawling Arnold," for example, Arnold is revealed to have been Jewish for one week; "the next week he converted to Buddhism" (51). In an apparently unpublished essay written a few years after *Tantrum* was published, "Someday My Prince Will Come Again," Feiffer recalls his own fantasies about escaping his ethnicity: "Not for a moment did I believe I was meant to live in the Bronx. ... A terrible mistake had been made. At four and a half, I learned that only movies could correct it." Watching *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1936), "convinced" Feiffer that his "suspicions were correct: I was not the son of Dave and Rhoda Feiffer, I was kidnapped. I was not Jewish. I was High Episcopalian. And I was English." Box 22, Jules Feiffer Papers, Jules Feiffer Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. In another telling remark, Feiffer told Gerald Nachman that Lenny Bruce's frankness about being Jewish "frightened" him, "because when I grew up, you didn't wear your Jewishness on your sleeve, because you were essentially among enemies." Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Back Stage Books, 2004), 397.

house"—hardly a stereotypical Jewish experience.⁸⁸ Yet even though his work has mostly avoided explicitly Jewish characters or settings, readers and critics have still perceived Feiffer as a Jewish writer; in Vincent Canby's review of the film *Carnal Knowledge*, for example, he noted that "although neither [of the main characters are] ... identified as Jewish, the style of their language and the style of their introspection come from a school of American writing whose authors (Feiffer, as well as Bellow, Roth, Gold, Friedman) have successfully transformed a quite specific, ethnic urban experience into dreams and nightmares that are, rather grandly, all-American."⁸⁹ Feiffer himself may have encouraged such a reading of ethnicity into his work, when it was not already explicit, with his joke in *The Great Comic Book Heroes* that Eisner's characters in *The Spirit* "were ... identifiable by that look of just having got off the boat. The Spirit reeked of lower middle-class: his nose may have turned up, but we all knew he was Jewish."⁹⁰ What does it mean, then, that Eisner and Feiffer—along with Spiegelman and Pekar, two other pioneers of the literary comic book—were Jewish? If it wasn't simply coincidence that Eisner and Feiffer seized on obscenity to elevate comic books to a higher level of

⁸⁸ Jules Feiffer, *Tantrum* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 5. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁸⁹ Vincent Canby, "I Was Sorry to See It End," *The New York Times* (July 4, 1971), D1, 18. On the question of Jewishness in Feiffer's works, see also Whitfield, 178-80.

⁹⁰ Feiffer, *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Book, 2003), 39. On a similar note, in a 2008 interview Feiffer was asked, "Mothers make a number of appearances in [*The Explainers*], but fathers don't tend to show up nearly as often. Why is that?" He responded: "Well, if you came from a Jewish family, you wouldn't have asked this question." Sam Adams, "Jules Feiffer," *A.V. Club* (July 29, 2008) <http://www.avclub.com/content/interview/jules_feiffer/3>.

Speaking to another interviewer, Feiffer said, "I seem to belong to that fast-vanishing breed of secular Jews who didn't make a big thing of their Jewishness, any more than they made a big thing of their neighborhoods." At the same time, he "acknowledged that 'the angst, attitude, and atmosphere' of his weekly strip derives from a Jewish sensibility." Matthew Surrence, "Jules Feiffer draws curtain on theater, writes for kids," *The Jewish News Weekly of Northern California* (March 8, 1996) <http://www.jewishsf.com/content/2-0-/module/displaystory/story_id/3143/edition_id/55/format/html/displaystory.html>.

literary prestige, surely it must reveal something about these projects that both men were self-identified Jews born and raised in New York—mustn't it?

In order to answer this question, it is worthwhile to juxtapose it to a very similar one that has been raised, repeatedly, about the dawn of the superhero in American comic books. NPR's David Bianculli expressed the general curiosity, while interviewing Mark Evanier on *Fresh Air* about his biography of Jack Kirby: "So many of the key figures in the Golden Age of comics ... they're all Jewish. Why so many, and why so influential?"⁹¹ Several books have been devoted to answering these questions, as have a couple of major museum exhibitions.⁹² Unfortunately, these books and exhibits, and most of the many newspaper and magazine articles that have discussed the issue, have indulged in the most lamentable tactics of Jewish cultural studies: essentialism and group psychology. These studies and essays trot out one silly generalization and implausible reading after another: science fiction appealed to Jews because they were "targets of prejudice"; the Fantastic Four are Jewish in that they are a family and "family is the very heart of the Jewish community"; the destruction of Superman's planet Krypton rewrites the Kabbalistic *shevirat ha-Kelim*.⁹³ Of course, midrashic or allegorical readings of Jewishness into non-

⁹¹ David Bianculli, "Biography Details the 'King of Comics,'" *Fresh Air* (May 21, 2008), <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=90647673>>.

⁹² Danny Fingerth, *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero* (New York: Continuum, 2007), and Simcha Weinstein, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey!: How Jewish History, Culture and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero* (Baltimore, Maryland: Leviathan Press, 2006); "Superheroes: Good and Evil in American Comics," The Jewish Museum (September 15, 2006 to January 28, 2007); "Zap! Pow! Bam! The Superhero: The Golden Age of Comic Books," The Jewish Museum of Florida (October 16, 2007 to April 30, 2008); Harry Brod, "The Superman Code," *Tikkun* (July 9, 2006) <<http://www.tikkun.org/magazine/reviews/article.2006-07-09.0335047863>>.

⁹³ Fingerth, 27; Weinstein, 28, 74. Douglas Wolk's essay "Just Plain Super," *Nextbook.org* (January 15, 2008) <<http://www.nextbook.org/cultural/feature.html?id=739>> insightfully critiques Fingerth's and Weinstein's books. Arie Kaplan's *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2008) mostly steers clear of such errors, and acknowledges that "if any Jewish

Jewish or ecumenical stories constitute a venerable tradition, but it is crucial not to confuse such deliberately anachronistic or esoteric literary interpretations with the history of culture. As this dissertation has argued repeatedly vis-à-vis obscenity, there is nothing inevitable about Jews participating in the creation of comic books, and despite the tendency of cultural theorists from Freud to Martin Jay to slide back into such ethnic essentialism, there is nothing fundamentally Jewish (or anti-Jewish) about visual culture or telling stories with pictures.⁹⁴ As Laurence Roth declares, sensibly, "the graphic novel ... is no more Jewish than the novel is Spanish or English or Russian."⁹⁵

Essentialism and simplistic psychological readings aside, then, the Jewish role in the creation of the superhero comic book, and in the genesis of the literary graphic novel in the 1970s, can be explained by following Brodhead's program for a "history of literary access." Sensible observers of the creation of the superhero comic books have insisted that the preponderance of young Jewish men in that industry was caused by socioeconomics, the exclusion of Jews from related industries, and some measure of historical accident—and certainly *not* an essential or mystical link between Jews *qua* Jews and supernatural adventure stories. For the purpose of this chapter, what bears

symbolism did seep out" in the work done by the Jewish creators of the first major superheroes, "it was purely subconscious" (43).

⁹⁴ Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (New York: Vintage, 1939); Martin Jay, "The Ethics of Blindness and the Postmodern Sublime: Levinas and Lyotard," in *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 543-86. For correctives to such popular misconceptions about Jewish aniconism, see, e.g., Kalman P. Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denial of the Visual* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Richard Cohen, *Jewish Icons: Art and Society in Modern Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

⁹⁵ Laurence Roth, 465. Handling similar issues in the somewhat higher-stakes context of discussing the alleged "Berlin-Jewish spirit," Peter Gay makes this point very clearly: "Just as there was no Jewish way to cut furs, there was no Jewish way to paint portraits, play Beethoven, produce Ibsen, or fence in the Olympics." Gay, *Freud, Jews and Other Germans: Masters and Victims in Modernist Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 181.

emphasis is that most of the young Jewish men who created superhero comics would have preferred to be working in higher prestige arts. In one of the more reliable histories of the Golden Era, Gerard Jones makes this clear: "Rough-edged Jewish kids knew they had a steep hill to climb if they wanted to become 'high-class' illustrators" for magazines and advertising agencies, he writes, "not only because of editors' prejudices but also because of the costs of the training, studio lighting, and live models needed for that perfect sheen."⁹⁶ Stan Lee echoes this point, discussing his pseudonym and early aspirations as a writer:

My birth name was Stanley Martin Lieber, a name I loved and was very proud of. In fact, I seem to remember practicing signing that name over and over again, as if trying to create the perfect signature for the day when I'd have to give out my autograph after I had written *The Great American Novel*. When I entered the comics field in 1940, comics were not held in high regard at that time—and that's putting it mildly. Not wanting my name to be sullied by them, I used the pen name of Stan Lee, leaving Stanley Martin Lieber for the great novel to come.⁹⁷

Lee was not just an accidental comics writer and editor, then, but a novelist *manqué*. Just as Eisner and *Batman* creators and artists Bob Kane and Jerry Robinson would have preferred jobs in advertising or magazine illustration, where they could have earned higher wages and accumulated cultural capital, Lee would have most liked to write for Maxwell Perkins or William Shawn.⁹⁸ But because of the dynamics of literary access in their time, what they ended up doing was making comics for disreputable printers, while

⁹⁶ Gerald Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 135.

⁹⁷ Stan Lee, "Foreword," in Fingerroth, 10.

⁹⁸ On Robinson, see Fingerroth, 27. Feiffer recalls: "One's ambitions were to break into the field through comics, move on to newspaper strips, and then ideally go into magazine illustrations for *The Saturday Evening Post* or *Esquire*." Jon B. Cooke, "Jules Feiffer: His Early Years with Will Eisner," *Comic Book Artist* 2:6 (November 2005): 117.

a smaller number of wealthier or luckier Jews made the connections necessary to seize opportunities in the fields of literature, advertising, and magazine illustration. The comics creators didn't sink quite as low as the smutmongers aptly described as "pariah capitalists" by Jay Gertzman, but they certainly occupied an analogous if not identical position to the generation of young Jewish publishers who, as Jonathan Freedman puts it in *The Temple of Culture*, "because they were positioned outside the cultural dominant and excluded from its traditional culture industries ... were able in subtle and not-so-subtle ways to change the substance of the industry they entered and, through it, the very texture of American culture itself."⁹⁹

The creation of the graphic novel in the late 1970s, then, can be understood as a striking result of the shift of one group of Jews in New York publishing in the years after World War II, paired with the legacy of another group in the creation of comics. Knowing that Eisner and Feiffer are Jewish tells us very little, in fact, about the work they produced (even when it comes to the explicitly Jewish subject matter handled in *Contract*), about their use of obscenity, or even about their psychological links with Judaism or Jewish history. It tells us much more about the changed opportunities and positioning of Jews in American publishing and literary circles at the time.

To put it simply, by the mid-1970s, Jewishness *was* literary in the United States. American Jewish writers wrote books with or without Jewish themes and won every literary prize, including, for example, the top prize in the O. Henry Awards in 1971, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1978, and 1980, and Nobels in 1976 and 1978. E. L. Doctorow's \$2 million advance for the paperback rights to *Ragtime* in 1975 was the largest such

⁹⁹ Gertzman, *Bookleggers and Smuthounds: The Trade in Erotica, 1920-1940* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 15-48; Freedman, *The Temple of Culture: Assimilation and Anti-Semitism in Literary Anglo-America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 175.

agreement signed that decade.¹⁰⁰ The heads of many of the most venerated publishing firms were Jewish; no longer minor or marginal, the firms started by Jews in the interwar years had expanded, and Random House, in particular, had grown by 1975 into a company with revenues of almost \$100 million annually.¹⁰¹ Many of the other participants in the system of literary production, from the book reviewers to the buyers and agents, were also Jewish. If the proportion of Jews on the faculties of English literature departments did not rise as rapidly as it did in law schools and history departments, Jews still accounted for 13% of the English professors "in the better universities" by the mid-1970s.¹⁰²

Though Truman Capote's petulant claims of a "Jewish Mafia," "a clique of New York-oriented writers who control much of the literary scene" weren't accurate,¹⁰³ there was truth to Edward Hoagland's amiable recollection that "a new establishment" of Jews in American literature had been created in the 1950s.¹⁰⁴ That a novel about a Catholic boy's experiences growing up in Iowa could go to press with the absurd title *Memories of a Non-Jewish Childhood* (1971) suggests how widely this sense of Jewish dominance of

¹⁰⁰ John Tebbel, *Between Covers: The Rise and Transformation of Book Publishing in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 424.

¹⁰¹ Tebbel, *Between Covers*, 381.

¹⁰² Stephen Steinberg, *The Academic Melting Pot: Catholics and Jews in American Higher Education* (New York: Transaction Publishers, 1977), 122.

¹⁰³ *Truman Capote: Conversations*, edited by M. Thomas Inge (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), provides an edifying survey of Capote's comments about Jews in contemporary American literature, made repeatedly between 1964 and 1973 ("in a thousand interviews and on the *Johnny Carson Show*," as Capote himself claimed), and culminating with Capote's statement that "The truth of the matter about it is, the entire cultural press, publishing... criticism... television... theater... film industry... is almost 90% Jewish-oriented. I mean, I can't even count on one hand, five people of any importance—of real importance—in the media who aren't Jewish. ... I've said it for years: 'Here's this god-damned Jewish Mafia working tooth and tong on the *New York Review of Books*, the *New York Times*, whether they're doing it consciously or not.' And mostly they're doing it consciously." 42, 158-59, 167, 199, 289.

¹⁰⁴ Edward Hoagland, "On Not Being a Jew," *Commentary* 45:4 (April 1968): 61.

the literary field had spread.¹⁰⁵ The same year, in a playful self-interview in the *New York Times*, ostensibly conducted by Henry Bech—the fictional Jewish novelist who is the protagonist of the stories collected in his *Bech: A Book* (1970)—John Updike explained that the Bech stories "had not so much been about a Jew as about a writer, who was a Jew with the same inevitability that a fictional rug-salesman would be an Armenian."¹⁰⁶ As much as this can be read as Updike's satire of Capote's paranoia, the joke contains more than a grain of truth. In the 1970s, to write as a Jew, or to write about Jewish life, was not a liability or an obstacle to one's literary access, prestige, or marketability. Leslie Fiedler called it "the great take-over by Jewish-American writers of the American imagination."¹⁰⁷ In short, in the years between 1920 and 1970, American Jews had transformed themselves into central players in the American culture of letters.

How exactly this came to pass cannot be fully sketched here; the available literary histories of the American Jewish literary boom offer a jumping off point for understanding this crucial development, though scholars have only begun to treat the mechanics of the publishing industry and the crucial relationships between Jewish publishers, authors, critics, and readers.¹⁰⁸ What's most important for the history at issue

¹⁰⁵ Robert Byrne, *Memories of a Non-Jewish Childhood* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1971).

¹⁰⁶ Henry Bech, "Henry Bech Redux," *The New York Times* (November 14, 1971): BR3.

¹⁰⁷ Leslie Fiedler, "Master of Dreams: The Jew in the Gentile World," *Partisan Review* 34:3 (Summer 1967): 347.

¹⁰⁸ The tremendous role of Jewish publishers, editors, agents, critics, and other contributors to the production of literature during the boom of American Jewish writing in the 1950s and 1960s has not even been mentioned, let alone studied in detail, in many of the finest studies of this literature, including Louis Harap's admirable *In the Mainstream: The Jewish Presence in Twentieth-Century American Literature, 1950s-1980s* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), Mark Schechner's *After the Revolution: Studies in the Contemporary Jewish American Imagination* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987), and Chametzky, et al., eds., *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001). Theodore L. Gross at least notes one aspect of the phenomenon, in his remark that "universities ... have provided the most compatible setting for the Jewish-American renaissance" in *The Literature of*

here is that by the late 1970s, when Eisner and Feiffer decided to create literary comics to be published as original hardcover books, the ascent of Jewishness to high literary prestige in the United States was already a *fait accompli*. When, in his speech notes, Feiffer kidded about his envy for the lifestyle of a serious writer, he was not imagining that life. He was friendly with Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, and any number of other authors who had been hailed throughout the 1970s as the leading American literary practitioners, and who received the sort of adulation that Feiffer described.¹⁰⁹ The editor who suggested that Feiffer write *The Great Comic Book Heroes* was E. L. Doctorow, who went on to publish *The Book of Daniel* (1971) and *Ragtime* (1975) and be hailed as a leading American Jewish author. Feiffer himself had won some prestigious awards, of course, just never for his longform narrative comics. Eisner's comparison of his own output to that of the American Jewish literati was explicit, at least in retrospect: "I've read *The Adventures of Augie March*," he told an interviewer late in his life. "I want to tell you that Bellow is doing nothing more than what I'm doing. As a matter of fact, his reach in that book is no wider than my reach in the books I've done. He got a Nobel Prize from that. I've been selling the same pretzel on the same street corner."¹¹⁰ The comparison isn't random; Bellow and Eisner had been born two years apart and raised in considerably similar circumstances. Any writer or artist, in any field, might have been jealous of

American Jews (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 176. Jonathan Freedman's *The Temple of Culture* is the best model for how necessary a study of publishing and wider cultural history is as a supplement to more traditional literary analysis in the particular case of the American Jewish literature produced after WWII, as Freedman sensibly relates the phenomena of Jewish writers' successes in this period with parallel developments in academia and the publishing industry.

¹⁰⁹ See also Feiffer's newspaper strip from January 10, 1963, in which he has his semi-autobiographical stand-in, Bernard Mergendeiler, mention that he "say[s] names ... like 'Bellow' and 'Malamud' and 'Albee'" to women to "to show them that I wasn't a lot of hot air." Reprinted in *The Explainers*, 332.

¹¹⁰ Hajdu, "Good Will," 31.

Bellow's massive international fame and prestige, but it is hardly surprising that an artist from a background as similar to Bellow's as Eisner was would have been.

Eisner and Feiffer created their first comics at a time when, as Jews, they would have faced obstacles in the more prestigious fields for which they had inclinations and talents. They pioneered the graphic novel three and a half decades later, when their Jewishness was not only no longer an obstacle to cultural prestige, but a significant aid in obtaining it. As Bourdieu would have it, "The propensity to move towards the economically most risky positions, and above all the capacity to persist in them (a condition for all avant-garde undertakings which precede the demands of the market), even when they secure no short-term economic profit, seem to depend to a large extent on possession of substantial economic and social capital."¹¹¹ Feiffer testifies to the relevance of this proposition to the situation of the nascent graphic novel in the late 1970s, noting that he had thought about a cartoon novel for decades but had been put off by his own "laziness" and "fear," and the lack of "real precedents in form": "all seemed very risky."¹¹² The fact that what changed his mind was his fiftieth birthday suggests the truth of Bourdieu's insight that reserves of economic and social capital often undergird artistic innovation. Not only were Eisner and Feiffer financially secure when they embarked on their pioneering graphic novel projects, but they also possessed the cultural capital conferred on them by their decades of work, and the advantages, in terms of literary access, conferred by their connections with Jews in the literary establishment.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 67.

¹¹² Box 56, Jules Feiffer Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹¹³ Eisner recalled of the mid-1970s: "By then, I had a few coins in my pocket and so I was able to afford to spend the whole year doing something without worrying about whether or not I'm going to have enough

This took very different forms for the two authors, and I do not mean to suggest that Jewishness guaranteed them any advantages: Eisner's work could just as easily be rejected by Oscar Dystel, the Chairman and CEO of Bantam Books, as Feiffer's could be accepted by his old friend Robert Gottlieb, who was the Editor-in-Chief and Publisher of Knopf.¹¹⁴ But the fact that Eisner could even arrange a meeting with Dystel—who, as it turns out, was born in the same Bronx where Eisner grew up, lived for a time on the Lower East Side with six other people "in an apartment that should have accommodated no more than five people," and had parents who met in a garment factory—distinguished him from the vast majority of underground comix artists.¹¹⁵ The publisher who did agree to print and sell *Contract*, Norman Goldfine, was an old friend of Eisner's, having worked with him on various commercial publishing projects, including *The Complete World Bartender Guide* (1977). In a recent interview, Goldfine remembered being pleased to help Eisner with a comic book that evoked both Eisner's childhood and his own: "[These were] all experiences which I went through growing up as a Jew in New York City... I grew up in a tenement in Brooklyn. I used to go up to the Jewish Catskills, in what was referred to as a *kokhaleyn*, a Jewish bungalow colony."¹¹⁶

bread to eat. So I decided I would start what I later called a 'graphic novel'... ." Jon B. Cooke, "Will Eisner: The Creative Life of a Master," *Comic Book Artist* 2:6 (November 2005): 43.

¹¹⁴ Gottlieb has recalled coming up with a book idea in the mid-1970s: "I thought, I am a Jew who knows nothing about Jewishness. I grew up in an atheist household; I never attended anything. I thought that Chaim [Potok] could write a very popular and useful book that might instruct someone like me." The result was Potok's *Wanderings* (1978), and Gottlieb's comment reflects not only an attention on his part to his Jewishness, but also his sense of the marketability in the 1970s of a book about Jewish history and culture. See Philip Gourevitch, ed., *The Paris Review Interviews* (New York: Picador, 2006), 349.

¹¹⁵ See David Finn, "An Interview with Oscar Dystel," *Move Magazine* 10 <<http://www.ruderfinn.com/move/issue-10/the-fragility-of-democracy.html>>.

¹¹⁶ Bob Sennett, *The Complete World Bartender Guide* (New York: Golden Apple Publications, 1977); telephone interview with Norman Goldfine, August 29, 2008.

Contract and *Tantrum* were, unsurprisingly, received as contributions to the field of American Jewish writing. In one of the first published reviews of *Contract*, Dennis O'Neil compared the graphic novel favorably to "the stories of Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, and Isaac Singer [sic]."¹¹⁷ A decade before *Tantrum* appeared, meanwhile, the *Los Angeles Times*' staff book reviewer, Robert Kirsch, remarked of *Portnoy's Complaint* that "all of it is better told in a Feiffer cartoon."¹¹⁸ In a review in the *Times Literary Supplement*—which had previously reviewed nine of Feiffer's books—Russell Davies compared *Tantrum* not just to Kafka, but also to Philip Roth's *The Breast* and to Woody Allen's movies.¹¹⁹ It is telling that Joseph Epstein included *Tantrum* in a survey of recent literary fiction in 1980 that was titled "Too Much Even of Kreplach"—borrowing an idiom from Isaac Bashevis Singer—and in which Epstein sardonically noted, among other wry observations, that sex and Jewishness were so common as to be unsurprising in the American literature of the late 1970s.¹²⁰ That critics, including Epstein, were skeptical about the form of the graphic novel is to be expected; more noteworthy is that when they did evaluate Eisner's and Feiffer's graphic novels as literary works, they considered them in relation to and alongside works of American Jewish literature.

X. Eisner and Feiffer as Pioneers

¹¹⁷ Dennis O'Neil, "Winners and Losers: Harsh Memories from Will Eisner," *The Comics Journal* 46 (May 1979): 52-53.

¹¹⁸ Robert Kirsch, "Roth Novel: More of His Sour, Limited Statement," *Los Angeles Times* (February 16, 1969): 34.

¹¹⁹ Davies, 552.

¹²⁰ Joseph Epstein, "Too Much Even of Kreplach," *Hudson Review* 33:1 (Spring 1980): 97-110.

There is no essential or transhistorical link between Jews and the graphic novel any more than there is such a link between Jews and the superhero (or, for that matter, between Jews and stand-up comedy or Hollywood films or pastrami). Yet Jewishness matters in the story of the graphic novel because it was one of the crucial conditions that structured the positioning of comic books in the literary field, first in the 1930s and then again in the late 1970s. Eisner and Feiffer pioneered the graphic novel, and Eisner turned to Jewish subject matter, at a time when their Jewishness aided this *littérisation*.

Eisner and Feiffer did not create extraordinarily successful graphic novels. It is no accident that *Contract* and *Tantrum* did not achieve the sort of recognition that Spiegelman did with *Maus* or that Alison Bechdel has much more recently with *Fun Home*, the graphic novel (in the sense of "literary comic book," though it happens to be nonfiction, and also in the sense that Bechdel represents sexuality explicitly) that within the first year of its publication had been named the best book of the year by *Time* magazine and featured prominently in *PMLA*. Eisner's and Feiffer's works constitute only the awkward prehistory of the genre; it makes sense to speak of them as pioneering, and to continue to read them, not because they are excellently realized works—sharp and insightful critiques of *Contract*, particularly, have proliferated alongside an ever-growing cult of Eisner appreciation¹²¹—but because of what they started, and how they did it. They were the context for *Maus*, for the first book-length *American Splendor*, and for the vast range of literary fiction in the form of comic books that has followed. They

¹²¹ See, e.g., Klingenstein; Laurence Roth justly notes: "*Contract*, while visually inventive and accomplished, is by no means a success in terms of its drafting of literary narrative strategies for service in the graphic novel. A good number of characters in the book, primarily the sexually voracious women and the nebishy men, fail to transcend stereotype, while the action sometimes veers toward melodrama and the plots too often take O. Henry as their model—the twist ending becomes a kind of narrative tic." 467-68.

forcefully excluded children from the audience for comic books, and that was a major step toward *littérisation*. And they should remind us of the role that Jewish culture makers and Jewish subject matter could play in *littérisation* in the 1970s.

It makes sense, meanwhile, to end this particular study of Jews and obscenity in American literature with the graphic novel not because 1980 was the last time that there would be intriguing or compelling intersections between Jewishness and obscenity in North American literature and culture—it certainly wasn't—but because Eisner's and Feiffer's embrace of obscenity to drag comics into the literary circles of their Jewish peers signals the investment of Jewish obscenity in American literature with prestige.

CHAPTER 6.
Conclusion: Obscenity Now

Charles Rembar declared the "End of Obscenity" in the late 1960s, but no thoughtful observer of American law and culture, Rembar included, can credit that claim as anything more than polemical overstatement.¹ Obscenity does not end, in the abstract sense that transgressions of social, literary, and linguistic conventions will always be possible. Even obscenity in Rembar's much narrower and more concrete sense of the term, which has been the subject of this dissertation—that is, explicit representations of sex and uses of taboo words—continued to occasion debates in the U.S. long after the freeing of *Fanny Hill* from postal and customs censorship in 1966. As Chapter 5 described, obscenity acquired new meaning in the following decade, as graphic representations of sex themselves became conventional in literary fiction, and as legislators and anti-vice crusaders shifted their focus to new fronts in the century-old American war on smut. In the first decade of the 21st century, as I researched and wrote this dissertation, obscenity in literary fiction only rarely stimulated genuine controversy in the U.S., but in more popular cultural forms—television shows, films, and the internet, for example—the old debates renewed themselves with impressive regularity, and American Jews continued to produce obscenity in dramatic and resonant ways. In concluding this project, I will briefly discuss one recent example of American Jewish

¹ Charles Rembar, *The End of Obscenity: The Trials of Lady Chatterley, Tropic of Cancer, and Fanny Hill* (New York: Random House, 1968).

popular culture and one very recent legal decision, exploring in broad strokes the complex ways in which obscenity continues to matter to American Jews as Jews, and, equally, how obscenity and Jewishness remain intertwined in American law.

The first example comes from Larry David's television series *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. David created *Seinfeld*, the iconic and much-discussed television series that represented the New York Jew as genial American everyman in the 1990s.² In his more recent work, David attends even more explicitly to the complications and mores of contemporary American Jews; episodes have dealt with issues in Jewish life ranging from the difficulty of procuring tickets to High Holiday services at enormous urban synagogues to the considerably more arcane *halakhic* question of the prohibition of an Orthodox Jewish woman sitting next to a man on a ski lift after the sun has set. In the final episode of the third season of the series, first aired on November 17, 2002, David engages with obscenity in an unusual way. Early in the episode, the show's protagonist, a fictionalized version of Larry David himself, notices that a number of students at a local high school have shaved their heads. He's informed that one of the teenagers lost his hair due to chemotherapy, and that "a lot of the boys in the senior class as a show of solidarity have shaved their heads." Moved by this, David remarks, "Maybe one day I'll get a chance to do something good for somebody like that."

His opportunity is not far off, of course. The episode and season conclude with the grand opening of a restaurant in which David has invested, and the event proceeds smoothly at first, with all of Larry's friends and family in attendance. Suddenly, in the middle of the meal, the chef, who suffers from Tourette's syndrome and cooks in a

² For a study of *Seinfeld* and its relation to Jewish culture, see John Stratton, *Coming Out Jewish: Constructing Ambivalent Identities* (London: Routledge, 2000), 282-314.

kitchen open to the entire restaurant, involuntarily shouts a string of taboo words: "Fuck-head, shit-face, cocksucker, asshole, son-of-a-bitch." A strained silence descends, and David flashes back to the high school students and their show of solidarity. Acting on their example, he decides to support the chef by mimicking his behavior. He screams, "Scum-sucking, motherfucking whore!" After a moment, his friends and loved ones follow suit. They speak a barrage of taboo words gleefully shorn of syntax or semantic content aside from their inherent offensiveness, probably without precedent on American television: "Cock, cock, jizzum, grandma, cock ... Bum, fuck, turd, fart, cunt, piss, shit, bugger, and balls ... Dammit, hell, crap, shit ... Fellatio, cunnilingus, French kissing, rimjob." David's father on the show is played by the veteran American Jewish comedian Shelley Berman, who published a novelty book in 1966 that lampooned the inanity of obscenity standards; in the book, Berman notes that taboo words, which he calls "FILTHYS," "may even find acceptance ... if written by an established author, or a dead one. I, being neither established or dead at this moment of writing, would feel plainly presumptuous setting forth a comprehensive list of FILTHYS, a fact that I frankly regard as a rotten shame."³ The *Curb* episode redresses this lost opportunity. Before the scene ends, Berman chimes in, adding a set of Yinglish taboo words—"Shmuck, putz, tukhis-lekher"—to the episode's "comprehensive list of FILTHYS," soon after which all the dialogue blurs into a joyful babble and the camera zooms in on Larry's satisfied face.⁴

³ Shelley Berman, *Shelley Berman's Cleans and Dirties* (Los Angeles: Price, Stern, Sloan, 1966), 66.

⁴ *Curb Your Enthusiasm: The Complete Third Season*, directed by Robert B. Weide et al, DVD (Home Box Office, 2005).

David and the episode's director, Robert Weide, were likely thinking of Lenny Bruce as they planned and shot this scene,⁵ but the climactic collocation of taboo words also parallels Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, which, as discussed in Chapter 3, builds to a similar crescendo of "dirty words." Like Roth's, the *Curb* episode's scene offers a blending of obscene voices, a chorus of profane American speech. Yet what in 1935 was shameful, vulgar, and dangerous—a cacophony that could be unified only through the techniques of high modernism—recurs as sweet, harmonious comedy in 2002. What could be less threatening than Shelley Berman, at the age of 76, calling out "*tukhis-lekher*" ["ass-licker"] to no one in particular? While little David Shearl and his creator needed the power of modernity and modernism—the massive electrical spark, the wordplay of James Joyce, and the blank verse of T. S. Eliot—to purify dirty words and assuage their sexual guilt, in *Curb*, the dirty words themselves constitute the shared culture that links Americans of all sorts, including prominently among them, a Yinglish-speaker who represents old fashioned, if not quite traditional, Jewishness. Larry David presents himself as willing to "speak like a Jew," in Henry Miller's sense, with no hesitation, and in so doing, he helps his community to avoid shaming a peer with a genuine inability to control the words he speaks. As if answering the prophet Isaiah, David ends the season, drinking in the linguistic chaos he has created, genuinely proud to be "a man of unclean lips ... in the midst of a people of unclean lips."

The pride and pleasure David takes in the presentation of obscenity on television is not, of course, shared by all Americans. Indeed, at issue in one contemporary legal debate is the degree to which the presentation of obscenity on television can be punished.

⁵ Before his work on *Curb*, Weide was known for writing and directing a well-regarded documentary, *Lenny Bruce: Swear to Tell the Truth* (Home Box Office, 1998).

In November 2008, the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments in *Fox v. FCC*, which concerns the question of whether or not the Federal Communications Commission was justified in changing a policy and imposing large fines on television stations for "fleeting expletives" spoken during live broadcasts—that is, taboo words spoken in an unpredictable way in unscripted programs.⁶ The controversial expletives were the old standbys, "fuck" and "shit" (or, as the court insists on itself referring to them, the "F-Word" and the "S-Word") which, as Chief Justice Roberts noted, shock listeners because of their "associat[ion] with sexual or excretory activity."⁷ In its decision, announced on April 28, 2009, the court upheld the new fines on administrative rather than constitutional grounds. Whatever the final result of this particular case—and depending on how the 2nd Circuit and Supreme Court eventually rule on the First Amendment grounds, the results could transform American popular culture, in one direction or the other—the debate offers a reminder that some forms of American culture still owe at least as much to Anthony Comstock's influence as they do to Lenny Bruce's.

Most relevant to the discussion at hand was a casual remark included in the court's published ruling. Writing for the majority, Justice Antonin Scalia rebutted a point argued in Justice Breyer's dissenting opinion about how "small-town broadcasters" would suffer unduly under the court's decision, because of the high costs of the equipment they would need to purchase to bowdlerize fleeting expletives instantly during live broadcasts. These "small-town broadcasters" would likely not suffer, Scalia counters, because their

⁶ No one has yet effectively challenged the FCC's right to dole out fines for scripted and pre-taped obscenity, as appears regularly on David's show. The FCC has jurisdiction over broadcast networks, and not cable ones, like HBO, which produces and distributes *Curb*.

⁷ A transcript of the oral arguments of the case have been made available online. See the Oyez Project, *FCC v. Fox Television Stations U.S. ___* available at <http://oyez.org/cases/2000-2009/2008/2008_07_582>.

"down-home local guests probably employ vulgarity less than big-city folks" or the "foul-mouthed glitteratae from Hollywood."⁸ Obscenity, Scalia declares somewhat astonishingly, is a "big-city," "Hollywood" problem, not one affecting "down-home," "small-town" Americans. Scalia does not, of course, go so far as to propose that the one demographic group characteristically associated both with "big-city" life and with "Hollywood"—American Jews—tend to speak more obscenely than other Americans, but if he had wanted to, he could not have a better illustration of his hypothesis than *Curb's* fictional Larry David, a Los Angeles Jew and Hollywood insider whom it would be difficult to imagine setting foot even momentarily outside of his metropolitan habitat.

To be fair, the celebrities whose speeches occasioned this particular legal case, Cher and Nicole Ritchie, are non-Jews, and it was of them, presumably, that Scalia was thinking (as evidenced in the female gender of "glitteratae"). Still, Scalia's quip relies on some of the same stereotyped associations according to which Telemachus Timayensis could fulminate against the Jews who spew "filthy expressions and obscene words" and whose "number is daily increasing . . . in every one of the large cities in America,"⁹ and John Sumner could argue that the nation's "literati" should be considered "abnormal" and thus unsuited to testify as to literary merit in obscenity cases.¹⁰ I do not mean to impute intentional or considered anti-Semitism to Justice Scalia's remarks, but following the lead of Ann Pellegrini and Janet Jakobsen, it seems worthwhile to point out that the tropes on which Scalia relies reproduce, and not for the first time, precisely the essentialisms that

⁸ *FCC v. Fox* 556 U.S. ___ (2009).

⁹ Telemachus Timayensis, *The American Jew* (New York: The Minerva Publishing Company, 1888), 81, 191. For more of the urbanism ascribed by anti-Semites to Jews, see also *The Original Mr. Jacobs* (New York: The Minerva Publishing Co., 1888) and its tirades against "the modern Jew—a type such as we meet by the thousands in all large cities" (219).

¹⁰ See *People v. Viking Press, Inc.*, 147 N.Y. Misc. 813 (Magistrate's Ct., 1933).

once fueled American anti-Semitism.¹¹ Scalia's remark thus furnishes an excellent illustration of Jonathan Freedman's insight that contemporary American populism frequently peddles antique American stereotypes that have been denuded of their original specificity.¹² The language of the decision suggests that alongside David's notion of obscenity as an American *lingua franca* spoken fluently by American Jews, a vision manages to persist, at least in the writing of certain influential thinkers, of a coterie of urban outsiders foisting perversion on simpler, "down-home" Americans.

Both of these examples suggest ways that obscenity continues to signify in particular ways for American Jews. Today—as in the 1890s when Lew Rosen mailed out copies of *Broadway*, and in the 1920s when Horace Liveright defeated the Clean Books Bill, and in the 1970s when Adele Wiseman published her novel about a Jewish prostitute—obscenity can be used for any number of disparate purposes by individual artists and cultural agents. American Jews will continue to engage with obscenity, argue for and against it, parody it and lionize it, as long as doing so gratifies them, aligns with their religious, social, and political principles, or helps them to achieve their personal and communal goals. Obscenity remains an area in which beliefs about sexuality, law, intimacy, and culture converge and conflict, so it seems likely that American Jews will have reason to do so for the foreseeable future. In attending, in this project, to a number of cases in which obscenity has mattered to American Jews, I have avoided suggesting that obscenity has always mattered to them or that it always will. Nonetheless, I propose

¹¹ Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 39-41.

¹² See Freedman's excellent chapter, "Antisemitism Without Jews," in *Klezmer America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 140-63. In the *Left Behind* series of Evangelical Christian novels, Freedman notes, "Jewish stereotypes of an almost startling crudeness recur ... sometimes attached to Jews, but more often, and more interestingly, floating free of them" (150).

that consideration of these interactions enriches our understanding of contemporary obscenity debates and of the conflicts and achievements of American Jewish culture.

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