Joke-making Jews / Jokes making Jews: Essays on humor and identity in American Jewish fiction

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JOKE-MAKING JEWS / JOKES MAKING JEWS:

ESSAYS ON HUMOR AND IDENTITY

IN AMERICAN JEWISH FICTION

by

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ABSTRACT

Joke-Making Jews / Jokes Making Jews:
Essays on Humor and Identity
in American Jewish Fiction

by

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Beginning from the premise that humor plays a prominent role in the
construction of group and individual identities, as a social phenomenon and a
simultaneously alienating and assimilating force, these essays explore and examine
humor and its construction of American Jewish identity within the context of various
works of American Jewish fiction. Though organized as “chapters,” the essays do not
build upon one another progressively, nor do they center on a unified thesis; rather,
each is written to stand alone; however, each approaches the general subject of humor
and identity in American Jewish fiction, and as a collection it is intended that the whole
equal more than the sum of its parts.

Following the Introduction, chapter two examines Abraham Cahan’s Yekl and
the relationship between humor and identity for the Jewish immigrant at the turn of the
20th century. Attention is also paid to the absences of humor, and how these are likewise
capable of constructing identity.
Chapter three raises questions regarding the ethics of humor, particularly when dealing with the Holocaust. It examines Saul Bellow’s *The Bellarosa Connection* under the guiding question of “What is to be gained by reading this novella?” — with specific attention being given to the connective function of the novella’s humor.

Bernard Malamud’s *God’s Grace* is examined in chapter four, which seeks to read the novel as a retelling of an old Jewish joke, in the form of the story of Abraham and Isaac; Malamud’s reversal of the story, and his use of absurdist humor, is read as an affirmation of humanism and Jewish identity.

Chapter five examines the humor of Philip Roth and Woody Allen, as representatives of second-generation anxieties about Jewish identity in America. Then, chapters six and seven explore two possible responses to these anxieties.

Chapter six looks at the works of the Coen brothers and asserts that Jewishness has been deliberately absented from their narratives; chapter seven looks at the works of Allegra Goodman and Nathan Englander and asserts that, in their fiction, a new, anxiety-free Jewish Self is being constructed, with humor playing a prominent role in this postassimilationism.
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Two of these essays appear in slightly different form, and under different titles, in the following publications: the Bellow essay (chapter 3) in the *Saul Bellow Journal* (2004); the Malamud essay (chapter 4) in *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (2001).
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I. Humor

In his 1979 film, Manhattan, Woody Allen plays the part of Isaac Davis, a writer for a popular television sitcom who despises the triviality of his work. At one point, in a fit of complaint, he decries the worthlessness of a particular episode by responding to co-workers' criticisms with, "It's worse than not insightful; it's not funny!"

The beauty of this exclamation is that it is itself both humorous and insightful. Allen manages to create humor by playing on our expectations: we typically think of insight as above humor in our hierarchy of values, but here it is repositioned below—apparently far below—the value of humor, and thus the juxtaposition of this statement with our previously held assumptions creates an incongruity that we respond to humorously. But the statement also provides insight as, upon examination, we realize that perhaps humor can, in fact, be more valuable than insight. After all, the statement itself illustrates this possibility—for not only does it provide this insight, but with it the pleasure of a humorous experience, and the likelihood that the insight will be more readily received, and perhaps even more readily retained. Humor thus becomes better than insight because it includes insight; it is insight and then something more.
Those who study humor analytically recognize this truth. John Morreall, for example, as the editor of a book on *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, claims that in both philosophy and humor we shift mental gears and look at things in new ways. And this departing from well-worn paths of thought brings a certain mental liberation, which has long been counted as among the chief values of philosophy and of humor. (2)

Louis D. Rubin, Jr., writes that American comedy and humorous writing provide “a valuable insight into the understanding of American society” (4). Says Lawrence E. Mintz, “American humor has been, from its very beginning, used to preach and to teach, on just about every issue that has concerned us as a people” (vii). And William Bedford Clark and W. Craig Turner, in their introduction to *Critical Essays on American Humor*, state that American humor is “so valuable a tool for understanding the American character” (2), and call it “an outgrowth of and index to the collective American mind” (3).

The philosophical study of humor has evolved into three major theoretical camps, which have been classified as Superiority Theory, Relief Theory, and Incongruity Theory. What follows is a brief look at each.

**Superiority Theory**

Much malice mingles with a little wit.

—John Dryden

Led by philosophers ranging from Aristotle to Thomas Hobbes, to Henri Bergson, and dominating the field of thought on humor for over 2,000 years, superiority
theory states basically that humor is produced when one observes an incident (i.e. behavior, act, statement, etc.) to which one feels superior in some way, and that all laughter is mixed with scorn or ridicule. A simplistic example illustrating this understanding of humor is the crowd of kids in the high school hallway who laugh at the girl who has worn a unique hat to class that day. If their laughter (i.e. if the humor they are deriving from the incident) involves ridicule or mockery, then it fits within the framework constructed by superiority theorists.

In his Poetics, Aristotle calls comedy “an imitation of people who are worse than the average,” and the ridiculous “a species of the ugly.” In his Nichomachean Ethics, he claims that “a joke is a kind of abuse.” 1 Centuries later this notion persists, as Bergson notes “the absence of feeling which usually accompanies laughter” (emphasis Bergson’s). Bergson goes on to argue that all humor is the result of our perception of a certain rigidity of character in other persons or situations, and that our laughter is “its corrective”—which is to say that we laugh in ridicule at that which we wish to correct, that which is undesirable or inferior. 2

Clearly this way of understanding humor does have some merit, and is readily applicable to our example of the students in the hallway. But superiority theory dominated thinking about humor for over 2,000 years most likely because of the ethos of those, such as Plato and Aristotle, who first established it, and not because of its wide-ranging applicability to real-life humorous situations. After all, a moment’s

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1 See Morreall, 14-15.
2 Ibid., 117-125.
contemplation reveals that there are many, many incidents of humor that do not involve ridicule.

Relief Theory

I force myself to laugh at everything, for fear of being compelled to weep.

—Pierre-Augustin de Beaumarchais

Relief theory’s most prominent proponent is Sigmund Freud, who saw humor “as an outlet for psychic or nervous energy,” or as involving “a repudiation of suffering.” In other words, for Freud, humor is a means of negotiating pain or anxiety. This usually occurs as tensions mount; the tension (or anxiety) itself must result in a response of either fear or laughter, and when the result is laughter, the laughter relieves that tension. Thus humor is seen as a psychological coping mechanism.

Returning to our example of the kids in the high school hallway, if the girl in the funny hat laughs along with those who are laughing at her—and the humor she experiences is fraught with anxiety, and her laughter is in effect a coping mechanism for that anxiety—then it fits within the framework of relief theories of humor.

Relief theory gained some prominence in the early 20th century, but again it seems that this might be due more to Freud’s ethos than to the theory’s wide-ranging applicability. Again, it takes only a moment’s contemplation to tell us that there are many, many incidents of humor that are not fraught with anxiety.

3 These are John Morreall’s words. See Morreall, 111.
Incongruity Theory

Impropriety is the soul of wit.
—W. Sommerset Maugham

Presently, the most widely accepted, most inclusive theory of humor is incongruity theory; whereas some incidents of humor may be explained by superiority theory but not by relief theory, or vice versa, virtually all incidents can be reconciled with some version of incongruity theory, which has its roots in the philosophies of figures such as Kant, Kierkegaard, and Schopenhauer. In essence, incongruity theory states that humor is derived from (or created by) the juxtaposition of two incongruous elements—usually generating some small amount of surprise in, or at, the juxtaposition. Kierkegaard, for example, states that “wherever there is contradiction, the comical is present,” and goes on to claim that both the tragic and the comic are based on contradiction, the comical being the “painless contradiction.” And Schopenhauer, in his The World as Will and Idea, speaks of laughter as the result of the “incongruity of sensuous and abstract knowledge,” which is to say the incongruity of our sensory perception of things and our abstract understanding of things. In applying Schopenhauer’s theory to Woody Allen’s remark in Manhattan, for example, we might say that our abstract understanding classifies humor as inferior to insight, and thus runs

4 Ibid., 83.
5 Ibid., 51.
incongruous to the remark (perceived through the senses) in which insight is made inferior to humor.

Returning once again to the high school hallway, we might explain the group’s laughter as deriving from the incongruity of the girl’s unique hat—and, notably, to do so we don’t have to classify their laughter as ridicule, as in the application of superiority theory. Whether their laughter is antagonistic or amiable, it can be traced to the presence of incongruity. Likewise, the girl’s laughter need not be classified as anxiety-laden, as in the application of relief theory; whether she laughs comfortably or uncomfortably, we can trace the humor to the incongruity she observes in her expectations (which presumably did not include being laughed at) juxtaposed with reality (i.e. being laughed at).

This particular incongruity—identified as the juxtaposition of expectations (or ideals) with reality—is perhaps the most common source of humor, at least within the context of American culture and what we might identify as American humor. As Rubin puts it, American humor relies heavily upon “the interplay of the ornamental and the elemental, the language of culture and the language of sweat, the democratic ideal and the mulishness of fallen human nature,” all of which creates what Rubin calls “the Great American Joke” (15). Indeed, what nation is better suited for this kind of humor than one built on a foundation of lofty ideals such as freedom, equality, and democracy? Ideals by nature are unobtainable, and consequently American culture—which clings so tightly to its ideals—becomes a fertile soil for a humor that relies on the incongruity of the ideal and the real.
The Function of Humor

A rich man’s joke is always funny.
—T. E. Brown

In undertaking my own study of humor, what I have found most interesting is not these overarching theories and their attempts to locate the source or nature of humor (i.e. where it comes from, how it comes about). Rather, I have become most interested in what humor accomplishes. Some theorists do touch on the function of humor. Bergson, for example, claims that humor’s function, via ridicule, is to correct human “rigidity.” And indeed the ridiculing aspect of humor as it is explained by superiority theory is (and serves) a kind function. Likewise, Freud’s relief theory incorporates a kind of function: laughter is not merely produced by the presence of anxiety, but is a release of that anxiety, and becomes a means of coping with it. But for most theorists, the function of humor—if it is touched upon at all—is treated secondarily, or implicitly, and is not of primary concern.®

In this study, the function of humor is the sole concern. In the essays that follow, very few references are made to superiority theory or relief theory, and most of the references to incongruity theory are made as a means of explicating the humor in the fiction for the purpose of examining its function. These essays represent the germination and evolution of my own theory of humor that speaks to humor’s primary function as a

® Bergson and Freud are perhaps the most prominent exceptions to this claim, in fact. Both devote substantial attention to humor’s function, and indeed my interest in, and ideas on, the function of humor and its relationship to group and individual identity owe a great deal to my readings of Bergson and Freud.
means of alienation and assimilation. In other words, it is my assessment that humor functions to simultaneously alienate and assimilate—people, ideas, values, environments, situations, etc.—and thus it becomes a prominent, perhaps even fundamental means of negotiating one’s place in the world. Or, more precisely, it becomes (and always already is) a prominent, perhaps even fundamental means of negotiating identity.

II. Humor and Identity

To the layperson—which is to say, the person who is not engaged in the critical analysis or philosophy of humor—the connection between humor and identity is nevertheless understood, though it usually remains unarticulated. Our conceptualization of a person’s identity includes our conceptualization of his or her “sense of humor,” and the degree to which we identify with others is often in proportion to the degree to which we identify with their sense of humor. In fact, when asked what we find most attractive in someone with whom we are considering a romantic relationship, we often cite a “good sense of humor” at or near the top of our list. In other words, humor is a communal, and thus community-building, thing; it brings people together and, with equal effectiveness, can drive them apart. The fact that we form our communities and our relationships with humor playing so regular and prominent a role in those formations illustrates our (albeit largely unexamined) understanding of humor’s relationship to identity. And it also illustrates the essentially alienating/assimilating function that humor serves.
By way of further illustration, let us return, once again, to our example of the kids in the high school hallway. Regardless of whether we attempt to explain the humor that is derived from the girl's unique hat via superiority, relief, or incongruity theory, the fact remains that in this instance a social negotiation is taking place, with regard to individual and group identities. The group that laughs at the girl and her hat is involved in a complex act of assimilation and alienation. Assuming their laughter is, in fact, the laughter of ridicule, then clearly we can say that the members are, through their humor, actively alienating the girl from their social group—and thus they are constructing the girl's individual identity as "not one of us," and the group's identity as "one that does not include that girl" (or, implicitly, others like her). The members of the group are also simultaneously assimilating one with another; that is, their humor also works to bind the group members more closely together. This is most readily noticeable in the fringe members of the group, who are able to solidify their membership by joining in the laughter and thereby benefiting from its assimilating function. Inherent in, and a key aspect of, this assimilation process is the assimilation of a value system, implicit in the ridiculing of the girl and her hat; it is in part the joint acceptance of and participation in this value system that results in the coagulation of the group. Thus, the group members, via this humor, construct an identity for themselves that includes a value system and a (seemingly) clear demarcation of who is in and who is out of the group.

Meanwhile, the girl's laughter, whether it is self-secure or anxiety-laden, is likewise simultaneously alienating and assimilating. Assuming her laughter is anxiety-laden, then her laughter is, as relief theory would have it, a coping mechanism—a means
of negotiating the incongruity with which she is faced. She did not expect to be laughed at, but is being laughed at, so her own laughter becomes a means of assimilating this new identity (as “one who is laughed at”). (According to Freud, her other option is to respond with fear or despair—to run to the bathroom in tears.) Depending on the subtle nuances of her laughter, she might be, like the group members, assimilating (at least temporarily) the value system inherent in their ridicule, in which case she is self-deprecatory in her humor. Or, she might be laughing along in a kind of ridicule all her own, designed to diffuse the group’s ridicule, in which case she asserts her own identity and deftly rejects or alienates that of the group. Either way, the girl, too, constructs an identity via assimilation and alienation—or, namely, via humor.

III. Jewish Humor and Identity

While it is possible to say that these constructions of group and individual identities are occurring always and everywhere, in all instances and occurrences of humor, it is easier—for the sake of close examination—if we focus on a particular group identity comprising particular individual identities. For this study, I have chosen to focus specifically on Jewish-American identity, and by extension Jewish-American humor, as they are explored and employed and constructed in Jewish-American fiction.

My reason for this focus is essentially twofold: 1.) the Jews have a long history and a well-established tradition of humor that can be identified as “Jewish”; and 2.) the Jews have a long history and a well-established tradition that entails a prominent preoccupation with identity, dating back thousands of years to Abraham and the
beginnings of the notion of “a Chosen People,” and continuing through centuries of
diaspora, Zionism, and anti-Semitism.

This preoccupation with identity has intensified for the Jews in America. Jewish
immigrants, for example, faced a more difficult transition than most other immigrants,
for two major reasons. First, Jewish immigrants came from a variety of nations (e.g.
Poland, Russia, England, France, Italy) and thus had no unified “homeland” to hold
them together as a group in the New Land. They spoke different languages and came
from different cultural backgrounds, so their sense of group identity relied heavily on
their shared Jewishness, which in turn relied heavily on their shared Judaism. But this
Judaism was, in fact, the second reason that Jewish immigrants had it harder than most
others—because most other immigrants were Christians, and thus able to more readily
assimilate themselves into an American culture that was itself predominantly Christian.
Jewish immigrants, if they were to maintain a sense of group identity as Jews, had to
hold fast to the one thing that would alienate them from a sense of group identity as
Americans. And thus the question of identity was constantly at the forefront of the
American Jew’s life—arguably more so than in the lives of those around him/her.

As Jews increasingly made their homes in America, and as they increasingly
chose to assimilate by abandoning their Judaism at least, if not their Jewish ethnicity
altogether, numerous debates arose over the issue of identity. What made a Jew a Jew, if
Judaism was abandoned? What bound a French Jew to a Polish Jew, to an English Jew, if
not religion? Moreover, Judaism itself was undergoing transformations, reformations.
That Jewish identity had become questionable, and that humor was playing a consistent
role throughout these constructions, deconstructions, and reconstructions of Jewish identity, is exemplified by one self-mocking definition of Jewishness which has it that “a Jew is anyone that another Jew says is a Jew.”^7 Joseph Dorinson and Joseph Boskin note that, especially in the 19th- and 20th-centuries, “where once religion reconciled [the Jews] to death, pain, and evil, now humor—especially Jewish humor—performs this vital function” (172).

Defining “Jewish humor,” like defining “American humor,” is difficult. It is not merely humor created by Jews, or about Jews, because a Jew can tell a joke that might have nothing to do with his or her Jewishness—a generic joke that easily could be told by an African-American or a Mormon and thus cannot be identified itself as “Jewish”—and because the anti-Semitic jokes told by Nazis, though about Jews, are likewise hardly the sort of humor we would characterize as “Jewish.” Perhaps the best way to talk about “Jewish humor” is in terms of the sentiments, values, or issues expressed or examined in or by that humor. As Joseph Telushkin puts it, “Many of the most important issues that Jews think about, often obsessively, are expressed in Jewish humor” (16). In other words, “Jewish humor” is specifically concerned with Jewishness, and is thus inextricable from Jewish identity.

Allen Guttman, looking at Jewish humor historically, writes:

Although it may seem odd to say so, there really is no such thing as “Jewish humor.” If the term refers to some form of humor which has been characteristic of Jews from the time of Moses to the day of Moshe Dayan,

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^ See Halio and Siegel, 18.
then clearly the term has no referent at all. There is, on the other hand, a kind of humor which is common to the great Yiddish writers of the nineteenth century and to many Jewish-American authors in the twentieth century. [...] This kind of humor is...the product of the social situation of East-European Jews as a minority which maintained a precarious existence within the larger culture of Christendom. (329)

Again, in other words, "Jewish humor"—if we can say there is such a thing—is concerned with, and is "the product of," concerns about or for Jewish identity. And much like "American humor," which often entails or results from the incongruity of the ideal and the real, Jewish humor too is "the result of a proud people acutely sensitive of their lowly social status," especially in 19th- and early 20th-century Europe and America (Guttman 330). Jews who came to America from Europe held the same ideals about America as other Americans—and they encountered the same harsh realities. But because of the unique situation of the Jewish immigrant, as discussed above, those incongruities were often heightened or exaggerated. Thus humor for the Jews was perhaps more necessary as a means of negotiating those incongruities—or, in effect, as a means of negotiating their identity.

Perhaps this accounts for why some 80% of America's foremost stand-up comedians are Jewish (Dorinson 168). And this use of and reliance upon humor also becomes quickly evident in the fiction of Jewish-American writers, beginning most notably with Abraham Cahan, the prominent realist writer and humorist, and acquaintance of William Dean Howells, during the late 1800s and into the early 20th
century. There were others, too—other Jewish-American writers who openly explored Jewish themes and Jewishness in their fiction, often employing humor in the process, such as Anzia Yezierska and Michael Gold—but Jewish-American fiction and Jewish-American humor in particular did not really flourish until after World War II. Perhaps this is because, following the War, American Jews felt more accepted and more comfortable in these open explorations. As Sarah Blacher Cohen puts it, “They had received sympathy from the Gentiles for the loss of their people in the Holocaust. They had been admired for helping create the state of Israel” (172). Now they could laugh openly about what it meant to be a Jew.

As a result, the 1950s were marked with a kind of renaissance of Jewish-American fiction, led by the trinity of Jewish-American novelists—Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth—and written mostly in the comic mode. Whereas Cahan and his peers were predominantly first-generation immigrants, this new crew of writers comprised the second generation—the sons and daughters (or grandsons and granddaughters) of immigrants who faced a new world with new and different questions of identity, and who attempted to answer those questions with new and different humorous responses.

The second generation maintained its influence through the 1970s and into the 1980s, through the trinity and others (e.g., Cynthia Ozick, Stanley Elkin, Woody Allen). But in the 1990s, and as we move into yet another new century, yet another generation has emerged, represented by authors such as Allegra Goodman and Nathan Englander. And with it comes yet another batch of humorous approaches to American Jewishness.
Throughout the years and the generations, though, one thing has remained constant: namely, this crucial tie between Jewish humor and Jewish identity. The two are inseparable, and Jewish humor (like American humor to American identity) is invaluable to our understanding of Jewishness. In Telushkin's words:

Jewish humor reveals a great many truths about the Jews, but no one great truth. Indeed, 150 years of Jewish jokes, and 2,000 years of folklore and witticisms, have the uncanny ability to express truths that sociological or other academic studies usually miss. (15)

The purpose of this academic study, however, is not to seek after those truths about Jewish identity that are usually missed, according to Telushkin; rather, it is to examine this relationship between humor and identity—to look closely at Jewish humor and how it functions in myriad ways to construct that Jewish identity.

IV. The Essays

In short, the essays in this volume are intended to represent a multifaceted analysis of humor and identity in American Jewish fiction. Though organized and labeled as “chapters,” they do not build directly upon one another in procession, as true chapters would, but are presented instead merely in a rough chronological order (according to the dates of the author or authors examined). The hope is that the success of this collection, as a study of this broad subject, is greater than the sum of its parts, in that it makes possible the examination of a variety of works and issues, from a variety of angles, that might not be possible under a more unified but necessarily narrower thesis.
The first essay, following the introduction and labeled "Chapter Two," examines Abraham Cahan's *Yekl* and the relationship between humor and identity for the Jewish immigrant at the turn of the 20th century. Notably, special attention is paid in this essay to the conspicuous *absences* of humor, at moments when humor might normally be present, and how these absences of humor are as capable of constructing identity as are its presences.

Chapter three moves into post-World War II America and raises questions regarding the ethics of humor, particularly when dealing with subjects such as the Holocaust. It examines Saul Bellow's *The Bellarosa Connection* under the guiding ethical question of "What is to be gained by reading this novella?"—with specific attention being given to the function of the novella's humor with regard to Jewish group identity.

Bernard Malamud's novel, *God's Grace*, is examined in chapter four, which seeks to read the novel as a retelling of an old Jewish joke, in the form of the story of Abraham and Isaac. Malamud's reversal of the story, and his use of absurdist humor, is read as an affirmation of humanism and an assertion of Jewish identity.

Chapter five then returns to the explicit issues of alienation and assimilation and examines the humor of Philip Roth and Woody Allen, as representatives of second-generation anxieties about Jewish identity in America. Chapters six and seven explore two possible third-generation responses to these anxieties.

For the first of these possible responses, we look to the works of Joel and Ethan Coen. Chapter six asserts that Jewishness has been deliberately absent from the
Coens' narratives, utterly alienated via a hostile humor, and subsequently abandoned. Chapter seven then examines another possible response to second-generation anxieties with a turn to the works of Allegra Goodman and Nathan Englander. The chapter suggests that, in Goodman's and Englander's fiction, a new, anxiety-free Jewish Self is being constructed and asserted, with a revised Jewish humor playing a prominent role in what might be called "postassimilationism," and that this might prove to be Goodman's and Englander's great accomplishment for Jewish humor and identity.

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\(^8\) Put forward, in slightly different form, in Rosenfeld's introduction.


Within any “minority” ethnic community there are two identity issues which, due to the incongruities inherent in them, can become sources of humor. The first is the issue of how the group member relates to others outside his or her group and of his or her attempts to assimilate into the majority. The second is the issue of how the group member relates to others within his or her own group and of his or her attempts to remain comfortably situated within the group after having successfully (or excessively) assimilated into the majority. In both cases, humor functions as a possible means of either assimilating or alienating the incongruity. In other words, the individual’s assimilation into the majority, or his or her alienation from the minority, is itself an incongruity which is either assimilated or alienated by those who encounter it—and humor is a means by which this assimilation or alienation can be accomplished.

Take the following joke as an example:

American banker Otto Kahn, Jewish by birth but a convert to Christianity, was walking with a hunchbacked friend when they passed a synagogue.

“You know,” said Otto, “I used to be a Jew.”

“Yes,” his companion replied. “And I used to
be a hunchback.”

Here, an individual has attempted to assimilate into a majority group and has even gone so far as to assert that his identity as a member of the minority group has been abandoned. For an identity such as Jewishness, this assertion presents an incongruity, because Jewishness is not merely a matter of religion, it is also a matter of ethnicity and genealogy. This joke, then, uses humor as a means of assimilating or alienating that incongruity. One might make a case for the idea that the joke is assimilating, in that it is not violent and allows for individuals such as Otto to make a claim of assimilation, though the claim is the object of ridicule. But ultimately, I would argue that the joke disallows such claims because it undermines them. In other words, the incongruity of a Jew claiming he is no longer a Jew after his conversion to Christianity is effectively alienated by this joke, because the joke reasserts Otto’s Jewish identity. Otto is no less Jewish than the hunchback is less hunchbacked. The point is that humor can function, through the assimilation and/or alienation of incongruities, as an effective means of constructing a sense of identity.

It is possible that humor may not necessarily function in this manner at all times; but because it can function this way, it is profitable to examine the uses of humor with regard to issues of identity. As Paul Lewis points out in his Comic Effects (1989), the conspicuous absence of humor in the face of such an incongruity can likewise be worthy of examination. Perhaps one of the most fruitful fields for such examination is American

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1 This is my wording of the joke. It also appears in Telushkin, 125.
Jewish literature, which often takes up issues such as alienation, assimilation, and "Jewishness" as some of its major themes.

The first prominent example of such a work is Abraham Cahan's novella, *Yekl*. Published in 1898, no other major work of American Jewish literature precedes *Yekl*, and it deals with precisely those themes mentioned above. Cahan—himself a Russian Jewish immigrant—had to deal with alienation and assimilation in his own life, and in *Yekl* he explores these through Jake Podkovnik's struggle for "Americanization" and his increasing inability to identify with his Jewishness. Considering the prevalence and prominence of these incongruities in the novella, it is not surprising that Cahan also creates and makes frequent use of humor.

That Cahan's humor was widely acknowledged and admired in his time is well-documented. Bernard G. Richards, in his introduction to Dover's 1970 edition of *Yekl* and *The Imported Bridegroom*, speaks of Cahan's "enlivening humor" (v) and his "rollicking humor" (vi) and quotes William Dean Howells's review of *The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto* (1898)—which appeared in the December 31, 1898, issue of *Literature*—in which Howells describes Cahan as "a humorist" whose "humor does not spare the sordid and uncouth aspects of the character whose pathos he so tenderly reveals." According to Howells, Cahan successfully "holds the reader between a laugh and a heartache" (qtd. in Richards, vii).

In *Yekl*, humor abounds. There is joking among the characters themselves, there are humorous situations shared by the narrator with the reader (Sanford Marovitz notes "the sharp contrast" between the narrator's language and that of the characters as "the
source of comic irony” [79]), and equally, if not most importantly, there are clear opportunities for humor from which humor is conspicuously absent. These “failures” of humor are important because, as Paul Lewis explains,

the failure or collapse of humor often heralds an affective and intellectual intensification, an anti-comedic shift into terror, alienation or confusion .

. Like the use of humor, the unwillingness or inability to be amused confronts us with what is most essential about a given writer, character or work. (157-58)

The best example of this in Yekl is the chapter in which Jake meets Gitl at the train station. Before examining this scene, however, it is necessary to first examine Cahan’s use of humor up to this point.

Yekl opens in the cloak shop where Jake Podkovnik works, and we learn quickly that Jake (whose Russian name was Yekl) wants very much to consider himself an American. We learn this not only through the Americanization of his name and the narrator’s description of him as “clean-shaven” and insistent on speaking a Yiddish “more copiously spiced with mutilated English” than the others, which he speaks “with what he considered a Yankee jerk of his head” (2), but we learn it also through the humor that is present. The opening scene is one of joking: Jake, proud of his knowledge of American sports, speaks of boxers, and the result is a verbal sparring match between Jake and the other Jews who work at the shop. It begins with one of the men, responding to Jake’s demonstrations of boxing techniques, saying, “Nice fun that! . . . Fighting—like drunken moujiks in Russia!":

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“Tarrarra-boom-de-ay!” was Jake’s merry retort; and for an exclamation mark he puffed up his cheeks into a balloon, and exploded it by a “pawneh” of his formidable fist.

“Look, I beg you, look at his dog’s tricks!” the other said in disgust.

“Horse’s head that you are!” Jake rejoined good-humoredly. “Do you mean to tell me that a moujik understands how to fight?” (3)

This good-natured banter between the workers is the first appearance of humor in *Yekl*, and it accomplishes two things. First, it posits Jake as very much a part of the group that is present. As Lewis notes, in his preface to *Comic Effects*, “In context—that is, as a shared experience—humor assumes and reveals social and psychological relations, cognitive processes, cultural norms, and value judgements” (ix). In other words, when we laugh with others, we assume and reveal shared values, identifying ourselves with one another as a social group. Because the group that is present here is identified as Jewish—they are speaking Yiddish, reading Yiddish newspapers, etc.—Jake, then, is identified initially—despite his desire to consider himself an American—as being comfortably situated within the Jewish community. Indeed, the fact that he wants so badly to see himself as an American only underlines the reader’s initial identification of him as not-American, as a part of this identified group of Jewish immigrants.

But immediately following this shared humor is the display of a more hostile humor, as Bernstein—a “rabbinical-looking man,” and thus, presumably, identifiable as ultra-Jewish—becomes irritated with Jake, who has interrupted his reading. Jake scoffs
at the mention of Russian moujiks who fight clumsily, claiming that "here [in America] one must observe rules." Bernstein, in response, and "with an air of assumed gravity," says, "America is an educated country, so they won't even break bones without grammar. They tear each other's sides according to 'right and left.'" In a footnote, Cahan makes it clear that this is "a thrust at Jake's right-handers and left-handers," and the fact that it is a joke is clear in that the others respond with an "outburst of laughter" (4).

Cahan's footnote also provides a brief explanation of the joke: Bernstein's reference to "right and left" is a punning of Jake's boxing moves, his "right-handers and left-handers," with the Hebrew equivalent of the letter s, "whose pronunciation depends upon the right or left position of a mark over it" (4).

The joke clearly functions as a "force in the exercise of power in social groups" (Lewis 36); Bernstein, a more educated man than Jake, makes a joke at Jake's expense, in which Bernstein's knowledge and Jewish literacy (he knows the sacred language, Hebrew, and we find out later that Jake can't even read Yiddish) is placed in a position of superiority over Jake's knowledge of American sports. As Bernstein and the others laugh at Jake (as opposed to with him) his identification with the group is undermined—he is alienated, to some extent. As a result, we begin to see Jake as at once Jewish (part of the group) and not-Jewish (apart from the group); or, perhaps more appropriately, we begin to see him as both no-longer-Jewish ("his religious scruples had followed in the wake of his former first name" [11-12]) and not-yet-American ("He thinks that shaving

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2 Cahan explains that the characters are speaking in Yiddish, and that italicized words are in English, and he often has to clarify the butchered English words; here, in brackets,
one’s mustache makes a Yankee!” [6]). From the first chapter, then, the theme of alienation and assimilation is firmly established.

We also learn in the first chapter that Jake has a wife and child in the Old World, but that this is not something he has shared with anyone, as the second chapter makes clear. Jake spends his free time at a dance hall, and it seems he has been somewhat intimate with at least two other women, by the names of Fanny and Mamie. “His resolution to send for his wife,” notes Jules Chametzky, is “in the indefinite future” (59). But in chapter three Jake learns of his father’s death and is forced to bring his wife, Gitl, and son, Yossele, to the New World. Until the news of his father’s death, Jake had continued his pursuit of Americanization. Not telling others of Gitl and Yossele was a part of this, as he “carefully avoided all reference to his antecedents” (24), thereby cutting himself off from a Jewish history. Yet Jake cannot completely let go of his past:

During the three years since he had set foot on the soil... he had lived so much more than three years... that his Russian past appeared to him a dream and his wife and child, together with his former self, fellow characters in a charming tale, which he was neither willing to banish from his memory nor able to reconcile with the actualities of his American present. (25-26)

After learning of his father’s death, which clearly signifies a substantial loss of his past and his former identity, Jake’s “native home came back to him with a vividness which it had not had in his mind for some time” (29). Jake resolves to send for his family
and to “begin a new life” (31). But it is too late; his Americanization has progressed too far, as is evidenced by his reaction to Gitl’s arrival in chapter four.

This is the above-mentioned scene in which the failure of humor “heralds . . . an anti-comedic shift into terror, alienation or confusion” (Lewis 157-58). The narrator’s telling of the scene demonstrates clearly that it presents an opportunity for humor, but for Jake there is none:

All the way to the island [Jake] had been in a flurry of joyous anticipation. The prospect of meeting his dear wife and child, and, incidentally, of showing off his swell attire to her, had thrown him into a fever of impatience. But on entering the big shed he had caught a distant glimpse of Gitl and Yossele through the railing . . . and his heart had sunk at the sight of his wife’s uncouth and un-American appearance. She was slovenly dressed . . . and her hair was concealed under a voluminous wig. (33-34)

The narrator, here, explains that Gitl actually had been “sprucing herself up for the great event,” and this incongruity between her intent and the outcome is clearly a potential source of humor. The potential for humor is then reiterated when the narrator remarks that Gitl was aware neither of this [the ugliness of the wig] nor of the fact that in New York even a Jewess of her station and orthodox breeding is accustomed to blink at the wickedness of displaying her natural hair, and that none but...
an elderly matron may wear a wig without being the occasional target for snowballs or stones. (34)

To say that the humor of the scene fails may be a bit misleading, for clearly there is humor here that is succeeding. Gitl is, after all, incongruity personified. Readers today will perhaps laugh naturally and unthreateningly at the scene, while the narrator seems to target Gitl in much the same way that Bernstein, earlier, targeted Jake—as an outsider, the object of a derisive, hostile humor which functions as an alienating force. Either way, the humor is not merely potential but fully present. Moreover, we note that through derisive humor the narrator constructs a set of values that are assumed to be shared by the reader, and it is interesting to note this as an instance in which Cahan (as narrator) might be accused of anti-Semitism. Chametzky, too, notes this tendency in the narrator when, after praising him for “dispelling . . . an implicit prejudice and ignorance in his audience,” he admits that “he is capable also of an arch and condescending attitude towards his Jewish characters” (63).

But in effect, though derisive, the humor is not violent nor is it ultimately alienating. That is, Gitl is not completely shunned by the group that includes the narrator and the reader (though Jake is another matter). While hostile humor directed at its object of ridicule can have an alienating effect, the fact that this hostility is expressed through humor is evidence that the alienation is not complete, nor need it be. Freud argued that humor was a safe means of venting hostility, and according to Lewis, “a character’s use of humor [is] related to his or her capacity for cognitive, emotional and moral development” (75). In other words, the ability to recognize incongruity and to
laugh at it demonstrates the ability to accept or assimilate that incongruity. Bernstein and the other Jews laugh at Jake in the cloak shop, but he is still acceptable to them—they do not ostracize him altogether. Likewise, as the narrator and the reader share a laugh at Gitl’s expense, the value system that is shared which allows for that humor allows also for the presence of the incongruity which Gitl represents. Whether there is anti-Semitism present, in the end, depends on whether or not a space is made for Gitl’s Jewishness (that which makes her incongruous)—whether or not her Jewishness is allowed to continue.

It is precisely this potential for not allowing the presence of incongruity to exist or to continue that, when realized, constitutes either true ridicule or the failure of humor altogether. It is this failure of humor altogether—to which I referred previously—that is realized in Jake’s reaction to Gitl’s appearance at the station. Instead of joining in with the narrator and the reader and having a laugh at Gitl’s expense, thereby accepting her incongruity and making space for it, Jake’s new system of Americanized values—or, more precisely, Jake’s version of American values—will not allow for that humor; instead, he recoils into anti-comedic terror and confusion:

[H]is heart had sunk at the sight of his wife’s uncouth and un-American appearance. . . . [H]e had no sooner caught sight of her than he had averted his face, as if loth [sic] to rest his eyes on her, in the presence of the surging crowd around him, before it was inevitable . . . and he vaguely wished that her release were delayed indefinitely. (34)
For Jake, who has been doing his best to assert his Americanness primarily through the suppression of his Jewishness, that Jewishness—to which he is still married, and with which he now comes face to face, as personified in Gitl—is unbearable, even unbelievable. “Here he was, Jake the Yankee, with this bonnetless, wigged, dowdyish little greenhorn by his side! That she was his wife, nay, that he was a married man at all, seemed incredible to him” (37). Jake is filled with “disgust and shame” (37), and quickly begins to see his wife and child “as one great obstacle dropped from heaven, as it were, in his way” (36). And it is with this last estimation that Jake’s failed humor is revealed as anti-Semitic, a manifestation of self-hatred, for Jake sees Gitl’s Jewishness, and thus his own Jewishness, as “one great obstacle” in his way to Americanization—an obstacle that must be removed or overcome. It must not be allowed to continue.

“When humor fails,” writes Lewis, “when a listener recoils in anger or discomfort, it is often because the listener and the teller have different values, a difference that manifests itself in an unwillingness or an inability to treat a particular subject lightly” (34). In this scene, Gitl is the joke—a joke told by the narrator and shared with the reader. Gitl is a text being read. Jake, as another reader of the text, however, does not share in the humor because he no longer shares the values that will allow him to treat the subject—Gitl’s apparent, even flagrant Jewishness—lightly. For Jake, the joke is not funny, it is offensive. And he spends the rest of the novella alienating this incongruity.

This alienation is accomplished as Jake pursues his divorce from Gitl and his relationship with Mamie. Mamie is one of the dance hall girls with whom Jake has had
some past intimacy, and she is furious over the revelation of Jake’s marital status. As Mamie’s character is developed we learn that she speaks an English that is “a much nearer approach to a justification of its name than the gibberish spoken by the men” (Cahan 19), and that she does so “with an overdone American accent” (49). Yiddish, of course, is representative of Jewish identity, and Marovitz notes that “the linguistic distinctions detailed in Yekl . . . add not simply to the local-color interest . . . but also to the definition of character and the assimilationist theme” (80). Thus, in an almost allegorical construction, Mamie—with her Americanized speech—comes to represent the Americanization that Jake is so desperately seeking, while Bernstein (with his Hebrew literacy) and Gitl, whose “backwardness in picking up American Yiddish” (41) is repeatedly emphasized, come to represent the Jewishness from which Jake wishes to escape.

In pursuing Mamie/Americanization, then, Jake must remove his “obstacle,” Gitl/Jewishness. This move from Gitl to Mamie culminates in chapter eight, in the scene between Jake and Mamie on the rooftop, when the plans for Jake and Gitl’s divorce and Jake and Mamie’s subsequent union are finalized. The significance of the imagery in the scene is made explicit:

When they reached the top of the house they found it overhung with rows of half-dried linen . . . . A lurid, exceedingly uncanny sort of idyl it was; and in the midst of it there was something extremely weird and gruesome in those stretches of wavering, fitfully silvered white, to Jake’s
overtaxed mind vaguely suggesting the burial clothes of the inmates of a

Jewish graveyard. (75)

This association of the flapping laundry with a Jewish graveyard underscores the death of Jake’s Jewishness. This metaphor is emphasized again as Mamie, playing hard to get, tells Jake to go back to his family; Jake begins to sense “the wrong he [is] doing,” and we learn that “moreover, while [Mamie] was speaking [Jake’s] attention had been attracted to a loosened pillowcase ominously fluttering and flapping a yard or two off. The figure of his dead father, attired in burial linen, uprose in his mind” (77). Clearly Jake feels haunted by his past, by his Jewishness. At that climactic moment when Jake and Mamie kiss, “The pillowcase flapp[s] aloud, ever more sternly, warningly, portentously,” and Jake has “an impulse to withdraw his arms from the girl; but, instead, he [clings] to her all the faster, as if for shelter from the ghostlike thing” (78). Jake’s identity as a Jew is at stake, and it is the surrendering of his Jewishness that agitates the ghost. Clinging fast to his Americanization provides at least the semblance of shelter from the hauntings of his past, so this is what he does. That this shift in identity is complete is evidenced by what follows: Mamie declares, “Now it is all settled,” Jake refers to her as “my gold” (78)—recalling the notion of America as “the golden land” (52)—and the two continue their conversation in English, during which Mamie repeatedly demands that Jake pledge his “oath of allegiance” (79), as though she were America herself.

Through all of this—from Jake’s reunion with Gitl on Ellis Island, to his pursuit of Mamie, and on to his eventual divorce and his projected future with Mamie—Jake continues on, conspicuously humorless. Highlighting this humorlessness, by contrast,
are scenes with Mrs. Kavarsky, Gitl’s mentor and advisor and easily the most humorous character in the novella. Gitl, too, is able to make jokes and to laugh at herself as a “greenhorn.” At one point, for example, Jake upbraids her for her poor English, saying, “Don’t say varim ess, . . . here it is called dinner.” To this, Gitl responds with “an irresistible pun”: “Dinner? And what if one becomes fatter?” Dinner, Cahan explains, is Yiddish for thinner (38). Jake’s reaction to the joke is, characteristically, nonexistent. The pun relies on a knowledge of Yiddish, on Jewish identity. To acknowledge and share in Gitl’s humor would be to share in her Jewishness—precisely what Jake wishes to avoid.

Because of his humorlessness, which contrasts with the humor of those around him, Jake might be described much in the same way that Lewis describes the protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”—as “the one serious person in a city of mirth” (91). Jake is surrounded by Jews and Jewishness, by immigrants trying to make a home in America; yet while those around him can acknowledge the incongruities inherent in their situations and can often laugh at them, Jake cannot. He is either unwilling or unable to treat his predicament lightly, and thus responds to it with that “anti-comedic shift into terror.” This notion of “anti-comedic,” of course, refers not only to humor but also to genre. As Jake fails to find humor in incongruity—a humor that will allow for the existence of this incongruity, and thus the existence of his Jewishness—his story shifts from potential comedy into personal tragedy, the tragedy being the end of his marriage and the death of his Jewishness, as, with the completion of the divorce, “the bond between [Gitl] and Jake [is] now at last broken forever and beyond repair” (87).
Gitl, on the other hand, as we see her at the end of the novella, has reaffirmed her Jewishness through her engagement to Bernstein (a man “fit to be a rabbi” [88]). Though we are told that she, too, has become somewhat Americanized, with new makeup and a new hat (84), we note that these are superficial changes—Americanizations in appearance only. Marovitz uses these, and the fact that “the rustic, ‘greenhornlike’ expression was completely gone from [Gitl’s] face and manner, and . . . there was noticeable about her a suggestion of that peculiar air of self-confidence with which a few months’ life in America is sure to stamp the looks and bearing of every immigrant” (Cahan 83), as evidence of Gitl’s own, more thorough Americanization. He romanticizes the novella, claiming that “both [Jake and Gitl] are the subjects and products of Americanization,” Gitl’s being the realization of “the intrinsic promise that Americanization can fulfill” (Marovitz 80-81).

But it is important to point out that Gitl’s “air of self-confidence” is only an air; more precisely, it is merely the “suggestion” of an air. Really, we are told, she looks “bewildered and as if terror-stricken” (83). When she participates in “the culminating act of the drama”—the divorce—“her cheeks [turn] ghastly pale” (85) and her arms shake “so that they [have] to be supported by Mrs. Kavarsky” (86). In truth, what little real confidence Gitl might have is provided by Mrs. Kavarsky, who curses Jake (“May no good Jew know him”) and whose words have “an instantaneous effect,” so that Gitl can compose herself (87). As Mrs. Kavarsky consoles her, and even scolds her for lamenting the loss of her husband, we learn that “at the bottom of her heart [Gitl] felt herself far from desolate, being conscious of the existence of a man who was to take care of her and
her child, and even relishing the prospect of the new life in store for her” (88). The second source of Gitl’s hope and confidence is Bernstein. Thus it is not America, or Gitl’s version of Americanization, which has affected Gitl for the good, as Marovitz suggests, but rather her continued and reaffirmed sense of Jewishness. We are told that Gitl and Bernstein will be married by the rabbi (87), unlike Jake and Mamie, who are rushing off in a cable car “bound for the mayor’s office” (89). It is also important to note that Gitl’s hope and confidence are buried under “an exhibition of grief” and a “paroxysm of anguish” (89), and that her future—though she relishes her prospects—is by no means guaranteed. The fact that Gitl and Bernstein’s future “seem[s] bright with joy” leads Marovitz to declare them “two new Americans in the Golden Land” (81). But this overlooks the fact that their future only seems this way to Jake (Cahan 89), whose grass-is-always-greener mentality now causes him, in his moment of supposed triumph as he races away with Mamie, to wonder whether he might still be able to “dash into Gitl’s apartments and, declaring his authority as husband, father, and lord of the house, fiercely eject the strangers” (89).

By deromanticizing our reading of the novella in this way—by recognizing the dampened hope in Gitl and Bernstein’s future and by denying Gitl the same Americanization attributed to Jake—we lend to it a greater power and authority as the “cautionary tale” that Chametzky suggests it to be. The novella illustrates the negative effects of not just one mode of Americanization (Jake’s), but of Americanization and the immigrant’s predicament in general. Again, Jake’s failure at humor underscores this, for, as Lewis notes, “fictions, especially those that focus on problems of adaptation, use
humor or the conspicuous lack of humor to raise questions about whether assimilating
the incongruous is always the best or most noble response” (110). In other words, Jake’s
inability to find humor in his own and others’ incongruity disallows that incongruity’s
existence and forces an assimilation whose value is questionable. The only happy ending
in the novella is in the story of Gitl and Bernstein, but whatever romance this might have
had is undermined, because it is essentially a story of alienation; the two find happiness
only by maintaining their identity as Jews, still separated to some extent from the
dominant culture. Meanwhile, the story of assimilation—of Jake’s desire to become a
“Yankee,” through and through—is the novella’s tragedy.

This may be what Cahan refers to when he demands that writers show “real life,
with its comedy and its tragedy mingled—giving us what in my Russian day we called
the thrill of truth” (qtd. in Marovitz 65). The realism of this truth, at least in Cahan’s
novella, is the notion that even happy endings are touched with sadness, loss, alienation.
Such is the case with Gitl and Bernstein. And the last words from the narrator of Yekl
describe Jake’s thoughts as he is swept away toward City Hall with Mamie. Jake’s
ending is supposed to be triumphant—he is getting what he wants, a divorce from Gitl,
marrage to Mamie, his Americanization—yet he cannot shake the feeling “which was
now gaining upon him, that, instead of a conqueror, he had emerged from the rabbi’s
house the victim of an ignominious defeat.” We are told that

If he could now have seen Gitl in her paroxysm of anguish, his heart
would perhaps have swelled with a sense of triumph, and Mamie would
have appeared to him the embodiment of his future happiness. Instead of
this he beheld her, Bernstein, Yosele, and Mrs. Kavarsky celebrating their victory and bandying jokes at his expense. (89)

This final reference to humor functions as a last mark of emphasis on the theme of alienation and assimilation. For Jake—whose values are such that incongruity cannot be tolerated and for whom there is no humor—to feel triumphant, he must flaunt “a hilarious mood” (89), making Gitl the butt of his hilarity; he must see his ex-wife, the symbol of his Jewishness, in the “anguish” of utter alienation. But instead, Jake feels, “in his inmost heart” (89), himself alienated. In his thrust for Americanization he has lost his sense of identity, his future seems “impenetrable,” as he knows he is not yet an American and no longer a Jew. The loss of his Jewishness is manifested in the perception in his mind’s eye of the others “bandying jokes at his expense.” Here, the presence of humor (though imagined) is used one last time, much in the same way that Bernstein uses it in the cloak shop, as a means of alienating Jake from the group. But unlike Bernstein’s humor, which was real and which evidenced an ability to allow for Jake’s incongruity, this humor is imagined by Jake himself in such a way as to alienate Jake completely. Thus it becomes a means of self-expulsion, expelling Jake from his Jewishness just as he has expelled Gitl from his Americanization. Jake feels this loss as he rides away, “the victim of an ignominious defeat,” his new identity finally and effectively constructed by the humor that surrounds him, whether real or imagined.
WORKS CITED


Saul Bellow’s The Bellarosa Connection

There is an old joke: A Jew survives the camps but loses all his family. He approaches the resettlement officer and asks to go to Australia.

“Australia?” says the officer. “But why?”

“Why not?” says the survivor. “It’s as good a place as any.”

“But it’s so far,” says the officer.

“Far?” replies the survivor. “From what is it far?”

I. The Holocaust

The history of the debate over the appropriateness of dealing artistically with the Holocaust is long and layered. Cries for a doctrine of silence regarding the Atrocity arose almost immediately in response to reports of its occurrence, yet such a doctrine was challenged from the beginning. As Leslie Fiedler observes, early on “the full horror of the Holocaust was [...] being relentlessly documented in print, on stage and screen, radio and TV” (173), and thus, ironically, the “catastrophe that had been labeled in an

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1 This is my version of the joke. It appears in slightly different form in Telushkin, 108. For a publication history of the joke, see Richard Raskin’s “‘Far From Where?’ On the History and Meanings of a Classic Jewish Refugee’s Joke.” (American Jewish History 85.2: 143–50).
instant cliché ‘unspeakable’ was being not only spoken about everywhere, but packaged, hyped, and sold on the marketplace” (174). Spokespersons for each side of the issue quickly stepped forward. The philosopher Theodor Adorno uttered his famous condemnation of the “barbarism” of writing poetry after Auschwitz, while survivors such as Elie Wiesel started publishing poetic prose about it. An articulation of the debate soon issued from the scholarly quarter, prompting formal questions regarding the issue. By 1975, Lawrence L. Langer had published The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination, in which he tells of the experiences that led him to question “whether the artistic vision of the literary intelligence could ever devise a technique and form adequate to convey what the concentration camp experience implied for the contemporary mind” (xii, emphasis added).

By 1979, with the publication of Edward Alexander’s The Resonance of Dust, the question of adequacy had become central and discussions of it more refined. Alexander, in his preface, quotes Lionel Trilling: “the great psychological fault of our time which we all observe with baffled wonder and shame is that there is no possible way of responding to Belsen and Buchenwald. The activity of mind fails before the incommunicability of man’s suffering” (xi). Alexander then explains that what Trilling really meant to say was not that there is no possible, but that there is no adequate, way of responding to the spectacle, enacted in full view of much of the world, of a genocidal campaign that had engaged the human and material resources of the German people for over six years. (xii)
For Alexander, then, underlying the debate over the appropriateness of dealing artistically with the Holocaust is this question of adequacy. Can a work of art deal adequately with the Holocaust? If so, what constitutes “adequacy.” How is a work to be judged as adequate or inadequate? Moreover, if adequacy is impossible, can there be value in a work that is inadequate?

According to Alexander, the inadequacy of any artistic treatment of the Holocaust is an essential aspect of it:

When you wrestle with an angel, it is probably better to lose than to win; and this is more especially the case when you wrestle with the angel of death who visited the Jews of Europe. We are, in other words, dealing here with one of those problematic human enterprises in which some degree of failure or inadequacy is almost a precondition of success. (xiii)

Others, such as Aharon Appelfeld and George Steiner, seem to agree with this notion of inherent inadequacy. Appelfeld begins his essay “After the Holocaust” by agreeing with Adorno on the barbarism of poetry after Auschwitz:

We must agree [...] with all our being. A religious person will certainly argue in favor of silence, but what can we do? By his very nature and, if you will, because of his weakness, man has a kind of inner need for ritualization, not only of his joy, but also, and perhaps essentially, of his pain and grief. (83)
The implication here is that, yes, poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, but human beings by their nature are barbaric, and in their weakness and inadequacy they will attempt to deal with their grief because, after all, “what can we do?” And Steiner concurs: “It is by no means clear that there can be, or that there ought to be, any form, style, or code of [...] expression somehow adequate to the facts of the Shoah” (155). He concludes that, despite the possibility or probability of inadequacy, the “compulsion to articulacy [...] will persist” (170), especially if the Jews as a people are to persist—because “for a Jew to be silent about any determining part of his own history is self-mutilation” (155).

The problem with this idea of inherent, unavoidable inadequacy is that, despite its apparent dismissal of the debate over the possibility of adequacy, it doesn’t actually resolve anything. If inadequacy is inherent and a given, then all works of Holocaust literature are inadequate in their representation of the Atrocity, and to label a work “inadequate” is meaningless (as the adjective fails to distinguish it from any other work). Moreover, we must acknowledge that some works are more appropriate or more successful in dealing with the Holocaust than others, and such an acknowledgment forces us, in determining the relative success or appropriateness of a work, to ask “How inadequate is too inadequate?” This, in turn, leads us to contrive some sense of “adequate inadequacy,” and suddenly we’re right back to where we started: Can a work of art deal adequately with the subject of the Holocaust?

Appelfeld’s and Steiner’s essays appear in Writing and the Holocaust (1988), edited by Berel Lang. Published nearly a decade after Alexander’s study, this volume
thoroughly and effectively articulates the views of, and the tangled nest of dilemmas facing, those who write and read about the Holocaust. Lang himself puts it succinctly in his introduction:

It is clear that the Holocaust is not a conventional or "normal" subject at all, that the evidence of its moral enormity could not fail to affect the act of writing and the process of its literary representation. The latter notion, in any event, constitutes the main premise on which the essays collected in this volume turn: that there is a significant relation between the moral implications of the Holocaust and the means of its literary expression. The essays included here [...] reflect a common set of questions: What constraints, whether in the use of fact or in the reach of the imagination, are imposed on authors or readers by the subject of the Holocaust? How does that subject shape the perspectives from which it is viewed — the stance, for example, of the "disinterested" scholar, or the assumption of aesthetic distance or "negative capability" in the poet or novelist? Is the enormity of the Holocaust at all capable of literary representation? And what would be the justification for attempting such representation even if it were possible? (1-2)

Most notable, from Lang's list of questions, is the materialization of a dilemma that appears to be increasingly more ethical than aesthetic. Lang writes of "moral
implications,” of “constraints” and of “justification.” He summarizes Adorno’s conclusions this way: “Placed in the balance with the artifice that inevitably enters the work of even the most scrupulous author, what warrant—moral or theoretical or aesthetic—is there for writing about the Holocaust at all?” (2). One might argue that a theoretical or aesthetic warrant for writing about the Holocaust has, like a moral warrant, an underlying ethical basis. For certainly a warrant, of whatever nature and for whatever act, exists within a system of values or ethics that provides the impetus for the justification of that act.

It would seem, then, that the primary question is not “Can art deal adequately with the Holocaust?” but rather “What value, if any, is there in the artistic treatment of the Holocaust?” If we answer this, we answer the question of adequacy: if there is potential value X in writing poetry about Auschwitz, then the poetry is adequate to the degree that it accomplishes X. It would seem that, for Adorno, there can be no value in writing about it—or, at least, the value of silence is far greater than any potential value the art may offer. Adorno’s position is that art can never be adequate and the ethical choice is silence.

In 1980, one year after Alexander’s The Resonance of Dust, Alvin H. Rosenfeld published A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature. But Rosenfeld, surprisingly, does not pick up the question of adequacy—perhaps because he felt that Alexander had sufficiently dismissed it. Rosenfeld spends the first chapter examining the problem of defining “Holocaust literature,” noting that it is not merely a “topical” literature like, for example, war literature—and in the introduction he does raise familiar
and important questions: “Can Holocaust literature be ‘literary’ [...]? Can it afford not to be literary?” (5); but he takes a backdoor approach to the question of adequacy when he asks, “What is to be gained from reading Holocaust literature [...] or what is to be lost from avoiding it?” (6). These questions strike at the heart of that at which the question of adequacy is aimed. In other words, Rosenfeld’s questions are ethical. Can good come from artistic treatment of the Holocaust? Furthermore, if good can come from it, and does, is this enough to deem the work “adequate,” though it fails to represent the totality of the Event? And on the other hand, supposing it is possible to adequately represent the totality of the Event, but the work fails to do so, can good still come of it?

To further complicate the ethical dilemma facing the writers and readers of Holocaust literature, there is also the question of the appropriateness of using humor, or of working in the comic mode—a debate that, though perhaps less widespread, is undoubtedly more potentially combustible than that which arises over Holocaust writing in general. And this only makes sense: after all, if there can be no more poetry, no more eloquence after Auschwitz, then how can there be humor? Lightheartedness? If breaking the silence is potentially irreverent, can there be a greater show of irreverence than cracking jokes? The idea seems to flirt with blasphemy.

Yet humor and comedy have been present in reactions to the Holocaust from the beginning. There is a long tradition of gallows humor, that brand of humor used by victims to articulate and, in some small way, assuage the terror and anxiety inherent in their position as victims. Terrence Des Pres, in his essay “Holocaust Laughter?”, notes some of the representations of this humor in survivor memoirs. But Des Pres’ main line
of inquiry is ultimately the same as mine: Is laughter possible in literary treatments of the Holocaust? It is one thing to conceive of the victims resorting to making light of death or depravity to temporarily relieve their burdens, or ridiculing their oppressors in a vain but somewhat gratifying grasp for a sense of superiority or power. But is it possible for the reader, the non-victim, to respond with humor to the Holocaust? And, in Des Pres’ words,

if possible, is it permitted? Is the general absence of humor a function of the event itself, or the result of Holocaust etiquette—or both? Laughter may or may not be possible; but it is not too much to say that most of us take a dim view of jokes or playfulness in matters so painful. (218)

And why shouldn’t we take this dim view? Joking and playfulness are thought by many to be by nature anarchic, subversive—in a word, they are irreverent. Yet Alan Dundes and Thomas Hauschild argue that “Nothing is so sacred, so taboo, or so disgusting that it cannot be the subject of humor. Quite the contrary—it is precisely those topics culturally defined as sacred, taboo or disgusting which more often than not provide the principal grist for humorous mills” (56). But Dundes and Hauschild’s argument appears in the context of an essay on “Auschwitz Jokes” in which it is not the gallows humor of the victims that is examined or highlighted, but rather the sick and anti-Semitic “executioner’s humor” of jokes such as the following: “[Q.] How many Jews will fit in a Volkswagen? [A.] 506, six in the seats and 500 in the ashtrays” (20). Surely, in the face of jokes such as this, the question of “etiquette,” of what is “permissible”—
surely the question of ethics and the use of humor with regard to the Holocaust—must be raised and answered. How can it not be?

Berys Gaut, in his essay “Just Joking: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humor,” argues effectively that humor, in fact, cannot be divorced from ethical considerations—which is to say that we cannot hold that humor is essentially, solely, or merely anarchic (and thus not answerable to the ethical constraints of other modes of discourse). “What is funny is partly dependent on what is ethical” (67), writes Gaut, so that, while humor may indeed be anarchic or irreverent, we must ask whether our ethics will allow for that anarchy or irreverence—whether we can condone or assimilate it. To find humor in something is to take steps toward the assimilation, at least temporarily, of the value system that is inherent in and conveyed by that humor. Otherwise the humor could not be appreciated. In considering the ethics of humor, then, we must consider the value system that is being presented and the effects or consequences of its assimilation. Also, in considering the value of a literary representation of the Holocaust that makes use of humor or is in the comic mode, we can assess the nature and function of that humor as a means of determining what good might come of the work, and whether the work is then adequate in accomplishing that good.

And this brings us to Bellow. In the context of these debates and dilemmas, what are we to make of Bellow’s slim novella, The Bellarosa Connection—a story full of humor, set against the backdrop of the Holocaust, about an assimilated American Jew and his fascination with Harry Fonstein, a Holocaust survivor? The narrator of the novella is scornful of Old World Jewishness and would recommend that Jews “go
American” (29), and he would rather avoid the topic of the Holocaust altogether. Is such a novella of value? Is Bellow’s humor ethical? Is his treatment of the Holocaust adequate? Or, to paraphrase Rosenfeld, What, if anything, is to be gained by reading The Bellarosa Connection? And what, if anything, is lost by not reading it—by, instead, simply maintaining the silence?

II. The Novella

The first significant statement that is made by the narrator of The Bellarosa Connection comes at the end of the novella’s opening sentence:

As founder of the Mnemosyne Institute in Philadelphia, forty years in the trade, I trained many executives, politicians, and members of the defense establishment, and now that I am retired, with the Institute in the capable hands of my son, I would like to forget about remembering. (1–2)

But the narrator recognizes that this is impossible—that, “if you have worked in memory, which is life itself, there is no retirement except in death” (2). And, as though to congratulate himself for the lasting integrity of his memory, he tells us that, despite his millions, he forces himself to remember that I was not born in a Philadelphia house with twenty-foot ceilings but began life as the child of Russian Jews from New Jersey. A walking memory file like me can’t trash his beginnings or distort his early history. Sure, in the universal
process of self-revision anybody can be carried away from the true
facts. For instance, Europeanized Americans in Europe will
assume a false English or French correctness and bring a
disturbing edge of self-consciousness into their relations with
their friends. I have observed this. It makes an unpleasant
impression. So whenever I was tempted to fake it, I asked myself,

“And how are things out in New Jersey?” (2–3)

It is through these opening pages that we are initiated into Bellow’s world of comic
irony, and to the humor that is inherent in the narrator’s situation. Here is a man—an
Americanized Eastern-European Jew—who claims that his infallible memory will not
allow him to “distort his early history” (2). Yet, after criticizing Europeanized Americans
for their falseness, he demonstrates his own falsity by suggesting, quite self-consciously,
that New Jersey, rather than Russian Jewry, is the soilbed of his “beginnings,” the source
of his identity.

This is necessary, of course, to the movement of the narrative, which is from the
narrator’s self-ignorance toward enlightenment. As Lillian Kremer puts it, “The
pervasive irony of the novella is that its narrator recognizes at the end of a long career
devoted to the mechanics of memory retention, that he has been blind to the relevance of
personal and collective memory” (50). It becomes clear, through this introduction and
subsequent events and descriptions, that the narrator has, in Elaine Safer’s words,
divorced himself “from all that is personal: emotional involvement with others and a
meaningful connection with his own family and his Jewish roots” (5). That is, the
narrator of The Bellarosa Connection is, at the start of the narrative, in a state of disconnectedness.

This disconnectedness is demonstrated not only by the narrator’s lack of self-awareness, but also by his attitude and sense of humor, which manifest themselves repeatedly throughout his narrative. According to Shiv Kumar, “Bellarosa makes it clear from the beginning that the attitude of [...] the narrator to all that Fonstein suffered in the Holocaust—death, brutality, evil, loss of family—is trivial” (33); and “the narrator’s use of humor is [...] characterized by an attitude that regards everything with amusement, even such things as the tragic experiences of Fonstein” (34). To trivialize and to regard with amusement are, of course, products of a certain level of disconnectedness. And in our narrator’s case, it is Fonstein and all that he represents—Jewish identity and Jewish history, and specifically the Holocaust—from which the narrator is disconnected. We get a taste of this trivializing, bemused attitude when the narrator describes Fonstein’s wartime experiences:

Most of Fonstein’s family were killed by the Germans. In Auschwitz he would have been gassed immediately, because of [his] orthopedic boot. Some Dr. Mengele would have pointed his swagger stick to the left, and Fonstein’s boot might by now have been on view in the camp’s exhibition hall—they have a hill of cripple boots there, and a hill of crutches and of back braces and one of human hair and one of eyeglasses. (4)
This cursory reference to these horrible facts appears amidst a grotesque description of Fonstein ("The head itself was heavy enough to topple a less determined man" [4]) and condescending remarks about the narrator's father (who "had a passion for refugee stories" [5]), and is followed by a flippant pun on the concentration camp ovens as the narrator explains that although Fonstein escaped from Poland and reached Italy, "The heat was on Italian Jews too, since Mussolini had adopted the Nuremberg racial laws" (4). Clearly, such treatment can only come from one who is emotionally distanced from both the individual Fonstein and a larger sense of Jewish history and identity.

This is where the question of ethics enters into the discussion. Every joke arises within a value system that allows for a humorous response to the situation presented by that joke; so it seems necessary that we examine the values of a narrator who is so clearly responding humorously to Fonstein's—and, by extension, to European Jewry's—dire predicament.

Humor, by nature, functions simultaneously as a means of both assimilation and alienation. To participate in the humorous response is, of course, to participate in at least one aspect of the assimilating function of humor, which is that socializing function whereby humor brings people together, establishes and strengthens relationships, and forms and reinforces communities; whereas, to resist participation, or to fail in or be incapable of participating, is to situate oneself outside of that community and to be subject to at least one aspect of the alienating function of that humor. This is one aspect of the social function of humor—which is the construction of group identities—but it is only one aspect; another, for example, has less to do with who is participating (or not
participating) in the humor and more to do with the attitude of the humor toward its object. And this latter aspect often exerts influence over the former.

For instance, our narrator’s humorous response to European anti-Semitism stems from a system of values that allows for such a response to the given situation. And perhaps, in our narrator’s case, the value of such a response is precisely the disconnectedness that it affords. In other words, the narrator—who would prefer to “forget remembering” and “go American”—finds value in disconnecting himself from his Jewish history and identity. Thus, his particular humorous response (characterized as trivializing amusement), which both requires and reinforces a degree of disconnectedness, is considered by him to be valuable. Moreover, the attitude of this humor, and the value system it represents, has an influence over who participates in it. To participate in any given incidence of humor, one must be capable of, and willing to, assimilate—at least momentarily—the value system that allows for the existence of that humor. In short, if I am unwilling (or incapable\(^2\)) of assimilating the value system inherent in a given humorous response, then I will not (or cannot) participate in it. And I thereby situate myself in relation to the community within which that humor is generated; that is, I either assimilate myself into that community, or I alienate myself from it.

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\(^2\) Humor is an intellectual experience and consequently demands a level of intellectual comprehension if one is to participate in it. That is why we can say we “don’t get it,” after hearing a joke that others find funny. As a result, there are many instances of humor that we might be willing to participate in, but which we are incapable of participating in because we lack the understanding that makes participation possible.
In assessing the value of a humorous literary treatment of the Holocaust, then, we must ask, Is the value system inherent in the work’s use of humor a value system that we wish to assimilate? (Recognizing all the while, of course, that we make this judgment while already situated within a value system that influences our evaluation of value systems.)

If The Bellarosa Connection was comprised of humorous treatments of the Holocaust and its victims and survivors that were all of a similar, trivializing attitude as the one described above, it seems safe to say that we would reject the work as being distasteful, even reprehensible. Our value system, which reveres the Holocaust as the most horrific modern Atrocity in Jewish history, would be incapable of assimilating such a sustained trivialization of the Event and its victims. But our narrator’s attitude toward the Holocaust and Jewish history is not so one-dimensional, and it is this conflicted, problematic nature of his response that makes possible our (albeit temporary) allowance for his occasionally undesirable treatments. Witness his reaction, for example, when Sorella, Fonstein’s wife, who “proved quite a talker” (26), brings a conversation “back to Fonstein’s rescue and the history of the Jews” (27):

What she occasionally talked about [...] was the black humor, the slapstick side of certain camp operations. Being a French teacher, she was familiar with Jarry and Ubu Roi, Pataphysics, Absurdism, Dadaism, Surrealism. Some camps were run in a burlesque style that forced you to make these connections. Prisoners were sent naked into a swamp and had to croak and hop like frogs. Children
were hanged while starved, freezing slave laborers lined up on parade in front of the gallows and a prison band played Viennese light opera waltzes.

I didn’t want to hear this, and I said impatiently, “All right, Billy Rose wasn’t the only one in show biz. So the Germans did it too. [...]”

[...] I was invited to meditate on themes like: Can Death Be Funny? or Who Gets the Last Laugh? I wouldn’t do it, though. [...] It suffocated me to do this. [...] Such things are utterly beyond me, a pointless exercise. (28–29)

When presented with an opportunity to participate in the “black humor” of the camps—a humor that, it would seem, requires a deep sense of disconnectedness from the reality of things, something our narrator at times appears to desire and to foster—he declines. And it isn’t that he is incapable of seeing the potential for humor; it is that he is unwilling to join in on this humor. He doesn’t even want to hear about it. It suffocates him.

The fact that the narrator refuses to participate in this humorous response is indicative of the complexity of his attitude, and his value system. He does not refuse every humorous response to the Holocaust—he only refuses Sorella’s. For the narrator, humor is typically trivializing, and when he says, “All right, Billy Rose wasn’t the only one in show biz. The Germans did it too,” he is attempting to stifle the discussion and to distance himself from the topic—to respond, not with Sorella’s sense of black humor, but
with his own attitude of trivializing humor. He wants to make the Germans' deeds unreal—to trivialize them as mere "show biz" and thereby disconnect from them—rather than engage with them philosophically, as Sorella would have it.

Indeed, by pointing out the absurdities of the camps and drawing connections with Dadaism or Surrealism, Sorella's humor becomes not one of trivialization, but one of philosophical examination. Humor arises from incongruities, and while the narrator's humor downplays or deflects the significance of these incongruities, Sorella's humor seizes them and probes them for whatever significance they might offer. Ultimately, Sorella's exploration is our own: she asks, "Can Death Be Funny," and she seeks some sense of adequacy, of value, in responses to Jewish history and the Holocaust.

Meanwhile, our narrator initially remains ignorant of his failure to connect with this Jewishness. It is immediately following this conversation with Sorella, after he claims that all of this is "utterly beyond me," that he says, "Also my advice to Fonstein—given mentally—was: Forget it. Go American" (29).

In effect, a prominent theme in the novella becomes these "two faces of contemporary Jewish-American response to Jewish identification and historic memory" (Kremer 51). Sorella, representing one of these faces, is steeped in Jewish identity and memory; she stands for Jewishness, and it is her desire to put other Jews into a position of remembrance. (Hence her desire to get Billy to acknowledge her husband.) Billy is the Americanized Jew: "Remember, forget—what's the difference to me?" he asks flippantly, when Sorella finally confronts him (53). He has no interest in Jewish history, Jewish memory, or Jewish identity, despite his major role in, and contributions to, them.
The absurd, utterly humorous anecdote that is at the heart of this novella—the story of Fonstein, a European Jew, rescued from Hitler by Billy Rose, an Americanized Jew, who then refuses to acknowledge Fonstein or his gratitude—functions as a metaphor for Jewishness in the twentieth century. The fate of post-Holocaust Jewish identity lies largely in the hands of the Jews in America; but assimilationism threatens to finish what Hitler started. Sorella knows this. Speaking of Billy, she remarks, “if you want my basic view, here it is: The Jews could survive everything that Europe threw at them. I mean the lucky remnant. But now comes the next test—America. Can they hold their ground, or will the U.S.A. be too much for them?” (65).

Throughout much of the story, the narrator aligns himself with Billy in his assimilationist attitude; but his movement is, so to speak, from Billy toward Sorella. Ultimately, this is what the novella is about: a movement toward Jewishness, toward collective memory, toward a sense of shared history. This movement manifests itself in conversations between the narrator and Sorella, such as when Sorella describes her confrontation with Billy. Billy, of course, denies Sorella’s request that he acknowledge his connection to Fonstein. Sorella tells the narrator that she lost her temper and threw the documents she had brought (hoping they would help to persuade Billy) “through the open window” (63). Then she says:

“I went to the door. I don’t suppose I wanted to make a gesture,
but I am a Newark girl at bottom. I said, ‘You’re the filth. I want no part of you.’ And I made the Italian gesture people used to make in a street fight, the edge of the palm on the middle of my
"Inconspicuously, and laughing as she did it, she made a small fist and drew the edge of her other hand across her biceps.

"A very American conclusion." [says our narrator] "Oh," she said, "from start to finish it was a one-hundred-percent American event, of our own generation." (63–64)

The "event" is American because it pits the Old World against the New: Sorella, champion of Jewishness, versus Billy, the assimilationist. This confrontation epitomizes the American experience for European Jews. And the irony of the "American conclusion"—the Old World rejecting the New while employing a distinctly New World attitude and gesture—is thick, and telling. And humorous.

Most significantly, the humor therein is simultaneously assimilating and alienating. Though Sorella’s act, at the time, is without humor, in recounting what happened to the narrator she laughs and enjoys the humor that arises from her account. The humor derives from a recognition of the ironies and incongruities of the situation, but it is also hostile toward Billy and all that he represents; thus the humor is alienating. Particularly, it alienates the idea of Americanization, its value system, and what it produces (e.g. people like Billy). Sorella and the narrator’s shared moment of humor at Billy’s expense functions to assimilate a value system that would shun or reject Americanization. As a result, Sorella and the narrator are, at least temporarily, assimilated to one another, joined in a community that devalues what Billy Rose represents.
This is a key moment in the narrator's trajectory toward Sorella and Jewishness, but the final movement does not come until after the narrator has had his dream-vision, his revelation that he "had made a mistake, a lifelong mistake" (87) by becoming disconnected from the past. In the end, it is the narrator's phone conversation with a "young moron" (102) who informs the narrator that Fonstein and Sorella are dead, that sparks the narrator's final, narrative turn toward Jewishness. In an attempt to reconnect with the Fonsteins, our narrator tries to find them and instead finds a house-sitter. Prior to this conversation, he notes that he has "begun to place [his] hopes and needs on Sorella Fonstein" (91), and upon hearing of the Fonsteins' deaths he says, "Something essential in me caved in, broke down" (96). At this point, the young man on the other end of the phone starts giving our narrator "the business" (96), "taunting" him for his "Jewish sentiments" (101). In other words, in the end, the narrator himself becomes the object of humor, and we are told specifically that the youth's taunts are aimed at the narrator's Jewishness. The humor is that of ridicule, mockery stemming from a value system that has little esteem for this Jewishness, and our narrator's noteworthy response is to galvanize and to assert his Jewishness. He dismisses the boy's "low-grade cheap-shot nihilism" and reaffirms the value of memory and its ties to Jewishness by noting that "the Jews ask even God to remember, 'Yiskor Elohim'" (102).

Thus, our narrator's redemption is enacted: he overcomes his disconnectedness from Jewish identity and turns from Billy's Americanization, and he reconnects with all that Sorella represents. Moreover, having aligned ourselves with the narrator (who remains, significantly, unnamed), as readers we are equally alienated by the young
moron's ridiculing humor and we are therefore equally alienated from a value system that allows for the scorning of memory and Jewishness. In effect, we assimilate a converse value system, now represented in our narrator, which favors the assertion of Jewishness, and we naturally applaud our narrator's final decision "to record everything I could remember of the Bellarosa Connection, and set it all down with a Mnemosyne flourish" (102).

III. The Connection

The sentiment conveyed by the joke at the start of this essay (when the Holocaust survivor asks, "From what is it far?") is one of disconnectedness. Bereft of any sense of home and, most significantly, of any living familial relationships—which is to say, of any sense of belonging to a tight-knit community—there is nothing from which the Jew in the joke can feel "far." It is perhaps the ultimate sense of disconnectedness because there is no longer even anything from which one might feel disconnected.

As is made explicit in the joke, this condition is at least in part a result of the Holocaust. But implicit in the joke is the perception, held by the post-Holocaust Jew, that the Jewish community no longer exists. The Jew in the joke does not consider turning to his fellow Jews; he does not consider his removal to Australia to be "far" from anything, suggesting that even his fellow survivors (remaining in Europe or going to America) hold no more connection for him than anyone else would. Such an attitude, it might be argued, is not entirely dissimilar from the attitude of the assimilationist, who likewise determines that there is to be no more connection with Jews than with anybody else.
And as Bellow intimates, through Sorella in The Bellarosa Connection, the American Jews' turn to assimilationism has perhaps become itself what many have called the "Second Holocaust."

Ultimately, the narrator recognizes his complicity in and victimization by this Second Holocaust, and begins to reassert his Jewishness in the face of those forces which would ridicule, or even do away with, Jewishness. Thus it might be said that Bellow's narrator becomes, like Fonstein, a Survivior; but unlike the Survivor in the joke, who survives the camps but falls victim to the resulting sense of disconnectedness, our narrator is a Survivor because he recognizes and seeks to repair that disconnectedness.

Another interesting aspect of the joke about the refugee is relevant here: it, too, arises out of a recognition of disconnectedness—or, more specifically, out of a recognition of the incongruity of such disconnectedness. Yet, paradoxically, it functions to bring Jews together. In other words, the humor plays on a shared sense of disconnectedness—those who participate in the humor must be willing to, and capable of, recognizing the disconnectedness—but they must also be willing to, and capable of, recognizing the incongruity of this disconnectedness. They must recognize that for a surviving Jew to feel disconnected from other surviving Jews is incongruous. Thus, while the Jew in the joke is blinded by his disconnectedness, the Jew who laughs at the joke is able to connect with other Jews through that shared sense of disconnectedness; and by recognizing the disconnectedness, it is both undermined and, in some small way, at least temporarily, surmounted.
This, potentially, is the connective power of humor. And it is this function of humor that Bellow relies upon in *The Bellarosa Connection*. After all, it is through our narrator’s eventual recognition of Billy Rose’s, and ultimately his own, disconnectedness that he manages to overcome it, and to make his (re-)turn toward Jewishness. And Billy Rose, then, becomes metaphorically the catalyst for the salvation of the Jews from both Holocausts, by saving not only Fonstein from the Nazis, but also our narrator from American assimilationism.

Billy Rose, then, is the necessary, the saving “connection”—but only if we see him through Old World eyes. So long as the narrator sees him only as Americans see him (Billy Rose: “full-fledged American” [23] and New York celebrity), the disconnectedness goes unnoticed and thus remains, to do its damage. But once Fonstein’s story is told, and we begin to see Billy through the eyes of European Jewry—as “Bellarosa,” a Jew who makes possible the salvation of other Jews, but who is ultimately despicable for his Americanization—then we are empowered with a recognition of this disconnectedness and the harm that it does. Only then, through this recognition of disconnectedness, are we able to take advantage of the Bellarosa Connection. And ultimately, this is the value of Bellow’s humorous or comedic response to the Holocaust: its potential for fostering Jewish connections, for contributing to the reconstruction of a sense of Jewish history and identity in the wake of two Holocausts. Presumably, the survival of Jewishness and the overcoming of widespread disconnectedness are things that we value; and in this sense, from within this system of values, we must conclude that *The Bellarosa Connection*, as a work of Holocaust
literature, does have value, that it is more than "appropriate" or "adequate"—that, like the telling of a good joke, it is much better than silence.

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BERNARD MALAMUD'S GOD'S GRACE

When you tell a joke to a Frenchman he laughs three times: once when you tell it to him, the second time when you explain it, and the third time when he understands it—for the Frenchman loves to laugh....

When you tell a joke to a Jew—before you've had a chance to finish, he interrupts you impatiently. First of all, he has heard it before! Secondly, what business have you telling a joke when you don't know how? In the end, he decides to tell you the story himself, but in a much better version than yours.

—Sanford Pinsker

Relatively little has been written on Bernard Malamud’s last completed novel, God’s Grace (1982), but nearly all those who have written on it have noted the novel’s retelling of the story of Abraham and Isaac, and commented on the significance of Malamud’s reversal of the Old Testament version. At the end of the novel, Calvin Cohn (the Abraham-figure) is taken up the mountain to be slain by Buz (a chimpanzee, and the Isaac-figure), and not only are the father and son roles reversed, but in Malamud’s

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1 Pinsker, 3.
version there is no divine intervention: the sacrifice is carried out and Cohn is slain, making the reversal complete.

This theme of reversal runs throughout the novel, and in fact penetrates the novel so thoroughly as to become its very nature—so that the novel itself is a reversal of the reader’s expectations. Just as the expectations of the reader who is familiar with the Abraham-Isaac story are thwarted by the reversal of that story in the novel, so the expectations of the reader who is familiar with Malamud’s previous novels are thwarted by the nature of God’s Grace. For though Malamud’s short stories are at times fantastical, full of angels and talking animals, the reader expecting a realistic novel in tune with The Assistant, A New Life, or The Tenants, is bound to perceive God’s Grace as a reversal of expectations that even the most fantastical stories fail to foretell.

With this in mind, we might, then, begin to see the novel as a kind of joke—for jokes often rely on a reversal of expectation in order to accomplish their effect. In fact, reversal is often the very nature of the joke (not merely something upon which the joke relies), as the joke and its effects often would not exist without the reversal: essentially, the reversal is the joke, the joke the reversal. Likewise, we might say that Malamud’s novel would not exist (i.e. would not be what it is) without the reversals that it enacts and upon which it relies. And recognizing the novel as a kind of joke proves useful to our understanding of it.

Malamud has said that his “premise is that we will not destroy each other,” that he is “for humanism—and against nihilism” (Wershba 7). Reconciling this stance with God’s Grace—a work laden with absurd humor and in which every attempt to restore
order and to rebuild civilization fails miserably, and which ends in chaos and the death of the last man on earth—is a difficult task. Several readers attempt to put a positive spin on the novel's ending, but Elaine B. Safer concedes that "we appreciate the frustration of Malamud's desire to affirm hope" (115), and she would apparently agree with Irving H. Buchen when he says: "For all the comic flourishes and occasional buffoonery, this is Malamud's darkest book....The concluding tone...is that of an elegy" (33). As Safer puts it, the novel is "the most violent and bleak expression of black humor anywhere in Malamud's fiction" (104).

Concerning this use of humor, Safer continues:

Cohn's continual yearning for meaning and purpose comes into confrontation with failure and frustration. This sets up an absurd perspective. It is absurd by Camus's definition which is based upon a "divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints"....

Often in absurdist literature, the conflict between the quest for meaning and the upset at finding none creates an emerging tone in which distress and joke, horror and farce collide. (104-105)

Safer is correct to identify the perspective of the novel as absurd; indeed, absurdism itself is another form of reversal—traditionally one expects to find meaning and purpose, or order, in life, and absurdism thwarts these expectations. However, most absurd humor is linked with black or dark humor (all of these terms are sometimes used

\[^{2}\text{See Cronin, Helterman, and Richman.}\]
synonymously), and tends toward nihilism. One might suggest that Malamud’s use of absurd humor, then, is yet another reversal—this time of his premise for humanism. But I believe that to carry the theme of reversal so far as to reverse Malamud’s very ideology is, itself, a bit absurd. Rather, as I intend to show, it is in fact the expectations surrounding absurdism (the absurdist novel enjoying, at the time of Malamud’s writing, a wide popularity) that are reversed.

Malamud’s humanism is his premise—“that we will not destroy each other.” But that God’s Grace plays (yet again) on a reversal of this is made clear on the novel’s opening page:

At the end, after the thermonuclear war between the Djanks and Druzhkies, in consequence of which they had destroyed themselves, and, madly, all other inhabitants of the earth, God spoke through a glowing crack in a bulbous black cloud to Calvin Cohn, the paleologist, who of all men had miraculously survived in a battered oceanography vessel. (3)

In other words, at the start of God’s Grace, humanity has already destroyed itself.

Malamud’s premise against nihilism is seemingly reversed. This reversal continues in the dialogue between Cohn and God (who always speaks through double-quotatiion marks), as God explains:

"I regret to say it was through a minuscule error that you escaped destruction. Though mine, it was not a serious one; a serious mistake might have jammed the universe. The cosmos is so conceived
that I myself don’t know what goes on everywhere. It is not perfection although I, of course, am perfect. That’s how I arranged my mind.

"And that you, Mr. Cohn, happen to exist when no one else does, though embarrassing to Me, has nothing to do with your once having studied for the rabbinate, or for that matter, having given it up...."

"I have no wish to torment you, only once more affirm cause and effect. It is no more than a system within a system, yet I depend on it to maintain a certain order." (3-4)

That God is capable of error—“minuscule” or, by implication, even “serious”—certainly runs counter to expectation, as does the notion that God doesn’t know “what goes on everywhere,” or that He is capable of embarrassment. But the most crucial reversal presented in the passage above concerns cause and effect, God’s “system within a system,” on which He depends to “maintain a certain order.” Calvin Cohn (whose very name is a sort of reversal), as lone survivor, exists outside of this order—God is careful to note that Cohn’s survival is not the result (effect) of past actions (cause)—and therefore Cohn represents the deconstruction of the system; or, in other words, Cohn is the reversal of cause and effect personified.

God’s wish to “once more affirm cause and effect,” His desire to reestablish order to the universe, demands the destruction of Calvin Cohn, and Cohn’s nature is further evidenced by his pleas for clemency. Concerning his survival of the “present Devastation” (the thermonuclear war followed by a Second Flood), Cohn says, “It wasn’t as though I had a choice,” and begs, “Since I am still alive it would only be fair if
You let me live. A new fact is a new condition” (5). If Cohn respected God’s system of order, he would recognize the need for his destruction; but Cohn is disorder incarnate, and therefore fights the system of order, begging God to spare him. That Cohn himself does not recognize God’s order, or his own nature, is made clear by the illogic of his pleas: he cites his having no choice in the matter as an excuse for his survival and reason for its continuance, when obviously personal choice was not an immediate factor in the world’s destruction; and he appeals to God’s sense of fairness in an effort to preserve himself, when fairness clearly demands Cohn’s demise along with the others’.

From this point on, Cohn’s nature and his lack of self-awareness provide the main thrust of the novel, as well as its primary source of humor, as Cohn continuously strives to (re)construct a sense of order in the world and—because he is himself the reversal of order—fails miserably. Without explanation, God allows Cohn to live, at least for the moment, and Cohn floats at sea for days wondering when his doom will come. He discovers a fellow-survivor in the chimpanzee, whom he renames Buz, and the two reach an island and attempt to (re)establish civilization under Cohn’s direction. Buz, by the aid of a device implanted in his throat by another scientist, is able to speak, and he finds other chimps on the island whom he teaches to speak, and these, again under Cohn’s direction, form a community, on the periphery of which is the gorilla named George (who does not speak English, but “loves cantorial music and occasionally wears a skullcap” [Buchen 24]).

Cohn’s attempts at (re)constructing order include farming, harvesting, and rationing the island’s food resources; the creation of a school where he can teach the
chimps history and theology and philosophy, and ethics (each of which is, itself, a constructed 'order'); the posting and implementation of a code of conduct, which Cohn calls "the Seven Admonitions" (171); and, in his most warped and absurd attempt at (re)constructing order, the re-procreation of the human race by mating with the only available female on the island, a chimpanzee named Mary Madelyn.3

All of these attempts to impose order—because they are enacted by Cohn, who is outside of order and the very presence of, and therefore cause of, disorder—result in utter chaos and confusion. One example is the Seder Cohn organizes in honor of the chimps, after they learn English. As Safer notes, "Cohn's Seder inverts the traditional progression from chaos to order, from darkness to light," and "ends in confusion: George the gorilla...upsets the table...as the participants race away...'in every direction'" (112-113). The disparity between the chaos of Cohn's Seder and the serious order of traditional ones is yet another reversal in the novel, and more evidence of Cohn as disorder personified. This is likewise evidenced by his creation of the school and his implementation of the "Admonitions." Cohn celebrates the chimps' ability to speak English, and lectures to them on various subjects, and admonishes them to behave civilly, not realizing that all of this is outside order, outside natural process: it is not a part of God's natural order for apes to speak, or to attend school, or to obey man-made rules, and so on. Hence, as Cohn's efforts increase, they result in increasing confusion. At the end of the novel, the chimps break into Cohn's cave and destroy all that is representative of his attempts at civilization (217-218).

3 There is Hattie, the other female chimp, but she is old and of no interest to the males.
The precursor to this last manifestation of disorder and chaos is Cohn's most unnatural attempt at restoring natural order: his copulation with and impregnation of Mary Madelyn, the female chimp. Mary Madelyn is the source of conflict, throughout the novel, between the two candidates for "Alpha ape," Buz and Esau, and the apes recognize the disorder extant in the union between Cohn and Mary Madelyn, and are outraged by it (it in fact becomes the issue which severs Cohn's special relationship with Buz, whom Cohn considers his "son"). Cohn's relationship with Mary Madelyn is an attempt to (re)construct order by re-procreating the human race—he even wishes to name the child that is born out of the union Rachel, after the Biblical mother of Judah, from whom the Jews are descended. For Cohn, humanity equals Jewishness. Though not religiously observant prior to the Flood, and supposedly opposed to proselytizing, Cohn (in yet another reversal) insists on indoctrinating the chimps in matters of rather strict Judaism, which is a way, along with teaching them English, of humanizing them. Cohn also does not like Buz's original name, Gottlob, for its Christian overtones, and instead renames the chimp after a distant cousin of Abraham, the Patriarch of the Jews (suggesting, despite his desire to humanize, that Cohn considers the chimp merely a distant cousin to humanity). The desire to name the baby Rachel suggests a desire to assert the proper lineage for a new Jewish (read "human") race.

The name that the child actually receives is Rebekah—the Biblical grandmother to Judah. Significantly, this is also the name of the ship that saves Cohn's life from the Second Flood, suggesting that Cohn hopes the child will be likewise the vehicle for
preserving humanity. But tensions in the community mount, things fall apart (apparently), and soon the apes steal the baby away and dash her body against a stone.

Cohn, of course, sees the actions of the apes as manifestations of chaos and disorder; he continues to fail to recognize the true or natural order of things, or his own nature and tendency toward disorder. The act of killing the human-ape baby, seen by Cohn as an act against the preservation of order, is (again, as a reversal of expectation) in fact an attempt to restore order. Cohn responds to his offspring’s death by trying to punish Esau and Buz, but both attempts (again) result in reversals of Cohn’s expectations. Cohn’s attempts to punish are attempts to enforce God’s system of cause and effect, action and consequence. But in attempting to punish Esau, Cohn accidentally kills an albino ape who appears briefly on the island (his attempt at order thus failing, resulting in destruction).

To punish Buz for his role in the baby’s death, Cohn takes away Buz’s ability to speak by disconnecting the wires of the device in his throat. Cohn sees this as a regrettable move away from the order he is trying to (re)construct—Jeffrey Helterman calls it “the most savage [act] in the book since it denies Buz’s humanity” (122)—but in fact it is yet another manifestation of the theme of reversal, for though the act might appear “savage,” in reality it is a restoration of natural order. And it is perhaps the only act Cohn commits that, albeit unwittingly, contributes to this restoration. Following Buz’s lead, the other chimps quickly lose their ability to speak also, and they grow increasingly wild in their behavior. Cohn—still acting out of a complete lack of awareness—perceives this as a further decline into confusion and disorder, when in fact
the reverse is true: it is an affirmation of God's natural system. According to the world presented in the novel, apes will be apes, according to God's plan.

Cohn's lack of self-awareness is revealed in almost everything he does. As Helterman puts it, Cohn is constantly forgetting "that he is the last man instead of the first" (111). But Cohn's lack of self-awareness is epitomized by a statement that Cohn himself makes early on, during the Seder, which introduces the question of the nature of God's grace in the novel. During the Seder, Cohn requires, according to tradition, several of the participants to answer four questions. Mary Madelyn, who has a speech impediment, is one of the participants, and answers question number three ("Do you know where you were born? What were your experiences during the Second Flood? How did you save yourself from the rising water?") as follows:

"First there was the Fwood and then came the awfuw nights of rain.... After the Fwood sank...I weft and wandered on, miserabwy awone untiw I met Mr. Mewchior and the twins [other chimps].

"When Esau joined our group he said he was our weader.... Soon we came to this wand of fruit trees and decided to stay. Buz found us and taught us your wanguage. He towd us his dod was a white chimpanzee, and no one bewieved it untiw we met you."

"God's grace," said Cohn. (120-121)

Here, Cohn's declaration of God's grace can be read also as an apositive: not only is he naming God's grace as the cause or source of these events, but he is also identifying himself as God's grace—and indeed this is exactly Cohn's misconception: that he, as the
lone surviving human, is God’s grace on the earth, whose calling it is to reestablish order and civilization. The truth is, of course, that this declaration is a manifestation of Cohn’s profound lack of self-awareness.

The nature of God’s grace, which is brought into question by Cohn’s declaration of it, and which is discussed by critics usually with special regard to the novel’s ending, is perhaps the most debated, most variously understood aspect of the novel. Helterman suggests that the title of the novel is—“on the face of it,” at least—“merely ironic” (123); and Safer seems to agree when she claims that “Malamud’s God...does not renounce or repent the punishment of Calvin Cohn, which is death. He offers no hope for mankind’s survival. He does not show ‘pity’—sometimes translated as ‘grace’—for mankind in this book titled God’s Grace” (109). These assessments, more precisely, question the presence of grace more than its nature. But to read the novel’s title as ironic does not seem strong enough. True, irony plays on reversal, but to suggest an ironic reading of the title is to fall short of acknowledging the novel’s very nature as that of reversal. The ironic reading holds that the title asserts a presence of grace when in fact there is none; but the theme of reversal in this novel is too potent, too ubiquitous and permeating to be hindered by such a simple assessment. I agree with those who argue that the reversal of expectations relevant to the novel’s title does not concern merely the presence of grace (i.e. we expect it to be there but it isn’t), but its nature and the manner in which it is manifested (i.e. we expect it to be there of a certain kind or in a certain way, but it isn’t).

Gloria Cronin, for example, takes up the question of the nature of grace and suggests that Cohn “finally penetrates the mystery of grace” (128) just before Buz slits
his throat, when he realizes that the nature of grace itself (and not just the use of the
term in the title) is ironic: God’s grace, being the gift of life, can result only in “suffering
and sacrifice” (121). Helterman, on the other hand, suggests that “Perhaps it is God’s
grace not to let man contaminate earth any longer. Perhaps it is God’s grace to let Cohn
live long enough to see that though man no longer exists, God does” (123). Helterman’s
first musing suggests that the nature of grace has to do not with human life (as Cronin
would have it), but with specifically the end of it—the end of all humanity—while the
second suggests that grace has nothing to do with life at all, per se, but with a kind of
knowledge or revelation. Sidney Richman seems to suggest something similar (but
different, nonetheless), seeing the novel as “a tribute to a spiritually evolving universe
calling forth a theocentric rather than an anthropocentric impulse” (218), and he claims
that the “harrowing conclusion” of the novel contains “an unconditional mark of God’s
own mercy” (205). Finally, Buchen suggests that God’s grace is perhaps a form of
leniency, or allowance: “God’s grace is self-conferred. He who makes the rules is free to
disobey them,” and, should God see fit, He might, “with the help of His grace, adjust
endings so that [man] would not have to die.... In other words, God’s grace makes
possible Cohn’s presumption” (26-27). That is to say, because of the presence of God’s
grace, or the possibility of a change in the plan (a pardoning of Cohn’s death sentence),
Cohn is able to act, to make an attempt at proving himself worthy of life.

Combine all of this with Cohn’s own ideas on the nature of grace—his notion
that grace is God’s intervention, which brings him and the chimps together after the
Flood, or that grace is in fact incarnated in Cohn himself, that Cohn’s very existence is
not only the result of, but is, God's grace—and it would appear the reader is faced with an unanswerable question: What is the true nature of God's grace, according to Malamud and to his novel which bears this title?

Of course, I believe the key to answering this question is, at the long-past risk of redundancy, in the recognition of the novel's nature as reversal. But first we must discuss the novel's ending.

As mentioned, after Cohn strips Buz of his ability to speak, the others lose their ability also and what appears to Cohn as chaos and disorder abounds. (It is, of course, not chaos and disorder that abound; rather, it is a return to natural process, a restoration of God's order.) Finally, one night as Cohn is "stuffing his gear into duffel bags, a gang of chimps rammed down his protective wall with a huge log they carried, and poured into the cave" (217). The chimps destroy Cohn's home and all the remnants of his attempts at (re)constructing order—his bookshelves, writing instruments, canned foods, his clothing, his cantorial music records and the portable phonograph. Then "the apes apprehended Cohn, binding his arms with a metal chain...[and] they laughed, screamed, barked, hooted, filling the echoing cave with impossible noise" (218). What follows is the novel's final, three-page chapter in which Cohn is taken up the mountain and sacrificed in a reversal of the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac. After his throat is cut, he lays on the floor of the cave, "waiting to be lifted into the flames" as the burnt offering:

"Merciful God," he said, "I am an old man. The Lord has let me live my life out."

He wept at the thought. Maybe tomorrow the
world to come?

In a tall tree in the valley below, George the gorilla, wearing a mud-stained white yarmulke he had one day found in the woods, chanted, “Sh’má, Yisroel, the Lord our God is one.”

In his throaty, gruff voice he began a long Kaddish for Calvin Cohn. (223)

That this Biblical story is an important analog to God’s Grace is made clear from the beginning. A part of the father-son relationship between Cohn and Buz is Cohn’s reading of Bible stories to the chimp, and Buz is constantly requesting “the one about the Dod who cut his little boy’s throat” (71). (At one point Cohn warns Buz that the story one hears the most is probably the one he will live out [85], foreshadowing the duo’s reenactment of Buz’s favorite tale.) It is significant that Buz’s pronunciation results in “Dod,” which can be translated (from the German) as either dad or God (Cronin 124), because in the end Cohn’s God is in fact the one who slays him, his blood “spurt[ing] forth an instant before [Buz’s] knife touched Cohn’s flesh” (223). The reversal of the father-son roles—Isaac (Buz) preparing to slay Abraham (Cohn), instead of the other way around—is compounded by another reversal of expectation, for as Cohn rightly insists, in the Bible God prevents the slaying from actually taking place, whereas in the novel it is God who sees it through.

After Cohn explains to Buz that Abraham does not kill Isaac, and that in fact “their suffering was limited more or less to intense worry, and had no discernible traumatic effect after the incident when they had confirmed the hard way that they all
loved each other,” Buz, who likes happy endings, responds by saying, “God is love” (73). But the Christian overtones of this make Cohn uncomfortable, so he quickly moves on to discuss the meaning of the story. Cohn states that it was a test of Abraham’s love for God (73), and Helterman notes that:

For Cohn, the Abraham and Isaac story goes only one way. Abraham proves he loves God, not vice versa. Though he will not admit it...this is what has been troubling him from Hitler’s Holocaust (Does God love or even care about the Jews?) to the atomic holocaust (Does God love or even care about mankind?). (121)

This seems to be a fair assessment of Cohn’s attitude; when he posts his Seven Admonitions, he goes out of his way to proclaim, in Admonition number two, that “God is not love, God is God” (171). But Cohn fails to realize that God makes it clear, in His very first appearance (strictly aural) to Cohn, that he does care, and that the holocaust atrocities are entirely human-made:

““The present Devastation, ending in smoke and dust, comes as a consequence of man’s self-betrayal. From the beginning, when I gave them the gift of life, they were perversely greedy for death....

““They have destroyed my handiwork.... They tore apart my ozone, carbonized my oxygen, acidified my refreshing rain. Now they affront my cosmos. How much shall the Lord endure?
"I made man to be free, but his freedom, badly used, destroyed him.... The Second Flood, this that now subsides on the broken earth, they brought on themselves. They had not lived according to the Covenant.

"Therefore I let them do away with themselves." (5)

Clearly, God cares—He’s upset about the situation—but He does not interfere with it. In fact, though he wishes to affirm cause and effect and to reassert His system of order, He continues to refrain from interfering with Cohn’s life even though Cohn’s survival is an error and the only way for God’s order to be reestablished is for that error to be corrected. When God does finally interfere with things, it is at the very end of the novel, when He enacts Cohn’s demise before Buz’s blade can do the trick.

Helterman also comments on Cohn’s attempt to use Kierkegaard’s interpretation in explaining the Abraham and Isaac story to Buz. As Helterman notes, Cohn “wrongly equates Kierkegaard’s view with Freud’s [that Abraham wanted to kill his son as a possible rival]. In fact, Kierkegaard puts the test in terms that Cohn would not understand. Kierkegaard argues that the sacrifice was a true test of faith because it was absurd” (120-121). The fact that Cohn “would not understand” the absurdist interpretation is more evidence of his lack of awareness, for all around him he is surrounded by the absurd—his very predicament is absurd—and this immersion in the absurd serves to heighten the potency of the reversal nature of the novel: the absurd is itself a reversal of expectations (expecting to find meaning and order and not finding it). Furthermore, and perhaps more significantly, the presence of the absurd creates
expectations of confusion and meaninglessness, even nihilism, in the astute reader, when the novel is in fact working against these, in affirmation of God’s system of order.

And this brings us back to the nature of God’s grace and its manifestation in the novel. Cronin suggests that it is at the moment of death that Cohn “penetrates the mystery of grace,” which is to say he has an epiphany and recognizes grace’s ironic nature, grace being life and life resulting inevitably in suffering and death. But at the moment of death, Cohn acknowledges that God has let him live out his life, then he weeps as though to mourn the fact. And his supposition—“Maybe tomorrow the world to come?”—suggests the possible realization that it is only through his death that “the world” (God’s order) can be restored. Norma Rosen says that “For Jewish writers (those, that is, who care about this sort of thing in the first place), illumination followed by death is no good. Jewish life, like Torah, is on earth” (37). In other words, the sort of epiphany Cronin refers to would be, for Malamud and for Cohn, “no good.” However, in a novel of reversal, for Cohn to realize—after having begged for his life, and having worked so hard to (re)construct the system of order that he believed it was his duty and calling, as God’s grace incarnate, to (re)construct—that it is in fact his death that is required for the (re)construction of that order, and that the nature of God’s grace is something else entirely, is the perfect reversal of Cohn’s own personal expectations, providing cause to mourn.

The nature of God’s grace, then, becomes His system of order—or perhaps more precisely, His (re)affirmation of that system. Grace is the (re)affirmation of cause and effect, all things in their proper order—the good are properly rewarded, the bad are
properly punished—so that, in this way, God’s grace is inextricably related to His justness. Helterman comes near this when he suggests that God’s grace is perhaps His not allowing man to continue on earth (they get what they properly deserve); but this assessment, on its own, is too nihilistic, not implying or acknowledging a future for humanity, and in the end it is this future that Malamud is after. This is made clear in an interview Malamud grants to Joel Salzberg: when asked about the meaning of God’s Grace, Malamud replied, “I had to find a way for man to have a possible future” (qtd. in Safer, 116). Presumably, this future is possible through evolution—apparently the ‘natural process’ that is restored when the last man is removed from the environment and the apes are left to themselves. God’s grace is in favor of man’s existence, then. Just not yet.

To provide this possible future, God must restore His system (enter grace), and to do this He intervenes in the commotion on Cohn’s Island. This intervention is a reversal of expectations because God intervenes not to save Cohn’s life, as Cohn might expect or as the Biblical analog might dictate, but to take it. This act of God, besides astonishing everyone (223), is a revelation to Cohn that his death is not at the hands of chaos and disorder—which have, for Cohn, come to be represented by the chimps—but at the hand of God. The reversal becomes profound as we realize that, where before God’s interference was expected but not received (as humanity executed its self-destruction), or not expected but received (as Abraham went up to sacrifice Isaac), now His interference is both expected and received, only it comes in the unexpected form of present further destruction (in order to enable future salvation).
In the end, the ultimate reversal of expectation is that what appears on the surface to be “Malamud’s darkest book,” the “most violent and bleak expression of black humor anywhere in Malamud’s fiction,” is in fact a substantiation, after all, of Malamud’s premise for humanism. Humanity will be restored now that God’s system of order is reinstated. “The great contribution...[of] Malamud’s work is...the work of repair,” Rosen tells us. “The theme of Malamud’s fiction has been nothing less than the restoration of the fallen world” (38). The fact that the human element—what is left of it as we know it—is disorder incarnate, whose existence results in disorder and who must be eliminated before “restoration” can be complete, is a fundamental component of this ultimate reversal of expectation. And though this elimination elicits mourning from Cohn and George—and lest Cohn’s final realizations or George’s Kaddish persuade us that the novel is mournful in its tone or nihilistic in its movement, we must heed Rosen’s warning that “we who are accustomed to think ‘prayer for the dead’ [when we think of Kaddish] should remind ourselves of the contents of that prayer: nothing but praise for the redemptive powers of God” (39). Thus, the Kaddish itself performs a reversal of expectation and becomes, as Malamud so succinctly puts it, “a vehicle for God’s grace” (qtd. in Safer, 115).

The novel, then, though it appears to be fraught with chaos and absurdity, becomes a tremendous affirmation of order and meaning. And if we allow that the Abraham and Isaac story is the story of a sort of joke, played by God on humanity (I can hear the angel now, just as he stops Abraham’s wrist, saying, “Psych!”), then perhaps God’s Grace might be the retelling of a very old joke. After all, jokes are often based on
incongruity—a reversal of expectations, so to speak. And Malamud’s version might be said to be better than the Old Testament’s if for no other reason than that it is updated, made contemporary. Malamud uses the popular mode of his day, the absurdist novel, and turns it on its head, using it to affirm what the antiquated (and perhaps unpopular) version of the joke already affirms: that there is order and meaning to life, even if that order and meaning are God’s and exist outside, or without, the existence (and perhaps the understanding) of humanity.

WORKS CITED


CHAPTER 5

WOODY ALLEN AND PHILIP ROTH

My one regret in life is that I am not someone else.

— Woody Allen

I. Yekl’s Children

For the Jews, anxiety over one’s Jewishness is nothing new. To be Jewish under Roman rule was never comfortable; to be a Jew in Europe was never any better—and was often much worse. And while some might argue that Jews in America have had it comparatively easy, we mustn’t forget that, until after World War II, the classified ads for employment regularly stated “Christians only need apply,” and stores were still posting signs in their windows saying “No Dogs or Jews Allowed.” After World War II, Jews were regularly targeted in Communist witch-hunts, simply because they were Jews. And some scholars have acknowledged that the U.S.’s immigration policies leading up to and during World War II were complicit in, or contributed to, the severity of the Nazi Holocaust.

As a natural product of all this, there has always been a tension between alienation and assimilation for the Jews—between the desire to maintain a delineated sense of identity and the desire to blend in, to avoid or at least to downplay that
delineation. And persecution has often been a primary motivation for that tension. But in America, the motivation and the tension itself have been somewhat different.

As mentioned, it is true that persecution still existed in America, and Jewish anxieties over Jewish identity were nonetheless existent, and often prominent. But America threatened no pogroms, no gas chambers. The bigotry that existed was often diffused, shared, and spread out over a variety of racial and ethnic-immigrant groups, so that the Jews were not singled out so readily—so singularly—as they had been elsewhere. And the ideal of America, at least, promised freedom and equality. Indeed, what was perhaps the most distinguishing aspect of the American experience, and what possibly contributed more to one's anxiety over one's Jewishness than persecution, was the fact that a sense of American identity was desirable—more desirable than other national identities had been (e.g. Russian, Polish, etc.), and perhaps even as desirable as Jewish identity was itself.

However, there were certain "American" identity traits (e.g., Christianity or secularism) that were "not Jewish," and certain "Jewish" identity traits (e.g., Judaism or Judeo-ethnocentrism) that were "not American." The problem that arose, then, was whether or not one's sense of identity would allow for the coexistence of both the "Jewish" and the "American" identities (both of which were desirable—or at least desired) without the adoption or assimilation of one resulting in the alienation of the

1 I am speaking historically here; ideally or theoretically (and, so we like to think, presently), one's "American" identity is not incongruous with any ethnic or religious identity. But historically it has been.
other. This tension, this potential loss of some desired aspect of one's sense of identity, has always been the source of anxiety that one feels over issues of assimilation and alienation. But in America, because the American experience has been different, the anxieties, too, have been different. These differences—this new, American Jewish experience—was the subject of Abraham Cahan's novella Yekl, the first major work of American Jewish fiction. Jake Podkovnik, the protagonist in Yekl, is emblematic of these tensions, as a Jewish immigrant to America in the late 1800s who struggles over his Jewishness and his desire to become "Americanized."

But there are things that further differentiate Jake's American experience from those of the next generation—the experiences of Yekl's children, so to speak. The "second generation" of American Jews, as a loosely defined group not strictly tied to formal genealogy, is usually temporally located in the middle part of the twentieth century and spilling over into the post-World War II era. In literature, this generation is represented by authors such as Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud. And, by way of differentiating it from the generation represented by Cahan, never in history did a generation of Jews experience such a widespread abandonment of Judaism. Part of what made the American experience different from other experiences in the diaspora was the promise that America presented to its Jewish immigrants. Whereas in Roman-ruled Judea or tsarist Russia or Nazi Germany, Jews were motivated to assimilate primarily by

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2 Jake and Yekl are the same person, "Jake" being Yekl's Americanized name.
3 Genealogically speaking, of course, a second-generation Jew is anyone whose parents were immigrants, meaning a second-generation Jew might exist in 1793 as well as 2003.
the fear of persecution, in America the motivation for assimilation was primarily the aspiration for the American Dream. In other historical experiences, Judaism represented the source of hope and promise for the salvation of the Jews and was a unifying force in the face of persecutions; but in America, though persecutions did continue, the hope and promise of the American Dream supplanted Judaism as the perceived source of salvation.

The result was a generation—the "second generation" of American Jews—that grew up in Americanized, secularized households, but that still had parents (or grandparents) whose identities were marked with a distinctive, seemingly foreign Jewishness. The tensions between alienation and assimilation, then, for this generation in America differed from those of the previous generation (much as the tensions for the previous generation in America had differed from those of the generations in Europe). For the second generation of American Jews, the conflict between Judaism and Christianity was lessened; their Jewishness was more ethnic than religious. And whereas previously the tensions had always been predominantly between the Jew and the non-Jewish community, now these tensions were shifting, arising more and more between the Jew and the Jewish community—religiously, between believing Jews and secularized Jews; and generationally, between the young assimilated Jews and their seemingly parochial parents and grandparents.

But I am referring to a construct of literary history, which labels authors of the World War II generation as "second-generation."
These new tensions gave rise to a new version of Jewish-American anxiety, a new kind of Jewish-American humor, and a newly constructed sense of Jewish-American identity. The common core ingredient of all three, at least in literature, was a pronounced Jewish neuroticism: the new anxieties manifested themselves as neuroticisms, the new humor exposed and exploited these neuroticisms, and consequently a new identity was constructed—that of the Jew-as-neurotic. And one of the things that the neurotic Jew is neurotic about is, of course, his or her own Jewishness. Arguably, the two most influential figures in the creation—or at least in the propagation—of this identity of the Jew-as-neurotic are the writers Woody Allen and Philip Roth.

II. Allen's Hostage Crisis

Woody Allen’s portrayals of the neurotic Jew and his manifestations of anxiety about Jewishness appear often in his early prose and films. Many of his New Yorker pieces, for example, take up the Jew-as-neurotic explicitly and quite humorously. And a piece such as “The Scroll” demonstrates Allen’s subversive bent toward Jewishness. In it he questions the authenticity of Jewish identity by metonymically questioning the authenticity of a collection of ancient scrolls (suggesting that “the word ‘Oldsmobile’ appears several times in the text” [33]), by parodying biblical language, and by making light of two of the most fundamentally Jewish stories from the Torah—the story of Job and the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. (As though to emphasize the place of humor in Allen’s sense of Jewish identity, Allen portrays God as chastising Abraham for
rushing off to sacrifice Isaac: “I jokingly suggest thou sacrifice Isaac and thou
immediately runs out to do it.” Abraham then replies, “See, I never know when you’re
kidding,” and God complains, “No sense of humor. I can’t believe it” [36]. This story
and many others are representative of Allen’s struggle with Jewish identity, via humor,
but for a focused look at Allen’s treatment of Jewish anxiety, Jewish humor, and Jewish
identity, let us examine what is perhaps Allen’s most well known film: Annie Hall

In Annie Hall, Alvie Singer (Allen), a stand-up comedian, opens the mock-
umentary with two jokes. Just after the credits (which roll without any soundtrack), we
see Singer standing and addressing the camera/audience:

There’s an old joke: Two elderly women are at a Catskill Mountain resort,

and one of ‘em says, “Boy, the food at this place is really terrible.” And

the other one says, “Yeah, I know. And such small portions.”

Alvie then explains how this joke applies to his life—how life is full of misery and
horror, yet it’s all over much too quickly. Then he tells the second joke:

The other important joke for me is one that’s usually attributed to

Groucho Marx, but I think it appears originally in Freud’s “Wit and Its

Relation to the Unconscious.” It goes, and I’m paraphrasing, I would

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4 The absence of the lively jazz music that usually accompanies Allen’s credit sequences
creates a sense of gravity at the start of the film. This is reiterated by Alvie’s demeanor as
he tells the jokes—he tells them as though in the hopes that we, the audience, will
understand him thoroughly. It seems clear that the purpose of the telling of the jokes is
not to evoke laughter, but to communicate something serious that Alvie, as a comedian,
perhaps cannot communicate in any other way.
never want to belong to any club that would have someone like me for a
member.

Alvie then applies this joke specifically to his relationships with women, unsure as to
whether he wants to be involved with a woman who would have someone like him for a
lover.

Both of these jokes express anxieties concerning the nature of existence and
identity, anxieties that Alvie wrestles with throughout the film—particularly, identity in
a relational context, with regard to the individual’s place among others or within a
group. The second joke, of course, is more explicit in its approach to this issue, but the
first joke is also relevant. The women in the first joke are at a resort—participating, as
individuals, within a defined community or group. Their complaints are, in effect, aimed
at what the community has to offer to the individual (metaphorically represented by
food), and together the complaints articulate a tension that exists in the relationship
between the individual and the group.

Alvie offers his own interpretations of the jokes and applies them to his life in
deliberate ways, but there is another anxiety that grips Alvie throughout the film and to
which each of these jokes is likewise applicable, though Alvie never explicitly draws the
connection. A characteristic that the jokes share is their “Jewishness.” That is to say, each
joke has a certain distinguishable Jewish context from which it is created, or in which it
exists. The first joke is set at a resort in the Catskills (a vacation spot traditionally
associated with the Jewish community) and it involves two women who complain to the

\[182x732]5\ All transcriptions of dialogue from the film are my own.
point of contradiction, a trait that has been likewise stereotypically associated with Jewishness. The second joke is attributed first to Groucho Marx and then to Freud, two famous Jews, and its intent or effect is self-deprecation, a trait stereotypically associated with Jewish humor. The other of Alvie’s anxieties to which I refer, then, concerns Alvie’s own Jewishness, or his identity as an individual within a group identified as “Jewish.” Alvie expresses this anxiety explicitly and continually, chiefly through his sense of humor and his paranoid perception of a nearly ubiquitous anti-Semitism.

In his conversations with his friend, Max, for example, Alvie claims that an “Aryan”-looking man in a music store looked at him knowingly and then mentioned a sale on Wagner. (Alvie insists that he recognizes the racist subtext that the salesperson is intending—Wagner being associated with Hitler.) Later, after Annie speaks of the gifts her Grammy gave her, Alvie says, “My Grammy never gave gifts. She was too busy getting raped by Cossacks.” And when the two of them are on Annie’s balcony a moment later, Annie says, “You’re what Grammy Hall would call a real Jew,” to which Alvie responds somewhat uncomfortably, saying “Thank you” (what else can he say?), just before Annie says, “Yeah, well, you know. She hates Jews.” The result of this exchange is that later, at the Halls’ home, Alvie compliments the “dynamite ham” only to feel as though Grammy is eyeing him suspiciously, seeing him with a beard and ringlets, wearing a black hat and tifflin.

Being aware and even wary of anti-Semitism is, in itself, not necessarily expressive of a significant anxiety over one’s Jewishness. What begins to reveal this anxiety in Alvie is his attempts to distance himself from his Jewishness, his acts of
resistance toward the traditional group identity of Jewishness, which might be interpreted as assertions of individual identity at the expense of an association with a particular group identity.

For instance, in another conversation with Max, Alvie complains of anti-Semitism again, claiming that the world's negative view of New York is itself anti-Semitic; then he admits that he sometimes shares this view. Max uses this as an opportunity to encourage Alvie to move to California (perhaps metaphorically encouraging an escape from Jewishness), and Max offers the sun as an ostensible reason for the move, suggesting more sun might be good for Alvie. But Alvie says, "Everything our parents said was good for us is bad: sun, milk, red meat, college." The joke is created out of incongruity: parents are supposed to be benevolent authority figures giving out reliable and helpful direction, and this is juxtaposed with the idea that their direction is instead faulty and damaging; the humor hits a high note when Alvie tosses in "college" for good measure. The effect of the joke, though, is to undermine the authority of the parental figure or of authority figures in general. Such a stance effectively places Alvie in opposition to his Jewish parents and to the Jewish (or at least Judaic) precept of honoring one's parents and respecting authority. Moreover, within the Jewish community, Jewishness itself is another thing that one's parents "said was good."

Perhaps Alvie, who can include even college in his rejection of "everything our parents said was good," is in fact rejecting Jewishness, too, as "bad."

This animosity, or at least ambivalence, toward Jewishness, because it manifests itself almost wholly via Alvie's humor, is complicated. That is, there are no diatribes, no
polemics against Jewishness; there is no explicit rejection of it. Rather, Alvie’s humor reveals a complexity in his response to Jewish identity that perhaps hints at the nature of Jewish identity itself. After all, his anxiety-ridden jokes about Jewish identity are *themselves* identifiable as Jewish. One way of looking at it is to say that one’s anxiety over one’s Jewishness becomes a marker of one’s Jewishness; to say, “I am not sure I am, or want to be, a Jew,” paradoxically asserts or reinforces one’s Jewishness. In effect, the identity becomes inescapable.

And, for Alvie, this—in a vicious cycle that is fully appropriate to Allen’s sense of farcical humor—in turn becomes a source of additional, increased anxiety. For Alvie, his Jewishness holds him hostage, and this identity as “hostage” is one that he both craves and despises, one that he pursues but cannot escape.

Alvie’s humor is on one level a coping mechanism, a way for Alvie to deal with his anxiety over this “hostage crisis” by diffusing it. (Freud’s assessment of the function of humor is, of course, applicable here.) But his humor is also a means of creating this hostage-identity; and, in fact, one joke that Alvie tells early on does so explicitly. Alvie does not directly refer to Jewishness in the joke, but its relevance to Alvie’s Jewishness is irrefutable.

At one point we are shown a clip of a talk show on which Alvie is a guest. As the show’s discussion turns to the topic of the draft, Alvie declares that he has been classified as “4-P.” He then explains that this means that, in the event of a war, he has been designated “a hostage.” Alvie’s humor here again arises out of incongruity: the common idea that one is designated for a particular purpose by one’s draft status is
juxtaposed with the decidedly uncommon idea that one might be designated for such a purpose as that of hostage. But why does Alvie, as the creator of the joke, choose to make himself a hostage? Why does he choose for himself this particular identity?

Wartime is traditionally and typically a time when members of a community band together and unite under the auspices of a shared group identity. In nationalistic terms, patriotism flourishes. But here Alvie separates himself from the community by asserting a uniquely individual identity—a draft status of "4-P," which he shares with no one else, and a status, moreover, that prevents him from playing an active role within the community when war is declared. As hostage, he cannot participate in the community as a soldier, as a supporter of the war, or as a protester of the war. His unique draft status, which is to say his (duly asserted) individual identity, in fact, removes him completely from the community by placing him in another country where he will be held hostage. Yet, paradoxically, it must be noted that his "hostage-ness," his identity, continues to be reliant on his previous association with the group from which he has distanced himself. In other words, Alvie's hostage identity, while a removal from the group, is also the result of his association with the group. In effect, he is held hostage by his group identity, despite his efforts to shed it. And this "hostage-ness" is in fact an identity he chooses.

While this joke does not explicitly refer to Alvie's Jewishness, its self-deprecating nature might allow us to suggest its Jewishness, and its relevance to the second-generation Jew's predicament is clear. It seems reasonable to say that the hostage joke is applicable to and indicative of Alvie's anxiety—his hostage crisis, his identity crisis—
regarding his Jewishness. Or, perhaps it is indicative of an anxiety over his Americanness (after all, only one who perceives himself as not fully American would eschew the American identity options of soldier, supporter, or protester in favor of the ambiguous and ambivalent identity of hostage)—in which case it is still an anxiety over Jewishness, just an indirect anxiety, for it is Alvie’s Jewishness that complicates his identity as an American.

Allen’s manifest anxiety over Jewishness continues through his later films, though often less explicitly. That is, there are fewer open conversations about Jewish identity in Allen’s films of the 1980s and 1990s. Zelig (1983) is a notable exception, as a film that deals entirely with a Jew’s obsessive need to assimilate whatever identity he happens to come into contact with—and it is worth mentioning that Zelig even feels the need to assimilate Jewishness: when in the company of obese men, he grows in girth; when in the company of black men, his skin darkens; and when in the company of orthodox Jews, he grows ringlets and a beard. The suggestion is that the assimilating Jew is without an identifiable identity, and yet, paradoxically, this slippery, unidentifiable identity is the American Jew’s identity.

Throughout almost all of Allen’s films—even when Jewishness is not directly or explicitly treated—the Allen persona is present, and is almost always at least nominally Jewish if not fully the Jew-as-neurotic. Indeed, the Allen persona has become essentially synonymous with the identity of the Jew-as-neurotic, or the Jew who is anxious about his Jewishness, so that almost every Allen film is a reconstruction and reassertion of that identity. This includes his recent work. Mary P. Nichols, in her discussion of Mighty
Aphrodite (1995), for example, notes Lenny Weinrib's (i.e. the Allen persona's) anxiety over and desire to distance himself from his Jewish identity, when she mentions the trouble Lenny and his wife have when they try to come up with a name for their child. Lenny avoids names that sound Jewish, moving to "other possibilities" when Amanda suggests "Ben"—and Nichols also notes that Lenny's parents (i.e. representatives of his Jewish roots) are conspicuously absent from the movie (197-98).

Even those films from which Allen himself is absent, such as Bullets Over Broadway (1994) or Celebrity (1998), still manage to succeed in reconstructing and reasserting this Jew-as-neurotic identity via the performances of other actors who simply recreate the Allen persona (John Cusack and Kenneth Branagh, respectively).

III. Roth’s Subversion of the Jews

Philip Roth’s work has much in common with Allen’s, in its manifestations and explorations of (Jewish) anxieties. Perhaps the most obvious similarity is in their bitter portrayals of the stereotypically domineering and anxiety-instilling Jewish mother-figure. Allen’s short film, Oedipus Wrecks, for example, is a sort of companion text to Roth’s Portnoy’s Complaint in that regard. Roth, even more so than Allen, is an author obsessed with identity, as works such as The Counterlife and Operation Shylock make excessively clear. This obsession is also situated squarely within a Jewish context; that is to say, the identity with which Roth seems particularly obsessed is a Jewish one—or might be, might not be, ought to be, could be, shouldn’t be. This complexity and undecideability is part of the obsession and a primary source of anxiety. And Roth’s, like
Allen's, is "a humor at once grounded in yet hostile to ethnicity" (Workman 16). Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's alter-identity, for example, declares himself, on the final page of The Counterlife, as "a Jew among Gentiles and a Gentile among Jews." He is a Jew without Jews, without Judaism, without Zionism, without Jewishness, without a temple or an army or even a pistol, a Jew clearly without a home, just the object itself, like a glass or an apple. (324)

Clearly, Zuckerman struggles with the tensions of assimilation and alienation; this mini-speech is an articulation of these anxieties over his Jewishness. He is, as Alan Cooper puts it, "suspended in a state of fictive uncertainty about his own identity: about how much he is the American, how much the Jew" (3). He says he is a Jew, acknowledges that he is a Jew, but what makes him a "Jew" if he lacks all the traditional markers of "Jewishness"? To say he is a "Jew without Jewishness" is to make of himself an object for study, for inquisition. It is to say an apple is an "apple"—but what marks its "appleness"?

And when he says he is "a Jew among Gentiles and a Gentile among Jews," he articulates the shift that has taken place for the second generation, as tensions have spread from Jew vs. non-Jew, to Jew vs. Jew—perhaps even from Self vs. Other, to Self vs. Self. For Zuckerman, his Self is the ultimate Other—Other to Gentiles, Other to Jews, even Other to his Self. (Talk about an identity crisis!)

Another Roth creation, and the quintessential construction of Jew-as-neurotic, Alexander Portnoy, voices this division between his Jewish Self and his fellow Jews, and the anxiety it produces, when referring to his parents he says, "These people are
incredible! These people are unbelievable! These two are the outstanding producers and packagers of guilt in our time!” (Portnoy 39). Like Alvie, Portnoy uses a food metaphor to express his ambivalence toward, even an outright rejection of, the Jewish community and the Jewishness that that community has to offer. “I don’t want the food from [my mother’s] mouth,” he says. “I don’t even want the food from my plate—that’s the point” (16). Portnoy “seeks relentlessly to be liberated from, rather than integrated with, his community” (Workman 24), and he even notes his entrapment in a hostage situation similar to Alvie’s: “We are not a family,” he says, “that takes defection lightly” (64).

That humor is central to Portnoy’s (and Zuckerman’s) anxiety-ridden struggle with Jewishness hardly needs mentioning; the most telling discussion of that humor in Portnoy’s Complaint comes when an Israeli woman tells Portnoy, “there is something very wrong with you.” She observes that Portnoy is the most unhappy person she’s ever known, then she says,

“You seem to take some special pleasure, some pride, in making yourself the butt of your own peculiar sense of humor.... Everything you say is somehow twisted, some way or another, to come out ‘funny.’ All day long the same thing. In some little way or other, everything is ironical, or self-depreciating. Self-depreciating?”

“Self-deprecating. Self-mocking.” (298-99)

Portnoy’s clarification of the woman’s English is also a confirmation. He knows this is his humor, and he defends it saying, “Self-deprecation is, after all, a classic form of Jewish humor.” But the woman replies, “Not Jewish humor! No! Ghetto humor” (299).
And she closes their conversation with this condemnation: “Mr. Portnoy,’ she said, raising her knapsack from the floor, ‘you are nothing but a self-hating Jew.’”

Portnoy’s response? “‘Ah, but Naomi, maybe that’s the best kind’” (300).

The fact that Portnoy does in fact make himself the butt of his own jokes is indicative of the complications and the conflictedness that he, like Alvie, feels over his own Jewishness. Strictly speaking, “self-deprecating” humor can be a sign of modesty and humility, an acknowledgment of the individual’s inability to measure up to the ideal. These are traits that, within the Judaic system of values, are praiseworthy; indeed, this is in part why self-deprecating humor is a “classical form” of Jewish humor. But Naomi is right the first time, when she calls Portnoy’s humor “self-depreciating,” because his humor is not a manifestation of modesty or humility; it is not merely self-deprecating. It is, quite clearly, full of self-ridicule; it is (as Portnoy admits) “self-mocking,” and in effect it devalues, it depreciates the Self—specifically the Jewish Self, as it is his Jewishness that Portnoy holds responsible for his suffering.6

The ghettoization of the Jews in Eastern Europe and in Germany was, historically and politically, an attempt to subvert Jewish identity, an attempt to undermine the strength and power of the Jewish community. When Naomi accuses Portnoy of “Ghetto humor,” then, it is an accusation of subversion—an accusation of, as she makes clear, Jewish self-hatred. In other words, Portnoy’s humor alienates him from the Jewish community, “and neither he nor it benefits as a result” (Workman 24).

6 See Portnoy, 40.
Naomi's accusations are against Portnoy, but they are nothing new to Roth; they began long before he'd written Portnoy, or The Counterlife, or Operation Shylock. By 1975, the accusations against Roth of Jewish self-hatred had become so common that Sanford Pinsker was taking them as matters of fact, noting "a correspondence between the public dimensions of Roth's scathing satire and the private realm of his self-abasement. Like D. H. Lawrence," writes Pinsker, Roth "is a writer out to 'shed his sickness' in the discipline and pattern-making of art" (3). Roth responds himself to these accusations in essays such as "Writing About the Jews," and Portnoy responds to Naomi by saying that perhaps the self-hating Jew is the "best kind." The response itself is, like Roth's humorous treatments of Jews and Jewishness, highly subversive. But is it subverting the Jews because it affirms Jewish self-hatred, agrees that self-hatred is anathema to Jewishness, and then asserts the self-hatred forcefully in order to alienate that Jewishness? Or is it subverting the Jews who accuse Roth of self-hatred, constructing and affirming instead a new, complex and complicated Jewishness that is not alienated by, but incorporates or embodies its own self-hatred? (Remember the notion put forward above in the discussion of Annie Hall, that anxiety over, even rejection of, one's Jewishness might in fact signify and substantiate one's Jewishness?)

The accusations of Jewish self-hatred originated following the publication of Roth's Goodbye, Columbus (1959). In fact, preceding his lengthy, novelistic examinations of Jewishness and the Jewish Self is a microcosmic, representative

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7 See Reading Myself and Others, 149-69.
examination in the first story Roth ever wrote, "The Conversion of the Jews."³

"Conversion" is worth a closer look because, as Roth’s first story, it represents his first attempt to deal with the tensions facing the second-generation Jew, and he deals with those tensions explicitly. Ozzie Freedman is the Jewish boy already struggling with his Jewish identity, who may just grow up to be the full-blown (and fully blown) Jew-as-neurotic, Alexander Portnoy. The humor that is present in the story reveals these anxieties, as well as an ambivalence toward Jewishness and a distinct subversion of it.

That Ozzie is a “pint-sized subversive” (Pinsker 13) is made clear in the opening paragraphs of the story; however, it is interesting to note that Ozzie is not unique in his subversiveness. All the kids at the Hebrew school are this way, it would seem. Ozzie’s best friend, Itzie, for example, though he favors “closed-mouthedness,” is nevertheless a practitioner of “behind-the-back subtleties such as gestures, faces, snarls and other less delicate barnyard noises” (“Conversion” 139). And the other kids are ready and willing to participate in any subversive activity, be it Ozzie’s or otherwise, as we see by their behavior at the end of the story. Itzie’s subversive behavior is clearly intentional and humorous in its means, but Ozzie’s, by contrast, is sincere and unintentional. Ozzie causes problems by asking questions—questions that he genuinely desires an answer to, but that slice at the heart of Judaic beliefs and values. And it is perhaps because of this sincerity that Ozzie’s form of subversion is so much funnier than Itzie’s.

³ Roth mentions in an interview that “Conversion” was the first story he wrote. See Searles, 7-8.
Significantly, the first question that gets Ozzie Freedman into trouble has to do with “how Rabbi Binder could call the Jews ‘The Chosen People’ if the Declaration of Independence claimed all men to be created equal” (141). The humor in the question arises from the juxtaposition of the sacred and the secular, the two seemingly conflicting ideals of what Binder calls “spiritual legitimacy” and “political equality” (141). The question articulates one of the conflicts faced by the second-generation Jew (represented by Ozzie) who no longer privileges the Jewish identity over the American, and the question is the source of no small anxiety, for how can the two desired identities be reconciled? Moreover, the question is subversive of Jewish identity precisely because it no longer privileges that Jewish identity. By raising the Declaration of Independence to a status equal to scripture, Ozzie elevates Americanness—to the diminishment of Jewishness.

Ozzie’s second question then regards his mother’s lamentation over a plane crash in which fifty-eight people were killed, eight of whom were Jews. His mother calls the crash a tragedy because of the eight Jews, and Ozzie wants to know why the inclusion of eight Jews makes the crash more tragic than it otherwise may have been. When Binder’s response (having to do with “cultural unity” [142]) is unsatisfactory, Ozzie declares that “he wished all fifty-eight were Jews” (142). This question is less humorous than the first, but no less concerned with Jewish identity and more indicative of Ozzie’s ambivalence, even resentment toward Jewishness. The death wish, in fact, is the first sign of a budding sense of self-hatred.
But the most significant question that Ozzie asks is his third, and the one upon which the plot of the story hangs. The question has to do with Jesus—that king of all subversive Jews—and Ozzie wants to know “'How if [God] could create the heaven and earth in six days, and make all the animals and the fish and the light in six days ... why couldn't He let a woman have a baby without having intercourse?'” (140-41). Unlike the first question, which inheres a certain humor for its juxtaposition of sacred and secular, this question is not in itself necessarily funny; it is a valid theological question that might be treated in all seriousness. And unlike the second question, which articulates explicitly a certain anxiety over Jewish identity, this question ostensibly has nothing to do with Jewishness; whether or not God could “let a woman have a baby without having intercourse” has little to do with Judaism or Jewishness. Thus, it is as a result of Binder’s (and his mother’s) reaction to this third question that it takes on its humor and its relevance to Jewish identity. In other words, it is because Binder (and Ozzie’s mother) sees the question as threatening—as potentially subversive—that it becomes subversive, and humorously so.

Binder’s reaction, of course, is anger. After Ozzie’s mother reacts by hitting Ozzie across the face when he tells her about the question at home, Binder also tries to slap Ozzie later, at school, when he raises it a second time. Ozzie bleeds when Binder’s palm catches him in the nose, and he runs out and up the stairs to the rooftop.

At this point, the shedding of blood, the nature of the question, and the title of the story combine to construct some parallels. Ozzie, clearly, is being comically constructed as a kind of Christ figure. Like Jesus, he has no earthly father; like Jesus, he
is twelve (or thirteen) and astonishing (or at least confounding) the rabbis with his learning and understanding of theological matters; like Jesus, he is a Jew no longer willing to buy into the traditions of Judaism. In effect, Jesus becomes a symbol of the second-generation Jew. Like Zuckerman, Jesus is "a Jew among Gentiles and a Gentile among Jews," and thus he becomes the perfect vehicle for Roth, via Ozzie, to explore and articulate this identity crisis.

That Ozzie is, in fact, involved in an identity crisis is revealed in the question that "[shoots] through his brain" as he finds himself on the rooftop: "Can this be me?" he thinks (147).

Louder and louder the question came to him—"Is it me? Is it me?"—until he discovered himself no longer kneeling, but racing crazily towards the edge of the roof, his eyes crying, his throat screaming, and his arms flying everywhichway as though not his own.

"Is it me? Is it me Me ME ME ME! It has to be me—but is it!" (148)

The question comes with such force, and runs so deep, that it suggests a kind of revelatory moment for Ozzie. It reaches beyond him, to an identity larger than "Ozzie Freedman." Indeed, it is this moment that seems to mark the advent of Ozzie-as-Messiah. Ozzie isn't wondering if he is Ozzie, if what he is doing coincides with the identity of Ozzie Freedman; he's wondering "Is it me?" while thinking messianically, wondering if the identity of Ozzie Freedman coincides with the identity of the messiah. This is confirmed in the paragraph that follows Ozzie's query:
It is the question a thief must ask himself the night he jimminis open his first window, and it is said to be the question with which bridegrooms quiz themselves before the altar. (148)

It is written, of course, that the Messiah will come as a thief in the night; and He is likened often to a bridegroom.

Ozzie's elevation to the status of Messiah, then, connotes salvation. And the final scene plays out like a mass conversion, as he demands that everyone kneel and confess that God could, indeed, let a woman have a baby without having intercourse. The scene is thoroughly comic, and the effect is ultimately subversive. Ozzie undermines all that Rabbi Binder, Ozzie's mother, and Yakov Blotnik represent—namely, Judaism and Jewishness—by insisting that they capitulate to his theology and by demonstrating a willingness to die for this cause. In effect, Roth says that the only way the Jews can be saved is if they are converted.

But the conversion here is not, as others have suggested, a conversion to American identity.® And it certainly is not a conversion to Christianity. Rather, it is Ozzie's coercion of the Jews toward a new Jewish identity. The "conversion" is the subversion of traditional Jewish identity and the forced acknowledgment, not of Jesus as the Christ, but of Jesus as the king of the Jews, or more precisely the epitome of Jewishness. Jesus is not the messiah; Ozzie is, come to save his people by revealing to them their true and thoroughly messed up, problematized and problematic identity.

® See Baumgarten and Gottfried, Understanding Philip Roth (U South Carolina P, 1990), p. 46.
Because it is only by making a space for this kind of anxiety-ridden, self-hating Jew that Jewishness can survive in the postmodern world.

And this brings us back to Portnoy's response to Naomi's accusations, when he says that maybe the self-hating Jew is the "best kind." Roth, via this response, via "The Conversion of the Jews," via Portnoy and Zuckerman and all his examinations of Jewish identity, works to (de-/re-)construct a new Jewishness that incorporates self-hatred. That is, he is working to make a space for the second-generation Jew, the Jew who is "a Jew without Jewishness," the Jew who is a Jew though he or she lacks all the traditional markers of Jewish identity. And to do this, to save the second-generation Jew, he must subvert the traditional notions of Jewishness.

This is, in effect, what second-generation Jewish-American writers like Allen and Roth accomplish: the articulation, the (de-/re-)construction of a Jewishness that is even more complicated and more complex, more conflicted, than it has been previously. Like Allen, Roth continues in his later work to struggle with Jewishness—Zuckerman, for example, in I Married a Communist (1998), continues in his ambivalence toward his Jewish identity, claiming he "didn't care to partake of the Jewish character," that he "didn't even know, clearly, what it was" and "didn't much want to" (39), and discussing with his friend Murray the "taxonomy" of Jews and their multiple identities (163-64). But this struggle with Jewishness is less violent in the later work than it necessarily must be in the earlier, because it is the earlier work that clears a space for what is to come. It is the earlier work that works hardest to (de-/re-)construct this new sense of Jewishness.
And the primary means for this accomplishment is humor, which is so often a complex
and complicating, anarchic, (de-/re-)constructive force.

In effect, Roth and Allen, as second-generation Jews, face a different conflict than
that faced by first-generation Jews like Yekl. Experiencing these new and different
anxieties over their Jewishness, Roth and Allen (and others)—“Yekl’s children”—make
for themselves, primarily through humor, an identity that both expresses and embodies
those anxieties. They negotiate a space wherein the conflict of identities of Jew and
American is no longer destructive; the conflict becomes constructive, in that it fosters a
new Jewish-American identity, rife with undecideability—and it is humor that allows or
provides for the assimilation of this paradox. Jewish self-hatred, then, becomes no
longer anathema to the Jewish Self, and the subversion of the Jews becomes an
affirmation—even an assertion—of one’s Jewishness.

WORKS CITED


33-37.


Nichols, Mary P. Reconstructing Woody: Art, Love, and Life in the Films of Woody


CHAPTER 6

THE COEN BROTHERS

I. Jewish?

If the filmmaking brothers Ethan and Joel happened to be marked with a less ethnically recognizable surname, such as Miller or Green, there would be little motivation for a scholar interested in American Jewish literature to explore the subject of Jewish identity in their films and fiction. After all, there is little that is readily identifiable as “Jewish” about the works of Ethan and Joel Coen beyond the fact that the creators’ surname marks them as descendants of the kohanim—the Hebrew priests who conducted services and sacrifices in Jewish temples. Yet the scholar who notes the surname and decides to poke around for manifestations of Jewishness will find that Ethan has written two short stories that confront Jewishness head-on; in addition, there is John Goodman’s character in The Big Lebowski—a film that has much to do with issues of identity, beginning with the confusion surrounding the two characters named Lebowski.1 Goodman’s character is a convert to Judaism, a result of his marriage to a

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1 Some might argue that Barton Fink is the Coens’ most notable treatment of Jewish identity, and indeed Fink is the only Jewish protagonist in the Coens’ film oeuvre. However, Fink seems to me to be little more than incidentally Jewish. In Fink the Coens play on stereotypes of the struggling socialist writer and of the demographics of Hollywood, and there is something to be said about their treatment of Jewishness (i.e., the anti-Semitism) in the film. But ultimately the presence of Jews and Jewishness is not
Jewish woman, and he continues to claim he is *shomer shabbos* (a Sabbath observer), which is to say that he continues to struggle with a sense of Jewish identity despite the fact that his marriage has ended and his Jewishness was an adopted identity to begin with. In each of these cases (the two stories and the film), Jewish identity is constructed and confronted, and in each case humor plays a prominent role as a means of construction and confrontation. What is interesting, when combined with the glaring absence of Jewishness from most of the Coens' work, is the fact that the Coens' humor is usually discomforting, anarchic, subversive, and ridiculous (i.e., pertaining to ridicule). In other words, one wonders whether the general absence of Jewishness has anything to do with the brand of humor in operation. This gives rise to an interesting line of inquiry:

When Jewishness *is* present, what is the effect of this mode of humor on the work's constructed notions of Jewish identity? How does this humor act on these notions (e.g., how does the ridicule of Jewishness affect our notions of Jewishness)? How does it fit *within* these notions (e.g., does "Coen" humor qualify as "Jewish" humor)? And, ultimately, what role do notions of Jewishness and our understanding of the functions of humor play in our understanding of the Coens' œuvre?
II. Appearances

The Coens’ fellow filmmaker Woody Allen is an artist whose work has played a major role in the construction of general American notions of Jewish identity; the Allen persona that so often appears in his films has been, for better or worse, closely identified with what it means to be Jewish in America. Even a younger generation, in pointing to the Jerry Seinfeld persona\(^2\) as representative of popular notions of Jewishness and Jewish humor, suggests notions that have their roots in Allen’s films and in popular novels such as Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*. The Seinfeld persona, though not as cowering and bumbling nor as fixated on his own Jewishness as Alex Portnoy or the Woody Allen persona, is certainly as neurotic and as hung up on sex as they are—two common aspects of the popular conception of Jewish identity that are common sources for, and objects of, the brand of self-deprecating humor that is typically identified as “Jewish.”\(^3\) In fact, the identification of these traits as “Jewish” has become so widely accepted and imbedded in American society, perhaps as the result of constructions via Woody Allen et al., that a persona such as Seinfeld’s need never make mention of his

\(^1\) When speaking of figures such as Woody Allen or Jerry Seinfeld, one must distinguish between the *person* and the *persona*. The person is never really in the public eye; we see only the persona, as it is created (i.e. written) and recreated (i.e. rewritten) within and by the various contexts in which it appears. Thus the persona becomes the text that we interpret as readers. My source for thinking this way about person/persona is Frank Krutnik’s *Inventing Jerry Lewis* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2000).

\(^2\) *Big Lebowski* in which Jewish identity is discussed and treated directly within the context of a film to which questions of identity are essential.

\(^3\) Neuroticism and a preoccupation with sex are both so commonly associated with Jewish-American identity that the Jewish-American author Melvin Jules Bukiet recently edited a collection of writings published by W. W. Norton called “Neurotica: Jewish
Jewishness at all—he need only exhibit these traits (and perhaps carry an ethnically identifiable surname) for us to identify the persona as Jewish.

But in watching the Coen brothers' films, one gets no sense of this Jewishness. None of the Coens' characters even remotely resembles the Woody Allen persona, or Portnoy, or even the more contemporary (and less exaggerated) Seinfeld persona. And the style of humor that characterizes Allen's, Roth's, and Seinfeld's work, and which can be traced back to Jewish influences such as the Marx brothers and the comics and comedians of the Borscht Belt, is almost entirely absent from the works of the Coen brothers.

*Almost* entirely absent, that is—but not entirely. There are moments of humor, however brief and rare, that seem to echo quite loudly the humor of the Coens' more identifiably Jewish forerunners and peers. Take the following passage from Woody Allen's short prose piece "Examining Psychic Phenomena" as a point of comparison:

There is no question that there is an unseen world. The problem is, how far is it from midtown and how late is it open? Unexplainable events occur constantly. One man will see spirits. Another will hear voices. A third will wake up and find himself running in the Preakness. ...What is behind these experiences? Or in front of them, for that matter? Is it true that some men can foresee the future or communicate with ghosts? And after death is it still possible to take showers? (Complete Prose 15)

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Writers on Sex." The volume, incidentally, contains selections from the writings of both Woody Allen and Philip Roth.
This passage displays Allen's typical play with language and his use of what we might call *quasi sequiturs*. Because Allen's is such a prominent persona and has been so strongly identified as "Jewish," and because the Marx brothers (who are also strongly identified as "Jewish") are a notable twentieth-century source for this kind of humor, it may be that this particular play with language is itself identifiable as "Jewish." Now compare the Allen passage to an excerpt from the Coens' preface to the published screenplay of *Blood Simple*. Here, they are writing about the process of writing and revision:

In fact ... in an early draft of the climactic scene the heroine, after impaling the private detective's hand on the window sill, saws off his captive fingers and pops them through the holes that he has shot into the wall that separates them. An even earlier draft had her first pull the nails off the disembodied fingers with a grimping hook, but we were advised that this might frighten small children.

So finally, by trimming the script instead of the digits of our hapless private snoop, we arrived at the paradigm of restraint that is now the climax of the movie. "Sellout!" some people will say. But one must remember that Art and Commerce are uneasy bedfellows 'neath picturedom's sheets, nor may they even shake hands without spraining something. ("Preface")

The glaring difference between the two passages is, of course, the presence of graphic violence in the latter. Also, the *quasi sequiturs* are not as numerous in the Coen passage as they are in Allen's writing. But the echo of Allen in the last sentence of the Coen
passage is undeniable. That echo reverberates as the Coens—much like Allen and his playful treatment of philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche—toy with Shakespeare, assigning him his own struggles with rewriting by suggesting that an early version of Macbeth contained the following version of its famous passage reflecting on life:

\[
\text{It is a tale told by an idiot}
\]

\[
\text{Full of sound and fury}
\]

\[
\text{And all manner of things. ("Preface")}
\]

Before ol’ Bill got it right, according to the Coens, another revision contained the line, “It is a tale told by an egret.”

Subversive humor in general—the bringing low of those of high status, or the undermining of established systems of order—is common among minority groups who may be posited as inferior to those they seek to bring low, or who are oppressed by the systems they seek to undermine. Jokes that mocked Hitler and the Nazis, for example, were widespread within German concentration camps. Thus it is possible to place the Coens’ humor (or at least the humor that is found in this “Preface”) within a tradition of subversive ethnic humor that manifests itself in the Marx brothers, Allen, and Roth. But because the subversiveness of this humor, or its use of quasi sequiturs, is not enough, alone, to identify it as decidedly “Jewish”—after all, other ethnic humors can be subversive, and comics and comedians of all races and ethnicities rely on the

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incongruities of quasi sequiturs for producing laughs—we must look for more. In other words, the apparent occasional echoing of Allen’s humor is not enough to go on. The question remains: Are there Coen works that are themselves identifiable as “Jewish” (beyond the fact that they were written by someone named Coen)? And if so, how is this Jewishness constructed and what is the attitude toward it? Is there a level of acceptance, an owned sense of the Jewish Self? Or is there a resistance to it, a positing of the Jewish as decidedly Other?

The answer to the latter, after reading the two most thorough treatments of Jewish identity in the Coen oeuvre—Ethan’s short stories “The Old Country” and “I Killed Phil Shapiro”—would appear to be that there is, in fact, a profound sense of resistance to Jewish identity. But a curious aspect of our conception of Jewish identity is that Jewishness seems to include or to make room for a certain struggle with itself. In other words, it seems that part of being Jewish in America is to be preoccupied with, anxious about, or even at odds with one’s Jewishness. The paradoxical result is that one’s resistance to, or anxiety over, one’s Jewishness may in fact reinforce or substantiate it.

We can see this by again turning to the works of Woody Allen, where the portrayal of anxiety over Jewishness is expertly pronounced in Annie Hall (1977). In this movie, the Allen persona—here named Alvie Singer—expresses paranoia over anti-Semitism (he explains to his friend that “Tom Christie said, ‘No, didchoo?’ Not, did you, didchoo eat? Jew? No, not did you eat, but jew eat? Jew. You get it?” [Four Films 10]) and reveals his self-consciousness about his Jewishness when he imagines himself

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dressed in orthodox garb, with full beard and ringlets, as he sits at Annie's parents' dinner table somewhere in the Midwest (55). However, it is in part because of—and not despite—these anxieties that Alvie is strongly and squarely identified as Jewish. These paranoias and manifestations of self-consciousness are marked as components of Alvie’s Jewishness. That is, though Allen perhaps subverts our sense of Jewishness by constructing a version of Jewishness that may even be considered by some to be anti-Semitic and laced with self-hatred, one cannot claim that the Allen persona has rejected or abandoned his Jewish identity. Rather, he has complicated it, reconstructed and reasserted it via his subversion of it. Jewishness is still the impetus for his actions, though (and because) his actions are conflicted about that Jewishness; thus we identify most of Allen’s films and most of his prose as “Jewish.”

This provides a means for answering the first question asked above, regarding whether there are Coen works that can be, themselves, identified as “Jewish.” The notion that Jewishness-as-impetus is the primary, even the sole, criterion for classifying a work as “Jewish-American” may be taken as the standard. If this standard holds, then from Ethan’s collection entitled Gates of Eden, only the two stories previously

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5 At the 2002 ALA conference on Holocaust and Jewish-American literature in Boca Raton, Florida, Ben Siegel asserted (and I believe he said he joined Jules Chametzky in this conclusion) that the only requirement for identifying a work as “Jewish” is that Jewishness be, somehow, a motivating factor. Others at the conference seemed to be in general agreement. I interpret this as meaning that Jewishness, or some aspect of it, must be a motivation behind the protagonist’s actions, or perhaps that some aspect of Jewishness must motivate the questions the narrative attempts to answer, etc. If we accept this definition, then the implication is that a piece of “Jewish” writing need not be written by a Jew, and that a work written by a Jew need not be a piece of “Jewish”
mentioned can be considered works of Jewish-American fiction; none of the Coen
brothers’ films can be categorized as Jewish-American films.

This is interesting, even compelling, especially after a closer look at “The Old
Country,” a story about a young boy’s experiences in Hebrew school. The story is told in
first person from the perspective of the boy, whose name we never learn, and at one
point we are told that it is “a true story” (47). Information about Ethan’s life is hard to
find—especially if one is interested in his upbringing prior to the creation of Blood
Simple (1984)—but the common, almost traditional ties between an author’s early fiction
and autobiography tempt one to speculate that perhaps Ethan himself attended Hebrew
school as a boy in Minnesota, and that perhaps the older sister mentioned in the story is
a fictional replacement for his real-life older brother, Joel. Even if this isn’t the case, the
treatment of the Jews in the story begs further examination, and one must ask why the
author would be so hostile toward a system that he was never subjected to. If the story
is, indeed, rooted in autobiography, then one cannot help but ask why someone who
may have had such a thoroughly Jewish childhood does not more frequently address
issues and themes influenced by this Jewishness.

III. The Old Country

In “The Old Country,” the narrator begins with a description of Michael Simkin,
who at ten years old is “a Hammer of God, defying not Rome or the crown, but the

writing. A text, in other words, has an identity quite its own—even a racial or ethnic
identity that may in fact be at odds with the racial or ethnic identity of the author.
Hebrew school principal” (31). Michael has “no program unless it were anarchy” (31), as even his physical description attests: “He had a large birthmark just below one cheekbone, advertising disorder” (32-33). The first third of the story catalogs Michael’s actions, starting with his sexual finger-gestures directed at the backs of his Hebrew school teachers (who could never catch him at it) and at fellow students—namely Laurie Sellaway, who is “unaware perhaps that the sign represented sexual intercourse but nevertheless undone by its powerful vibe” (31). In response to Laurie’s reaction, it is Michael’s habit to “adopt the dreamy manner of a monocled Gruppenfuhrer with a pluming cigarette: ‘Bawlink, Tsellavaaaay?’ he would murmur as she sobbed” (32).

In addition to the lewd finger-gestures, Michael sings jingles, “lampooning the anthem of the local chapter of the American Zionists Association”—or, “along more biblical lines,” singing about “five constipated patriarchs” from the Torah (33):

There were five, yes five,  
Constipated men in the Bible,  
Oh in the Bible.  
The first, yes the first,  
Constipated man was Cain:  
He wasn’t able. (33)

Finally, we are told of Michael’s habit of throwing things into the ceiling of the Hebrew school after having pushed aside a piece of acoustical tile with a broom handle. It starts with other students’ cookies, but he soon takes to “tossing copies of Shiarim Hatorah—‘Gates of the Torah,’ our Hebrew school text—into the ceiling as well” (35).
Clearly the humor that is created by this character and these situations is anarchic and subversive in nature—Coen spells this out for us in his early descriptions of Michael Simkin. But what stands out is the stance that this humor takes toward Jewishness. That each of Michael’s actions targets individuals who are Jewish is obvious; that each targets Jewish identity, or Jewishness, is less obvious but no less discernible. The Torah and the patriarchs—both metonymic for the religion of Judaism—are, of course, key elements of Jewish identity; thus, Michael’s subversion of the respect held for these things, when he sings about constipation for instance, is a show of disrespect toward the identity they represent. His lampooning of the AZA’s anthem is likewise such a subversion, as the Zionist movement is a major component, not only of Judaism, but also of secular Jewish culture. When he disrupts the classroom with his finger-gestures, it is a Hebrew school classroom—his disrespect for the teachers is a disrespect for identifiably Jewish role models and Jewish authority figures. And it is significant that Michael adopts the manner of the Gruppenfuhrer with Laurie Sellaway, effectively taking a German—that is, an identifiably anti-Semitic—stance towards his weak and explicitly Jewish victim.

The tossing of Hebrew textbooks into the ceiling is yet another component of Michael Simkin’s attack on Jewishness, and one that is somewhat akin to the disrespect he shows toward the Torah and his teachers. But what makes this instance worthy of particular attention is the narrator’s apparent complicity in the mockery. The narrator tells us of the tossing of the textbooks—actions for which Michael Simkin is responsible—but it is the narrator himself who is responsible for the commentary:
[Michael] once threw another student’s shoe up [into the ceiling], and the teacher who climbed onto a stool to retrieve it also found, mysteriously to him, several copies of Shiarim Hatorah—an apparent miracle which, had it happened in Maccabean times, would have been the basis for a Jewish holiday. (35)

This crack about Jewish holidays—clearly intended to be humorous—is also clearly intended as ridicule. The joke not only makes light of the magnitude of the miracles that are actually celebrated by religious holidays, it also challenges the very nature of those miracles as miracles, by suggesting that they too might be as readily explained as the discovery of the books in the ceiling. Moreover, it mocks those (Jewish) persons who were supposedly foolish enough to have “misjudged” the events as miraculous in the first place. The fact that it is the narrator who employs this sort of ridiculing humor is significant because of the community-forming nature of humor in general.

To understand what is meant by this “community-forming nature of humor,” we could turn to what scholars and theorists have said about it, but turning to personal experience and observation should be sufficient. Quite simply, we feel a bond with others when we share a similar sense of humor with them, and shared laughter is an important part of what forms our friendships, our romantic relationships, and other alliances. Indeed, a sure way to gain a profound understanding of another group or culture is to gain an understanding of their humor, for to

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understand another's sense of humor is to understand how they see the world, and to see things that way too, if only momentarily.

We see this occurring in the story when the narrator and the other kids laugh at Michael Simkin's antics. As they do so, they align themselves with him, effectively assuming the same subversive stance, though individuals may vary in their commitment to it. Each of the instances described—the finger gestures, the jingles, the book tossing, and the verbal ridicule—is an instance wherein humor is used as the primary means by which the act of subversion is performed. Presumably many of the children act as interlopers in Michael's world, understanding and participating in his humor—and thus in his rebellion—though perhaps only temporarily. In the first two cases, the humor has its source in Michael's actions, which provoke a humorous response primarily in the other students who are present (the reader's humorous response is secondary, as a witness to the events); in other words, the humor of these instances is created in the story. The alliances that are formed, if only temporarily, are formed among the students—including, clearly, the narrator—who admire and appreciate Michael's humor.

But the instance wherein Michael tosses the books into the ceiling is, for the other students, less humorous than the other instances; that is to say, the humor in the story is minimal. In this case, it is the humor created by the story—by the narrator in the telling of the story—that is most prominent, as the narrator makes the crack about miracles and Jewish holidays. The humorous response that is provoked here is now primarily in the reader. But though the source and context for the humor are different, the function of the
humor remains the same: as we understand and appreciate the humor, and participate in it, we—at least temporarily—align ourselves with the stance that it takes. In this story, the humor’s stance is always in resistance to, or an attack on, Jewish identity, via mockery or ridicule or subversion. In other words, when we laugh at the narrator’s joke, we are complicit in his derogation of Jewishness.

Putting off questions of ethics and the reader’s complicity and sticking to the issues at hand, what stands out most in this last example of humor is not only its revelation of the narrator’s complicity in the attack on Jewishness but the revelation that his commitment to this stance is more than temporary. No longer does the narrator merely relate and appreciate Michael’s brand of humor; he becomes an instigator of it.

This reading of the narrator’s stance as antagonistic is substantiated, interestingly, by the fact that the story lacks any sense of plot—if by “plot” we mean an ordered series of actions that are connected causally and build toward a climactic moment. As if to underscore the narrator’s (and possibly the author’s) admiration for Michael’s anarchic, subversive nature, we are presented with not an orchestrated sense of plot but a catalog, a description of events and memories that form a collage-like image of the narrator’s childhood. Significantly, most of these memories are not only

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7 The ethical questions surrounding the notion of complicity are compelling: Is racial or ethnic humor good because it allows for a release of tension through the temporary assumption of an antagonistic stance? Or is racial or ethnic humor bad because it promotes or reinforces the assumption of an antagonistic stance that might already be, or can too easily become, long-standing? And to what extent must the reader/hearer of a joke be complicit in the joke’s stance for the reader/hearer to appreciate and/or participate in its humor? And where do antagonistic jokes about an ethnic group’s
unconnected causally but are distinctly negative, and often this negativity is directed toward Jewishness.

For example, we are told about Slim, the “goy who patrolled the hallways” (36). The character of Slim serves no function in the traditional sense of constructing a plot or moving it forward; rather, it seems we are made aware of Slim only so that we can be made aware of the Jews’ treatment of him. “Slim’s position,” we are told, “was the dehumanized one of useful outsider” (36); he was “called upon to make such minor physical repairs as Jews could not be expected to know how to perform” (37), and so on. The memory of Slim seems conveyed only to convey a negative image of the Jews who were so dehumanizing and condescending. Most of the memories of the narrator’s home life that are conveyed seem to serve the same purpose. We are told, for instance, that the story of the narrator’s family “was composed of two eras: that in which we did not have a finished basement; that in which we did. The first era was marked by planning for and anticipation of the second” (40). Here there is a hint of mockery directed at the Jews’ sense of Jewish history and its division into eras—the finishing of the basement being likened perhaps to the building of the temple in Jerusalem, or to the eventual coming of the Messiah. In any case, the narrator’s way of telling the memory conveys a negative attitude held by the narrator toward his parents—or, metaphorically, toward his Jewish ancestry, his sense of his own Jewish past.

characteristics, told by and within the ethnic group itself, in the spirit of playful self-mockery, fit within any such discussion of ethics and/or complicity?
The middle part of the story is composed of these memories and concludes with a description of a TV show that the narrator had long anticipated watching. The show is called “Seven in Darkness” and is about a group of blind men who survive a plane crash in the wilderness and must make it back to civilization—a case of the blind leading the blind. The narrator tells how he “was deeply moved” by the show. “For me,” he says, “the dark was connected to the turmoil of sleep,” when, “as I started to drift off, I felt myself floating back to the formless fears of early childhood,” and “the door’s slanting shadow excited in me a dread that I could not name; it reached back to a time when I knew no names.” The narrator then says, “I describe all of this because of what happened to Michael Simkin” (44).

The last third of the story, then, is a return to memories of Michael—specifically to what may be the closest thing to a climax that the story has to offer, which occurs during the all-school assembly held “at the outbreak of the 1967 Six-Day War (though it was not called that at the time of the assembly—who knew?)” (44). According to the narrator, this is the only all-school assembly to have occurred at the school, and the students “were called together so that the faculty could tell [them] about Israel’s performance and prospects in the fighting.” The assembly’s main speaker is Rabbi Jacobson, “an earnest teacher,” who sits and tells of the many fronts and assures the students that Israel is doing well. The narrator then relates the following:

In the middle of the talk Michael Simkin, perhaps discombobulated by the fact that a classlike gathering was being held in the free zone of the snack bar, perhaps on a sugar high from having consumed that day’s
cookies instead of having heaved them into the ceiling, ...but at any rate unable to contain himself, leapt to his feet and made the trilling sexual intercourse sign right at Rabbi Jacobson's face. (45)

As a result of this, Michael Simkin is ushered out of the room and disappears from school for about a week, and when he returns it is "immediately clear that something [is] wrong" (46). Michael no longer is the anarchic, subversive rabble-rouser—instead he is quiet and studious and subdued, even in the face of the other students' efforts to "get a rise out of him" (46). Eventually the other students give up and Michael continues as "a model student" for several months, until his family finally moves to California (47).

The narrator's description of Michael's actions is preceded by a list of possible excuses for them. From this the narrator's sympathies are clear. It is likewise noteworthy that the narrator describes the reaction to Michael's act of supreme disrespect in a single sentence: "There was stunned silence" (45). For a moment, nobody moves. The significance here is that there is an utter absence of humor in this response. Part of humor's function as a community-builder is as a means of assimilation; it is as though Michael, in this last act, comes to represent a chaos that is inadmissible—his stance cannot be assimilated and appreciated by those around him, not even temporarily and not even by those who previously had aligned themselves with him all the way. The narrator—who admits that, in the swift reprimanding and reformation of Michael Simkin he "saw no tragedy" (47)—goes on to reveal that "Of course it now strikes [him] as terrible that a ten-year-old boy was destroyed by parents who were tired of managing
him” (47). Here the narrator makes known the depth and extent to which his commitment to the subversive stance represented by Michael Simkin runs. Rather than assuming the stance that is held by the other adults, such as the rabbis at the school, Michael’s (and presumably the other children’s) parents— namely, the Jews—a stance that perceives Michael’s actions as disrespectful, irreverent, and an affront to Jewish identity, the narrator instead (and again) sides with Michael. He sees Michael as having been “destroyed” rather than reformed.

By way of explanation, the narrator offers a description of what he believes is every child’s experience and the reason that none of the children sees what happens to Michael, at the time, as a tragedy. According to the narrator, all children are “acquainted with a terror deeper even than that which Michael’s parents had visited upon him through beating or some other form of what we would now call abuse”— a terror that manifested itself at one’s bedtime. We are told that “it was in bed, waiting for sleep”— and not during the day, at school— “that [the narrator] confronted the world directly” (47), and this seems to suggest that, though Michael may have achieved the kind of chaos that was, for a moment, too terrible for anyone to assimilate, there was still a chaos more terrible and real. The last three pages of the story mark a return to the images of dark and sleep— recalling the description of the effect that the TV show about the blind men had on the narrator. In effect, these last pages enact a kind of reverence for “the tohu vavohu of Genesis” (48), for “the pressure of silence, silence, the world’s

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8 The “tohu vavohu of Genesis” refers to the initial state of the physical universe, prior to its organization into a “created” universe. In biblical Hebrew, the word that most
worth of silence” and for “that darkness, and the silence, and the chaos inside” (49), all of which are confronted by the child at bedtime. Ultimately, the narrator seems to be saying that maturity represents the loss of these things—and, significantly, he seems to equate Jewishness with maturity. It is significant that he sees Michael as having been “destroyed” and not merely reformed, because in choosing to see it this way the narrator expressly rejects the Jewish way of seeing it. For the Jew, chaos—the tohu vavohu—is, quite literally, reformed (or transformed) into creation; it is not destroyed. But the narrator rejects this view and instead asserts the need for chaos in the face of order (the former represented by Michael Simkin, the latter by Jewishness) and claims that, “despite what Scripture says, it will never be banished, for without it there would be no horror, no misery, and no childhood” (49).

The effect of all this, it would seem, is a condemnation of Jewishness that, in the end, is unmitigated, conveyed without any sense of humor. For the narrator, the “old country” referred to in the title of the story—that for which there are strong feelings of nostalgia and remembrance and, especially, reverence—is not the Jewish immigrant’s homeland. Rather, he uses this title ironically, to reject the Jewish identity that is typically associated with the idea of “the old country” and to assert his desires for the primordial state, that state of chaos prior to cosmos, the tohu vavohu that is experienced most immediately, exhibited most genuinely, and represented most effectively by

commonly refers to “creation” refers primarily to the transformation or organization of something into something else—not to the making of something from nothing (i.e., ex nihilo, which is a Christian concept that has its sources in Greek philosophy, not Hebraic scripture).
childhood, and which the narrative of Jewishness destroys. Michael Simkin is a chief and true representative of this chaotic state—or matter, or force—and so it is with the so-called destruction of Michael Simkin that the narrator expresses his feelings of reverence and loss, as well as his feelings of animosity. This destruction occurs at the hands of the Jews—both on the microcosmic level, in the case of Michael Simkin, and on the macrocosmic level, in the case of Jewish Scripture wherein the tohu vavohu is “banished” as it is transformed into the known physical universe. For the narrator, Jewishness represents that ordering force that is in conflict with chaos, and his alignment with Michael Simkin is an alliance not merely with chaos but also, expressly, against Jewishness. Michael’s and the narrator’s use of humor manifests this stance, but in the end the humorous attack is not strong enough and is abandoned. It is replaced with condescending and condemning images of Jewish adults (representative of Jewish history and authority) and a direct refutation of Jewish Scripture.

IV. Disappearances

Following this reading of “The Old Country,” an extensive reading of Ethan Coen’s other Jewish story, “I Killed Phil Shapiro,” is unnecessary; suffice it to say that it is a story about a man who kills his father—a father from whom he has distanced himself so extensively that he calls him by his first name rather than by any familial nickname. It is a murder that seems to be the culmination of frustrations resulting from, and targeted at, a myriad of explicitly Jewish situations. The phrase “I killed Phil Shapiro” is repeated like a refrain throughout the narrative, and the following scene is
offered by way of example. In it, the man’s family argues about blintzes and what to eat for breakfast, and whether or not Savemart will be open late enough to pick up Wheatena on the way home. The conversation is marked with Yiddishims and other manifestations of Jewishness, and it ends this way:

"Savemart is open till eight. Nightly."

"So we should finish by eight? We should bolt our pot roast like savage Indians?"

"Blintzes, nu?"

"Well then, he can have some of my Grape-Nuts."

"Danny doesn’t have your stomach made of sheet metal."

"Grape-Nuts are extremely digestible."

"For some they are digestible. Barely."

"Well" —Danny’s father shrugged— "he could skip breakfast one day."

Mimsy gasped. "A lunatic, this one."

Mother said, "I don’t have to make him eggs. I could make him something else."

Mimsy said, "Danny, go to the kitchen and make yourself a peanut butter sandwich." She turned to my mother. "May we?"

"I’ll make."

"Lots of peanut butter, not much jelly."

"Blintzes, nu?"
I killed Phil Shapiro. (176)

This story, like “The Old Country,” is narrated in the first-person, by a character who holds an explicitly anti-Jewish stance—in this case, the narrator is the killer. Here, as in other scenes, the refrain follows the scene, concludes it, as though to suggest that the narrator’s act of murder was the result of these scenes and the madness that they instill in him.

Also similar to “The Old Country” are the direct and humorous stabs at Jewishness, as in the narrator’s comparison of a fellow Hebrew schoolmate’s farts to “t’keyah g’dolahs, proud shofar blasts” (178). The shofar is the ram’s horn that is blown in the synagogue during the high holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Clearly, the likening of farts to shofar blasts is a show of disrespect, another subversion of Jewish identity. Because the overall tone of the story is less nostalgic and more violent, this stance is more pronounced, more anti-Jewish than that of “The Old Country.” It is at least more explicit in its anti-Jewishness: at one point the narrator refers to the many Jewish experiences his mother encourages him to pursue as “never-ending torments” (187).

There are two moments in “I Killed Phil Shapiro” that are of particular significance, especially as they pertain to our understanding of the role that Jewishness (or the absence of it) plays in the Coen oeuvre. The first of these comes near the end of the story, when the narrator is speaking of his alienation as a Jew. Here, he mentions these “never-ending torments” and proceeds to list many other forms of “finely calibrated torture,” claiming that “In every meal and Hebrew school class and doctor’s
waiting room I felt the pinprick of my differentness—from the goyim .... Our Passover Haggadah admonished me to act as if I personally, and not just my tribe, had been led out of Egypt. Perhaps this was Egypt” (187-188, emphasis mine). Again, humor is absented; whereas previously the narration provided humor created both in and by the story, here the pain of alienation and the resentment that is felt toward Jewishness is too overwhelming. The narrator’s resistance to, or anxiety over, his Jewish identity begins to transform itself into outright rejection. The line “perhaps this was Egypt” refers to Jewishness itself; in other words, the narrator suggests that perhaps Jewishness is the captivity, the slavery, the misery from which he must make his exodus.

This moment is then followed by a reversal of the story of Abraham and Isaac, as the narrator imagines a Sphinx-like creature speaking to him:

Boychik, it says.

Hinayni, I say.

Takest thou thy father, thine only father, even Philip, whom thou lovest not, and make of him an offering. (189)

The imagined scenario extends the suggestion that the narrator must escape from his Jewishness. The sacrificing of animals was a religious ritual, a demonstration of obedience and loyalty to God, a manifestation of religious identity. When Abraham was commanded to sacrifice Isaac, it was a test of that obedience and loyalty—a testing of his identity. Through his willingness to sacrifice his son, he demonstrated his commitment to his Jewishness. The narrator’s reversal of this prominent biblical narrative of Jewishness is, in effect, an ironic rejection of his own Jewishness—a rejection that is,
again, underscored by the metaphor of killing his father, representative of destroying the link to his Jewish heritage.

Continuing in this dreamlike scenario, the narrator then tells of a journey recalling the exodus out of Egypt and back to Israel—a journey initiated with the killing of his father. Soon he encounters a staggering figure in the desert. “It is Phil,” we are told—“or given the fluid identity which dreams neglect to fix, it may be myself” (190). Here the narrator makes clear that the killing of Phil Shapiro is tantamount to the killing of the narrator’s Self; it is the identity that the father represents that the narrator wants to escape or to destroy, but it is that (Jewish) identity of the narrator’s Self, not the actual personage of the father, of which he wants to be rid. On encountering this father-figure, the narrator asks:

What connects me to him? Is the figure I now see the rear guard of a parade of ghosts, successive yet simultaneous, each generation melting into the next? What was passed down from father to son, even to the generation of Phil Shapiro, even unto our own day? What mysteries have been preserved, what lost, and what transformed in our migrations from Canaan to Eastern Europe to New York City and finally this far-flung garden suburb?

With vacant eyes the figure passes. The wind starts to fill the shuffling footprints he leaves behind even as he ascends the dune, stands swaying for a moment, and then lurches on, rippling, to disappear beyond the crest. (190)
And so the story ends, with this personification of Jewishness “disappearing beyond the crest,” the question of “What connects me to him?” still hanging in the desert air, presumably to be answered with little more than a shrug. With this final image, the narrator effectively narrates his Jewish identity out of himself, away from himself—narrates Jewishness up and over the dune, to disappear beyond the crest. This is the power the narrator has: to tell the story of his own identity—an identity that, for this narrator, is what it is in part for its rejection of Jewishness.

V. Living in the Past

It is in this outright rejection of Jewishness that the Coen brothers persona differs from others such as the Woody Allen persona—or the personas of Mel Brooks, Charlie Chaplin, Jerry Seinfeld, the Three Stooges, or the Marx Brothers. For these others, certain societal pressures may have led to the suppression of Jewishness at times, and certain anxieties over this Jewishness are present and manifest themselves. But these tensions between alienation and assimilation, between assertions of the Jewish Self and suppressions of—even resistances to—the Jewish Self are ultimately incorporated into our very notions of Jewishness. For most Jews in America, being conflicted over one’s Jewishness is a part of being Jewish. And, indeed, for most non-Jews in America this remains a part of the general notion of what it means to be Jewish. Hence, for example, the strong association of self-deprecating humor with what we call “Jewish humor.”
In “Jewish humor,” however, there is little real and actual rancor directed at Jewishness. Anti-Semitic jokes exist, but they are not a part of what we call “Jewish humor.” They are outside this sense of Jewish identity.

Returning to questions raised previously, then: What is the effect of the Coen brothers’ brand of humor on constructed notions of Jewish identity? It would seem, from the readings of these two stories, that the effect is rancorous—that their humor does not qualify as self-deprecating “Jewish humor,” but instead appears to be anti-Jewish in its bent, emanating not from a discomfort or anxiety over Jewish identity but from an intense criticism and rejection of it.

As mentioned, direct treatments of Jewish identity are, for the most part, absent from the filmworks of the Coen brothers—but Jewishness is briefly confronted in The Big Lebowski. In this film, John Goodman plays Walter, a man who, at a moment of crisis when the Dude (Jeff Bridges) needs his help, insists that he can’t do anything to break the Sabbath. The Dude tries to enlist his help and this exchange follows:

“Okay, but how does all this add up to emergency?”

“Huh?”

“I’m saying, I see what you’re getting at, Dude: he kept the money. My point is, here we are, it’s Shabbes—”

“Shabbes?”

“—the Sabbath, which I’m allowed to break only if it’s a matter of life or death.”
"Will you come off it, Walter, you’re not even fucking Jewish, man."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You’re fucking Polish Catholic."

"What the fuck are you talking about? I converted when I married Cynthia—c’mon, Dude—"

"Yeah, yeah—"

"—you know this."

"—yeah, and five fucking years ago you were divorced."

"So what are you saying? You get divorced, you turn in your library card, you get a new license—you stop being Jewish?"

[mumbles] "This is the drama."

[mumbles] "I’m as Jewish as fucking Tevya."

"Man, you know, it’s all part of your sick Cynthia thing, man. Taking care of her fucking dog, going to her fucking synagogue—you’re living in the fucking past."

"Three thousand years of beautiful tradition, from Moses to Sandy Koufax—you’re Goddamn right I’m living in the fucking past! I’m—"

And at this point the conversation is interrupted.

The above passage represents the most extended, most explicit discussion of Jewish identity to appear in any of the Coen brothers films, and it is almost the only
reference to Jewishness in this film—despite Walter's apparent commitment to his
religion. Moreover, as in the two stories by Ethan, in this exchange the feeling of
antagonism toward Jewishness is apparent. Walter is an absurd character, worthy of
ridicule, and the audience cannot be expected to admire his commitment to a Jewish
identity that is at best adopted out of a sense of love and loyalty to his wife (but
nevertheless adopted) and at worst clung to in a desperate attempt to cling to the past,
to something that is no longer his—much in the same way that he clings to the memories
of his service in the Vietnam war.

This latter notion—of clinging to something that is no longer one's own, and of
being worthy of ridicule for doing so—fits in well with the attitude toward Jewishness
that is manifested in the stories. The sentiment conveyed is that one should abandon
these things. "You're living in the fucking past," says the Dude—and we, as the
audience, cannot help but agree. This complicity in the Dude's conviction of Walter
follows, in part, from the humor of the situation. We laugh at the rigidity of Walter's
position—at the ridiculousness of it—and thus we align ourselves with the Dude's
assessment of it. Even Walter himself undermines his Jewishness when he speaks of a
tradition running "from Moses to Sandy Koufax." How can we take seriously an identity
rooted in religion and the great prophet and author of the Torah that has fallen into the
secular hands of a Dodger southpaw? Walter convicts himself when he says, "You're
Goddamn right I'm living in the fucking past!" It would seem to be no accident that the
conversation is interrupted at this point, with the self-proclaimed (but essentially

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9 This is my transcription of the film's dialogue.
counterfeit) Jew admitting to the foolishness of his position. Nowhere does this sort of outright rejection of Jewish identity, as manifested in these stories and in this scene from The Big Lebowski, take place in even those works that are, purportedly, the most anti-Semitic works of Woody Allen or Philip Roth.

But before we solidify this assessment of the Coens, we must consider whether this stance may be a part of the postmodern frame through which they are viewing the world—a frame that they then impose upon their audience, as we read their fiction or watch their movies. This postmodern shift, the making of new realities and new identities and the recognition of the contradictions and inconsistencies between and resulting from them, may in fact be a part of the brilliance of their work. As Joseph Natoli puts it,

The ludic quality of a Coen brothers’ film comes out of their fascination with the sheer variety of ways in which their characters know, identify, and produce reality and the expected and unexpected ways these characters run into each other. Anticipating clashes of reality frames is part of our audience enjoyment. (90)

Natoli goes on to say that this ludic quality “leads us to a defensiveness as we distance our lives from those on the screen, and an offensiveness as we muster up a critique of a filmic reality that lacks coherence, continuity, and closure” (91). In other words, perhaps the defensiveness one feels in the face of such an anti-Jewish stance, and the offensiveness one might muster in an essay condemning the Coens for their anti-
Semitism, are a part of the postmodern complication that the Coens' work endeavors to convey.

And perhaps, in the end, this is where we find ourselves with regard to the Coens' œuvre and Jewish identity—in a state of defensiveness and offensiveness. We cannot help but admire the autonomy of a postmodern view that allows for the construction of one's identity against history and society, yet we cannot help but desire to distance ourselves from the anti-Jewish stance that is assumed by characters and narrators—and even, presumably, by the Coens themselves. We cannot help but muster up a critique of a Coen reality that challenges the coherence and continuity inherent in notions of Jewish identity—a coherence and continuity that is challenged by the Coen brothers' persona itself. For the Coen brothers’ persona is marked by an identifiably Jewish surname, yet it offers little else for marking it as Jewish. Instead and to the contrary, it manufactures a reality in which clashes between realities occur, and in which Jewishness itself is narrated out of the picture. For the Coen brothers, it would seem, Jewishness is an identity condemned to eventual abandonment—condemned to its own disappearance, so to speak, beyond the crest.

WORKS CITED


CHAPTER 7

ALLEGRA GOODMAN AND NATHAN ENGLANDER

To introduce and to contextualize this discussion of these two authors and their accomplishment, we must begin with the following quotation from an essay by Allegra Goodman that appears in *Daughters of Valor: Contemporary Jewish American Women* Writers, edited by Jay Halio and Ben Siegel. Goodman writes:

Jewish American fiction has a complex and troubling position in the United States. The Jewish writers of my generation are the inheritors of two traditions of Jewish fiction. One is the tradition of writers such as Chaim Grade, Sholom Aleichem, and I.B. Singer.... These are writers whose aesthetic qualities and achievements are rarely isolated from their subject matter. Always they are the recorders of a lost culture and a lost language.... These writers' books are marginalized as artifacts rather than read consistently as art works.

The other tradition that comes down to us is that of Jewish American writers such as Roth and Bellow, who develop and project their self-consciousness, ambivalence, and guilt about the Jewish tradition into mainstream American fiction. If the translated Yiddish writers are marginalized as parochial, the great Jewish American writers are read as
in a sense their fame makes it hard to hear them as ethnic voices. ("Writing" 269-70)

The tension Goodman describes between these two traditions is essentially the tension between alienation and assimilation. The Yiddish writers she describes are forever alienated—"parochial"—and consequently marginalized, while the "great Jewish American writers" have become largely assimilated. To underscore this latter point, Goodman observes that a particular Norton anthology, in its introductions to Roth and Bellow, fails to make any mention of either writer’s Jewishness.

Goodman’s objective in identifying these two traditions in Jewish writing is to differentiate them from what she hopes to accomplish in her own writing. Goodman is not concerned with alienation or assimilation—or, perhaps more precisely, she is not anxious about them. She is not self-conscious nor is she ambivalent about her Jewishness. She is a postassimilationist writer who wishes, in Gloria Cronin’s words, “to be a part of a Jewish literature that in the postassimilationist era can recapture the spiritual and religious dimension of Judaism” (248). Says Goodman, “I practice...a fiction that is unapologetic and energetically ethnic” (“Writing” 271). In other words, Goodman is a part of a new generation of Jewish-American writers whose principle distinction from previous generations might just be their willingness to embrace the label “Jewish-American writer.”

Illustrating this distinction, Goodman writes of a conversation she had with Cynthia Ozick at a dinner in Ozick’s honor at Stanford University, where Goodman was a Ph.D. student. Goodman describes the conversation this way:
We began to talk about the term Jewish American writer, and she told me how much she resented the label. It is derogatory, she said, it is simplistic and reductive. It reduces art and ideas to ethnic commodities. The very word *ethnic*, she said, is a hateful term; it is really a slur, a term of alienation, with its root word *ethnos* connoting foreign and heathen. To label fiction as Jewish American, to think of it as ethnic, is not merely to categorize it but to attack it. Then she leaned over and asked, "What do you think?" ("Writing" 268)

It is interesting to note that Goodman sets up this situation to make it humorous: she highlights the irony inherent in the juxtaposition of Ozick's rant with her seemingly sincere inquiry. In this way, humor becomes, for Goodman, a means of—or, at least, it opens the door to—negotiating Jewish identity, and particularly how it has been constructed by Ozick. What Goodman thinks, in fact, is that "a writer cannot have enough labels if they are keys to new audiences" ("Writing" 269). She feels that her "most intimate and immediate audience comes from the American Jewish community" ("Writing" 268). Such a difference in opinion might seem merely that—a difference of opinion—but in reality it speaks volumes on Jewish-American literature and identity, and on the ways in which these have changed from generation to generation.

Jewish-American immigrants came to the United States and, as a largely and highly literate group, entered quickly into the literary scene with novels about immigration and the struggle to overcome alienation. As generations of Jews were born in the United States, they continued to write about their alienation as children of
immigrant Jews—an alienation both from mainstream American society and from the history and culture from which their parents had come—and the tension was between the tug of the old world and the pull of the new, the tug and pull of alienation and assimilation (the latter being often referred to as "Americanization"). This tension has long been a part of Jewish-American fiction, and thus by extension has long been a part of our constructed sense of Jewish-American identity, and the post-World War II, so-called "mainstream" writers (e.g. Bellow, Malamud, Roth) have not dispensed with this tension. To the contrary, they have exhibited great anxiety over it, and have frequently responded with great ambivalence. But with the advent of writers such as Goodman and Nathan Englander there seems to have been a shift—or a de-/reconstruction of that identity. This new Jewishness, so to speak, is, as Goodman puts it, "unapologetic and energetically ethnic," and no longer is it so anxious or ambivalent about its identity.

The proof is in the prose. Goodman and Englander both have made their literary names (at least initially) as short story writers, and both exhibit this postassimilationist posture in their early stories. Moreover, each may be considered a comic or humorous writer, and each employs that humor in significant ways with regard to Jewish identity. In fact, it may even be said that it is primarily their particular uses of humor that work to construct this new, postassimilationist Jewish identity—just as it is primarily the humor of writers such as Philip Roth or Woody Allen that constructs an identity of anxiousness and/or ambivalence toward Jewishness.

Goodman's "And Also Much Cattle" is a good place to start, in examining this postassimilationist shift, because it is, significantly, the first story Goodman ever
wrote—and because the story revolves around Yom Kippur services. Yom Kippur is a
time of deep thought and great hope, a time to turn away from past sin, to forgive others
and to be forgiven, and the beginning of a new year. All of this, of course, is appropriate
to a work that is, at least for Goodman, inaugurating the reconstruction of a new Jewish
identity. In the story, Gail and B.J. Schick are holding Yom Kippur services in their home
in Honolulu, Hawaii. The story opens with the arrival of the Sugarmans and continues
with the arrivals of more guests and with the comic-chaotic attempts to perform the
religious rituals of the holiday.

Before going on, however, we should note that this story appears in Goodman’s
first book, entitled Total Immersion (1989), and this too is significant and worthy of
consideration. Cronin describes the predicament of “total immersion” as being “stuck in
a human space that prohibits the transcendental leap beyond ... engulfed in the hilarious
great earthbound suck of the mortal self” (249). And Sanford Pinsker likewise notes that
“‘Immersion’ operates as the charged word here,” because “the possibility of being
swamped—of a total immersion into the unfamiliar—always looms as a possibility”
(193). Building on both Cronin’s and Pinsker’s observations, we might add that the
metaphor of immersion also has much to do with the postassimilationist perspective: for
when an object is immersed, it is completely surrounded by and involved in that in
which it is immersed, yet it retains its integrity as an individual object; it is not alienated
as something outside of that in which it is immersed, nor is it assimilated into that in
which it is immersed, as with something that is absorbed or dissolved. And while
Goodman does write about humans who are immersed in mortality and the unfamiliar,
she also writes specifically about Jews who are immersed, not only in the society and culture of the United States, but in their own Jewishness and Judaism. And the incongruities that result from this predicament, from these immersions, are unapologetically hilarious.

For the postassimilationist writer this hilarity poses a potential dilemma, however, because the function of humor is the alienation or assimilation of incongruities. How, then, does a writer such as Goodman—who wishes to be unapologetic and to avoid the self-conscious anxiety and ambivalence about Jewishness that are so often associated with the humor of “mainstreamed” Jewish-American writers—use humor without constructing Jewishness as an incongruity that must be either alienated or assimilated? In other words, how do we joke about Jews without The Jew and Jewishness somehow suffering as the butt of the joke?

The answer to this is inhered in the postassimilationist shift in perspective, which removes Jews and Jewishness from the role of spectacle. Humor, it is generally acknowledged, is the result of some incongruity—the juxtaposition of two things that do not fit together. Often, this incongruity manifests itself as a conflict between the ideal and the real. An example from “And Also Much Cattle” is the scene in which Gail Schick’s sons are cussing and fighting in front of the Torah in the middle of services (179). Another is Arnold Bogner’s claim that he always goes for the intellectual girls, juxtaposed with the glimpse we get of Pearl’s to-do list in her bedroom (Pearl is the girl that Arnold is infatuated with): her list reads, “1. Wash hair” and “2. Paint nails” (183-
84). In both instances, the incongruity between ideal or expectation and reality is humorous, but it has nothing to do with Jewishness per se.

By contrast, in the tradition of Jewish-American fiction via Bellow and Roth, one’s Jewishness itself is a source of incongruity. In other words, in these works Jewishness, when juxtaposed with Americanness, doesn’t quite fit—because Jewishness is implicitly not a part of the supposed ideal of “Americanness.” Thus Jewishness, as incongruity, often becomes a focal point, a source of anxiety and thus a source of humor and the subject of laughter. That laughter, then, is often directed at the incongruity and functions to either alienate or assimilate it. That is, we either laugh acceptingly at the difference, making room for it—or, as is often the case, our laughter is full of discomfort and even ridicule, or deprecation, thereby alienating the difference or annihilating it by coercing it into assimilation. It is precisely because of this function of humor that writers like Roth and Allen have at times been accused of self-hatred or anti-Semitism.

Goodman, however, is not an author creating characters who are self-conscious, guilt-ridden, and/or ambivalent toward their Jewishness, whose Jewishness contributes to their sense of their own state of incongruity; rather, she is an “unapologetic and energetically ethnic” author whose characters are immersed in their own Jewishness. The resultant incongruities, then, have more to do with their humanness—the Schick brothers’ immaturity and irreverence, or Arnold’s lack of self-awareness, for example—than with their ethnicity. Jewishness, instead of being constructed as the real which comes into conflict with the ideal of Americanness, is constructed as an ideal in and of
itself. The effect is that the humor's alienating/assimilating force is directed not at Jewishness or Judaism as a (or the) source of incongruity, but at human folly.

This is the essence of the postassimilationist shift: a move away from the perception of Jewishness as Other, or as incongruous. This perception of Jewishness-as-Other can really only be held from outside Jewishness and is thus predominantly the alienator's (i.e. the anti-Semite's) perception—or, if one is Jewish yet one holds this perception of Jewishness-as-Other, then it becomes the assimilationist's perception (as one strives to suppress or disavow one's Jewishness/Otherness by assimilating). By contrast, the post-assimilationist's perspective is a move toward the assertion of the Jewish Self. In other words, it is the total immersion of the Jew into his or her Jewishness, so that the incongruities that arise are not the result of being Jewish but are often, instead, the result of being not Jewish enough.

In "And Also Much Cattle," we (as readers) are immersed along with Goodman's characters into a context of Jewishness, wherein Judaism operates as an ideal instead of an incongruity, and from within that context it is the reality of the characters' humanness (e.g. immaturity, pride, self-ignorance) that runs incongruous with the ideal that Judaism presents. Thus, it is human imperfection and not Jewishness at which we are laughing, and it is the alienation or assimilation of humanness that we must negotiate as laughers. Depending on our stance, we either make room for human folly and accept it (which is perhaps our response to what we call the comic), or we ridicule it out of an urge to change or correct it (which is perhaps our response to what we call the satiric). Either way, the postassimilationist's perspective is accomplished, as
we are no longer concerned with the alienation or assimilation of Jews or Jewishness per se.

Goodman continues this pursuit of postassimilationism in other stories, and most recently in her latest novel, Paradise Park (2001). The novel follows the odyssey of Sharon Speigelman, a woman in search of God and identity. On her perception of her own Jewishness she is clear, early on: “I came from a background of staunch secularism,” she tells us. “Nominally my family was Jewish, but we didn’t belong to anything, or do anything” (48). In this way, Goodman establishes Sharon as another Jewish-but-less-than-Jewish character; and her status as Other is emphasized in various ways, including the way she is treated by her housemates in Hawaii. They are “all local and loved to tease [her], since [she] was what they called a ‘haole,’ which was an affectionate way of saying intruder and outsider and interloper” (46). Sharon unwittingly reiterates her outsider status when she then admits that, “Actually, I didn’t understand a lot of what these guys said, because they liked to talk in pidgin English” (46).

By establishing that Sharon does not consider herself Jewish, other than nominally, and that she is an interloper, an outsider, Goodman implicitly constructs Jewishness as one more identity to which Sharon is Other. Her strained relationship with her parents works metaphorically to underscore this: though her parents are staunch secularists, as her parents they function symbolically as Sharon’s ethnic heredity. Her distanced relationship with them is emblematic of her distance from her own Jewishness—and their secularism increases this distance. If Bellow and Roth characters
are generally second-generation Jews, still caught up in tensions over alienation and
assimilation, Sharon is a third-generation (at least), assimilated Jew. But about halfway
through the narrative, Sharon encounters Rabbi Everett Siegel, who recognizes this
distance. And Sharon, who is constantly in search of a god or a spiritual identity that she
can adopt, is at first spellbound by Siegel's spirituality. The spell wears off when Siegel
comments on the behavior of contemporary Jews. In response to this, Sharon says:

"I just wanted to say that personally I was a little bit offended
when you spoke about people of Jewish backgrounds running way [sic].
Because I am not and I have never been a person who is running away
from anything."

"I see," he said.

"I happen to be a comparative religion major at UH," I said. "I
happen to be a person running toward spiritualism."

He looked at me with his melancholy eyes. "The question," he
said, "is whether your spiritualism, as you call it, has anything to do with
your religion."

"My what?"

"With Judaism."

"I never said Judaism was my religion."

"The irony is," Rabbi Siegel told me in his rolling tones, "we are a
people who have survived by our memories. And now we are plagued
with amnesia." (149)
The rabbi's statement is, of course, a statement against assimilation. And in the process of trying to respond indignantly to the rabbi's assertion that she is "an amnesiac," Sharon ironically asserts her Jewishness. In this way, humor (via irony) again becomes the primary vehicle for the construction of a Jewish identity that is not Other, to be alienated from or assimilated into American identity, but is instead a Self in and of itself, an identity which Sharon suddenly wishes to assert. After telling us previously that she is only nominally Jewish, and emphasizing her staunch secularist background, she now tells the rabbi, "I come from a Jewish home, and my stepmother was also Jewish. It's not like I could run away from Judaism if I tried!" And this comic assertion of Jewishness is then heightened (and perhaps validated) by Sharon's claim that "at that moment the bashert happened! The Jewish fate Gary had referred to" (149). The moment becomes a turning point—a very Jewish turning point—as Sharon (re-)enters a/the Jewish community as the result of an identifiably Jewish phenomenon (i.e. bashert) and steps onto a path leading to the end of her odyssey, which is ultimately the fulfillment or realization of her Jewishness.

For, in the end, Sharon assumes and asserts a Jewish identity that is, like that of the characters from "And Also Much Cattle," fully immersed in, but not assimilated into, her Americanness. In other words, rather than being objectified as something to be assimilated or alienated, Jewishness—and Judaism, more particularly—becomes idealized as that toward which Sharon is striving and of which she falls short. Her assertion of her Jewish Self is unmistakable: she becomes an orthodox Jew, marries an immigrant orthodox Jew named Mikhail, and they have a son that Sharon names Zohar.
(The name means “radiance, splendor, and light” [351] and is a deliberate attempt on Sharon’s part to declare that she has finally found the identity she has been looking for.)

That humor has played a consistent and prominent role in the assertion of this postassimilationist Jewish identity is likewise unmistakable: during a conversation with her mother, for instance, at the hospital following the birth of Zohar, Sharon tries to convince her mother that she no longer blames her for past behaviors, to convince her that she has found “a more enlightened place” now; and in response her mother says, “You are. No question you are. Enlightened, and everything else. Jewish! Who would have thought?” (343-344). An explication of the comic irony in this remark is hardly necessary, but certainly it is noteworthy that the remark comes from Sharon’s mother—that emblem of her ethnic heredity. And the irony is only heightened with the recognition that Sharon’s newfound Jewishness might actually increase the distance between herself and her parents, who remain assimilated Jews. In the end, it is clear that Sharon will continue to assert her Jewishness while continuing to fall short of the ideal that it represents, so as readers we laugh heartily—but we’re laughing at Sharon the human being, not at Sharon the Jew.

Nathan Englander

There is no explicit indication as to whether or not Nathan Englander became familiar with Goodman’s writing prior to or during the composition of his own stories, but certainly Englander’s fiction produces an effect similar to Goodman’s. Englander exploded onto the literary scene with his debut story collection, For the Relief of Unbearable Urges (1999), and though Englander has not articulated his place in relation
to Jewish-American literary tradition as Goodman has, he certainly is conscious of a similar objective. In an interview that appears on his publisher’s web site, Englander explains it this way:

It’s no shock that people focus on the Jewish themes in the collection. They are not exactly hidden. But for me they have more to do with setting and with providing the rules, the logic, by which the worlds presented function. ("Interview")

In other words, for Englander Jewishness is context, not subject or object; in Englander’s stories, as in Goodman’s, the same postassimilationist shift manifests itself. Like Goodman, Englander refuses to construct Jewishness as an incongruity in the context of Americanness, instead using Jewishness (combined with Americanness) as a context into which individual human beings are immersed.

In his story “The Wig,” for example, Ruchama, the main character, is a victim of vanity. She is an orthodox Jew who longs for the head of hair she once had, before she was married (and was, according to her orthodoxy, required to shave it off), and who lies and swindles others in the pursuit of something like it—in the form of a wig made from the heavenly locks of a fruit-tree delivery boy. It is an admirable feat and a testament to his postassimilationist perspective that Englander manages to portray this story with great humor throughout, while preventing Ruchama’s ethnic Jewishness or her extremely orthodox Judaism from becoming, even once, the direct source or target of that humor. Instead, it is Ruchama’s humanness—her human flaws, principally her vanity—that is exposed and exploited.
Moreover, it is interesting to note that a portion of Ruchama’s humanness—a portion of her vanity—feeds off of recognition from, and the influences of, the non-Jewish community. For example, she is motivated in part by the images of a woman in a fashion magazine, which is considered *narishkeit* (i.e. contraband), and which she peruses in secret during her trips to the city. In this way, by reinforcing her weakness via non-Jewish sources, Englander emphasizes that it is not her Jewishness nor her Judaism that makes Ruchama a comic figure; it is human folly—her shortcomings as an orthodox Jew who is tempted and influenced by the Gentile world—which generates our laughter. Englander does not point us to the incongruity of a Jew in America (which, of course, suggests that Jews are incongruous with “America”); rather, he points us to the incongruity of a human being with human weaknesses immersed in a religion and culture of lofty ideals (suggesting that orthodox Jews are, in fact, very much a part of “America” and a lot like their fellow Americans, though they may not be “Americanized”).

Something similar to this occurs in other Englander stories. In “The Gilgul of Park Avenue,” a Gentile, Charles Luger, comes to the realization that he is “the bearer of a Jewish soul.” While riding in a taxi, he suddenly “knew, as he knew anything at all, that there was a Yiddishe neshama functioning inside” of him (109). This realization is immediately followed by Luger’s assertion of his new Jewish Self, when out of a desire to share his revelation he knocks on the Plexiglass divider in the cab: “‘Jewish,’ Charles said. ‘Jewish, here in the back’” (109). The cab driver responds that the meter ticks the same for all creeds, and thus humor again becomes the principal means whereby this
postassimilationist Jewish identity is constructed. Luger’s assertion is humorous for at least two reasons. First, for the incongruity of the presentation, as such a profound realization about identity is delivered in the understated manner of “Jewish, here in the back.” And second, for the incongruity of the content, as it is a non-Jew who is declaring sudden Jewishness. But note that it is not the Jewishness per se that is incongruous here; rather, it is the absence of “real” Jewishness that presents the incongruity. As a result, our laughter focuses on the alienation or assimilation not of Jewishness, but of Luger’s lack thereof, so that we are either accepting (via congenial laughter) or rejecting (via scornful laughter) the idea that a non-Jew could claim Jewishness. In other words, Jewishness again becomes context rather than subject or object. The cab driver’s response reinforces this, as it is, in Luger’s words, a “benign” response (109), leaving aside the alienation or assimilation of Jewishness.

As it is for characters in Goodman’s fiction—most prominently Sharon, in Paradise Park—Jewishness is for Luger an ideal to which he aspires. And the principal comic irony in the story, at least at first, lies in Luger’s unhesitating assertion of his Jewishness when he knows almost nothing about what that Jewishness entails. When he sits down to dinner with his wife, for example, he is afraid to tell her of his new identity because he isn’t sure how she’ll react—but he seems, in fact, to be just as troubled by the food that sits before him:

Half an hour Jewish and already he felt obliged. He knew there were dietary laws, milk and meat forbidden to touch, but he didn’t dare ask Sue and chance a confrontation, not until he’d formulated a plan. He’d
call Dr. Birnbaum, his psychologist, in the morning. Or maybe he’d find a rabbi. Who better to guide him in such matters? (111)

In effect, then, Jewishness becomes—as it is for the other characters we’ve examined—the context into which Luger is suddenly immersed, and we laugh at this predicament wherein the human being, with all his or her faults and failures, falls short of the ideal. This immersion is iterated in “Gilgul” when Luger seeks guidance at the Royal Hills Mystical Jewish Reclamation Center (the R-HMJRC). There, “standing in the middle of the marble floor,” Luger feels “the cold space, the only thing familiar being his unfamiliar self” (112). In other words, Luger’s new Self—his Jewishness—is at once his own and not his own. He is, himself, Other to his Jewishness. And from this postassimilationist perspective, it is his Otherness as non-Jew (not his Jewishness) that requires alienation or assimilation. This is reiterated when he meets Rabbi Zalman Meintz of the R-HMJRC, who looks “like a real Jew” (113); Luger, by contrast, does not, and the context is such that Luger, as aspiring Jew, is constructed as Other to Meintz, the “real Jew.”

As mentioned, much of the humor in the story resides in the incongruity of Luger’s reality (i.e. as human being) with his ideal (i.e. orthodox Judaism). This humor is perhaps at its best and most exemplary during the incident involving the mezuzah. After telling his wife about his new identity, Luger continues his transformation amid a barrage of spousal protests. On a Sunday afternoon, his wife, Sue, drags him from his reading.
“I could kill you,” she said. And though smaller, she had already pulled him to his feet. Charles followed her to the foyer.

“What is this?” she yelled, slamming open the door.

“A mezuzah,” he said. “If you mean that.” He pointed at the small metal casing nailed to the doorpost. “I need it,” he said. “I have to kiss it.”

“Oh my God,” she said, slamming the door closed, giving the neighbors no more than a taste. “My God!” She steadied herself, put a hand against the wall. “Well where did it come from? It’s got blue paint on it. Where does one buy a used mezuzah?”

“I don’t know where to get one. I pried it off eleven-D with a letter opener. They don’t even use it. Steve Freiman had me in to see their Christmas tree last year. Their daughter is dating a black man.” (126-127)

The humor created by this episode is evident, and arises from an understanding—the same understanding that gives rise to the humor in the story about Ruchama and the wig: namely, the understanding that orthodox Jews are not supposed to behave in this way, to covet curly locks or to lift mezuzahs using letter openers. In other words, we laugh not at Judaism, nor at Luger’s Jewishness, but distinctly at his not being Jewish enough. We laugh at his humanness.

What is unique about “The Gilgul of Park Avenue,” though, is that it hints more strongly at a direct contrasting of the postassimilationist’s perspective with the assimilationist’s, chiefly by constructing a sort of rivalry between Rabbi Meintz and Luger’s psychologist, Dr. Birnbaum. Meintz, the one who looks “like a real Jew” and the
one who provides Luger with guidance during his transformation, comes to represent
the postassimilationist assertion of the Jewish Self. Birnbaum, on the other hand, is a
secular, assimilated Jew, apparently ambivalent about his own Jewishness, who
encourages Luger to consider other options to orthodox Judaism such as “gardening or
meditation” (133). Underlying all of this, and illustrating the role of humor in these
identity constructions, is the great irony that Meintz is, apparently, a former-Gentile
“gilgul” like Luger, while Birnbaum is (in traditional terms) the “real” Jew. Englander
seems to be suggesting that, in the postassimilationist shift, “real” Jewishness is in the
construction and assertion of a Jewish Self, not in the traditional trappings of heredity,
which have been victimized by the trap of assimilationism. Meintz, in fact, asserts as
much when he tells Luger earlier that the body (i.e. heredity) doesn’t matter. “Jew, non-
Jew, doesn’t matter. The body doesn’t matter,” he says. “It is the soul itself that is
Jewish” (115).

At the end of the story, Luger and his wife, Birnbaum, and Meintz have dinner
together, to negotiate Luger’s new identity. But despite his wife’s protests, and
Birnbaum’s soft cajoling, Luger (with Meintz at his side) stands firm. In fact,
Birnbaum—that representative of assimilation—slowly recedes from the heated
discussion between Luger and Sue, seemingly signifying the triumph of Luger’s
postassimilationist assertions by “backing away with quiet steps” (135). Meintz leaves
too, of course, but he is unable to slip away as the doctor does, because Luger wants to
walk him to the door. There, Meintz reaffirms Luger’s Jewishness in the process of
warning him about hardships ahead. (“I tell you this from one Jew to another. There is
no hope for the pious’” [136].) Luger then returns to his wife and stands before her, in
the full assertion of his new Self, wanting “to be wholly seen” by his wife—wanting her
to acknowledge and accept his new identity, rather than alienate or assimilate it. Or, as
England puts it, “wanting her to love him changed” (137).

Through all of this, then—in “The Gilgul of Park Avenue” and in “The Wig,” as
in other stories—England does what Goodman does: he constructs Judaism and
Jewishness as that into which his characters are immersed; as an ideal compatriot to
Americanness, rather than incongruous with it; and as an identity of the Self rather than
of the Other. This is not to say that Englander’s (or Goodman’s) characters do not
function as Others, for indeed much of the humor in these stories arises from this
Otherness. But unlike the Otherness of characters from many of the Jewish-American
works that are a part of the two previous traditions to which Goodman refers, Luger’s—
and Sharon’s, and Ruchama’s, and the Schick brothers’—Otherness is not derived from
his (or their) Jewishness. Rather, they are Other in relation to that Jewishness, as
Jewishness becomes not that which must be alienated or assimilated, but that to which
the characters aspire to assimilate themselves.

Speculations

It is too early to say right now, of course, but it is possible to speculate that
perhaps this will be Goodman’s and Englander’s great accomplishment. Stepping out of
the two previous traditions in Jewish-American literature, these writers do not portray
an alienated, parochial Jewish experience, nor do they promote or exhibit assimilationist
tendencies by expressing guilt over, or self-consciousness about, or ambivalence toward
Jewishness, or by portraying it scornfully or apologetically; rather, they immerse the reader into worlds where Jewishness and Judaism are, along with generalized “Americanness,” a part of that in which the reader and the characters are immersed, or an ideal toward which they might strive. By preventing and/or refusing the construction of Jewishness as the Other, Goodman and Englander prevent it from becoming the butt of their humor. In this way, Goodman and Englander move beyond the traditional issues of—and preoccupations with—Jewish alienation and assimilation, to laugh instead at, in Cronin’s words, the “human conditions that have always blocked individual consciousness and formed the stuff of human comedy” (266). With this shift into the postassimilationist perspective, and by owning and pursuing their ethnicity enthusiastically, Goodman and Englander do much to assert the Jewish Self and to bring a renewed sense of integrity to Jewish identity. And with a great and pleasing irony, they at the same time, in fact, push their humor and their narratives into a real, more substantial universality.

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The purpose of this study was never to provide an overarching narrative of Jewish-American humor and identity in the 20th century; yet it is worth noting that such a narrative does seem to emerge as we move from the immigrant humor of Cahan's *Yekl*, which tends to focus primarily on first-generation anxieties of alienation, through the works of Roth and Allen, which tend to focus on second-generation anxieties of assimilation, to the works of the Coen brothers and those of Goodman and Englander, which posit two possible third-generation responses to these anxieties—each of which, it may be added, could be referred to as postassimilationist. Having noted this emergent overarching narrative, however, my impulse is to back away from such a reductive, overly simplistic portrayal of Jewish-American identity, which certainly has not evolved in any singular direction, let alone one so easily traceable and encapsulated. The real intent and value of this study is, I believe, not the suggestion of an overarching narrative but the presentation of a plurality of narratives, a plurality of approaches to Jewish-American humor and identity.

As mentioned in the Introduction, this study is comprised of individual essays and not true chapters; they do not cohere around a centralized thesis, but gather under the general topic of the relationship between Jewish-American humor and Jewish-
American identity. As David E. E. Sloane says, in his introduction to *New Directions in American Humor*, “It is the divergent components of American humor that make monolithic analysis a problematic undertaking at best” (4), and the very same can be said of Jewish humor. My hope here has been the same as Sloane’s is for his audience: “Readers of this book,” he says, “...should be able to start at nearly any point and discover...ways of viewing humor that lead to further inquiries” (3). The Malamud essay, for example, should raise interesting questions about Malamud’s humanism and the possibility of postmodern readings of his novels—something that has not been explored much, to the detriment of Malamud’s standing in academia. Likewise, the Bellow essay should point to an array of questions surrounding the relationship between humor and the Holocaust, as well as to questions of ethics and humor. And the last essay, on Goodman and Englander, might raise questions about the direction of postmodern thought in general: Is Goodman’s turn toward Orthodox Judaism, for instance, indicative of a reactionary response to postmodernism’s notions of relational, constructed identities, and in effect a re-turn to notions of essence in/of/and identity?

In other words, a goal of this study is to open up the discussion of Jewish humor and identity by suggesting further inquiries, rather than to close it by offering decisive answers. Because questions about the construction of identity are so central to these essays, the essays should lead readers, again in Sloane’s words, “to the broadest issues of philosophical belief, national versus international cultural identity, and self-definition” (3). And always at the forefront (of this study at least, if not of future inquiries) is the steady recognition of the inextricable relevance of humor to these
issues—the constant realization that, with regard to questions of ethics, philosophy, and identity, ultimately humor matters, and there can be no such thing as “just joking.”

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