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The "Mythical Jew"  
and the "Jew Next Door" in  
Nineteenth-Century America

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## The "Mythical Jew" and the "Jew Next Door" in Nineteenth-Century America

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"In the wilds of Tennessee, a mountaineer, who had just 'sperienced religion at a camp meeting, was coming down the road when he met a peddler. 'Say,' said the newly converted Tennessean, 'say, ain't you a Jew? I never seed a Jew but I calkalate you is one.'

"The peddler modestly answered the question affirmatively, ignorant of the results.

"'Put your pack down,' said the Tennessean. 'Now I am going to knock hell out of yer,' and he proceeded to do as he had threatened.

"'What you hit me for?' said the peddler.

"'What fer?' said his assailant, 'what fer? Well that's a nice thing to ask a gentleman. You crucified our Lord, that's what you done.'

"Then the Jew explained that it had occurred nearly nineteen hundred years ago and that he had absolutely nothing to do with it.

"'Scuse me,' said the mountaineer, 'I'm sorry I beat you. I was told up there at the camp meeting, that the Jews had crucified the Lord, and I calkalated you was one of the men that did it. I never heard of it before today.'"<sup>1</sup>

Such humor as can be found in this backwoods folktale comes from the absurdity of ignorant mountaineers confusing the Jew today with the Jew who lived back in the days of Jesus, and in blaming the former for misdeeds allegedly committed by the latter. Afro-American folklore contains a similar story but with roles

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reversed. The "good" Jew is the biblical one; the "bad" Jew a contemporary:

An old pious Negro mammy . . . expressed before her mistress the wish to see some of the Children of Israel, inasmuch as she could not visit the Land of Canaan. To humor her, the mistress, upon learning of the coming of a Jew peddler to the nearby village, told her servant that she might pay a visit there, and view the "Child of Abraham." The servant soon returned, and indignantly exclaimed: "Missus! dat's no Chillen o' Israel. Dat's de same ol' Jew peddler w'at sole me dem pisen, brass yearnings las' 'tracted meetin' time. Sich low down w'ite man as dat, he nevah b'long to no Lan' o' Cainyan."<sup>2</sup>

Both of these tales, at a deeper level, deal with a tension that affected far more than just the credulous and rural. Highly intelligent American Christians faced the same problem: how to reconcile the "mythical Jew," found in the Bible, recalled in church, and discussed in stereotypic fashion, with the "Jew next door" who seemed altogether different. Mythical Jews could, depending on the circumstances, personify either evil or virtue. Real Jews fell somewhere in between. Mythical Jews were uniformly alike. Real Jews displayed individuality, much as all people do. This tension between received wisdom and perceived wisdom, image and reality, posed little problem in colonial America; Jews were too few in number. But in the nineteenth century, America's Jewish population ballooned from 3,000 to almost 1 million and Jews spread throughout the country. As increasing numbers of Americans came in contact with Jews, reality began to impinge on previously unchallenged "truths." New questions emerged.

Americans coped with these new questions in various ways. While others have dealt with images of the Jew and the various, often contradictory myths—many dating back to antiquity—which shaped those images, here the focus more narrowly centers on the clash between myths and intruding realities. This clash assumed different forms at different times for different people, since both preconceptions and perceptions differed as circumstances did. Nevertheless, in structure if not in detail, the forms and responses were all variations on a common pattern.

The problem of the "mythical Jew" and the "Jew next door" was not confined to the nineteenth century, was not confined to America, and was not even unique to Jews; other stereotyped minority groups faced similar problems. If not unique, however,

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the problem in a nineteenth-century American Jewish context certainly displayed striking features, for it became intertwined with larger questions regarding the relationship of Jews past to Jews present. As such it not only affected the way Christians viewed Jews; ultimately, it also influenced the way Jews viewed themselves.

During the early days of the Republic, dissonance between the "mythical Jew" and the "Jew next door" frequently went unnoticed. Thomas Jefferson, for example, summarized his readings and reflections on the Jewish people as follows:

II. Jews. 1. Their system was Deism; that is, the belief in one only God. But their ideas of him and of his attributes were degrading and injurious. 2. Their Ethics were not only imperfect, but often irreconcilable with the sound dictates of reason and morality, as they respect intercourse with those around us; and repulsive and anti-social, as respecting other nations. They needed reformation, therefore, in an eminent degree.<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere, Jefferson attacked Jewish theology "which supposes the God of infinite justice to punish the sins of the fathers upon their children, unto the third and fourth generation," and quoted approvingly to John Adams the conclusions of William Enfield in his epitome of Johann Jakob Brucker's *Historia critica philosophiae*:

Ethics were so little studied among the Jews, that in their whole compilation called the Talmud, there is only one treatise on moral subjects. Their books of Morals chiefly consisted in a minute enumeration of duties. From the law of Moses were deduced 613 precepts, which were divided into two classes, affirmative and negative, 248 in the former, and 365 in the latter. It may serve to give the reader some idea of the low state of moral philosophy among the Jews in the Middle age, to add, that of the 248 affirmative precepts, only 3 were considered as obligatory upon women; and that in order to obtain salvation, it was judged sufficient to fulfill any one single law in the hour of death; the observance of the rest being deemed necessary, only to increase the felicity of the future life. What a wretched depravity of sentiment and manners must have prevailed before such corrupt maxims could have obtained credit! It is impossible to collect from these writings a consistent series of moral Doctrine.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, the same Jefferson saluted his friend Joseph Marx "with sentiments of perfect esteem and respect" and expressed to him

what Marx termed "liberal and enlightened views" on Jewish affairs. He also declared himself "happy in the restoration of the Jews, particularly to their social rights" and lamented in a letter to Mordecai Noah that "public opinion erects itself into an Inquisition, and exercises its office with as much fanaticism as fans the flame of an *Auto-de-fe*." Jefferson championed the rights of Jews both in 1776, in a debate over naturalization in Virginia, and in 1785 when they gained protection under the Virginia Act for Religious Toleration. He consistently appointed Jews to public office. He took pride, as expressed in a letter to Isaac Harby, that his university "set the example of ceasing to violate the rights of conscience by any injunctions on the different sects respecting their religion."<sup>5</sup>

Jefferson thus displayed remarkable liberality when dealing both with Jews and with matters directly affecting their welfare. By contrast, his attitude toward what he believed Jews stood for—their theology, morality, and doctrine—was negative and scornful. These two simultaneous and contrasting approaches toward matters Jewish appear repeatedly among deists and freethinkers, and in most cases, Jefferson's among them, they seem to have stood virtually unreconciled.<sup>6</sup> Though Jefferson must have known that his Jewish correspondents and appointees differed from the Jews described in his readings, the fact gives no evidence of having troubled him.<sup>7</sup>

Abolitionist reformer Lydia Maria Child displayed even greater inconsistency in her attitudes toward Jews. In some of her letters, she invoked the typical stereotypes of her day, writing about "half-civilized Jews," and "a people so benighted and barbarous as the Israelites." Her description of the "Jewish Synagogue in Crosby street" (1841) was somewhat more sympathetic ("there is something deeply impressive in this remnant of a scattered people"), but still mentioned Jews' "blindness and waywardness" and found "spiritual correspondence" between old clothes dealers in New York and poor Jews in Judea. In her *Progress of Religious Ideas Through Successive Ages*, Child laid heavier stress on "the immense debt of gratitude" owed the Jews and spoke of their treatment as the "darkest blot" in the history of Christendom. Not long afterward, though, she described in a letter how Jews "have humbugged the world and dragged the wheels of progress." Child knew two

myths about Jews: one positive, one negative. She invoked both, thereby unconsciously embodying the ambivalence of her age.<sup>8</sup>

In dealing with real Jews, however, Child ignored her preconceptions and treated them as objects of persecution, compared specifically in one case to "colored people." With obvious pride she related to Henry Ward Beecher's friend and associate, Theodore Tilton, how she stopped some boys who "were following a man with a long black beard, and calling after him 'I say, old Jew, got any ole clo's?'" Child reproved the boys, reminding them "that Moses and Solomon and St. Peter and St. Paul were Jews." On another occasion, she termed contemporary prejudice against the Jews "utterly absurd and wicked." However uncertain she was about the Jews in the past, she felt that the Jews around her deserved equal treatment.<sup>9</sup>

The case of James Russell Lowell offers a third and still more complex example of contradictory attitudes toward Jews. This youngest of the "Fireside poets" operated simultaneously with two versions of the "mythical Jew"—the noble ancient Hebrew and the medieval European scapegoat—and with two versions of the "Jew next door"—the talented, rich, and powerful Jew and the immigrant peddler. He eventually became obsessed with Jews and took delight "in the bizarre pastime of discovering that everyone of talent was in some way descended from Jewish ancestors. . . . He would play the game of 'detection' with a relish that approached monomania." Myth and reality blurred in Lowell's mind. Consequently, he both sought Jews out and avoided them, defended Jews and attacked them, admired Jews and feared them. His uncertainties about Jews paralleled his feelings about America in general and reflected, as Barbara Solomon has pointed out, larger social and intellectual concerns of his age—an age when perceived wisdom diverged from received wisdom on a whole range of issues, and when many old traditions broke down. If Lowell embodied the contradictions of his day, he neither recognized them nor solved them. Like Jefferson and Child, he held different views at different times about different Jews, and never reconciled them.<sup>10</sup>

Others in nineteenth-century America did recognize that their conceptions of the Jew differed from their perceptions. In 1816, for example, Philip Milledoler, later president of Rutgers, delivered

a presidential address before the newly formed American Society for Evangelizing the Jews. He talked of Jews' "laxness of morals," claimed that "their religious exercises are scarcely conducted with the form, much less with the spirit, of devotion," lamented that "the female character among them holds a station far inferior to that which it was intended to occupy by the God of nature and of providence," and so on in a like vein. Then he suddenly put in a disclaimer: "In this description of the Jews it will be remembered that we are speaking in general terms. We do not by any means intend to say, that all which is here stated will apply to every individual and family among them: —we still hope better things of some of them, and especially of that part of the nation which is resident in this country."<sup>11</sup>

Milledoler was not alone in realizing that the Jews "in this country" did not quite comport with his analysis. During the 1819 debate over the Maryland Jew Bill ("to extend to the sect of people professing the Jewish religion, the same rights and privileges that are enjoyed by Christians"), Judge Henry M. Breckenridge recognized the same thing. He asked opposition speakers directly "whether the American Jew is distinguished by those characteristics" which they were ascribing to Jews generally. No answer is recorded.<sup>12</sup>

As the nineteenth century progressed, an increasing number of Americans made the vexing discovery that Jews formed too variegated a congregation to accord with any single stereotype. With the rise of Jewish immigration, it became clear not only that mythical Jews and real Jews diverged, but that in America not even all real Jews could be pigeonholed together. Writing in 1860, novelist Joseph Holt Ingraham still repeated the old refrain that "the Jew of Chatham Street, in this city, is, in every lineament, the Jew of Jerusalem today, and of the Jews of the days of Jesus." Even for him, however, that was only an article of faith. As a practical matter he had to concede that "in what this peculiarity consists, it is difficult to determine precisely. . . ."<sup>13</sup> If it was difficult to draw connections between the peddlers of Chatham Street and their ancient forebears, how much more so in the case of New York's wealthy Jews or the growing number of assimilated American Jews? The more Americans saw of Jews the less they understood them.

Tensions between the "mythical Jew" and the "Jew next door," or between received wisdom and perceived wisdom, resulted in what sociologists would later call cognitive dissonance, the realization that two items of knowledge do not fit together. "Dissonance produces discomfort," Leon Festinger wisely observed, "and correspondingly there will arise pressures to reduce or eliminate the dissonance."<sup>14</sup> In the case of Jews, dissonance was relieved in four ways: (1) suppression, (2) rationalization, (3) elimination, and (4) reconceptualization. Examples of all four may be found throughout the nineteenth century, seemingly from people in all walks of life. As might be expected, evidence suggests that most people sought easy ways to eliminate dissonance; *reconceptualization*, a difficult intellectual feat, took place infrequently. Still, by the end of the nineteenth century, the groundwork had been laid for the great intellectual revolution which raised Jews from a lowly religious status—allied in the popular mind with infidels and deists—into a high one, membership in one of America's "three great faiths." General acceptance of the "Protestant-Catholic-Jew" model, of course, came only in the twentieth century.

*Suppression* meant ignoring feelings of dissonance and living with the resulting inconsistency.<sup>15</sup> As we have seen, Jefferson, Child, and Lowell did this; indeed, in their cases dissonance may never have reached consciousness. Philip Milledoler employed suppression explicitly. While ideally conscious and unconscious modes of suppression should be distinguished from one another, as a practical matter this is usually impossible. All that can be said with certainty is that throughout nineteenth-century America, much of the ambivalence found in perceptions of the Jew stemmed from one or another form of unresolved inconsistency. Positive and negative images stood side by side, each expressed on different occasions depending on the situation. The *New York Herald* could sometimes revile Jews as haters of Christianity, usurers, and second-hand clothes dealers who "deserve to be hung high as Haman for their charlatanism, pretension and folly," and yet on other occasions find them charitable and pious, "excellent men, excellent fathers, excellent husbands, excellent citizens."<sup>16</sup> The *Boston Sunday Gazette* summed up similar ambivalence in one succinct sentence: "It is strange that a nation that boasts so many good traits should be so obnoxious."<sup>17</sup>

*Rationalization* involved moving out beyond conscious or unconscious inattention to the anomaly of Jews who neither fit existing stereotypes nor resembled one another in order to search for solutions. The most obvious and popular of these simply dismissed the “non-conforming Jew” as “an exception to the rule.” Thus William D. Howells wrote in his diary, “Dr. Kraus, Jew, but very nice.”<sup>18</sup> Both Judge Henry Hilton and financier Austin Corbin admitted that there were “nice” and “well-behaved” people among the Jews, but since these were only exceptions, they did not allow them to affect their thinking. Hilton still excluded Jews as a class from the Grand Union Hotel and Corbin followed suit, refusing to admit them to his resort on Coney Island.<sup>19</sup> Even so grossly anti-Semitic a tract as *Tit for Tat* (1895), which claimed as fact that “the Jew is built expressly for that kind of cold-blooded heartless commerce in which sentiments take no part whatever” and then charged Jews with trying to “own the earth and reduce its occupants to starvation and beggary,” still admitted that “there are honorable exceptions”—although they were allegedly few in number.<sup>20</sup> More commonly, as Nina Morais noted in 1881, the exceptional Jew found acceptance but did “not materially aid to negative [*sic*] the impression created by their less favored brethren.” “You are a different kind of Jew,” such a one was told, yet those who offered the praise continued to believe that to know one Jew was to know them all.<sup>21</sup>

Facts that do not comport with theoretical expectations do not by themselves overturn established paradigms. As Thomas Kuhn demonstrated in another connection, they may “be recognized as counterinstances and still be set aside for later work.” We have seen that many nineteenth-century Americans handled seemingly anomalous Jews precisely this way. They noted their exceptional status, mentally filed it away, and yet kept established stereotypes intact. In other cases, “numerous articulations and *ad hoc* modifications” of stereotypes took place in order to rationalize apparent inconsistencies.<sup>22</sup> Some exceptional Jews, among them Mordecai Noah, Judah Touro, and later Simon Wolf, were termed “good Christians,” the apparent implication being that they diverged from Jewish traits so much that they must not be completely Jewish. While the word “Christian” used in this fashion often meant no more than moral or ethical, as in the phrase “a Christian thing to do,” literary evidence demonstrates that many genuinely

viewed Jewish "good Christians" as Jews in name only, or "Christians in Jews' clothing." At least in novels, such characters frequently "saw the light" and converted.<sup>23</sup>

In "Judith Bensaddi, a Tale Founded in Fact," the young man, William Garame, describes Judith, the Jewish woman he loves, as "the most beautiful gem of humanity," a woman quite different from most members of the "accursed race": "In spirit and feeling she is a far better Christian than nine-tenths of those who make the loudest professions. She loves the rules and spirit of the Christian religion, and I have no doubt that she only needs to be placed in Christian society, and under Christian influence, to be soon persuaded to believe fully in Jesus of Nazareth." Although Garame is prevented from marrying her, Judith confirms his prediction less than a year later by converting.<sup>24</sup>

While benevolent Jewish males in American literature converted less often, possibly because nineteenth-century Americans classified religion as part of "women's sphere," "eminent men among the Israelites" regularly appear in anti-Semitic writings as Aryans or Christians in Jewish disguise, and hence no danger to prevailing stereotypes. Telemachus T. Timayenis's *The Original Mr. Jacobs*, a particularly notorious tract, sums up this standard apologia on page one of its opening chapter:

I admit that there have been eminent men among the Jews, as, for instance, their renowned lawgiver and leader in ancient times, Moses. But a careful examination of this anomaly (it is not an exception) will show that the great men among the Jews have drunk copious draughts of Aryan civilization, and have quickly either renounced Judaism or adopted a nominal, sometimes a real, Christianity. Thus their famous men—Heinrich Heine, Ludwig Borne, Edward Gans, Mose Mendelssohn, Disraeli, and Johann Neander—cannot be fairly called Jews; for either they became rank infidels, or they carefully tried to conceal their origin by a change of name, a practice followed to the present day.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, Timayenis also displays the obverse of this kind of rationalization, what might be termed "the Jew in Christian's clothing." He calls non-Jews who conform to his Jewish stereotype "Jews," evidence to the contrary notwithstanding: "Has ever a man of observation asked himself the question: 'Is there any Jewish blood in the veins of John D. Rockefeller?' We do not hesitate to affirm from an intimate knowledge of the man, that if Rockefeller is not actually a Jew, he has many Jewish traits.

. . . [T]he spirit of the Standard Oil Company is simply the spirit of the monopoly, of cruelty, of annihilation of all competitors, a spirit in fact such as manifests itself in the scandalous enterprises of the Jews."<sup>26</sup> Both the use of the name Shylock in connection with non-Jews, and the use of the word Jew in a non-Jewish context, meaning to bargain or cheat, imply the same sort of rationalization. Many apparently found it hard to admit that some non-Jews could exhibit supposedly "Jewish traits." Rather than divorcing behavioral traits from religious ones and abandoning stereotypes, they found it easier to adhere to existing stereotypes by making such "Jew-like" Christians into "Jews," just as they made "good Christian" Jews into "Christians."

While some Americans rationalized away dissonance by dismissing "uncharacteristic" Jews as "exceptions," and others did the same by ascribing to them "inner Christianity," still others sought to achieve harmony, consciously or unconsciously, by *elimination*. They sought to rid themselves of the problem by transforming reality to conform to expectations. Such attempts, similar to what scientists do when they destroy evidence that fails to fit in with their theories, led inevitably to what Jews saw as pernicious forms of anti-Semitism.

Three basic strategies for elimination emerged. The first involved doing in fact what others did in their literary imaginations: converting the Jew to Christianity. Conversionists did not restrict themselves to missionary work aimed at those whom they considered "uncharacteristic of the race," for they viewed any Jewish conversion to Christianity as a victory, a step toward solving the overall "Jewish problem." They need not even have been fully conscious of the degree to which they were reconciling what to them was the anomaly of the modern Jew. Some formal and many informal conversionist efforts did come to center on "exceptional Jews"; nevertheless, they were the most prized converts. Rabbi Bernhard Felsenthal, an opponent of all Christian missionary efforts, found this fact particularly disdainful:

You have every day occasion to meet members of the Jewish race. You know, perhaps, that there are Jews who enjoy excellent, sound positions, that some have become famous for their eminent learning, for their contribution to the treasures of science and art, for their literary attainments, for their acts of benevolence, for their deeds of grand phi-

lanthropy. Now approach such a Jew and say to him, "Oh, my poor friend, how I pity you! You are in such a forlorn condition. . . ." Speak in such a manner to your Jewish neighbor, and he will hardly understand you. He will sarcastically smile at you, thinking, perhaps, that there is a certain class of people who stick with wonderful tenacity to their notions, be they as unfounded as possible, and if he answers you he will say, "My friend, you are entirely mistaken."<sup>27</sup>

Jews insisted that they could be thoroughly modern and fully moral without converting, traditional Christian wisdom to the contrary notwithstanding. They urged Christians to change their stereotypes and leave the Jews alone.

The second strategy designed to harmonize received and perceived wisdom about Jews proceeded from an opposite tack: it sought to eliminate "uncharacteristic Jews" by treating them as inferior citizens and by degrading them until they eventually adhered to the expected stereotype simply because they had no other choice. This kind of self-fulfilling prophecy had commonly plagued Jews in the Middle Ages, where charters, for reasons as much social, political, and economic as religious, restricted Jews to precisely that accursed status supposedly foretold from on high. While nothing of similar magnitude occurred in America, moves in that direction, likewise undertaken for a variety of reasons—social, political, economic, and religious—were also not totally absent. Jews remained without full rights in New Hampshire until 1877, and throughout the nineteenth century they periodically had to battle against proposed Christian amendments to the Constitution aimed at rendering them second-class citizens. They also faced a host of discriminatory policies designed to restrict their educational and economic progress.<sup>28</sup>

The overall failure of all such efforts should not obscure their intended result: to put Jews in their place. Those who protested Jewish religious equality, ascribing to them a secondary status in Christian America, and those who thought as Austin Corbin did that Jews deserved "no place in first-class society" and should, therefore, be excluded, really were charging that Jews occupied a social position different from the one they supposedly "deserved." To resolve the contradiction, they sought to mold reality to fit their preconceived notions. They hoped that by treating Jews as second-class citizens, Jews would reassume their "rightful place,"

and so “proper” harmony, a harmony more closely comporting with their own social and economic expectations, would be restored. It wasn’t.<sup>29</sup>

A final means of eliminating the problem posed by Jews was elimination of the Jews altogether; that way there would not be any “Jew next door,” nor any dissonance either. Although such a suggestion received no serious consideration or support, in 1888 it did emerge in print:

“The Jew must go!” . . . Let them go with all their ill-gotten gain, and let us forget that it was ill gotten—but let them go. . . . We want no parasites among us; we will not have them; our social health demands that we purge ourselves of them. The Jew must go. Let the nation assert itself to this effect, not passionately, not bitterly, not vindictively; but from Maine to Louisiana, from New York to the Golden Horn, let the American people rise as one man, and assert in deep tones of calm, unwavering resolve, “We want no parasitic race among us: THE JEW MUST GO!”<sup>30</sup>

There remained another means of confronting the challenge that the “Jew next door” posed to nineteenth-century Americans and that was through *reconceptualization*. Where elimination involved forcing the “Jew next door” to conform to the “mythical Jew” or disappear, reconceptualization did the opposite. Old wisdom was pushed out; a new paradigm, one which took account of the realities of the day, replaced it. All evidence suggests that most people find it difficult to change long-standing cherished beliefs, regardless of the weight of the evidence. That Oliver Wendell Holmes and Mark Twain did so is, therefore, all the more remarkable.

Holmes admitted that he grew up with “the traditional idea” that Jews “were a race lying under a curse for their obstinacy in refusing the gospel.” “The principal use of the Jews,” he believed, “seemed to be to lend money, and to fulfill the predictions of the old prophets of their race.” Later, as he came into contact with Jews, Holmes changed his mind. As he recounted in his poem, “At the Pantomime,” he moved from “silent oaths” against “the race that slew its Lord” to a recognition that Christianity emerged from Judaism and that Jews remained an extraordinary people. More important, he adopted a pluralistic view of religion—one more commonly found in the twentieth century—urging Christians

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"to find a meaning in beliefs which are different from their own." Distancing himself from Christian triumphalism, he insisted that "in the midst of all triumphs of Christianity, it is well that the stately synagogue should lift its walls by the side of the aspiring cathedral, a perpetual reminder that there are many mansions in the Father's earthly house as well as in the heavenly one; that civilized humanity, longer in time and broader in space than any historical form of belief, is mightier than any one institution or organization it includes."<sup>31</sup>

Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) underwent a similar transformation of views. In his autobiography he admitted that as a schoolboy he thought of Jews only in biblical terms: "They carried me back to Egypt, and in imagination I moved among the Pharaohs and all the shadowy celebrities of that remote age." His first Jewish schoolmates were persecuted by "the boys"—presumably including Sam Clemens himself—chased and stoned and taunted with cries of "Shall we crucify them?" It was only later, beginning in 1860, that his ideas began to change as he learned more about Jews and met a river pilot whose life had been saved by one. In subsequent years he came into contact with a great many other Jews, and in 1899, he published his famous essay entitled "Concerning the Jews." The essay, though overgeneralized and simplistic, nevertheless displayed what for its time was remarkable praise for Jewish characteristics and virtues while at the same time striving for balance. Some unfortunate stereotypes remained, most notably a comment on the Jew's alleged "unpatriotic disinclination to stand by the flag as a soldier," a charge corrected in a later postscript. What is really noteworthy about "Concerning the Jews," however, is its effort to make judgments based upon reliable facts rather than upon received myths. "Neither Jew nor Christian will approve of it," Clemens predicted when he wrote his essay, "but people who are neither Jews *nor* Christians will, for they are in a condition to know the truth when they see it." It is precisely this quest for verifiable truth that made the process of reconceptualization possible.<sup>32</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, the process of reconceptualization had also proceeded on other levels. Jews had won election to public office and held high appointive positions in government. The first pulpit exchanges between rabbis and ministers had taken place. Rabbis had delivered prayers before Congress

and state legislatures. Liberal Jewish and Christian leaders had sat side by side at the meetings of the Free Religious Association. Jews had taken an active role in religious and women's activities connected with the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition.<sup>33</sup> Though isolated incidents, together these suggest that, however slowly, American Jews were winning acceptance on their own merit, myths notwithstanding. The process proceeded at a slow pace, cannot be said to have found widespread acceptance until after World War II,<sup>34</sup> and is not fully realized today. Nonetheless, pluralism—an attitude toward Jews quite different from that found earlier in the century—had at least begun to take hold, even as other means of confronting the “Jew next door” continued.

Although the problem of the “mythical Jew” and the “Jew next door” was seemingly a non-Jewish matter, involving Christian beliefs and perceptions, American Jews who interacted with their non-Jewish neighbors could hardly ignore it. After all, the problem concerned them; they *were* the Jews next door. They had to face embarrassing comments from neighbors who never had met Jews. They had to confront the challenge of wanting to become like everybody else while retaining Jewish identity intact. They had to grapple with rising social discrimination in many walks of life. By becoming involved in shaping their own image, American Jews sought to meet all of these challenges at once, demonstrating Judaism's complete compatibility with American life.

Not all Jews, of course, took part in this effort. Those who did, however, considered reconceptualization and elimination the best means of affecting negative Christian views. They presumably reasoned that if Christians would change their negative stereotypes at the same time as Jews showed how little they now resembled those stereotypes, then the so-called Jewish problem would be solved. For obvious reasons, Jews worried not at all about any positive preconceptions that Christians held regarding Jews; if anything, they sought to reinforce them.

A major thrust of the reconceptualization effort involved reinterpreting Jewish history so as to make the ancient Jew appear more respectable. This seemingly aimed both at easing the reconciliation of past Jews with present ones and at demonstrating that Christianity's mythical Jew lacked any historical basis whatsoever. In reinterpreting the biblical period, American Jews at first

stressed Enlightenment concerns, endeavoring to prove that Judaism was far more reasonable and ethical than critics believed. Isaac Mayer Wise's *History of the Israelitish Nation*, for example, painted a Moses who might have been a *philosophe*. "Moses did not depart one step from the broad field of observation," Wise wrote. "He reasoned from facts; he started from observations on nature and history." "Moses gave a sanctity to virtue, to industry and labor, and awakened his people to the performance of human duties as men and citizens." While Moses did recommend "a careful study of the law . . . the study of the law is not the end and aim of it." Instead, "Divine service consists in obeying the laws, in doing what is good, noble and useful, and reforming the heart to desire the same; and shunning what is bad, ignoble or hurtful, and educating the heart to despise the mean, the bad, and ignoble desire." In case anyone missed the modern parallel, Wise made it explicit: "Liberty, justice and fraternity were his watch words, now the nations re-echo them; mental, moral and physical strength constitute the proper man, to which superstition, immorality, opulence and luxury are the greatest enemies. . . . This is the doctrine of Moses, which the world now begins to understand."<sup>35</sup>

Later in the nineteenth century, American Jews, basing themselves on ideas worked out in Germany, shifted the tone of their revisionism to confront charges leveled by higher biblical criticism. Striving to negate the stereotyped picture of an ancient Jew, steeped in legalism if not paganism and offering sacrifices to an angry Lord, they stressed Prophetic Judaism which, by no coincidence, displayed lofty universalistic values thoroughly consonant with contemporary Social Gospel ideals. "Not the law . . . but the prophetic principles constitute the essence of Judaism," Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch declared, "for the Law operates largely, especially in its priestly conceits, with institutions based upon ante-Jewish and often anti-Jewish conceits, while the Prophetic vision and ardor is instinct with a new view and outlook, interpreted as a proclamation of those hopes and assurances, of those maxims and principles upon which the fate of humanity, as humanity, depends."<sup>36</sup> Prophetic Judaism thus permitted reconciliation between Israel past and Israel present. It offered all-embracing universalism in place of tribalism. It gave Jews a biblical heritage which they could affirm with pride, even when attacked.

A similar effort underlay revisionist accounts of Christianity's birth. The mythical Jew, described in countless Christian works, belonged to a degenerate race, unremittingly orthodox in its devotion to legal minutiae, that rejected and persecuted the savior of mankind, and then finally crucified him screaming "his blood be upon us and upon our children." Jews, particularly in the late nineteenth century, sought to effect a change in this myth. They apparently hoped that a reconceptualization of their part in Christianity's past would create a more favorable climate for harmonious Jewish-Christian relations in the present.

The revisionist view that Jews put forward, largely based on Jewish and Christian scholarship in Germany, stressed that Jesus was born a Jew and remained one throughout his life. He was, Isaac Mayer Wise insisted in 1888, "an enthusiastic and thoroughly Jewish patriot, who fully understood the questions of his age and the problems of his people, and felt the invincible desire to solve them." Wise had by then discarded his earlier doubts as to whether Jesus existed and had determined that Christianity's founder was actually a "Pharisean doctor of the Hillel School."<sup>37</sup> Moritz Loth, Wise's disciple and the first president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, went further, calling Jesus "the greatest king that emanated from the loins of Jacob."<sup>38</sup>

Having reclaimed Jesus, Jewish revisionists proceeded to explain away the crucifixion, usually blaming it on the Romans, and to insist that Christianity, far from being a sharp break from Judaism, was merely what Mordecai Noah had earlier called "our laws, our principles, our doctrines . . . beneficially spread throughout the world under another name." The relationship of Judaism to Christianity was, to Rabbi Solomon Schindler, the relationship of a mother to her daughter: "The daughter soon severed all connections with her mother. She went her own way; for she had a mission of her own to fulfil; a mission which neither Judaism nor Hellenism could have fulfilled with success: she had to civilize a world of barbarians."<sup>39</sup> It followed from the writings of Schindler and others that Jews and Christians had once been united and could be reunited; that Christian beliefs about first-century Judaism were wrong, as witnessed by the fact that Jesus was a Jew; and that the "Jew next door" was the heir of those who provided the spiritual foundation upon which Christianity was built. As with Prophetic Judaism, so too with first-century Judaism, revi-

sionism had refashioned the past to meet what it saw as contemporary needs.

While revisionism stressed the continuity of Jewish history, and sought to improve the image of Jews in earlier centuries in order to help Jews in the nineteenth century, elimination did the opposite. It stressed the discontinuity of Jewish history and sought to distinguish modern Jews from their predecessors by casting off "excrescences." Reform Jewish leaders made their break with the past explicit. The Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, which Isaac Mayer Wise properly termed a "Declaration of Independence," rejected "all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization" and eliminated many traditional laws and ceremonies as "altogether foreign to our present mental and spiritual state." Ten years later, the Central Conference of American Rabbis officially declared "that our relations in all religious matters are in no way authoritatively and finally determined by any portion of our Post-Biblical and Patristic literature."<sup>40</sup>

Most other efforts to transform American Jews, including Reform Jewish ones, more prudently sought legitimation in history. Their supporters, therefore, claimed either to be revitalizing forgotten relics of bygone days or to be conforming to natural historical processes. In deeds, if not in words, they too sought to effect changes that would render the modern Jew quite distinct from his pre-modern stereotypical counterpart. Some worked to direct Jews into "productive" professions, particularly agriculture, in order to counteract the image of the Jews as merchants and middlemen. Others, especially late in the century, took up Zionism, a different attempt to change the Jewish image and transform Jewish life.<sup>41</sup> Still others, perhaps those with more modest ambitions, thought it sufficient to change the Jewish name. They hoped that modern "Yahvists," "Hebrews," or "Israelites" could be distinguished from pre-modern "Jews," and that stereotypes connected with the latter would not be applied to the former.<sup>42</sup> The means differed, but the desired end remained the same: the modern Jew sought to make himself as different from the mythical one as possible.

In counteracting Christian myths, reconceptualization and elimination thus manifestly worked at cross purposes: the one aimed at maintaining ties to the past while the other sought to sever them. At the same time, the two strategies also worked

nicely in tandem. Reconceptualization aimed at improving the Christian's image of the historical Jew, while elimination aimed at improving that of the contemporary one. The latter consistency needs no explanation. Jews sought the best possible image of themselves, past and present, much as any minority group does. The inconsistency, however, is much more revealing. Jews' simultaneous desires to both identify and break with their past express a basic tension in American Jewish life: the tension between tradition and change. Ambivalence about the past reflects ambivalence about the past's religious legacy, ambivalence about the Old World heritage, and ambivalence about assimilation. Many nineteenth-century American Jews displayed conflicting attitudes in all three cases.<sup>43</sup>

And so a final paradox: without realizing it, Christians and Jews in nineteenth-century America faced a common problem. Both had trouble reconciling traditions received from the past with the changed Jewish situation that they perceived in the present. The nature of the received myth differed in the two cases as did the means used to overcome dissonance, but the problem itself—the relationship of the Jewish past to the Jewish present—was never truly resolved, not in the nineteenth century and not today.

### Notes

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1. Rudolf Glanz, *The Jew in the Old American Folklore* (New York, 1961), pp. 134–35.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

3. Jefferson to Benjamin Rush (Apr. 21, 1803) in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb (Washington, D.C., 1904), 10: 382. Robert M. Healey's "Jefferson, Judaism, and the Jews: Divided We Stand, United We Fall!" *American Jewish History* 73 (June 1984): 359–74 appeared after this essay was in proofs.

4. Jefferson to Ezra Stiles (June 25, 1819) in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Albert Ellery Gergh (Washington, D.C., 1904), 15: 203; Jefferson to John Adams (Oct. 12, 1813) in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester J. Capon (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1959), 2: 383.

5. Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States, 1791–1840: A Documentary History* (New York, 1963), pp. 12, 13, 605, and passim;

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Max J. Kohler, "Unpublished Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Some American Jews," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* (hereafter cited as *PAJHS*) 20 (1911): 11-30; Lee M. Friedman, *Jewish Pioneers and Patriots* (Philadelphia, 1942), pp. 31-42, 377-79; Morris U. Schappes, *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States 1654-1875* (New York, 1971), pp. 157, 605, and *passim*.

6. Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Freethinker, The Jews, and The Missionaries: George Houston and the Mystery of Israel Vindicated," *AJS Review* 5 (1980): 101-14, esp. n. 33.

7. In contrast with Jefferson's attitudes toward blacks, see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770-1823* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975), pp. 166-84; John C. Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* (New York, 1977). A rigorous comparative study of attitudes toward Jews and blacks in America would be valuable.

8. Patricia G. Holland and Milton Meltzer, eds., *Guide to the Collected Correspondence of Lydia Maria Child, 1817-1880* (New York, 1980), s.v. "Jews," esp. letters to Louisa Gilman Loring (Sept. 4, 1846) and Ellis Gray Loring (Mar. 5, 1854); Lydia Maria Child, *Letters From New York* (New York, 1846), pp. 37-47, and *The Progress of Religious Ideas Through Successive Ages* (New York, 1855); Louise Abbie Mayo, "The Ambivalent Image: The Perception of the Jew in Nineteenth Century America" (unpublished Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1977), p. 54.

9. Child to Mrs. S. B. Shaw (1859), *Letters of Lydia Maria Child* (Boston, 1882), p. 141; Child to Theodore Tilton (Apr. 10, 1862); Child to Robert Purvis (Aug. 14, 1868) in *Collected Correspondence*, ed. Holland and Meltzer (microfiche).

10. Martin Duberman, *James Russell Lowell* (Boston, 1966), pp. 307-10; Barbara M. Solomon, *Ancestors and Immigrants: A Changing New England Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), pp. 17-20; Louis Harap, *The Image of the Jew in American Literature from Early Republic to Mass Immigration* (Philadelphia, 1974), pp. 96-99; Edmund Wilson, *A Piece of My Mind: Reflections at Sixty* (New York, 1958), pp. 85-107.

11. *Religious Intelligencer* 1 (1816): 535-37.

12. E. Milton Altfeld, *The Jews Struggle for Religious and Civil Liberty in Maryland* (Baltimore, 1924), pp. 77, 119; Edward Eitches, "Maryland's Jew Bill," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 60 (Mar. 1971): 258-79.

13. Joseph Holt Ingraham, *The Sunny South* (Philadelphia, 1860) as quoted in Harap, *Image of the Jew*, p. 58. For somewhat different perspectives on the Jewish image, see Harold Fisch, *The Dual Image* (New York, 1971) and Michael D. Dobkowski, *The Tarnished Dream: The Basis of an American Anti-Semitism* (Westport, Conn., 1979); the latter cites earlier literature on the subject.

14. Leon Festinger, *When Prophecy Fails* (New York, 1956), p. 26, and *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, Calif., 1965); for the use of this theory in another historical context, see Henry Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1978), esp. pp. xvi, xvii.

15. "Social scientists tend to underestimate the ease with which people can live with cognitive dissonance. . . . People professionally concerned with ideas and with the logic of social relationships may elevate the general significance

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of logic and consistency in human affairs." Neil J. Smelser, *Sociology: An Introduction* (New York, 1973), p. 524.

16. *New York Herald* (Nov. 2, 13, 1837); Jonathan D. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* (New York, 1981), pp. 119-20.

17. Quoted in John Higham, *Send These to Me: Jews and Other Immigrants in Urban America* (New York, 1975), p. 124.

18. William D. Howells, *Selected Letters*, ed. Thomas Wortham (Boston, 1981), 4: 151.

19. *Coney Island and the Jews* (New York, 1879), pp. 17, 28.

20. "Prof. Pal. Sylvanus," *Tit for Tat: Satirical Universal History* (Chicago, 1895), pp. 30, 57, 18.

21. Nina Morais, "Jewish Ostracism in America," *North American Review* 133 (1881): 273. For a parallel case, see Gary B. Mills, "Miscegenation and the Free Negro in Antebellum 'Anglo' Alabama: A Re-examination of Southern Race Relations," *Journal of American History* 68 (June 1981): 32. See also Maxwell Geismar, ed., *Unfinished Business: James N. Rosenberg Papers* (New York, 1967), pp. 267-68.

22. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1970), pp. 82, 78. See also David A. Hollinger, "T. S. Kuhn's Theory of Science and Its Implications for History," *American Historical Review* 78 (1973): 370-93.

23. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, p. 133; Leon Huhner, *The Life of Judah Touro* (Philadelphia, 1946), p. 109; *Selected Addresses and Papers of Simon Wolf* (Cincinnati, 1926), p. 24; David A. Brener, "Lancaster's First Jewish Community, 1715-1804, The Era of Joseph Simon," *Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society* 80 (1976): 276; Sarna, "The Freethinker, the Jews and the Missionaries," 107.

24. Harap, *Image of the Jew in American Literature*, pp. 72-76; Curtis Carroll Davis, "Judith Bensaddi and the Reverend Doctor Henry Ruffner," *PAJHS* 39 (1949): 115-42. Henry Ruffner, *Judith Bensaddi: A Tale* has recently been reprinted with an introduction by J. Michael Pemberton as part of the Library of Southern Civilization (Baton Rouge, La., 1984). For other examples, see Mayo, "The Ambivalent Image," pp. 93-104.

25. [Telemachus T. Timayenis], *The Original Mr. Jacobs* (New York, 1888), p. 1; Leonard A. Greenberg and Harold J. Jonas, "An American Anti-Semite in the Nineteenth Century," in *Essays on Jewish Life and Thought Presented in Honor of Salo W. Baron*, ed. J. L. Blau (New York, 1959), pp. 265-83. For a later and more extreme form of this type of rationalization, see William H. Montgomery, *Jesus Was Not A Jew* (New York, 1935), and Jacob E. Conner, *Christ Was Not A Jew* (n.p., 1936).

26. [Timayenis], *The Original Mr. Jacobs*, pp. 283-85; for an earlier example, see Eitches, "Maryland's Jew Bill," p. 275.

27. Bernhard Felsenthal, *The Wandering Jew* (Chicago, 1872), p. 4; see other literature cited in Jonathan D. Sarna, "The American Jewish Response to Nineteenth Century Christian Missions," *Journal of American History* 68 (June 1981): 35-51.

28. Naomi W. Cohen, "Pioneers of American Jewish Defense," *American Jewish Archives* 29 (Nov. 1977): 116-50; Cohen, "Antisemitism in the Gilded

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Age: The Jewish View," *Jewish Social Studies* 41 (1979): 187-210; Allan Tarshish, "Jew and Christian in a New Society: Some Aspects of Jewish-Christian Relationships in the United States, 1848-1881," in *A Bicentennial Festschrift for Jacob Rader Marcus*, ed. Bertram W. Korn (Waltham, Mass., 1976), pp. 565-83; all survey anti-Semitism during this period citing earlier sources.

29. *Coney Island and the Jews*, pp. 21-22; see [Telemachus T. Timayenis], *The American Jew: An Exposé of his Career* (New York, 1888), esp. pp. 21, 218-19; Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America* (New York, 1971); F. M. Szasz, "Protestantism and the Search for Stability: Liberal and Conservative Quests for a Christian America, 1875-1925," in *Building the Organizational Society*, ed. Jerry Israel (New York, 1972), pp. 88-102.

30. [Timayenis], *The American Jew: An Exposé of his Career*, pp. 218-19.

31. Philip Cowen, *Prejudice Against the Jew* (New York, 1928), pp. 15-23; Harap, *The Image of the Jew in American Literature*, pp. 87-90.

32. Samuel Clemens, "Concerning the Jews," in *The Complete Essays of Mark Twain*, ed. Charles Neider (Garden City, N.Y., 1963), pp. xxii, 235-50; Harap, *The Image of the Jew in American Literature*, pp. 349-57. For another example of reconceptualization, see Paul Engle, "Those Damn Jews," *American Heritage* 30 (1978): 72-79.

33. Allan Tarshish, "Jew and Christian in a New Society: Some Aspects of Jewish-Christian Relationships in the United States, 1848-1881," pp. 565-87; Bertram W. Korn, "The First Jewish Prayer in Congress," in *Eventful Years and Experiences* (Cincinnati, 1954), pp. 98-124; Benny Kraut, "Francis E. Abbot: Perceptions of a Nineteenth Century Religious Radical on Jews and Judaism," in *Studies in the American Jewish Experience*, ed. Jacob R. Marcus and Abraham J. Peck (Cincinnati, 1981), 1:90-113; Rebecca T. Alpert, "Jewish Participation at the World Parliament of Religions, 1893," in *Jewish Civilization*, ed. Ronald A. Brauner (Philadelphia, 1979), pp. 111-21; Ellen Sue Levi Elwell, "The Founding and Early Programs of the National Council of Jewish Women: Study and Practice as Jewish Women's Religious Expression," (unpublished Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1982), pp. 49-82.

34. *American Jewish Year Book* 42 (1941): 206; Koppel Pinson, "Antisemitism in the Post War World," in *Essays on Antisemitism*, ed. Koppel Pinson (New York, 1946), pp. 3-16; Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (Garden City, N.Y., 1960).

35. Isaac M. Wise, *History of the Israelitish Nation* (Albany, N.Y., 1854), pp. 161-68, 189-90; for other examples see Sarna, "American Jewish Response to Christian Missions," p. 40.

36. Quoted in W. Gunther Plaut, *The Growth of Reform Judaism* (New York, 1965), p. 228; see also D. R. Schwartz, "History and Historiography: 'A Kingdom of Priests' As a Pharisaic Slogan," *Zion* 45 (1980): 96-117 with the subsequent exchange with Michael Meyer in *Zion* 46 (1981): 57-60; Jacob B. Agus, *Jewish Identity in an Age of Ideologies* (New York, 1978), pp. 282-333; Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, Wash., 1982), p. 86.

37. Quoted in James G. Heller, *Isaac M. Wise: His Life, Work and Thought* (New York, 1965), p. 645; see Samuel Sandmel, "Isaac Mayer Wise's 'Jesus Himself,'" in *Essays in American Jewish History* (Cincinnati, 1958), pp. 325-

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58; Walter Jacob, *Christianity Through Jewish Eyes* (Cincinnati, 1974), pp. 67-82; Benny Kraut, "Judaism Triumphant: Isaac Mayer Wise on Unitarianism and Liberal Christianity," *AJS Review* 7-8 (1982-83): 179-230.

38. Moritz Loth, *Pearls From the Bible* (Cincinnati, 1891), p. 17.

39. Mordecai M. Noah, *Address Delivered at the Hebrew Synagogue in Crosby-Street, New York, on Thanksgiving Day to Aid in the Erection of the Temple at Jerusalem* (Jamaica, N.Y., 1849), p. 11; Solomon Schindler, *Messianic Expectations and Modern Judaism* (Boston, 1886), p. 56; for other examples see Plaut, *Growth of Reform Judaism*, pp. 178-90 and sources cited in n. 37.

40. Plaut, *Growth of Reform Judaism*, p. 34; see also Sefton D. Tenkin, *The New World of Reform* (Bridgeport, Conn., 1974); *CCAR Yearbook* 5 (1895), p. 63; Marc Lee Raphael, "Rabbi Jacob Voorsanger of San Francisco on Jews and Judaism: The Implications of the Pittsburgh Platform," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 63 (Dec. 1973): 185-203.

41. See Uri D. Herscher, *Jewish Agricultural Utopias in America, 1880-1910* (Detroit, 1981), and Melvin I. Urofsky, *American Zionism from Herzl to the Holocaust* (Garden City, N.Y., 1976) which cite earlier literature.

42. This subject merits a study of its own. See, meanwhile, Adolph Moses, *Yahvism and Other Discourses* (Louisville, Ky., 1903), pp. 1-10; Heller, *Isaac M. Wise*, pp. 519-21; Harap, *Image of the Jew in American Literature*, pp. 58, 345; Abraham S. Schomer, *The Primary Cause of Antisemitism* (New York, 1909), esp. pp. 76-77; and H. L. Mencken, *The American Language* (New York, 1937), pp. 297-300; Harold R. Isaacs, *Idols of the Tribe* (New York, 1975), pp. 71-92.

43. Fisch, *The Dual Image*, pp. 77-79.