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The Gentile Who Mistook Himself for a Jew

> Every man is a Jew though he may not know it.[1]
>
> The Jews are like everyone else, only more so.[2]
>
> He the anti-Semite is a man who is afraid. Not of the Jews … but of himself, of his own consciousness….[3]

In his controversial study of Jewish identity, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946), Jean-Paul Sartre notoriously argues that the relationship between anti-Semites and Jews is not so much antithetical as symbiotic: "the anti-Semite is in the unhappy position of having a vital need for the very enemy he wishes to destroy," while "The Jew is one whom other men consider a Jew...it is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew."[4] He goes on to draw a distinction between the "authentic Jew," "who asserts his claim in the face of the disdain shown toward him" and the "inauthentic Jew," "whom other men take for [a] Jew...and who...run[s] away from this insupportable situation."[5] Furthermore, his attempts at flight are doomed to failure because "he cannot choose not to be a Jew. Or, rather, if he does so choose, if he ... denies with violence and desperation the Jewish character in himself, it is precisely in this that he is a Jew."[6]

This "damned if you do, damned if you don't" conundrum leads, in turn, to compulsive second-guessing, and to self-alienation:

> the Jew is not content to act or think; he sees himself act, he sees himself think ...The Jew, because he knows he is under observation, takes the initiative and attempts to look at himself through the eyes of others...while he contemplates himself with the "detachment" of another, he feels himself in effect *detached* from himself; he becomes another person, a pure witness.[7]

Sartre's conception of Jewish identity as essentially reactive, the product not of an autonomous history, tradition, or religion, but of a dialectic with the hostile perception of the Gentile other, is disempowering, deterministic and arguably (in spite of the obvious philo-Semitic inclinations of the book) anti-Semitic.[8] However, it continues to define the theoretical terms of the debate over Jewish identity. Sander Gilman's seminal study *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (1986), for example, though it only mentions *Anti-Semite and Jew* briefly, is predicated on the Sartrean premise that Jews cannot escape the identity imposed upon them by the (anti-Semitic Other) because "As Jews react to the world by altering their sense of identity … so they become what the group labeling them as Other had determined them to be."[9] Even Alain Finkielkraut, who, in *The Imaginary Jew* (1980), argues that "what made me Jewish was not the gaze of the Other, but the competitive desire to capture his attention for myself when it was being sought by everyone else" implicitly confirms the very thesis that he seeks to invert, in that he seeks reification of his (Jewish) self in terms of the (non-Jewish) Other.[10] Whatever their limitations, then, Sartre's observations provide a very useful model for considering the ways in which post-war Jewish novelists represent Jews, anti-Semites, and the relations between them. In particular, I want to look at three post-war American-Jewish novels - Arthur Miller's *Focus* (1945), Bernard Malamud's *The*

Assistant (1957), and Emily Prager's *Eve's Tattoo* (1992), in which the process of self-detachment that Sartre describes is embodied in the form of Gentiles who mistake themselves for Jews. However, whereas Sartre's definition of Jewishness (whether of the "authentic" or "inauthentic" kind) take as a *donné* the presence of an internalized racism, or self-hatred, in the Jew, these novels represent Jewishness (as it manifests itself in converted Gentile and Jewish-born Jew) in characteristically ambivalent terms.

That some Jews have often wished themselves Gentiles is incontestable: whether the result of a desire for cultural assimilation, for socioeconomic advantage, or as a safeguard against religious persecution, Jews have, for centuries, changed names, neighbourhoods, professions and religions in order to pass themselves off as Gentiles. Even when remaining recognizably Jewish, they have often sought to minimize or elide differences between themselves and their host communities. It is hardly surprising that many protagonists in post-war Jewish fiction are, to use Ivan Kalmar's term, distinctly "eji" about their Jewishness, if not actually at pains to disguise or deny it.[11] What is perhaps rather odd is the number of Jewish post-war novels featuring Gentiles who, in various ways and to various extents, become Jewish.[12] Hollywood studios (many of them of course historically owned by Jews) have frequently employed non-Jews to portray Jews on film in order to facilitate sympathy between these characters and the (predominantly Gentile) audience, and in Laura Z. Hobson's novel *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) – which was made into a highly successful Hollywood film with Gregory Peck in the lead role – a non-Jewish investigative journalist pretends to be Jewish in order to discover for himself, and reveal to his readers, the extent to which anti-Semitism is endemic in genteel American society. In the novels that I want to look at, however, the process of Gentile

identification with Jewishness goes well beyond this sort of temporary expedient, so that, taken together, they form a sub-genre of post-war Jewish fiction.[13]

Perhaps the most famous example in fiction of a Gentile who mistakes himself for a Jew is Frank Alpine in Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*. Malamud, like most of his contemporaries, disliked the term Jewish-American writer, finding it "schematic and reductive" and insisting "I'm an American, I'm a Jew, and I write for all men."[14] Typically, "American" takes precedence over "Jew" when Malamud defines his identity. In interviews, he consistently argues that the Jewishness of his writing, far from indicating a parochial ethnicity, actually reflects a desire to transcend the particular and peculiar and deal with the general and universal: "I try to see the Jew as universal man … The Jewish drama is prototypic, a symbol of the fight for existence in the highest possible human terms."[15] This universalist, humanist view of Jewishness is articulated in *The Assistant* by Morris Bober, the Jewish grocer whose assistant the Gentile Frank Alpine becomes.

Having worked at Bober's side for some time (partly to atone for his role in a robbery in which his accomplice had beaten Bober, and partly because of a growing attachment to the grocer's daughter, Helen), his casual, unreflective anti-Semitism gradually modulating into a more thoughtful curiosity, Alpine finally raises the issue of Jewish identity with Bober: "What I like to know is what is a Jew anyway?"[16] This theme unsettles the grocer somewhat, and he struggles to find answers to Frank's questions, frequently having recourse to the rather abstract notion of a respect for "the [Jewish] Law" (which seems not to involve the observance of Jewish holidays or dietary restrictions).

That Alpine's relationship to Bober is not so much assistant (*pace* the novel's title) as substitute, or surrogate, is signalled from the outset. In one of the first

conversations they have, Bober reflects sadly to himself that "I am sixty and he talks like me"[17] and he is soon warning Alpine, with proleptic irony, "A young man without a family is free. Don't do what I did,"[18] but when Bober collapses with pneumonia, Alpine symbolically removes the grocer's apron and puts it (like an albatross) round his neck.

> The Jew lay white and motionless on the couch. Frank gently removed his apron. Draping the loop over his own head, he tied the tapes around him.
>
> "I need the experience," he muttered.[19]

The connotations of "experience" here – encompassing both Alpine's practical need for knowledge of retailing and his moral and spiritual desire to assume Bober's familial responsibilities, to prove himself worthy of bearing Bober's emotional, spiritual and financial burdens – are extended when Bober later suffers a relapse and dies suddenly.

At the funeral, the Rabbi's eulogy restates Bober's definition of Jewishness in pluralist terms: "'There are many ways to be a Jew ... Morris Bober was to me a true Jew because he lived in the Jewish experience, which he remembered, and with the Jewish heart."'[20] Just as Bober's own explanation of Jewishness raised more questions than it answered, so here what the Rabbi means precisely by "the Jewish experience" and "the Jewish heart" is not entirely clear. For Alpine, however, the funeral is a defining moment. During the ceremony, he falls into the grocer's open grave, thereby symbolically asserting his right to Bober's patrimony, and when the grieving mother and daughter return home, it is no surprise either to them or to the reader that the old grocer's place has been taken by him: "As they toiled up the stairs

they heard the dull cling of the register in the store and knew the grocer was the one who had danced on the grocer's coffin."[21]

The impression of patriarchal succession is reinforced here by the fact that both men are referred to not by name, but, generically, by profession. Of course the phrase "danced on the grocer's coffin" is more suggestive of triumph over a rival than of redemptive suffering on his behalf, and certainly there is an implicit element of primal conflict in the relationship between the men: though they have an instinctive sympathy for each other, there is also mutual distrust. Yet, finally, it is difficult to see Alpine's conversion to Judaism (which is related, abruptly, in the final paragraph of the novel) as anything other than a – paradoxically quasi-Christian attempt – to do penance for his past wrongs by adopting not just Bober's family, but also his ethical values, signified by his Jewishness, "One day in April Frank went to the hospital and had himself circumcised. For a couple of days he dragged himself around with a pain between his legs. The pain enraged and inspired him. After Passover he became a Jew."[22]

These wrongs now include the rape of Helen, whose bitter reproach ("Afterward, she cried, 'Dog - uncircumcised dog!'"[23]), coupled with his disgust at his sense of his own (unrestrained, Gentile) sexuality, arguably contributes as much as any spiritual revelation to Alpine's metamorphosis (so that the circumcision is a self-inflicted punishment, a self-emasculation, as well as a declaration of religious intent). By the end of the novel, certainly, Frank's attitude towards Helen seems more paternalistic than amorous: his most cherished goal is, apparently, no longer to seduce or even to marry her, but to earn the money to send her to college (something that Bober had tried, and failed, to do). If, as Malamud has suggested, "Jewish history [... is] a metaphor for the fate of all men," then Alpine's conversion would seem to

represent the consummation of his moral journey from disaffected, self-pitying, self-loathing delinquency to industrious, altruistic, responsible respectability.[24] In embracing Judaism, Alpine is realizing (both in the sense of recognizing, and fulfilling) his own humanity: the fact that Bober is frequently referred to as "the Jew" reinforces the impression that this is a novel that operates more on a metaphorical than a literal level of signification.

In these humanist terms, Alpine's transformation from anti-Semite to Jew is a rite of passage: Alpine rejects his immature hostility and prejudice towards others, learning to accept his essential kinship with them, their common humanity. For Sartre, however, the attraction of humanism for Jewish intellectuals was precisely that it enabled them to deny their difference (that is, their Jewishness). Alpine's acceptance of his responsibilities may well seem characteristic of the authentic Jew; then again, if we see the conversion as an internalization of his anti-Semitism (that is, by becoming a Jew, Alpine justifies his own self-hatred, because in the eyes of the anti-Semite the Jew, by virtue of his Jewishness, is a legitimate object of hatred) then he comes to resemble the inauthentic Jew whose attempts to deny his own Jewishness only confirm it, and his conversion comes to seem less like a celebration of new-found humanity and more like an act of grim resignation, or even masochism.

Alpine's journey from anti-Semite to Jew is one that had already been undertaken by Laurence Newman, the protagonist of Arthur Miller's novel, *Focus*, some twelve years earlier. However, if Malamud offers little explanation of the psychological processes that this journey might entail, in Miller's novel each stage of Newman's progress is carefully analyzed. Whereas Malamud's is always one of the first names in any list of post-war American-Jewish fiction writers, Miller's rarely appears at all. In part this is because he is much better known as a playwright (apart

from *Focus*, he has only published three other books of fiction in his long career), in part because his Jewishness has rarely been reflected explicitly in his work (*Incident at Vichy* and *Broken Glass* being obvious exceptions).[25]

Like Malamud, Miller is, ideologically, a humanist and a moralist. In his autobiography, he describes how the popularity of Charles E. Coughlin's Nazi propaganda wartime broadcasts in America moved him to pledge himself to use his writing to combat notions of ethnic difference:

> I had somehow arrived at the psychological role of mediator between the Jews and America, and among Americans themselves as well. No doubt as a defense against the immensity of the domestic and European fascistic threat, which in my depths I interpreted as the threat of my own extinction, I had the wish, if not yet the conviction, that art could express the universality of human beings, their common emotions and ideas.[26]

The vehicle the young Miller (not yet established as a playwright) chose for his universalist message was *Focus*.

The novel opens with a symbolic episode in which Newman, whose name is carefully chosen for its racial ambiguity (in that it might or might not be a Jewish name) and for its emblematically American resonance (in that it alludes to the American myth of itself as a new Eden, in which a new man is born),[27] is woken in the night by the sounds of a fracas in the street and a voice shouting "'Police!"'[28] Rather than calling 911, however, he ignores the woman's cries for help, reasoning that "she could take care of herself because she was used to this sort of treatment. Puerto Ricans were, he knew."[29]

Newman's prejudice, it soon becomes clear, is not confined to Puerto Ricans. As part of his job – recruiting secretarial staff for a large corporation – he routinely sifts out any Jewish applicants at the behest of the management. However, Newman

is literally as well as metaphorically (which is to say, morally) myopic and when he lets one slip through the net, he is summarily reprimanded for his oversight and ordered to get a pair of glasses.[30] Ironically, it turns out that his reluctance to do so stems from the conviction that wearing glasses makes him look Jewish. When he is forced by these events at work to buy a pair, he comes home, tries them on, and his worst fears are confirmed:

> In the mirror in his bathroom, the bathroom he had used for nearly seven years, he was looking at what might very properly be called the face of a Jew. A Jew, in effect, had gotten into his bathroom.[31]

Newman's initial response to this sense of self-alienation (it is his own reflection that he sees, but his own face now seems to be the face of another, an intruder, an impostor) is to reaffirm his Gentile identity by resuming his anti-Semitic practices at work with renewed zeal. Whilst conducting interviews to replace the Jewish girl, Newman encounters a candidate, Gertrude Hart, whom he decides is Jewish; he tries to dismiss her, but she becomes increasingly indignant, until the tables are turned and he becomes convinced that she believes him to be Jewish. Thoroughly discomfited, both by the implied accusation in her behaviour, and by a strong sexual attraction for her, which he struggles to master, Newman finds that he cannot defend himself:

> he could not say he was not Jewish without colouring the word with his repugnance for it, and thus for her. And in his inability to speak, in his embarrassment she seemed to see conclusive proof, and strangely – quite insanely – he conceded that it was almost proof. For to him Jew had always meant impostor...
>
> He was sitting there in the guilt of the fact that the evil nature of the Jews and their numberless deceits, especially their sensuous lust for women ... all were reflections of his own desires with which he had invested them. For this moment he knew it and perhaps never again, for in this moment her eyes had made a Jew of him...[32]

When he looked at his own reflection in the bathroom mirror, Newman tried to displace his feelings of self-hatred, seeing the Jew looking back at him as an interloper who had, somehow, inexplicably, "gotten into his bathroom," but when he sees his own (suspicions of her) Jewishness mirrored in Gertrude Hart's eyes, he recognizes himself as the impostor – and therefore, by association, as Jewish. Moreover, he is forced, momentarily, to recognize that the "evil nature" of the Jews, as he has hitherto understood it, is no more than a projection of these feelings of self-hatred. In this novel, published a year before Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Miller anticipates Sartre's belief that Jewish identity is in the eye of the (anti-Semitic) beholder: Hart's hostile scrutiny makes a Jew out of Newman. In this instance, Newman's own anti-Semitism is reflected back at him, so that his hatred of the Other becomes hatred of himself. Whereas Sander Gilman argues that "the first key to the structure of self-hatred … is how Jews see the dominant society seeing them and how they project their anxiety about this manner of being seen onto other Jews as a means of externalizing their own status anxiety", here Newman's fear of being seen as a Jew is projected onto Hart, whose own fear of being seen as a Jew is projected onto Newman, so that their mutual (self-) hatred binds them together in a cycle of self-fulfilling paranoia.[33]

Newman is sacked from his job, refused an alternative post in another company, and berated by a fellow-passenger on the subway ("'You people! When are you going to learn your manners?'"[34]), all clearly as a result of the fact that he now "looks Jewish," his racist conviction that Jews can be identified by their appearance is both confirmed and undermined: confirmed in that others now see in his

physiognomy the same unmistakable signs of Jewishness that he does, undermined in that if he, a Gentile, can be mistaken for a Jew, then these facial characteristics cannot, after all, be uniquely Jewish. Sartre points out that popular visual stereotypes of Jewishness actually vary considerably from one country to another, and that "even admitting that all Jews have certain physical traits in common ... I can on a moment's notice find any of them in an 'Aryan.'"[35] The point is, however, that it is precisely because Jews are *not* always easily distinguishable from WASPS in the way that, say, Afro-Caribbeans are, that anti-Semitic propaganda insists that they are, while paradoxically warning of their undetected infiltration of the white race. It is arguably a weakness of the novel that we are asked to believe that such a dramatic change in Newman's appearance could be brought about by a pair of glasses (formerly recognized as unimpeachably Gentile, he is now universally mistaken for a Jew), but it is the premise on which the entire action of the novel is built. If Miller's didactic purpose is to be achieved, disbelief must be suspended (as it is in the *Superman* comic strip – also, incidentally[36], devised by Jews – in which no one notices Clark Kent's resemblance to the man of steel when he's out of costume and in a pair of spectacles).

Newman next finds employment at a company that is partly Jewish-owned, where he encounters Gertrude Hart again. Meeting her in this new context (he is now the interviewee, she the interviewer), he quickly revises his opinion of her.

> Her loud way of talking no longer seemed offensive. He felt rather that it was forthright, and where it had then indicated crudeness now it bespoke a contempt for evasions. As a Jewess she had seemed dressed in cheap taste, too gaudily. But as a gentile he found her merely colourful in the same dress...As a Jewess she had seemed vitriolic and pushy…but now...
>
> He could not understand how he had ever mistaken her. There was nothing about her that was Jewish. Nothing.[37]

That the very same characteristics could seem both damningly Jewish and attractively Gentile to Newman is proof of the arbitrariness of such identifications, and yet Newman is not the first, nor the last, of Hart's acquaintances to mistake her for a Jew. The fact that both Newman and Hart are Gentiles whom others mistake for Jews (and who mistake each other for Jews) may seem rather implausible but, again, it is a necessary expedient for Miller if he is successfully to dramatize the different responses that such a situation might provoke. The two begin a relationship, get married, and settle into a conventional suburban existence, but it soon becomes clear that they have been identified as targets by the Christian Front, an anti-Semitic organization active in the neighbourhood. Despite Newman's appeals to his next-door neighbour, Front activist and erstwhile friend, Fred, to intervene on his behalf, a campaign of intimidation begins to gather momentum, and Hart insists that the only way for Newman to identify himself unequivocally as a Gentile is to participate in the anti-Semitic activities of the Front himself. Torn between increasing distaste for their bigotry (they organize a boycott of the store owned by the only local Jew, Finkelstein, to which Newman queasily adheres) and fear of being its victim, Newman reluctantly agrees to attend one of their public meetings. In the event, however, he is violently ejected from the hall, when a fascist sitting next to him denounces him as a Jew, because he fails to applaud the speakers and, again, because of his appearance ("'He's a Jew ... Can't you see he's a Sammy?"' the man exclaims[38]). Incredulous at this latest ignominy, Newman reflects on the injustice of it all:

> They had to understand that he was Laurence Newman of a family named Newman which had come from Aldwych, England, in the year 1861, and that he had pictures at home showing his baptism and ... he could explain how he had been employed for more than twenty years by one of the most anti-Semitic corporations in America ...[39]

There is a sort of grim humour operating here at Newman's expense (note the absurdity of his misplaced pride at having been "employed...by one of the most anti-Semitic corporations in America"), but also a pathos in his desperate, futile, incongruous fantasy of displaying family portraits of his baptism to the racist thugs at the Front rally.

On his way home, dishevelled and distressed, Newman encounters Finkelstein, who attempts to engage him in conversation about the Front. Newman affects a lofty detachment, yet soon begins to realize that he is actually in a worse position than Finkelstein, because he is just as vulnerable to attack, yet he cannot accept the reality of this situation, as the Jew can, because he continues to be two people – the Gentile whom he was once acknowledged to be, and the Jew whom he is now taken to be. The strain of this dual identity – of attempting to reconcile his old self with his "secret new personality" now haunts his every action, imbues his every gesture with that painful self-consciousness that Sartre describes as characteristic of Jewishness:

> He could no longer simply enter a restaurant and innocently sit down to a meal. …he found himself speaking quite softly, always wary of any loudness in his tone. Before reaching for something on the table, he first unconsciously made sure that he would not knock anything over. When he spoke he kept his hands under the table, although he had always needed gestures…to destroy any impression of tightfistedness, he left larger tips than he used to...The things he had done all his life as a gentile, the most innocent habits of his person, had been turned into the tokens of an alien and evil personality, a personality that was slowly, he felt, implacably being foisted upon him. And wherever he went he was trying to underplay that personality, discarding it in every way he knew while at the same time denying that he possessed it.[40]

By this late stage in the novel, Newman is moving towards the position of the Jew who wishes to assimilate but cannot because of his own and others' continued awareness of his Jewishness. The constant second-guessing, the over-interpretation of

insignificant details, above all the internalization of prejudice (Newman now seems to believe that he might actually exhibit the stereotypical characteristics – miserliness, vulgarity, clumsiness – of the anti-Semite's Jew), identify Newman as one of Sartre's inauthentic Jews. His efforts to slough off this Jewishness, to disown this "evil personality," are futile because it is something that is being imposed on him externally, "implacably ... foisted upon him."

Once again, Sartre's conception of Jewishness holds sway: what matters is not whether you perceive yourself to be Jewish, but whether others – specifically anti-Semites – perceive you to be Jewish. Moreover, the signifiers of Jewishness are so slippery that the innocent habits of a Gentile, once attributed to a Jew, become tokens of depravity (just as, conversely, the very things that had disgusted Newman about Gertrude Hart when he thought she was Jewish, become endearing when he realizes that she isn't). The complication with Newman is that he is now both anti-Semite and Jew, so that in him Sartre's dichotomy breaks down, and in place of symbiosis we get synthesis. Seeing himself – this Jewish *new man* – through the eyes of his old Gentile, anti-Semitic self, Newman realizes that, just as he ignored the Puerto Rican woman's cries for help, so, when the Front come to get him, his neighbours will turn a blind eye: "They would not come out because he would be a Jew in their eyes, and therefore guilty. Somehow, in some unsayable way, guilty."[41]

Just as the signifiers of Jewishness are represented as at once indeterminate and manifest, so the guilt of the Jew is inexplicable and yet incontrovertible, "unsayable" and yet ungainsayable. In fact, it is precisely because the anti-Semite's conviction of the Jew's guilt is irrational that it cannot be disputed: arguments can be met by counter-arguments, but prejudice and superstition are immune to debate.

When Newman eventually is attacked, it prompts him, in the final scene of the novel, to report the incident to the police, representing himself as a Jewish victim of anti-Semitic violence (or rather not correcting the policeman when he makes that assumption). As he does so, he "felt as though he were setting down a weight which for some reason he had been carrying and carrying."[42] Having spent most of the novel defying and denying the Jewishness that he and others have located in him, Newman ultimately resigns himself to it, if he does not quite embrace it. Like Frank Alpine, however, the suspicion remains that Newman's belated identification of himself as a Jew is as much a consummation of his self-loathing as a rejection of it. Whereas Alpine is weighed down by his new identity ("he dragged himself around with a pain between his legs"), Newman is liberated by it, but for both men their conversions seem more like penitential acts of moral solidarity than affirmations of belief. Like *The Assistant*, then, *Focus* ends with a formerly anti-Semitic Gentile redefining himself as a Jew. In Emily Prager's novel, *Eve's Tattoo*, however, this process is replayed in reverse.

Prager is one of a growing number of prominent young American-Jewish women writers of fiction, but unlike many of her contemporaries she is not to be found in any anthologies or bibliographical sourcebooks of Jewish fiction,[43] and she tends to be reticent on the subject of her Jewishness (preferring to emphasize her upbringing as Texan baptist). Partly as a result of this, and also perhaps because of her notoriety as a *Penthouse* columnist and former soap actress, when *Eve's Tattoo* (the only one of her fictions to display an interest in Jewishness) was published, many British reviewers, apparently unaware of the fact that Prager's father was Jewish, bracketed the novel with others by non-Jewish writers (such as Martin Amis" *Time's Arrow* [1991]), as an example of what one of them termed "Holocaust chic" and

another the "designer death-camp novel."[44] Since then, Prager has consolidated her reputation as an audacious novelist who takes on controversial subjects (her last novel, *Roger Fishbite* [1999], is a reworking of *Lolita* from the nymphet's point of view), but she remains best known for *Eve's Tattoo*.

The novel begins with Eve Flick, a Gentile columnist living in New York, getting herself tattooed on her fortieth birthday with the number of a concentration camp victim, a woman whose photograph she discovers accidentally "at the back of a file cabinet belonging to [her French Catholic boyfriend] Charles César."[45] Arriving at Big Dan's Tattoo Parlor, Eve encounters an extraordinary range of Nazi memorabilia, including, on one of the proprietor's arms, "the full insignia of the elite Totenkopf, or Death's-head squadron of the SS…perfectly inked with its lightning bolts and skull … swastikas and iron crosses, ending on top of his hand with ACHTUNG, around which coiled a naked blonde with red lips and a rolled hairdo from the 1940s."[46]

In one sense, Eve's decision to preserve the memory of the woman in the photograph by having the tattoo done is clearly an implied rebuke to this glamourization of Nazism, and the austerity of the tattoo itself (the numbers 500123, "squiggly, done in a hurry ... That's just how I want them"[47]) acts as a sort of antidote to the ornate, eroticized imagery of the Nazi tattoo. Most importantly for Eve, however, the tattoo is indelible. Explaining her actions later that day to an incredulous and indignant Charles, Eve explains herself by pointing out that:

> in a very few years...the people who lived through the Third Reich will all be dead. And when the people who experienced an event are no longer walking the planet, it's as if that event never existed at all. There'll be books and museums and monuments, but things move so fast now, the only difference between fantasy and history is living people. I'm going to keep Eva alive. She'll go on living, here, with me.[48]

Living in a trivializing and trivialized society preoccupied with ephemeral matters (a world whose values are revealed by the initial responses to Eve's tattoo),[49] Eve hopes that her tattoo will connect her with a time and place when more was at stake and will act as "the emblem of a different perspective."[50] However, there is more involved here than a mid-life crisis. Eve's tattoo is to serve a didactic purpose: "'people will ask me about this tattoo and I'm going to tell them tales, based on facts from my reading, tales specially chosen for them, so they can identify, so they can learn."'[51] This is no sudden whim: Eve has been studying the Nazi regime for some time now (to the distaste and incomprehension of Charles) and her research has led her not just to revise her view of this period of European history, but to question her own previous complacency:

> in the forty-five years since the war, Americans had simplified the hideous phenomenon that was the Third Reich, tying it up into a neat package labeled: MAD HITLER – KILLED JEWS. Eve had done that herself. For years she read histories and witness accounts, and, though she found them profoundly disturbing, she always had an out. A little WASP voice in her brain would shield her. I would have been okay, it echoed. I'm not Jewish. I would have been safe.[52]

What Eve's reading reveals – and what her educational tales illustrate – is that you didn't have to be Jewish to fall victim to the Nazi reign of terror, and moreover, that the very question of who was Jewish and who wasn't was often a vexed one. The protagonist of one of Eve's tales is Eva Klein [53], a Jew who "was blond and blue-eyed and snub-nosed, a paradigm of racial eugenics"[54] and married to a Gentile, while another relates the (imagined) history of Eva Hofler, who had been "baptized and confirmed" as a child, "grew up in a Lutheran orphanage," and became an ardent supporter of Hitler as an adult until renovations on the orphanage brought to light a

set of papers indicating that her parents had been Jews: "A Mr. and Mrs. Tannenbaum, killed in an automobile accident."[55]

Eva Hofler's story provides a counterpoint to that of Charles César, who, it turns out, was himself born Jewish but had later converted and been confirmed into the Catholic church. When Eve discovers this, she assumes that it explains his implacable hostility to her tattoo (he leaves her because of it): as a Jew himself he must regard her actions as presumptuous and offensive, a "bizarre overidentification," an affront to those, like himself, whose connection to concentration camp victims was familial rather than conceptual, real rather than imagined.[56] As it turns out, however, Charles' family history is rather murkier than Eve had imagined: his parents had been collaborators – "catchers" of fellow Jews for the Nazis – and Charles' resentment of Eve's interest in the Nazis has more to do with his own guilty self-hatred than with scepticism about her entitlement to, or motivation for, the tattoo.

The irony of Charles' inherited guilt is compounded by the fact that Eve's investigations into Nazi history are prompted, in part, by her own feelings of hereditary complicity in the Nazi persecution of the Jews. When she discovers the photograph of the camp inmate, whom she resembles, Eve is moved to wonder, "'I'm of German ancestry. I'm a Christian ... do I have mass murder in my blood or what?"'[57] Indeed much of the novel is taken up with Eve's theories about the relationship between Christianity and Nazism, and in particular the role that Christian women played in the Nazi regime: "'Christian women in Nazi Germany...How could they be Christian and do what they did?...I am implicated by association."'[58] It is, after all, Eve's own personal history (as an Episcopalian and, racially, a German), as much as any intellectual curiosity or liberal guilt, that underpins the relationship she

forms with the woman in the photograph, a relationship that gradually takes over her life: "Her alliance with 500123, the woman she called Eva, was the strongest bond she had ever formed."[59] Although two of the women in Eve's tales (those already mentioned) turn out to be Jewish, the other three Evas are not, and indeed the real woman in the photograph, it emerges, was a devout Gentile follower of Hitler, imprisoned as a result of the activities of her insubordinate sons, and subsequently tattooed and executed at Auschwitz as the result of an administrative error.

Just as the revelation of Charles' history subverts Eve's (and the reader's) expectations, so with the historical Eva things turn out "different [sic] than either of them Eve and Charles had imagined, 180 degrees different."[60] Yet in a sense, the fact that the real Eva was an anti-Semite rather than a Jew makes Eve's identification with her more authentic, rather than less so. Although Eve's radical act of remembrance seems at first to be a classic case of a Gentile mistaking herself for a Jew (and in fact she does try to pass herself off as a Jew when questioned by a member of the audience for one of her stories), as the novel proceeds her quintessential non-Jewishness (together with the inevitable accompanying anti-Semitism) reasserts itself in disturbing ways.

When she first discovers that Charles is Jewish, certain of his characteristics seem suddenly to be illuminated, retrospectively:

> And then there was that earthiness about him, a hotness that up until now she had ascribed to Catholicism. She had thought, perhaps, he had Italian or Irish blood, some genetic drop that made the difference. But no, she thought, he's Jewish.[61]

Just as the very habits that had always seemed irreproachably genteel and Gentile, suddenly appear vulgar and Jewish in Miller's Laurence Newman once his latent Jewishness has been activated, as it were, so here traits of Charles that had seemed

perfectly consistent with his Catholicism before Eve discovered his Jewishness, now seem explicable only by reference to this new identity.

That the revelation of Charles" Jewishness has altered irrevocably the way that Eve thinks about him is made clear in the final words of the second chapter: "'Jewish, Eva," she said to her look-alike in the photo. "My boyfriend is Jewish. Are you?"'[62] Later, Charles tells her "'You know how Christians are just Christians?...I wanted to be a Jew like that. I didn't want to be a Jew in quotes,"' yet it is exactly as a Jew in quotes – that is to say, with an omnipresent awareness of his Jewishness – that Eve does see him.[63]

Towards the end of the novel Charles is reconciled with Eve and to his Jewishness, and Eve, her tattoo having been conveniently erased by an accident in which she is run over by a van, is reconciled to her own imperfect self. Yet in its closing chapter the novel's ambiguities persist, indeed deepen. It turns out that the photograph of Eva was bought by a film-maker friend of Charles "from a Neo-Nazi booth in a flea market in Berlin;" when Charles smiles at her, "once more he was her Vatican cardinal, once more he was her prince of the church;" and the final image of the novel is of the two of them examining "a Star of David armband from the Nazi era ... The yellow of the star was faded now. A weak yellow, as weak as a dying sun."[64]

This is, in a number of ways, an unsettling ending to an unsettling novel. To begin with, the provenance of the photograph is disturbing, particularly as the events of the novel unravel against the background of the collapse of the Berlin wall and the prospective reunification of Germany. Moreover, two questions remain unresolved: does Eve's restored image of Charles as a Vatican cardinal represent her triumph over anti-Semitism, or a deliberate retreat into the pre-tattoo era of their relationship? And

does the dying sun represent the waning of anti-Semitism (of which the armband – which Jews were forced to wear under the Nazi regime – may be a symbol), or the terminal decline of Jewish identity itself (if the Star symbolizes Jewish history and tradition)? Perhaps, like the improbable obliteration of Eve's supposedly permanent tattoo, the image of the fading star suggests a corresponding weakening of Eve's own interest in, and ability to identify with, Jews themselves, who have become simultaneously more and less alien to her during the course of the novel. Whereas at the start of the novel, Eve sacrifices her erotic relationship with Charles for her political relationship with Eva, by the end her willed, wilful attempt to participate vicariously in Jewish suffering (in the form of Eva, the Gentile she mistakes for a Jew) has given way to her unwitting, accidental connection to it (in the form of Charles, the Jew she mistakes for a Gentile). That Charles is an "inauthentic", self-hating Jew whose determination to reject his Jewishness has been as fervent as Eve's desire to fabricate hers only complicates matters further.[65]

Perhaps the most disquieting aspect of the ending, however, is the question that is not posed at all, even implicitly: namely, how is Eve to survive without her tattoo and all that it has come to represent for her? After all, for much of the novel Eve allows her (re)construction(s) of Eva to take over her life, to the extent that her own identity becomes indistinguishable from (the various) Eva's. While she believes that Eva may be Jewish, Eve effectively adopts the role of the authentic Jew, asserting her claim to memorialize her suffering in the face of ignorance, bewilderment and scepticism, if not disdain, but once she discovers that she has mistaken Eva (herself) for a Jew, this claim (like the tattoo) vanishes without trace. Although she sets out simply to tell these women's stories, she ends up, as we have seen, having internal dialogues with them. In fact, it is no exaggeration to suggest that, for much of the

novel, Eve appears to be suffering from a form of schizophrenia: "Eve had begun to talk to Eva in her mind. Their relationship had progressed from remembrance to co-habitation, from the past to the present."[66]

Indeed, the overriding sense in all three of the novels I have been discussing is that Gentiles who mistake themselves for Jews do just that (they err, they delude themselves) because Jewishness is, arguably, not something that can be acquired. In fact I would suggest that the protagonist in each of these novels displays psychopathological symptoms not unlike those described by Oliver Sacks in his book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985): hence the title of this essay. In addition to Eve's schizophrenia, Frank Alpine's conversion to Judaism is arguably as masochistic as it is idealistic and Laurence Newman's belated attempt at what might be called counter-assimilation is as much a product of his distorted vision of himself as of any positive identification with Jewishness. If Sartre is right when he identifies an existential uneasiness in authentic and inauthentic Jew alike, then Alpine's and Newman's ambivalence makes their Jewishness more, rather than less, convincing. Indeed, one explanation for the periodic recurrence of this quirky plot device is that it reflects an uneasiness on the part of the authors themselves, a reluctance to confront openly the question of Jewish identity. Instead of representing Jewish ambivalence directly, it is externalized (in the form of a Gentile who is both anti- and philo-Semitic), before being reintegrated into the Jewish identity when the Gentile mistakes himself for a Jew.

At any rate, the question remains: what is the meaning behind these plots? Are they manifestations, in inverted form, of the Jewish anxiety to assimilate, fictional arguments in support of the notion of universal brotherhood? Certainly there is a strong didactic pull in this direction in Miller's and Malamud's novels; the message

in the former being that if, as a Gentile, you don't make a stand against racism and bigotry, you might find yourself a victim of it, while the latter seems to bear out Malamud's assertion that "Every man is a Jew." For Sartre, this impulse to deny the differences between Jews and others is characteristic of the humanist Jew who "seeks to dissolve by critical analysis all that may separate men and lead them to violence, since it is he who will be the first victim of that violence."[67] Yet he himself uses similar humanist rhetoric, describing the Jews as the "quintessence of man" and ending his essay with an appeal to his (Gentile) readers' self-interest: "anti-Semitism is...*our* problem...we...run the risk of being its victims…What must be done is to point out to each one [Gentile] that the fate of the Jews is *his* fate."[68] In this context, the suffering undergone in these novels by the Gentile in his/her guise as Jew seems to represent a form of wish-fulfillment – a revenge fantasy in which Jewish authors punish Gentiles for their anti-Semitism by turning them into Jews, so that the perpetrators of anti-Semitism get a taste of their own medicine.

Equally, the plots of these novels might be seen, in psychoanalytical terms, as Jewish fantasies of Gentile guilt, or as projections onto the Gentile of the guilt of Jews untouched by the Holocaust: the guilt of Miller's and Malamud's generation of Jews who lived through the war "not dar[ing] to demand that rescue efforts be put in motion, such was the fear of exacerbating the American people's hostility...to Jews;"[69] and the guilt of Prager's generation, many of whom owe their lives to the serendipitous emigration or fortuitous survival of parents and/or grandparents.

Certainly, guilt is a crucial motivating factor in all the conversions: Frank Alpine's guilt for having taken part in the robbery of Bober's store (and later for having stolen from him and raped his daughter); Laurence Newman's guilt for his cowardly complicity in the racist activities of the Christian Front, and Eve's guilt for

being of German ancestry. For all these figures, identifying themselves with, and as Jews, is an attempt to expiate this guilt: the guilt of anti-Semitism.

That there was, in the aftermath of the Second World War, a sense of collective guilt on the part of many Gentiles (or at least their political representatives) for the Holocaust is undeniable: the establishment of the state of Israel would have been impossible without it.[70] Yet none of these novels deals with the events of the Holocaust directly: *Eve's Tattoo* touches on it incidentally, but is more concerned with the seductive and insidious power of Nazi ideology, in particular its hold over German women; *Focus*, though set during the war, makes no reference to the plight of European Jews, while *The Assistant*, as Philip Roth has observed, is a curiously ahistorical novel, apparently taking place in "a timeless depression and a placeless Lower East Side."[71] If, as Sander Gilman argues, "self-hatred results from the outsider's acceptance of the mirage of themselves generated by their reference group – that group in society which they see as defining them – as a reality," then the silence of these authors on the subject of the Holocaust might be seen as evasiveness, a sign of Sartrean inauthenticity.[72] On the other hand, in an era when what has been called the "Holocaust industry" has become big business, their reticence might more charitably be explained as an authentic refusal to appropriate the suffering of others.[73] For, as Alain Finkielkraut points out, self-hatred can just as easily manifest itself in a glib overidentification with, and exploitation of, Jewish suffering, as in a desire to minimize it, or deny it altogether:

> Others had suffered and I, because I was their descendant, harvested all the moral advantage…I did not deliberately turn the catastrophe i.e. the Holocaust to the shallow ends of self-aggrandizement…But…I owed to the bond of blood this intoxicating power to confuse myself with the martyrs.[74]

Seen in this light, the decision of Miller, Malamud and Prager to represent Gentile protagonists who do "confuse [themselves] with the martyrs" becomes a strategy for exploring their own ambivalence towards Jewish history, a way of explaining themselves through the experience of others. To use a theatrical analogy, just as a male actor playing a female playing a male (as was often the case in Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre) serves to highlight and at the same time problematize gender difference, so a Jewish writer impersonating a Gentile impersonating a Jew both blurs and redefines the boundaries of Jewish identity. Whereas Sartre sees Jewishness as a response, positive or negative, to the monolithic hostility of anti-Semitism, in these novels Jewishness and anti-Semitism enter into ambivalent negotiations with each other, producing, to adapt Finkielkraut's definition of contemporary Jewry, "something impure…that…refus[es] to let itself be encompassed by a stable and recognized concept."[75]

Notes

[1] Bernard Malamud, in Lawrence Lasher, ed., *Conversations with Bernard Malamud* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 30.

[2] Attributed to Heine, quoted in Ivan Kalmar, *The Trotskys, Freuds and Woody Allens: Portrait of a Culture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), 9.

[3] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 53.

[4] Ibid., 28, 69.

[5] Ibid., 91, 93. Sartre stresses – perhaps disingenuously – that the term inauthentic "implies no moral blame" (Ibid.). Certainly, his definition of authenticity – "having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation ... assuming the responsibilities that it involves ... accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror or hate" (Ibid., 90) – though strictly morally ambiguous (the positive terms "true", "lucid" and "pride" are balanced by the negative "humiliation", "horror" and "hate"), seems ethically preferable, in that it always involves an acceptance (whether reluctant and resentful or not) of responsibility.

[6] Ibid., 89.

[7] Ibid., 96-7.

[8] L.S. Dembo argues that "Sartre's position on Jewish authenticity is indefensible; it is so because he ignores the positive values and ideals associated with Judaism in general and with the Jew's vision of himself"; and that "The

term "Inauthentic Jew," insofar as it is normative as well as descriptive, carries an opprobrium with it that leads to caricature rather than realistic portrayal": L.S. Dembo, *The Monological Jew: A Literary Study* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 21, 25. Susan Suleiman takes a more balanced view, arguing that the first section of Sartre's book is an effective "declaration of war against anti-Semites" (Sartre quoted in Suleiman), but that in the final section of the book he "*thinks* he is defending the Jew against the anti-Semite's myth, but actually reinforces the myth": Susan Suleiman, "The Jew in Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive*: An Exercise in Historical Reading", in Linda Nachlin and Tamar Garb, eds., *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 201, 214.

[9] Sander Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 12.

[10] Alain Finkielkraut, *The Imaginary Jew*, tr. Kevin O'Neill and David Suchoff (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press), 171-2.

[11] An acronym for "Embarrassed Jewish Individual." Kalmar also uses the term adjectivally, to denote the "edginess...about being Jewish" which is symptomatic of the "cultural condition" which his book explores. Ivan Kalmar, *The Trotskys, Freuds and Woody Allens*, 6.

[12] In addition to those I discuss here, there have been two notable recent examples: the hero of Philip Roth's latest novel, *The Human Stain* (2000), who is a black man who passes himself off as a Jew, and the protagonist of Nathan Englander's short story, "The Gilgul of Park Avenue", a WASP who suddenly and inexplicably becomes convinced that "he was the bearer of a Jewish soul." Nathan Englander, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).

[13] In using the term sub-genre I do not wish to imply either that the authors of these works are consciously locating themselves within an established tradition of Jewish writing (there is no evidence that any of these novels have been directly influenced by any of the others) or that there has been any critical recognition of the affinities between them. As far as I am aware, only Robert Alter, in a brief passage in an essay entitled "Sentimentalizing the Jews" has written on what he calls "the motif of conversion or quasi-conversion," *After the Tradition: Essays on Modern Jewish Writing* (New York: Dutton and Co., 1969), 42. The novels Alter refers to are *The Assistant*, Edward Lewis Wallant's *The Children at the Gate* (1964) and Jerome Charyn's *On the Darkening Green* (1968).

[14] Lasher, *Conversations*, 39, 63.

[15] Ibid., 30.

[16] Bernard Malamud, *The Assistant* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1959), 114.

[17] Ibid., 37.

[18] Ibid., 78.

[19] Ibid., 53.

[20] Ibid., 207-8.

[21] Ibid., 210.

[22] Ibid., 222.

[23] Ibid., 154. One of many Shakespearean allusions in the novel, "uncircumcised dog" is the phrase Othello uses, in his final speech, to describe the Turk whom he killed for traducing the state. In order to ingratiate himself with Helen, Alpine had earlier given her a copy of the complete works of Shakespeare.

[24] Lasher, 50.

[25] Though in his autobiography, *Timebends* (1987), Miller makes it clear that the genesis of *The Crucible* had something to do with his personal affinity ,as a Jew, with the Puritan society of Salem: "I felt strangely at home with these New Englanders, moved in the darkest part of my mind by some instinct that they were putative ur-Hebrews sic, with the same fierce idealism, devotion to God, tendency to legalistic reductiveness, the same longings for the pure and intellectually elegant argument." (Arthur Miller, *Timebends*, (London: Methuen, 1987), 42). A number of critics have also argued that the idioms and concerns of the Loman family in *Death of a Salesman* are distinctively Jewish.

[26] Miller, *Timebends*, 83.

[27] It is no coincidence that this is also the name Henry James chooses for the protagonist of his first novel, *The American* (1876-7).

[28] Arthur Miller, *Focus* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1949), 2.

[29] Ibid., 2-3.

[30] The title of the novel alludes to Newman's impaired vision, and Miller is preoccupied throughout with the processes of perception.

[31] Miller, *Focus*, 24.

[32] Ibid., 34.

[33] Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred*, 11.

[34] Miller, *Focus*, 72.

[35] Ibid., 62.

[36] Or perhaps not so incidentally. See Ivan Kalmar, *The Trotskys, Freuds and Woody Allens*, 255-261.

[37] Miller, *Focus*, 83.

[38] Ibid., 161.

[39] Ibid., 163.

[40] Ibid., 185-6.

[41] Ibid., 157-8.

[42] Ibid., 217.

[43] With the exception of the *Babel Guide to Jewish Fiction*, in which there is an entry for *Eve's Tattoo*. Ray Keenoy and Saskia Brown, *The Babel Guide to Jewish Fiction* (London: Boulevard Books, 1998).

[44] Penny Perrick, "Review of Christopher Hope's *Serenity House*," *Sunday Times*, 6 September 1992, 4; Paul Taylor, "Review of *Serenity House*," *Independent on Sunday*, 13 September 1992, 5.

[45] Emily Prager, *Eve's Tattoo* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), 10.

[46] Ibid., 6-7.

[47] Ibid., 8.

[48] Ibid., 11.

[49] At her birthday party one of her friends remarks, "'Darling, what is that? Your supermarket PIN number, I hope? Your cash machine code number, perhaps?"'(19), while one of the male guests notes that "'A lot of rock bands have tattoos now ... It's really in"' (24). Later in the novel, at a show-business function, a young actress, envious of what she assumes is a brilliant stroke of self-publicity, says: "'Damn, I wish I'd thought of that!"' (58). If these reactions seem implausible, we need only refer to the experience of a real-life camp survivor, Natalia Karpf, who tells of the time she "went once to a reception at a friend's house...and there was a lady there who saw the number on my arm, and she...said, 'What have you put here - your telephone number?'"

[50] Prager, 13.

[51] Ibid., 12.

[52] Ibid., 30.

[53] To emphasize her identification with the protagonists of her stories, Eve names each one Eva.

[54] Ibid., 26.

[55] Ibid., 47.

[56] Ibid., 20.

[57] Ibid., 51.

[58] Ibid., 32.

[59] Ibid., 49.

[60] Ibid., 193.

[61] Ibid., 13.

[62] Ibid., 14.

[63] Ibid., 17.

[64] Ibid., 194.

[65] When Eve tells him that "'There's anti-semitism sic in me ... You don't want that"', Charles replies "'I'm used to it ... I chose it. It's in me too"' (Ibid., 177).

[66] Ibid., 93.

[67] Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 115.

[68] Ibid., 153.

[69] Miller, *Timebends*, 63.

[70] A sense of guilt that must have been heightened by the fact that, during the war itself, domestic anti-Semitism increased markedly, as Miller makes clear in *Focus* when Gertrude Hart tells Fred that "There's a million organizations like that i.e. the Christian Front out there. Against the Jews" (Miller, *Focus*, 114).

[71] Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1975), 127.

[72] Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred*, 2.

[73] See Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life* (1999) for a discussion of this phenomenon.

[74] Finkielkraut, *The Imaginary Jew*, 11.

[75] Ibid., 168.