HOW anyone today first comes to hear the name Max Nordau says much about his interests. He might, if his literary tastes so dictate, chance across him in Bram Stoker’s Dracula, where Mina Harker cites Nordau as evidence that the count is a criminal and therefore of imperfectly formed mind. For Dracula’s and Nordau’s contemporaries, however, no such fortuitous encounters were necessary. Nordau was a household name whose most popular books appeared in scores of editions in a dozen languages. As a personality he was as colossal as his reputation. As critic, philosopher, novelist, playwright, sociologist, versifier, orator, journalist, polyglot, Zionist, psychologist, and physician, his versatility is impressive even when measured against an age when many tried their hand at more than one thing.

Scant traces are all that are left of his fame. As a critic of late nineteenth-century culture, he is remembered only for his book Degeneration (Entartung). A polemical hailstorm unleashed on modernist culture, it is read today mainly as an example of how completely important cultural trends were once misjudged. Even in its own time the book was received vociferously, but with little permanent effect.¹ Primarily, and from his own point of view somewhat disappointingly, Nordau is remembered as a figure of secondary importance in the early Zionist movement. After the Second World War he became a source of inspiration for what is known as Reconstructionist Judaism. Reconstructionism views Jewish “peoplehood or nationhood” rather than religion as the central aspect of Judaism. It is based on a faith in rationality and a

belief that "nothing is so dangerous as emotion, unchecked, undirected, undisciplined." The attempt to reinflate Nordau's reputation is due largely to Meir Ben-Horin's book, Max Nordau: Philosopher of Human Solidarity. Ben-Horin and other Reconstructionists attack present-day culture for reasons reminiscent of those which turned Nordau against that of his day. "It is as if," writes Ben-Horin, "the rediscovery of Max Nordau is not due to the accident of personal interest, but to the nature and essence of the social, political, intellectual and religious crisis of our time." This "rediscovery" is, however, more of a reinterpretation and has less to do with the historical Nordau than his disciples would like.

Ben-Horin interprets Nordau's thought in terms of what he calls his "philosophy of human solidarity." At the center of the maze of this argument lies the proposition that in his Zionist thought, Nordau elegantly and harmoniously combined his activity as a liberal social critic with the tenets of Jewish nationalism to form his so-called "solidaritarian" position, a position which, Ben-Horin thinks, is characterized primarily in that it "signifies the unity of mind and love," and "insists on the intimate connection between free institutions and free inquiry in all areas of human concern." An examination of Nordau's intellectual career, however, in particular the relationship between nationalism and liberalism found there, sheds a different light on the matter. Although many of his contemporaries had no trouble combining nationalism and liberalism into an integrated scheme of thought, Nordau found the task ultimately impossible. He led a dual life, torn between a nationalist ideology that appealed to the basic features of his conception of the world and a commitment to liberalism which his rarely flagging rationalism never allowed him to repudiate. The liberal and the nationalist never really came together in the form of Nordau, the Zionist. Some Zionists, like Herzl, happily bent the liberal lance over the stone of nationalism in order to play "politics in a new key" with nationalist ideology. That Nordau did not do so, or that he was unhappy to the extent that he did, provides another variety of confirmation that Zionism, like the other nationalistic move-


ments of the day, can be understood best in terms of the breakdown of liberalism. The fate of the liberal Nordau within the context of the nationalist movement of his choice and the extinguished reputation of one who was once a popular and highly controversial figure has something to say about the fate of liberalism in an illiberal era.

* * *

Max Nordau was the self-made man par excellence. Even his name was of his own invention. He was born Simon Maximilian Südfeld in 1849 in Pest, the son of a rabbi. He changed his name to symbolize his break with his orthodox Jewish, Eastern European background, fled his home city as a young man, studied medicine, travelled in Europe making a living as a journalist, and, in 1880, finally settled in Paris, where he remained until the outbreak of the First World War. "Cosmopolite" was a description which, at the beginning of his career at least, he welcomed. In the prefaces to many of his works he makes mention of the supranational, suprapartisan vantage point from which he looked out over the European scene. One observer compared him naturally enough to another great Jewish cosmopolite of the time, the critic Georg Brandes. Having rejected the religious provincialism of his father, Nordau embraced the tradition of liberal assimilationism as his heritage. For a Jew, who would be nothing without the French Revolution, to make fun of its principles and to affect conservative leanings, he warned, is a crime no less ugly than that committed when a son threatens violence against his mother. Liberalism was for Nordau, the prodigal Jew, his personal salvation, and it became, in his version and his opinion, that of all people.

Nordau's liberal world view was formulated in extreme terms of a broad scope, without nuance. Man is a rational creature whose role within the evolution of nature is the development of reason. Natural evolution requires of man that he suppress instinct and emotion in favor of reason, restraint, and discipline. The motor force of evolution is vital


energy, which gives man the strength to adapt to new conditions and thus to advance. Revolution of any sort which attempts to mold the world to fit man is therefore a contraevolutionary misunderstanding. To be able to adapt, man must have an exact knowledge of the world. Hence progress involves the expansion of consciousness and the restriction of the unconscious. Love, pleasure, and beauty are but expressions of eugenic drives of the human organism to produce individuals of the highest health and greatest vital energy. Science is the highest of human endeavors, religion the most regressive. Art is little better than religion and, in any case, to the extent that it does not equate beauty and eugenic advantage or serve the social function of ennobling the common man, is harmful and should be resisted. Such are the main points of Nordau’s general philosophy.7

Within this, his social thought also follows the general tendency from instinct to reason. Man is by nature antisocial, yet his ultimate goal is a society of universal brotherhood. This, argued Nordau, is no paradox. The development of civilization is the process by which man overcomes instinct and conquers personal emotion in order to further a life of rational unity with his fellow humans. That social life is founded on reason is an important aspect of Nordau’s liberal conception. Society is based on what he terms altruism. The extent to which altruism dominates egotism in a given society provides an exact measure of its vital energy. Altruism is possible only for that human who comes close to Nordau’s ideal of the clear-thinking, rational being, since an exact conception of the external world is required. To the degree that a person remains irrational, he retains only an indistinct impression of the external world and therefore remains egotistically trapped by a pathological concern for himself.8

It follows, in Nordau’s view, that society is based on the rationality of the individual and not on any sort of instinctive sympathy or shared sociobiological characteristics. The primary unit of society was always, for Nordau, the individual.9 As a liberal he scorned any attempt to regard society as a superentity with a life of its own beyond that of its

7. His early liberal thought is found primarily in Die conventionellen Lügen der Kulturmenschheit, Paradoxe, Aus dem wahren Milliardenlande, Zeitgenössische Franzosen, Von Kunst und Künstlern, Entartung.
citizens individually. "To regard society, the state, or humanity actually and not just symbolically as a living, unified creature is to be naive.... It is to indulge in unbelievably superficial word fetishism." Chauvinistic nationalism he rejected as conservative and illiberal. More importantly, however, he also shied away from any definition of nationalism which could not be reconciled with his cosmopolitan attitude. The idea of the Volk as the basis of nationalism was alien to his liberal thought; he suggested language as the criterion of nationality. Nordau even went so far as to reject the idea of the homeland that was later to play so important a role for his Zionist conceptions. Reviewing Barrès's *Les Deracinés*, he wrote, "Barrès maintains that man must put down roots in racially inherited ground in order to develop fully.... This is the view of conservatives in all countries who are against the right of choosing one's own domicile. ... When man puts down roots, this leads to a general standstill and then quickly to brutalization.... Movement accelerates development and progress in that it places the individual in new relationships which force him to adapt independently."

Nordau took these ideas and applied them inflexibly to the activities of his contemporaries. The result was his idea of degeneration. It is worth keeping in mind that in his attacks on degenerate culture Nordau was not shadowboxing with conceptions of modern trends which had no basis in fact. Most of his pronouncements on the value and future appeal of various artists are directly the contrary of received opinion today. These were, however, the judgments not of an uncomprehending philistine, but of a rationalist who, although aesthetically perceptive and often appreciative of degenerate art for exclusively artistic reasons, was repulsed by the moral and social tendencies which he thought found expression there. Curiously, his ability to portray his subject accurately stood in almost direct proportion to his disagreement with its implica-

11. Nordau, *Zeitgenössische Franzosen* (Berlin, 1901), p. 72. For his dislike of nationalism, see Milliardenlande, 2:227–28, Menschen und Menschliches, p. 36, Paradoxe p. 287. A curious aspect is that while he rejected conservative nationalism in his social and philosophical works, his fiction often contains elements to the contrary. A case in point is a short story entitled "Prince and Peasant" in *How Women Love and Other Tales* (New York, 1896) which could have been written by the later, conservative Barrès. It deals with a blâse nobleman who is catapulted from the narrow bonds of his individuality into the invigorating life of his country (Germany) while watching a gruesomely depicted slaughter of French troops during the Franco-Prussian War. Similar examples may be found in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (How Women Love, p. 226) and in *The Malady of the Century* (London, 1898), pp. 62ff. and 96.
tions. He was astoundingly well read and up to date. He was familiar with Kierkegaard, for example, at a time when the name was scarcely known; his treatment of Nietzsche came so early in the public career of that thinker, following the first of Brandes’s Copenhagen lectures by four years, that it helped, ironically enough, to popularize his philosophy. Concerning Degeneration, one scholar has written, “Max Nordau was able to assemble in one book nearly all the elements and many of the personalities involved in modernism. His word for it, however, was not modernism, but degeneration.”

Nordau brought his medical and scientific training to bear in his attack on modern culture. Not only did he regard modern trends as manifestations of physiological ailments, but he thought of himself as a physician called in to care for a patient racked by the fastigium of disease. “The cultural world,” he charged, “is but one monstrous sickroom where the air is filled with anguished groans and where, on the beds, suffering writhes in all its forms.” “We stand,” he continued, “in the midst of a serious spiritual national disease, a sort of black plague of degeneration and hysteria.” He saw himself besieged in the last stronghold of order and sanity by the forces of corruption and decay. His attacks on degenerate culture were (successfully) calculated to spark controversy and are often formulated in extreme terms, replete with invective and hyperbole. It is therefore important to avoid falling prey to the primarily rhetorical devices of what Ben-Horin calls the furor Nordaucius and to go to the sources of his arguments.

To be a degenerate by Nordau’s standards was, quite simply, not to subscribe to his view of cultural progress. Given its narrowness and precision, this was, of course, a distinction earned with no great effort. This view, moreover, gave his arguments a pseudoscientific leverage which he exploited to the hilt. Those who were at variance with his theories did not just approach the matter from a different perspective; rather, they suffered from some physical or psychological disorder which Nordau was usually quick to name and describe. His opponents were those unfortunates who “do not see things as they are.” Since he equated degeneration and lack of conformity to his notion of cultural

progress, his favorite terms of abuse were ones like "atavistic" or "re-
gressive." All so-called modern art which depicted itself as the wave of
the future was, in fact, a retreat into the outmoded past. "Degenerate
art and literature," he claimed, "are from beginning to end but the
rehabilitation of all that civilization up to this time has stamped out as
injurious and vicious."15 Nordau was indignant that what he regarded
as perversions of the meanings of some of his favorite terms could take
root in modern parlance. "The 'freedom' and 'modernity,' the 'progress'
and 'truth' of these fellows are not ours," he said of the degenerates.
"We have nothing in common with them. They want debauchery, we
want work. They want to drown consciousness in the unconscious, we
want to strengthen and enrich consciousness. They want streams of
thought and giddiness, we want attention, observation, and knowledge.
Everyone can recognize true moderns and clearly distinguish them from
the swindlers who call themselves modern in this way: whoever preaches
lack of discipline is an enemy of progress and whoever worships his ego
is an enemy of society."16 In the course of his treatment, Nordau listed
numerous manifestations of degeneration. An increase in the consump-
tion of alcohol and in the rates of insanity and suicide in modern life
indicates degeneration on a social level, as does a decrease in population
growth. The individual degenerate is marked by pessimism, dissatisfac-
tion, mysticism, emotionalism, egotism, unwholeness of personality,
unsociability, impulsiveness, lack of thought, incapacity to adapt, blindly
destructive tendencies, scepticism, and disrespect for tradition.

Despite his blunderbuss approach to the phenomenon of cultural de-
cline and degeneration, however, Nordau viewed the problem in simple
and unified terms. He spoke of "a common sickness of the age" (Zeit-
krankheit) which was everywhere the same although distinguished by a
variety of names. "The multiplicity of designations," he was convinced,
"only covers a unity of evils."17 Modern degeneration was the product
of cultural exhaustion. The pathology of the degenerate is characterized
by a number of peculiarities: "a brain which cannot function normally;
from this follows weakness of the will, lack of attention, the predomi-
nance of the emotions, lack of knowledge, an absence of sympathy, lack
of participation in the world and with humanity, atrophy of the con-

1895): 538.
cepts of duty and morality. Although these images of sickness are, clinically speaking, considerably dissimilar, they are, nevertheless, only different manifestations of a single fundamental principle, namely, exhaustion.” In identifying cultural decline with a lack of energy, the so-called abulia, Nordau was in agreement with many of his contemporaries, including some of those who supposedly suffered from this ailment. Just as vital energy was the driving force of evolutionary progress in his vision, so, conversely, its absence signified degeneration. Because progress was a question of biological and moral—not just aesthetic—concern, Nordau regarded the problem of degeneration as one of great import. Fin-de-siècle did not just mean a preoccupation with one style rather than another. If allowed to continue, it meant the end of civilized life and Nordau suggested the term fin-de-race as a more accurate description.

Nordau viewed degeneration as the outcome of the tension he saw between the scientific conception of the world and existing society. “The contradiction between our views and all forms of our culture . . . is what makes pessimists and sceptics of us,” he argued. “This is the deep split which runs through the entire cultural world. Because of this irreconcilable discord we lose all joy in life and all aspirations.” Such contradictions have always existed, however, he admitted, and the question why they became dominant precisely at the end of the nineteenth century remained. Nordau’s answer to this question reveals a curious contradiction in his thought. Although a child of Western, urban, scientific culture, he condemned the rapid growth and dissemination of technology, especially as found in large cities, as the historical cause of degeneration.

The last fifty years have witnessed a tremendous growth in the pace and sophistication of urban life due to the development of technology, he explained. The human body and mind, however, have undergone no comparable progress, and consequently man has been outstripped by his culture. During this time, the population of Europe has doubled, but the sum of its labors has increased tenfold. All manifestations of degeneration “are the consequences of conditions of tiredness and exhaustion. These, in turn, are the result of contemporary civilization, the

21. Lügen, p. 35.
vertigo and whirl of our speeding life, the greatly increasing number of sensations and organic reactions . . . which today are crowded together in a given timespan.”22 In the modern metropolis especially, Nordau accused, life becomes hard to live. He described cities as parasites that feed on the juices of the countryside and their inhabitants as “a type of humanity destined to go under.”23 Relying on his evolutionary scheme, he was, nevertheless, optimistic about the future. Degenerates will not survive the demands made on them by modern conditions and will die off. A new type of man adapted to the speed and rigor of urban life will arise.

Nordau’s attitude towards degenerate culture thus followed from his liberal, rationalist outlook. He thought of progress in terms of vital energy and of degeneration in terms of its absence. From his early perspective degenerate culture was no match for the insights of the truly scientific view; from ours, he missed the mark completely. Although his impressive powers of observation permitted him to portray accurately what we now recognize as the beginnings of modern culture, his overly confident rationalist attitude deceived him as to its importance. His view of nationalism, although related in many ways to that of degeneration, was no such easy matter. The ambivalence of the position into which nationalistic considerations forced him reflects a problem which has, in many ways, become more pressing and less resolved now than it was when Nordau faced it.

* * *

In November of 1895 Theodor Herzl, author of the recently published The Jewish State, came to see Nordau. He had been sent by an acquaintance who was worried by the state of mind revealed by the proto-Zionist concerns of the book and who hoped that Nordau, in his capacity as psychiatrist, would take Herzl on as a patient. The result of this encounter was, as the story has it, that after three days of conversation and argument, Nordau exclaimed to Herzl, “If you are insane, we are insane together. Count on me!”24 Two years later the first Zionist Congress was held in Basel with Herzl and Nordau as its chief leaders. Unlike Herzl’s thunderclap conversion to Zionism, however, Nordau’s adherence to the cause was won only gradually. The rising tide of anti-

22. Entartung, 1:68.
24. Anna and Maxa Nordau, Max Nordau: A Biography (New York, 1943), p. 120.
Semitism, breaking forth in the pogroms of Eastern Europe, the Drey-fus Affair, and personal experiences with anti-Semitic antagonism, fo-cused Nordau’s previously so cosmopolitan attention on the problem of the Jews. Like many fin-de-siècle literati, Herzl went from decadence to nationalism in one fell swoop, finding in nationalism a cure for the boredom and effeteness of his former life as well as a solution to the Jewish question. Nordau, however, who rejected decadence to begin with and who had independent criteria by which to judge proposed solutions to the problem, was not so easily won over. His adherence to Zionist ideals was tenuous, especially as these grew more conservatively nationalistic. This is not to say that he did not on occasion subscribe to the tenets of conservative nationalism, but rather that there was always a tension between his Zionist interests and his liberal thought which he was never able to resolve. Rather than renounce one or the other position, he chose to split his thought in two. He spent the rest of his life straddling a decision he refused to make and was forever confronted in one role by his double in the other. One might perhaps, to paraphrase a term in vogue towards the end of his life, call Nordau a Zionist manqué.

That becoming a Zionist was a major transition in Nordau’s life is clear. Ben-Horin, who wishes to argue that Zionism and liberalism are, in Nordau at least, perfectly compatible, indeed one and the same thing, is forced to argue for the unity of Nordau’s pre-Zionist and Zionist thought. He speaks of the fictitious split between what he calls the “One and the Other Nordau, the social scientist and the Zionist,” and concludes that, “Contrary to the opinion of those who spoke of the ‘great riddle’ which Nordau flung at his readers when he went from the Lügen [The Conventional Lies of Civilization (1884)] to the Basel Congress, it is the present writer’s hypothesis . . . that this ‘great riddle’ is rather the solution to the enigma of Nordau’s Zionism.”25 This view is untenable. Nordau himself was aware that he was diverging from the main course of his thought and embarking on a new journey to the extent that he became a Zionist. His references to the problem of anti-Semitism and to Judaism in general before he became a Zionist are few and of no particular importance.26 The nature of the break in his life represented by

26. Examples include: Lügen, p. 2; Entartung, 1:325; Milliardenlande, 2:229; The Drones Must Die (New York, 1897), p. 221. Although Nordau described anti-Semitism as one form that degeneration assumed, especially in Germany, he later repeatedly denied that it was a problem of cultural decline and thereby cut the link between his pre-Zionist and
his conversion to the Zionist cause was recognized by a friend who described him as he was in 1895. Nordau, he recalled, "was still filled with the spirit of his Konventionellen Lügen der Kultur menschheit and his recently published Entartung (1893), so that his attitude was thoroughly rationalist, materialist and anti-religious. At that time Nordau wanted neither to be Hungarian, as his birth certificate demanded, nor to recognize the inescapable Jewishness of his blood. . . . I gained the impression then that it would be impossible ever to convert Nordau to an appreciation of things Jewish."27 This view was shared by Nordau himself.28

Nordau, the Zionist, often said things which directly contradicted views held by Nordau, the liberal. The man who had once regarded the French Revolution and its principles as the salvation of the Jews and, indeed, of all men from the bonds of the past, who had said, "the words 'freedom, equality, and brotherhood' sounded and immediately the thousand-year-old wall around the Jewish ghetto sank into the ground and those who had been locked within by racial hatred now saw the whole wide world and all of life open before them," now regarded these standards in a different light.29 The history of the emancipation of the Jews, complained the Zionist, has not been that of increasing brotherhood, but of rationalism. "This rationalism is constructed out of pure logic without regard for living feelings. . . . The emancipation of the Jew represents another equally automatic use of the rational method. . . . And so, in France, the equality of the Jews was proclaimed, not out of brotherly feeling for the Jews, but because logic demanded it."30 The liberal rationalist had once thought that man's fate is determined by forces outside of himself and had considered the question of nationalism and concluded:

Europe will not be able to avoid the great and violent sundering of nationalities for much longer. . . . The twentieth century will hardly draw to a close without wit-

Zionist thought in this respect. As a Zionist, he argued that anti-Semitism is a result of the natural propensity of man to dislike that which is different from himself, that it would therefore not disappear by itself, and that it could only be resolved by evacuating the Jews from Europe. See his Zionistische Schriften (Cologne and Leipzig, 1909), pp. 199, 228, 356ff.

29. Milliardenlande, 2:150.
necessing the end of this world-historical drama. Before then a large part of Europe will experience trouble and spill much blood. It will see many atrocities and crimes committed; one will rage against peoples and mercilessly crush races. . . . These are gloomy perspectives which open before us, yet they cannot frighten those who have reconciled themselves to the harshness of the common laws of life. Life is a battle and the power to live also gives the right to live. . . . Let him who is sentimental wipe his eyes at the sight of the downfall of a people; those who are knowledgeable realize that it disappeared because it did not have the strength to survive.\(^{31}\)

Now the Zionist handed in his season ticket to the world-historical drama and proclaimed that he and those Jews who agreed with him “have broken with the traditional suffering attitude of our race and have decided to forge our destiny here on earth through the exertion of all our might. Let the final result be what it may, we already feel the blessing of the deed in us.”\(^{32}\)

Another important respect in which he diverged from former opinions was his revised consideration of nationality and his acceptance of the \textit{völkisch} idea. The liberal who could argue that nationality was merely a question of language (and who by his own polyglottal standards was a true cosmopolite) and that there was no such thing as the psychology of the crowd, but only that of the individual, changed his mind. He spoke of racial feeling, of psychobiological connections between men, and brought himself to declare that “a people is an individual of a higher order.”\(^{33}\) The otherwise perfectly assimilated Jew now rejected the assimilation of Jews into existing society as making of the Jewish people a \textit{Luftvolk} without its own territory.\(^{34}\) Jews no longer gained culture by becoming assimilated, but denied their true culture by rejecting their membership in the Jewish \textit{Volk}. In this respect Nordau stood in the mainstream of Zionist thought which was inextricably bound up with the conception of the \textit{Volk} also shared by the Pan-Germans, the Pan-Slavs, the anti-Semites, and other nationalistic movements of the time. Zionism, affirmed Nordau, “is a national-Jewish movement which I ought to join because I belong to the Jewish race, to the Jewish people.”\(^{35}\) Nordau’s view of socialism also changed along with his relation to Zionism. Where he had once thought of socialism

\(^{31}\) \textit{Paradoxe}, p. 296.

\(^{32}\) \textit{Zionistische Schriften}, p. 250.


\(^{35}\) \textit{Zionistische Schriften}, p. 369.
as a product of mystical thinking, hiding behind a façade of scientific terminology, but springing from the same psychological sources as religion, he now accepted its goals and aspirations. It was no coincidence, he asserted like the anti-Semites but with opposite intent, that Marx and Lasalle were Jews. He still rejected the socialist movement for practical reasons, because of its latent anti-Semitism, but viewed it with theoretical sympathy as compatible with Zionism.36

Why did Nordau detour from his liberal philosophy, embrace nationalism and take his own Jewish heritage out of the closet where he had hung it so many years before? Nordau himself never discusses the answer to this question and any attempt to do so must be based to some extent on implications and hints in his writings. The source of his nationalistic detour lies, it seems, in a sense of dissatisfaction with his liberal world view which plagued him at the middle of his life. He saw Zionism in some sense as a cure both for the cultural degeneration he had so violently and yet ineffectually lambasted and for a personal feeling of sterility and rootlessness.

Shortly before his conversion to Zionism, Nordau had written a play entitled The Shackles of Fate. It deals with a young man who moves to Berlin from the provinces hoping to achieve success. Aping the opinions and mores of the ruling elite, he almost manages to attain political position and to marry an heiress. His progress upwards, however, is arrested by the actions of his bumbling, countrified mother and the discovery of an illicit and fruitful relationship with a servant girl in his youth. The elite whose favor he has been courting turns against him, most implausibly, not because of his indiscretions and background, but because he is dishonest and attempts to keep these hidden. Finally, after a change of heart he marries the servant girl and takes her and his mother back to the provinces to live honestly. He understands in the end that these two, whom he once regarded as his shackles, are really his anchor.

Nordau, it is likely, regarded his own life and especially his self-imposed alienation from his Jewish heritage analogously as a Zionist. He said of his fellow Zionists that they wished to be homeless wanderers no longer, but was certainly thinking of himself as well. On the occasion of publishing an article in a Jerusalem periodical, he wrote that “the thought that these lines will be printed and read in Jerusalem, in the vicinity of the synagogue wall, causes my heart to beat violently. It is to

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no avail that I arm myself with all my scepticism and even the blague of the boulevards.” He described himself with vocabulary formerly reserved for the degenerates and contrasted this with the excitement of his newly rediscovered national identity. “That the very thought of Jerusalem,” he continued, “can call forth this effect in a man whose entire life has been one long striving towards liberation from all unproven and unprovable traditions demonstrates triumphantly once again how much we remain Jews at the bottom of our hearts, even those of us who during the greatest part of our lives have lost every feeling for living Judaism.”37 Finally, he lamented the fact that he could express himself better in Latin than in the language of the father whose Jewish name he refused to bear as a young man. “In Zionism,” wrote one observer shortly after Nordau’s death, “he found new responsibilities, new content for his life, but, above all, he found himself.”38 Nordau himself indicated that as a Zionist he had found a role which was not among his many others. “The time for mere aesthetic fine talk strikes me as being quite over,” he wrote. “We owe it to ourselves, our people and the world to deal with practical questions through sober, positive, practical work.”39 Thus, in an age of nationalism and rootedness, the cosmopolite Nordau discovered that he was not immune to the needs sensed by the coevals on whom he otherwise heaped such vigorous disdain.

On a cultural level as well, Nordau thought of Zionism as a remedy for degeneration. Since Western Jews were a predominantly urban population, the problem of the degeneration inherent in metropolitan life was an important one for Nordau. He fully accepted the Zionist ideal of a return to the land as its solution.40 His views of non-Zionist, assim-
lated Jews are peppered with images and vocabulary from his attacks on degenerate culture. “The emancipated Jew,” he charged, “is rootless, unsure in his relations to his fellow creatures... He uses his best efforts to conceal carefully his inner nature since he is afraid that his nature might be recognized as Jewish... Internally he is crippled, outwardly he is artificial.”41 He also went so far on occasion as clearly to identify assimilated Jews with the degenerates.42 Most important for the connection between degeneration and Zionism was Nordau’s view that the Zionist ideal offered a source of cultural energy. Images of rebirth and youth crowd his treatment of Zionism. Zionism “awakens Judaism to new life,” it “renews Judaism and makes it young again.”43 He looked into the future and saw an age when Jews, freed from their bonds, would “develop spiritually, morally, and even physically with an energy which will leave the world astonished.”44 In this respect, he succumbed to the same fascination that nationalism exerted over such “degenerates” as Barrès, Swinburne, and D’Annunzio.45 Barrès, for example, went from his “culte du moi” to a concern with “l’energie nationale,” from egotistical aestheticism on the model of the Duc des Esseintes to conservative nationalism. He thought that through alliance with his Volk he would find a source of energy which would help him overcome the inertia and lethargy of fin-de-siècle culture. Nordau was well aware of this development in Barrès’s thought, but as a liberal found it reprehensible.46 His concern with the dangers of degeneration coupled with his reawakened national consciousness led him away from his liberalism towards a similar type of nationalism. As a liberal, he would have agreed with one Barrès scholar’s interpretation that “a wild and frenzied sense of decadence is the spiritual foundation of Barrèsian nationalism... Modern nationalism is the other side of modern nihilism.”47 As a liberal, however, who became aware of the limitations of his own system and as a Jew confronted with the growth of anti-Semitism, he agreed with Barrès to a certain extent.

As a liberal, Nordau had no cause to perceive any contradiction be-

42. Zionistische Schriften, pp. 303, 393.
43. Zionistische Schriften, pp. 72, 283.
44. Zionistische Schriften, p. 306.
47. Ernst Robert Curtius, Maurice Barrès und die geistigen Grundlagen des französischen Nationalismus (Bonn, 1921), p. 228.
tween rationalism and a concern for the vital energy of society. Reason, he thought, was the manifestation of such energy in human terms. The man with the greatest energy was also the man capable of the greatest exercise of rationality and restraint and hence potentially a citizen of the highest, most progressive society. Reason stood in direct proportion to energy. Nationalism showed him for the first time that this might not be the case, that reason might hamper the free flow of energy, or, rather, that only other ideals, ones that were far from rational, could evoke the energy which seemed to be so lacking. Zionism gave Nordau the choice between reason and energy and as a nationalist he chose the latter. In fact, his basic commitment was always to energy. Reason, even in his most liberal theory, was never more than the tip of the mountain, one of nature's tools for her own self-fulfillment, the human equivalent of the speed of the horse or the claws of the lion. In this sense, his liberalism was not much of a bulwark against the nationalist onslaught. In many ways, some of Nordau's presuppositions made much more sense in the nationalist context than they had in the liberal.

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Nordau's intellectual career might be viewed analogously to that of the fin-de-siècle aesthete who, like Barrès, went from decadence to nationalism. According to such a reading, Nordau started on the outside of degenerate culture and, despairing of solving its problems through means no longer pertinent, ended up in the same camp as some of his enemies. This view would involve a radical simplification, however, for regardless of how great a beating it had suffered, the Nordauian liberal system had not been vanquished. As he had done with the nineteenth century as a whole, he was also to try to fit Zionism into the framework of his liberal outlook.

Nordau strove to adapt Zionism to the general schema of evolutionary progress. Rather than following a straight line from the egotism of contemporary society to the altruism of that of the future, the course of things now made a detour through nationalism. "If nationalism avoids going astray, then it is a natural phase in the process of development from barbaric egotistic individualism to altruism and a free humanity—a phase the justification and necessity of which only he who has no understanding of the laws of organic evolution and absolutely no sense of history can deny."48 Many of Nordau's pronouncements on

Zionism indicate that he thought of the movement in terms of further evolution towards a goal which had not changed even when he joined its ranks. Assimilated Jewry "bears the seed of its decline within itself," and has no future.\textsuperscript{49} Zionism, however, consists of precisely those aspects and elements of Judaism which have the strength to live, which are vital and capable of further development. The attainment of the Zionist ideal will represent only one further step in the progress of all mankind. "An oppressed, persecuted, despised Judaism among anti-Semitic peoples is of no value for mankind; a free, strong, vital Judaism will be a useful coworker in the progress of humanity."\textsuperscript{50} Even the concept of the \textit{Volk}, that most irrational of ideas which Nordau now accepted, was viewed through the spectacles of science. It was not always a question of mere emotional sympathy and psychobiological bond, but one of positive knowledge as well. We must conduct extensive statistical investigations of the Jewish people to determine what it eats, what diseases it catches, what its mortality rate is, and so on, he said. "One has to know all such things if one wants really to know a people. As long as one does not, all that one wishes to do for it will be a groping in the dark and all that one says about this people will be at best poetry and at worst empty talk."\textsuperscript{51}

Indicative as well of the liberal attitude which ran as a subcurrent to even his most conservatively nationalistic ideas, was the position he adopted in the most important internal struggle of the movement, that which opposed "political" to "cultural" Zionism. Cultural Zionism, which found favor primarily among the Jews of Eastern Europe and which was represented by Ahad Ha'am, emphasized the necessity of a rebirth of Jewish culture rather than the founding of a Jewish state. When such a state did eventually come into being, it should accordingly be, in Ahad Ha'am's words, "a Jewish State and not just a State of Jews."\textsuperscript{52} The political Zionists, mostly Western Jews led by Herzl and Nordau, believed that the important task at hand was to give Jews an economic and political foothold and thus the same chances of survival and development as other peoples. Their vision of the Jewish State contained very little that was specifically Jewish and was, in fact, a species of liberal utopia, a Switzerland of the Middle East, which could accom-

\textsuperscript{49} Zionistische Schriften, pp. 20–21.
\textsuperscript{50} Zionistische Schriften, pp. 11–12.
\textsuperscript{51} Zionistische Schriften, p. 114.
\textsuperscript{52} Kohn, ed., Nationalism, p. 79.
modate any other people as easily as the Jews. The political Zionists also opposed what was known as Hoveve Zion, or "practical" Zionism which, although opposed by Ahad Ha'am, was largely favored by Eastern Jews. Practical Zionism supported small-scale colonial efforts in Palestine, while the political Zionists thought that legal and political guarantees should first be obtained so that settlement could be accomplished on a large scale.

Nordau felt assured that, by allying himself with the political variety of Zionism, he remained closer to the liberal tradition. His attacks on cultural Zionism and his disdain for the mystical and irrational views of Eastern Jews demonstrate this. He distinguished between the Zionism of enlightened, educated Western Jews and that of their brethren of the East. One sympathizer of political Zionism contrasted "Herzl's modern Zionism" with "constricted spiritual Zionism," and another concluded that for Nordau "Zionism meant less a return to Judaism than a self-determination of the Jewish being."53 Nordau disliked in cultural Zionism what he saw as an obscurantist and mystical approach and a form of conservative nationalism which looked into the past for its origins rather than ahead to its future. He had little regard for a man like Ahad Ha'am who, in contrast to all that Nordau had written earlier against egotism, could turn Judaism into a subset of the Nietzschean philosophy. Nordau could not possibly agree with someone who argued that at the base of Jewish national consciousness lay the idea of the Jewish superman and who conceived the goal of cultural Zionism to be the creation of a "Supernation" which would produce "Supermen."54

It is ironic that history has not borne out Nordau's opinion of cultural Zionism. Many recent observers have praised Ahad Ha'am for his liberal, humanitarian leanings and have charged that the Herzlian version of Zionism led to chauvinistic excesses.55 Political Zionism, it has been asserted, contained tendencies which led to the conservative, chauvin-

istic, militaristic, so-called "Revisionist" Zionism of Vladimir Jabotinsky which has been influential in more recent Zionist attitudes.

In an article that is seminal for an understanding of the period, Carl Schorske has analyzed Herzl's Zionism along with two other contemporary movements, Pan-Germanism and Christian Socialism, with which it shared its völkisch-nationalistic approach, in terms of the breakdown of liberalism, or, as he calls it, "politics in a new key." He writes of the leaders of these movements that they "grasped a social-psychological reality which the liberal could not see. Each expressed in politics a rebellion against reason and law which soon became more widespread."56 Aware of the incompatibility of even political Zionism with the basic tenets of his liberal creed, Nordau ultimately refused to retune his instrument to the new key. He found himself caught between his personal commitment to Judaism and his intellectual convictions, which warned him against pursuing the course of action indicated by Zionism. Nationalism he accepted in the end only as a necessity. As a Zionist, he replied to an objection which he himself might have advanced in a more liberal mood. The crime of the century is nationalism, his imaginary opponent accuses; evolution leads mankind away from small, hostile nationalities into larger, peaceful groupings. Do you want to counteract this evolutionary trend and create a new nationality? This argument sounds attractive, replies Nordau, but go tell it to Rumanian and Russian Jews and they will answer, "But we have to eat somehow."57

The question of whether Zionist nationalism was merely the mirror image of Pan-German and anti-Semitic nationalism preoccupied Nordau. The man who normally did not hesitate a second in choosing between conflicting opinions had difficulties coming to a conclusion on this matter. Zionism is not just anti-Semitism in reverse, he thought at one point; anti-Semitism is not the cause, but merely the occasion for Zionism. Elsewhere, however, he acknowledged that Zionism sprang from the same völkisch-nationalistic ideas as anti-Semitism.58 It would not, however, he often reassured himself, be guilty of the excesses to which similarly based movements fell prey. "Young Jews," he announced, "enter into the national and racial thought of the day without

58. Zionistische Schriften, pp. 22-23, 177.
adopting the grotesque exaggerations and mad consequences thereof, and proudly acknowledge their own Jewish nationality and race.”

When Herzl died in 1904, Nordau was the obvious successor and was asked to assume the responsibilities of his colleague. He refused, to the consternation of some Zionists, and thus let the mantle pass to David Wolffsohn. When Wolffsohn was replaced in the Zionist leadership by representatives of East European practical Zionism in 1911, Nordau left the movement as well. He spent the war years in Spain, exiled from Paris as an enemy alien, in isolation from the movement, and he returned to it afterwards only with reluctance. He travelled to London and found the organization dominated by the practical Zionists who represented for him the antithesis of Herzl’s vision of political Zionism. He, in turn, was regarded as a venerable but outmoded figure from the past. His conflicts with those then in command were numerous and violent and he died a few years later in 1923 without having witnessed the reestablishment of all that he had fought for. Political Zionism was not taken up again until the thirties and then only in the extreme interpretation of Jabotinsky and his followers.

During the last decade and a half of his life the liberal again gained the upper hand. Books such as The Biology of Ethics, The Meaning of History, and The Essence of Civilization stand firmly in the tradition of his earliest philosophical speculations and contain no hint of his Zionist activities. Reaffirming his individualistic, rationalist ethic in the age of irrational ideology and mass movements, they give evidence, as utter intellectual anachronisms, to how deeply planted his liberal world view was. Undoubtedly his disillusionment with the direction of the Zionist movement played a role in this. Also important was his revised view of the question of the vital energy of society which had always been a fundamental concern, whether as a liberal or as a Zionist. There are signs that his concern with cultural decline had become much less pressing. Apparently he now had evidence that the optimism he had expressed at the end of Degeneration concerning the future of Western culture had been justified. Society no longer suffered from a lack of vitality; the opposite was true. In 1915 he wrote of contemporary life

59. *Das Judentum im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, p. 23. One of the most extreme statements of the contrast between Zionism and liberalism comes from Morris Cohen who writes of Zionism that “It claims to be a solution of the Jewish problem; and its emphasis on Palestine rests on a nationalist philosophy which is a direct challenge to all those who still believe in liberalism.” *The Faith of a Liberal* (New York, 1946), p. 327.
that "It surrounds us with so many heroic deeds that it forces man to be amazed. At the time when decadence was the latest aesthetic and moral fashion, weaklings who were acutely aware of their enervated state sighed movingly after 'professors of energy.' Mankind does not need these any longer. It has grown beyond their lessons. It now has hoards of energy such that earlier ages have never seen their like; it has of this most precious of all goods so much that it can and does wantonly waste it. Even the most arid and wizened pedant . . . is forced to acknowledge with sparkling eyes that we live in a proud age of human greatness."  

The need for Zionism in his cultural schema was no more. Nordau's continuing adherence to its tenets can therefore be understood only on personal grounds, not on intellectual or philosophical ones.

Ben-Horin wishes to deny the existence of any tension between Nordau's liberalism and his Zionism. His argument, however, misrepresents Nordau excessively. "Although Zionism as such may be compatible with such non-solidaritarian ideologies as supernaturalism, political and social conservatism and radicalism, irrational chauvinism, cultural isolationism," he admits in his book Max Nordau, "this study of the meaning and purposes of Nordau's Zionism indicates that in him Zionism is profoundly solidaritarian in nature." Just what he means by his interpretation of Nordau's so-called "solidaritarianism" he reveals elsewhere. "The meaning of 'human solidarity,' " he defines, "now emerges as indeed the essential union of mind and love, science and ethics, means and morals, intelligence and compassion. To attain this union is to raise life to the level of humanity . . . . Solidarity or living on the level of the mind-love continuum, I suggest, is the equivalent of sainthood for modern man. It was Max Nordau's answer to the challenge and the threat of ruggedness [i.e., egotism] wedded to mysticism." To accept the suggestion that the apostle of logic, reason, clear-thinking, and consistency would acknowledge this interpretation of his work as accurate is difficult. Ben-Horin completely vitiates the sense of problem and urgency which surrounded Nordau's thought. If all men were divine, the world's problems would not exist, Ben-Horin's Nordau argues. Undoubtedly; but this is hardly an empirical proposition. It follows from our definition of divinity. To suggest that Nordau was not concerned with problems that were real, debatable, and difficult is to mar unnecessarily the

60. Mensch en und Menschliches, p. 86.  
61. Ben-Horin, Max Nordau, p. 211.  
memory of a man who prided himself on being, above all, an intellectual pugilist.

The opposite point of view has been argued here. There was a split between Nordau, the nineteenth-century liberal, and Nordau, the nineteenth-century Jew. At the beginning of his career, the Jew bowed before the liberal. The liberal’s search for answers to cultural degeneration, a sense of personal sterility, and, concurrently, the deterioration of the condition of the Jews at the end of the century, however, put an end to this artificial harmony. Demanding attention, the Jew forced the liberal into what, to concoct an image, might be called a spiritual white marriage. Standing outside fin-de-siècle culture, Nordau analyzed its manifestations in the same terms as did many of its proponents. In some respects he also agreed with his enemies on the nature of the solution. Nationalism presented itself to the liberal rationalist as well as to the decadent as a source of missing vitality. For the liberal, however, unlike his opponent, nationalism was a detour, an emergency measure, its expediency due only to the gravity of the situation. For the Jew, on the other hand, it was an end in itself. It represented a guarantee that the heritage to which he had finally returned would not be vanquished.