

Mimicry and Denial: Proliferating Identities in Howard Jacobson's The Finkler Question

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ABSTRACT: Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question* examines anti-Semitism in the contemporary United Kingdom, in particular Jewish life besieged by anti-Zionist antagonists. More specifically, the novel, with satire and gallows humor, explores the specific character of a postmodern anti-Semitism. In a society of fluid identities and self-reinvention, archaic prejudices reassert themselves tenaciously, and Jacobson explores possible Jewish responses to this predicament.

CELEBRATED AS THE WINNER of the 2010 Man Booker Prize, *The Finkler Question* by the prolific British author Howard Jacobson is a darkly comic novel that presents a satire of a segment of Jewish life in contemporary London in the context of rising anti-Semitism and an increasingly bitter anti-Israel discourse. The humor derives significantly from the portrayal of the obsessive protagonist, Julian Treslove, a non-Jew who desires desperately to become Jewish, despite his several Jewish acquaintances who complicate his stereotypical expectations. He envies, admires, and competes with the novel's eponymous hero, Sam Finkler, who is, for Treslove, so much the model Jew that the family name becomes Treslove's private placeholder for "Jewish," hence the running gag that the perplexing "Finkler Question" serves as a circumlocution for the ominous "Jewish Question." The text's humor is constrained, however, by reports of spreading anti-Semitic violence as well as by deaths, of both Finkler's wife, Tyler (a convert to Judaism), and Malkie Hofmannsthal, the wife of half a century to Libor Sevic, a former teacher of both Treslove and Finkler: the triangular friendship of the three men forms the core of the novelistic world. At stake therefore is comedy as gallows humor, on at least two distinct levels, one political and the other existential: the looming threat to the durability of Jewish life in England and the tenuousness of life as such as two main characters lose their life partners. It only makes sense then that, despite the witticisms and incessant joking around, the book concludes in an epilogue with a meditation on the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead.

The Finkler Question is more than a portrait of Jewish life in contemporary London, although it would be a misreading to marginalize the Jewish content in order to read the text solely in terms of the structures of friendships, the complexities of male rivalries, or the affective economies of commitment and loss. These are obviously the materials that Jacobson utilizes, but he does so in order to engage in an extended meditation on the character of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, and the dialectic between them. The novel offers an interrogation of ethnic identity (which Treslove tries to achieve) as much as it satirizes the genre of the ethnic novel altogether. Jacobson mobilizes stereotypes in order to parade them in all their insufficiency, whether as ethnographic descriptors or as the stuff of serious literature. What is of special interest in the novel, however, is how the multiplication of signs of identity counterintuitively destabilizes ethnicity in order to contribute to the overall satire in this anti-ethnic novel. Precisely this is the core of the novelistic dynamic, since the three central male figures are all embedded in the culture industry of sign production: Sevic was formerly a successful Hollywood journalist, Finkler writes popular books that explain the practical advantages of classical philosophy (*The Socratic Flirt: How to Reason Your Way into a Better Sex Life*),¹ and Treslove, formerly of the BBC and administrator of modest cultural festivals, works by providing entertainment as a celebrity impersonator. Incessant image production is detached from material labor as much as from financial spheres; the novel takes place instead in a world where information is disseminated, identities are reinvented, and images are reshaped—in other words, a space of textual proliferation through chains of imitation and exclusion, mimicry and denial—all in order to explore the tenuous status of Jews in modern England. What *The Finkler Question* provides, therefore, is an inquiry into the cultural logic of a specifically postmodern anti-Semitism.

This central problematic, postmodern anti-Semitism, erupts in the foundational event of the novel. After one of the regular dinners with Sevic and Finkler, Treslove walks home through midnight London, turning off Regent Street into the area of “the small wholesale fashion shops of Riding House and Little Titchfield Streets, surprised as always at the speed with which, in London, one cultural or commercial activity gave way to another” (30). The stage is set for a cultural instability or, better, multiplying semiotic paradigms, compounded by an Oedipal backdrop: he recalls how his father once owned a shop there, and this patriarchal bond amplifies the prominence of *Hamlet* references in exchanges with Finkler. Lost in these recollections, Treslove is suddenly assaulted, the Ur-trauma of the narrative: “It was as he was looking at the violins, lost in these tristful recollections, that he was attacked, a hand seizing him by his neck without warning” (31). It transpires so rapidly that there is barely any detail of the physical event, as he is simply overcome by the violence of the assailant: “It was all over too quickly for him to have a say in the matter. He was grabbed, thrown, eviscerated.” We do, however, learn, and Treslove knows, or imagines that he knows, that the attacker was a woman.

So much for the event itself. The narrator then proceeds with an ironic “But that wasn’t the half of it” (31). Much more was at stake than Treslove’s bruises and the loss of his wallet, phone, and watch. It was not the physical event alone that mattered but its interpretation or, more specifically, the language associated with the attack: “It was what—reliving the event in the moments afterwards—he believed she had said to him. He could easily have been wrong. The attack had been too sudden and too brief for him to know what words had been exchanged if any.... [T]he

¹ Howard Jacobson, *The Finkler Question* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), 270. Hereafter, page numbers for citations from this book are provided in parentheses in the text.

words he thought she had spoken to him might have been no more than the noise of his nose breaking on the pane or his cartilages exploding or his heart leaping from his chest. Nonetheless, a collection of jumbled sounds persisted and began to form and re-form themselves in his head” (31–32). This stark separation between the act of the attack and the linguistic attributes he associates with it—and, moreover, unreliably—marks the postmodern condition, as signified and signifier push in different directions. More important than the material loss is the cultural imagination, and we find Julian Treslove demonstrating quite an imagination indeed. He ponders whether the attacker had truly demanded “Your jewels,” as if to imply that he would be wearing rings and necklaces like a woman. This hypothesis gives way to an alternative account in which Treslove believes she might have uttered, “You’re Jules,” as if the assailant had intentionally targeted him and, implausibly, had known the nickname that his mother had used. His ruminations continue through several more reversals until he hits upon the reading that the mugger who had robbed him had addressed him simply as “You Ju” (33). The basis of the novel is then the staged separation of deed and word, world and language, as the semiotic marker of the event displays a high degree of indeterminacy, and in this linguistic condition it is precisely the phenomenon of anti-Semitism and its corollary circumlocution, the Finkler Question, that emerge. Once addressed as a Jew, the non-Jew Julian proceeds to pursue his discovered-imagined Jewish identity on an itinerary through contemporary London Jewish life, itself besieged by the Middle East debates.

That itinerary leads through multiple venues of cultural production: this is a novel about the cultural sphere. The novel opens outside the BBC with Treslove’s recollection of his past employment there and proceeds, by the end of part 1, to a Seder in Sevic’s apartment, yet—a further indication of cultural indeterminacy—a Seder held not in the springtime but in September to accommodate an aging family member: culture is available apparently for voluntary reinvention. Hence, Treslove’s itinerary includes a series of locations of culture or culture industry: a piano bar in Eastbourne, a London theater, the Groucho Club in Soho, Albert Hall, a public debate in Holborn, and a newly established Museum of Anglo-Jewish Culture on Abbey Road, no less, in the hope of drawing in Beatles tourists through a link to the story of Brian Epstein, their manager during a key period. At stake is, constantly, cultural representation as evidenced by the proliferation of signs, and this is truer for no one more than Treslove. His good looks are ascribed, early on, to a symmetry of appearance (26), a physiognomy that emphasizes a principle of doubling, as if one were never enough. Multiplicity enters especially in the phonemic repetition in the names of the girlfriends in Jules’s past or his imagination: June, Judith, Juno (58), all evidently confirming his obsessive association with Jewishness. Similarly, the American television producer Kimberly, who meets him at a Jane Austen party where he had been hired to impersonate Colin Firth as Mr. Darcy, mistakes him for Dustin Hoffman, then for Adam Sandler, and finally Billy Crystal: her guess list confirms his own sense of performing Jewishness (69). Treslove emerges as the master of self-invention and reinvention: he has fathered two sons with two different women, stylizing each failed relationship in the terms of Italian operas, one Puccini and one Verdi, with one son named Alfredo and the other Rodolfo. In the backstory we learn how he would confuse the visiting times when the sons were young, so the two half brothers grew up knowing each other, as did their mothers. The seemingly neat subjectivity construction of the Oedipus-Hamlet paradigm invoked at the outset, in Treslove’s recollection of his father, cedes ground to expansive

reproduction of semiotic references that suggest an absolute primacy of malleable culture: post-modernism unbound.

Yet *The Finkler Question* ferrets out how, in the midst of this seemingly emancipatory cultural flow, archaic modes of essentialist identification reemerge, impervious to the culture's self-understanding as post-traditional. In the midst of textual multiplication, a regressive process of fixed identity ascription takes place, as old stereotypes reassert themselves and, in the case of Treslove's sons, do so with a certain Oedipal malignancy. Discussing Treslove's sudden reinvention as Jewish, the brothers try to sort it out with their mothers.

“Interesting, though,” Rodolfo said. “If I discover I’m half Jewish will I suddenly become half clever?”

Janice ruffled her son's hair. “You don't need *him* to make you half clever,” she said.

“Half rich, then?” (107)

The traditional stereotypes of Jews as clever and rich reappear stubbornly, even though all stable identity had seemingly dissipated into the torrent of cultural reinventions. Prejudice unexpectedly survives postmodernism's promise of unencumbered reinvention: despite the end of grand narratives, some malicious narratives continue, perhaps in part because postmodernism promised in particular the end of the grand narrative of emancipation. Rodolfo's viciousness toward his father is definitely postemancipatory. The freedoms of post-traditional identity invention are, evidently, too hard to bear because of an antithetical need for the firm and grounded certainty that only thoughtlessness provides. There is suddenly a nostalgia for referentiality that returns in the grotesque form of name-calling. Nomadic paradigms of cerebral mobility and cultural adaptation, here the wandering Jews, face a direct assault from an epistemologically regressive notion of indigeneity, for which outsidership is an irreparable flaw, indeed a crime against humanity.

Yet anti-Semitism disrupts the postmodern separation of word and deed established in the initial attack in an additional way. Although *The Finkler Question* plays itself out in the hermetic world of cultural production, violence nevertheless intrudes into that world. At stake is an attack on cultural invention as such (the assault takes place, tellingly, while Treslove is staring at the window of a violin shop). The violence constrains culture and threatens it, in ways that lead some to confront it and others to deny it. The primacy of culture risks ending when attacks, including violent attacks, proliferate as much as do texts and representations.

The novel marks that transition, between culture and violence, when Treslove, pondering the imagined anti-Semitic character of the attack he experienced, tries to determine the plausibility of his hypothesis and the frequency of such incidents. “Let's say he had been . . . looking like Horowitz, or Mahler, or Shylock, say, or Fagin, or Billy Crystal, or David Schwimmer, or Jerry Seinfeld, or Jerry Springer, or Ben Stiller, or David Duchovny, or Kevin Kline, or Jeff Goldblum, or Woody Allen, or Groucho Fucking Marx, was that any reason for her to attack him?” (80). Treslove's question marks the move from the cultural sphere of proliferation into thought-ending action and violence. To determine the likelihood of this step from word to deed Treslove turns to his computer, a further cultural marker of the moment: “Not expecting to find anything post-thirteenth-century Chelmno, he looked up ‘Anti-Semitic Incidents’ on the internet

and was surprised to find upwards of a hundred pages. Not all of them round the corner from the BBC, it was true, but still far more in parts of the world that called themselves civilized than he would ever have imagined” (80). The reference to thirteenth-century Chelmno was intended, presumably, to suggest that anti-Semitism belongs to a distant medieval past; in fact, Chelmno was the site of a Nazi extermination camp (Kulmhof) near Lodz, Poland, where more than 300,000 victims, mostly Jews, were killed. To give Jacobson the benefit of the doubt, one could claim that the Chelmno reference is intended to indicate Treslove’s ignorance and his compartmentalizing separation of the Holocaust from “anti-Semitic incidents.” He is in any case “surprised” to find so many current reports, which he reads, country by country, with growing signs of discomfort: Venezuela, Argentina, Canada, France, Germany, and England. Yet when Treslove, agitated by this proliferation of violence reaches out to Finkler, the latter dismisses it with the relativization: “it’s not exactly Kristallnacht, is it?” and “Ring me when a Jew gets murdered for being a Jew on Oxford Street” (82).

That murder does not take place in the fictional world of *The Finkler Question*, but Sevic meets an old flame who “told him, without tears, without false sentiment, that her twenty-two-year-old grandson had been stabbed in the face and blinded by an Algerian man who had shouted ‘God is great’ in Arabic, and ‘Death to all Jews’” (153), and this had indeed taken place in England, if not on Oxford Street. The separation of word and deed introduced in the original attack—Treslove’s seemingly arbitrary or imagined connection between the assault and anti-Semitism—begins to lose its credibility. There is moreover a reported incident of an attack by a Jewish settler in the West Bank against an Arab family. In all these cases, violence at the margins pushes against the cultural sphere at the center. Treslove responds, initially at least, with denial, too invested as he is in the world of cultural production to attend to the reality of actions. Pessimistic Sevic chooses another route, a fatalistic acceptance of the violence through the claim that he cannot change the way of the world. Neither displays the capacity to act outside of language (and Sevic ultimately opts for suicide). But Jacobson breaks the roadblock by moving the topic away from these “incidents” and toward the broader responses to anti-Zionism, which dominates the second half of the novel. This discussion mediates between the experience of violent threats and the discourses of Jewish self-understanding. The distinctive feature of Jacobson’s treatment of the topic is that the initial warning about anti-Semitism comes from outside the core of the Jewish community: from the non-Jew, or imaginary Jew, Treslove. Ultimately however it will be up to Finkler to articulate the strongest answer.

The novel’s response to anti-Semitism proceeds through Finkler’s engagement with anti-Zionism, which he initially embraces only eventually to surpass it. After criticizing Israel in a television show, he receives an invitation to join a group of like-minded Jews, which he eagerly accepts. He is, however, motivated significantly by the career-serving opportunity to meet with some cultural celebrities: “Most of the professors he knew already and didn’t care about, but the actors represented a new scaling of the heights of fame. . . . There was a celebrity chef on the list too, and a couple of stellar stand-up comedians” (113). Yet the meetings turn out to be less exciting: “As always he was disappointed to see so few of the illustrious actors and comedians,” and “only academics with nowhere else to go attended regularly” (144), a delicious commentary on engaged professors. Finkler’s aspiration for cultural self-promotion through participation in organized anti-Zionism does not succeed. Instead, the engagement leads him to slide into an explicitly

anti-Semitic discourse when he adopts the phrase “[t]he imputation of anti-Semitism leaves us stone-cold” (140), an identifiable borrowing from Harold Sherwood’s 1919 tract *Democracy or Shylocracy*, a genealogy that does not trouble most of the anti-Zionists.

Yet Finkler does grow troubled by the group’s mediocrity and its low intellectual quality; he is a philosopher after all and dissatisfied with a general lack of logical rigor in the anti-Israel discourse. At a turning point in his development, he criticizes a non-Jewish, British anti-Zionist who claimed to admire “the sublime Jewish ethic” (235) only to complain that Israel did not live up to it. For Finkler the contradiction is too great. There is racism in all countries: “So what empowers racists in their own right to sniff out racism in others?” (236), a question all the more germane since Finkler designates the critic as “a bleeding-heart, conscience-pricked representative of the very Gentile world from which Jews, through no fault of their own, have been fleeing for centuries” (236). Finkler’s argument takes on a new character here, criticizing anti-Zionism not in terms of a superior claim to indigeneity—who was in the Holy Land first—but with reference to the history of displacement and refugee status. Mobility is a legitimate feature of the human condition; indeed, immovability points to a propensity for a rigid dogmatism as well as a lack of emotion. Therefore, after his declaration, “mainly what he saw was humanity trapped in conviction, like rats in rat traps” (236), an apt description of ideological self-assurance, antithetical to the capacity for rapid self-invention in the cultural world. *The Finkler Question* is an interrogation of the temptation of such traps and the opportunities to escape them. 