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Joyce, Bloom, and Max Nordau

MARILYN REIZBAUM, *Unfit: Jewish Degeneration and Modernism*.
London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.
\$130.00 hardcover; \$39.95 paperback.

Rafael Hernandez

Marilyn Reizbaum's new book, *Unfit: Jewish Degeneration and Modernism*, arrives at a bright moment in literary studies where matters of embodiment are enjoying renewed attention. In Joyce Studies, too, the body and its myriad expressions have been the focus of much scholarly discourse of late. Essays on Joyce and disability (e.g., Colangelo, Lawrence, Quirici) and monographs on transatlantic modernism and disability (e.g., Bolt, Linett) match the scholarly interests of Reizbaum's newest work. Thus, *Unfit* is in good company among other recent publications and conferences that marry Joycean scholarship with studies in disability and embodiment. Beyond its considerations of Joyce, *Unfit* also probes a wide array of modernist aesthetics. Reizbaum positions herself within an impressive genealogy of Joycean scholarship, Jewish studies, medical history, and embodiment studies, dictating an important turn in modernist studies towards a broader geographic, temporal, and generic scope.

Unfit asks a straightforward (though, to be sure, not simple) question: how and why was Jewishness at the center of degeneration discourses—both in its expression in art *and*, crucially, in the scientific writing that circulated and created the mythos? Reizbaum is interested largely in the aesthetic and social history of Jewish identity (often characterized by her playful and interesting conceit of “Jew-ish” aesthetics). Thus, she configures Jewishness throughout her book as a racial marker, political identity, or social location rather than a solely religious devotion or practice. *Unfit* seeks to better understand how the Jewishness of such influential degenerationists as Cesare Lombroso, Max Nordau, Magnus Hirschfeld, and Otto Weininger contributed to degeneration discourse's latent or obvious anti-Semitism. However, rather than merely meditating on the irony of Jewish thinkers' role in promoting an antisemitic master narrative, Reizbaum handles with deep attentiveness the rationales and motivations that each writer may have had in their commitment to degeneration theory.

Two distinct and noteworthy methodological projects help Reizbaum arrive at her central thesis. First, Reizbaum is undeniably a “new” modernist scholar. That is, she insists on a scholarly view of modernism unbound by once-conventional geographic and temporal limits. Following Mao and Walkowitz, then, Reizbaum punctures the boundaries of “genre, geography, and generation” to explore a variety of modernism's forms and textures (5). Importantly, this comes from the subject matter itself for, as she convincingly demonstrates throughout her book, “the trope of Jewish degeneration is commensurate with [a] more expansive modernism, traversing boundaries of all kinds, national, generic, and temporal” (13-14). Secondly, Reizbaum makes a case for reading autobiographical influence in the urtexts of degeneration theory. Or, at the very least, given Lombroso, Nordau, Hirschfeld, and Weininger's Jewish backgrounds, Reizbaum asks the obvious question others have seemingly avoided: can't we link their own Jewishness to their medical discourse? Where some ask how we can divorce the philosopher from the Jew, Reizbaum ponders the “difference it makes when we don't” (9). Following this question, Reizbaum takes great care in

exploring how we might consider these writers' shared background without compromising our methodologies and drawing blanket claims of racial determinism.

Reizbaum legitimates the broad scope of her subject material by underscoring degeneration's discursive elasticity and by convincingly tracing the "roots and routes" of degeneration narratives from their origins in nineteenth century Europe to their most remote cultural disclosures. Following the introduction, a chapter dedicated to the "avatars" of degeneration surveys the lives and works of Lombroso, Nordau, Hirschfeld, and Weininger. Subsequent chapters are organized by disparate pairings of aesthetic objects and their connection to one of the four thinkers. One might question why Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) is paired with Pat Barker's *Regeneration* (1991) or how the art photography of the modernist Claude Cahun casts a line to 1990s portraits by Adi Nes. Nevertheless, Reizbaum's early observations of degeneration's endurance and legacy followed by her thorough close readings leave the reader with no doubt regarding such pairings. The influence of each thinker is tightly explained, broadening our understanding of their work, before making way for thoughtful and original close readings of films, novels, and photography.

In Chapter One, Reizbaum provides a rich exploration of how Lombroso, Nordau, Hirschfeld, and Weininger's Jewish backgrounds may have influenced their contributions to degeneration discourse. In her introduction, Reizbaum hints at a parallel project to cultural analysis that defines most of her book—that is, an attempt to resuscitate a Jewishness from the annals of degeneration history and "remedy the effacement of degeneration's 'roots and routes' in Jewishness and modernism" (3). Reizbaum concedes that in doing so, she trudges dangerously close to a kind of racial determinism. However, she succeeds in avoiding the issue, pitching her consideration of these thinkers' Jewishness as a kind of "Foucauldian genealogy," without reducing their contributions and influence to their ethnic background—the identification of a collision between scientific history, anti-Semitism, and political turmoil that was the background for so many of these writers (8).

In the second chapter, Reizbaum explores how Cesare Lombroso's ideas of criminal degeneracy overwrite the crime films of American director Mervyn LeRoy. As the book's first case study, this section joins Jewishness and degeneration, corroborating Miriam Hansen's influential argument about cinematic vernacular modernism. Reizbaum draws a direct line of influence from Lombroso to LeRoy by focusing on films that rehearse the Lombrosian concepts of the gangster, social reform, and the evil child. This chapter stands on its own as a wonderful study of degeneration's influence on early Hollywood, but it also assists Reizbaum with doubling down on her commitment to broad understandings of modernism.

Reizbaum's most exciting chapter centers on Joyce and degeneration. At the root of this chapter are the resonances between Joyce, Leopold Bloom, and the degenerationist Max Nordau. After discussing Jewish performances of masculinity in Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, Reizbaum turns to Joyce. Following the influence of notable Joyce scholars such as R. Brandon Kershner and Vita Martina Plock, Chapter Three tracks Leopold Bloom's interest in physical fitness as, in part, a remedy to his "unfitness." Reizbaum aligns Bloom with Nordau in his flirtation with Zionism and his sense of an outcast Jewish identity. Moreover, Reizbaum argues, Nordau's treatises on Muscular Judaism as a vehicle for Jewish regeneration mirror Bloom's taking up of Eugen Sandow's self-development fitness routine. The body and nation-building metaphor has been thoroughly traced by Todd Samuel Presner, whose work informs Reizbaum's; however, Reizbaum's unique contribution rests in her deft exploration of Zionism and Muscular Judaism in the novel. For Reizbaum, Zionism and Nordau's Muscular Judaism shape more than just Bloom's character and inner life. They illuminate the very nature of *Ulysses* itself. Outside of Bloom's varied performances of masculinity—Nordau's "new Jew"—Reizbaum makes a compelling case for understanding *Ulysses* as "a novel about fitness" writ large (137). Indeed, Reizbaum's close reading posits that "the interplay between assimilation and Zionism" is not merely a feature of the novel, but a central tension that propels

Ulysses forward (136). Furthermore, Nordau's turn to Zionism, she affirms, greatly influenced Joyce, resounding in the novel's tropes of homecoming, fitness, and the key mythic/historical figures who mediate their textual interplay (i.e., Balfour, Parnell, Casement, Moses).

To close the book, Reizbaum turns to the influence of Magnus Hirschfeld, the German sexologist and medical photography pioneer, on the modernist art photograph. Reizbaum's coverage of Hirschfeld's influence is followed by two wonderful, extended close readings of the photographic works of Claude Cahun and Adi Nes. Literary scholars will especially enjoy the ways that Reizbaum folds in discussions of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and the studies in abstraction of Vanessa Bell. The book's coda briefly examines Otto Weininger's influence on Jewish degeneration discourses, specifically their "terminus" or full realization in Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. She configures Weininger here in relation to Slavoj Žižek's study of Jewish jokes and Freudian theories of humor. In a compelling coda, Reizbaum engages with the tricky issue with which scholars of degeneration grapple—that tendency to *backshadow*, as Neil Levi puts it, to read the degenerationists and "see the future already inscribed within them" (24). But Reizbaum's "terminus" here registers differently as both a "dead end" for degeneration myths and a "locus of their extension" beyond the moment of modernism, conventionally speaking (20).

Unfit confirms Reizbaum's place in a genealogy of scholars, from Sander Gilman to Todd Samuel Presner, interested in Jewish embodiment as well as her own prominent influence in Joyce Studies in *James Joyce's Judaic Other* and *Ulysses: Engendered Perspectives*. The most interesting critical discourse is Reizbaum's engagement with Neil Levi, perhaps her closest intellectual counterpart due to their shared interest in Nordau's Jewishness. Levi also considers Nordau's Jewishness as a motivation for his work on degeneracy. Although Reizbaum references Levi's consideration of Nordau's "self-reflexive" rationale (38),¹ more time spent cohering their ideas would have enriched *Unfit*'s critical contribution even more. Nevertheless, Reizbaum's work will stand in excellent company with Levi and other scholars of Jewish degeneration.

Unfit: Jewish Degeneration and Modernism makes a strong case for revisiting the "degeneration" concept to understand more fully its strange and seemingly limitless mobility. Previous monographs on degeneration (e.g., Pick, Greenslade, Arata, Karschay) have yet to center Jewishness. Reizbaum not only centers it but seriously considers the Jewishness of degeneration's progenitors as well. In *Unfit*, Reizbaum layers the tricky-to-define "degeneration" with refreshing nuance and care, reminding us of how "the Jewish subject is imbricated culturally, translationally, and formally within modernism" (3).

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Works Cited

Levi, Neil Jonathan. *Modernist Form and the Myth of Jewification*. New York City: Fordham University Press, 2014.

Reizbaum, Marilyn. *Unfit: Jewish Degeneration and Modernism*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.

¹ Levi discusses Nordau's own Jewishness and his desire to "[displace] properties commonly associated with Jews onto modern artists" (44).