

The Un-Americans

Joseph Litvak

JEW, THE BLACKLIST,
AND STOOLPIGEON
CULTURE



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TO LEE



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Sycoanalysis

An Introduction

A sycophant will always say to himself that in biting what has some value he might thereby make a little profit.

—ALAIN BADIOU, “The Word ‘Jew’ and the Sycophant”

Lillian Hellman recounts the following exchange with her lawyer just before what would become her famous “uncooperative” testimony—her refusal to name names—in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1952:

“Don’t make jokes.”

“Make jokes? Why would I make jokes?”

“Almost everybody, when they feel insulted by the Committee, makes a joke or acts smart-aleck. It’s a kind of embarrassment. Don’t do it.”¹

Hellman took her lawyer’s advice and maintained an impeccably dignified, resolutely *noncomic* bearing throughout her appearance, the fame of which derives from her courageous refusal to “cut [her] conscience to fit this year’s fashions.”² For all the deserved fame of her testimony, however, Hellman’s repudiation of mere show in favor of “the good American tradition” made her a fairly typical uncooperative witness.³ Accusing HUAC and its many informers—the “cooperative” or “friendly” witnesses—of a contemptible *trendiness*, Hellman pointed to a larger irony, whereby the congressional investigation of alleged Communist influence in show business itself became an exercise in show business: a

media spectacle—one of the first of the postwar period—acted out before newsreel cameras and then, a little later, with the triumph of a new technology, under television’s menacing (if distracted) gaze.⁴ The converse irony is that Hellman, like so many other left-wing figures from Hollywood and Broadway, emphatically identified herself with the very Law that was investigating and ultimately persecuting her. To put oneself on the side of this Law, to align oneself with a certain *righteous left*, moreover, one did not need to avoid the comic as rigorously as did Hellman. Even those uncooperative witnesses who “ma[d]e jokes” and “act[ed] smart-aleck” did so, as Hellman’s lawyer explained, because they felt “insulted” or “embarrassed,” their “embarrassment” and their wounded pride testifying to a seriousness, at least about themselves and their reputations, that in turn bespoke an underlying respect for the norms of self-presentation in the postwar American public sphere.

Not that HUAC was appeased by these displays of respect. The committee itself, I propose in this book, was so enraged by jokes and other manifestations of the comic that it was prepared to end the career of anyone who used them, or who might have used them, to “act smart-aleck,” even if that behavior, originating in embarrassment, revealed a fundamentally law-abiding disposition. In its investigative, and punitive, zeal, HUAC deployed a hermeneutic of suspicion too implacable to be taken in by mere assertions of patriotic probity, or by the kind of joking that pays tribute to seriousness by dreading the loss of its own face. Behind both straight seriousness and comic seriousness, HUAC detected the clear and present danger of forces whose radicalness consisted in their lying beneath and beyond the saving disciplinary reach of insult and embarrassment, and that, since they could not be rehabilitated, had to be destroyed. It was just such destruction, in fact, that the practice of blacklisting attempted, and in large part achieved. Imposed by the committee on the film and television industries, which proved all too eager to enforce it, the blacklist, in effect from 1947 to the mid-1960s or later, constituted a purge of all those who would neither discuss their politics with HUAC nor “give” it the names of their fellow Communists (names that it already had).⁵ As the following chapters will show, however, the committee’s official project, the investigation of Communism, served mainly as a screen for its even more obsessive and therefore much less allowable business: going after those smart alecks who, without even having had

to appear before it, embarrassed it by their very being—by embodying not just the comic, but the whole scandalous, indeed criminal, conspiracy of smartness, acting, pleasure, happiness, imitation, mobility, and play, centered in yet reaching well beyond Hollywood and New York, that I will be delineating here under the rubric of *comicosmopolitanism*.

HUAC was not about to be put off the scent of this conspiracy by the uncooperative witnesses' frequent professions of patriotism, religiosity, and other forms of good citizenship. If comicosmopolitanism is more often a matter of unintended meanings and of performative implications than of explicit political and ethical belief, this covertness corresponds exactly to the committee's relentless suspicion that jokes were being made at the nation's expense even when, as in the case of Lillian Hellman's testimony, or of her work as a playwright and screenwriter, nothing funny seemed to be going on. As far as HUAC was concerned, in other words, making jokes was not merely a tactical gaffe that uncooperative witnesses might have avoided if they had just not let themselves get so flustered, or if only they had had a lawyer as astute as Lillian Hellman's. Rather, their making of jokes, or, more precisely, their quasigenetic propensity to make them, whether or not they ever did, was the reason the uncooperative were subpoenaed by HUAC in the first place. Once in front of the committee, they had to be made examples of, in the pedagogical sense, since they already exemplified the operations of an obscure and sinister international network of comedians, next to which "Communism" itself might aptly be said to function as a Red herring, its legendary drabness and humorlessness conveniently drawing attention away from the more driving preoccupations of those who made such a spectacle of investigating it.⁶

Even before the uncooperative witnesses arrived in front of the committee, *in order to* arrive in front of it, that is, they had to have been perceived as insulting *it*, essentially and fundamentally, by representing the "un-American activity" of an intolerable enjoyment: an enjoyment that—insofar as it seems to bear the distinctive mark of the Jews, who have long been thought to have a particular gift both for the comic and for cosmopolitanism, and who have almost as long been resented for "controlling" American mass culture—might as well be called en-Jewment.⁷ HUAC's acting chairman, Congressman John Rankin of Mississippi, was less circumspect in his Jew-hatred than some of his colleagues on the committee (which included the by no means philo-Semitic Richard Nixon). In a

statement that has become a set-piece of blacklist historiography, Rankin revealed the “real names” of various Hollywood figures—not Communists, but merely liberals—who had signed a petition criticizing the committee’s encroachment on the First Amendment:

One of the names is June Havoc. We found out from the motion-picture almanac that her real name is June Hovick.

Another one was Danny Kaye, and we found out that his real name was David Daniel Kaminsky.

Another one here is John Beal, whose real name is J. Alexander Bliedung.

Another one is Cy Bartlett, whose real name is Sacha Baraniev.

Another one is Eddie Cantor, whose real name is Edward Iskowitz.

There is one who calls himself Edward Robinson. His real name is Emmanuel Goldenberg.

There is another one here who calls himself Melvyn Douglas, whose real name is Melvyn Hesselberg.⁸

When uncooperative witnesses make jokes or act smart-aleck in the course of their almost always bullying and unnerving interrogation by HUAC, these local transgressions merely confirm what the committee and other enforcers of Americanism suspect, and prosecute, as a prior degeneracy: a “subversive” tendency much broader and deeper than any particular political ideology, as Rankin’s attack on the Hollywood liberals shows; a “subversive” tendency, indeed, of an ontological or even racial kind.⁹

Madeline Gilford, the wife of a blacklisted actor and a blacklistee herself, relates how, posing as an NBC secretary, she called a Syracuse grocer, then terrorizing NBC by threatening to boycott products advertised on shows with blacklisted personnel:

“We’re not gonna carry those products [Kellogg’s cereals and Pet Milk], if you’re gonna have those people on your shows. You people down there in New York may think it’s all right, but it isn’t all right with us up here in the country. I told him [the network executive] you can’t have those people on like George Kaufman and Sam Levinson,” and he proceeded to name only Jews, so “you people down in New York” was another euphemism.¹⁰

Kaufman and Levinson were hardly Communists, but they did not need to be: it was enough that they were comic denizens (one as an author,

the other as a performer) of the New York–Jewish world of show business. If the defenders of “the country” were insulting, this is because they felt insulted by the very presence, “down there in New York,” and in all sorts of less obvious cultural and academic nooks and crannies, of what they apprehended as virtually a *race of jokers*, far larger than the considerable parade of witnesses whom, in an exercise of synecdochic justice, HUAC summoned before itself.

For its part, the committee itself was as synecdochic as the justice it meted out, so fashionable, as Hellman perceived, was the anticommopolitanism it represented. Here, for instance, is Congressman George Dondero of Michigan, not a member of HUAC but what we might call a fellow non-traveler:

The art of the isms, the weapon of the Russian Revolution, is the art which has been transplanted to America, and today, having infiltrated and saturated many of our art centers, threatens to overawe, override and overpower the fine art of our tradition and inheritance. So-called modern or contemporary art in our own beloved country contains all the isms of depravity, decadence, and destruction. . . .

All these isms are of foreign origin, and truly should have no place in American art. . . . All are instruments and weapons of destruction.¹¹

Like the Syracuse grocer, Congressmen Dondero and Rankin, less wary than most of their colleagues, come close to articulating the inarticulable fantasy behind the anti-Communist fashion show of which HUAC, before and after Joseph McCarthy, was the nation’s principal impresario: a fantasy of revenge against those who had inflicted on it, and on the nation as a whole, the massively insulting joke—depraved, decadent, destructive—of comicosmopolitanism and en-Jewment themselves.

To be a cooperative witness, as I have noted, one had to do more than just renounce Communism: one had to recite for HUAC the names of one’s associates in the Party, thereby becoming what I will be calling a *sycophant*—literally and archaically, one who shows the fig, or, by extension, one who points the finger at fig-thieves, or, by further extension, an informer.¹² In keeping with the more familiar understanding of the term, the sycophant, the object of *sycanalysis*—the discipline introduced and unfolded throughout these pages—certainly flatters the committee, mitigating the insult that the uncooperative and their fellow-traveling,

indeed all-too-nomadic, kind have already inherently inflicted upon it. An uncooperative witness, of course, is one who refuses to inform. But behind this refusal lies the image of another refusal, even more outrageous in the minds of those who would avenge it: a refusal of that American *seriousness* that HUAC sees itself as both protecting and, since its members, after all, belong to the House of Representatives, representing. I have suggested that anyone capable of feeling insulted and embarrassed, as many uncooperative witnesses undoubtedly were, cannot have relinquished all claims to seriousness, at least in relation to him- or herself. But despite their often explicit endorsement of this value, and despite their not infrequent recourse to the language of dignity, pride, and strength, the most uncooperative of the uncooperative witnesses—the least righteous of the left—incur the wrath of the committee by rejecting its very rhetoric of national self-presentation: by enacting a comedy grounded not in the anxious imperative to cover or to recover from embarrassment, but, on the contrary, in an indifference to embarrassment and therefore to the norms of citizenship that it presupposes.

Consider, for instance, this excerpt from the HUAC hearing of the actor Lionel Stander in 1953:

MR. VELDE [THE COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN]: Let me tell you this: You are a witness before this Committee—

MR. STANDER: Well, if you are interested—

MR. VELDE:—a Committee of the Congress of the United States—

MR. STANDER:—I am willing to tell you—

MR. VELDE:—and you are in the same position as any other witness before this Committee—

MR. STANDER:—I am willing to tell you about these activities—

MR. VELDE:—regardless of your standing in the motion-picture world—

MR. STANDER:—which I think are subversive.

MR. VELDE:—or for any other reason. No witness can come before the Committee and insult the Committee—

MR. STANDER: Is this an insult to the Committee?

MR. VELDE:—and continue to—

MR. STANDER:—when I inform the Committee I know of subversive activities which are contrary to the Constitution?

MR. VELDE: Now, Mr. Stander, unless you begin to answer these questions and act like a witness in a reasonable, dignified manner, under the rules of the Committee, I will be forced to have you removed from this room.

MR. STANDER: I am deeply shocked, Mr. Chairman.¹³

The “subversive activities which are contrary to the Constitution” turn out to be those of the committee itself, whose members Stander characterizes as “a group of fanatics who are desperately trying to undermine the Constitution of the United States by depriving artists and others of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (643).¹⁴ Anticipating this punch line, Congressman Velde would avert its “insult” by threatening the witness. But this is an insult that pays a hidden compliment: implicit in Stander’s disapproval of the subversive activities perpetrated by the committee is a regard for the law and the nation, albeit a more benign law and a more democratic nation than those the committee purports to defend. Stander was not the only uncooperative witness to accuse it of the very un-Americanism it claimed to be investigating. “You are the non-patriots, and you are the un-Americans, and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves” (789), Paul Robeson would reproach his interrogators; after laughing during his testimony, and being warned, “This is not a laughing matter,” Robeson replied, “It is a laughing matter to me, and this [hearing] is really complete nonsense” (774). However provocative and even antagonistic, Robeson’s attempt to shame the committee, like Stander’s attempt to charge it with subversion, or like Hellman’s tactic of smearing it with fashionability, still plays by the rules of a national style of seriousness that the committee itself enforces, far more aggressively and vigilantly than any particular ideology, anti-Communist or otherwise. For Robeson to describe the hearing as a “laughing matter” is for him to dismiss it as “complete nonsense”—as though the comic were equivalent to the merely absurd. Similarly, for Stander to invoke the Constitution against the committee is for him to confront one earnestness with another.

The real insult to the committee is Stander’s refusal to “act like a witness in a reasonable, dignified manner.” The insult is indeed one of manner rather than of matter, of form rather than of content. What the committee can’t stand about Stander is his *acting*—not *that* he is acting, but *how* he is acting. Photographed by newsreel and television cameras,

broadcast on radio, conducted in “executive [i.e., closed] sessions” that the committee does not hesitate to publicize, HUAC’s investigations of show business are themselves show trials, with elaborate, if unwritten, rules about what one should “act like” and how one should carry out that performance.¹⁵ On the national stage presided over by the committee, Lionel Stander has the audacity to deviate from the decorum of a theatrical orthodoxy that no Stanislavsky or Strasberg ever maintained more rigorously. For the conventions of testimony are nothing less than the conventions of citizenship: HUAC’s rules of testimonial etiquette rule over the performance of Americanness itself. Leftist and liberal theorists of citizenship value it as the potential basis of a democratic polity, a realm apart from and salutarly larger than the exclusionary circles of the tribe and the community.¹⁶ But even this inclusive democratic space cannot constitute itself without both collective assent to the sovereignty of the national, or transnational, order (citizenship as collaboration) and collective vigilance against “abuses” of the freedom of expression (citizenship as informing).¹⁷ Even in its most benign forms, that is, citizenship entails a perpetual readiness to bear witness in the name of the law, to give evidence about oneself and others. Dispensing with the blandishments of a more *civil* or more *civilized* inflection of citizenship, HUAC has the rude merit of laying bare the irreducible complicities of citizenship tout court, whereby every citizen necessarily has within him- or herself at least a little bit of the collaborator and at least a little bit of the informer.¹⁸

In *I Married a Communist*, Philip Roth’s 1998 novel of the blacklist, one of the characters says of the epidemic of betrayal in the United States during the years between 1946 and 1956:

It was everywhere during those years, the accessible transgression, the *permissible* transgression that any American could commit. Not only does the pleasure of betrayal replace the prohibition, but you transgress without giving up your moral authority. You retain your purity at the same time as you are realizing a satisfaction that verges on the sexual with its ambiguous components of pleasure and weakness, of aggression and shame: the satisfaction of undermining.¹⁹

I would modify this lucid account in two ways. First, I would argue, and do argue below, that, while the betrayal of which Roth’s narrator speaks was indeed “everywhere” during the immediate postwar decade, it has

pervaded American life both before and after that decade as well. Second, I would argue, and do argue below, that the quasisexual transgression of betrayal was and remains not merely permissible but *obligatory*. Enforcing the *rules* of sycophancy, HUAC put on display the *rule* of sycophancy: a regime of transgression-as-moral-authority that has yet to show any signs of waning.

For now, let us note that when Lionel Stander deviates from the rules of American sycophancy, and defies its rule, he does not do so merely by “acting funny”: in that case, he would reaffirm the opposition between seriousness and the comic from which the former derives its power—including the power to distinguish between itself and its opposite. The witness’s offense, rather, consists in acting seriousness in such a way that his audience can no longer know whether to take him seriously or not: “I am deeply shocked, Mr. Chairman”; “Is this an insult to the Committee?”—or, a little later in the hearing, “I have never been more deadly serious in my life” (644). Not only does Stander thus contaminate seriousness with apparent mock-seriousness: he adds injury to insult by drawing Velde, the committee chairman, into a scene that, with its farcically interrupted dialogue, overlapping malentendus, and bad puns (“regardless of your standing in the motion-picture world”), plays like something from a Marx brothers movie—here lies the authentically pernicious Marxism—with Stander in the Groucho role and Velde as Margaret Dumont’s dimly indignant dowager. Casting Velde as his straight man, Stander casts both his straightness and his manhood into question.²⁰ In the context of this travesty, the chair’s exhortation to “act . . . in a reasonable, dignified manner” can only call attention to his own acting, whose effects of reasonableness and dignity, nowhere more histrionically emblazoned than by indignation itself, thereby assume the campy guise of unwitting self-parody.

Velde does not, as it happens, make good on his threat to have Stander “removed from this room.” Instead, after their comical pas de deux together, he pronounces a more exquisitely indefinite sentence: “It is the order of the Chair and this Committee that you be continued under subpoena, and the investigation and hearing be continued in your case until a future date, at which time you will be notified by our counsel” (653). For Stander, who had never joined the Communist Party, “the blacklisting was complete,” and would last another ten years.²¹ He does not help

his cause when, near the end of his testimony, he says, "My name is Stander. It was adopted . . . because, unfortunately, in feudal Spain my ancestors didn't have the protection of the United States Constitution and were religious refugees" (652). Velde's reply: "I asked you a question . . . which had nothing to do with religion" (652). The chair is only half-right: the "questions" put to Stander have to do not with his Judaism but with his Jewishness. He has been summoned before HUAC, and will be kept dangling under its subpoena, not because of his religious beliefs but because of the racial difference that they stand in front of, as if to protect a refugee.²² They of course fail to protect that difference: that deviant performance style (as pungent as a strange perfume) that no adopted name or constitutional right can ever fully legitimate. Try as he might to seek dignifying cover in a democratic American tradition, one of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," Stander's particular way of pursuing happiness—comically, by mocking the putatively reasonable and the dignified—remains radically unassimilable, even to that necessarily capacious tradition, let alone to the far narrower Americanism promoted, with a vengeance, by HUAC.

In making jokes and acting smart-aleck, Stander may betray an embarrassment, an insultability—which is to say, a pride—that in turn bodes well for his susceptibility to the essentially normal, normalizing charms of citizenship: not just to its rights but to its *rectitude*. Only those whose narcissism has been wounded, after all, can know what it means to want to protect it, even if protecting it means taking shelter within the humbling apparatus of the state. "I stand here struggling for the rights of my people to be full citizens in this country," Paul Robeson told HUAC. "And they are not" (778). Stander's stand may be as patriotic, in its joking, smart-aleck way, as Robeson's shaming laughter. But the very same joking, smart-aleck behavior may also, and simultaneously, betray a shamelessness that thwarts all efforts to bully the joker and smart aleck into conformity with the dominant national style: a shamelessness that Robeson, too, evinces when he says of the cameras documenting his appearance before the committee, "I am used to it and I have been in motion pictures. Do you want me to pose for it good? Do you want me to smile?" (774). While relying heavily on the respectabilizing discourse of rights, Robeson tropes on the figure of the black trickster; while accusing HUAC of subversion, Stander practices it by making jokes and acting

smart-aleck in a way that aligns him with a strand of Jewish culture even harder to domesticate than the one represented by his religious refugee ancestors. Refugees, after all, seek refuge, whether they find it or not; and if they are *religious* refugees, they may hope for the special deference that American culture tends to reserve for religiosity (provided, of course, that it is the right kind of religiosity).²³ Stander may stand instead with those insolently, incorrigibly comic Jews whom Hannah Arendt, after Bernard Lazare, calls “conscious pariahs”:

Modern Jewish history, having started with court Jews and continuing with Jewish millionaires and philanthropists, is apt to forget about this other trend of Jewish tradition—the tradition of Heine, Rahel Varnhagen, Sholom Aleichem, of Bernard Lazare, Franz Kafka, or even Charlie Chaplin. It is the tradition of a minority of Jews who have not wanted to become upstarts, who preferred the status of “conscious pariah.”²⁴

Not that the pariahs, according to Arendt, have an exclusive claim to comic Jewishness. The upstarts, or the parvenus, as she also calls them, have evolved their own repertoire of Jewish—or perhaps more accurately, non-Jewish—jokes:

It is true that most of us [refugees] depend entirely upon social standards; we lose confidence in ourselves if society does not approve us; we are—and always were—ready to pay any price in order to be accepted by society. But it is equally true that the very few among us who have tried to get along without all these tricks and jokes of adjustment and assimilation have paid a much higher price than they could afford: they jeopardized the few chances even outlaws are given in a topsy-turvy world.²⁵

Arendt is writing in 1943. But even in the post-Second World War American scene that is the focus of the present book, the Jewish outlaws, the conscious pariahs, are an embarrassment to society. Indeed, a certain postwar American desire to forget European fascism—as if there had only ever been two antithetical political ideologies, Democracy and Communism—may have helped, if not exactly to reenact it here at home, then at least to replicate its regime of “adjustment and assimilation,” with all its attendant “tricks and jokes.” If, accordingly, most Jews in America in the 1950s were “ready to pay any price in order to be accepted by society,” one of the prices paid was, precisely, sycophancy, by which I

mean the betrayal of the outlaw relatives: a betrayal of the comic as well, not despite the sycophantic parvenu's recourse to the tricks and jokes designed to win society's approval, but because of it.²⁶

Any parvenu by definition practices a kind of pseudocomedy: the techniques of ingratiation obviously have the comic aim of *pleasing*; but eagerness to please entails the triumph of eagerness *over* pleasure, where pleasure is always compelled to pay tribute to the tension, fear, and threat of *displeasure* driving the eager performer. But this book is not about the parvenu per se. It is about the category of parvenus—so large a category as to constitute a condition, by no means limited to Jews—who are best designated as sycophants in the “classic” sense of the term. And the sycophant does more than just purvey an anxiously false comedy, a cringing imitation of comedy. He or she does that, to be sure, but, as I have suggested, sycophancy is not mere flattery of the master: to qualify as a sycophant, one must also inform on the members of one's own group—inform on them for the purpose of destroying them. When Lionel Stander tells HUAC that he has never been more “deadly serious” in his life, his assertion, however sincere, is seriously compromised by the comic performance in which it is embedded. The uncooperative witness turns seriousness into comedy; the cooperative witness turns comedy into seriousness. For “tricks and jokes” that are indeed no laughing matter, so aggressively do they support a seriousness that well deserves to be called deadly, we must look, in other words, to the “friendly” witnesses, who, in informing on their friends, in effect helped the state to assassinate them. “Get ready to become nobody”: thus did screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, one of HUAC's first casualties, formulate the consequence of “unfriendliness.”²⁷ No one who was blacklisted could work openly in Hollywood or in television; to be blacklisted (unless, as a writer, one could work, tenuously, behind a “front”) meant the death of one's career in American film and television, and, in some cases, death itself.²⁸

Watch this deadly serious pseudocomedy, this *anticomedy*, at work in the testimony of (in Ed Sullivan's words) “ballet star and choreographer,”²⁹ and soon-to-be director, Jerome Robbins, one day before the testimony of Stander:

INVESTIGATOR: You were at one time a member of the Communist Party, is that correct?

MR. ROBBINS: Yes.

INVESTIGATOR: For how long were you a member?

MR. ROBBINS: I attended my first meeting in the spring of '44. At one of the earliest meetings, I was asked in what way did dialectical materialism help me to do my ballet *Fancy Free*!

*Laughter.*³⁰

This is the laughter of the comedicial state: a state every bit as humorless as its mortal enemy, the Soviet regime echoed in the question allegedly put to Robbins; a state, moreover, that will not hesitate to rid itself of jokers and smart alecks, since its very existence is endangered by anyone whom it cannot intimidate into assuming the "reasonable, dignified manner," which is to say, the petrified rigidity, that constitutes "acting like" a citizen.³¹ Acting that part to the hilt, distinguishing himself as a model witness-citizen, Robbins plays out his role in the national drama by proceeding to re-deliver to the committee the names of eight of his former associates in the Communist Party, including that of the actress-comedian Madeline Gilford, also known as Madeline Lee, the Party member who asked him the "ridiculous" and "outrageous" question, as he explicitly characterizes it elsewhere in his testimony, of how dialectical materialism helped him to do *Fancy Free*.³² The anti-laughter that he dutifully elicits from his audience already colludes with him in the murders he will commit, or complete, by naming names: exposing the question's "ridiculousness," Robbins reveals as well the deadly seriousness, the vengeful bloodthirstiness, of this collective, this almost *tribal* derision.

At the same time that Hannah Arendt was bitterly marking the dismal fate that parvenus, for all their labors of "adjustment and assimilation," had nonetheless come to share with pariahs, her fellow German-Jewish refugees, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, had this to say about the genocidal hatred that had driven them all out of Europe:

The anti-Semites gather to celebrate the moment when authority lifts the ban [on pleasure]; that moment alone makes them a collective, constituting the community of kindred spirits. Their ranting is organized laughter. The more dreadful the accusations and threats, the greater the fury, the more withering is the scorn. Rage, mockery, and poisoned imitation are fundamentally the same thing.³³

Organized laughter, of course, is no more laughter than authorized pleasure is pleasure. Not just a Jew but a homosexual Jew—that is, doubly implicated in comicosmopolitanism’s lightness—Jerome Robbins may figure here as the exemplary sycophant, a virtuoso of betrayal: he performs and instigates, on cue, a “*poisoned* imitation” of the comic, a “mockery” of the comic, that is “fundamentally the same thing” as an annihilating, outraged “rage” against the comic.

Not only is Robbins the exemplary sycophant: sycophancy itself, this book argues, is exemplary. The sycophant is not merely a self-hating Jew, whose self-hatred is so advanced that it makes him betray other Jews to the anti-Semitic authorities. To be sure, anti-Semitism, and the systematic recruitment and display of Jewish collaborators, were very much on HUAC’s only half-hidden agenda. HUAC’s anti-Semitism produced its most hysterical symptom in the “ranting” of its one-time chairman, Congressman Rankin; six of the Hollywood Ten, the first uncooperative witnesses—all of whom were imprisoned as well as blacklisted—were Jews; two of the four who were not, as we shall see in chapter 3, landed in front of HUAC in large part because their work on Hollywood’s first anti-Semitic film effectively made them “honorary” Jews; a third non-Jew among the Ten was accused of “writing like a Jew”;³⁴ and Jews made up an overwhelmingly large percentage of the witnesses (both “friendly” and “unfriendly”) who appeared before the committee throughout its investigations of show business in the fifties. Yet the aim of this book is not to belabor the obvious (and well-established) point that HUAC, like many “anti-Communist” entities, was motivated by anti-Semitism.³⁵ Its project, rather, is to show how the “friendly” witness’s murderous complicity in the war on comicosmopolitanism—the real Cold War, the one that has yet to end—illustrates, with pathological clarity, the normal functioning of both citizenship (in the political sphere) and mass entertainment (in the cultural sphere).

And while the book takes HUAC’s mission to be the staging and enforcement of a normative style of American seriousness, its implications are confined neither to “the blacklist era” that supposedly ended around 1960, nor even to the American scene, over which the blacklist exercised its particular reign of terror.³⁶ Indeed, one of this book’s theses is that, at the very moment when HUAC and its partners are seeking to impose a xenophobic national (or nationalist) style, the “Americanism”

thus promoted paradoxically testifies to a foreign entanglement more complex than any Communist conspiracy: the entanglement of a proud, even truculent “Americanism” with the European fascism that the nation had recently helped to defeat. Cold War American anti-Semitism is neither strictly “American,” nor strictly “Cold War,” nor, for that matter, strictly “anti-Semitism”: HUAC did not invent, but, rather, modified and expanded and presided over, a “community of kindred spirits,” a system of sycophantic treachery, of “dreadful . . . accusations and threats,” of “fury” and “withering scorn,” that has roots at least as far back as nineteenth-century Europe, and that persists to this day. The ostensible “breaking” of the blacklist—mythically fixed at the moment when Dalton Trumbo was credited as the screenwriter of *Exodus* and *Spartacus* in 1960—attests, rather, to its success: some (though by no means all) of the blacklisted would be openly employable once again, but only because the blacklist’s war on comicosmopolitanism had implanted itself so deeply in the culture as a whole that the blacklist—never acknowledged, in any case, by the Hollywood that was enforcing it—could appear simply to fade away. (Of his “post”-blacklist career, blacklisted screenwriter and director Abraham Polonsky remarked, in 1976: “Suddenly I realized I was just as blacklisted even when they wanted to hire me as when they didn’t want to hire me.”)³⁷ With greater discretion than in the forties or fifties, but no less “poisonously” for all that, the sycophantic community of “anti-Semites” continues to epitomize the deadly seriousness of American citizenship. It no longer even requires Jews as its objects—these days, in fact, “homosexuals,” “terrorists,” and “immigrants” usually do much better—as it continues, with the same anticomic rage, to shape not only the products of mass entertainment but the most refined and high-minded cultural criticism as well.

Elsewhere in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the book in which the passage about anti-Semitic “laughter” appears, Horkheimer and Adorno, programmatically and ungratefully blurring the line between the Europe from which they have fled and the America in which they have taken refuge, predict the blacklist that is three or four years away. “The culture monopolies,” they write, “have to keep in with the true wielders of power, to ensure that their sphere of mass society, the specific product of which still has too much of cozy liberalism and Jewish intellectualism about it, is not subjected to a series of purges.”³⁸ The blacklist was

that series of purges, but it reflected less the failure of the Hollywood studios to “keep in with the true wielders of power” than their attempt to stay ahead of the game: to prove themselves more American than the Americans. All but one of the major studios was run by a Jewish executive; all of those executives endorsed the “Waldorf Statement,” the founding document of the blacklist, whose existence, as I have said, the studios nevertheless made a point of denying.³⁹ Thus did the Jews who “invented Hollywood” think to divest their product of its “cozy liberalism and Jewish intellectualism.”⁴⁰ But what of the cozy liberalism and Jewish intellectualism represented by, say, liberal Jewish intellectuals? I am referring not to the screenwriters who figured prominently in the Hollywood Ten, or in the much larger, second group of blacklisted, but to writers and critics working outside the “culture monopolies,” in the more distinguished and presumably more disinterested worlds of the academy and high journalism. Lillian Hellman claims that she was not surprised by the sycophantic capitulation of the Hollywood moguls when HUAC came to town: “It would not have been possible in Russia or Poland, but it was possible here to offer the Cossacks a bowl of chicken soup.”⁴¹ Hellman’s disappointment came from another source:

I had no right to think that American intellectuals were people who would fight for anything if doing so would injure them; they have very little history that would lead to that conclusion. Many of them found in the sins of Stalin Communism . . . the excuse to join those who should have been their hereditary enemies. Perhaps that, in part, was the penalty of nineteenth-century immigration. The children of timid immigrants are often remarkable people: energetic, intelligent, hardworking; and often they make it so good that they are determined to keep it at any cost. The native grandees, of course, were glad to have them as companions on the conservative ship: they wrote better English, had read more books, talked louder and with greater fluency.⁴²

Keeping the blacklist to keep in with the true wielders of power, Hollywood sought to dissociate itself from Jewish intellectualism. But Jewish intellectuals were just as busy dissociating themselves from Hollywood, and for similar reasons of self-preservation: each saw that the other was perceived as excessively “cozy,” as vulnerably soft; the intellectuals, because of their negative capability, and Hollywood, because of its frivol-

ity. Hellman's view of "timid immigrants" and their children no doubt evinces the snobbery of the more socially (though not more politically) assimilated American Jew. Yet disapproval of her attitude should not exempt us from considering the extent to which a certain timidity still informs the American intellectual landscape. I have argued elsewhere that contemporary Anglo-American criticism is dominated by the strictness of conscience that Matthew Arnold called Hebraism—and that what this Hebraism excludes is less a "Hellenistic" free play than a "Jewish" levity.⁴³ Even the academy's theoretical interlude of the seventies and eighties, its encounter with a more or less French "playfulness," seems to have left its most enduring legacy by congealing into a corpus of prestigious rationales for the practices of virtue and rigor that would have prevailed in American literary studies anyway. Notwithstanding the appearance (or the advertisement) of an almost total reversal of values since the timid hegemony of the "apolitical" New York intellectuals and the New Critics, today's political, historical, and ethical criticisms rejoin the formalisms, aestheticisms, and moralisms of Hellman's day in their profound "accommodation to the world," to adopt a phrase of Adorno's.⁴⁴ Now as then, literary intellectuals, and not just Jewish ones, ground their authority in a repudiation of the irresponsible pleasure of the comic: of that comic "light-heartedness," to use another Adornian term, still associated with Jewish entertainment at its most embarrassingly *impudent*.⁴⁵

The repudiation is not necessarily a matter of elitist disdain for Hollywood and mass culture in general. For while that disdain indeed constituted something like an article of faith among Cold War literary intellectuals, their postmodern heirs do tend to differ from them in treating nonelite culture at least with a certain tolerance, and often with outright affection and respect. But even the affection and respect typically stop short of that point at which cultural studies begins to assume the features of its unreasonable, undignified object. That point, as we might try to imagine it, indeed as this book tries to illustrate it, is where critical engagement with the object ceases to be merely conceptual or interpretative and takes on the character of stylistic mimesis: where the object's unseriousness crosses over into the commentary on it. Since the mutual disavowal of Jewish Hollywood and the intellectuals, such mimesis has become virtually unthinkable: the very idea of it seems too "ridiculous"

to entertain. For a comparable “ridiculousness,” in fact, one would have to revert to the question Madeline Lee asked Jerome Robbins in the spring of 1944, about how dialectical materialism influenced him in his creation of the ballet *Fancy Free*. To be sure, the question is ridiculous in part because, aping a certain Stalinist ideological policing—“ironically” aped again by HUAC—it exemplifies all too well the left’s famous and often fatal humorlessness. But the question’s ridiculousness also has to do with its awkward mixing of registers, tones, and genres—indeed, of humorlessness with humor, of the heavy with the light. The Congressional “laughter” that greets Robbins’s rehearsal of the question seconds him in his destructive rage not just against the comic, but against the peculiar tendency of the comic, already demonstrated by Lionel Stander, to confuse the serious with the unserious. Just as the power of seriousness depends upon its ability to distinguish between itself and the comic—to know, for example, when it is being mocked and when it is being revered—so must that power remain confident in its regulation of the boundary between the often dangerous gravity of Philosophy (“dialectical materialism”) and the mere gossamer lightness of Art, which a ballet with a title like *Fancy Free* seems destined to figure forth.

Not, of course, that ballet by itself seems much more likely than, say, Marxism to win the admiration of the House Un-American Activities Committee (although one committee member does thank Robbins for his testimony by plugging the Broadway musical he had recently choreographed: “I am going to see *The King and I* tonight, and I will appreciate it much more” [Bentley, ed., *Thirty Years of Treason*, 633]). What is most “ridiculous” about the confusion of dialectical materialism with *Fancy Free*, what most provokes the collective violence of Robbins and HUAC, is that the confusion reveals not how laughably incommensurable intellectuality and levity are, but, on the contrary, how irritatingly similar they are: as similar as smart aleck and joker. Far from colliding with each other, they explain each other, and they do so all too well, as though calling undue attention to the un-Americanism, more precisely, to the comicosmopolitanism, that they share. “Outrageously” juxtaposed with each other in such a way that they seem to egg each other on, the baleful philosophical smart aleksei and the high-flying, light-hearted ballet “insult the Committee” by repeating, in different registers, the same threat to its regime of national style. Dialectical materialism brings out the ele-

ments of system and speculation in the work of art, even in a trifle like the ethereally titled *Fancy Free*; *Fancy Free* calls attention to the buoyant choreography of thought in any theoretical construct, even in the oppressively elephantine dogma that dialectical materialism seems to be. Put together by the “ridiculous” question, like improbable but somehow magically congenial dancing partners, the heavy, earthbound philosophy and the airy, evanescent ballet double and interpret each other as products of *fancy* indeed, where fancy implies imagination, caprice, ornament, and desire—all inimical to the petrifying rule and rules of American performance of which HUAC, by no means alone in this law enforcement, took particularly watchful custody.

Which is why, when the committee’s counsel imitates the Communist interrogation by asking Jerome Robbins to describe the ballet, “so that we may know what the Communist Party had in mind when you were asked that question,” the witness replies:

The purpose of it was to show how an American material and American spirit and American warmth and our dancing, our folk dancing, which is part of jitterbugging, part of jazz, could be used in an art form. The story concerns these three boys in New York for the first time, having a good time, trying to pick up some girls. It’s always been identified everywhere, [sic] it’s played as a particularly American piece, indigenous to America, and its theme has great heart and warmth, as far as representing our culture is concerned. (628)

This reply is obviously sycophantic in the familiar sense of the term. Bending over backward to demonstrate his patriotism—one can never say “America” or “American” often enough—Robbins strikes the well-known pose of the servile underling desperate to placate his superiors by telling them what they want to hear: in this case, not just a fulsome pledge of allegiance, but a tribute, all the more gratifying coming from a homosexual Jewish dancer and choreographer, to the red-blooded American male heterosexuality (“trying to pick up some girls”) that often simply is “America.”

In both popular wisdom and expert opinion, as we shall see, this willingness to grovel before the master seems to give sycophancy not only a Jewish inflection (think of the eagerly assimilationist parvenu) but a distinctly homosexual coloring as well: a coloring evoked, in fact, by

expressions like “bending over backward,” not to mention more vulgar and more overtly homophobic ones such as “sucking up,” “kissing ass,” and so forth.⁴⁶ Just as there were non-Jewish, heterosexual unfriendly witnesses, so, to be sure, were there non-Jewish, heterosexual friendly ones: this book’s most illustrious sycophant, Elia Kazan, is in fact neither a Jew nor a homosexual. But since I am discussing Jerome Robbins, and since he is not this chapter’s only Jewish and homosexual paradigm of sycophancy, let me make a claim here that I will develop later: that sycophancy in general is a mode of internalized anti-Semitism as it is a mode of internalized homophobia—that all sycophancy is a turning against a primary and universal “Jewishness,” from which an equally primary and universal “homosexuality” can never be stably differentiated. Far from being essentially Jewish or essentially homosexual, sycophancy is essentially anti-Jewish and essentially anti-homosexual.⁴⁷

In contemporary France, Alain Badiou has argued, the sycophant’s function is to restrict the signification of the word “Jew,” lest it assume, or recover, a revolutionary “vivacity” irreducible to “the tripod of the Shoah, the State of Israel and the Talmudic Tradition.”⁴⁸ This book shows that, in Cold War America as well, the sycophant is the antithesis of the Jew: a semiotic cop, the sycophant works to strip the word “Jew,” as well as particular Jews in American culture, of the radicalness that would otherwise make Jews unlikely candidates for American (or any other) citizenship. If Jews and male homosexuals are nevertheless regarded as specialists in sycophancy, this is because they have been constructed as such, in order to conceal the sycophancy of *all* subjectivity—not least that of the Christian, heterosexual, American man, who can take shape only by subjecting himself to another Christian, heterosexual, American man, or to the idealized version of that figure. The Jewish homosexual sycophant worships the Christian heterosexual master—but so, as we shall see, does the Christian heterosexual sycophant. Only the comicosmopolitan, as we shall also see, realizes the possibility that the Jew shares with the homosexual: the possibility of becoming a *happy pervert*. And this is why, in the period with which we are concerned, sycophants are often—but not exclusively—drawn from the sphere of Jewish and homosexual comicosmopolitanism.

In other words, if Robbins is to stand as an exemplary sycophant, we must note that he goes beyond the sycophancy of fawning, self-abasing