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THE REST IS LITERATURE:
MIDRASH AND THE INSTITUTION OF 'THEORY' IN AMERICA

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If we represent concepts by areas of extension on a plane, this is, to be sure, a figure [*Gleichnis*] that may be used only with caution, but here it can serve us well. To a vaguely bounded concept there would correspond an area that was not sharply bordered all the way around, but rather in some places simply faded away into its surroundings. This would not actually be an area at all; and likewise, a concept that is vaguely defined is not properly called a concept. Logic cannot recognize such concept-like images as concepts; it is impossible to lay down precise laws for them. ... For example, would the sentence, 'Any square root of 9 is odd' have a comprehensible sense at all, if *square root of 9* were not a sharply bounded concept? Does the question, 'Are we still Christians?' really have a sense, if it is indeterminate to whom the predicate *Christian* can truly be ascribed, and to whom it must be denied?

—Gottlob Frege, *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik II* (1903), §56

Nothing is more unfitting for an intellectual resolved on practicing what was earlier called philosophy, than to wish, in discussion, and one might almost say in argumentation, to be right. The very wish to be right, down to its subtlest form of logical reflection, is an expression of that spirit of self-preservation which philosophy is precisely concerned to break down. ... When philosophers, who are well known to have difficulty in keeping silent, engage in conversation, they should always try to lose the argument, but in such a way as to convict their opponent of untruth. The point should not be to have absolutely correct, irrefutable, watertight cognitions—, for they inevitably boil down to tautologies, but insights which cause the question of their justness to judge itself. —To say this is not however, to advocate irrationalism, the postulation of arbitrary theses justified by an intuitive faith in revelation....

—Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (1951), §44

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ABSTRACT

“The Rest is Literature: Midrash and the Institution of ‘Theory’ in America” offers a new interpretation of the brief, unlikely mutual interest taken by rabbinicists and American literary theorists in each other’s fields from 1975–1995. Revising the few extant accounts of this moment, which the rabbinicist David Stern has nicknamed “the midrash–theory connection,” this dissertation avoids relitigating the connection’s question of whether midrash and postmodern literary theory share some genetic or structural affinity than in elucidating just what made that question both possible and pressing to ask at a particular time (the 1980s), in a particular place (the United States), within a delimited discursive and institutional milieu (the academic study of English, French, and comparative literatures).

At its broadest level, the dissertation argues that the “theory” phenomenon of the 1970s–80s should be understood as a byproduct of the Christian genealogy of the modern project of aesthetic education, a genealogy which has continued to determine the category of “literature” itself even in, and as, a hegemonic secularism. From this slant, the dissertation contends that “theory” is continuous in Euro-American modernity with what we know, in a different context, by the name “the Jewish question.” Framing “theory” as an iteration of the Jewish question allows us to get a firmer handle on what was at stake for the American literary critics affiliated with “theory” who valorized rabbinic hermeneutics in the 1980s.

The first three chapters of the dissertation are primarily historical. Chapter 1 supplies an overview of the “midrash-theory connection” with special attention to the uptake of literary theory among rabbinicists, situating this uptake in the longer history of academic Jewish studies since the *Wissenschaft des Judenthums*. Chapter 2 maps the Christian genealogy of the

institutionalized study of literature, from the rise of philosophical aesthetics in late eighteenth century German philosophy through the New Criticism's consolidation of pedagogical power in American colleges and universities after World War II, using this background to explain the vituperative reaction of the aesthetic-humanist mainstream of American literary studies to the unorthodox style and methods of the so-called "Yale Critics" in the 1970s. Chapter 3 examines the rise of "Bible as literature" scholarship during this same period, showing how literary critics interested in reading the Hebrew Bible were forced by an increasingly hegemonic secularism in "theory"-adjacent literary studies to perform their disavowal of scripture's religious elements.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on specific authors who sought to mobilize the linking of midrash and "theory" in a positive sense. Chapter 4 revisits the book which kicked off the midrash-theory connection, Susan Handelman's *The Slayers of Moses* (1982). Chapter 5 reads a pair of essays on midrash by Geoffrey Hartman. Handelman and Hartman ultimately arrive at opposed understandings of how repetition works, understandings characterized here as "tradition" and "error," respectively. The conclusion compares Hartman's idea of error to Edward Said's notion of "secular criticism," and suggests the implications of this interpretation of the midrash–Theory connection for contemporary debates about literary studies in the neoliberal university.

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INTRODUCTION

“Thus, the rabbis come to New Haven....”¹

1. The rabbis in New Haven

There are times when scholars seem to speak in code. Not just a disciplinary idiom intelligible only to the educated; not just allusions perceptible only by the erudite; but a secret language of figures—synecdoches, metonyms, metaphors—decipherable only to the initiated. For example, the title of this introduction, quoted from a 1991 book review in the academic journal *Christianity & Literature*. What does the reviewer’s heralding of a rabbinic arrival mean?

Context, of course, will clarify. Who are “the rabbis”? The rest of the review makes clear that the critic is referring to the rabbis who wrote, compiled, and are represented in the collections of late-ancient Jewish biblical exegesis called *midrash*. But those rabbis lived in ancient Palestine and Babylonia. Surely the sentence does not proclaim they have up and moved to Connecticut? No: what the reviewer, Francis Fennell—a scholar of nineteenth-century English poetry, not of midrash or, indeed, anything Jewish—means is that midrash, figured by “the rabbis” whose interpretations of the Bible the name “midrash” comprises, has come to New Haven. Among American elites, meanwhile, “New Haven” is a well-known metonym for Yale University, and that is how Fennell, addressing an academic audience, is using “New Haven” here. Yet Fennell is not announcing, say, that Yale’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript

¹ Francis L. Fennell, review of Jill Robbins, *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother*, *Christianity & Literature* 41.1 (Autumn 1991): 78–80, at 79.

Library has recently acquired some ancient Jewish texts. The sentence does not describe the arrival of a physical object at a specific site on the Yale campus. “New Haven” does not designate Yale the place, but Yale the institution, the brand, the proper name.

Why Yale? As it happens, the author of the book under review, Jill Robbins, received her PhD in comparative literature from Yale, and the book itself is based on her dissertation—but Fennell never tells his readers this. There *is* a stray reference to a certain Geoffrey Hartman as Robbins’s “mentor,” which—to a reader who knows beforehand who Hartman is and that in 1991 he had been teaching for decades in Yale’s comparative literature department (where he himself did his doctoral work)—counts as a disclosure of Robbins’s educational background. But even this would only explain the reference to Robbins’s “mentor,” which in turn tells us little unless we also have some grasp of the further significance of Hartman and of Yale. For, in Fennell’s sentence, “New Haven” does mean Yale, but “Yale” doesn’t mean (only) Robbins’s alma mater. New Haven names, instead, a particular discourse currently active in and around American literary studies in 1991, a discourse metonymically associated since around 1970 with Yale and more specifically with Hartman and his colleagues Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, and Harold Bloom. Fennell is not insinuating something about the quality of Robbins’s education but rather is informing us that she practices a specific kind of literary criticism. Robbins writes, as it were, in a New Haven accent—one not limited to those affiliated with Yale, nor shared by all affiliated with Yale. *Midrash* likewise denotes for Fennell not a textual object but a discourse. And like Yale, this discourse is a hermeneutical one. That is, both “the rabbis” and “New Haven” refer here not to concrete objects but to particular ways of reading and understanding written texts.

“Thus, the rabbis come to New Haven” proclaims that a midrashic hermeneutic has entered into the discourse figured here by Yale, that discourse known via a further chain of metonyms as “deconstruction,” or “literary theory,” or “French theory,” or just plain “theory.” As Marc Redfield writes, “‘theory’ refers primarily to a certain kind of reflection on language and literature that garnered the tag ‘deconstruction’ in the 1970s, and in distorted form became a minor mass-media topic in the 1980s. Both as a media event and, in more complex ways, as an academic one, ‘theory’ was understood to be epitomized by the writings, the proper names, and the ambivalently twinned personae of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man.”² (It is necessary, Redfield adds, to couch the word in those quotation marks, “little flickers of compulsive irony,” because they “form part of the term itself.” For ease of reading, though, I’ll henceforth substitute a capital *T* for Redfield’s quotation marks.)³

From a present-day perspective, Fennell might appear to be asking too much—to be assuming the readers of *Christianity & Literature* in 1991 were equipped with an unreasonable amount of insider knowledge. In fact, though, he’s not asking of them anything they wouldn’t have been prepared to give. Any academic active in an American department of English, French, or comparative literature could reasonably be expected to pick up on the meaning of the sentence right away; most of it had been part of the disciplinary koine since the late 1970s. As a matter of fact, by 1991 a sizable percentage of the general American reading public, its lack of any professional investment in Ivy League comparative literature faculty rosters notwithstanding, would likely have been able to follow Fennell’s drift, too, having been clued in by over a decade of breathless commentary, sometimes amazed but mostly horrified, from such publications as the

² Marc Redfield, *Theory at Yale: The Strange Case of Deconstruction in America* (New York: Fordham UP, 2016), 1.

³ Redfield, *Theory at Yale*, 1.

New York Review of Books, the *New Republic*, the *New York Times*, and *Newsweek*. Most literary academics and many general readers in 1991 would have known who Hartman was, where he was employed, and all about his association with Theory. Not only that, but these readers would not have needed any prompting to understand that “New Haven” = “Yale” = “Theory.” The academic reader, if not most of the general ones, would also have understood “the rabbis” as a metonym for midrash even without being told, and would have known, if only vaguely, what midrash is and why it is mentioned here in the same breath as Theory. If anything, that reader might have been surprised to learn that “the rabbis” had only just then (i.e., in 1991) come to “New Haven.”

Decrypting the academese, we can translate the sentence as follows: “Thus, the midrashic hermeneutic enters the discourse of Theory.” But if Fennell means as much, why didn’t he just say so? From this decision we can glean that the sentence’s primary function is not so much informative as it is rhetorical. And here the “literal” meaning of the sentence comes back into play. Robbins, Fennell writes, “sees in midrashic commentary—with its attention to gaps in the text, its predilection for wordplay, its production of a literature about literature, and its assumption that ‘anything in scripture can comment on anything else’...—a type of postmodern literary criticism. Thus, the rabbis come to New Haven.”⁴ The first of these sentences tells us about how Robbins conceives of the relationship between midrash and Theory, and then the second sentence, by giving us to imagine the absurd scene (however marginal or flickering) of ancient sages arriving in a small New England city, tells us what Fennell thinks we should think about what Robbins thinks. An ironic gap opens up within the second sentence between the literal and figurative meanings—a gap which is itself the figural dilation of the ironic

⁴ Fennell, review of Robbins, 79.

discrepancy yawning between the two sentences. This dilatory sequence of ironic figures deploys the image of time-travelling rabbis to make the first sentence appear more preposterous than it otherwise might. That's not necessarily to say that Fennell rejects totally the idea that midrash might be a "type" (note the ambiguous sense in this context of that word) of Theory. To be clear, his review isn't a pan. It *is* to say, though, that Robbins's claims about midrash and Theory should be taken, Fennell thinks, as bucking commonsensical expectation, straining against the bonds of reason. For, surely, the rabbis don't belong in New Haven!

...Or do they? Might Fennell's ironic juxtaposition of the rabbis and New Haven actually resolve itself on the level of the figurative? Does midrash turn out to be a "type" of Theory?

Interestingly, that's a question posed by numerous scholars around the time Robbins's book was published. The rabbinicist David Stern has called the moment in question "the midrash-theory connection."⁵ This connection was an unprecedented flourishing of interdisciplinary contact between American literary critics and rabbinicists, significant and prevalent enough as a trend within even a discipline so heterogeneous as literary studies that Fennell could write, "Thus, the rabbis come to New Haven" in *Christianity & Literature* in 1991 with the reasonable expectation that his readers would know what he meant, even if they, like himself, were not themselves involved in this connection. Between approximately 1978 and 1998, peaking in 1986–91, around 100 books, articles, and book reviews were published in English which either (a) drew some kind of essential connection between rabbinic hermeneutics and Theory, (b) applied the methods of contemporary literary studies to rabbinic texts, or (c) directly challenged the validity of one or both of those approaches. (To illustrate, Table 0.1

⁵ See David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1996), 1–2.

below presents a chronology of relevant events and publications.) “For a short time,” comments Stern, “midrash has even been a ‘hot’ topic.”⁶

Table 0.1. Selected publications and events related to the midrash-Theory connection

- 1980 Susan A. Handelman, “Greek Philosophy and the Overcoming of the Word”
Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today*
- 1981 Inaugural issue of *Prooftexts*, “a journal of Jewish literary history”
Handelman, “Interpretation as Devotion: Freud’s Relation to Rabbinic Hermeneutics”
Handelman, review of Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*
David Stern, “Rhetoric and Midrash: The Case of the Mashal”*
- 1982 Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory*
Howard I. Needler, “Sacred Books and Sacral Criticism”
Shira Wolosky, “Derrida, Jabès, Levinas: Sign-Theory as Ethical Discourse”*
- 1983 G. Douglas Atkins, “Partial Stories: Hebraic and Christian Thinking in the Wake of Deconstruction”
Handelman, “Jacques Derrida and the Heretic Hermeneutic”
James L. Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash”*
- 1984 Hartman and Sanford Budick convene 2-year colloquium on midrash at Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Stern, review of Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses**
Wolosky, review of Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*
- 1985 Daniel Boyarin, “Rhetoric and Interpretation: The Case of the Nimshal”*
Handelman, “Fragments of the Rock: Contemporary Literary Theory and the Study of Rabbinic Texts”*
Handelman, “‘Torments of an Ancient Word’: Jabès and the Rabbinic Tradition”
Hartman, “Meaning, Error, Text”
Hartman, “On the Jewish Imagination”*
Stern, “Literary Criticism or Literary Homilies? Susan Handelman and the Contemporary Study of Midrash”*
Stern, response to Boyarin, “Rhetoric and Interpretation”*
- 1986 Boyarin, “Voices in the Text: Midrash and the Inner Tension of Biblical Narrative”
José Faur, *Golden Doves with Silver Dots: Semiotics and Textuality in Rabbinic Tradition*
Handelman, “‘Everything is in it’: Rabbinic Interpretation and Modern Literary Theory”
Hartman and Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (based on the HUC colloquium)
- 1987 George Aichele, “The Rabbis and the Poststructuralists”
Robert Alter, “Old Rabbis, New Critics”
Beth Sharon Ash, “Jewish Hermeneutics and Contemporary Theories of Textuality”
Boyarin, “Old Wine in New Bottles: Intertextuality and Midrash”
Gerald L. Bruns, “Midrash and Allegory: The Beginnings of Scriptural Interpretation”
Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, “Who’s Kidding Whom?: A Serious Reading of Rabbinic Wordplays”
Eilberg-Schwartz, review of Faur, *Golden Doves with Silver Dots**

⁶ Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 1.

Table 0.1 continued

- Steven D. Fraade, review of Hartman and Budick, *Midrash and Literature* *
- William Scott Green, "Romancing the Tome: Rabbinic Hermeneutics and the Theory of Literature"
- Jacob Neusner, *Canon and Connection: Intertextuality in Judaism*
- Neusner, *Midrash as Literature: The Primacy of Documentary Discourse*
- 1988 Neusner, *Wrong Ways and Right Ways in the Study of Formative Judaism*
- Elisa New, "Pharaoh's Birthstool: Deconstruction and Midrash"
- Stern, "Midrash and Indeterminacy"
- Wolosky, review of Faur, *Golden Doves with Silver Dots*
- 1989 Boyarin, "The Sea Resists: Midrash and the (Psycho-)Dynamics of Intertextuality"
- Michael Fishbane, "Extra-Biblical Exegesis: The Sense of Not Reading in Rabbinic Midrash"
- Hartman, "Criticism and Restitution"
- 1990 Boyarin, "Inner-Biblical Ambiguity, Intertextuality, and the Dialectic of Midrash"*
- Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*
- Boyarin, "The Song of Songs: Lock or Key?"
- Bruns, "The Hermeneutics of Midrash"
- Neusner, review of Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*
- 1991 Dennis Fischman, *Political Discourse in Exile: Marx and the Jewish Question*
- Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy*
- David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis*
- Martin S. Jaffee, "The Hermeneutical Model of Midrashic Studies: What It Reveals and What It Conceals"*
- Jill Robbins, *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother: Interpretation and Alterity in Augustine, Petrarch, Kafka, Levinas*
- Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature*
- 1992 Bruns, review of Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*
- Ken Frieden, *Freud's Dream of Interpretation*
- 1993 Boyarin, "Placing Reading: Ancient Israel and Medieval Europe"
- Boyarin, review of Robbins, *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother*
- Vassilis Lambropoulos, *The Rise of Eurocentrism: Anatomy of Interpretation*
- Neusner, review of Stern, *Parables in Midrash*
- Louis Silberstein, "Literary Theory and Modern Jewish Studies"
- 1994 Hartman, "Midrash as Law and Literature"
- 1995 Boyarin, "Take the Bible for Example: Midrash as Literary Theory"
- Boyarin, review of Stern, *Parables in Midrash*
- Neusner, *The Documentary Foundation of Rabbinic Culture*
- Gillian Rose, "'Would That They Forsake Me But Observe My Torah': Midrash and Political Authority"
- 1996 Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies*
- 1997 Bruns, review of Stern, *Midrash and Theory*

* = published in *Prooftexts*

The Rest is Literature: Midrash and the Institution of 'Theory' in America is about that “short time,” the temperature of it. Almost a half-century ago now, this was a moment when a strange thing called Theory fractured literary studies along multiple axes—ideological, methodological, generational—even as it bled over into other disciplines formerly insulated from the influence of literary studies and, ultimately, reverberated across the landscapes of American higher education and popular culture more generally; when lurid stories about Theory were splashed across the pages of *Newsweek* and the *New York Times*, and conservative jeremiads against the alleged left-wing radicalization of the academy like Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (1987) could become #1 bestsellers; and when graduate students specializing in, say, Romantic poetry—not Jewish studies, much less rabbinics—at a handful of the nation’s most elite universities could tell you a thing or two (albeit not necessarily *facts*) about rabbinic hermeneutics.

The point of departure in this dissertation, though, is not the conceptual question of whether midrash is or is not a “type” of Theory. The answer to that can only be no, for the simple reason that, as I shall demonstrate, the phenomenon of Theory is indissociable from the institutionalized category “literature”—which did not exist in the West until the mid-eighteenth century, and which in any case was certainly not available to the rabbis during the first eight centuries of the Common Era, when the Midrashim and later the Talmuds were compiled.⁷ Instead, I take off from a set of historical questions about that conceptual question. How and why did it become not just possible but pressing to ask it, at a particular time (the 1980s), in a

⁷ However, cf. Daniel Boyarin, “Take the Bible for Example: Midrash as Literary Theory,” in Boyarin, *Sparks of the Logos: Essays in Rabbinic Hermeneutics* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 89–113. Boyarin overhastily conflates “fiction” with “literature.”

particular place (the United States), within a delimited discursive and institutional milieu (the academic study of literature)? What brought the rabbis to New Haven?

2. The midrash–“Theory” connection

Among the most remarkable things about the midrash-Theory connection is its lopsidedness, then and now. Stern, already speaking retrospectively in the introduction to *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (1996), records the asymmetry of the connection’s institutional footprint: “How lasting and deep the impact of midrash has been on literary theory remains an open question. My purpose here, however, is not to ask what midrash *can do for* literary *criticism*, but what *theory has done to* midrash.”⁸ The latter sentence, in fact, is an oblique citation of the prophetic conclusion of Geoffrey Hartman’s 1994 essay “Midrash as Law and Literature”: “As for the future, and the field that may eventually be created by the awareness that midrash and literary study take of each other, I can only say one thing with confidence. A knowledge of midrash will prove more interesting for the literary critic than a knowledge of literary criticism for the scholar of Jewish texts. Ask not what deconstruction can do for midrash; ask what midrash may do for deconstruction.”⁹ Stern’s rewriting of Hartman suggests that Hartman’s confidence was misplaced; “knowledge of literary criticism” has quite demonstrably “interested” far more “scholars of Jewish texts” than vice-versa, despite the fact that the number of professional literary critics working in the US today *vastly* exceeds the number of rabbinicists. Several major works on rabbinic literature which emerged from the midrash-Theory connection—Stern’s *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic*

⁸ Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 1, emphases mine.

⁹ Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Third Pillar: Essays in Judaic Studies* (Philadelphia: U. Penn. Press, 2013), 101.

Literature (1991), Daniel Boyarin's *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (1990), Steven D. Fraade's *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (1991), the essays by Michael Fishbane, Joseph Heinemann, Judah Goldin, and James Kugel in Hartman and Sanford Budick's 1986 coedited volume *Midrash and Literature*—remain touchstones in rabbinics today, and the scholars of subsequent academic generations whose work bears the connection's imprint are too numerous to count. No comparable influence—say, of the more “literary” essays in the second half of *Midrash and Literature*—is detectable in the work of scholars in the departments which, in 1991, had housed Fennell's intended audiences. Literary critics today are liable to be perplexed by or dismissive of the sentence, “Thus, the rabbis come to New Haven.”

This asymmetry is especially striking in view of the fact that it was the attention paid by literary critics to midrash, not of rabbinicists to literary theory, which made midrash, as Stern puts it, into “a hot topic” and put it on the radar of non-rabbinicists in the late 1980s. The midrash-Theory connection's prominence was yoked to literary studies, so when Theory receded from its high-water mark of institutional influence in the 1990s, literary-critical interest in midrash declined, too. Only one monograph which engaged the notion of a midrash-Theory connection from the literary critics' side of the hyphen appeared after 1986: Jill Robbins's *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother: Interpretation and Alterity in Augustine, Petrarch, Kafka, Lévinas* (1991)—the book Francis Fennell was reviewing when he wrote, “Thus, the rabbis come to New Haven.”

By 1991, in fact, “the rabbis” had already begun to depart from “New Haven.” The data presented in Table 0.2, below, indicates that of the eight major books related to the midrash-Theory connection, it was *Midrash and Literature* which enjoyed the broadest reception, with

reviews appearing not only in journals devoted to ancient Judaism (*JOAS*, *Vetus Testamentum*), to Jewish studies more generally (*CrossCurrents*, *Hebrew Studies*, *Prooftexts*, *Shofar*), and to religious studies (*JAAR*, *Journal of Religion*, *Journal of Theological Studies*), but, additionally, in a few focusing on literary studies (*Comparative Literature Studies*, *Literature & Theology*, *Modern Philology*, *Poetics Today*) and one mass-distributed non-academic magazine (*The New Republic*).¹⁰ No other book from the midrash-Theory connection received similarly widespread attention in the form of book reviews, especially not outside of Jewish studies. Against *Midrash and Literature*'s fourteen reviews, the next most-reviewed book, Stern's *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (1991), received nine, but was given space in only one literary studies journal without a Jewish studies-specific mandate (*Religion & Literature*). Only one relevant book published after *Midrash and Literature*, Robbins's *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother*, received attention from major literary studies journals, including two (*Diacritics*, *SubStance*) known as major venues for the dissemination of Theory. Tellingly, Robbins's is the only one of the eight books in Table 0.2 which does not directly treat rabbinic texts; although the *Diacritics* review was written by Daniel Boyarin, he does not focus on midrash but instead on Robbins's theme of Christian supersession, and he reads *Prodigal Son* alongside not rabbinic scholarship but, rather, some recent studies of the Apostle Paul.¹¹ While book reviews are not the only metric for assessing interest among academics in the "hot topic" of midrash, the fact that

¹⁰ José Faur's *Golden Doves with Silver Dots* was reviewed in *The New Republic* as well, but as a part of an omnibus review by Robert Alter alongside *Midrash and Literature*. I think it's doubtful that Faur's book alone would have warranted the extensive treatment the magazine gave the two books together, but it's plausible that *Midrash and Literature* would have received more or less the same space even if Faur's book did not exist. See Robert Alter, "Old Rabbis, New Critics," *The New Republic* 196.1–2 (January 5–12, 1987): 27–33.

¹¹ See Daniel Boyarin, "The Subversion of the Jews: Moses's Veil and the Hermeneutics of Supersession," *Diacritics* 23.2 (Summer 1993): 16–35.

attention in this form from Jewish studies-specific journals is virtually consistent from 1984 into the mid-1990s, while attention from literature-specific journals drops off steeply after *Midrash and Literature*, is illuminating. Undoubtedly, the special excitement from literary quarters about the Hartman-Budick volume was due to the presence of some highly distinguished literary figures among its eighteen contributors: Hartman, Frank Kermode, and, above all, Jacques Derrida, who by 1986 was a bona fide intellectual celebrity, one of America’s first academic “stars.”¹²

Table 0.2. Reviews of eight major books related to the midrash-Theory connection

Reviews per journal:

6 reviews: *Journal of Religion (JR)*

5 reviews: *Prooftexts, Religion & Literature (RL)*

4 reviews: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion (JAAR)*

3 reviews: *Association for Jewish Studies Review (AJSR)*, *Hebrew Studies (HS)*, *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods (JSJPHRP)*, *Shofar*

2 reviews: *Alei Sefer*, *Journal of the American Orientalist Society (JAOS)*, *Jewish Quarterly Review (JQR)*

1 review: *Catholic Biblical Quarterly (CBQ)*, *Christianity & Literature (CL)*, *Comparative Literary Studies (CLS)*, *CrossCurrents*, *Diacritics*, *Jewish History (JH)*, *Jewish Studies (JS)*, *Journal of Theological Studies (JTS)*, *Literature & Theology (LT)*, *Modern Language Notes (MLN)*, *Modern Philology (MP)*, *The New Republic (TNR)*, *Philosophy & Literature (PL)*, *Poetics Today (PT)*, *Religious Studies Review (RSR)*, *SubStance*, *Vetus Testamentum (VT)*

Reviews per book:

Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses* (1982)—7 reviews:

1983 Donald Keeseey, *PL*

1984 Thomas J. J. Altizer, *RL*

¹² Derrida’s contribution to *Midrash and Literature*, “Shibboleth”—a lengthy essay on Paul Celan dubiously categorized by the editors, alongside an aphoristic text by the French-Egyptian poet Edmond Jabès, as “Contemporary Midrashim” (Geoffrey H. Hartman and Budick, “Introduction,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ix–xiii, at xiii)—appeared there in English translation for the first time. Some reviewers sympathetic to deconstruction, like the Hartman- and de Man-trained Romanticist Ian Balfour, praised “Shibboleth” as the virtuosic apex of *ML* (see Ian Balfour, review of *ML*, *Comparative Literature Studies* 27.3 [1990]: 255-58); while others, like Lilian Furst and Michael Goldberg in a review essay bearing the exasperatedly italicized title, “Interpretation of *What?*” (*Journal of Religion* 67.3 [July 1987]: 348–52), found Derrida’s language incomprehensible and his inclusion in the volume incongruous.

Table 0.2 continued

- Karl Plank, *JAAR*
 David Stern, *Prooftexts*
 Barbara Kirchick Urbut, *JR*
 Shira Wolosky, *AJSR*
 1993 Louis Silberstein, *RSR* (omnibus review with *Golden Doves, From Tradition to Commentary*)
- José Faur, *Golden Doves with Silver Dots* (1986)—7 reviews:
 1987 George Aichele, *CrossCurrents* (omnibus review with *Midrash and Literature*)
 Robert Alter, *TNR* (omnibus review with *Midrash and Literature*)
 Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *Prooftexts*
 Moshe Idel, *Alei Sefer* [Hebrew]
 1988 Anthony Saldarini, *HS*
 Shira Wolosky, *JR*
 1993 Louis Silberstein, *RSR* (omnibus review with *Slayers of Moses, From Tradition to Commentary*)
- Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (1986)—14 reviews:
 1986 Alan Mintz, *Shofar*
 Stefan C. Reif, *VT*
 1987 George Aichele, *CrossCurrents* (omnibus review with *Golden Doves*)
 Robert Alter, *TNR* (omnibus review with *Golden Doves*)
 Beth Sharon Ash, *MP*
 Adele Berlin, *JAOS*
 Steven D. Fraade, *Prooftexts*
 Lilian Furst and Michael Goldberg, *JR*
 Martin Melaver, *PT*
 Paul Morris, *LT*
 Edith Wyschogrod, *JAAR*
 1988 Andrew Chester, *JTS*
 Stuart Lasine, *HS*
 1990 Ian Balfour, *CLS*
- Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (1990)—7 reviews:
 1990 Jacob Neusner, *JSJPHRP*
 1991 Herbert Basser, *JQR*
 Martin S. Jaffee, *Prooftexts*
 Gary Porton, *Shofar*
 1992 Gerald L. Bruns, *RL*
 1994 Richard Sarason, *JR*
 1997 Yaakov Elman, *HS*
- Steven D. Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary* (1991)—8 reviews:
 1992 E. Cortes, *JSJPHRP*
 Eliezer Segal, *Prooftexts*
 Tzvee Zahavy, *Shofar*
 1993 Herbert Basser, *JQR*
 Jack Lightstone, *JAAR*
 Louis Silberstein, *RSR* (omnibus review with *Slayers of Moses and Golden Doves*)
 1995 Richard Kalmin, *AJSR*
 Maren R. Neihoff, *JH*
- Jill Robbins, *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother* (1991)—5 reviews:
 1991 Francis L. Fennell, *CL*

- 1992 Saul Myers, *MLN*
 Kathy Royer, *RL*
 1993 Annette Aronowicz, *SubStance*
 Daniel Boyarin, *Diacritics*

David Stern, *Parables in Midrash* (1991)—9 reviews:

- 1992 Richard Pearson, *RL*
 1993 Edward Goldman, *JAOS*
 Alan Mintz, *JS* [Hebrew]
 Jacob Neusner, *JSJPHRP*
 Elsie Stern, *JR*
 Burton Visotzky, *CBQ*
 Tzvee Zahavy, *JAAR*
 1995 Daniel Boyarin, *AJSR*
 1996 Chayim Milikovsky, *Alei Sefer* [Hebrew]

David Stern, *Midrash and Theory* (1996)—2 reviews:

- 1997 Gerald L. Bruns, *RL*
 1998 Marc Hirshman, *JR*

The lopsidedness of the midrash-Theory connection is clarified by the propensity of Theory to “travel,” as Edward Said and later Geoffrey Galt Harpham put it, beyond its “native” disciplinary confines, a drift that David Simpson—no opponent of Theory—has called “the rule of literature” in the postmodern academy, and which the editors of a polemical “anthology of dissent” describe more pugnaciously as *Theory’s Empire* (2005).¹³ While self-reflexivity is one of Theory’s most recognizable qualities, the “disciplinary imperialism” of literary studies during and since the Theory years has gone largely unremarked except by its detractors: there is curiously little problematization, *by* literary theorists themselves, of this imperialism. Even though the question of literary studies’ object—what *is* literature, anyway?—continues to be, if

¹³ See Edward W. Said, “Traveling Theory,” in Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983), 226–47; Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *Shadows of Ethics: Criticism and the Just Society* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999), 9–10; David Simpson, *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature: A Report on Half-Knowledge* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1995); Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral, eds., *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005).

only subliminally, the organizing question of theoretical reflection on literature, literary critics avoid troubling too much over the strange power of their own discourse to “travel” into other disciplinary milieus and even to expropriate those disciplines’ “native” resources for literary studies. The legacy of the midrash-Theory connection is symptomatic here. In none of the extant studies of Theory is Judaism mentioned at all except in biographical discussions of Hartman, Derrida, and Harold Bloom. Even in an otherwise illuminating essay treating those figures such as Evan Carton’s promisingly titled “The Holocaust, French Poststructuralism, the American Literary Academy, and Jewish Identity Poetics” (2004), midrash does not merit so much as a single footnote.¹⁴ Meanwhile, a history of modern scholarship on midrash can scarcely afford to neglect the midrash-Theory connection.

Although the proper names are different, all of this will have a familiar ring to scholars of religion. To an extent matched only by anthropology, with which religious studies has especially longstanding institutional ties, since the 1970s the academic study of religion has been engaged in a dialectical ritual of hyper-vigilant intellectual exfoliation and collective self-flagellation for its colonial beginnings—an unflattering genesis which, many religionists now argue, defines the very distinctions between rationality and superstition, the secular and the religious, which make it possible (or, as it turns out, impossible) to study “religion” as an object. It was partially under the influence of Theory as it “traveled” from literary studies that scholars of religion began to displace their own claims to presumptively neutral, secular rationality and to historicize their categories more suspiciously. There is much to compare positively between literary studies and religious studies since the advent of Theory: in both disciplines, scholars “have learned

¹⁴ See Evan Carton, “The Holocaust, French Poststructuralism, the American Literary Academy, and Jewish Identity Poetics,” in Peter C. Herman, ed., *Historicizing Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), 17–48.

about... ‘self-evident’ categories—maleness, whiteness—[that] it is precisely those terms that we take for granted, that have become so normative that we no longer even notice them, that continue to exert a strong control over our thinking.”¹⁵ However, Michael Kaufmann accurately observes that “the religious,” “the secular,” and their binary opposition—the two terms which have undergone the *most* rigorous interrogation in religious studies—remain unproblematic in literary studies:

This may be so because our [literary critics’] continued reliance on a traditional narrative of secularization, with all of its teleological inevitability, has effectively rendered the secular/religious dynamic inert, as something that no longer has a shaping influence on a fully secularized profession. With scholars of religious studies, we may not believe that religion represents a fixed, transcendent category, but we nonetheless tend to characterize it as such in many professional histories, if only by representing it as a realm of thought we no longer accept. Even more problematically the conviction that religion has long ago been left behind renders the secular itself into a transcendent category—a fixed and stable view from nowhere from which we narrate our professional history.¹⁶

The midrash-Theory connection represents a moment when literary studies ran up against the limitations of its own self-mythologization as “a fully secularized discipline” in which religion no longer figures. From this angle, the connection is more than just a curiosity in the annals of academe, more than one example among others of the risks and rewards of the vogue for interdisciplinarity sweeping the humanities during the last three decades of the twentieth century. The connection opens up a counter-history with the potential to reverse the “disciplinary imperialism” of literary studies: the history of the academic study of literature in the US emerges here as *a question for religious studies* as much as, or more than, for literary studies. In other words, even as this dissertation makes both historicist and constructive contributions to the

¹⁵ Michael W. Kaufmann, “The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Profession,” *New Literary History* 38.4 (Autumn 2007): 607–27, at 614.

¹⁶ Kaufmann, “The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies,” 614.

subfield of religious studies called “religion and literature,” it also advances the larger claim that American literary studies *already is* the study of “religion and literature,” although literary critics remain generally unconscious of this condition. When we speak of “New Haven,” then, we are already saying: “the rabbis.”

3. On the Jewish question

The secularization narrative which structures American literary critics’ sense of their own disciplinary history is often credited, reductively but not wrongly, to the Victorian poet, cultural critic, biblical translator, and school inspector Matthew Arnold. In a series of texts from the 1860s and 1870s, Arnold famously called for aesthetic “culture,” above all literature, to supplant “religion” as the social institution entrusted with the moral acculturation (what Arnold’s German predecessors called *Bildung*) of “the masses.” Generously interpreted, this is an argument in favor of, or at least resigned to, secularization; Arnold palpably echoes the post-Kantian tradition in German philosophical aesthetics, where “the literary absolute” (as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy later termed it) was valorized as the *rational* “guarantor of social and philosophical unity.”¹⁷ While Arnold is hardly a beloved figure and his arguments have served as the targets for plenty of criticism, his version of the story is so profoundly entrenched that, as Kaufmann noted above, its underlying categories—“the religious” and “the secular,” binaristically opposed, with “literature” falling squarely under the latter heading—have continued to circulate as commonplaces even in otherwise self-reflexively critical scholarship.

¹⁷ Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996), 44. See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988).

The problem with this state of affairs can be readily illustrated with a passage from a widely assigned textbook, Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983; now in its third [2008] edition):

If one were asked to provide a single explanation for the growth of English studies in the later nineteenth century, one could do worse than reply: 'the failure of religion.' By the mid-Victorian period, this traditionally reliable, immensely powerful ideological form was in deep trouble. It was no longer winning the hearts and minds of the masses, and under the twin impacts of scientific discovery and social change its previous unquestioned dominance was in danger of evaporating. This was particularly worrying for the Victorian ruling class, because religion is for all kinds of reasons an extremely effective form of ideological control. Like all successful ideologies, it works much less by explicit concepts or formulated doctrines than by image, symbol, habit, ritual, and mythology. It is affective and experiential, entwining itself with the deepest unconscious roots of the human subject; and any social ideology which is unable to engage with such deep-seated a-rational fears and needs, as T. S. Eliot knew, is unlikely to survive very long. Religion, moreover, is capable of operating at every social level: if there is a doctrinal inflection of it for the intellectual elite, there is also a pietistic brand of it for the masses. It provides an excellent social 'cement,' encompassing pious peasant, enlightened middle-class liberal, and theological intellectual in a single organization. Its ideological power lies in its capacity to 'materialize' beliefs as practices: religion is the sharing of the chalice and the blessing of the harvest, not just abstract argument about consubstantiation or hyperdulia. Its ultimate truths, like those mediated by the literary symbol, are conveniently closed to rational demonstration, and thus absolute in their claims. Finally religion, at least in its Victorian forms, is a pacifying influence. It is no wonder that the Victorian ruling class looked on the threatened dissolution of this ideological discourse with something less than equanimity.

Fortunately, however, another, remarkable similar discourse lay to hand: English literature.... It is a striking thought that had it not been for this dramatic crisis in mid-nineteenth century ideology, we might to today have such a plentiful supply of Jane Austen casebooks.... As religion progressively ceases to provide social 'cement,' affective values and basic mythologies by which a socially turbulent class-society can be welded together, 'English' is constructed...to carry this ideological burden from the Victorian period onwards.

...

If the masses are not thrown a few novels, they may react by throwing up a few barricades.¹⁸

¹⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: U. Minn. Press, 2008), 20–21.

Eagleton gives no sources for his definition of “religion” here. He also never specifies *which* religion he means (Christianity; specifically, Protestantism; more specifically still, Anglicanism). It is as though the definition of religion were both self-evident and monolithic, at once natural and homogeneous—which are probably the *only* qualities that contemporary scholars of religion would all agree definitely do *not* describe religion!¹⁹ Finally, Eagleton presents literature as “remarkably similar” to religion, but intends—like Arnold—to fix literature as “secular,” that is, as *not* “religious,” since only thus does the argument of the passage make any sense. Yet nowhere does Eagleton actually differentiate literature and religion; that the religious and the secular are legible categories to his reader, and that literature slots cleanly into the latter, are simply assumed. Thus, this argument—which Eagleton intends as a *critique* of the Arnoldian theory—actually reifies all of the same categories and values as does Arnold’s. The result is a basically straightforward retelling of the Arnoldian secularization story, spun this time from the Marxist left rather than the liberal center-right.

Because Eagleton both reduces religion to Christianity and opposes the religious to the secular while insisting that a secular discourse (literature) can be all but identical to a religious one, his argument has the curious double effect of figuring both the religious and the secular, despite their binaristic opposition, in the image of a certain Christianity. In this regard, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* illustrates neatly the very problem that has preoccupied scholars of religion, anthropology, and postcolonial studies for some decades now. Increasingly, “secularization”—which now seems better described by the Derridean neologism

¹⁹ For the classic version of this argument, see Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1998), 269–84.

mondialatinisation (“globalatinization”)²⁰—is conceived neither as an organic sublation of, nor an essential break from, a “religious,” “superstitious,” or “enchanted” prehistory, but rather as the gradual and uneven institutionalization of the very distinction between and opposition of the religious and the secular, first in post-Reformation Europe as the fallout of violent sectarian conflict amongst Christians, and then exported to and transformed by other parts of the world along imperial and colonial vectors. The religious/secular binarism, then, is genealogically internal to Western Christendom.²¹ To speak of religion, as Karl Marx does in *On the Jewish Question* (1844), as having been transformed into “the abstract confession of an individual oddity, ... a private whim, a caprice,” is, comments Jeffrey Sacks, already “to speak an idiom of theological dimensions.”²²

This is not only a matter of etymology, but of politics and epistemology, too. The modern Western notion of the political as a secular zone in which all subjects are equally implicated and

²⁰ See Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” trans. Samuel Weber, in Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Gil Anidjar (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 43–101. I’m thinking here especially of Adam Y. Stern’s uptake of Derrida’s term in Stern, *Survival: A Theological-Political Genealogy* (Philadelphia: U. Penn. Press, 2021).

²¹ This is by now a standard historical claim. See, e.g.: Gil Anidjar, “Secularism,” in Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008), 39–66; Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003); Daniel Boyarin and Carlin A. Barton, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York: Fordham UP, 2016); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000); Peter Harrison, “Religion” and the Religions in the English Enlightenment (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990); Jason Ānanda Josephson-Storm, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2012); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004); Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2016); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2005); Stern, *Survival*.

²² Karl Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, in Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1977), 26–52, at 35; Jeffrey Sacks, “Latinity,” *CR* 9.3 (Winter 2009): 251–86, at 267.

from which all religious claims have been evacuated, or at least equalized, presumes distinctions between religion and secularity—theology and politics, ritual and belief, supernatural and natural, transcendent and immanent, superstition and reason—that are already Christian. Thus Christianity, especially a Protestant form prioritizing the interiority of a self-governing subject and the epistemology of belief, is naturalized as the essence of religion as such. Inadvertently, this sets up Christian subjects to navigate the secular sphere more fluently than can those who adhere to other forms of life—called, in modernity, “religions”—which for various reasons are not always so smoothly bracketed out of public life. As Robert Orsi argues, a certain Protestantism conceived as “rational, word-centered, nonritualistic, middle-class, unemotional, [and] compatible with democracy and the liberal state” thus becomes at once the most and least religious of religions, or, what amounts to the same thing, the most and least secular of religions. It has been installed in many Western societies, including the US, as the exemplary “good religion,” over against others religions marked as “bad religions” insofar as they refuse their own evacuation from the political sphere.²³ At the intersection of the religious/secular binarism and the polar dyad of good religion and bad religion, post-Reformation Christianity’s double status as exemplary and indistinguishable ensures that its hegemony is extended through and as a putatively universal, neutral secularism—what Jacques Derrida once called a “white mythology.”²⁴

²³ Robert A. Orsi, “On Not Talking to the Press,” *Religious Studies News* 19.3 (May 2004): 15. See also Orsi’s longer discussion of the polar structure of “good religion/bad religion” (or: Protestantism/Islam) in “Snakes Alive: Religious Studies Between Heaven and Earth,” in Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), 177–204.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology,” in Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1982), 207–71, at 213, italics in original: “Metaphysics—the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West: the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own *logos*, that is, the *mythos* of his idiom, for

Literature is inextricable from this history of secularization/globalization. We should recall here that “literature” is a concept of relatively recent vintage. In the modern sense of “aesthetic writings,” the (Latinized) English word *literature* did not even exist until the mid-eighteenth century, and it did not finally subsume its predecessor categories (not synonyms)—*belles lettres*, poetry, rhetoric, fiction—until about a hundred years later. The French and German cognates, *la littérature* and *die Literatur*, follow similar chronologies.²⁵ As historical scholarship on this topic confirms, the emergence of literature was made possible by secularist elements of early modern liberal politics: the delineation of the private and the public spheres, the definition of “religion” as a private matter of subjective belief,²⁶ and the juridical indemnification of speech, even speech critical of political or ecclesiastical authorities, from political retaliation. As Derrida writes, literature is

the universal form of what he must still wish to call reason.... White mythology—metaphysics has erased within itself the fabulous scene that has produced it, the scene that nevertheless remains active and stirring, inscribed in white ink, an invisible design covered over in the palimpsest.” See esp. Anidjar, “Secularism,” for a succinct (if overly polemical) presentation of this argument with regard to the crypto-Christianity of secularism.

²⁵ J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1–2.

²⁶ Victoria Kahn has recently discussed the post-Reformation rearrangement of discourses under the aegis of “literature,” which she considers as a technology for the production (*poiesis*) of belief, in her *The Trouble with Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2020). While I find Kahn’s analyses in this book of texts by Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Milton, Kant, Kierkegaard, and Coetzee compelling, her starting assumptions about the epistemology of “belief” are all implicitly Christian. This leads her book ultimately to affirm rather than problematize the articulation of Western literary history as a liberal narrative of “secularization.” Contrast Kahn on Kierkegaard, for example, with Jacques Derrida, *Literature in Secret: An Impossible Filiation*, in Derrida, *The Gift of Death & Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills, 2nd ed. (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2008), 117–58. The same lacunae afflict Regina Mara Schwartz’s *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008) and despite repeated evocations of Jewish/Christian difference. Adam Stern makes a similar claim in *Survival*, 119–47. However, Stern proceeds by *problematizing* the Christianity, and the anti-Judaism, of the putatively secular concept at stake in his argument (“sovereignty”), whereas Schwartz does not pose the Christianity of “literature” as itself a problem in need of critical interrogation.

inscribed in conventions and institutions which...secure in principle its right to say everything. Literature thus ties its destiny to a certain non-censure, to the space of democratic freedom (freedom of the press, freedom of speech, etc.). No democracy without literature; no literature without democracy. One can always want neither one nor the other, and there is no shortage of doing without them under all regimes; it is quite possible to consider neither of them to be unconditional goods and indispensable rights. But in no case can one dissociate one from the other.... And each time that a literary work is censored, democracy is in danger, as everyone agrees. The possibility of literature, the legitimation that a society gives it..., all that goes together—politically—with the unlimited right to ask any question, to suspect all dogmatism, to analyse every presupposition....²⁷

Taking a cue from Derrida, Jeffrey Sacks argues that literature is not just indissociable from the “colonial political theology” of Western Christendom—globalatinization—but is one of that colonial political theology’s very means of dissemination, perpetuation, reification, and naturalization.²⁸ Literature, to be perfectly blunt and perhaps a little hyper-polemical about it, *is* secularism *is* Christianity.

Sacks, like Derrida, would add: *is* Europe. While there is a transatlantic dimension to the story I want to tell in this dissertation, though, it is a relatively limited one; Theory, and thus also the midrash-Theory connection, is foremost an *American* phenomenon. However, that’s only to insinuate a specificity rather than a discontinuity. The United States, after all, is anything but non-occidental. As Walter Mignolo writes,

the connection of the Mediterranean with the Atlantic through a new commercial circuit, in the sixteenth century, ... creates the condition for a new global imaginary built around the fact that the new ‘discovered’ lands were baptized ‘Indias Occidentales.’ The Occident, the West, was no longer European Christendom (as distinguished from Eastern Christians...) but Spain (and by extension the rest of Europe) and the new colonial possession. ‘Occidentalism’ was the geopolitical figure that tied together the imaginary of the modern/colonial world system. As such, it was also the condition of emergence of Orientalism: there cannot be an Orient, as the other, without the Occident as the same. For this very reason, the Americas, contrary to Asia and Africa, are not Europe’s

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Passions: ‘An Oblique Offering,’” trans. David Wood, in Wood, ed., *Derrida: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 5–35, at 23.

²⁸ Sacks, “Latinity,” 253.

difference but its extension. This motif did not change when French and German naturalists, historians, and philosophers in the eighteenth century replaced the early descriptions of America provided by missionaries, soldiers, and men of letters with their own impressions: from Buffon to Hegel, America was conceived as the daughter of Europe and its promised future.²⁹

Comparative studies of secularisms and modernities have reminded us³⁰ that the US's national genesis as a British colony comprising a majority of dissenting Protestants gives a distinctive political shape to the American idea of religious freedom versus, say, French *laïcité*.

Nevertheless, this dissertation tracks the particularly American form of a larger Western (i.e., European) problematic.

That American form is Theory—despite the fact that Theory has been consistently figured as “French” by American commentators. In France, the texts Americans gather under the anomalous heading of Theory are categorized as *philosophie* or *critique littéraire*, the borders between these being far more permeable in France than in the US for reasons to be explored below. The bilingual title of François Cusset's 2003 French-language survey of the phenomenon records Theory's decidedly American, Anglophone stamp: *French Theory: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux États-Unis*. On multiple occasions in

²⁹ Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2012), 51. Thanks to Mendel Kranz for drawing my attention to Mignolo's text at a key moment in the development of my argument.

Closer to the disciplinary terrain of this dissertation, Jonathan Boyarin launches a comparative inquiry with the claim, “American empire is to a large degree an extension of Europe, and so America's Indians are to a large degree Europe's Indians.” Jonathan Boyarin, “Europe's Indian, America's Jew: Modiano and Vizenor,” in Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory* (Minneapolis: U. Minn. Press, 1992), 9–31, at 10. See also Boyarin's book-length elaboration of the thesis of this essay, *The Unconverted Self: Jews, Indians, and the Identity of Christian Europe* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2009).

³⁰ See, e.g., the essays collected in Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, eds., *Secularisms* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008) and in Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Elizabeth Shankman Hurd, Saba Mahmood, and Peter G. Danchin, eds., *The Politics of Religious Freedom* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2015).

the latter half of his career, Derrida himself commented with some bafflement on the Americanness of the terms “deconstruction” and of “Theory.”³¹ As Cusset documents, the French mass-media did not really get wind of the American notion of “French Theory” until the Sokal Affair in October 1997, at which time the French received it with much bemusement.³² And, in a witless bit of irony, some of the French intelligentsia can now be heard disavowing the archive of “French Theory” as a toxic airborne event blown across the Atlantic *from* the US. In an October 2, 2020 address “on the theme of the struggle against separatisms,” the French President Emmanuel Macron dismissed postcolonialism as a “theory,” “imported entirely from the United States.”³³

As crucial as the importation of Continental thought was, then, I maintain throughout this dissertation that the Theory phenomenon (and the subsequent connection of Theory with midrash) is best understood not in terms of its transatlantic genealogy but instead its

³¹ See Jacques Derrida, James Creech, Peggy Kamuf, and Janet Todd, “Deconstruction in America: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” *Critical Exchange* 17 (1985): 1–33; Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires: For Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay et al., 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia UP, 1989); Derrida, “Some Statements and Truisms About Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms,” in David Carroll, ed., *The States of “Theory”: History, Art, and Critical Discourse* (New York: Columbia UP, 1990), 63–94; Derrida, “The Time is Out of Joint,” in Anselm Haverkamp, ed., *Deconstruction and/is America* (New York: NYU Press, 1995), 14–38; Derrida, “Deconstructions: The Im-Possible,” in *French Theory in America*, 13–33; Catherine Malabou and Jacques Derrida, “Deconstruction is America?,” in Malabou and Derrida, *Counterpath: Traveling with Jacques Derrida*, trans. David Wills (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004), 219–29.

³² See François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort et al. (Minneapolis: U. Minn. Press, 2008).

³³ Emmanuel Macron, “La République en actes : discours du Président de la République sur le thème de la lutte contre les séparatismes,” quoted in Norimitsu Onishi, “Will American Ideas Tear France Apart? Some of Its Leaders Think So,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 9, 2021, accessed online April 7, 2021: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/09/world/europe/france-threat-american-universities.html>>. Macron’s speech is available in full at *Elysée.fr*, published October 2, 2020: <<https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/10/02/la-republique-en-actes-discours-du-president-de-la-republique-sur-le-theme-de-la-lutte-contre-les-separatismes>>.

responsiveness to the peculiar exigencies of American literary studies after World War II. In this respect my interpretation diverges from all the precedents. The most recent and most nuanced account of the midrash-Theory connection, Alexander Freer's "Faith in Reading: Revisiting the Midrash-Theory Connection" (2016), still turns on the claim that Theory is but a "kind" of "European philosophy."³⁴ As I've just stated, there are real continuities between Europe and the US, and it is indeed true that a certain figure of "the Jew" circulates throughout the imaginary of post-World War II French philosophy; a comparison of that discourse with the one I examine here might therefore still bear some fruit.³⁵ I would say, though, that the midrash-Theory connection is more obscured than clarified when it is reduced to an American importation of the "the Jew" found in the work of French thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Lévinas, Maurice Blanchot, Jean-François Lyotard, and Alain Badiou. (Derrida, because of his constant yet marginal presence on the American literary-critical scene since 1966, is the exception proving the rule.) Even in the strict terms of intellectual-historical vectors, these two phenomena

³⁴ Alexander Freer, "Faith in Reading: Revisiting the Midrash-Theory Connection," *Paragraph* 39.3 (2016): 335–57, at 346.

³⁵ See Susan E. Shapiro, "Écriture judaïque: Where Are the Jews in Western Discourse?," in Angelika Bammer, ed., *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), 182–202; Seth L. Wolitz, "Imagining the Jew in France: From 1945 to the Present," *Yale French Studies* 85 (1994): 119–34; Michael Weingrad, "Jews (in Theory): Representations of Judaism, Antisemitism, and the Holocaust in Postmodern French Thought," *Judaism* 45.1 (Winter 1996): 79–98; Elizabeth J. Bellamy, *Affective Genealogies: Psychoanalysis, Postmodernism, and the "Jewish Question" After Auschwitz* (Lincoln: U. Nebraska Press, 1997); Geoffrey Bennington, "Lyotard and 'the jews,'" in Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus, eds., *Modernity, Culture, and "the Jew"* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 188–96; Max Silverman, "Re-Figuring 'the Jew' in France," in *Modernity, Culture, and "the Jew,"* 197–210; Carton, "The Holocaust, French Poststructuralism, the American Literary Academy, and Jewish Identity Poetics"; and esp. Sarah Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2010), which at points rebuts the arguments of Shapiro, Wolitz, and Weingrad. For challenges to Hammerschlag's account, cf. Bruno Chaouat, *Is Theory Good for the Jews?: French Thought and the Challenge of the New Antisemitism* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2020) and Elad Lapidot, *Jews Out of the Question: A Critique of Anti-Anti-Semitism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2020).

do not quite link up. As Sarah Hammerschlag has demonstrated, Lévinas was the central author in the French postwar reevaluation of “the Jew,” but Lévinas’s writings on Judaism—the essay collection *Difficult Freedom* (1963) as well as his talmudic exegeses—were almost entirely unknown to American literary critics until the late 1980s, except through Derrida’s much-misunderstood essay on Lévinas in *Writing and Difference* (1967, trans. 1978).³⁶ If anything, the chronology of publication, translation, and reception suggests that it was the midrash-Theory connection which helped to bring France’s “figural Jew” to American literary critics’ attention.³⁷

What these French and American discourses *do* have in common is their shared status as post-World War II iterations of a Western problematic which, around 1800, acquired the name “the Jewish question”—a formulation which, merely by implying the possibility of a (final?)

³⁶ See Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew*, 117–200.

³⁷ The pitfalls of failing to properly distinguish between France and the US, philosophy and literature, “the Jew” and “the rabbis” are illustrated by the egregious case of Lesleigh Cushing’s [as Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg] *Sustaining Fictions: Intertextuality, Midrash, Translation, and the Literary Afterlife of the Bible* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2008). Cushing writes on p. 116: “It goes without saying that Jacques Derrida, the patriarch of deconstruction, should have been attracted to midrash—or at least midrash as he construed it.” In fact, though, this does *not* “go without saying.” The word “midrash” never appears in Derrida’s published work, not even the essays on the French-Egyptian poet Edmond Jabès, and “talmudic” crops up only a very few times. The only direct quotation of a rabbinic text in his corpus, a well-known passage from *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* invoked early on in his 1967 book *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), 16. Not only is the rabbinic text presented in an unambiguously pejorative light, but the citation in the endnotes (*Of Grammatology*, 324n7) reveals that Derrida did not encounter this passage in its rabbinic source, but only via Lévinas’s quotation of the same passage in *Difficult Liberty*.

Indeed, by his own account Derrida had almost no knowledge at all of rabbinic texts. In “Others Are Secret Because They Are Other,” in Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005), 136–63, at 141, Derrida complains about readers who insist on the “rabbinic” or “Jewish” qualities of his writing. Such attempts “always leave...me puzzled. First, because I think that patient, vigilant, micrological, interminable reading is not exclusive to the Jewish tradition. And also I must confess that my familiarity with the Jewish culture...is, alas, very weak and indirect. ... If what I do reminds people of Jewish annotation, that is not the result of a choice, or a desire, or even of a memory or cultural formation.” Derrida, then, never “construed” midrash at all, nor was he “attracted” to it.

“solution,” testifies to what Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno describe in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) as the intrinsic tendency of the emancipatory project of liberal modernity to pervert into its own terrible opposite.³⁸ Prior to the eighteenth century, Jewry was understood as a nation unto itself, “‘in’ but not ‘of’ various European nations.” By the late eighteenth century, the collapse of Catholic hegemony and the emergence of religiously tolerant nation-states had made the already vexed question of Jewry’s civil status into a new sort of political problem. In republican France, for instance, where the predicate of citizenship was supposed to apply universally to *all* French people regardless of “religion,” how could French Jewry be counted as citizens of the new republic? The answer, in short, was that the Jews would have to be “made to fit, ...transformed, cleaned up, and normalized” by being reinscribed not as a political entity, a “nation,” but instead as, variously and sometimes contradictorily, a racial and a religious one—“religious,” though, in the secularist sense of unmarked, “good religion,” i.e., of post-Reformation Christianity.³⁹ The prerequisites of political emancipation thus end up repeating, often explicitly, the theological supersession of Judaism (carnal, literal, particular) by Christianity (spiritual, universal). In the history of Jewry in the modern West, we can see how the distinction between the religious and the secular effaces, suppresses, remakes, and sometime obliterates the empirical heterogeneities that overflow its borders and flout its codes, remaking forms of life as “religions” in the invisible image of Christianity.

³⁸ See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, “Elements of Antisemitism: Limits of Enlightenment,” in Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007), 137–72.

³⁹ Wendy Brown, “Tolerance as Supplement: The ‘Jewish Question’ and the ‘Woman Question,’” in Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006), 48–77, at 53. On the (de-) racialization of Jewry in the US specifically, see Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007).

Even the figure of the Muslim (and earlier, the “Mohammedan,” the “Moslem,” the “Muselmann”), supposedly joined to the Christian and the Jew in an Abrahamic “brotherhood,” occupies a very different role in this story than does the Jew.⁴⁰ For, by virtue of Christianity’s Judaic origins, and in pointed distinction from Islam’s supposed tardiness with respect to Christianity, the Jews have continually been an uncanny presence in Christian-majority societies. Judaism may no more be wholly excluded from a Christian polity than the Old Testament may be expunged from the Christian Bible. (It’s no a coincidence that the attempts by some German theologians at a neo-Marcionite *Entjudung* of German Christianity precipitated and coincided with the Nazi genocide of European Jewry.)⁴¹ For this reason, and exacerbated by the ongoing conflict in Israel/Palestine, the Jew is often counterposed to the Muslim in Western political discourse despite the fact that each functions as a figure of alterity: as Gil Anidjar has argued, the complex interactions of Western religious and racializing discourses produce the Jew and the Muslim as polarized “Semites,” with the Jew already inscribed within the secular West as its Semitic Other whereas the Muslim is excluded totally, erased from view—an “other Other.”⁴²

⁴⁰ For a potent critique of the notion of “the Abrahamic,” taking Derrida as its representative, see Joseph A. Massad, “Forget Semitism!,” in Massad, *Islam in Liberalism* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2015), 312–42. For detailed discussions of the figure of the *Muselmann* in the Nazi death camps, see Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2002); and, bringing Agamben’s discussion into the orbit of questions about the supersession of the Jews and the Christian genealogy of secularism, Stern, *Survival*, 82–118.

⁴¹ On theological *Entjudung* under Nazism, see Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010).

⁴² See Gil Anidjar, *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003); Anidjar, “The Semitic Hypothesis: Religion’s Last Word,” in Anidjar, *Semites*, 13–38. Jill Robbins deftly discusses the Pauline and Augustinian roots of the *inclusion* of the Jew as excluded Other in *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother*. “Other Other” is originally Jonathan Boyarin’s formulation, in *Storm from Paradise*, xviii, although its political implications are elaborated most fully by Sergey Dolgopolski in *Other Others: The Political After the Talmud* (New York: Fordham UP, 2018).

Mirroring Christianity's slippery toggling between the poles of exemplarity and invisibility, Judaism is a highly unstable entity under secularism: it is not simply "bad religion," but oscillates between "bad religion" (when contrasted with the Christians who comport best with secularism) and "good *enough* religion" (when contrasted with Islam, other insufficiently advanced, secularized, modernized "world religions,"⁴³ and other Others). Judaism thus becomes a "question," marking the limit posed by difference to any secularist political vision whose ostensible universalism is fashioned from the whole cloth of Christianity. As Marx puts it, whether or not any given society actually contains any actual persons who self-identify as Jews, it is nevertheless "from its own entrails that civil society ceaselessly engenders the Jew."⁴⁴ And since, to reiterate, literature *is* secularism *is* Christianity, I would rewrite Marx's statement like this:

It is from its own entrails that literature ceaselessly engenders Theory.

Unlike Susan Handelman, whose work we'll encounter later in Chapters 1 and 4, I am not the least bit interested in identifying Theory as *essentially* Jewish. What I am trying to do is historicize and unpack the conditions of possibility for such an identification, which reaches its apotheosis in the rhetoric of the midrash-Theory connection. (Why did *the rabbis*, specifically, come to New Haven?) To say that Theory *is* the Jewish question is not at all to say that Theory is irreducibly Jewish. It is precisely to say, instead, that—because the Jewish question is really a secular (so, Christian) question, a question secularism (so, Christianity) poses by, to, and about

⁴³ On the Western academic production of "world religions" in the nineteenth century, see Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*.

⁴⁴ Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, 50. Aamir R. Mufti has dramatized this claim by tracking the continued function of the Jewish question in debates about Muslim minority identity in postcolonial India; see Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007).

itself—Theory is *all too Christian*. I also lack any patience for polemics which, in the name of criticizing political secularism, set up Christianity as *simply* a target for critique.⁴⁵ The point here is neither to vilify Christianity nor to transcendentalize it as beyond history—anything but. This dissertation encourages contemporary literary scholars to recognize how, as with any other hegemonic force, Christianity’s afterlife in/as secularism continues to determine the categories available for us to think with, through, against—in literary studies no less than in religious studies or Jewish studies.

4. The fetishism of “Theory”

Finally, before proceeding any further, it’s necessary to get a better handle on the valence of the term “Theory.” Capital-*T* “Theory,” as we’ll see, does not mean what an uninitiated reader might intuitively understand by the word in the context of literary studies, namely, literary theory: meta-level reflection on the specificity of literary language and the methodological implications of that specificity for the interpretation of discrete literary texts. As a general term, literary theory comprehends the entire field of literary theories, which may, depending on the theory, either remain at the “nonempirical” level or lend themselves heuristically as propaedeutics to the “practice” of interpreting works of literature.⁴⁶ Neither does Theory here index any of the things it sometimes does in the humanities: it is not, for example, the dialectical method of German

⁴⁵ Here I mean to signal some wariness towards the seductively provocative formulations found in Gil Anidjar’s “Secularism” and his later monograph, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (New York: Columbia UP, 2014).

⁴⁶ Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels characterize theory as “nonempirical” and define “practice” in literary studies as the interpretation of individual literary works in their polemic, “Against Theory,” in W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1985), 11–30.

Idealism,⁴⁷ nor is it “critical theory,” a particular strain of Marxist thought associated with the Frankfurt School of Social Research.⁴⁸ All those discrete literary theories, in the small-*t* sense—structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, feminism, queer theory, Marxism, the New Historicism, cultural studies, postcolonialism, reception theory, and all the other subheadings found in any undergraduate-oriented anthology of “literary theory and criticism”—are encompassed by Theory, but under the intense pressure of American debates over higher education, canons, the humanities, pluralism and multiculturalism, social equity, freedom of speech, common sense, and truth (among other things) in the run-up to what we now call “the culture wars,” Theory consistently crystallizes as deconstruction, and deconstruction in turn crystallizes further as a compounding of Derridean philosophy and de Manian “rhetorical reading.” Even as it covers the whole heterogeneous constellation of theories, then, Theory also reduces that plurality to a single synecdoche—deconstruction—via a “dreamlike process of condensation and personification.”⁴⁹ As John Guillory observes, the scandal ignited by the 1987 revelation that the late de Man had written for the Belgian collaborationist newspaper *Le Soir*

⁴⁷ Cf. Andrew Cole, *The Birth of Theory* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2014); Ian Hunter, “The History of Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 33.1 (Autumn 2006): 78–112; and Fredric Jameson, “How Not to Historicize Theory,” in Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory* (London: Verso, 2008), 286–303.

⁴⁸ Cf. Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell et al. (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), esp. “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 188–243. See the genealogy of “theory” sketched by Shai Ginsburg, Martin Land, and Jonathan Boyarin in “Jews, Theory, and Ends,” the introduction to their coedited volume *Jews and the Ends of Theory* (New York: Fordham UP, 2019), 1–25. Confusingly, some literary critics at a remove from Marxism use the term “critical theory” (usually uncapitalized—but then, it is often uncapitalized in the Marxist context as well) to mean “the theory of [literary] criticism” or else “the theorizing done by literary critics.” This problem renders murky the critical thrust of a volume like *Jews and the Ends of Theory*, where the latter term seems to mean something different to each of the volume’s contributors.

⁴⁹ Redfield, *Theory at Yale*, 1.

during World War II could only have become front-page news for the *New York Times* because Theory “itself [was] perceived to be implicated in the figure of de Man.”⁵⁰

It may seem counterintuitive to group all those theories under the sign of Theory-qua-deconstruction-qua-Derrida-and-de Man, given the fact that, beginning long before the wartime writings scandal, deconstruction was regularly charged by critics on the American political left, inside and outside of academia, with having lost touch with the world, history, ethics, and politics, even as it was charged by the political right for diametrically opposite reasons. The logic of the synecdochic reduction has to do with the central complaint raised by Theory’s opponents, both the old-guard humanists within the academy and the cultural arbiters at extra-academic institutions like the *Times*: that “theorizing” about literature interceded between the reader (nearly always figured as an elite undergraduate) and the literary text, obstructing what was supposed to be a pure, unmediated aesthetic experience. Deconstruction suspended the immediacy of aesthetic experience more relentlessly, pitilessly (in the vein of the Marxian *rücksichtslose Kritik*)—some said, sadistically—than any other strain of literary theory. While those who clamored for the overhaul of the canon were blamed by conservatives for subordinating aesthetic quality to a political agenda, at least the project of canon reform still conceded the value of a literary canon as such. Deconstruction, by contrast, puts into question whether there even *is* such a thing as “literature” to canonize. Thus, deconstruction became Theory, or “high theory,” “a phrase implying a pure extract, a sovereign essence,” as Redfield writes.⁵¹ What any history of Theory, including my own, needs to account for are the reasons

⁵⁰ John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1993), 178. On December 1, 1987, the *New York Times* ran the headline “Yale Scholar Wrote for Pro-Nazi Newspaper” on page B1.

⁵¹ Redfield, *Theory at Yale*, 20.

why the signifier “Theory” became so hyperinflated by the hot air of polemic that, well before the “de Man Affair,” it had already burst into full-fledged scandal. Why did so many people *care* so very much about whether or not the students at what was really a very small number of elite colleges like Yale were having properly unmediated aesthetic experiences in their literature classes?

And why, indeed, does Theory *still*, today—some three decades after articles and books began to appear proclaiming the “death” of Theory⁵²—cause the temperature of public discourse to spike? Consider the panic convulsing the American right, as I type these words, over “Critical Race Theory” (CRT). As Sam Kriss duly observes, what conservatives *call* CRT bears only the most tangential of connections to CRT properly speaking, that is, an offshoot of the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) movement dating back to the 1980s.⁵³ Instead, “what they’ve [conservatives] developed is just a fancier way of railing against wokeness,” and Kriss comments that “*wokeness* is actually a much better name for this thing: it makes clear that what we’re facing is not really a cohesive ideology but a cluster of postures and affects.”⁵⁴ If that’s the case—and I think it is—then why is it that the right has opted to substitute something “fancier,” like “CRT,” for “wokeness” in its rhetoric of moral panic? Kriss doesn’t ask or answer this question, but I will: “CRT” does what “wokeness” cannot because its nomenclature invokes the specter of Theory. By naming its target as *Theory*, the right-wing campaign against CRT

⁵² See, e.g., Paul A. Bové, *In the Wake of Theory* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1992); Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Double Reading: Postmodernism After Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993); Barbara Johnson, *The Wake of Deconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

⁵³ For an overview of CRT, see Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 2017).

⁵⁴ Sam Kriss, “What’s So Bad About Critical Race Theory?,” *Idiot Joy Shadowland* (June 25, 2021), accessed online June 30, 2021: <<https://samkriss.com/2021/06/25/whats-so-bad-about-critical-race-theory/>>.

activates an anti-intellectual current not alerted by the slangier “wokeness,” and taps into memories of the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s.

Nor is the echo of the “Theory wars” in the current panic over CRT accidental. It is explicit, for instance, in a March 2021 op-ed by the critic James Campbell in the *Wall Street Journal*. Campbell blames “deconstruction” for contemporary activists’ efforts at “the ‘decolonization’ of curricula—the latest step being the banishing of alleged ‘white supremacist’ ancient classics—and...the toppling of statues and renaming of schools.” For Campbell, left-wing political agitation in defense of Black life is directly connected, via Theory, to what he laments in his op-ed’s title as the “Dying Art of Criticism.” Literary criticism, he argues, properly serves to “guide the reader toward a wider appreciation than might otherwise be possible. ... All hail the critic, then, whose function, as [T. S.] Eliot put it, is ‘the common pursuit of true judgement and the correction of taste.’ How appealing it sounds. And how obsolete.” Literature “has been the common cultural conversation,” he continues, “since the time of Homer,” but Theory “render[s] the ‘common pursuit’ impossible.”⁵⁵ In these lines we begin to see how a conservative like Campbell strives to link up aesthetic experience, formal education, and a specific political project, so that the “death” of “the art of criticism” at the hands of Theory—from deconstruction to “CRT”—is nothing less than the writing on the wall for Western liberal democracy itself. How and why does Theory continue to be held liable for the failure of that articulation of aesthetics and politics?

⁵⁵ James Campbell, “Deconstruction, Identity, and the Dying Art of Criticism,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 19, 2021, accessed online March 20, 2021: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/deconstruction-identity-and-the-dying-art-of-criticism-11616177190>.

The further we drift temporally from the alleged heyday of Theory, the more such questions have snapped into focus, spurring redoubled inquiry. Gregory Jones-Katz's new intellectual history *Deconstruction: An American Institution* (2021) downplays the transatlantic itinerary and the xenophobic rhetoric, emphasizing instead those local social, economic, and political factors which nourished the rise of Theory at American universities far beyond the New Haven city limits, such as the University of Minnesota and the University of California at Irvine.⁵⁶ Redfield's *Theory at Yale: The Strange Case of Deconstruction in America* (2016), meanwhile, offers not so much an intellectual history as a genealogy of Theory's mediatization, a sort of deconstructive philology of the signifiers "Theory" and "Yale." Redfield's readings suggest that Theory is, in a bona fide psychoanalytic sense, a fetish. Theory serves as a polemical lightning rod, the node where currents of argumentation converge and dialectically invert into their own opposites, the site where contradictions are symptomatically bound together: at once European and American, foreign and domestic, political and apolitical, radical and reactionary, the ideology of neoliberalism and an insidious means of what today's far-right ideologues and demagogues incoherently dub "Cultural Marxist" indoctrination. Indeed, "Theory" may well name nothing *but* the effect of a reflexive attempt of the discourse around literature to lay hold of its own fetishistic structure.

This fetishism of Theory may help to explain why the figurative corpse of Paul de Man, the very personification of Theory—and a brilliant, morbid theorist of figurative personification—is routinely exhumed once or twice per decade and wheeled out for another round of public condemnation which never quite succeeds in laying the ghost of Theory to rest.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ See Jones-Katz, *Deconstruction*.

⁵⁷ See Redfield, *Theory at Yale*, 15–17.

All such attempts at exorcism fail because Theory is not exogenous to literature: it is from its own entrails that literature, as it has been institutionalized in the American academy, ceaselessly produces Theory. De Man puts it this way: “Nothing can overcome the resistance to theory since theory *is* itself this resistance. The loftier the aims and the better the methods of literary theory, the less possible it becomes. Yet literary theory is not in danger of going under; it cannot help but flourish, and the more it is resisted, the more it flourishes, since the language it speaks is the language of self-resistance.”⁵⁸ I want to take stock of this resistance to Theory as an effect of “the Jewish question,” that is, of religious genealogy of the institution of literature.

5. Synopsis of the dissertation

Chapter 1, “Midrash and ‘Theory’: A Missed Connection” presents an overview of the intellectual history of the midrash-Theory connection, concentrating on the reception of Theory in the field of rabbinics. I argue that rabbinicists and literary critics understood the word “theory” to name different things—a methodological toolkit, for the former, and an entire discourse, for the latter—and that, consequently, much of the so-called connection actually consisted of scholars talking past each other. I illustrate this failure in the 1980s to bring literary studies and rabbinics together with a disagreement in the pages of a 1985 issue of *Prooftexts* between Susan Handelman and David Stern over how to properly interpret BT *Sanhedrin* 34a.

Chapters 2 and 3, “Bad Examples (I): Leopards in the Temple of Culture” and “Bad Examples (II): How Not to Read the Bible as Literature,” analyze from different directions the pejorative image of rabbinic exegesis that circulates in literary studies of the postwar era.

⁵⁸ Paul de Man, “The Resistance to Theory,” in de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: U. Minn. Press, 1986), 3–20, at 19–20.

Chapter 2 focuses on the backlash to the prose style of the “Yale Critics” during the 1970s, especially Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom. Against interpretations of Hartman and Bloom which would attribute their respective stylistic experiments and mounting interest in Jewish hermeneutics (midrash for Hartman, kabbalah for Bloom) to their Jewish backgrounds, I argue that both those aspects of their work need to be understood as reactions to the unresolved investment of aesthetic education in a Christian, anti-Jewish structure of supersession, which is institutionalized as “literary studies” by the New Critics of the 1930s–50s. Chapter 3 examines the rise of “Bible as literature” scholarship, focusing on the 1980s. I show how the uneasy secularity of institutionalized literary studies resulted in a special pressure for scholars interested in reading biblical texts, who were compelled to perform in a hyperbolic way their commitments to ideological secularism. These performances frequently took the form of a denigration of midrash as “uncritical reading.”

Unlike Chapters 2 and 3, which offer broad historical accounts and discuss the anti-Judaism of postwar literary studies, Chapters 4 and 5 focus on specific authors who understood themselves to be implicated by this anti-Judaism and sought to link midrash to Theory in a positive manner through their readings of texts by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Derrida. Chapter 4, “Re-Circumcisions: Judaism and Psychoanalysis in Susan Handelman’s *The Slayers of Moses*,” offers a more thorough reading of Handelman’s book than has heretofore been attempted in the history of its critical reception. I argue that Handelman’s psychoanalytic notion of “the Rabbinic repressed” effectively collapses an ethnocentric concept of hereditary Jewish identity and Judaic hermeneutical traditions, but that this is only half the book’s gambit. Positioning Jacques Lacan, a non-Jewish author, as the “Paul” to Freud’s “Jesus,” Handelman also argues for a figural, spiritualized—indeed, Pauline—idea of Judaism, “the heretic

hermeneutic,” which would render all of Theory part of the chain of tradition going back to Moses at Sinai. In the latter part of the chapter, I turn to Handelman’s misunderstanding of Derrida’s critique of Jacques Lacan’s interpretation of a story by Edgar Allan Poe. Handelman and Derrida have divergent understandings of the nature of signification, which lead, I argue, to “two interpretations of repetition”: repetition as tradition and repetition as dissemination.

Chapter 5, “‘No Sin to Limp’: Geoffrey Hartman’s Ethics of Error” argues that Hartman thought the midrash–Theory connection along the lines of the second interpretation of repetition. Rather than “doing midrash” or positioning Theory as a “heretical” elaboration of an essential, unaltered Judaism, Hartman sees midrash as one exemplary form of exegesis among others, including the Romantic fragment, the essay, and Derrida’s book *Glas*. Recognizing, on the basis of a passage from Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, that the Derridean theory of signification’s “iterability” forecloses the possibility of absolute fidelity to tradition, Hartman takes midrash as a model of critical “error” (not a pejorative word, here) from which the secular literary critic must, in turn, err. If midrash assumes a special place in this argument, it is not because midrash is *essentially* superior to the essay or the fragment, but rather because the long history of anti-Judaism alluded to in Chapters 2 and 3 imbues the “restitution” of midrash with ethical and political urgency in post-Holocaust discourse. Finally, the conclusion to the dissertation compares Hartman and Edward Said, and suggests the implications of my interpretation of the midrash–Theory connection, especially the idea of critique as error, for contemporary debates in literary studies in the neoliberal university.

CHAPTER ONE

MIDRASH AND ‘THEORY’:

A MISSED CONNECTION

Introduction

When David Stern coined the phrase “the midrash–Theory connection” in the introduction to *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (1996), he intended for it to name “the encounter of midrash scholarship with contemporary literary studies.” That the scholars of midrash are the subjects of this encounter, and literary studies its object, is made evident on the first page of Stern’s retrospective account, where he immediately insists on splitting apart the midrash–Theory connection into *two* questions: “How lasting and deep the impact of midrash has been on literary theory remains an open question.... My purpose here, however, is to ask not what midrash can do for literary criticism but what theory has done to midrash.”¹

The latter sentence is really an encrypted citation of the prophetic concluding lines of Geoffrey Hartman’s 1994 essay “Midrash as Law and Literature”: “As for the future, and the field that may eventually be created by the awareness that midrash and literary study take of each other, I can say only one thing with confidence. A knowledge of midrash will prove more interesting for the literary critic than a knowledge of literary criticism for the scholar of Jewish

¹ David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1996), 1.

texts. Ask not what deconstruction may do for midrash; ask what midrash may do for deconstruction.”² Stern draws attention to how naïve Hartman’s words sound just two years later. Not only was no new “field” created by the midrash–Theory connection, as Hartman believed would happen, but the impact of Theory upon rabbinics was already demonstrably greater—or, at least, more apparent—than vice-versa; indeed, as indicated by Tables 0.1 and 0.2 in the Introduction, above, the decline of interest in midrash among literary critics after about 1991 was precipitous. Stern rewrites Hartman’s future tense (“may eventually be created,” “will prove more interesting,” “may do”) in the past perfect; instead of “what midrash can do for literary criticism,” he asks “what theory *has done to* [the study of] midrash.” The quasi-citation suggests that these questions have little to do with each other; Stern’s hyphen, “connecting” midrash and Theory, may in fact be partitive.

The rest of *Midrash and Theory* confirms this impression. The opening chapter, a slightly revised version of Stern’s 1988 *Critical Inquiry* article “Midrash and Indeterminacy,” chastises what Stern regards as the zeal for resemblances among recent literary-critical discussions of midrash—for example between the literary critics’ term “indeterminacy” and the multiplicity of meanings found in midrash, which Stern prefers to call “polysemy.” Having dispatched Theory’s potential incursion in “Midrash and Indeterminacy,” Stern is free to move on to discuss midrash alone; the remaining three chapters of *Midrash and Theory* (on the *mashal*, homiletical exegesis in the opening chapters of *Vayikra Rabbah*, and divine anthropomorphism in rabbinic literature, respectively) scarcely acknowledge the second noun in the book’s title at all, despite Stern’s initial insistence that “[t]his book was conceived during the same period as the midrash–Theory

² Geoffrey H. Hartman, “Midrash as Law and Literature,” in Hartman, *The Third Pillar: Essays in Judaic Studies* (Philadelphia: U. Penn. Press, 2013), 85–101.

connection developed, and the story of that connection is, in large part, the history behind its writing.”³ The book has a great deal to say about “ancient Jewish exegesis,” but almost nothing at all to say about “contemporary literary studies.” In his review of *Midrash and Theory*, Gerald Bruns—one of the implicit targets of “Midrash and Indeterminacy”—summarizes the book’s methodological intervention as follows: “[...A]ny attempt to appropriate midrash for literary criticism, or indeed to approach it in the spirit of theoretical interest, simply misses the point of midrash, which is to actualize the Torah, that is, to create an intimacy between the sacred text and those to whom it speaks.”⁴ It is enough to make the reader wonder whether “the midrash–Theory connection” named by Stern ever actually happened. Did “the rabbis” really “come to New Haven”?

This chapter offers a general historical overview of the midrash–Theory connection. The narrative I present in the following pages is thus the foundation of, and a continual point of reference for, the subsequent chapters. Yet, as the juxtaposition of “Midrash as Law and Literature” with *Midrash and Theory* hints, the narrative will acquire a strangely bifurcated, lopsided shape as it proceeds, but I shall argue that indeed there *wasn’t* really a midrash–Theory connection to speak of. Rather, there were two. They were simultaneous and they interacted, yes, but on closer examination of the archive it becomes apparent that the literary critics and the rabbinicists were largely carrying on two different—at times, radically distinct—conversations about rabbinic texts and literary theory. The chapter focuses on the uptake of literary theory by rabbinicists, as well as rabbinicists’ critiques of the appropriation of midrash by literary studies.

³ Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 2.

⁴ Gerald L. Bruns, review of Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, *Religion & Literature* 29.2 (Summer 1997): 75–78, at 76.

The reason for the connection's asymmetry is simple: for all its methodological quirks and convolutions, rabbinics has metabolized the midrash–Theory connection. Its major rabbinics texts, such as *Midrash and Literature*, Stern's *Midrash and Theory* and *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (1991), Daniel Boyarin's *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (1990), and Steven D. Fraade's *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (1991)—all of which I'll discuss below—are classics of midrash studies and continue to be frequently cited; the connection's central debates still animate scholarship today, as when Fraade and Azzan Yadin-Israel recently sparred in the pages of the *AJS Review* over the validity of the term “polysemy” to describe rabbinic hermeneutics. For Jewish studies, the midrash–Theory connection amounted to a methodological revolution whose impact has since been felt not only in midrash studies but also in adjacent fields including Talmud, kabbalah, and patristics; the connection helped open these fields up not just to literary criticism and theory but also to fresh methods from cultural studies, postcolonialism, folkloristics, anthropology, philosophy, and gender and sexuality studies, among others. Several important publications from the last two decades are altogether unimaginable without the intervention of the midrash–Theory connection. That's not to say that the connection is remembered accurately or fully in rabbinics—far from it—but, rather, that it is remembered at all, whereas it has been largely forgotten by scholars of English and comparative literature. Of course, that asymmetry makes a certain degree of good intuitive sense, insofar as midrash is thematically central for the one group of scholars and relatively tangential for the other. Nevertheless, it's a revealing lopsidedness, especially when we consider the sweeping scope of the claims made about midrash by literary critics: Handelman, for example, argues that all of Theory is but the unfolding in postmodernity of a chain of tradition, a “heretic

hermeneutic,” that extends all the way back to the revelation at Sinai itself; Hartman believed that midrash would have a greater effect on literary studies than vice-versa; and so on.

In other words, the asymmetry of my presentation in this chapter corresponds inversely to the asymmetry of institutional memory when it comes to the midrash–Theory connection. Indeed, it’s precisely such asymmetry which I aim to explain here by differentiating what the rabbinicists and literary critics each actually meant by a midrash–Theory connection. Defined by discord and asymmetry rather than interdisciplinary collegiality and exchange, the “connection” was—or rather, the connections *were*—divided from the start by fundamental divergences in stakes, methods, values, and even in the operative definitions of the two key terms: *midrash* and *Theory*. After providing this general picture, I’ll deal in detail with a single exchange between a rabbinicist, David Stern, and a literary critic, Susan Handelman, in the pages of *Prooftexts* in the mid-1980s. This exchange exemplifies the midrash–Theory connection’s “missed” status—the way in which the two groups of scholars’ divergent premises led them to speak past each other.

1.1. Midrash as literature

In “Two Introductions to Midrash,” initially published in the new Jewish studies journal *Prooftexts* in 1983 and reprinted in Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick’s volume *Midrash and Literature*, James Kugel drily comments: “There are many recent works that seek to define midrash, and nothing would be gained here by attempting to reduce these efforts to a few sentences; though one might say more pointedly . . . that, since these studies have already not defined midrash in ample detail, there is little purpose in our not defining it again here.”⁵

⁵ James L. Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash,” in Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986), 77–103, at 91. This volume henceforth abbreviated in notes as *ML*. Cf. the classic twentieth-century scholarly definitions of

If there is one thing that rabbinicists of the late twentieth century agreed upon, it was that it is far easier to say what midrash isn't than what it is. Immediately before a tirade against "Kugel and... his colleagues in the sectarian literary journal, *Prooftexts*," the prolific historian of ancient Judaism Jacob Neusner argues that "as a category, midrash meaning simply all 'Jewish' or 'Judaic exegesis' but no gentile exegesis" is an essentializing (and potentially "racist") construction. He therefore dismisses it in favor of taking each rabbinic document on its own terms.⁶ Martin S. Jaffee agrees with Neusner's assessment, writing that "the concept 'midrash'...appears artificially reified" by literary critics. "[...W]hat the historian of religions discovers is not 'midrash in general,' but exegetical discourse on Scripture deployed in this document one way, in that another, and so on. From this vantage point, the various 'species' of midrashic discourse—the discrete compilations...—become far more interesting than the 'genus,' the abstraction..."⁷ Although Daniel Boyarin ultimately ends up vesting the term "midrash" with slightly more positive content, his own working usage of the term in *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (1990) is a circular "delimit[ation] without any

midrash: Renée Bloch, "Midrash," trans. M. H. Callaway, in William Scott Green, ed., *Approaches to Ancient Judaism, Vol. 1: Theory and Practice* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978), 29–50; Gary G. Porton, "Defining Midrash," in Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Study of Ancient Judaism* (New York: KTAV, 1980), 1:55–92; Geza Vermes, "Bible and Midrash: Early OT Exegesis," in P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Bible, Vol. 1: From the Beginnings to Jerome* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970), 199–231.

⁶ Jacob Neusner, *Midrash as Literature: The Primacy of Documentary Discourse* (Lanham: UP of America, 1987), 6, 4. From Neusner's voluminous corpus, see also *Judaism and Scripture: The Evidence of Leviticus Rabbah* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1986); *Canon and Connection: Intertextuality in Judaism* (Lanham: UP of America, 1987); *Wrong Ways and Right Ways in the Study of Formative Judaism: Critical Method and Literature, History, and the History of Religions* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); *The Documentary Foundation of Rabbinic Culture* (Tampa: U. South Florida Press, 1995). For criticism of Neusner's approach, cf. Steven D. Fraade, "Interpreting Midrash 1: Midrash and the History of Judaism," *Prooftexts* 7.2 (May 1987): 179–94.

⁷ Martin S. Jaffee, "The Hermeneutical Model of Midrashic Studies: What It Reveals and What It Conceals," *Prooftexts* 11.1 (January 1991): 67–76, at 71.

definition”: “[... ‘m]idrash’ is the type of biblical interpretation which is found in the Jewish biblical commentaries which the Jews call ‘midrash.’”⁸ Gerald Bruns makes a parallel point, opting for a generalizing rather than particularizing angle: “*Midrash* is the word for whatever occurs in a situation in which the understanding of the Torah is called for. The point, however, is that there is never a situation in human life in which the understanding of the Torah is *not* called for.”⁹

The problem of defining midrash is exacerbated by the conventional, but often hazy, distinction—made by the rabbis and by the scholars who study them—between two varieties: *midrash halakhah*, or legal exegesis of the Bible, and *midrash aggadah*, a vague category encompassing...well, everything else “which is found in the Jewish biblical commentaries which the Jews call ‘midrash.’”¹⁰ This distinction is crucial for understanding the reception of midrash in modernity, because the discrepant proximities of midrash aggadah and midrash halakhah to Jewish law, *halakhah*, grants the latter a stronger religious authority than the former. Accordingly, the two varieties provoked different reactions from early modern Jews negotiating their emancipation as citizens of European polities. As Jay Harris demonstrates, the tannaitic practice of deriving legally authoritative statements from biblical texts through exegesis (midrash

⁸ Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), viii. To distinguish between these two uses of the word *midrash*, I observe the convention of writing *Midrash* with a capital letter when referring to the commentaries themselves, and *midrash* with a lowercase letter when referring generally to rabbinic biblical hermeneutics.

⁹ Gerald L. Bruns, “Midrash and Allegory: The Beginnings of Scriptural Interpretation,” in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987), 625–646, at 628, italics in original. This volume henceforth abbreviated in footnotes as *LGB*.

¹⁰ See Joseph Heinemann, “The Nature of the Aggadah,” trans. Marc Bregman, in *ML*, 41–55, esp. 41–42. On troubling the distinction between halakhah and aggadah (in the context of Talmud), see Barry Scott Wimpfheimer, *Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories* (Philadelphia: U. Penn. Press, 2011), 31–62.

halakhah) was significantly contested in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, along both reformist and reactionary lines. Harris comments:

By the end of the eighteenth century..., while some Bible scholars could continue to find divinity within the biblical text, midrash halakhah demanded far more. To sustain midrash halakhah one has to affirm that the Bible was given by God to Moses, however that was understood; that it was formulated in distinct divine speech demanding not just multivalence, but the hermeneutic significance of even prepositions, syllables, and letters; that this speech was preserved in its pristine purity throughout some three millennia; that the hermeneutic techniques developed by the rabbis...represent the tools need to expose the multiple meanings of the text; and that the applications of those techniques by the rabbis are authoritative and correct. I think it is safe to say that no Jew who engaged the emerging modern world could comfortably affirm all these propositions. [...T]hey could perhaps affirm some, but not all. [...S]uch Jews also confronted intellectual challenges to the notion of an unbroken tradition. Unlike their medieval predecessors, they came to have the freedom to be transformed by these challenges.... We can see from their experiences that, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, rabbinic Judaism was to face its most formidable challenge, at the heart of which stood the question of the viability of rabbinic hermeneutics.¹¹

Midrash halakhah, with its direct implications for Jewish forms of life, thus became a major site of what Harris refers to as a modern Jewish *Kulturkampf*.

The stakes were otherwise, though, for midrash aggadah. Because this variety of midrash did not possess the same degree of legal authority, the question of whether and how to retain these traditions was less urgent for modern Jewry outside the *beit midrash* (the rabbinic study-house). Already in the late twelfth century, Maimonides had claimed in the *Guide for the Perplexed* (1190) that midrash aggadah is neither true biblical exegesis, as the rabbis maintained, nor misbegotten biblical exegesis, as argued, for example, by some of the medieval rabbis' Karaite, Christian, and Islamic contemporaries. Maimonides argued that midrash aggadah is not biblical exegesis at all, but rather a discourse of "poetic expressions" used by the Sages to

¹¹ Jay M. Harris, "How Do We Know This?": *Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 135–36.

communicate their ideas.¹² In the very different cultural and political milieu of modern Germany, the Maimonidean view of midrash aggadah was recuperated under the aegis of the emerging category of “literature [*Literatur*].”

In his *Fragments on Recent German Literature* (1766–67), the polymathic Prussian philosopher, Orientalist, poet, and critic Johann Gottfried Herder articulated what would become an enormously influential idea of *Literatur* as the distilled aesthetic expression of the unique “genius” or “spirit [*Geist*]” of a linguistically (and therefore essentially) unified “people [*Volk*].” The Hebrew Bible features heavily in Herder’s exposition of this idea in the *Fragments* and in his later work, including the two-volume dialogue *Of the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (1782–83).¹³ In 1818, Leopold Zunz, a pioneer of the *Wissenschaft des Judenthums* movement, lamented in his essay *On Rabbinic Literature* that the antiquarian emphasis of Herder and other Orientalists on “the formidable remains of the ancient Hebrews’ golden age” had caused the Bible to eclipse later Jewish literature. “After Israel’s intellectual and political decline,” wrote Zunz, “this nation seemed to have gradually lost its potency, contenting itself with the more or less adequate

¹² Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedländer, 2nd ed. (New York: Dover, 1956), 353–54. However, cf. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, 3: “The claims that Maimonides in making in the passage may be...best understood in the light of several other passages in the *Guide*....” On Maimonides’s views on midrash halakhah, cf. Harris, “*How Do We Know This?*,” 86–95.

¹³ On Herder’s theory of national literature, see Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004), 75–81. On the central importance of the Hebrew Bible for that theory, see Jeffrey S. Librett, *Orientalism and the Figure of the Jew* (New York: Fordham UP, 2015), 29–51; Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 43–52; Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992), 21–50; Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005), 148–81.

exegesis of a bygone era's writings."¹⁴ Zunz defended the literary value of rabbinic tradition, a defense from which midrash aggadah—denigrated in its capacity as biblical exegesis—stood especially to benefit.¹⁵

The literary appreciation of rabbinic texts reached its zenith in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1886, the Russian Jewish novelist Sholem Yankev Abramovitch (*nom de plume*, “Mendele Moykher Sforim”) permanently transformed Hebrew prose style by “set[ting] rabbinic rather than biblical Hebrew as the normative framework of his prose”—a shift which Mendele’s “disciple,” the Zionist poet and essayist Chayim Nachman Bialik, celebrated as the genesis of a Jewish national literature in the Herderian sense.¹⁶ From 1908 to 1911, working with the editor and publisher Yehoshua Chana Ravnitzky, Bialik compiled the *Sefer ha-aggadah*, a massive Hebrew treasury of aggadot drawn from the whole range of rabbinic literature. (Simultaneously, in 1909, the first volume of Louis Ginzberg’s anthology of aggadic materials, *The Legends of the Jews*, appeared.)¹⁷ For Bialik and Ravnitzky, the rabbinic genre of aggadic writing was like “a beautiful palace” in which “the spirit and soul of the Jews permanently dwelled,” but which now lay in ruins due to the neglect Zunz condemned in *On Rabbinic*

¹⁴ Leopold Zunz, “Etwas über die rabbinische Literatur,” trans. James Adam Redfield, in Christine Hayes, ed., *Classic Essays in Early Rabbinic Culture and History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 27–42, at 28.

¹⁵ For a critical discussion of Zunz’s work on rabbinic texts, see Yonah Fraenkel, *Darkhe ha-aggadah vaha-midrash* (Jerusalem: Masada, 1991), 542–48. For a detailed biographical and critical account of Zunz’s life and work, see the excellent recent biography by Ismar Schorch, *Leopold Zunz: Creativity in Adversity* (Philadelphia: U. Penn. Press, 2016).

¹⁶ Robert Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose: Modern Fiction and the Language of Realism* (Seattle: U. Wash. Press, 1988), 30–31. On Bialik’s literary Zionism, see Na’ama Rokem, *Prosaic Conditions: Heinrich Heine and the Spaces of Zionist Literature* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2013), 94–118, esp. 100–01 on Bialik’s reading of Mendele.

¹⁷ On Ginzberg’s *Legends*, see the essays collected in Galit Hasan-Rokem and Ithamar Gruenwald, eds., *Louis Ginzberg’s Legends of the Jews: Ancient Jewish Folk Literature Reconsidered* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2014).

Literature.¹⁸ Bialik even stated that the aggadot scattered across the Midrashim, Talmuds, and other rabbinic texts were fragments of a ruined Jewish literary epic which, in the *Sefer ha-aggadah*, had finally been partially reconstructed. As Stern comments, aggadah here serves as “the key to Jewish uniqueness” (what Herder and Zunz had called *Volksgeist*), and “this project...of restoring the ruined palace to its original glory...was in fact a trope, a figure in his [Bialik’s] mind for the reconstruction, the restoration, of the Jewish people themselves.”¹⁹ Unlike in Midrashim, where the exegetical units are arranged in order of the lemma upon which each unit comments, Bialik and Ravnitzky arranged their aggadic treasury by theme. Thus, the *Sefer ha-aggadah* tends to elide the exegetical function of midrash aggadah.²⁰

It was against this tendency to “save” midrash as literature by effacing its exegetical dimension that Isaak Heinemann pushed with his groundbreaking monograph *Darkhei ha-aggadah* (1949)—the twentieth century’s first full-fledged scholarly presentation of the philosophies of language and history guiding rabbinic exegesis. Heinemann located the problems of modern readers with rabbinic exegesis in the consciousness of those readers and their historical remove from the world of the rabbis, rather than finding some methodological or philosophical fault with the rabbis themselves. Midrash aggadah, he argued, *was* biblical exegesis: “[...W]e must see it [midrash aggadah] as a serious and successful effort to discover

¹⁸ Bialik and Ravnitzky, introduction to *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, quoted and trans. in David Stern, “Introduction,” in C. N. Bialik and Y. C. Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends (Sefer Ha-Aggadah): Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. William G. Braude (New York: Schocken, 1992), xvii–xxii, at xvii.

¹⁹ Stern, “Introduction” to *Book of Legends*, xix.

²⁰ This is a move repeated and exaggerated by later aggadic anthologies designed for a general readership. For instance, in Nahum Glatzer’s volume *Hammer on the Rock: A Short Midrash Reader* (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), minute fragments of rabbinic text are broken up into lines so that they resemble nothing so much as lyric verse, each fragment headed by a poetic title of Glatzer’s own invention.

the depths of Scripture.”²¹ This does not mean, however, that Heinemann jettisoned the Romantic view of midrash aggadah as literature; indeed, as indicated by his famous description of midrash aggadah as “creative historiography” and “creative philology,” the aesthetic dimension of these texts was central to his argument. Simply to invert the privileging of the aesthetic over against the exegetical would only repeat the problem *Darkhei ha-aggadah* seeks to address. Heinemann’s contention was that the creativity of midrashic exegesis did not cancel out its interpretative power but was instead a subjective source of that power; crucially, the “creativity” of the rabbis modifies their historiography and philology, rather than taking precedence over it.²²

In *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, Daniel Boyarin commends and emulates Heinemann’s rejection of the literature/exegesis dichotomy. Boyarin criticizes *Darkhei ha-aggadah*, however, for having overcome that dichotomy through a Romantic valorization of “creativity” which, Boyarin contends, transcendentalizes the creative subject. In other words, Boyarin argues that Heinemann overcorrected for both the aestheticist and historicist tendencies in earlier treatments of this topic. His recuperation of midrash aggadah as neither literature nor exegesis but, precisely, as *exegetical literature* paid the price of dehistoricizing the object and effacing the role of social and political forces in its production. On Boyarin’s view, *Darkhei ha-aggadah* is not a solution to the problems afflicting the modern reception of midrash aggadah so

²¹ Yitzhak Heinemann, *Darkhei ha-aggadah*, 3rd ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1974), 41, quoted and trans. in Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, 6.

²² For an overview of the contents of *Darkhei ha-aggadah*, see Lieve M. Teugels’s concise and helpful article, “Two Centuries of Midrash Study: A Survey of Some Standard Works on Rabbinic Midrash and Its Methods,” *Nederland Theologisch Tijdschrift* 54 (2000): 125–44; and, for a critique of Heinemann’s methodology, Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, 1–15.

much as a dialectical counterpoint to the *wissenschaftlich* historicists who, even into the later twentieth century, have tended to fix midrash in its *Sitz im Leben* and regard it as seeking

to give to direction to their [the rabbis'] own generation, to resolve their religious problems, to answer their theological questions, and to guide them out of their spiritual perplexities.... The aggadists do not mean so much to clarify difficult passages in the biblical text as to take a stand on the burning questions of the day, to guide the people and to strengthen their faith. But since they addressed themselves to a wide audience...they could not readily formulate the problems in an abstract way, nor could they give involved, theoretical answers. In order to present their ideas in a more comprehensible and engaging fashion, the sages cast them in a narrative format and employed parables and other literary means which appeal to all.²³

As James Adam Redfield argues, Boyarin's characterization of *Darkhei ha-aggadah* is unfair, painting Heinemann as projecting a Romantic myth of the creative genius onto the late-ancient rabbis.²⁴ Boyarin's motivated representation of Heinemann can be understood, however, as a way to set up the history of modern rabbinics as caught between two complementarily inadequate methodological frameworks. This polemical reading of his predecessors allows him to posit literary theory as a resource for rabbinics. Boyarin's objective in *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* is thus to use literary theory, and specifically the concept of intertextuality, to dismantle the binarisms he claims have controlled the reception of midrash. He directs his

²³ Joseph Heinemann, "The Nature of the Aggadah," 49. Boyarin criticizes this passage in *Intertextuality*, 3–5. However, I think Boyarin overstates Joseph Heinemann's (no relation to Isaak) dismissal of the exegetical function of midrash. After all, on the very same page of the same essay, Heinemann writes that "the rabbinic creators of the Aggadah looked back into Scripture to uncover the full latent meaning of the Bible and its wording," which brings Heinemann closer to Boyarin than Boyarin concedes. Boyarin seems to take issue primarily with the statement that the rabbis "*do not mean so much to clarify difficult passages in the biblical text as to take a stand on the burning questions of the day*" (emphasis mine), which does admittedly insinuate a hierarchy of functions. Read in context, though, it seems clear to me that Heinemann posits the two functions—call them exegetical and homiletical—as equivalent exigencies for the rabbis, even though he does focus more on the homiletical than the exegetical in the essay.

²⁴ See James Adam Redfield, "Creative Historiography Today: Re-Enchanting Isaak Heinemann," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* (forthcoming).

intervention against a set of assumptions including (1) that a literary text cannot be exegetical and an exegetical one cannot be literary; (2) that “real” exegesis addresses the (transhistorically consistent) meaning of the primary text but not the exegete’s own historical situation, and vice-versa; and (3) that legal texts do not have literary qualities.²⁵

By literary theory, to recall from the Introduction, I mean not Theory but theory: any meta-level reflection on the specificity of literary language and the methodological implications of that specificity for the interpretation of discrete literary texts. Because, as Stern puts it, the fundamental premise of the new wave of midrash scholarship in the 1980s was the claim that “midrash, too, was literature,”²⁶ these rabbinicists found literary theory useful—if not by itself sufficient—for refining scholars’ understanding of midrash. Especially helpful were those contemporary theoretical movements and concepts which were keenly alert to phenomena found in midrashic texts such as Boyarin’s privileged concept, intertextuality.²⁷

Steven D. Fraade – whose book *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* was published in 1991, one year after *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* – agrees with Boyarin’s critique of what Fraade refers to as the twin “fallacies,” “hermeneuticism and historicism,” in the modern academic study of midrash.²⁸ Fraade likewise emphasizes the need for a fresh, theoretically current approach in which the “double-facing” aspect of midrash, simultaneously toward the biblical text and the

²⁵ As Azzan Yadin-Israel observes, however, although Boyarin focuses on the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, conventionally classified overall as midrash halakhah, he “concentrate[s] on the aggadic pericopes” within the *Mekhilta*. Yadin-Israel makes the same point about Steven D. Fraade’s *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991). See Azzan Yadin-Israel [as Azzan Yadin], *Scripture as Logos: Rabbi Ishmael and the Origins of Midrash* (Philadelphia: U. Penn. Press, 2004), ix.

²⁶ Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 4.

²⁷ See Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, 12.

²⁸ Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary*, 14.

exegete's historical situation, is properly accounted for. Echoing Boyarin's critique of *Darkhei ha-aggadah*, Fraade is especially concerned in *From Tradition to Commentary* with the insights of post-Heideggerian continental philosophy regarding the ineluctable limitations of the scholar's own historical situation in the act of reading. Thus, he argues, not only does the *Sifre Devarim* need to be read as both "interpretation" of the Bible and "representation" of the *Sifre*'s Tannaitic scene of production, but, in turn, he himself must be alert to the refraction of his own reading of *Sifre* through his own historical situation, his production of a commentary about a commentary.²⁹

David Stern shares Boyarin's and Fraade's objective of moving beyond the restrictive, anachronistic literature/exegesis dichotomy. For Stern, the relevant strain of literary theory is the structuralist return to the study of rhetoric. In his first article on midrash, "Rhetoric and Midrash: The Case of the Mashal" (1981), Stern describes how recent theoretical work on rhetoric has opened a "wider perspective...in approaching all forms of literary discourse," including those "that previously have been excluded from the purview of traditional literary criticism" such as "historiography and philosophy." Theorists of rhetoric have "pointed out the limitations to our inherited beliefs about what constitutes literature, even the cultural provinciality that sometimes lies behind our easy acceptance of those beliefs." Stern argues that these recent developments

hold...special potential for adding to our understanding of rabbinic literature, and in particular midrash.... If the unique character of midrash lies in the fact that it appears to be situated precisely in that undefined area between those types of discourses we conventionally call exegesis and narrative—on account of which, among other things, midrash has often eluded those attempts that have been made in the past to apply it to the

²⁹ See Fraade *From Tradition to Commentary*, 22-23. Although he eschews literary theory, Judah Goldin is also acutely sensitive to the methodological ramifications of commenting on commentary in his study of a section of the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, The Song at the Sea: Being a Commentary on a Commentary in Two Parts* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1971).

normative criteria of Western literary criticism—a rhetorical theory for midrash would enable us to describe this literature on its own terms.³⁰

Furthermore, some retrospective comments from Stern indicate that it was really certain modernist writers, not “postmodern” literary theory, which initially helped him to feel a way out of the literature/exegesis dichotomy: “I sensed what had drawn me to the ‘literary’ dimension of midrash...was its resemblance to the unconventional mingling of narrative and commentary that I was familiar with in writers of fiction like Kafka and Borges and literary critics like Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes.”³¹ In another reflection, he adds: “If we had not first learned how to read these modernists, we would never have known how to read midrash. They provided the lens through which we were first able to recognize the singular literary-exegetical features that are visible in midrash as well as in modernist texts.”³² The place of literary theory in Stern’s work is thus narrower than such book titles as *Midrash and Theory* would have us think.

Indeed, what is remarkable about rabbinics’ alleged turn to literary theory during the 1980s is the nevertheless relatively minor presence of literary theory in the resulting scholarship. Although Fraade’s idiom is clearly marked by literary theory—“dialogism” tips us off to the relevance of Mikhail Bakhtin, “illocutionary” evokes speech-act philosophy—his sources are almost entirely submerged. With the solitary exception of an extended quotation from Barthes’s *S/Z* (1970) in the introduction, *all* of the citations from and references to literary theorists occur in the 110 pages of endnotes, not in the main text.³³ While Fraade is obviously deeply read in

³⁰ David Stern, “Rhetoric and Midrash: The Case of the Mashal,” *Prooftexts* 1.3 (Sept. 1981): 261–91, at 261–62.

³¹ David Stern, “*Vayikra Rabbah* and My Life in Midrash,” *Prooftexts* 21.1 (Jan. 2001): 23–38, at 23–24.

³² Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 8.

³³ Among the authors cited in Fraade’s notes we find: J. L. Austin, Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, Peter Brooks, David Carroll, Terry Eagleton, Harold Fisch, Stanley Fish, Michel Foucault, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Gérard Genette, Roman Ingarden, Wolfgang Iser, Roman

literary theory, then, the field's role in *From Tradition to Commentary* is decidedly auxiliary. Stern, meanwhile, positions himself explicitly at the intersection of rabbinics and literary studies, yet he actually cites *fewer* theorists *less* frequently than Fraade in his contemporaneous monograph, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (1991).³⁴ Passing mentions are made of Barthes, Peter Brooks, Gérard Genette, Wolfgang Iser, Roman Jakobson, and Vladimir Propp on just a handful of pages. As in *From Tradition to Commentary*, Stern's fluency in literary theory is marked ambiently in *Parables in Midrash* through vocabulary rather than direct engagement; although he uses terms like *sjuzhet* and *fabula*, "gap," "focalization," "speech act," and "ideology," whenever possible he presents them without interrupting his discussion of the midrashic texts at hand. In neither case is there is ever any question that the theoretical sources are included only because the author finds them heuristically useful for elucidating empirical phenomena in the *Sifre Devarim* (Fraade) or *Eikhah Rabbah* (Stern). The encounter of midrash and literary theory takes place off the page, in the formative background of these texts, and it goes one way: literary theory is *applied* to midrash.

It's Boyarin who, to a vastly greater degree than any of his colleagues, puts theoretical sources front and center during his writings from the later 1980s. Hence, he makes for an especially useful representative of the new wave of midrash scholarship, as the relative subordination of theory to midrash in his work goes *a fortiori* for other rabbinicists.³⁵ Consider,

Jakobson, Fredric Jameson, Hans-Robert Jauss, Frank Kermode, Murray Krieger, J. Hillis Miller, Paul Ricoeur, Michael Riffaterre, John Searle, Tzvetan Todorov, Joel Weinsheimer, and Hayden White.

³⁴ The books are almost exactly equal in length: 343 (Fraade) and 347 (Stern) pages.

³⁵ The number of book-length works in the discipline of rabbinics from 1978-98 which actually make any substantial use of literary theory to describe and understand midrash is much smaller than Stern's talk of a "midrash–Theory connection" as a "hot topic" leads us to expect. If we classify José Faur's *Golden Doves with Silver Dots: Semiotics and Textuality* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986) as primarily theological rather than philological or historical in orientation, as

for instance, the structuralist concept “intertextuality.” In “Old Wine in New Bottles: Intertextuality and Midrash” (1987), Boyarin enlists this concept to help him better understand how midrashic texts relate to biblical narrative. He begins his article:

In recent theoretical writing, the concept of intertextuality plays a significant role. Julia Kristeva’s insight (inspired by [Mikhail] Bakhtin) that ‘every text builds itself as a mosaic of quotations, every text is absorption and transformation of another text’...has inspired both an enrichment of practical criticism and descriptive poetics. In this paper, I would like to study the workings of intertextuality in a specific non-Western literary tradition, the midrash. Midrash is the way the Sages of the Talmudic period (the first five centuries of the Christian Era) read the Bible, as well as the written evidence for that way of reading. Much of midrash presents itself in the form of a paraphrase of the Biblical text in which verses and parts of verses from many places in the canon are combined into a new discourse. It is accordingly openly and radically intertextual (by Kristeva’s definition) in its very foundations, inasmuch as it lays bare...the mosaic-structure of quotations from which the text (all texts) is built. The specific question I would like to address here has to do with the cultural function of texts which build themselves out of more or less transformed *tesserae* of known earlier texts. [...E]xplicit intertextuality can carry with it both ‘disruptive’ and ‘reconstructive’ features and I will argue that, with

I would, we are really left with only five books: *ML* (or at least its first 194 pages), Boyarin’s *Intertextuality*, Stern’s *Parables in Midrash* and *Midrash and Theory*, and Fraade’s *From Tradition to Commentary*.

In *Midrash and Theory*, 95n5, Stern lists off “a few of the most important works,” but the list he gives is lighter on theory than this presentation suggests. One of the items, James L. Kugel’s *In Potiphar’s House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990) does not actually refer to *any* literary theory; as Marc Bregman writes in his review of *In Potiphar’s House* for the *Journal of Religion* 73.2 (April 1993): 287–88, at 287: “The dominant tendency, in the past decade or so, has been to view the corpora of rabbinic biblical interpretation (midrash) as literature can be most fruitfully studied with those critical tools employed in the analysis of other written texts, ancient and modern. However, earlier scholars...tended to view midrash, particularly the nonlegal midrash aggadah, as an evolving chain of originally oral tradition on the Hebrew Bible. *In Potiphar’s House* demonstrates that the ‘traditions-history’ approach to the study of midrash is still very much alive and continues to develop as an important tool for the study of biblical interpretation.” If anything, then, Kugel’s book functions as a counterexample. Another item on Stern’s list, Michael Fishbane’s *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989), gets some initial mileage out of a provocative comparison to Derrida’s notion of *différance* on a single page of a single chapter (see Fishbane, *Garments*, 19), and makes brief usage of the concept of intertextuality in another (reprinted from *ML*), but otherwise does not directly engage literary theory at all. Even Stern’s own *Midrash and Theory*, title notwithstanding, really only addresses literary theory as such in the introduction and the (previously published) first chapter before leaving theory behind in the remaining chapters. Cf. Yadin-Israel, *Scripture as Logos*, ix.

reference to midrash at least, this double movement of disruption and regeneration is precisely its *raison d'être*. ... The thesis of this paper is that studying midrash on the background of these theoretical analyses of the functions of intertextuality and quotation in modern texts will provide a fruitful avenue for overcoming the strangeness of midrash without violating that very otherness. Midrash, it will be claimed, provides a particularly special and interesting case of the intersection between the intertextuality of the poetic text and the quotations of the critical text.³⁶

Boyarin is not claiming that the rabbis theorized intertextuality *avant la lettre*; he is not drawing up a “family resemblance” between midrash and intertextuality. Instead, he is suggesting that the phenomena described by the theory of intertextuality are present in the particular midrash he discusses, the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, and potentially by extension other midrashic literature as well. Reading the *Mekhilta* through what Boyarin images as the heuristic “eyeglasses” of intertextuality allows us to get better traction on “how midrash reads” the Bible.³⁷ The subordination of the theory to the object is accentuated in “Voices in the Text: Midrash and the Inner Tension of Biblical Narrative” (1986), in which Boyarin speaks casually of “the intertextual web of the midrash” without elaborating, confining the theory to merely adjectival status.³⁸

In *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, Boyarin further highlights the contingency of his interest in literary theory by rejecting any single theoretical framework in favor of a heterogeneously sourced “more or less self-consistent system” of Boyarin’s own design, a theoretical bricolage assembled from the work of Bakhtin, Iser, Jakobson, Walter Benjamin, Julia Kristeva, Louis Marin, Stefan Morawski, Michael Riffaterre, and others: “[...W]hen I have found a concept that seems to help in understanding a structure of midrashic reading, I have

³⁶ Daniel Boyarin, “Old Wine in New Bottles: Intertextuality and Midrash,” *Poetics Today* 8.3–4 (1987): 539–56, at 539–42, italics in original.

³⁷ Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 15, x.

³⁸ Daniel Boyarin, “Voices in the Text: Midrash and the Inner Tension of Biblical Narrative,” *Revue Biblique* 93.4 (Oct. 1986): 581–597, at 596.

adapted it to my descriptive system. This does not mean that I have here just a grab bag or smorgasbord,” Boyarin writes, because “[t]hose concepts and terms that I use are those which make sense to me at some epistemological level aside from their aid in understanding midrash.”³⁹ Boyarin openly admits to the potential for internal contradictions, given the fact that “intertextuality” has been theorized in at least three different ways by different authors – but he immediately turns this into an advantage: “‘Intertextuality,’ *because* of the polysemy of its usages, provides a powerful metaphor” for the reading of the *Mekhilta*, a text whose hermeneutics overflow the limits of systematization.⁴⁰

In the book’s preface, Boyarin states that his own perspective is informed above all by “the philosophical project of Jacques Derrida.” Yet Derrida is never cited in the book, which, Boyarin adds, is after all “not a deconstructive work. The terms of reference are rather semiotic and structural,” because his primary objective is to “describe” and “understand” midrash, and he finds structuralism more useful to that end. “The reader will realize, I hope, that the opposition between signifiers and signifieds *is* being interrogated at every point. . . , even as the terms are being invoked. What I am attempting here involves not doing away with the sign but shifting our understanding of its structure in the light of Derrida’s writing, such that a less ethnocentric semiology may be generated.”⁴¹ If the project of Derridean deconstruction is at all furthered by *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, then, this will only have been via the structuralist study of midrash – not the other way around.

³⁹ Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, x–xi.

⁴⁰ Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 12, 20, emphasis in original.

⁴¹ Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, x, emphasis in original.

1.2 The resistance to Theory

Contrast Boyarin's employment of "intertextuality" as a heuristic for reading *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* with Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick's usage of the same concept in their introduction to *Midrash and Literature*:

What we are concerned with throughout this volume is a variety of 'open' modes of interpretation, a life in literature or in scripture that is experienced in the shuttle space between the interpreter and the text. Abiding in that same intermediary space is a whole universe of allusive textuality (the history of writing itself, some say) which lately goes by the name *intertextuality*. In this spacious scene of writing the interpreter's associative knowledge is invested with remarkably broad powers, including even the hermeneutical privilege of allowing questions to stand as parts of answers. Both in midrashic and post-formalist times, the drift of these attitudes could have been, but did not turn out to be, linguistic and literary nihilism. In fact, these very attitudes have produced an immense quantity and force of interpretive writing. By confronting the undecidability of textual meaning, this species of interpretation does not paralyze itself. Instead its own activity is absorbed into the activity of the text, producing a continuum of intertextual supplements, often in a spirit of high-serious play. And even when we encounter play of a seemingly outrageous kind, we cannot dismiss it as mere self-indulgence, because the phenomena of intertextuality and supplementarity systematically achieve, to a remarkable degree, the very effacement of self. Here there are essentially no proprietary rights, nor, properly speaking, are there any individuals to be proprietors.... What especially fascinates at this moment is...the capacity of midrash to bring about the rebirth of tradition. Midrash somehow engages in ever-new revelations of an originary text, while the question of origins is displaced into the living tradition of writing. Indeed, the passwords into our era, still hard for our uncircumcised lips, may well be the 'originary supplement[s]' that Derrida and others began to trace out twenty years ago...and which have lain inscribed in midrash for two millennia.⁴²

Intertextuality, here, does not describe a phenomenon—it *is* the phenomenon being described.

When they decline to "specify which is the primary, which the secondary object of our discussions," Hartman and Budick allow their two objects to run together.⁴³ So when they speak of "this species of interpretation," they are referring neither to midrash nor to literary theory, nor even to midrash *and* literary theory, but, more essentially still, to the "species of interpretation"

⁴² Hartman and Budick, "Introduction," in *ML*, ix–xiii, at xi and xiii, italics in original.

⁴³ Hartman and Budick, "Introduction," xi.

of which *both* are examples, equally adrift in the “whole universe of allusive textuality.” (Thus, the rabbis come to New Haven.)

As more than one reviewer of *Midrash and Literature* complained at the time, Hartman and Budick’s approach resulted in a distortion of the term “midrash” beyond all recognizability from the rabbinicists’ perspective.⁴⁴ The most flagrant example is the fifth and final section of the book, titled “Contemporary Midrash.” Here we find two texts by French writers: Derrida’s long essay on the poetry of Paul Celan, “Shibboleth,” and Edmond Jabès’s aphoristic piece “The Key,” extracted from his 1985 collection *Le Parcours*. In Chapter 5, I’ll argue that there is a logic to the inclusion of these texts in the volume. Even so, however, the application of label “Contemporary Midrash” to “Shibboleth” and “The Key” is problematic. Derrida, it’s true, does employ an “intertextual,” associative method of reading Celan’s work in “Shibboleth”: he moves back and forth between different poems on the basis of shared words. For example, the word *Schibboleth* allows him to leap from the poem titled “Schibboleth” to another in which the same word appears, “In Eins.” But Derrida’s basis for this approach is Celan’s own poetics, as set forth in the lecture *Der Meridian* (1960),⁴⁵ and in a late interview, “Others Are Secret Because They Are Other,” he reminds us that he had only a “very weak and indirect” familiarity with “the

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Robert Alter, “Old Rabbis, New Critics,” *The New Republic* 196.1–2 (Jan. 5–12, 1987): 27–33; Lilian Furst and Michael Goldberg, “Interpretation of *What?*,” *Journal of Religion* 67.3 (July 1987): 348–52; Steven D. Fraade, “Interpreting Midrash 2: Midrash and Its Literary Contexts,” *Prooftexts* 7.3 (Sept. 1987): 384–400; and William Scott Green, “Romancing the Tome: Rabbinic Hermeneutics and the Theory of Literature,” *Semeia* 40 (1987): 147–68.

⁴⁵ Cf. Jacques Derrida, “Shibboleth,” trans. Joshua Wilner, in *ML*, 307–47, at 309–10. For commentary on this essay, see Hent de Vries, “The Shibboleth Effect: On Reading Paul Celan,” in Bettina Bergo, Joseph Cohen, and Raphael Zagury-Orly, eds., *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham UP, 2007), 175–213; Michael G. Levine, *A Weak Messianic Power: Figures of a Time to Come in Benjamin, Derrida, and Celan* (New York: Fordham UP, 2013); Marc Redfield, *Shibboleth: Judges, Derrida, Celan* (New York: Fordham UP, 2020).

Jewish culture [of] annotation”—making whatever is said to be “midrashic” about Derrida’s essay into an editorial analogy at best, and at worst what he elsewhere calls a violent “recircumcision” into a Jewish identity he consistently problematizes in his various autobiographical writings.⁴⁶ While Derrida’s essay is haunted throughout by the disturbing story of the massacre of the Ephraimites by the Gileadites in Judges 12, from which the word *shibboleth* derives, the story’s presence is mediated by Celan’s allusions to it. The biblical narrative is not the primary text commented upon in “Shibboleth,” so it is difficult to claim that Derrida offers a biblical exegesis at all.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005), 141. On “recircumcision,” see Derrida’s critique of Yosef Yerushalmi’s interpretation of Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* in Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1996), and my Chapter 4, below. Hence, cf. J. Hillis Miller, *For Derrida* (New York: Fordham UP, 2009), 304–05, on Derrida’s book *Le toucher*, Jean-Luc Nancy (2000): “‘Rabbinical’ is a good analogy for Derrida’s demonstration that, for him at least, *Methodes ist Unweg*. Derrida’s *Le toucher*, in its baroque complexity, in its endless, nitpicking questions and endless suspensions or syncopes, forbidding firm conclusions, its interminable digression, each flying off at a different tangent, is something like rabbinical Midrash. The interpretative techniques of Midrash can get endless, undecidable meanings out of a simple story or a brief biblical phrase, or could get, in this case, such meanings out of what Nancy says about touching.... However, to say a final final word, or to give Derrida the last word, one must be extremely careful about pushing the analogy with Midrash too far, or even very far at all. Derrida more than once somewhat ruefully confessed to his more or less complete ignorance of Judaic commentary on the Torah.... Such denials forbid one to think of Derrida on an afternoon deep in reading Midrash. The Christian Bible was probably more pertinent for him than the Torah, as his many references to it suggest, and St. Augustine or Kierkegaard much more important than Midrash, as, for example, *The Gift of Death* and *Circumfession* attest.... In *A Taste for the Secret*, Derrida pays homage not to Midrash as the source of his ways of reading but, with characteristically complex reservations, to the French tradition of commentary on canonical philosophical texts.”

⁴⁷ As for “The Key,” the Bible is even *less* present there than in “Shibboleth”: in Jabès’s text, we read only of “the book.” Ironically, Jabès’s earlier poetry in *The Book of Questions* (1963) actively solicits comparisons to traditional Judaic texts by including numerous spurious rabbinic dialogues, but “The Key” does not feature any such dialogue. Despite its thematization, shared with “Shibboleth,” of Jewish identity and textuality, it is really one of Jabès’s texts *least* evocative of rabbinic literature.

Unlike Boyarin's anti-definition of midrash in *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, which is resolutely particularizing in its tautological circularity—midrash names only those texts named midrash—the non-definition of “midrash” in *Midrash and Literature* generalizes it to the point of meaninglessness. In “Old Rabbis, New Critics” (1987) a combative review essay on *Midrash and Literature* and José Faur's *Golden Doves with Silver Dots: Semiotics and Textuality in Rabbinic Tradition* (1986) in *The New Republic*, Robert Alter complains that

one of the unfortunate consequences of the literary vogue of midrash is that some writers have begun to invoke the magic of the name for any interpretive text produced by a Jew. [...] It seems important to keep in mind that midrash arose in particular historical circumstances, developed certain distinctive literary conventions, and was actuated by an ideology and addressed itself to issues that are not shared by modern literary culture. This element of historical distance does not mean, of course, that midrash is a matter of merely antiquarian interest. And yet something is awry in its contemporary critical use.⁴⁸

Alter writes that *Midrash and Literature*, *Golden Doves with Silver Dots*, and Susan Handelman's *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (1982) are all guilty of a “collapsing of distinctions between contemporary theory and ancient practice.”⁴⁹ In addition to the historical distinction, Alter adds a stylistic one. Offering *Bereshit Rabbah* 86:1–2 as a counterexample to the essays in *Midrash and Literature* by Derrida, Myrna Solotorevsky, and Betty Rojzman, he argues that, as befits its homiletical function,

The pervasive language of midrash reinforces [a] sense of intimacy and accessibility: the fluent colloquial style of rabbinic Hebrew, at times switching to the actual vernacular, Aramaic, stands in contrast to the loftier, more formal diction of the Prophets and the Psalms embedded by quotation in this plain-spun prose. In contrast to the accessibility of

⁴⁸ Alter, “Old Rabbis,” 27–28.

⁴⁹ Alter, “Old Rabbis,” 28.

midrash, the poststructuralists have made an ideology of cultivating a difficult style, bristling with esoteric language.⁵⁰

Frustration with those “terminological shell games,” as William Scott Green puts it,⁵¹ led rabbinicists to draw fine distinctions between Theory in general and their own local applications of theoretical concepts: for example, intertextuality vs. what Green and Jacob Neusner term “writing with Scripture”;⁵² or, in an important essay by David Stern, “indeterminacy” vs. “polysemy.”⁵³ But the challenges were waged on a more global level, too. As Green writes in a representative statement of this resistance to Theory:

The notion that rabbinic and contemporary hermeneutics – *midrash* and deconstruction, for example – are both similar to one another and diametrically opposed to mainstream Western literary interpretation...has gained currency and popularity in recent years. To be credible, a defense of this claim must rest on an accurate description of rabbinic interpretive practice. But to succeed, the argument for similarity also must show how the purported ‘resemblances’ and ‘affinities’ between classical rabbinic interpretation and contemporary literary theory are more than mere operational likeness or superficial formal correspondence, how they point beyond themselves. The very claim of comparability requires an analogical model that classifies these two historically disparate hermeneutical enterprises in a single category and justifies their being examined together and in light of one another. Moreover, to be analytically useful, the case for similarity between the two must be grounded in a perception of their difference; it must show how the absence of identity makes the resemblance revealing.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Alter, “Old Rabbis,” 32.

⁵¹ Green, “Romancing the Tome,” 150.

⁵² See Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, *Writing with Scripture: The Authority and Uses of the Hebrew Bible in the Torah of Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989).

⁵³ See David Stern, “Midrash and Indeterminacy,” *Critical Inquiry* 15.1 (Autumn 1988): 132–61. Although Stern attributes “indeterminacy” to deconstruction, represented by Hartman, it’s worth noting that the term has a stronger connection to the Anglo-American philosophical tradition (esp. Quine and Davidson, as Gerald Bruns, for example, is careful to note). Moreover, it was the rabbinics scholar Max Kadushin, not Hartman or any other literary critic, who introduced it into the discipline. Cf. Max Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind* (New York: JTS, 1952), 131–32; Bruns, “Midrash and Allegory.”

⁵⁴ Green, “Romancing the Tome,” 150.

On each count, Green argues, the literary critics pushing the notion come up short: their descriptions of midrash are often inaccurate, their analogical framework is lacking, and they drive toward an identification that elides historical difference to the detriment of both terms implicated by the comparison.

Similar concerns abound in the writings of Green's colleagues. David Weiss Halivni, for instance, grants that a similarity between midrash and Theory exists, but finds it too superficial to be illuminating.⁵⁵ Stern, likewise, thinks that midrash and Theory are more different than similar, but they both maintain, with Green, that a "case for similarity...grounded in a perception of their difference" could justify the comparison by "help[ing] us see a little more clearly the very conditions of our own theorizing."⁵⁶ "[...W]hat is interesting," comments Howard Eilberg-Schwartz in a critical review of *Golden Doves with Silver Dots*,

is seeing how one cultural tradition resists the categories of another, thus forcing the interpreter to engage in a hermeneutical process whereby he or she manipulates the categories of his or her own culture in order to understand the categories of the other. The clashing of vocabularies and languages will not result in a neutral or objective account of the culture being studied. But it will produce new ways of thinking about ourselves and the culture in question, which is ultimately all we can do.... The question, therefore, is whether in moving between our culture and some other tradition, we work to deny the differences or we go hunting for them. The answer, in turn, will depend on whether one wants to work within the vocabulary that is currently available or whether one wants to find the limitations of that vocabulary and move on to something else.⁵⁷

The midrash–Theory connection here becomes, potentially, an exemplary instance of the strengths and the limitations of comparative scholarship.

⁵⁵ See David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), 158-62.

⁵⁶ Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 17.

⁵⁷ Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "When the Reader is in the Write," *Prooftexts* 7.2 (May 1987): 194-205, at 200. See also Eilberg-Schwartz, "Who's Kidding Whom?: A Serious Reading of Rabbinic Wordplays," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55.4 (Winter 1987): 765-88.

Literary critics, too, recognized the value in comparison as a means of understanding one's own hermeneutical situation as well as the object of interpretation. Yet their presentations of this value veered toward the synthetic. Thus Harold Fisch, in his *Midrash and Literature* essay "The Hermeneutic Quest in *Robinson Crusoe*," remembers to stipulate that, for all its "freedom," midrash is still "constrained" by the Bible, and in this respect is quite unlike the modern novel—only to ignore this caveat in favor of a grander claim:

To put the two [midrash and the novel] side by side is not to say anything about midrash as a localized historical institution, nor is it to say anything, strictly speaking, about the 'origins of the novel.' Instead, by bringing these two categories together, we may light up something more deeply interfused, something about the way in which key words are scrutinized and rescruited in both cases; about the way in which stories and hints of stories are generated by the art of interpretation; and about the way in which, both in midrash and the novel, the authors address themselves to the new whilst adhering to what has been transmitted to them from the past.⁵⁸

In the same essay, Fisch compares the midrash–Theory connection to the literary appropriation of the terms "myth from the anthropologists and archetype from the analytical psychologists," appropriations which he insists take place "without prejudice to the way those terms are still used by the professional specialists. It is recognized on both sides that there is value in stretching terms like these. The value, it would seem, is not only in providing a language for interdisciplinary communications, but in freeing the categories thus displaced from formal boundaries and restrictions and releasing their phenomenological essence."⁵⁹ The lip service paid to the "professional specialists" of midrash here is a red herring, since the very idea of *the* "phenomenological essence" of midrash, as a general category, is precisely the sort of reductive notion that, say, Neusner's history-of-religions approach was designed to dispel.

⁵⁸ Harold Fisch, "The Hermeneutic Quest in *Robinson Crusoe*," in *ML*, 213–35, at 231 and 228.

⁵⁹ Fisch, "Hermeneutic Quest," 228.

Indeed, Fisch's essay in *Midrash and Literature* exemplifies the ahistorical undertow of even the comparative version of the literary interest in midrash. Attempting to preempt the obvious counterargument, he writes: "If the myth of Dis and Persephone is relevant to the tragic death of Juliet, then the model of midrash may legitimately be brought to bear on the novel as it grew in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries."⁶⁰ This comparison fails in two ways. First, William Shakespeare *knew* the myth of Dis and Persephone, whereas, as Fisch admits upfront, Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding do not appear to have had any awareness of rabbinic biblical interpretation; while a discussion of the Persephone myth as an intertext for *Romeo and Juliet* has the option of being waged on the historical basis of authorial intention, a discussion of *Joseph Andrews* as a "midrash" on Genesis 39 must be undertaken on an ahistorical ground. (That's not to say such a discussion would be "illegitimate," only that the comparison with the mythological allusions in *Romeo and Juliet* doesn't hold.) Second, the relationship between the Persephone myth and Juliet's death is a relationship between the content of two discrete texts, whereas the relationship between midrash and the novel, as Fisch sketches it in this essay, is a relationship between two genres of text. The latter relationship turns on those genres' respective *structural* relationships to prior texts; it is about the novel as an "interpretative" genre, not about any particular novel's allusions to rabbinic tradition. As we've already seen, Fisch doesn't claim to be making a historical argument. Yet the problem is that the justification he offers for the type of argument he *does* make *is* a historical argument, whether he wants it to be or not. The upshot is that his comparative thesis about midrash and the novel lapses into incoherence: we learn something about the novel only by distorting and reducing midrash to a "phenomenological essence" which bears little resemblance either to the specific midrashim Fisch does quote in his

⁶⁰ Fisch, "Hermeneutic Quest," 228.

essay or to the hermeneutical principles that may be reasonably extrapolated from those midrashim. The initially promising similarities between Fisch's project and the one proposed, with variations, by Stern, Green, Weiss Halivni, and Eilberg-Schwartz conceal more serious differences on, precisely, the question of similarities versus differences.

1.3. Midrash versus Theory: The Case of BT *Sanhedrin* 34a

Nothing better dramatizes the incompatibility in stakes between rabbinics and literary studies than the reception of Susan Handelman's *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (1982),⁶¹ an expansion of the author's doctoral dissertation in the English department at the State University of New York in Buffalo. While the book found some vocal admirers,⁶² the overall reaction was lukewarm at best; one finds it most commonly cited for its basic premise, handily encapsulated by its subtitle, rather than substantively engaged.⁶³ This habit of referencing the book's basic conceit rather than engaging its argument is confined, however, to the literary critics. Rabbinicists hardly mention it at all, especially not after the waning of interest in the midrash–Theory connection by the mid-1990s.

To an extent this asymmetry is to be expected; after all, it follows the general trend we have been tracking in this chapter. The stakes of the book for rabbinicists consist less in the details of her discussions of rabbinic hermeneutics and more in the meta-level argument about

⁶¹ Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982), henceforth abbreviated in citations and footnotes as *SM*. This book will be cited parenthetically in the main text throughout the chapter, with the abbreviation when necessary.

⁶² E.g., Thomas J. J. Altizer, review of *SM*, *Religion & Literature* 16.1 (Winter 1984): 73–78.

⁶³ Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Meaning Error Text," *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985): 145–49, at 147n1; Jill Robbins, *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother: Interpretation and Alterity in Augustine, Petrarch, Kafka, and Levinas* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1991), 14 and 148n28–29.

the relationship of those hermeneutics to post-Freudian literary theory. At the height of the midrash-Theory boom in the later 1980s, two additional books positing the connection between the two fields generated additional venues for rabbinicists to adjudicate that meta-level argument: Faur's *Golden Doves with Silver Dots* and *Midrash and Literature*, both published in 1986. As these latter books, especially *Midrash and Literature*, were reviewed more widely than *Slayers*, their critical reception doubled as a referendum on Handelman's book, too.⁶⁴

By the end of the 1980s, rabbinicists generally seemed to have decided where they stood on the question of the midrash-Theory connection. David Stern's "Midrash and Indeterminacy" (1988), in the Theory-heavy journal *Critical Inquiry*, circumscribed the relevance of deconstruction, in particular, for rabbinics, while still challenging longstanding methodological tendencies within rabbinics which he considered conservative. Neusner pushed back on literary theory's incursions into rabbinics, including *The Slayers of Moses*, in two books, *Canon and Connection* (1987) and *Wrong Ways and Right Ways in the Study of Formative Judaism* (1988). And in the 1987 issues of *Prooftexts*, Steven Fraade published "Interpreting Midrash," a two-part review essay comparing the competing methodologies available to contemporary rabbinicists as represented in several recent books, among them *Midrash and Literature* and *Midrash as Literature*. In the early 1990s, the publication of Stern's *Parables in Midrash*, Fraade's *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Sifre to Deuteronomy*, and Boyarin's *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* provided the field with three prominent examples of what positive Theory could make to rabbinics. From that point forward, references

⁶⁴ E.g., Robert Alter, "Old Rabbis, New Critics," *The New Republic* 196.1-2 (January 5-12, 1987): 27-33; Beth Sharon Ash, "Jewish Hermeneutics and Contemporary Theories of Textuality," *Modern Philology* 85.1 (August 1987): 65-80; Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "When the Reader is in the Write," *Prooftexts* 7.2 (May 1987): 194-205.

to *Slayers* by rabbinicists decline steeply, especially with Boyarin pivoting to cultural studies in a more New Historicist vein and Stern taking an interest in the genre of the anthology and the material history of Jewish books.⁶⁵

The direction of the interdisciplinary flow in the cases of Boyarin, Fraade, Stern, and Neusner—from literary studies to rabbinics—indicates why work like Handelman’s, which moved in the opposite direction (“the emergence of rabbinic interpretation *in* modern literary theory”) was ultimately neither compelling nor especially welcome to rabbinics. Thus, it’s equally predictable that the reception of *Slayers* was warmer among the non-specialists in literary studies. If, as Stern later wrote, “the midrash–Theory connection was...an effort to find a genealogy, a precursor, for theory itself,” this was an effort with more immediate payoff for the literary theorists than the rabbinicists.⁶⁶

The more familiar readers were with rabbinic literature, the more likely they were to be either skeptical of or hostile toward Handelman’s argument. Boyarin stated that he was unpersuaded by her attempt to isolate a “uniquely Jewish way of understanding language or

⁶⁵ Daniel Boyarin’s cultural studies turn in the 1990s is represented by works like *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1993), *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1994), and *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1997). Stern’s interest in anthological forms and the material history of the book dominates his publications after *Midrash and Theory*: see, e.g., Stern, ed., *The Anthology in Jewish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004); Stern, “The Washington Haggadah: The Life of a Book,” in Joel Ben Simeon, ed., *The Washington Haggadah: A Fifteenth-Century Manuscript from the Library of Congress* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011); and David Stern, *The Jewish Bible: A Material History* (Seattle: U. Wash. Press, 2017).

⁶⁶ David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1996), 4. See also William Scott Green, “Romancing the Tome: Rabbinic Hermeneutics and the Theory of Literature,” *Semeia* 40 (1987): 147–68, at 149.

texts”;⁶⁷ William Scott Green protested that Handelman, Faur, and others operated with an altogether mistaken idea of rabbinic hermeneutics; and in a lengthy appraisal for the *AJS Review*, Shira Wolosky wrote that Handelman was insufficiently fluent not only in rabbinic primary sources, but also Christian, kabbalistic, classical, and philosophical ones.⁶⁸ Like other reviewers, Wolosky found Handelman’s central opposition between Judaism, on the one hand, and the allied “logocentric” forces of Christianity and Greek philosophy,⁶⁹ on the other, to be grossly reductive. While Wolosky, Stern, Robert Alter, Karl Planck, and Joseph C. Sitterson, Jr. varied in their respective assessments of the book as a whole, all five critics expressed frustration with the book’s rigidly schematized, overly generalized presentation of Jewish, Christian, and Greek thought. As Stern sums up the consensus:

Handelman’s treatment of these traditions does not describe merely two modes of interpretation. What she is actually talking about are mindsets, or worldviews: the ‘text’ here is really the created universe; hermeneutics is not simply the science of interpretation but more like the Heideggerian project of understanding ‘being-in-the-world.’ Yet this very feature of Handelman’s thesis, her globalizing, holistic intentions,

⁶⁷ Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), xii. Boyarin’s frustrations with Handelman’s book are registered repeatedly in *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, especially in the chapter on rabbinic citationality, although his remarks are largely confined to the endnotes. Subsequently Boyarin adjusted his position on *The Slayers of Moses*. See his review of Robbins’s *Prodigal Son / Elder Brother*, “The Subversion of the Jews: Moses’s Veil and the Hermeneutics of Supersession,” *Diacritics* 23.2 (Summer 1993): 16–35, at 24: “Just as the ancient Rabbis simply refused to allow the letter to be purloined from them, so also we can refuse. We can refuse, however, in discourse shared with others and not only in the private discourse of the Jews. I am suggesting that the postmodern era has returned to us the option of refusing out loud, as it were, as equal partners in a certain domain of discourse: the hermeneutics, precisely where Christian doctrine has, for two thousand years, most delegitimized us.” And *ibid.*, 24–25n12: “Susan Handelman’s *The Slayers of Moses*...reads curiously in some ways more like the defensive discourse of Jews engaged in a disputation than like the autonomous Jewish speaking subject.... Handelman’s book has, however, empowered all of us and as a pioneer effort should not be simply dismissed.”

⁶⁸ See Shira Wolosky, review of *SM*, *AJS Review* 9.2 (Autumn 1984): 273–81, at 277–78.

⁶⁹ An alliance based largely on the thin evidence of Thorleif Boman’s discredited argument (see below) and the following passage from Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997).

her wish to have the rabbinic-patristic distinction encompass every nuance...in Judeo-Christian history, ends in making her own position seem as literalistic and dichotomous as the one she attributes to the Greeks and the Christians.⁷⁰

Critics pointed out errors in Handelman's interpretations of the key sources for her oppositional dyad of Jew and Greek(-Christian), such as Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, and Jacques Derrida's *Writing and Difference*. Like Harold Bloom and G. Douglas Atkins before her and Faur after,⁷¹ Handelman relies on Thorleif Boman's *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (1954) to supply the requisite imprimatur of philological authority for the opposition of the Judaic and the Greco-Christian along a series of contrastive axes: written vs. oral, letter vs. spirit, body vs. voice, concrete vs. abstract, literal vs. figurative, metonymy vs. metaphor, secondary vs. primary, exile vs. rootedness, difference vs. homogeneity, absence vs. presence, open vs. closed, negative vs. positive, plural vs. singular, contingent vs. necessary, signifier vs. signified. Unfortunately, the use of Boman proves damaging, since Handelman, like Bloom and Atkins, was apparently unaware that Boman's argument been discredited twenty years earlier by James Barr.⁷²

By far the harshest criticism of *Slayers* though, was Stern's 12-page review essay for *Prooftexts*, "Moses-side: Midrash and Contemporary Literary Criticism" (1984). Stern restates

⁷⁰ David Stern, "Moses-side: Midrash and Contemporary Literary Criticism," *Prooftexts* 4.2 (May 1984): 193–204, at 195.

⁷¹ Cf. Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 42; G. Douglas Atkins, "Dehellenizing Literary Criticism," *College English* 41.7 (March 1980): 769–79; and José Faur, *Golden Doves with Silver Dots: Semiotics and Textuality in Rabbinic Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986).

⁷² See Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, trans. Jules L. Moreau, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1970) and James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1961), esp. 1–45 and 129–40, where Barr deals with Boman's interpretation of the polysemic Hebrew word דָּבָר *davar* ("word," "thing," "matter"), the point upon which Bloom, Handelman, Atkins, and Faur all rely most heavily in their respective arguments. Cf. also Isaac Rabinowitz, "'Word' and Literature in Ancient Israel," *New Literary History* 4.1 (Autumn 1971): 119–39.

all of the above points and piles on several more, resulting in a review damning enough that Handelman felt compelled to respond to it in a subsequent issue of *Prooftexts*. The stated purpose of her 21-page defense, “Fragments of the Rock: Contemporary Literary Theory and the Study of Rabbinic Texts” (1985), is “not to try to correct all his [Stern’s] misinterpretations of my book, but to lift the discussion to another level; for the question of contemporary literary theory raises the larger issue of methodology in the current study of rabbinic literature (and, by extension, the field of Jewish Studies in general).”⁷³ This diplomatic intention is betrayed somewhat by Handelman’s (understandably) defensive attitude throughout the essay, however, which leads her to misrepresent Stern’s objections in the worst possible light.

For instance, Stern, like Wolosky, observes a discrepancy between what Handelman says about her own methodology, which she claims is that of a *structural* comparison, and what the book is actually doing, namely advancing an *historical* narrative about the Judaic tradition. (This observation is accurate; we will revisit it in detail below.) Handelman represents this point in “Fragments” as follows: “If I intend to articulate the historical difference, he [Stern] argues, then my evocation of the history of these traditions is illegitimate. Apparently for Stern, ‘history’ and ‘theory’ are two distinct entities which must be separated like milchigs and fleischigs. In his view, because I have mixed them up...the whole project just isn’t kosher.”⁷⁴ Stern proceeds to argue that the rabbis were not “anxious” about their belatedness with respect to Torah, *à la* Harold Bloom, but on the contrary were “faithful” and “content” in their belated position. She responds: “Is the argument here that only the ‘faithful’ and ‘content’ are proper interpreters of

⁷³ Susan A. Handelman, “Fragments of the Rock: Contemporary Literary Theory and the Study of Rabbinic Texts,” *Prooftexts* 5.1 (January 1985): 75–95, at 75.

⁷⁴ Handelman, “Fragments of the Rock,” 76.

rabbinic texts?”⁷⁵ But nowhere in “Moses-side,” much less in the passage Handelman cites, does Stern speak about proper and improper interpreters of *rabbinic* texts; he is speaking, rather, of the rabbis themselves as interpreters of the Written Torah. It’s so sloppy a paraphrase that one begins to understand Stern’s exasperation in his response to “Fragments,” titled “Literary Criticism or Literary Homilies?: Susan Handelman and the Contemporary Study of Midrash” (published in the same 1985 issue of *Prooftexts*). In “Fragments” and “Literary Homilies,” both scholars end up speaking *at* (and thus past) rather than *to* (and thus with) each other. These texts often read as though each author has deliberately sought out the least generous possible reading of the other’s words, even to the point of outright misrepresentation. Stern makes Handelman sound ignorant and intellectually lazy; Handelman makes Stern sound like a bitter reactionary.

To some extent that characterization is earned. Because the primary sources in question are works of rabbinic literature, it is easy to suspect that Stern’s overreaction is fueled by a parochial protectiveness; the history of women’s (lack of) access to rabbinic learning, moreover, imbues the whole affair with a sour chauvinistic note. Now, inasmuch as the effect of “Literary Homilies” was to make an example of Handelman and thus to aggressively, if implicitly, police discursive and institutional boundaries, those parochial and chauvinistic elements cannot be denied. At the same time, though—and precisely because these *effects* are too palpable and too unpleasant to ignore—they make it too easy to underread the Handelman-Stern “controversy.”⁷⁶ While Stern’s tone is, charitably put, unstrategic, and while he can reasonably be held responsible for not being conscious of (or not caring about) the historical and institutional power

⁷⁵ Handelman, “Fragments of the Rock,” 76.

⁷⁶ This is not my word; it’s the label under which the editors of *Prooftexts* printed “Fragments” and “Literary Homilies”—as they had previously done with the 1982 debate between James Kugel and Adele Berlin, discussed in Chapter 3 below.

dynamics in which his review of *Slayers* was necessarily embroiled, neither of these judgments addresses what Stern actually *says* in “Moses-cide” and “Literary Homilies.” Already in “Fragments,” Handelman’s interpretation of Stern’s criticisms generates a narrative of the controversy in which *effects* are substituted for *content*; this doesn’t help her counter his charge of intellectual sloppiness. In the process, both authors’ positions are reduced to caricatures with little mooring in their actual claims. If we fall into the habit of interpreting the *Prooftexts* controversy as a clash between innovation and tradition, inclusivity and chauvinism, po-mo lit-crit and the rabbinic old guard, Handelman is cast as the literary critic bringing newfangled secularizing methods to bear on the texts of the Judaic tradition, and Stern is cast as the reactionary fending her off by whatever means necessary up to and including sexist invective. This picture, as we shall see, does not suffice; in fact it is Stern who is most anxious to shore up the secular credentials of rabbinic studies.

Stern’s own retrospective commentary on the controversy in the introduction to his book *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (1996) hints at the problem with such reductive interpretations. He says that “midrash specialists [i.e., Stern himself] suddenly found themselves cast into the role of jealous guardians of the temple, while the theorists [i.e. Handelman] felt they were being portrayed as trespassers in the holy precinct.”⁷⁷ Anecdotally, I have found that scholars of Jewish studies remember the Handelman-Stern controversy—if they remember it at all—along these lines. Stern then adds, however: “On the other hand, the theorists sought to depict themselves as the authentic heirs of the midrashic tradition; this, after all, was the essence of their claim to the continuity between the midrashic tradition and the poststructuralist stance. From this perspective, the midrash specialists were

⁷⁷ Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 6.

revealed to be closet positivists, old-fashioned philologists...concerned only with defending their scholarly turf.”⁷⁸ This seems to contradict the previous sentence. Was the problem the parochialism of the rabbinicists, or their methodological positivism? Were the theorists profaning midrash, or were they its rightful inheritors?

In an important passage from “Moses-cide,” Stern argues that “one result of Handelman’s argument” is to “sacralize” the writings about language and literature by her quadrumvirate of “slayers of Moses,” Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Harold Bloom:

Several times Handelman describes the works of the modern thinkers she treats as ‘a secular oral Torah [...]’ Describing the current state of literary criticism, she writes: ‘The *Text* has become, in fact, as divine an object, as authoritative a source of meaning [...] as was the Torah for the Rabbis. [...]T]he text today is the Holy Scripture for its critics, or perhaps we should say “worshippers.” ... But what can it possibly mean to say that...? We know why the Rabbis considered the Torah to be sacred scripture: Because they believed that God has given the Torah to Israel at Sinai; that it was a sign for the people of Israel that God had chosen them to be His nation; and that the Torah contained the law, in both its written and oral forms, which God had ordained for Israel. ... There is here, I believe, a rather large issue about the function of modern criticism. At least since the time of Matthew Arnold, criticism has been devoted to ‘seeing things as they really are,’ to the exercise of skepticism and intellectual dissent, to the testing of our conventional values, and those texts we read, against our powers of reason and better judgment. Against this profoundly secular background, enshrining the critical text as The Text is—in intellectual, not religious, terms—an act of idolatry. Such criticism, Edward Said has recently suggests, has...divest[ed] the text of its worldliness, as Said calls the circumstances, historical, political, and social, that serve to produce a text, these schools of criticism have opted instead for the making of ‘systems,’ all-encompassing theories of culture and knowledge that are far removed from the tiniest complicity in human history, from the least responsibility to human affairs. Said has justifiably described these systems as ‘religious.’ Totalized, impersonal, they solicit the kinds of deference and authority that once were reserved exclusively for traditionally sacred matters; by means of such systems, their inventors avoid the challenges and risks of critical consciousness. It might be argued that the popularity sacred commentary, including midrash, currently enjoys is due partly to this process of theologization in contemporary critical writing.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Stern, “Moses-cide,” 100.

Stern reproduces Said's anxious statements about "religious criticism" (discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation) nearly verbatim, including the problematic troping of an unqualified, unhistoricized "religion" as the exemplary instance of all ideology. So this passage is more complicated than a reading which concentrates only on content *or* only on effects would allow us to recognize. On the one hand, Stern reproaches Handelman for "theologizing" what ought to be secular and secularist; on the other hand, the particular dynamics in which that criticism is embedded make it into an act of gatekeeping of precisely the type Said calls "religious" in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*.

Extending the Saidian intonation, Stern also suggests that the joyful, anxiety-free belatedness of the rabbis is a *historical* and *worldly* position as opposed to the ahistorical and unworldly "religious criticism" promoted, on his view, by Handelman. But Stern's picture of the rabbis here is a little too rosy. As a single "illustration" from the rabbinic tradition of this happy historicity, he offers the "Oven of 'Akhnai" aggadah from BT *Bava Metsi'a* 59b. The 'Akhnai aggadah is a narrative which, Elijah's report to R. Nathan in the second part of the story notwithstanding, does not exactly suggest a placid deference to divine authority in matters exegetical, nor admirable ethical conduct in intra-rabbinical disagreements, nor a gender politics worth emulating.⁸⁰ Stern ignores most of this aggadic narrative, as well as both the rest of the sugya in which it appears and the Mishnah (*Bava Metsi'a* 4:10) on which it comments, and thus ends up repeating some of the rabbis' behavior depicted therein—making the 'Akhnai aggadah

⁸⁰ Stern, "Moses-side," 203n5. For discussions of the 'Akhnai aggadah that draw out its frequently overlooked ethical implications and its gender politics, cf. Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: U. Penn. Press, 2004), 151-201; Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, "When the Rabbi Weeps: On Reading Gender in Talmudic Aggadah," *Nashim* 4 (Autumn 2001): 56-83; and Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999), 34-63.

into an allegory of sorts, a narrative of the contradiction in Stern's own texts between content and effect, intention and rhetoric. Here we get a sense of how a critic committed to secularism ends up reproducing the dynamics of exclusion he attributes to "religious" or "theologizing" criticism.

As Handelman tells it in her 1985 rejoinder to Stern's review, "Fragments of the Rock," the whole history of modern Jewish studies—and especially rabbinics—are guilty of a problematic rationalist dogmatism. Handelman attributes the field's methodological problems to the nineteenth-century movement among German Jewish scholars, known as *die Wissenschaft des Judenthums* ("the Science of Judaism"). According to Handelman, who follows Gershom Scholem's highly critical account of *Wissenschaft* in his 1959 lecture "The Science of Judaism—Then and Now," the movement "has its own quite unscientific agendas amongst which were apologetics and religious reform."⁸¹ This is true, although the scholars involved in the movement would have denied it; the context in which *Wissenschaft* developed was too politically fraught to pretend otherwise.

In "Fragments of the Rock," Handelman does not object to *Wissenschaft's* apologetic agenda per se, so much as to the ideal of "science"—meaning, more broadly in German than in English, rational inquiry—as a value-neutral discourse, an ideal to which German academics of the nineteenth century, including the *Wissenschaft des Judenthums* movement, were dedicated.⁸² Handelman charges 160 years of academic scholarship on the history of Judaism with remaining caught in the grip of this faith in reason's universality and transparency. Scholars since Leopold

⁸¹ Handelman, "Fragments of the Rock," 78.

⁸² On the ideal of *Wissenschaft* in nineteenth-century German academic discourse, Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-1933* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1969), 102-13.

Zunz failed, she argues, to be self-reflective about their methodologies, resulting in the persistence of the twin fallacies of “the dogma of immaculate perception,” or what Donna Haraway calls “the god-trick,”⁸³ and the Arnoldian definition of criticism as “seeing the object as in itself it really is,” which has its historicist equivalent in Leopold von Ranke’s “how it actually happened [*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*].”⁸⁴

“The problem,” writes Handelman,

...affects many other areas in Jewish studies today – that is, the employment of a dichotomous conception of history and theory and a model of interpretation that contemporary advances in historiography, literary studies, philosophy, and linguistics have rendered outdated. Let it be clear at the outset that my intention is not to denigrate the great achievements of those fine scholars whom Stern wants me to cite more—such as [Isaak] Heinemann, [Max] Kadushin, [Saul] Lieberman. Yet their critical apparatus was to a large degree based on a view of history and literature that essentially had been articulated a century earlier. Their notion of ‘literary’ analysis was not derived, it would appear, from any real familiarity or contact with...literary scholars.⁸⁵

From Zunz to Stern, Jewish studies—and above all, rabbinics—has continually missed the literary-theoretical memo. According to Handelman’s account, the most recent version of that memo preaches the gospel of standpoint epistemology: the hermeneutical circle and the materiality of language entail the illusory status of any “neutral methodology.” So the “critical questions...must be posed as much to the stance of the narrator/observer and the status of

⁸³ “FR,” 81, referring to Howard Alexander Slatte, *The Dogma of Immaculate Perception: A Critique of Positivist Thought* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1979). On the “god-trick,” see Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1991), 183-202; cf. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), 3-89. In her discussion of “postmodern science” (e.g. Kuhn, Feyerabend), Handelman relies on Stephen Toulmin’s hermeneutical account in “The Construal of Reality: Criticism in Modern and Postmodern Science,” in W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *The Politics of Interpretation* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1983), 99-118.

⁸⁴ Leopold von Ranke, *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1535* (Leipzig: 1823), x.

⁸⁵ Handelman, “Fragments of the Rock,” 77–78.

language itself as to the data or objects observed.”⁸⁶ The texts which have suffered most under the regime of reason, midrash and kabbalah, are also the ones which could help rabbinicists see the error of their ways, if only they applied—speaking of hermeneutical circles—the insights of the very discourse, Theory, in which “the Rabbinic repressed,” repressed *by* rabbinicists, is even now (that is, in 1985) “emerging.” “Perhaps a postmodern interpretation of Judaism could help reunite Jewish history and Jewish memory,” Handelman writes at the end of “Fragments, “history and theology, midrash and literature,” things which should never have been separated in the first place. “Students of rabbinic texts, of Jewish Studies in general, need, once more, to learn to read anew.”⁸⁷

In Stern’s reply to Handelman’s reply, “Literary Criticism or Literary Homilies?,” he challenges nearly every piece of her account of the history of the field. Most importantly for our purposes, he points out that she has underestimated the different connotations of the English “science” and the German *Wissenschaft*, the latter of which does not necessarily entail the same value-neutral objectivity. In fact, nineteenth-century German historicism, as the philosophy of the *Geisteswissenschaften* (the “human sciences,” or humanities), has for its underlying theoretical armature precisely *hermeneutics*, a branch of philosophy of which Handelman seems to think rabbinicists are completely ignorant. Much of “Fragments” rehearses hermeneutical clichés evocative of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and the early Heidegger. The result is that she ends up arguing with straw men without significant counterparts in rabbinics past or present. “Handelman speaks of historical understanding,” writes Stern, “as though it were solely a mode of distantiation, a way of removing the text from oneself, of pushing it off into the unthreatening

⁸⁶ Handelman, “Fragments of the Rock,” 78, 80.

⁸⁷ Handelman, “Fragments of the Rock,” 93.

distances of the past. What she does not understand is that the historical approach is essentially a way of overcoming the otherness of the texts.... The only possibility of overcoming this otherness is to try, as best one can, to situate oneself within the text's own historical frame, to see it, as it were, from inside."⁸⁸

Handelman's misrepresentation of historical scholarship as anti-hermeneutical leads her to set up a false dichotomy of hermeneutics and science, with Theory falling into the former category and history into the latter. Stern objects to this picture, as it suggests a lack of growth and reflection in the methodologies utilized by modern historians of Judaism. Against that reductive image, he argues that *Wissenschaft's* shortcomings have actually served modern Jewish studies as a vital cautionary tale, encouraging the discipline to be

very self-consciously critical about its methods and motives for the past half-century. Indeed, I doubt if there exists an academic discipline whose members would be readier to acknowledge their ideological motivations than are those in Jewish Studies. If one wishes to identify a single characteristic to define post-*Wissenschaft* Jewish Studies, it would be the wish to present and understand all the varieties of Jewish experience throughout history without making a priori judgments about their authenticity as valuable expressions of Judaism.... The fruit of that legacy has been its discovery in Jewish history of a richness and complexity that no one had earlier imagined, and this achievement has undoubtedly been one reason why Jewish Studies in American universities has enjoyed such a remarkable success, precisely because it has helped Jewish students in particular to gain a deeper understanding of their Jewishness.⁸⁹

Now it seems that Stern and Handelman are actually on the same page about the dangers of presuming to judge what is and is not *echt* Judaism. Their disagreement, then, is apparently over the current state of Jewish studies in 1985. Has Jewish studies perpetuated apologetic (self-) censorship, or has it learned from the mistakes of the *Wissenschaft des Judenthums*? It's at this

⁸⁸ David Stern, "Literary Criticism or Literary Homilies?: Susan Handelman and the Contemporary Study of Midrash," *Prooftexts* 5.1 (January 1985): 96-103, at 98.

⁸⁹ Stern, "Literary Homilies," 100.

point that Theory reenters the picture: how, each scholar asks, does Theory help or hinder the progress of Jewish studies? We can assess their answers by contrasting their respective attempts, in “Fragments of the Rock” and “Literary Criticism or Literary Homilies?,” to put Theory into the practice of reading a particular rabbinic text: a gloss on Jeremiah 23:29, “Is not My word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that shatters a rock? [הֲלוֹא כֹה דְבַרְי כְּאֵשׁ נְאֻמֵי־יהוָה וְכַפְטִישׁ יַפְעִיץ]” in BT *Sanhedrin* 34a:

Just as when R. Assi asked R. Yochanan, he said to him, What if two judges [say] one ruling from two verses? He answered, They are not counted as multiple, but rather as one. Whence do we know this? Abaye said, As it is said: *He spoke the word once, twice I have heard it, that strength belongs to God* (Ps. 26:11). One verse conveys several rulings, but a single ruling does not derive from several verses. According to the school of R. Ishmael, *Like a hammer, that shatters a rock...* (Jer. 23:29). As with this hammer, that is split [מתחלק] into several fragments, likewise one verse conveys several rulings.⁹⁰

Handelman notes that the first verb in the last sentence, מתחלק, poses some difficulties, since it is reflexive; where Jeremiah has the hammer shattering the rock, the school of R. Ishmael appears that think the *hammer* is shattered upon contact with the rock. (Elsewhere, in BT *Shabbat* 88b, an analogous passage uses the passive form נתחלק, which eliminates the ambiguity of the verb but not the confusion it causes.) She includes a summary of the various rabbinic attempts to make sense of the hammer “that is split,” in direct contradiction to the biblical simile:

Tosafot try to explain the problem by saying that in fact the hammer does get split. R. Tam cites a story from the midrash on Job about a person who tried to examine some sapphires by putting them on an anvil and striking them with a hammer; the hammer and the anvil were broken but the sapphire remained intact. Rav Shmuel [*sic*], on the other hand, maintains that he has a tradition which reads the verb as מחלק—the rock is split. ...Tosafot...conclude that even though it says in one place [Jer. 23:29] that the Torah is the hammer which does the breaking, and in another [*Sanhedrin* 34a and *Shabbat* 88b] that the hammer is...broken, a totally opposite meaning, ‘Don’t worry, one verse may be

⁹⁰ BT *Sanhedrin* 34a, trans. mine.

divided into many meanings.’ יוצא לכמה טעמים. אין לחוש מקרא אחד A good version, indeed, of the hermeneutic circle.⁹¹

The problematic usage of the biblical verse by the school of R. Ishmael becomes the justification for its own departure from the literal meaning of the same biblical verse.

This exegetical loop figures, Handelman writes, nothing short of

the nature of the divine word and its interpretation.... The ambiguous relation of interpreter and text, hammer and rock, rabbi and Scripture are all described here. But where do we, modern hammerers on the rock, fit in? For all of us from Zunz...to Stern and myself are also engaged in hammering on the rock of midrash. And there are problems with our hammering as well. Do our hammers, our critical methods taken from ‘secular’ disciplines...get split apart by a resistant sacredness in Scripture? Or do they split and open up new meanings of sacred texts?⁹²

Handelman refuses to answer these questions; the very ambiguity emerging from the comparison of the texts under discussion is taken to allegorize the confusion among the scholars who read them, including Stern and herself. *Sanhedrin* 34a therefore cannot be understood, except as an allegory of its own resistance to understanding, a “hermeneutical circle” from which one cannot escape. To claim to have so escaped, as Handelman suggests Stern does, is nothing less than the mystification of secular criticism.

“As allegory, this is all very clever,” comments Stern. “But what does it have to do with literary criticism? Nothing in Handelman’s interpretation enriches our understanding of the text, or even adds to R. Tam’s reading of it. Her analysis also does not increase our knowledge about the ambiguous relationship between text and interpreter other than to propose that the Talmudic passage serve as an allegory for that ambiguity; its theoretical significance is therefore negligible.”⁹³ Stern expects literary criticism to communicate a content which “increase[s] our

⁹¹ Handelman, “Fragments of the Rock,” 89–90.

⁹² Handelman, “Fragments of the Rock,” 91.

⁹³ Stern, “Literary Homilies,” 101.

knowledge”; in this regard his criticism of Handelman’s talmudic exegesis echoes his earlier defense of historicism against her charge of hermeneutical ignorance. Handelman’s plural first-person pronouns (“we, modern hammerer on the rock,” “all of us,” “our hammers, our critical methods”) emphasize plurality rather than collectivity. If there is a collectivity to “all of us,” it is the collectivity of a shared predicament— standpoint epistemology. Stern, meanwhile, uses “our” to index an intellectual commons, a fund of shared knowledge arrived at through criticism and dialogue.

The contrast is vividly illustrated in the very different style of exegesis Stern offers of *Sanhedrin* 34a. He argues that the verbs are less troubling than Handelman thinks, because “the reflexive form is frequently used in the active *kal*-sense as well as in the passive *nif’al*-sense (particularly in late forms like *nithalek*, a conflation of the *hitpa’el* and *nif’al*). The real difficulty with the exegetical simile of the School of Ishmael and its application is determining what the reference of the simile actually is: What does the hammer refer to, the interpretation or the verse?”⁹⁴ Stern sifts through the commentaries, judging their validity and utility for interpreting the talmudic text, and then offers a clear answer to what he considers “the real difficulty”:

As we have seen, this interpretation involves a fairly extensive revision of the verse’s plain sense; it is therefore necessary to ask what provoked this reinterpretation. The explanation lies, I would like to suggest, in what was for the School of R. Ishmael the problematic relationship of the two similes in Jer. 23:29: as the reader will recall, in the first simile God compares His word to fire, in the second to a hammer breaking a rock. Why two similes? the Rabbis would have asked themselves. And what is the connection between the two similes? In response, the School of Ishmael interpreted the verse so that, in effect, the second simile explains the first: ‘My word is like fire says the Lord, like sparks of fire that a hammer produces when it strikes a rock.’⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Stern, “Literary Homilies,” 102.

⁹⁵ Stern, “Literary Homilies,” 102–03.

Handelman does not hope to decide on what the talmudic passage means, but, as Stern says, to find in the passage an allegory of the indeterminacy which, she argues, is common to the underlying linguistic theories of both midrash and postmodern literary criticism. Stern, by contrast, does not think that merely stating the fact (which he certainly does not contest) that knowledge is caught up in a circular dynamic negates the value of knowledge as such. He is invested in critical scholarship: he wants to know what the passage says, why it says what it says, and how this reflects or complicates our collective understanding of how the Sages of the talmudic era read scripture. Likewise, Handelman and Stern arrive at very different conclusions about the relevance of a term from the philosophy of language, “indeterminacy,” to rabbinic exegesis. Handelman, we have just seen, regards midrash as not just indeterminate but as a hermeneutic which thematizes its own indeterminacy, leading the reader to a paradoxical understanding of her own non-understanding. As we have seen, in his later essay “Midrash and Indeterminacy” (1988) Stern ultimately finds that there is nothing in midrash which corresponds sufficiently to what contemporary philosophers and literary theorists mean by “indeterminacy” to warrant the word’s application to midrash.⁹⁶ For him, indeterminacy is a concept with precise boundaries and a delimited utility for criticism; for her, it’s the deep structure of the relation between textuality and subjectivity. One approach turns inward, atomizing and isolating a plurality of readers; the other turns outward, committing the critic to participation in a shared hermeneutical project.

⁹⁶ Cf. David Stern, “Midrash and Indeterminacy,” *Critical Inquiry* 15.1 (Autumn 1988): 132-61. See also the later discussions of indeterminacy in BT *Sanhedrin* 34a by Daniel Boyarin, “Shattering the Logos: or, the Talmuds and the Genealogy of Indeterminacy,” in Peter Schäfer, ed., *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 3:273-302; and Azzan Yadin-Israel, “The Hammer on the Rock: Polysemy and the School of Rabbi Ishmael,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 10.1 (2003): 1-17.

The divergence in critical itineraries has its corollary in the two scholars' conflicting views of the history of academic Jewish studies. For Handelman, Stern is both victim and perpetrator of an ideological repression by Jewish scholars of their Jewishness, and the vitriol of his reaction to her work is symptomatic of this repression's intensity. For Stern, Handelman is suggesting nothing less than the futility of any Jewish critical activity whatsoever, and indeed calling into question the very place of the Jews in secularized institutions of higher education: "Handelman's wish to make theological or religious understanding the goal of Jewish Studies threatens to reverse its entire program, to change the study of Jewish texts from an effort to understand those texts on their own terms to an exercise in theological justification."⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Stern, "Literary Homilies," 100.

CHAPTER TWO

BAD EXAMPLES (I):

LEOPARDS IN THE TEMPLE OF CULTURE

View'd, to-day, from a point of view sufficiently over-arching, the problem of humanity all over the civilized world is social and religious, and is to be finally met and treated by literature. The priest departs, the divine literatus comes.

—Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*

There is a key in the *récit*: a 'Yale' key. Like all keys, it locks and unlocks, opens and closes.

—Jacques Derrida, "Living On/Border Lines"

2.1. "Away with this jew's rag-bag"

In a letter of 1835 discussing Thomas Carlyle's novelistic satire of German Idealism, *Sartor Resartus*, the American Transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson confesses: "There is a part of ethics...which possesses all attraction to me; to wit, the compensations of the Universe, the equality and the coexistence of action and reaction, that all prayers are granted, that every debt is paid. And the skill with which the great All maketh clean work as it goes along, leaves no rag, consumes its smoke."¹ Glossing this passage in his 1980 book *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today*, Geoffrey Hartman adds: "Undoubtedly, there is

Epigraphs: Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas* (Washington: 1871), 6; Jacques Derrida, "Living On/Border Lines," trans. James Hulbert, in Harold Bloom, ed., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1979), 75–176, at 146.

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoted in Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980), 134.

something smoky or excrementious about Carlyle's style. Such highpitched language, Emerson suggests, should burn more purely."² As Hartman reads Emerson reading Carlyle, Emerson finds something all too material in Carlyle's literary style, an excess of the linguistic sign over the meaning it bears which causes it to leave behind some useless and unwelcome residue.

Carlyle's protagonist, a fictitious German "Professor of Things in General" and author of a monumental study of "the philosophy of clothing" named Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, bequeaths to the novel's editor-narrator twelve sacks of fragmentary scribblings on an astonishing variety of subjects, which the editor attempts to arrange into a coherent biographical narrative. Perhaps inspired by Teufelsdröckh, Emerson returns repeatedly in his writings to the image of the "rag" as a synecdoche of the spent, the cast-off, the thrown-out, the excessive, the useless, the merely decorative. In a May 1854 journal entry quoted by Hartman in "Midrash as Law and Literature" (1994), Emerson writes: "If Minerva offered me a gift & an option, I would say give me continuity. I am tired of scraps. I do not wish to be a literary or intellectual chiffonier. Away with this jew's rag-bag of ends & tufts of brocade, velvet, & cloth of gold; let me spin some yards or miles of helpful twine, a clew to lead to one kingly truth, a cord to bind wholesome & belonging facts."³ Hartman, a German-born, nonobservant Jew who claims an "emotional and intellectual" affinity with Emerson, is stung by the reference to "this jew's rag-bag," what with its implications that whatever the Jew has to offer is inessential, incoherent, and/or deficient. Like Teufelsdröckh, whose work the editor-narrator of *Sartor Resartus* repeatedly describes as

² Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 134.

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoted in Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Third Pillar: Essays in Judaic Studies* (Philadelphia: U. Penn. Press, 2013), 86.

“talmudic,” “rabbinical,” and “cabalistic,” the Jew can only offer a surfeit of distracting or nonsensical particulars incapable of generating a unified and meaningful truth.⁴

While for Emerson, the Jew peddles a “rag-bag of ends & tufts of brocade, velvet, & cloth of gold,” and Carlyle’s prose is stylistically faulted for failing to “leave...no rag, consume...its smoke,” Hartman’s readings of these lines from Emerson points us toward Emerson’s figuring of Carlyle as too *Jewish*. This figuration is significant because, first, Carlyle’s own representation of Teufelsdröckh presumes exactly the same pejorative attitude toward Judaism that Emerson does; and, second, because the English of *Sartor Resartus* is, as Hartman puts it, “a ‘Babylonish dialect’ made of Germanisms,” a “crazy, mockingbird style...meant to be a nauseous cure or asafetida for British empiricism.”⁵ That is to say, Emerson balks not at the Judaism of Carlyle’s novel but its *Germanness*, yet this Germanness is repudiated in terms identical to those used in the casual disparaging of Judaism. That Carlyle’s novel is too “German” for the American philosopher’s taste is precisely what also makes it too “Jewish.” (And the same “near-zeugma,” observes Elisa New, arises in Emerson’s comments on Emanuel Swedenborg, whose work, Emerson writes in *Representative Men* [1850], would have been much improved “if the Hebraism had been omitted and the Law stated without Gothicism.”)⁶

When Carlyle and Emerson route their anti-Continental intellectual sentiments through pejorative figures of Judaism, they offer a pair of examples of what the historian David

⁴ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, ed. Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 29.

⁵ Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 47.

⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoted in Elisa New, “Pharaoh’s Birthstool: Deconstruction and Midrash,” *SubStance* 17.3 (1988): 26–36, at 27.

Nirenberg means by “anti-Judaism.” Commenting on Karl Marx’s roughly contemporaneous pamphlet *On the Jewish Question* (1843), Nirenberg writes that

Marx’s fundamental insight here was that the ‘Jewish question’ is as much about the basic tools and concepts through which individuals in a society relate to the world and to each other, as it is about the presence of ‘real’ Judaism and living Jews in that society. He [Marx] understood that some of these basic tools—such as money and property—were thought of in Christian culture as ‘Jewish,’ and that these tools therefore could potentially produce the ‘Jewishness’ of those who used them, whether those users were Jewish or not. ‘Judaism,’ then, *is not only the religion of specific people with specific beliefs, but also a category*, a set of ideas and attributes with which non-Jews can make sense of and criticize their world.⁷

Nirenberg argues that the absence of “actually existing” Jewish people—or, I would add, Judaic texts—does not necessarily correlate to the waning of anti-Judaic rhetoric, because “Judaism” names here a conceptual category. Such is indeed the case with Carlyle and Emerson, neither of whom is concerned in the above passages with Jews or Judaism per se, but rather with prose styles and modes of thinking they perceive as “Judaized” or “Judaizing”: discontinuous, overwrought, impure, excessive, superfluous, unsystematic. That the “Judaism” of Teufelsdröckh’s and Carlyle’s styles is also identified as a Continental quality is telling: the “Judaic,” here, is a privileged trope for the foreign. That trope has a long history, and persists in contemporary antisemitic paranoia about the dual national loyalties of Jews.

In this regard, the anti-Judaic moments in Emerson’s writings to which Hartman draws our attention constitute an allegory of sorts for the diatribes levied against *Hartman* in the 1970s and 1980s by other American literary critics. These critics charged Hartman and the other so-called “Yale Critics”—Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Harold Bloom, “and, in a complicated

⁷ David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: Norton, 2013), 3, emphasis mine.

fashion, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida”⁸—with smuggling into the plainspoken, wholesome “continuity” of American literary studies an esoteric foreign discourse. By the end of the 1970s, that discourse would become known by a series of names—“rhetorical reading,” “deconstruction,” “high theory,” “literary theory,” “French theory”—which, in turn, eventually crystallized as, simply, Theory. The resemblance between Emerson on Carlyle and Theory’s opponents on Theory turns precisely on the *stylistic* objections of the detractors in both cases. What for Emerson is “Judaizing” about Carlyle’s prose style anticipates, as I shall argue in the present chapter, what for the anti-Theory voices of the 1970s is problematic about the writings of the Yale Critics.

That does not mean, however, that the same overtly anti-Judaic rhetoric reappears in the debates over Theory. Outside of references what I will call the Jewishness (rather than the “Judaizing”) of some of the critics involved—especially Hartman; in an idiosyncratic fashion, Bloom; with much resistance and hedging, Derrida—when Judaism is explicitly invoked in this archive, it is nearly always invoked by partisans, not opponents, of Theory, and not in reference to those authors’ actual Jewishness but rather as a way of characterizing the Yale Critics’ Judaizing conceptual and stylistic interventions into the discourse of midcentury American literary studies. For example, in *A Map of Misreading* (1975), dedicated to Paul de Man, Bloom directly links both his psychoanalytic reinterpretation of literary history as intertextuality (“There are no texts, but only relationships between texts”) and his corresponding claim for the creative element of criticism (“As literary history lengthens, all poetry necessarily becomes verse-criticism, just as all criticism becomes prose-poetry”) to rabbinic midrash and Lurianic

⁸ Gregory Jones-Katz, *Deconstruction: An American Institution* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2021), 2.

kabbalah.⁹ In a 1981 *New York Times* op-ed responding to his detractors, “How Creative Should Literary Criticism Be?,” Hartman adduces not only midrash and kabbalah but also “patristic” and “neoplatonic” hermeneutics as precedents for his stylistic experimentation and intellectual promiscuity:

While in the domain of art everything seems free and mobile, in Anglo-American criticism there has been, since the 1930s, a swing to the right, a curious upsurge of puritanism, so that when we compare Matthew Arnold with T. S. Eliot, or Walter Pater or even R. P. Blackmur with a modern academic, the earlier critic often seems less prissy and conservative. ... The line between original text and critical commentary may always have been precarious, or not as separate and distinct as the conservative scholar holds it to be. The rabbis and the Church Fathers, as well as the later Kabbalists, even when they thought they were honoring the literal sense of Scripture, were producing inventive interpretations, ingenious adjustments to received and authoritative truth.¹⁰

Here, for reasons that should become clear as this chapter proceeds, Hartman opposes his work specifically to a certain *Protestantism*—he will elsewhere name it “puritanism”—that remained, in 1981, still hegemonic in American literary studies; not until his essays directly treating midrash in the mid-1980s does Hartman begin to distinguish between and differently value the Judaic and Christian (Protestant and Catholic alike) hermeneutical traditions. De Man, as we’ll see at the end of the chapter, likewise “Judaizes” insofar as he provocatively overturns a Protestant-influenced theory of literature and reclaims the category of “allegory”; meanwhile Miller participates in these developments not only by inverting the conventional hierarchy of literature and commentary (as in his *Deconstruction and Criticism* essay, “The Critic as Host”) but also through his sharp turn from a phenomenological method specifically concerned with

⁹ Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 3. See esp. 41–80, as well as Bloom’s contemporaneous book *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

¹⁰ Geoffrey H. Hartman, “How Creative Should Literary Criticism Be?,” *The New York Times* (April 5, 1981), accessed online June 9, 2019: <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/04/05/books/how-creative-should-literary-criticism-be.html>.

Christian themes (in books like *The Disappearance of God* [1963]) to an arch-deconstructive approach in which attention to those themes drops out completely.¹¹

The tipping point for linking the Yale Critics to Judaic hermeneutics arrived in 1980 with the publication of the essay “Dehellenizing Literary Criticism” by G. Douglas Atkins, a literary with his own (Christian) theological agenda. In this essay as well as its sequel, “Partial Stories: Hebraic and Christian Stories in the Wake of Deconstruction” (1983), and his book *Reading Deconstruction/Deconstructive Reading* (1983)—the latter pair of texts written in light of, and citing, Susan Handelman’s *The Slayers of Moses*, which in turn frequently cites “Dehellenizing Literary Criticism”—Atkins tries to rescue Christianity from deconstructive critique by marshalling a trope whose history we’ll retrace in the next section of this chapter, Matthew Arnold’s Hebraic/Hellenic dyad and its recycling by Thorleif Boman. Distinguishing between Christianity’s “Hellenic” and “Hebraic” impulses, Atkins aligns all of the Yale Critics, their differences notwithstanding, with the latter and blaming the former on the baleful influence of “Paul’s efforts at accommodation” of the Greek Gentiles to his messianic Judaism.¹² For Atkins, to “dehellenize” literary criticism (by “Hebraizing” it) is an unequivocally salutary action for both literary studies and Christian theology. While his readings of the Yale Critics’ texts often distort them in order to ally them with his own Christian project, Atkins gets something crucially right about understanding the Yale Critics as rebelling against the “neoclassical” norms of an implicitly but pervasively Christian literary establishment: even in discussing Hartman’s “Hebraism” and “Jewish ideas” in the third chapter of *Reading Deconstruction*, it is to

¹¹ See J. Hillis Miller, “The Critic as Host,” in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 217–253; Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers*, 4th ed. (Urbana: U. Ill. Press, 2000).

¹² G. Douglas Atkins, *Reading Deconstruction/Deconstructive Reading* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1983), 41.

Hartman's orientation toward that literary establishment, and not his biography, that he locates this Hebraism.¹³

Of course, the latter is far from irrelevant. To be sure, part of the thematic charge of Yale University, specifically, in the story of the midrash-Theory connection is the Yale English department's notoriety as the last bastion of WASP elitism among the university's humanities departments, which in turn were generally far slower than the social and natural sciences to admit Jewish undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty. Just a few years before Hartman and Bloom arrived as doctoral students in the Comparative Literature and English departments, respectively, the Jewish critic Lionel Trilling was denied appointment in the English department for openly antisemitic reasons. (Trilling settled at Columbia instead, and in 1948 became that university's first Jewish full professor of English.)¹⁴ In a 1987 interview, Bloom crankily described English at Yale as "an Anglo-Catholic nightmare...[in which], no matter what you read or how you taught it or what you wrote, you were supposed to gravely incline the head and genuflect to the spirit of Mr. Thomas Stearns Eliot, God's vicar upon the earth, the true custodian of the Western tradition."¹⁵

Accordingly, we might understand Hartman and Bloom's work in terms of their experience of being Jewish in this specific institutional context. It's certainly the case that

¹³ Atkins, *Reading Deconstruction*, 61.

¹⁴ Dan A. Oren, *Joining the Club: A History of Jews and Yale* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000), 280–81. On antisemitism and Jewish inclusion in American academia, see David A. Hollinger, *Sciences, Jews, and Secular Culture* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996); Suzanne Klingenstein, *Jews in the American Academy: The Dynamics of Intellectual Assimilation* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1998).

¹⁵ Imre Salusinszky, ed., *Criticism in Society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1987), 61, quoted in Evan Carton, "The Holocaust, French Poststructuralism, the American Literary Academy, and Jewish Identity Poetics," in Peter C. Herman, ed., *Historicizing Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), 17–48, at 33.

Hartman's critical tendencies were shaped by the youthful fascination with rabbinic literature he recounts in his 2007 memoir *A Scholar's Tale: Intellectual Journey of a Displaced Child of Europe*, and allusions to midrash begin appearing in his work as early as "Adam on the Grass with Balsamum" (1969), an essay on *Paradise Lost* that predates Hartman's first direct engagement with rabbinic hermeneutics by a decade.¹⁶ (As for Bloom, his first book, *Shelley's Mythmaking* [1959], opens with a citation of Martin Buber, but his eventual turn toward a highly idiosyncratic version of Lurianic kabbalah does not seem to have been precipitated by a comparable youthful attraction to kabbalistic literature.) In the best intellectual-historical treatment of these authors as Jewish critics, "The Holocaust, French Poststructuralism, the American Literary Academy, and Jewish Identity Poetics" (2004), Evan Carton argues that it was reading Derrida in the late 1960s and early 1970s that gave Hartman and Bloom, and after them a whole generation of Jewish literary critics, a "vocabulary" for "articula[ting]...the notion of Jewishness as a principle, locus, or legacy of *différance*," a linking of Jewish identity to Theory attested to by many of the essays collected in the volume *People of the Book: Thirty Scholars Reflect on Their Jewish Identity* (1996).¹⁷ Carton's account is persuasive as far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough. It is limited to reading the work of Hartman, Bloom, and Derrida through the prism of Jewish identity, and so ultimately can offer only a partial explanation for the appearance of references to Judaism in the discourse of Theory.

¹⁶ See Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Adam on the Grass with Balsamum," *English Literary History* 36.1 (March 1969): 168–92; Hartman, *A Scholar's Tale: Intellectual Journey of a Displaced Child of Europe* (New York: Fordham UP, 2007).

¹⁷ Carton, "Jewish Identity Poetics," 35–36. See Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, eds., *People of the Book: Thirty Scholars Reflect on Their Jewish Identity* (Madison: U. Wisc. Press, 1996). As Carton notes of this volume in "Jewish Identity Poetics," 46–47n66, "the contributors...who are most attracted by the idea that professional and Jewish identity are linked tend to be the younger ones. Significantly, the older scholars represented here respond more guardedly, even resistantly, to the volume's project."

For instance, Carton cannot account for the violence of the backlash to the Yale Critics. It is not hyperbolic to call Theory a scandal. Leafing cursorily through the dossier of anti-Theory polemics, and limiting ourselves to texts predating the (re)discovery of Paul de Man's wartime journalism, we find again and again that the reaction to the Yale Critics is couched in vividly sensationalistic terms verging on the lurid, the hysterical, and the gothic. In a famous essay, "The Hermeneutical Mafia: or, After Strange Gods at Yale" (1975), William H. Pritchard casts Hartman and company as *mafiosi*, imbuing their names with potent overtones of brutality, intimidation, criminality, subversion, secrecy, ritual, tribalism, and, of course, Europeanness; in 1980's *After the New Criticism*, Frank Lentricchia picks up on this image and pushes it rather too far, labeling de Man as "the Godfather" of the Hermeneutical Mafia. Gerald Graff comments on "Fear and Trembling at Yale" in 1977, while in the May 1980 issue of the *London Review of Books*, S. L. Goldberg dubs the Yale Critics the "Deconstruction Gang," and Kenneth Woodward, writing one year later for *Newsweek*, routes Goldberg's image through Cold War phobias to arrive at the formulation, "Yale's 'Gang of Four.'" In his February 1986 piece for the *New York Times Magazine*, Colin Campbell writes of "The Tyranny of the Yale Critics," a move which extends the anticommunist tang of Woodward's *Newsweek* piece but also cleverly sets up the Yale Critics—now technically whittled down to three after de Man's death and Bloom's disaffiliation, and about to lose Miller and Derrida to the University of California at Irvine—as ambiguously illiberal: are they the *ancien régime*, derelicting their responsibilities to the people, or are they Robespierres? Speaking of the French Revolution, martial notes echo ominously throughout these polemics: Woodward speaks of an "all-out war" at Yale between the old-guard humanists and the newfangled theorists; Hilton Kramer, in a 1977 *New York Times* piece on Bloom, writes disgustedly of "the *triumph* of misreading." Likewise echo charges of incivility:

Pritchard suggests that the Yale Critics' work extends past the boundaries "not merely of desirable but of *civilized* practice," and Peter Shaw complains that this "*degenerate* criticism" has led to "the dismal state of English studies" in the pages of the October 1979 issue of *Harper's*. And, in perhaps the most notorious anti-Theory essay of the era, René Wellek, a Yale critic of the previous generation and coauthor, ironically, of the classic textbook *Theory of Literature* (1949), declared that Theory was guilty of nothing less than "the destruction of literary studies."¹⁸ (De Man, who had a certain flair for drama, had no qualms matching this tone. In a diary entry from 1988, Miller recalls: "As de Man himself put it one of the last times I saw him, a few days before his death, 'the stakes are enormous.' He was speaking, first and immediately, of a deplorably ignorant and malicious essay by René Wellek...accusing de Man and others of 'Destroying Literary Studies.' A copy was on de Man's beside table with a friendly inscription from Wellek.")¹⁹

Or, again, an interpretation focused on Jewish identity can't explain why Romantic poetry is so central to the idea and legacy of "the Yale Critics." Three of the four critics were Romanticists. Hartman was renowned as a specialist on William Wordsworth; Bloom's books

¹⁸ William H. Pritchard, "The Hermeneutical Mafia: or, After Strange Gods at Yale," *Hudson Review* 38.4 (Winter 1975–76): 601–610, at 603; Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1980), 283–84; Gerald Graff, "Fear and Trembling at Yale," *The American Scholar* 46.4 (Autumn 1977): 467–78; S. L. Goldberg, "The Deconstruction Gang," *London Review of Books* 2.10 (May 22, 1980), accessed online February 15, 2022: <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v02/n10/s.l.-goldberg/the-deconstruction-gang>>; Kenneth Woodward, "A New Look at Lit Crit," *Newsweek* (June 22, 1981): 80, 82–83, at 80; Colin Campbell, "The Tyranny of the Yale Critics," *The New York Times* (February 9, 1986), accessed online June 7, 2022: <<https://www.nytimes.com/1986/02/09/magazine/the-tyranny-of-the-yale-critics.html>>; Hilton Kramer, "The Triumph of Misreading," *The New York Times* (August 21, 1977), 3 and 28; Peter Shaw, "Degenerate Criticism," *Harper's* (October 1979), accessed online June 7, 2022: <<https://harpers.org/archive/1979/10/degenerate-criticism/>>; René Wellek, "Destroying Literary Studies," in Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral, *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005), 41–52.

¹⁹ Quoted in Jones-Katz, *Deconstruction: An American Institution*, 255.

from the 1960s treated nearly every Romantic poet to write English, with a focus on Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Blake; de Man made his name with the essay “Structure intentionnelle de l’image romantique” (1960). In fact, the Yale Critics’ 1979 non-manifesto *Deconstruction and Criticism* was originally intended to comprise readings of Shelley’s 1822 fragment “The Triumph of Life” (although Bloom, Derrida, and Hartman all ended up straying from this assignment to discuss John Ashbery, Maurice Blanchot, and William Wordsworth instead). Now, as Bloom complained, when he entered the Yale English department as a graduate student, it was known as the institutional center of the New Criticism and decidedly Eliotian, which is to say Christian, in taste and methodology. Carton understands Hartman and Bloom’s attraction to the Romantic tradition as graduate students as a form of rebellion “against critical orthodoxy, and—one might say—against gentlemanly Christianity itself,” implying that they became Romanticists *because* they were Jews.²⁰ This interpretation makes their interest in Romanticism a matter of simple historical contingency; if Eliot had not infamously attempted to write the Romantics out of the English literary canon, Carton seems to suggest, then Hartman and Bloom would not have gravitated toward Romanticism. Yet as Marc Redfield writes in *Theory at Yale: The Strange Case of Deconstruction in America* (2016), it is no mere accident that “professional romantic literary criticism in the United States remains far more preoccupied with de Man’s work than any other academic field,” a fact which “may to some extent be explained in personalized terms as the influence of particular teachers on particular students,” but “at a certain point, if one is to take measure of this phenomenon, one needs to move on to institutional and discursive considerations.” Accordingly, Redfield argues that there are “intersecting lines of force among the discursive-institutional and conceptual clusters of theory,

²⁰ Carton, “Jewish Identity Poetics,” 33.

aesthetics, and romanticism.”²¹ On this interpretation, there is something about Theory which *needs* Romanticism, and something about Romanticism which *produces* Theory. How to square this with the view of Hartman and Bloom as only contingently Romanticists, rebelling against the hegemonically Christian culture of Yale in the 1950s? What has being Jewish to do with Romantic poetry? If we superimpose Carton’s argument on Redfield’s, the tantalizing question comes into focus: Is *Judaism* part of the “discursive-institutional and conceptual cluster” Redfield tracks?

This is not a question that can be answered entirely or, to repeat, even primarily in terms of Jewish identity. To begin with, de Man was not Jewish, nor—with the conspicuously opposed exceptions of his very early collaborationist essay “Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle” (1941) and his final lecture, “Conclusion: Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator’” (1983)—does his work *ever* address Judaism or Jewishness at all.²² Likewise, Miller’s interest in religious themes is focused generally on Christianity, not Judaism. What’s at stake here, I contend, is better elucidated through Nirenberg’s notion of anti-Judaism as “a set of ideas and attributes with which non-Jews can make sense of and criticize their world,” ideas which intersect in various ways with actual Jewishness and antisemitism but are not reducible to them. My claim is not that there is something essentially Judaic about the work of any of these authors, but rather that there is something *anti-Judaic* about the historical articulation and conceptual architecture of the institution that their work challenged. Thus, the violent reaction of the literary-academic

²¹ Marc Redfield, *Theory at Yale: The Strange Case of Deconstruction in America* (New York: Fordham UP, 2016), 9.

²² Cf. Paul de Man, “Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle,” trans. Martin McQuillan, in Martin McQuillan, *Paul de Man* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), 127–30, and de Man, “Conclusions: Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator,’” in de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: U. Minn. Press, 1986), 73–105.

mainstream to the Yale Critics is to be explained not as antisemitism, but as anti-Judaism, for the institution of “literature” itself is caught up in a Christian, and specifically supersessionist, genealogy. Romanticism is implicated in this anti-Judaism because, as Redfield notes following the findings of a brilliant intellectual history by David Simpson, “Romanticism” is a tag applied by Anglo-American critics to “a certain aesthetic excess, legible in wildly divergent ways—as escapism; as revolutionary energy; as apocalyptic humanism; as deconstructive rhetorical performance.”²³ Romanticism names writings that leave their rags, do not consume their smoke or pay their debts. Romanticism is what Emerson found distasteful in Carlyle (and which Carlyle, in his turn, found distasteful in the Romantics). At this point it begins to become a little clearer why the return of a canonically exiled Romanticism is troped by anti-Theory critics in ways that intersect with the rhetoric of Christian anti-Judaism.

One valuable contribution of Redfield’s overview of the archive of Theory between 1966 and 1979 in the first chapter of *Theory at Yale* is his demonstration of how the legacy of Theory has eclipsed that of the Yale Critics per se. In “histories of twentieth-century literary theory,” which are after all usually “histories of ideas,” de Man and Derrida have tended to stand in as avatars of “high theory” more so than the other Yale Critics.²⁴ This is due, in part, to the fact that the Yale Critics were never methodologically unified: Hartman, in the preface to *Deconstruction and Criticism* (1979, proposed and edited by Bloom), warns the reader that while “Derrida, de Man, and Miller are certainly boa-deconstructors...Bloom and Hartman are barely deconstructionists. They even write against it [deconstruction] on occasion”; thus, in the end, “[p]erhaps diversity is...why no one can agree on what to name this new group of critics. Do

²³ Redfield, *Theory at Yale*, 10. See David Simpson, *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt Against Theory* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1991).

²⁴ Redfield, *Theory at Yale*, 23.

they really have a common program, or is their unity simply that of achieving a ‘critical mass’ at Yale?”²⁵ The reasons why de Man and Derrida have become the twinned avatars of Theory are complex, and have been more fully adumbrated in recent work by Redfield, Mark Currie, and Gregory Jones-Katz than can be accomplished here;²⁶ for the time being, we can note that while Theory was a live issue in both academic and mass-media publications long before the “Paul de Man Affair” of 1988–89, it was usually tagged in the 1970s not as “Theory” or “deconstruction,” but rather as “Yale.” It was the Yale Critics *as a group* who were the target of anti-Theory ire in the 1970s, not Derrida and/or de Man, and when specific members of that group are adduced as representatives, it is more often *Hartman and Bloom*, the non-“boa-deconstructors,” who are nominated.

This tells us something important and almost always forgotten about the debates over Theory: whatever it was that made Theory scandalous to the mainstream of American literary studies, it was neither a theory nor a method, since Hartman and Bloom do not even share such things with each other, let alone with de Man and Miller (to say nothing of Derrida, who is not even a literary critic). What Hartman and Bloom *do* have in common, though, is a predilection for pushing, if not outright crossing (or exploding), the boundaries of critical style. It’s not a coincidence that they are the only two of the Yale Critics to have published literary writings in the conventional sense, as well as literary criticism: Hartman’s poetry collection *Akiba’s Children* appeared in 1975, Bloom’s *Star Wars*-esque novel *The Flight to Lucifer: A Gnostic Fantasy* in 1979. So, what does this stylistic gambit have to do with anti-Judaism?

²⁵ Geoffrey H. Hartman, preface to *Deconstruction and Criticism*, vii-ix, at ix; Hartman, “Literary Criticism and Its Discontents,” *Critical Inquiry* 3.2 (Winter 1976): 203–10, at 212.

²⁶ See Redfield, *Theory at Yale*; Jones-Katz, *Deconstruction: An American Institution*; and Mark Currie, *The Invention of Deconstruction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

If, as I'm suggesting, the major problem with the Yale Critics was a matter of prose style, this is clearly not a superficial offense. Part of my task in this chapter is to elucidate just what's at stake in the designation of Theory as "bad writing." Introducing their coedited volume on that theme, *Just Being Difficult?: Academic Writing in the Public Arena* (2003), Jonathan Culler and Kevin Lamb lay out the various charges directed at this "bad writing," such as that it's opaque, incomprehensible, too difficult; or, it's deliberately obfuscatory, a case of the emperor's new clothes; or, it's elitist, written by and for a hip, exclusive in-group and therefore not as politically radical as that in-group claims; or, again, it's not properly *critical*. It's telling that the latter complaint, the one which is most important for understanding the controversy over the Yale Critics in the 1970s, is the one least-remembered in retrospective accounts of Theory and the only one which hasn't survived into the culture wars of the 2020s. (See the Introduction to this dissertation.) We tend to think, rather, of complaints leveled by philosophers: Allan Bloom against the "Nietzscheans" of the post-Sixties academy, John Searle against Jacques Derrida, Martha Nussbaum against Judith Butler, Alan Sokal against, well, everybody.... In such cases, it's the alleged difficulty and obscurantism which incite the philosophers' ire. In the 1970s, though, the resistance to Theory was directed at literary critics *by* literary critics, and they took umbrage primarily with the perceived uncriticality of the texts. (As is well known, due to the dominance of Anglo-American analytic philosophy in American philosophy departments, Derrida's institutional inroads in the US, unlike in France, were through departments of French and comparative literature; so, in fact, Searle's rebuttal to Derrida's critique of J. L. Austin is a relatively rare instance, especially for 1970s, of an American philosopher engaging seriously on a philosophical level with Derrida.)

As Culler and Lamb rightly note, other disciplines are permitted their difficulty: “Since scientists and even social scientists are not vilified in the public press for bad writing,” the reason for that vilification “must lie in the status of the humanities.”²⁷ Specifically, it lies with the anti-Judaism of the humanities as an institution, which in the midcentury American literary academy is expressed as the demand for criticism to be both intelligible to the general public and differentiated from its object, that is, literature. Accordingly, this chapter charts the intellectual genealogy of literary studies from post-Kantian Romantic philosophy through the New Criticism; this genealogy shows that the category of literature emerges with the institutions of the university and the nation-state as part of a secular, universalizing aesthetico-pedagogical project premised on the supersession of particular difference. Grasping the contours of this genealogy will clarify why de Man’s deathbed comment to Miller was, in a sense, perfectly correct: the stakes *were* enormous. Literature, the university, America, the West, democracy, *humanity itself* were all understood to be somehow implicated in the prose style of a handful of literary academics at a single university. (Notably, this has continued to be the case in the years since the Theory boom—and bust—even as the material resources allotted to literary studies by the market logic of the neoliberal university have dwindled. Literary studies may not bring in the cash, yet it is still the hyperbolic locus of ideologically charged debates over American education.)

One thing this chapter, and indeed this dissertation, does *not* do is offer a conventional intellectual history of the American institution of literature or of the rise of the Yale Critics and Theory. Those stories have been told before, and very well, by a number of scholars upon whom I rely both explicitly and implicitly in the following pages. These include classics of the field like

²⁷ Jonathan Culler and Kevin Lamb, “Dressing Up, Dressing Down,” in Culler and Lamb, eds., *Just Being Difficult?: Academic Writing in the Public Arena* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), 1–14, at 2.

Gerald Graff's still-authoritative intellectual history *Professing Literature: An Intellectual History* (1987), Frank Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism* (1980), Jonathan Culler's *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions* (1988), John Guillory's *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993), and Bill Readings's *The University in Ruins* (1997), as well as recent, revisionist work by Joseph North, Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, and Andy Hines.²⁸ The history of the Yale Critics phenomenon and the reception of Francophone thought by the American literary academy—with movements like structuralism, existentialism, *la nouvelle critique*, and the Geneva School all preceding and in some sense precipitating the arrival of “deconstruction in America”—has been detailed a number of times from different

²⁸ On the history of Anglo-American literary studies, see: Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism, 1848–1932* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983); Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Studies* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2021); Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions* (Norman: U. Oklahoma Press, 1988); Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: U. Minn. Press, 2008); Andy Hines, *Outside Literary Studies: Black Criticism and the University* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2022); Ian Hunter, *Culture and Government: The Emergence of Literary Education* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988); Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1980); Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2017); Robert Scholes, *The Rise and Fall of English: Reconstructing English as a Discipline* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998).

On American education and universities, see: David F. Labaree, *A Perfect Mess: The Unlikely Rise of American Higher Education* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2017); Emily J. Levine, *Allies and Rivals: German–American Intellectual Exchange and the Rise of the Modern Research University* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2021); Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997); Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2020); Julie A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1997); Ellen Schrecker, *The Lost Promise: American Universities in the 1960s* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2021); Laurence Vesey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1965).

On the history of the American “culture wars,” see: Gerald Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (New York: Norton, 1992); Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2018); Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2012).

historical and disciplinary vantage points, including in books by Marc Redfield, Gregory Jones-Katz, Mark Currie, and Michael Thomas, essays by Rebecca Comay, Rodolphe Gasché, and Ian Hunter, and edited volumes such as *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America* (1982) and *Historicizing Theory* (2004).²⁹ Most crucially, the early chapters of Redfield's *Theory at Yale* and Jones-Katz's *Deconstruction: An American Institution* (2021) track in detail the emergence of the trope of the "Yale Critics" in academic and mass-media writing and the institutional

²⁹ On "Theory" and the Yale Critics specifically, see: Jonathan Arac, *Critical Genealogies: Historical Situations for Postmodern Literary Studies* (New York: Columbia UP, 1987); Arac, Wlad Godzich, and Wallace Martin, eds., *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America* (Minneapolis: U. Minn. Press, 1983); Art Berman, *From the New Criticism to Deconstruction: The Reception of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism* (Champaign: U. Ill. Press, 1988); Michael Bérubé, *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics* (London: Verso, 1994); Paul A. Bové, *In the Wake of Theory* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1992); Rebecca Comay, "Geopolitics of Translation: Deconstruction in America," *Stanford French Review* 15.1–2 (Jan. 1991): 47–79; Currie, *The Invention of Deconstruction*; François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort et al. (Minneapolis: U. Minn. Press, 2008); Herman, ed., *Historicizing Theory*; Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Structuralism: The Anglo-American Adventure," *Yale French Studies* 36–37 (1966): 148–68; J. David Hoeveler, Jr., *The Postmodern Age: American Thought and Literature in the 1970s* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); Ian Hunter, "The History of Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 33.1 (Autumn 2006): 78–112; Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2009); Barbara Johnson, *The Wake of Deconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Jones-Katz, *Deconstruction: An American Institution*; Peggy Kamuf, *The Division of Literature: or, The University in Deconstruction* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1997); Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen, eds., *French Theory in America* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001); J. Hillis Miller, "Tales Out of (the Yale) School," in Marina Grishakova and Silvi Salupere, eds., *Theoretical Schools and Circles in the Twentieth-Century Humanities: Literary Theory, History, Philosophy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 115–32; Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Double Reading: Postmodernism After Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996); Patai and Corral, eds., *Theory's Empire*; Tilottama Rajan and Michael J. O'Driscoll, eds., *After Poststructuralism: Writing the Intellectual History of Theory* (Toronto: U. Toronto Press, 2002); Herman Rapaport, *The Theory Mess: Deconstruction in Eclipse* (New York: Columbia UP, 2001); Redfield, *Theory at Yale*; D. N. Rodowick, *Elegy for Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2014); Simpson, *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt Against Theory*; Jordan Alexander Stein, *Avidly Reads: Theory* (New York: NYU Press, 2019); Michael Thomas, *The Reception of Derrida: Translation and Transformation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and Andrzej Warminski, "Deconstruction at Yale," in Warminski, *Material Inscriptions: Rhetorical Reading in Theory and Practice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013), 213–232.

mechanics of the transition from the New Criticism to Theory, respectively; I take these reconstructions more or less for granted, local quibbles notwithstanding. What I am tracking here are anti-Judaic concepts and cathexes—of literature, secularism, criticism, the university, Yale, America, the West, and so on, in short, the ideological currents of American literary studies.

2.2. Supersession and the institution of literature

2.2.1. What is literature?: A philosophical genealogy

Terry Eagleton remarks on the first page of *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983) that “If there is such a thing as literary theory, then it would seem obvious that there is something called literature which it is the theory of.”³⁰ That does indeed seem obvious; and, as this chapter is a study of the emergence of Theory in American literary studies, we would do well to begin by defining that “something.” And yet, as Eagleton immediately proceeds to write, literature has proven strangely resistant to definition in the two hundred-odd years since the word *literature*, in its current sense, entered common parlance.

Ten years before *Literary Theory: An Introduction* was published, the new Theory-aligned journal published by the Johns Hopkins University Press, *New Literary History*, devoted a special issue to the question: *What is literature?* Unsurprisingly, the issue supplied (at least) as many answers to this question as there were contributors to the issue. One of the articles was by Stanley Fish, at that time best known as a Miltonist and a theorist of reader-response. In this article, “How Ordinary is Ordinary Language?,” Fish argues that there is no aspect of language which can be isolated exclusively in literary texts, and concludes on this basis that “literature”

³⁰ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 1.

does not name a stable linguistic object but, rather, the objective result of an epistemological and institutional decision:

[...W]hat, after all, *is* literature? Everything I have said... commits me to saying that literature is language...; but it is language around which we have drawn a frame, a frame that indicates a decision to regard with particular self-consciousness the resources language has always possessed.... What characterizes literature then is not formal properties, but an attitude—always within our power to assume—toward properties that belong by constitutive right to language.... Literature is still a category, but it is an open category, not definable by fictionality, or by a disregard of propositional truth, or by a statistical predominance of tropes and figures, but simply by what we decide to put into it. The difference lies not in language, but in ourselves.³¹

To ask *what* literature is, here, is not to define an object but to research the criteria whereby “we decide” what literature is—a research which necessarily specifies or takes for granted whom that pronoun “we” names. In this respect Fish’s argument gestures toward his later neopragmatist work and propels us beyond the synchronic, semiological approaches indulged by the other contributors to this issue of *New Literary History*. *What is literature?* is a social question, and therefore a historical one. We cannot finally say with absolute objectivity, Fish suggests, what literature is, but we can ask *when, where, how, and for whom* literature is whatever it is, such that one (thinks one) knows it when one sees it.

To begin with, then: literature is “modern” and “Western.” By this I mean that the “decision” Fish mentions is one that was first made in Britain, Germany, and France (and, a little later, the United States) during the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is, of course, demonstrably the case that every human society in the history of the world has produced written and/or oral traditions which we now refer to as literary; it is not the object but the institution which is named and dated by the emergence of the word *literature* (and its French and

³¹ Stanley E. Fish, “How Ordinary is Ordinary Language?,” *New Literary History* 5.1 (Autumn 1973): 41–54, at 52, emphasis in original.

German cognates *la littérature* and *die Literatur*) in the current sense of this word—meaning something like “written texts whose primary function is aesthetic,” a heuristic definition which I aim in the following pages to historicize and problematize—in Western Europe in the late eighteenth century. In Samuel Johnson’s 1755 *Dictionary*, the word *literature* still means “Acquaintance with ‘letters’ or books; polite or humane learning; literary culture.”³² Rather than an object, literature for Johnson is a personal quality or an activity; the object, meanwhile, was better known as “poetry” or *belles lettres*.

A complex set of changes during the European Enlightenment induce the supplementation and then replacement of *belles lettres*, an elite culture oriented around the outward imitation of an example, by literature. As Martha Woodmansee has shown, these include the shift to capitalism and the commodification of culture, the juridical institutionalization of “the author” and copyright law, and the development, between Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* (1750) and Kant’s third *Critique* (1790), of the philosophical category of “the aesthetic” to denote the sensory cognition of phenomena which are autotelic and disinterested.³³ This notion of literature as aesthetic language is also dependent on the juridical

³² Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary*, quoted in J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), 2.

³³ See Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994). On p. 12, Woodmansee provides a pithy example of thinking about the aesthetic in the run-up to Kant’s third *Critique* with a citation from Karl Philipp Moritz, *Versuch einer Vereinigung aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften unter dem Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten* (1785): “In contemplating a beautiful object...I roll the purpose back into the object itself: I regard it as something that finds completion not in me but in itself and thus constitutes a whole in itself and gives me pleasure for its own sake.... Thus the beautiful object yields a higher and more disinterested pleasure than the merely useful object.”

A detailed survey of eighteenth-century philosophical aesthetics is well beyond the scope of this chapter; for such accounts, see, in addition to Woodmansee’s invaluable study: Howard Caygill, *The Art of Judgement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Jonathan M. Hess, *Reconstituting the Body Politic: Enlightenment, Public Culture, and the Invention of Aesthetic Autonomy* (Detroit: Wayne State

and political institutions of post-Westphalian Europe: liberalism, secularism, democratic republicanism; the rights to freedom of expression, of the press, of thought, of religion. For, as Jacques Derrida argues, if an utterance is to be “free,” it must be allowed to exist aesthetically, “in excess or advance of utility,” safeguarded from external standards of truth, morality, or utility to the point of putting those very standards into question.³⁴ Literature gives the author “license...to say everything he wants or everything he can, while remaining shielded, safe from all censorship, be it religious or political.”³⁵ Yet this very freedom to write language for its own sake comes at a cost—the cost, precisely, of being “framed,” in Fish’s terms. As aesthetic language, literature is separated out from the social world of “ordinary language,” where language communicates truth-claims and discharges performative effects.

As the doubling of author and work in Derrida’s account suggests—the literary work escapes utility, the author escapes responsibility—the institution of literature is structurally and historically affiliated with the self-legislating and self-ratifying subject of Western modernity, the subject who, in Eagleton’s phrasing,

obey[s]...no laws but those which they gave themselves. This bourgeois public sphere breaks decisively with the privilege and particularism of the *ancien régime*, installing the middle class...as a truly universal subject.... What is at stake here is nothing less than the production of an entirely new kind of human subject—one which, like the work of art itself, discovers the law in the depth of its own free identity, rather than in some oppressive external power. The liberated subject is the one who has appropriated the law

UP, 1999); Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988); Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, trans. James Swensen (New York: Columbia UP, 2011); and Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996), 1–62.

³⁴ Redfield, *Phantom Formations*, 8.

³⁵ Jacques Derrida, “This Strange Institution Called Literature,” trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, in Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), 33–75, at 37.

as the very principle of its own autonomy, broken the forbidding tablets of stone on which that law was originally inscribed in order to rewrite it on the heart of flesh.³⁶

In the absence of “the coercive apparatus of absolutism,” what lends cohesion to this social order is taste—“habits, pieties, sentiments, and affections.” When the law is, as Eagleton puts it here following Jean-Jacques Rousseau (following the Apostle Paul, following the Hebrew prophets), “written on the heart,” it is “identif[ied...] with the human subject’s own pleasurable well-being, so that to transgress the law would signify a deep self-violation.”³⁷ By the end of the eighteenth century, aesthetic experience is identified as the medium for this introjection of the law. Now the doubling of work and subject becomes a dialectic of exemplarity: the aesthetic work represents to the subject the very structure of the subject’s own subjectivity, and the subject, by identifying itself with the object on the basis of this intuited prefiguration, becomes ever more what it already is. In the unspooling of this typological spiral, the subject takes pleasure in becoming self-conscious of its own reflexive structure, appreciating as a good in itself its own autotelic, autoproduktive sovereignty. For this reason, the name given to this aesthetic education is *Bildung* in German and (self-)formation in English, both of which carry within them the concept of form in plastic and mimetic senses (*Bild*) as well as of education, cultivation, and acculturation.³⁸ This philosophical rationale breaks from “the classical tradition of poetics” enshrined in the elite culture of *belles lettres*, which takes representation as an imitation of reality. In post-Kantian aesthetics, Redfield comments, representation

is in no way limited to being on or about the experience or object that it frames or specifies, but is always also a discourse on humanity and history, and the nature of representation itself. If aesthetics invents autonomy as the condition of the artwork, and

³⁶ Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 19.

³⁷ Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 20.

³⁸ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Donald Marshall and Joel Weinsheimer (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 9–11.

disinterestedness as the condition of the perception of the artwork, it also defines art as the sign of the human, the human as the producer of itself, and history as the ongoing work of art that is humanity.³⁹

Hence, in the formulation of Romantic aesthetics' major philosophical proponent, Friedrich von Schiller: "Man is at once the material on which he [the artist] works and the goal toward which he strives."⁴⁰ The key word in Schiller's statement is "strives." The work of the work of art is never over, the dialectic of *Bildung* is never total, and subjectivity is never perfected so long as humanity remains a historical organism. Instead, both work and subject progress toward a telos which is always out of reach, yet nevertheless imperative.

Literature emerges from within the general field of the aesthetic as its "absolute" exemplar, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy put it, because of its linguistic nature. In the background here is Kant's contemporary, the polymathic Prussian orientalist, theologian, philosopher, poet, and critic Johann Gottfried Herder. Between 1766 and 1783, Herder advanced a highly influential account of "artful" language—in contradistinction to the merely "mechanical" language of animals and human infants—as the distinctive property of human being.⁴¹ In language, Herder writes in his *Essay on the Origin of Language* (1772), mankind "mirrors himself to himself." What's mirrored, though, is not just a universal figure of the human, but also a double particularity: first, the particularity of the individual subject who speaks or writes ("One ought to be able to regard every book as the imprint of a living human

³⁹ Redfield, *Phantom Formations*, 11. This distinction—between classical poetics (mimesis as "mirror" of reality) and Romantic aesthetics (mimesis as emanation of the subject)—is the titular distinction whose historical emergence M. H. Abrams charts in *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1953).

⁴⁰ Friedrich von Schiller, *Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*, quoted and trans. in Redfield, *Phantom Formations*, 11.

⁴¹ See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Essay on the Origin of Language*, trans. Alexander Gode, in Gode, ed., *On the Origin of Language: Two Essays* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1966), 85–166, at 103–08.

soul”);⁴² and, second, the particularity of the language in which the subject speaks or writes. When this philosophy of language is integrated into Romantic aesthetics, the typological system of *Bildung* is extended from the individual subject to human universality through the medium of the nation and its language, as the instantiation of that universality in history. As David Lloyd writes, the particularity of national identity in Romantic philosophy, despite being “potentially in contradiction with the universalism of modernity, is subsumed in the formal congruence between its own narratives of identity, directed at one people, and the narrative of identity that universal history represents for humanity in general.”⁴³ Literature is thus a political institution, not only because it presupposes the autonomy of the subject and the freedom of speech, but also because, as the absolute of language, it is the vehicle of the national “spirit [*Geist*].”⁴⁴ The idea of a “national literature”—indeed, of the nation itself—has its immediate genesis in post-Kantian thought’s inheritance of the Herderian philosophy of language: it is *through literature*, the creation and consumption of it, that the subject becomes a citizen and the nation, constituted by citizens, historically instantiates a universal humanity.

Let us pause here to recall that in this philosophical lineage, the very notion of a national spirit was defined in no minor part through the religio-racial figure of the Jew. From Herder to Kant to Hegel, to the pamphlet war between Bruno Bauer and Karl Marx on the “Jewish

⁴² Johann Gottfried Herder, *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele*, quoted and trans. in Woodmansee, *The Author, the Art, and the Market*, 54.

⁴³ David Lloyd, “Nationalisms Against the State,” in Lloyd and Lisa Lowe, eds., *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997), 173–198, at 178.

⁴⁴ On Herder’s theory of literature and Romantic nationalism, see Erich Auerbach, *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jane O. Newman, ed. James I. Porter (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2014), esp. “Vico and Herder” (11–23), and “The Idea of the National Spirit as the Source of the Modern Humanities” (56–64); Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004), 45–81; and Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005), 148–81.

Question” (the question, that is, of German Jewry’s civil emancipation), the possibility, or lack thereof, of Jewish subjects becoming citizens of the nation-state was understood to be, variously, the test case or else the limit case for the nation’s philosophically rickety articulation of humanist universality and ethnic particularity.⁴⁵ (This is not only a matter of philosophical anti-Judaism, for it directly shaped the identities and actions of Jewish subjects campaigning for full political emancipation. It is a commonplace that German Jewry of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries advanced their case for civil rights by pursuing *Bildung*, cultivating themselves as bourgeois German citizens and actively participating in the public culture of the Enlightenment.)⁴⁶

The narrative model that produces the idea of national *Geist* turns out, then, to be homologous to—if not outright derived from—the Christian theological narrative of supersession, in which “Judaism went out of existence with the coming of Christ, and the Jews are doomed to anachronism by their refusal to accept the truth.”⁴⁷ The homology matters more

⁴⁵ See Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006), esp. 48–77; Jonathan Freedman, *The Temple of Culture: Assimilation and Anti-Semitism in Literary Anglo-America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 1–54; Aamir R. Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007).

⁴⁶ The importance of *Bildung* in the German-Jewish Enlightenment, or *Haskalah*, has been thoroughly detailed by Jonathan M. Hess in *Germans, Jews, and the Claims of Modernity* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2002) and *Middlebrow Literature and the Making of German-Jewish Identity* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2010). See also Paul Mendes-Flohr, *German Jews: A Dual Identity* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999), 1–44.

⁴⁷ Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), xi. Excellent accounts of what Kathleen Biddick calls ancient and medieval Christianity’s “typological imaginary” and its subtending anti-Judaic supersessionist philosophy of history may be found in Biddick, *The Typological Imaginary: Circumcision, Technology, History* (Philadelphia: U. Penn. Press, 2003); Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1994); Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1999); Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*; Jill Robbins, *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother: Interpretation and Alterity in Augustine, Petrarch, Kafka, Lévinas* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1991).

than the possibility of derivation, since the fact of Christian hegemony affords Christians relative ease in identifying with the national spirit of a tolerant or secularist nation-state whether or not Christian universalism is the explicit model of that spirit. In this situation, Jewish difference proves problematic in various ways, so that the Jewish subject must give up something that constitutes Jewishness in order to find a place in the national community; in this sense, the Jew is the ideal type of the “immature [*unmündig*]” subject whose “emergence” into self-legislating rationality through *Bildung* is the supersessionist plot of *Aufklärung* itself.⁴⁸ Just as the supersession of Judaism is constitutive of Christianity, this sacrificial logic directed at the Jew is constitutive of the nation: the nation needs Jewish difference because it is by including this difference within itself that it becomes a historical exemplar of universality.

What bears emphasis here, precisely because it drops out of much writing on the genealogy of the institution of literature, is that this anti-Judaic narrative of supersession, despite being “secularized,” is the structure of aesthetic education as a whole and not only its political stage. It manifests, for instance, in the persistent rhetoric of internalization (the notion in Rousseau and Kant of a movement from heteronomy to autonomy as the “writing of the law upon the heart”). Familiar descriptions of aesthetics as a “secularization” of Christianity miss the point, even as they rightly point up the continuity and compatibility of Christian and secular discourses, whenever they neglect the Christian structure of the secularization narrative itself: Christianity, slotted into the “Judaized” place of the heteronomy to be overcome, authorizes its own supersession by a still more universal universalism, a still more autonomous autonomy. As Derrida puts it in *The Gift of Death* (1995): “Every demystification of Christianity submits again

⁴⁸ Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?,” trans. James Schmidt, in Schmidt, ed., *What is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1996), 58–64, at 58.

and again to justifying a proto-Christianity to come.”⁴⁹ For example, in *Natural*

Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature (1971) M. H. Abrams argues that

the course of Western thought since the Renaissance has been one of progressive secularization, but it is easy to mistake the way in which that process took place. Secular thinkers have no more been able to work free of the centuries-old Judeo-Christian culture than Christian theologians were able to work free of their inheritance of classical and pagan thought. The process—outside the exact sciences at any rate—has not been the deletion and replacement of religious ideas but rather the assimilation and reinterpretation of religious ideas, as constitutive elements in a worldview founded on secular premises. Much of what distinguishes writers I call ‘Romantic’ derives from the fact that they undertook, whatever their religious creed or lack of creed, to save traditional concepts, schemes, and values which had been based on the relation of the Creator to his creature and creation, but to reformulate them within the prevailing two-term system of subject and object, ... the human mind or consciousness and its transactions with nature. Despite their displacement from a supernatural to a natural frame of reference, however, the ancient problems, terminology, and ways of thinking about human nature and history survived, as the implicit distinction and categories through which even radically secular writers saw themselves and their world, and as the presuppositions and forms of their thinking about the condition, the milieu, the essential values and aspirations, and history and destiny of the individual and of mankind.⁵⁰

Abrams overlooks how the very movements he describes in *Natural Supernaturalism* as structures of secularization themselves number among the theological inheritances of the same Christianity supposedly being secularized. To secularize is, in this respect, to Christianize. It is not only the concepts that are saved which make aesthetics a “secularized Christianity,” but the very act of saving them, too.

⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death & Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills, 2nd ed. (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2008), 109.

⁵⁰ M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), 13. For a relevant critique of Abrams’s thesis, see Joshua Wilner, “Romanticism and the Internalization of Scripture,” in Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986), 237–52.

By 1858, John Henry Newman could uncontroversially aver that “by great authors, the many are drawn up unto a unity, national character is fixed, a people speaks, the past and the future...are brought into alignment with each other.”⁵¹ As Bill Readings elaborates,

Newman explicitly positions literature as the site of the development of both an idea of the nation and the study of literature as the means of training national subjects. Literature is both the agent and the expression of the organic unity of a national culture, the synthetic power of culture in action.... What literature does at the level of the *Volk*, fusing the people into a single national voice, literary training does for the individual.... Explicitly national, literature thus replaces philosophical science in uniting the dual sense of culture as both product and process, as general object and individual cultivation.⁵²

Newman’s claim, delivered in the context of a supplementary lecture to his 1852 book *The Idea of a University*, returns us to the specific question of how aesthetics relates to education and to the University—not *a* university, but *the* University as such, the *idea* of the University, a discursive trope and ideological figure against which particular universities are measured as historical instantiations. For the post-Kantian German philosophers who theorized and founded the first modern research university in Berlin in 1810—Humboldt, Schleiermacher, Fichte, and others—the organizing principle of the University is precisely *Bildung*, which now might be better rendered as “culture.”

Raymond Williams reminds us that culture “is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This complexity is due partly to the fact that culture is irreducibly, constitutively double, on the basis on the model outlined above: culture is at once an “identity,” the national culture, and a subjective “process of development.”⁵³ In the post-Kantian

⁵¹ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University: Defined and Illustrated* (London: Longmans, Green & Co. 1925), 193.

⁵² Readings, *University in Ruins*, 76–77.

⁵³ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), 49; Readings, *University in Ruins*, 64.

view, these functions are inextricable, and this inextricability is institutionalized as the University. “The high school practices teaching without research,” summarizes Readings, and “the academy practices research with teaching. The University...is where research and teaching are combined,” and may thus be defined as nothing less than the institutionalization of the aesthetic.⁵⁴ In other words, the University is implicated in the typological system whose contours we have been tracing. Its structure mirrors that of the human, the nation, and the work of art. The University exemplifies the nation by preserving and transmitting its culture—“the best which has been thought and said,” per Matthew Arnold’s definition—through the education of proper moral subjects, on the one hand, and simultaneously by producing its culture through the production of those subjects and the free pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.⁵⁵ Literature retains a peculiarly elevated position in this system for all the reasons outlined above. Literature is, Readings writes, the “noncontradictory museal or canonical space of rational historical understanding”—which, he adds, “is also the space of the *Norton Anthology*.”⁵⁶

For all the talk of a “people,” or a *Volk*, with a common national “spirit” across this genealogy, Ian Hunter swiftly reminds us that in practice, postsecondary education was still largely an elite affair, especially in Britain, where *Bildung* remained “for most of the nineteenth century a more or less voluntary ‘practice of the self,’ confined to caste groupings at one remove from the machinery of popular education.”⁵⁷ Although Romantic aesthetics privileges a nascent vernacular canon over against the Greek and Latin classics of the *belles lettres* model, the democratic potential of this post-Reformation standard of vernacularity remained unactualized

⁵⁴ Readings, *University in Ruins*, 64–65.

⁵⁵ Matthew Arnold, “*Culture and Anarchy*” and *Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 79.

⁵⁶ Readings, *University in Ruins*, 73.

⁵⁷ Hunter, *Culture and Government*, 5.

until the academic study of literature was implemented at the level of mass education. This is why, for example, Eagleton begins *Literary Theory: An Introduction* with a historical narration of “the rise of English” as a school subject, with W. R. Leavis and the *Scrutiny* coterie as his protagonists.⁵⁸ Hunter suggests that Matthew Arnold has assumed such “centrality in the standard history” of literary studies because he so effectively exemplifies its syntheses: in addition to his work as a poet, biblical translator, and Victorian Britain’s foremost cultural critic, Arnold was a government schools inspector.⁵⁹ Straddling the Romantic aesthetic project and the practical one of mass education, Arnold marks the moment in Anglo-American intellectual history when the doubleness characterizing literary education is actualized in pedagogy and institutions.

However, Arnold’s thought also differs in important ways from that of predecessors like Hegel and Newman, and these are the key to understanding both why Arnold was so invested in bringing literary education to the masses as well as why American literary studies was institutionalized in the early twentieth century as an expressly Arnoldian enterprise. Readings has identified the decisive difference between Arnold’s British context and the German one in which the University of Berlin was founded: the British universities, and specifically the elite schools at Oxford and Cambridge, were in the Victorian period “still directly linked to the

⁵⁸ See Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 15–46. See also Scholes, *The Rise and Fall of English*.

⁵⁹ Hunter, *Culture and Government*, 113. This dissertation is not the place, alas, for a detailed historical account of the process of institutionalization. For such accounts, see, in addition to Hunter’s *Culture and Government*: Baldick, *Social Mission*; Graff, *Professing Literature*; John Guillory, *Cultural Capital*; Readings, *University in Ruins*, esp. 70–88; Reuben, *Making of the Modern University*, 117–29; and the sources collected in Gerald Graff and Michael Warner, eds., *The Origins of Literary Studies in America: A Documentary Anthology* (London: Routledge, 1989). For comparison, see Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Building a National Literature: The Case of Germany*, trans. Renate Baron Franciscono (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982) and Wlad Godzich and Nicholas Spadaccini, eds., *The Crisis of Institutionalized Literature in Spain* (Minneapolis: Prisma Institute, 1988).

church...; this link has not been replaced by the link to the state.”⁶⁰ The different configuration of the relations between the subject, the state, and the church in the British context means that the crisis to which literature is the British answer arrives later and in another form. It is technology, industrialization, and “science” in the English (rather than the German) sense, which induce this crisis—and this crisis is experienced, at least for Arnold, as a religious one.

2.2.2. Matthew Arnold: Culture and disenchantment

In a 1938 letter to his friend Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin comments that Franz Kafka’s writings “present...a sickness of tradition” in which the “consistency of truth...has been lost. Kafka was far from being the first to face this situation. Many had accommodated themselves to it, clinging to truth...and, with a more or less heavy heart, forgoing its transmissibility. Kafka’s real genius was that he tried something entirely new: he sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to its transmissibility...”⁶¹

Benjamin, famously, interpreted Kafka’s response to this modern crisis of tradition through the lens of Judaism, of halakhah and aggadah. However, the crisis in question is not exclusive to modern Jewish life; in fact, Benjamin’s comments on Kafka unexpectedly echo Arnold’s critique of Victorian society. In 1879, Arnold lamented the decline of “religion” (by which he meant Christianity) among “the masses” of Britain as a cumulative effect of industrial modernity’s shocks, including the development of industrial capitalism, the rise of the natural sciences as an explanatory model, and the spreading skepticism about biblical revelation fostered by modern scholarship. In such times, Arnold wrote, “[t]here is not a creed which is not shaken,

⁶⁰ Readings, *University in Ruins*, 75.

⁶¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 143–44.

not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it.”⁶² Christianity, which no longer offered “the masses” the most convincing “interpretation of life” under the emergent conditions of industrialized society, risked reduction to an empty, purely formal dogmatism, to practices whose justification was the bare tautology of heteronomy—that is, what Arnold had earlier referred to, in *Culture and Anarchy* (1868–69), as “Hebraism,” “this energy driving at practice, this paramount sense of the obligation of duty, self-control, and work...”⁶³ From this vantage, liberal theologians’ attempts to accommodate scientific reason looked at best like a stopgap, at worst to a type of slow-motion theological euthanasia.

Arnold is sometimes recorded as a critic of secularization, per his famous elegiac lines about “the melancholy, long withdrawing roar” of “the Sea of Faith” in “Dover Beach” (1867).⁶⁴ However, this picture overstates and misplaces his concern, which was ultimately not so much theological as social. In a turbulent, increasingly fragmented and “disenchanted” (to use the Weberian nomenclature)⁶⁵ society, Arnold regarded Christianity as bestowing a sense of historical coherence, meaningfulness, and shared values, all of which transcended such earthly divisions as class. If the tide of secularization was to sweep away Christianity as an authoritative

⁶² Matthew Arnold, introduction to *The Hundred Greatest Men*, quoted in Arnold, “The Study of Poetry,” in Arnold, *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold, Vol. IX: English Literature and Irish Politics*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: U. Mich. Press, 1973), 161–88, at 161.

⁶³ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 126.

⁶⁴ Matthew Arnold, *New Poems* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1867), 96.

⁶⁵ For Weberian “disenchantment,” see Max Weber, *Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures*, trans. Damion Searls, ed. Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon (New York: NYRB Classics, 2020); and, for relevant commentary relating Weber’s concept to the rise of modern research university and “the humanities,” Reitter and Wellmon, *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2021).

social institution, Arnold contended that the technologies for its mediation of social relations could be isolated and reproduced outside of their traditional ecclesiastical settings; the *content* of Christianity might be lost, but its social function did not have to go with it.

Drawing on the post-Kantian philosophical tradition outlined above, Arnold identified poetry as this secular substitute for Christianity. In “The Study of Poetry” (1880), he writes:

The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. [...] For poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea *is* the fact. The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry. ... We should conceive of poetry worthily, and more highly than has been the custom to conceive of it. We should conceive of it as capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto. More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.⁶⁶

As Amy Hungerford remarks, if poetry thus conceived can imbue life with meaning, this happens on the level of individual subjective experiences. Arnold

finally resorts to a mystified notion of literary knowledge to guide the reader toward the true ‘classic,’ the sort of text that might replace traditional religious forms of meaning. The reader comes to know which poem is a classic only by internalizing other classic examples, thereby infusing the reading mind and heart with that ineffable sense of form and substance that propels the classic toward transcendence.... What is left is an emphasis on the form of the classic, its sound and feeling of transcendence, a sound and feeling that is only inadequately described by pointing to particular features of particular lines and cannot be replaced by pointing to what those lines mean.⁶⁷

Like Benjamin’s Kafka, Arnold’s concept of poetry offers literary *form* as a solution to the crisis of social unity in modern society. Unlike Benjamin, though, Arnold isn’t talking about specific works which offer this solution, but rather about an institutional program: only when

⁶⁶ Arnold, “The Study of Poetry,” 161–62, emphasis in original.

⁶⁷ Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010), xvii.

implemented at the level of “the masses,” through the existing and nascent infrastructures of education (especially literacy education), could poetry be a secular substitute for “religion.”

Which “religion,” though? Arnold’s understanding of aesthetic and religious experience as homologous centers on the interior psychological life of the subject. Religion, accordingly, is defined as a matter of affect and epistemology, that is, of feeling and believing, and it’s precisely contemporary religion’s failure to engage Arnold’s fellow Britons in these respects which leads him to disparage it as excessively “Hebraic,” “a single-minded Puritanism that must find correction by a Greek-inspired suppleness.”⁶⁸ Rehearsing the Hegelian critique of Judaism (and Kant), Arnold designates as Hebraic those aspects of religion which are concerned with conduct for its own sake, with adherence to positive law *because it is law*, rather than because the law is reasonable.⁶⁹ In *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold reaches for a balance of Hebraism and Hellenism, in which conformity with the law would be motivated not by fear but by a tasteful sensibility: “Hebraism and Hellenism,—between these two points of influence moves our world. At one time it feels more powerfully the attraction of one of them, at another time of the other; and it ought to be, though it never is, evenly and happily balanced. ... The aim and end of both Hebraism and Hellenism is...one and the same, and this aim is august and admirable.”⁷⁰

Arnold’s objection is therefore not to Hebraism per se but to its excessive influence in British culture. (He points to the example of Heinrich Heine—whose *Ludwig Börne* [1840] is Arnold’s

⁶⁸ Freedman, *Temple of Culture*, 18.

⁶⁹ On Hegel’s critique of Kant as a “Jewish” thinker, see Freedman, *Temple of Culture*, 37–43; Miriam Leonard, *Socrates and the Jews: Hellenism and Hebraism from Moses Mendelssohn to Sigmund Freud* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2012); Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*, 387–422.

⁷⁰ Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 126–27.

source for the terminology of *Culture and Anarchy*—as someone whose critique of an “unbalanced” culture required championing Hebraism over against Hellenism.)⁷¹

However, the very invocation of “the Hebrew” as the figure for an empty, formalistic legalism necessarily posits Judaism as the paradigm of Hebraism without Hellenism. While Arnold doesn’t exclude Judaism from the field of “religion,” therefore, it is included only as a bad example: the failure of religion to sustain human society in modernity. The formal aspect of religion which Arnold wants to recuperate through poetry is one which, he suggests, does not and *cannot* exist in Judaism. If poetry can be religion’s “secular substitute,” therefore, the religion in question is never Judaism, but Christianity—more precisely, a liberal Christianity refashioned, in the wake of the Counter-Reformation and the critique of religion in Enlightenment philosophy, as a private, subjective experience. As John Guillory summarizes, Arnold’s goal is the replacement of “religious *belief*,” involving the rational assent to propositions about God and the world, by “literary *sensibility*,” the intuitive judgments of the tasteful subject.⁷² Arnold’s concept of literature thus reiterates the movement of internalization and the logic of supersession whose persistence in post-Enlightenment universalist and nationalist thought we have been tracing here.

The reiteration of supersession in the Arnoldian project allows us to make sense of his recourse to the figure of the Jew. For the Jew “survives” the secularization/supersession of Christianity by nationalism: as the universal is transposed from a theological register to an ethnocentric one, the Jew undergoes a corresponding transposition (i.e., from Judaism to Semitism) and so remains in place as the (over)determined figure of the particular, the different,

⁷¹ Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 127.

⁷² Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, 136, emphases in original.

the other.⁷³ Jonathan Freedman and Michael Ragussis point out that the scales are weighted against Hebraism in *Culture and Anarchy*, and they are weighted *in the name of balance*: because Hebraism is defined as rigidity and Hellenism as suppleness, Arnold “redefines ‘culture’ as a species of Hellenic suppleness, one whose suppleness is performed, in fact, by the very act of incorporating into its purview the figure of the Hebrew,” recapitulating “the absorption of Judaism in Christianity, or Hebrew Scripture in the Christian Bible....”⁷⁴ Hebraism by definition can *never* incorporate Hellenism, and Hellenism by definition *must* subsume Hebraism—a replaying of the nationalist supersession already directed at the figure of the Jew in Romantic thought. Arnold’s inclusion of the Hebraic under the sign of the Hellenic is vital to his overall project, including the replacement of religion by literature. He wants literature to do a specific type of work for the modern nation-state, and its ability to do that work depends on its structural homology with a certain (i.e., not-*too*-Hebraic) Christianity. Defining *both* religion *and* literature against Jewish difference ensures this homology and thereby makes possible what Lawrence Levine has termed the “sacralization of culture.”⁷⁵

One effect of this maneuver is the extension and reification of Christian hegemony in, through, and as the secular category of literature. For the putative neutrality and universality of

⁷³ On the historical emergence of the category “Semite” and the renegotiation of Jewish difference, see Gil Anidjar, “The Semitic Hypothesis: Religion’s Last Word,” in Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008), 13–38. On the trope of Jewish “survival,” see Adam Y. Stern, *Survival: A Theological-Political Genealogy* (Philadelphia: U. Penn. Press, 2021).

⁷⁴ Freedman, *Temple of Culture*, 46; Michael Ragussis, *Figures of Conversion: The “Jewish Question” and English National Identity* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), 47.

⁷⁵ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988), 83–168. Cf. Jordan Alexander Stein, “Secular Aesthetics: Form, Theme, and Method in the Study of American Literature,” *Comparative Literature* 65.3 (Summer 2013): 325–344, where Stein argues that “the historical process by which culture is made sacred is of a piece with the process by which divinity is made secular” (328).

literature's *form* tolerates the Christianity in whose image it is made more so than religious forms of life which tend toward the Hebraic pole of Arnold's system; Christianity as such tends to become invisible or unremarkable, while frictions and tensions foreground other religions (exemplified in Arnold's work by Judaism) as such. In this fashion, the institution of literature subtly entrenches the presumptive identification of the Anglo-American national character with Protestant Christianity while still locating that national character in a secularized field. For example, the increasing popularity of the idea of "reading the Bible as literature" between 1890 and 1940, which I treat in more detail in Chapter 3, is a direct consequence of this laundering of Protestant hegemony through literary culture: at the undergraduate level, as universities and colleges formally disaffiliated with ecclesiastical institutions and student populations diversified during those five decades, the King James Bible continued to be taught to generation after generation of students in public and private American schools alike, on account of its status as a "classic" of English—and American—literature. (This privilege was not enjoyed by the sacred texts of any other religious tradition.)⁷⁶ Christianity gets reinscribed here as a *historical* inheritance of the secular nation, its effective hegemony reduced on the one hand to a tautology (e.g.: *We read so much literature by Protestant authors because we read great literature, and so much of the great literature in English is by Protestant authors*) and on the other to an accident (e.g.: *The aesthetic experience of reading great literature just so happens to be an experience that resonates formally and sometimes thematically with Protestantism*). Literature is thus "secularized Christianity," as Abrams would have it, not because, behind a secular mask, it's "really" Christianity, but because it institutes a discursive, social, and institutional space which

⁷⁶ This unequal situation was only exacerbated by *Abington v. Schempp*, the 1963 Supreme Court decision intended to ameliorate it. On the decision and its effects, see Chapter 3 of this dissertation, below.

overlaps with a certain Christianity by reproducing its structures and dynamics while not extending the same degree of accommodation to other religious forms of life.

Arnold's critique of industrial modernity in texts like *Culture and Anarchy* and "The Study of Poetry" was easily transferred to the scene of American universities and colleges (although the very existence in the US of both universities *and* liberal arts colleges, not to mention both public and private institutions, is symptomatic of its idiosyncratic and uneven adaptation of European educational models). In the American context, two major trends—the specialization of academic research and the secularization of institutions—had by 1900 left in doubt just who, exactly, was supposed to be furnishing American undergraduates with the moral formation that was still, ostensibly, the rationale for education in the "liberal arts." Into this vacuum stepped a group of literary critics who saw an opening for resisting the encroachment of specialization in their own discipline, in the form of philological, linguistic, and positivistic historical methodologies imported in part from Germany. These critics, whom their scientific colleagues regarded as unmethodical "generalists" and "aesthetes," explicitly invoked Matthew Arnold in advancing what we can generally refer to as an aesthetic-humanist program. Like the reforms Arnold proposed in British education, these aesthetic humanists made their case both against modernity's fragmentations (exemplified here by scientific specialization) and as a substitute for a Christianity which was increasingly failing to bestow coherence upon education.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ For more detailed accounts of secularization and specialization in American higher education during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Graff, *Professing Literature*; Levine, *Allies and Rivals*; Reuben, *Making of the Modern University*; and Jon H. Roberts and James Turner, *The Sacred and the Secular University* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000).

These generalists were not entirely unsuccessful, but the specialists' critique was prescient. American higher education continued to move in a specialized direction which left the generalists in a marginal position. They were regarded as teachers more than scholars, for insofar as literary studies constituted a professional *discipline*, it remained dominated by philological, historical, and linguistic research rather than criticism or interpretation. It was not until the arrival on the scene of American literary studies of the formalist project known as the New Criticism that "criticism" acquired sufficient rigor to challenge the methodological supremacy of philology in English departments.

2.2.3. The New Criticism and the aesthetic university

The New Criticism originated in a political and literary coterie, a circle of conservative literature students studying with John Crowe Ransom at Vanderbilt University in the early 1920s. As members of the Agrarian movement, the Vanderbilt group's views were aesthetically and politically organized around system of congruent oppositions: tradition versus modernity, organicism versus technology, agrarianism versus industrialization, high culture versus mass culture, immediacy versus alienation, and religion versus secularism. Like Arnold, the target of their critique was fragmentation and disunity at every level: in literature, in the self, in the national spirit (the latter inflected by their reaction to Reconstruction in the American South). Following the lead of their major intellectual antecedent, T. S. Eliot, the New Critics rewrote the Arnoldian substitution of "literary sensibility" for "religious belief" as a deliberate (re)entrenchment of Christian cultural hegemony, pitched explicitly against modern, industrialized, secularized American life.

In “Religion and Literature” (1935), Eliot disparages explicit attempts at linking religion and literature, such as “reading the Bible as literature,” on the grounds that “such writings do not enter into any serious consideration of the relation of religion and literature: because they are conscious operations in a world in which it is assumed that religion and literature are not related. It is a conscious and limited relating. What I want is a literature that should be *unconsciously*, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian.”⁷⁸ As John Guillory glosses: “Eliot’s desire for a literature that is ‘unconsciously Christian’ obviously places Christian belief in the position of *doxa*,” meaning “a state of belief preexistent to both orthodoxy and to heterodoxy” to which condition “all ideology aspires.” “If literature is unconsciously Christian,” continues Guillory, “it serves no *dogmatic* function. It is merely redundant with respect to Christian belief,” so that “literature itself can be installed as a sensibility that performs the social function of *doxa*—producing a state of cultural homogeneity, of unquestioned belief—without ever requiring the ‘imperfect’ supplement of orthodoxy, without specifying directly what these beliefs are.”⁷⁹ The scaffolding of Arnold’s “The Study of Poetry” is still here, but with a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between ideology and representation. This is why it is possible for a New Critic like Cleanth Brooks to openly state that “literature is not a surrogate for religion,” despite the fact that Brooks was one of the critics most responsible for institutionalizing the New Critical approach.⁸⁰ For indeed, literature here does not stand in for

⁷⁸ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (San Diego: Harcourt, 1975), 100, emphasis in original.

⁷⁹ Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, 136–38, emphasis in original. Guillory borrows the concept of “*doxa*” from Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977), 164.

⁸⁰ Cleanth Brooks, “The Formalist Critics,” *Kenyon Review* 8 (1951), quoted in William K. Wimsatt, Jr., *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: U. Kentucky Press, 1954), 276.

religion, but rather is the means of its expression in culture. On this view, literature heralds the ideological pervasiveness of Christianity in Anglo-American culture, not its disappearance.

What is it about literature, as theorized by Eliot and then the New Critics, that makes it “unconsciously Christian”? Like Arnold’s concepts of culture and poetry, the answer lies in form. Unlike Arnold, however, whose appeal to poetic form was ultimately “impressionistic” and “aestheticist” in the sense meant by the anti-formalist philologists of the early twentieth century, the New Critics grounded their formalism in a thoroughly worked-out theory of literary language derived from Eliot’s notion of the “impersonality” of poetry.⁸¹ Specifically, they asserted the indissociability of literary form and literary content. Put otherwise, the New Critical theory of literature maintains that the structure of literary language is “symbolic,” in the technical sense established by the German and British Romantic theorists whom Eliot and the New Critics otherwise denigrated.⁸²

In *The Statesman’s Manual* (1816), Samuel Taylor Coleridge representatively describes “symbol” as “characterized by the translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general; above all by the translucence of the eternal

⁸¹ See Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *Selected Prose*, 37–44.

⁸² As the predominance of “symbol” in thinking about literature is typically associated in literary history with Romanticism, the centrality of symbol to New Criticism may come as a surprise; Eliot was an infamous critic of the Romantics, whom he charged with the cardinal sin of “dissociating” (Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 64) emotion and cognition. As Guillory demonstrates in “Ideology and Canonical Form: The New Critical Canon,” in *Cultural Capital*, 134–75, Eliot and the New Critics after him overhauled the received English literary canon on the basis of this hostility to Romanticism, elevating Shakespeare, the Metaphysical poets, and the neoclassicists while denigrating Milton, Dryden, and the Romantics. As Louis Menand argues in *Discovering Modernism: T. S. Eliot and His Context*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), at 177, however, Eliot never dispensed with many key Romantic ideas, but instead merely restated them “in a neoclassical-sounding language.” Such is the case with “symbol.”

through and in the temporal.”⁸³ Commenting on this passage, Paul de Man notes that the structure of the symbol for Coleridge is synecdochic, “for the symbol is always a part of the totality that it represents. Consequently, in the symbolic imagination, no disjunction of the constitutive faculties takes place, since the material perception and the symbolical imagination are continuous, as the part is continuous with the whole.” The symbol is “conceived as an expression of unity between the representative and semantic function of language,” reconciling part and whole, particular and universal, form and content, signifier and signified in an organic totality.⁸⁴ By contrast, Coleridge and other Romantics denigrate “allegory,” a signification in which sign and meaning are not continuous, not organically unified, but rather are institutional—that is, artificially articulated by “a pure decision of the mind.”⁸⁵ Allegory, continues de Man,

appears as dryly rational and dogmatic in its reference to a meaning that it does not itself constitute, whereas the symbol is founded on an intimate unity between the image that rises up before the senses and the supersensory totality that the image suggests. [...T]he allegorical form appears purely mechanical, an abstraction whose original meaning is even more devoid of substance than its ‘phantom proxy’ [Coleridge’s phrase], the allegorical representative; it is an immaterial shape that represents a sheer phantom devoid of shape and substance.⁸⁶

In Coleridge’s opposition of symbol and allegory, we can already hear an anticipation of the Arnoldian dyad of Hellenism and Hebraism: the difference between sign and meaning which constitutes both modes of signification is reconciled in symbol, as the opposition to Hebraism is reconciled in the universal inclusivity of Hellenism. However, unlike Arnold’s description of culture as a dialectical process, the New Critics’ essays are usually focused intently on discrete

⁸³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Statesman’s Manual*, ed. W. G. T. Shedd (New York: Harper, 1875), 437–438.

⁸⁴ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: U. Minn. Press, 1983), 191, 189.

⁸⁵ De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 192.

⁸⁶ De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 189, 191–92.

literary works, especially lyric poems, taken as *objects*: synchronic and autotelic. The Romantic concept of the symbol serves the New Critics well by articulating a mode of linguistic signification wherein sign and meaning are temporally coincident by virtue of their indissociability. Unlike allegory, where the sign always trails temporally after the meaning “it does not itself constitute,” symbol effects a “translucence” of the eternal in the instant of signification. The New Critics extend this concept of symbol to the literary object *as a totality*. Hence the recurrence in their interpretations of literary works of structures constituted by tensions, oppositions, and differences: “ambiguity,” “paradox,” “complex of attitudes,” “irony:”⁸⁷ the poem, as a symbolic, synchronic totality, can bring these differences into harmonious unity without destroying them. In the phrasing of the New Critic William K. Wimsatt, Jr., the literary object is a “concrete universal.”⁸⁸ If Arnold’s inchoate formalism gives us culture as secularized Christian supersession, the New Critics’ fully developed formalism offers the literary object as secularized Christian incarnation—a “sacralization of culture,” indeed.

That’s an ontological claim as well as a semiotic one. The New Critical theory of literature is not just a theory of *how* literature signifies, but also of *what* literature *is*. This theory sets literature apart from the general field of human language, whose structure is basically allegorical: ordinary language, in science or in everyday discourse, consists of language as the instrumental vehicle for a “meaning that it does not itself constitute.” Unlike Fish’s and Derrida’s ideas of an institutional “frame,” though, the New Critics locate this distinction in the

⁸⁷ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1975), 195.

⁸⁸ See William K. Wimsatt, Jr., “The Concrete Universal,” in Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon*, 69–84.

tautology form itself, and by extension in *poesis*, the authorial act of literary creation: literature is literary because it is literary, and this literariness inheres in the formal essence of the object itself. (The relatively marked difference of lyric form from ordinary language is one way to grasp the New Critics' strong generic preference for lyric poetry over prose fiction, although this preference was not absolute.) The first and most obvious consequence of this austere formalistic objectivity is a turn away from what René Wellek and Austin Warren, in their discipline-defining textbook *Theory of Literature* (1949), call "extrinsic approaches" to literature—e.g., biographical and psychological studies of authors, historical studies of texts in their social and intellectual settings; philology—and toward "intrinsic approaches."⁸⁹ This turn is perhaps most famously proclaimed in the pair of polemics Wimsatt coauthored with Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946) and "The Affective Fallacy" (1949): the first rejected the conflation of the meaning of a literary work and the meaning intended by the work's author; the second rejected the conflation of the meaning of the literary work and the psychological response of the work's reader.⁹⁰ "The outcome of either Fallacy, the Intentional or the Affective, is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgement, tends to disappear."⁹¹

In fact, the consequences of the New Critical position go beyond even Wimsatt and Beardsley's polemics. These consequences are most rigorously expressed in the eleventh chapter of Cleanth Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947), "The Heresy of Paraphrase." Here, Brooks argues for an essential split—an iteration of the split, precisely, between the symbolic language of literature and the allegorical language of everything

⁸⁹ See René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1993), 73–74 and 139–41.

⁹⁰ See William K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy," in Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon*, 3–20 and 21–40.

⁹¹ Wimsatt and Beardsley, "Affective Fallacy," 22.

that is not literature—between the language *of* a literary work and the language used to talk *about* a literary work:

The truth of the matter is that all such [paraphrastic] formulations lead away from the center of the poem—not toward it; that the ‘prose-sense’ of the poem is not a rack on which the stuff of the poem is hung; that it does not represent the ‘inner’ structure or the ‘essential’ structure or the ‘real’ structure of the poem. We may use—and must use—such formulations are more or less convenient ways of referring to parts of the poem. But such formulations are scaffoldings which we may properly for certain purposes throw about the building; we must not mistake them for the internal and essential structure of the building itself. Indeed, one may sum up by saying that most of the distempers of criticism come about from yielding to the temptation to take certain remarks which we make about the poem—statements about what it says or about what truth it gives or about what formulations it illustrates—for the essential core of the poem itself.⁹²

The implications for the literary critic are stark: “If we allow ourselves to be misled by it [the heresy of paraphrase], we distort the relation of the poem to its ‘truth,’ we raise the problem of belief in a vicious and crippling form, we split the poem between its ‘form’ and its ‘content’—we bring the statement to be conveyed in an unreal competition with science or philosophy or theology.”⁹³ Brooks here locates the critic firmly on the allegorical side of the line, in the fallen world of instrumental language. The upshot is that criticism is, to borrow Brooks’s metaphor, merely a scaffold, the means to a hermeneutical end. The critic’s task is to explain how the poem works so that, ideally, the critical apparatus will fall away as it grows less necessary for the reader who initially turned to the critic for guidance. A necessary correlate of this view of criticism is the mandate for critical writing to be lucid and accessible for the reader; to be obscure is to fail to perform the central task of criticism.

It is by now a commonplace that this argument is saturated in the residues of Protestant biblical hermeneutics. This is apparent, for instance, in the adamant claim for the hermeneutical

⁹² Brooks, *Well-Wrought Urn*, 199.

⁹³ Brooks, *Well-Wrought Urn*, 201.

self-sufficiency of the literary text, which echoes the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura* (“scripture alone”)—a doctrine pitched against the allegorical hermeneutics of the Catholic Church, which Luther and his followers regarded as obscuring the Word and alienating the Christian subject from it. As David Nirenberg has demonstrated, Protestant theologians couched this anti-Catholic hermeneutical polemic in the rhetoric of anti-Judaism: whereas early Church exegetes had demoted the Hebrew scriptures to shadowy prefigurations of the narrative of Christian messianic redemption and charged Jewish exegesis with obscuring the true status of those scriptures, in Protestant theology the Catholic Church’s own hermeneutical apparatus was denigrated in precisely the same terms, reduced to a “Judaizing” discourse that mediated and distorted the Word.⁹⁴ The interpreter who relies upon something other than scripture itself to interpret scripture becomes one of the Jewish exegetes the Apostle Paul disparages in his commentary on the narrative of Moses’s veil from Exodus 34:29–35: “Indeed, to this very day, when they [i.e., Jews who rejected Christian messianism] hear the reading of the old covenant, the same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed” (2 Cor. 3:14–16). The critical discourse does *not* progress toward its own redundancy, which does *not* pastorally guide the reader to her own independent understanding of the poem, functions as the veil of Moses. The structure of Christian supersession is reiterated here, but with a surprising twist: criticism itself is the subordinated term, the “Judaic” point in the dialectic; it prefigures the meaning which will eventually be grasped, unmediated, in the light of the literary work. If the work has the symbolic structure of incarnation, then criticism, as allegorical discourse, is only a propaedeutic, engineering the conditions of its own obsolescence.

⁹⁴ See Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*, 246–68.

As Jonathan Freedman argues, this unexpected figuring of criticism as “Judaism” in Anglo-American literary studies begins with Matthew Arnold’s writings of the 1860s. In *Culture and Anarchy*, for example, Arnold divides society into three classes—“Barbarians,” “Philistines,” and “the Populace”—and then stipulates that there exists within each of these a minority consciousness he describes as “alien,” evoking the rhetoric of the Jewish Question to coin, as Freedman writes, “the ideal of the critical, alienated intellectual in Anglo-American culture.”⁹⁵ In the slightly earlier text “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” (1864), Arnold is more direct about the Judaism of criticism. There, he distinguished between “creative” and “critical” consciousness, but understands this distinction as a dialectic rather than a binarism. The critic, he maintains, can be creative: “[...T]o have the sense of creative activity is the great happiness and the great proof of being alive, and it is not denied to criticism to have it; but then criticism must be sincere, flexible, ardent, ever-widening in its knowledge.” (A criticism which is not as “criticism must be” would, in the terms of *Culture and Anarchy*, be “Hebraic.”) “Then it [criticism] may have,” he continues, “in no contemptible measure, a joyful sense of creative activity; a sense which a man of insight and conscience will prefer to what he might derive from a poor, starved, fragmentary creation. And at some epochs no other creation is possible.”⁹⁶ However, immediately after these sentences, Arnold says that even such criticism is still lesser than the greatest creations:

Still, in full measure, the sense of creative activity belongs only to genuine creation; in literature we must never forget that. But what true man of letters can ever forget it? ... The epochs of Æschylus and Shakespeare make us feel their pre-eminence. In an epoch like those is, no doubt, the true life of literature; there is the promised land, towards which criticism can only beckon. That promised land it will not be ours to enter, and we

⁹⁵ Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 110; Freedman, *Temple of Culture*, 47.

⁹⁶ Matthew Arnold, “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” in Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 26–51, at 51.

shall die in the wilderness; but to have desired to enter it, to have saluted it from afar, is already, perhaps, the best distinction among contemporaries; it will certainly be the best title to esteem with posterity.⁹⁷

Figuring the critic, which is to say himself, as Moses, Arnold narrates a temporally convoluted typology in these concluding lines of “The Function of Criticism.” On the one hand, the critic’s “beckoning”—his judgment of the literature of his own “epoch” against the standard of “the best that has been thought and said”—is a melancholic gesture, for the “promised land” of true literature is already lost to history. On the other hand, as Moses, the function of the critic is to lead the writers of his epoch *toward* the promise land of a messianic “true” and “living” literature which is still yet to come. The promised land is both bygone and incipient, a redoubling which inscribes exactly the critic’s dual role as a both scholar and teacher in the regime of aesthetic education. The critic’s function is both archival, preserving and transmitting a cultural heritage, and pedagogical, since the archival function allows for future generations’ *Bildung* and contributes to the fulfilment of the literature to come. When Arnold casts himself as the Moses of English letters, he deems himself at once necessary for the flourishing of culture and, if successful in his mission, also doomed to supersession by the literature he helps usher into existence.

In his own essay titled “The Function of Criticism” (1923), T. S. Eliot make[s] several qualifications” to Arnold’s argument.⁹⁸ Eliot retains the dialectical understanding of creativity’s relation to criticism and so allows that critics may partake of the pleasure of creation, but he counters this allowance by arguing that the creative writer is likewise also critical. Arnold, he writes,

⁹⁷ Arnold, “Function of Criticism,” 51.

⁹⁸ Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 69.

overlooks the capital importance of criticism in the work of creation itself. Probably, indeed, the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour; the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing: this frightful toil is as much critical as creative. I maintain even that the criticism employed by a trained and skilled writer on his own work is the most vital, the highest kind of criticism; and...that some creative writers are superior wholly because their critical faculty is superior. ... But this affirmation recoils upon us. If so large a part of creation is really criticism, is not a large part of what is called 'critical writing' really creative? If so, is there not creative criticism in the ordinary sense?⁹⁹

Eliot's answer to these latter questions is unequivocal: "[...T]here is no equation," due to the ontological difference of literary and critical language. Because criticism, unlike the autotelic work of art, is "about something other than itself"—namely, the work of art—it is not possible to "fuse creation with criticism as you can fuse criticism with creation. The critical activity finds its highest, its true fulfilment in a kind of union with creation in the labour of the artist."¹⁰⁰ Here Eliot squeezes Arnold's argument in "The Function of Criticism" into the framework of the later *Culture and Anarchy*, mapping creativity and criticism onto Hellenism and Hebraism and thereby completing the supersessionist logic introduced by Arnold. For Eliot, criticism is not only negated by the literature to come, but that the literature to come incorporates its own critique within itself. Like Hellenism, literature is ever more itself by incorporating a criticism which is too heteronomous to reciprocally absorb literature.

Although Arnold, Eliot, and Brooks valorize literature over against criticism and other non-literary language, in all three of these essays—"The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," "The Function of Criticism," and "The Heresy of Paraphrase"—criticism is assigned a vital, if subordinated and ultimately self-superseding, role, like Moses leading the Israelites to

⁹⁹ Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 73.

¹⁰⁰ Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 73–74.

Canaan, of which he will be “vouchsafed only a Pisgah-peek.”¹⁰¹ By reserving criticism this place “in the wilderness,” they overcome the limitations of the pre-New Critical aesthetic humanists, whose desire to implement the Arnoldian project in American education was stymied by their lack of a method. In the view of the scientifically-minded philologists, the aesthetic humanists were engaged in an unmethodical impressionism verging on apophysis: the aesthetic appreciation of literature, runs this critique, is very well, but it tells us nothing about literature itself and shouldn’t be confused with the *study* of literature. That this complaint contains the germ of Wimsatt and Beardsley’s “The Affective Fallacy” is revealing: the New Criticism’s subordination of “allegorical” criticism to “symbolic” literature did not render criticism useless, but rather spurred them to develop a new way of talking about literary form.

Hence, Wimsatt and Beardsley’s attacks are against *both* literary history (“The Intentional Fallacy”) and impressionistic aestheticism (“The Affective Fallacy”), neither of which, in these critics’ view, manages to say anything about the literary object itself, the one being mired in contexts (“What porridge had John Keats?” sneers Brooks)¹⁰² and the other in feelings. The New Criticism, despite its alignment with aesthetic humanism’s idea of the salvific role of literature, rejected both approaches and advanced instead a formalistic methodology now known as “close reading,” described by Eagleton as “deliberately...the toughest, most hard-headed techniques of critical dissection.”¹⁰³ Drawing on Eliot and especially the psychologistic

¹⁰¹ Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Minor Prophecies: The Literary Essay in the Culture Wars* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991), 153.

¹⁰² Brooks, *Well-Wrought Urn*, 153, quoting Browning.

¹⁰³ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 42. For a general discussion of close reading’s invention, see Andrew DuBois, introduction to DuBois and Frank Lentricchia, eds., *Close Reading: The Reader* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), 1–42.

work of the British critic I. A. Richards,¹⁰⁴ the New Critics developed close reading as “a more or less rigorous counter-methodology of ‘interpretation’” which upended the institution of literature on both fronts.¹⁰⁵ Close reading was rigorous enough to compete with philological and historical scholarship, but served the aesthetic-humanist ends of moral education and the production of a national identity. In short, close reading was the rearticulation of the Arnoldian project *as a scientific hermeneutics of literature*.

Because close reading proceeded on the basis of a theory of literature and a concomitant critique of other literary scholars’ failure to perceive and respond to this theory, the “counter-methodology” of the New Criticism intervened in academic scholarship by legitimating the thematic interpretation of discrete literary works as a valid subject-matter for publication. As Jonathan Culler sums up the impact of the New Criticism, its “most widespread legacy...is the assumption, which still holds sway, that the test of any critical activity is whether it helps us to produce richer, more compelling interpretations of literary works”—a legacy that nowadays passes for a commonplace, but which was received in the 1930 and 1940s as a radical challenge to prevailing disciplinary expectations.¹⁰⁶ Thus, as Timothy Aubry adds, the New Critics carved out “a position of markedly greater institutional prestige and power for the critic” (as opposed to the philologist)—a position secure *through*, rather than despite, their persistent effacement of criticism in relation to the sacralized literary object.¹⁰⁷ In fact, the New Critics effectively *invented* “the critic” as the primary figure of the literary scholar, to the point that, today, “literary

¹⁰⁴ The origins of close reading in I. A. Richards and William Empson’s work, both of whom were considerably to the left of Eliot and the New Critics politically, are argued for (against prevailing stereotypes of the New Criticism) in North, *Literary Criticism*, 21–55.

¹⁰⁵ Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, 155.

¹⁰⁶ Culler, *Framing the Sign*, 13.

¹⁰⁷ Aubry, *Guilty Aesthetic Pleasures*, 43.

critic” and “literary scholar” are regularly treated as synonyms despite these terms having designated distinct and often diametrically opposed camps for the better part of the discipline’s history. This legacy stands even if we acknowledge, with Culler, that most scholars who adopted the methodology of close reading were not orthodox New Critics: “‘Normal criticism’ becomes interpretation that joins such techniques of close reading...with an interest in authors and in literary history. Institutional practices of teaching and writing about literature create a shifting, eclectic ‘normal criticism.’”¹⁰⁸ The New Criticism was hegemonic—and, one could argue, still is—not in the sense that the majority of literary critics subscribed to the entire theoretical apparatus laid out in, say, *The Well-Wrought Urn*, but, rather, insofar as “producing richer, more compelling interpretations” became the mandate of literary studies. One major index of this shift is the 1951 alteration to the constitution of the largest professional organization of scholars in the US, the Modern Language Association (MLA). Prior to 1951, the MLA’s stated purpose was “to promote study and research in modern languages and their literatures”;¹⁰⁹ after, the constitution read: “The object of the Association shall be to promote study, *criticism*, and research in modern languages and their literatures.”¹¹⁰

That said, the New Critics acquired leverage at the level of research and publication only because they effected a stunning coup at the level of instruction. It was the massive success of close reading as a pedagogical method in post-World War II classrooms that allowed them to make their voices heard in academic journals and faculty meetings. While American college

¹⁰⁸ Culler, *Framing the Sign*, 13.

¹⁰⁹ As historical accounts like Culler, *Framing the Sign*, Graff, *Professing Literature*, and Scholes, *The Rise and Fall of English* all illustrate, the pre-1951 constitution was also, at one time, controversial—the addition of “and their literatures” is a legacy of the earlier debates between philologists and aesthetes in the late nineteenth century.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Culler, *Framing the Sign*, 6–7, emphasis added.

enrollments had climbed throughout the prewar years, it was the passage of the G. I. Bill in 1944 that gave the New Critics their opportunity. Skyrocketing enrollments strained the postwar University, both because of the expanded sizes of the matriculating classes and because of the greater diversity in student backgrounds this entailed. A shared class milieu and educational background, including familiarity with English literary “classics,” could no longer be presumed in undergraduate courses. Close reading proved a remarkably accommodating pedagogy for the postwar University, since it required no prior knowledge of literature or history, merely basic literacy in the English language. Most importantly, close reading not only made it possible to teach classes of students without a shared background, but, as Arnold had predicted, the logic of aesthetic education itself *furnished* this common basis, a unifying set of aesthetic and moral values. By the time the MLA updated its constitution to acknowledge the new institutional prominence of criticism, close reading was already trickling down from undergraduate to secondary education via a cadre of new teachers who had been trained in close reading at college. So, Aubry writes, “what the New Critics helped to support was the democratization, on an unprecedented scale, of nonproductive forms of aesthetic sensitivity that had been mostly reserved up until that point for members of the leisure class.”¹¹¹

With this “democratization” came a consolidation of the definition of “literature”—and, concomitantly, of “criticism”—on New Critical terms. In effect this was the definitive moment

¹¹¹ Timothy Aubry, *Guilty Aesthetic Pleasures* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2018), 43. For a sharp critique of the idea of the New Criticism as “democratizing,” with specific attention to the racial dynamics of the New Criticism, see Hines, *Outside Literary Studies*.

The basic overview of the history of the New Criticism as a pedagogical institution I’ve given here is synthesized from Aubry, *Guilty Aesthetic Pleasures*, 31–63; Culler, *Framing the Sign*, 3–40; Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 15–46; Graff, *Professing Literature*, 145–208; Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), 129–50; Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, 134–75; North, *Literary Criticism*, 21–55; Hines, *Outside Literary Studies*.

of the institutionalization of a peculiarly Christian sensibility at multiple rungs of the American education system. Freedman rightly points out that in the early twentieth century, formalism was on the rise in in continental Europe and Russia as well as in Anglo-America—the Russian Formalists were, in fact, the first group to merit the label “literary theorists”—but, despite the presence of logocentric elements in those other formalistic discourses on literature, it’s telling that only the American New Critics valorized Coleridge’s definition of symbol in a way that “leads directly to a valorization of the Christian *logos*, the word made flesh, as the ultimate symbol of symbols, the universal of universals.”¹¹² In keeping with Guillory’s analysis of the New Criticism as the institutionalization of a Christian doxa, this Christian sensibility consisted not so much in the subject matter of literary studies, but, as Freedman writes, rather “as the very essence of that subject matter”—an essence which, as we have seen, demanded a specific methodology constructed around the scene of the solitary reader’s unmediated hermeneutical encounter with the literary symbol.¹¹³ The democratization achieved by the New Critics was also a Christianization, sloughing off the overt doctrinal trappings of a certain Protestantism and reinscribing them as secular, neutral ones directed at the acculturation of American selfhood. (It’s quite indicative of literary studies’ affirmation of Christian presuppositions that Brooks and Wimsatt published, regularly and explicitly, on the special compatibility of Christianity and literature without expressing any sense concern that this practice might contradict the putative secularity of literature.)¹¹⁴

¹¹² Freedman, *Temple of Culture*, 178. On the Russian Formalists as the first literary theorists, see Galin Tihanov, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2019).

¹¹³ Freedman, *Temple of Culture*, 179.

¹¹⁴ Freedman, *Temple of Culture*, 178–79.

Since the New Critical theory of literature still maintains the necessity of allegorical language for interpretation and instruction by the Moses-critic, it follows that, contrary to the popular stereotype of these critics, much of their writing in fact consists of “cultural and philosophical essays” in which lyric poems become “allegorical statements about the dissociation of sensibility, technical rationality, the collapse of the Old South, or some other equally large theme,” as Gerald Graff writes.¹¹⁵ However, this allegorizing takes a peculiar form given the theoretical presuppositions of the New Criticism. For the symbolic language of the poem to make an allegorical statement about the world from which this symbolism exempts it, the allegory must occur in the mode of self-reflexivity; that is, the allegory is never directly about the world, but about precisely the poem’s constitutive removal *from* the world. John Guillory demonstrates this reflexive allegoresis brilliantly in his perspicacious analysis of Brooks’s exegesis of John Donne’s “The Canonization” (1633) in “The Language of Paradox,” the opening chapter of *The Well-Wrought Urn*.

Guillory uses Brooks’s slippage from Donne’s metaphor of sacredness and *profanity* in the poem to the anachronistic metaphor of sacredness and *secularity* to get traction on how Brooks reads his own, decidedly twentieth-century concerns into the poem by reading the poem as an allegory of its own poetic nature. In the poem, the sacred/profane hierarchy is “mobiliz[ed]...in a surprising way, by aligning the sacred with the private and the profane with the public,” but when Brooks elevates this “paradox” into a general statement about “the language of poetry,” he effects a “transference” of “the epithet ‘sacred’ from a historical period,” in which its opposite is “profane,” to the poem itself. Thus, Guillory argues, a “second allegory emerges from behind, or is carried forward by, the first, in which ‘The Canonization’ somehow

¹¹⁵ Graff, *Professing Literature*, 150.

inscribes the essential condition of the poetic or the literary.”¹¹⁶ “The aura of the sacred is then transferred again to a certain social space accessible only in the reading of the poem,” a social space which “replicates the space figured in the poem” as the space of the sacred, of “religious withdrawal. ... In this way,” Guillory concludes, “the distinction between the sacred and the secular is carried over into a characterization, respectively, of the social space of literature and some other, antithetical social space.” That other social space is “the secular,” which “would have to include in Brooks’s terms virtually everything within the experience of modern life, the space which is perceived to be inherently hostile to literature,” which in turn makes the space of “religious withdrawal” into the “social space of the *reading of the poem*.” Guillory therefore reads Brooks as sacralizing the “unmistakably institutional” space of literature’s reading, which is to say, of the University.¹¹⁷ This reading of “The Canonization” as an allegory of poetry’s separation from the “secular” world is, Guillory argues,

not simply to rehearse once again the imaginary identification of literary culture with the clergy, but to redefine the social space of literary culture as necessarily institutional. The school becomes the site at which the practice of reading can be cultivated in such a way as to preserve the cultural capital of literature (signified in the Brooksonian allegory as a kind of sacredness), just because its social space can be conceived as a space of deliberate and strategic withdrawal, as the withdrawal of literary culture from ‘the world.’ The aura of sacredness which is communicated first to the poem and then to the social space in which the poem is read defines that space not simply as an ‘elsewhere,’ but as transcendent, ... because that space acquires the auratic properties of the sacred. In the same way the truth the poem communicates becomes transcendent, and its refusal to speak directly, to assert propositions, is the guarantor of its possession of that other kind of... ‘paradoxical’ truth. The truth of *every* poem thus retreats before the act of interpretation; out arrival in its pretty room discovers an empty shrine, but a shrine nonetheless. ... In this sense every poem becomes an image of the very institutional space in which it is read, a perfect mirror in the imaginary of that space....¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, 162, 164; see Brooks, *Well-Wrought Urn*, 11–12.

¹¹⁷ Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, 164–65.

¹¹⁸ Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, 165–66.

Guillory deftly anatomizes the way the New Critical method of close reading manages to schematize, in the reading of a poem, the typological system of aesthetic education from its Kantian outset, centering this typology around the scene of the University itself. The New Criticism's pedagogical success is allegorized by the symbolic structure of poetic language itself: the postwar University is an increasingly diversified space, yet the institutionalization of the unmediated aesthetic experience of the literary object as the moral ground of that space sets it off from the instrumentalized, technological "real world" (as undergraduates like to refer to postgrad life), making the University into the secular space of "religious withdrawal," an aestheticized space whose internal tensions are promised reconciliation and harmony by their reflection through the synchronic totality of the "paradoxical" language of poetry. The University's exemplary relation to the society it represents only grows more heightened as college admissions grow more competitive, with the meritocratic rationale of the admissions process making the self-consciously curated "student body" at the nation's most prestigious institutions—say, Yale, where Brooks taught—into a putative synecdoche of America itself. The combination of meritocracy and selectivity in this process makes the undergraduate of institutions like Yale into an at once democratic and elitist figuration of the American past (the literary canon), present (the institution of aesthetic education), and future (the fulfilment of the dialectic of *Bildung*, the literature to come).

To sum up: Brooks's interpretation of "The Canonization" correlates the literary object and the University as a pair of secular yet sacralized spaces whose interaction is integral to the flourishing of the nation through (1) the custody of its culture, (2) the production of its culture, and (3) the acculturation of its subjects. Both of these secular-sacred spaces are defined by their self-presence and rigid separation setting them off from the general fields with which they must

not be confused or intermingled: language in general, “the real world.” These boundaries are reinscribed again as the borders of the nation, a geopolitical line articulating the national identity as a totality constituted through the incorporation of differences.

This explains why, as Marc Redfield argues, the notion of “multiculturalism” touted on the American liberal-left in the 1980s and 1990s, as a project specifically invested in the reformation of the American literary canon and the curricula of undergraduate education, is at once incendiary to self-appointed guardians of tradition invested in a reactionary view of American national identity yet “accommodated and promoted by scholarly, pedagogical, and other cultural institutions” with “relative ease,” since the institutions challenged by the idea of a multicultural reform are organized on the basis of “an understanding...that the canonical text is representative and exemplary.”¹¹⁹ Redfield continues,

the canon can be ‘expanded’ to incorporate representatives of previously marginalized groups without prejudice to its hegemonic function. Indeed, it is precisely in and through this expansion that aesthetics becomes properly hegemonic, by distributing its representative attentions over the widest possible social field and internalizing as much as possible the terms of conflict. ... As long as the multiplication of cultures remained integrated under the sign of the human..., and even as long as the noncanonical cultural objects studies are taken as examples of ethnic or national identity, an aesthetic logic controls the field of dispute, organizing ethnic identity on upon the neutrally white background of ‘culture’ itself, as the (Western, male, etc.) institution of aesthetics has defined it.¹²⁰

“Christian” is one of the labels rolled up into Redfield’s *et cetera*, as is “secular” (these being, as I’ve maintained throughout, not necessarily at odds with each other). Jewish difference, as we’re now primed to expect, becomes representative of this nationalist project, as exemplified in the invention of the category “Judaean-Christian.” K. Healan Gaston has demonstrated in detail

¹¹⁹ Redfield, *Phantom Formations*, 26.

¹²⁰ Redfield, *Phantom Formations*, 26–27.

how this category was popularized during the Cold War as an expression of a distinctively American and by extension “Western” cultural identity in express opposition to the Soviet Union’s perceived and propagandized godlessness. The idea of “*the* Judaeo-Christian tradition” gathers Judaism and Christianity together and redefines their continuity as a secular fund of common national-cultural heritage.¹²¹ It is not accidental that this redefinition coincides historically with an increase in demographic representation of Jews at the undergraduate, graduate, and faculty tiers of the American institutional hierarchy; in fact it anticipates the inadvertently supersessionist logic of the multiculturalist project led by members of other minority groups, a logic which aims to make literature more representative of the institution and the institution more representative of the nation while leaving intact the very structures of inclusion/exclusion which have made the project necessary in the first place. As Daniel Boyarin comments in the introduction to his *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (1990), the “liberal” notion of a Judaeo-Christian cultural synthesis “masks a suppression of that which is

¹²¹ Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), xi. Boyarin’s critique is correct, but his proposed solution fails to propel the discussion of Judaism beyond that terminology: by taking rabbinic midrash seriously “as interpretation and indeed as a model for interpretation,” he writes, Boyarin intends a “revoicing of a Jewish discourse in the discourse of the West.” This revoicing advances a multicultural ethos, but as becomes clear in the next sentence—“In recent theoretical writing about literature, which searches for a richer, more nuanced understanding of reading, the unique Jewish discourse called midrash has been distinguished and has even entered the theoretical *canon*”—it does not entail a challenge to multiculturalism’s prevailing aesthetico-pedagogical logic. Although “the theoretical context” for *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* is “the philosophical project of Jacques Derrida,” Boyarin understands that project as “question[ing]...the Platonic-Aristotelian (ultimately Enlightenment) understanding of language” in a way that “makes possible a space for a more sympathetic reading of midrash as an interpretive act, because it [deconstruction] puts into question all interpretive acts” (x). It is at precisely this point in the introduction to his book that, as we saw in Chapter 1, Boyarin explicitly distances his work from Derrida’s by aligning himself methodologically with structuralism rather than deconstruction; what unites him with the French philosopher is not a method of reading so much as an ethico-political quest for “a less ethnocentric semiology” (x).

distinctly Jewish. It [the term ‘Judaeo-Christian]’ means ‘Christian,’ and by not even acknowledging that much, renders the suppression of Jewish discourse even more complete,” rewriting the story of supersession “in secular, anthropological terminology.”¹²²

2.3. Leopards in the temple

As the above reading of Brooks’s “The Language of Paradox” suggests, in the imaginary of the American literary establishment at midcentury the borders of the nation, the campus, and the literary work are more than coincidentally isomorphic. As much is clear in “Day of the Leopards,” a strange essay published in the Autumn 1969 issue of the Yale Graduate School of Arts and Sciences magazine by the New Critic William K. Wimsatt, Jr., then the Frederick Clifford Ford Professor of English at Yale.

Wimsatt’s essay is constructed as “an anthology of excerpts,” delivered in three series. The first of these series comprises a trio of quotations “taken from the writing of colleagues, professors of English at Yale”: Robert Penn Warren, Geoffrey Hartman, and Robert Brustein. All three quotations rehearse a basically Nietzschean thesis (from *The Birth of Tragedy*) about the relationship between art and transgression. The Hartman quotation, from his 1966 essay “Structuralism: The Anglo-American Adventure,” is especially representative: “Profanation enters the inner sanctum and becomes part of the holy.... Does not every society, every relationship, every system have its necessary and permitted profanations? ... Literature is a kind of loyal (though not always legal) opposition which opens the sacred to scrutiny, and so at once profanes and purifies it.... Great art is always flanked by its dark sisters, blasphemy and

¹²² See K. Healan Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America: Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2019).

pornography.”¹²³ The next series of quotations is “taken not from the groves of academe, but from the journalism of the everyday, unrefined world.” First, a description of a brutal mass murder on the South Side of Chicago in the July 15, 1966 *New York Times*; second, a description of a foiled terrorist bombing at the New Haven police headquarters and two New Haven banks, in the December 27, 1967 *New Haven Register*; and, finally, the following dramatic snippet from the May 1, 1968 *New York Times*:

It was 4:30 in the morning and the president of the university leaned against the wall of the room that had been his office. He passed a hand over his face.

‘My God,’ he said, ‘how could human beings do something like this?’¹²⁴

What is Wimsatt after with this “coarse juxtaposition”? He stipulates that he does not intend to posit an “actual or even likely causal connection between any of these moments.... I adduce the outer world as an amplifier for the academic—to give a step-up to its resonance, perhaps to induce a momentary suspicion, or illusion, for literary criticism, that the guns are loaded.”¹²⁵ But this is not quite true, for while the first three quotations amount to reiterations of the same basic Nietzschean point, the academic literary critic—resident of “what one might suppose to be one of the last citadels of contemporary calm”¹²⁶—is actually implicated in the second series. The latter scenes from “the outer world,” alternately lurid, menacing, and gothic, do not simply “amplify” the first. Arranged chronologically by Wimsatt, these excerpts narrate a tightening of focus on the University itself and the encroachment of violence onto the campus. In

¹²³ Geoffrey H. Hartman, “Structuralism: The Anglo-American Adventure,” quoted in William K. Wimsatt, Jr., “Day of the Leopards,” *College English* 33.8 (May 1977): 877–882, at 878. Wimsatt’s essay was reprinted in *College English* from *Ventures: The Magazine of the Yale Graduate School* 9.2 (Autumn 1969).

¹²⁴ A. M. Rosenthal, “Combat and Compassion at Columbia,” *The New York Times*, May 1, 1968, quoted in Wimsatt, “Day of the Leopards,” 879.

¹²⁵ Wimsatt, “Day of the Leopards,” 879.

¹²⁶ Wimsatt, “Day of the Leopards,” 877.

the first quotation, the violence is located in the (predominantly Black) urban environs of Chicago's South Side; in the second, it has infiltrated New Haven, home to Yale itself; in the third, taken from an article about events at Columbia University, the violence has penetrated the innermost sanctum (the president's office) of the Ivy League. The "last citadel of contemporary calm" has by this point been penetrated by the dangerous forces of social upheaval, political subversion, and urban decay. And, as Wimsatt announces at the outset of "Day of the Leopards," things have only gotten worse since he penned the essay, "not during the spring of the tortured year 1969...but in the relatively halcyon moment of January and February 1968."¹²⁷ (Gregory Jones-Katz notes that the anti-Vietnam War protests rocking Yale's campus in May 1969 were hardly the worst of it: a month later, students set fire to a campus building; a year later, graduating seniors disrupted graduation in response to the Kent State shootings, and the New Haven Black Panther trials "brought more than ten thousand protestors" to New Haven Green.)¹²⁸

Wimsatt is clearly aware that even though he has not actually *argued* for a "causal" link between these first two series of quotations, nevertheless he has strongly implied one. For he immediately links the two via another quotation, "which I do not consider part of either off the above series, yet a legitimate supplement to both." This quotation comes from a zine spotted by Wimsatt at a New York City newsstand: *Guerrilla, Free Newspaper of the Streets*: "POETRY IS REVOLUTION...an application of the discovery implicit in every true creative act: the absolute necessity for total societal & cultural revolution now if poetry is to go forward."¹²⁹ And then the

¹²⁷ Wimsatt, "Day of the Leopards," 877.

¹²⁸ Jones-Katz, *Deconstruction: An American Institution*, 19.

¹²⁹ *Guerrilla, Free Newspaper of the Streets* 2.1 (1968), quoted in Wimsatt, "Day of the Leopards," 880.

third series of quotations, a pair, both taken from *Yale French Studies* 39 (1967), on the theme “Literature and Revolution.” In these passages, the French critics Jacques Ehrmann and Michel Beaujour reject *Guerrilla*’s equation of poetry and revolutionary action on structuralist grounds: poetry holds “open” a “utopian” space which, by definition, can never be discharged into violent action.¹³⁰ Although he is sympathetic to their claims and to the New Criticism-esque rigor of their analyses, Wimsatt is not comforted: “Nevertheless, the very agility of their salvaging operation...testif[ies] to the embarrassments of a strong contemporary resemblance between the academy and that of the raging streets.”¹³¹ Wimsatt’s point is that literature professors who fail to police the boundaries of the literary object abandon the civilizing mission of aesthetic education: “Poetry, like the university, as sanctuary for the intolerable.... The insurrection, we understand, is the aim.”¹³² Instead of shoring up the boundaries of literature and the University, these critics were reveling in the transgression of those boundaries, and unlocking the gates from the inside.

Wimsatt sums up his critique through his selection of a parable by Franz Kafka, quoted in Hartman’s “Structuralism: The Anglo-American Adventure,” for his essay’s epigraph: “*Leoparden brechen im den Tempel ein und saufen die Opferkrüge leer; das wiederholt sich immer wieder; schließlich kann man es vorausberechnen, und es wird ein Teil der Zeremonie.* [Leopards break into the temple and drink dry the sacrificial vessels; this repeats again and again; finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes a part of the ceremony.]”¹³³ On Wimsatt’s interpretation, Kafka’s narrative is either a wishful fantasy of transgression’s

¹³⁰ Jacques Ehrmann, “On Articulation,” and Michel Beaujour, “Flight Out of Time: Poetic Language and the Revolution,” both in *Yale French Studies* 39 (1967), quoted in Wimsatt, “Day of the Leopards,” 880.

¹³¹ Wimsatt, “Day of the Leopards,” 880.

¹³² Wimsatt, “Day of the Leopards,” 882.

¹³³ Franz Kafka, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:201, quoted in Wimsatt, “Day of the Leopards,” 877, trans. mine.

redemption or else represents a delusional misinterpretation of how this transgression actually works. The leopards, he insists, do not become part of the ceremony—they will destroy the temple.¹³⁴

At its most histrionic, Wimsatt's anti-Sixties polemic suggests that the destruction of the temple of culture—the University, and above all the English department, where he taught—is causally related to the downfall of America:

A President of the United States was assassinated in Dallas by a single, deranged opportunist. No tangible evidence of an effective conspiracy has ever been adduced. But on the day before the event, handbill photographs of the President with the legend: 'Wanted for Treason' were circulated in Dallas. Large portions of our major cities are destroyed of a summer—in fulfillment of prophecies uttered by liberal voices in the spring. Our campuses become places of privilege for a repertory of violence ranging from incivility through hoodlum trespass and vandalism to armed banditry.¹³⁵

With this much at stake, the boundaries between the secular enchantment of the symbolic literary object and the mundane profanity of allegorical commentary are more necessary than ever. Yet in the writing of Wimsatt's Yale colleagues like Hartman, who relishes "crossing over" from commentary to literature,¹³⁶ and Bloom, with his outright rejection of Eliot's distinction between criticism and creation, these borderlines grew increasingly blurred during the 1960s–70s. Their leopardine prose represents and *causes* the decline of the secular-Christian regime of aesthetic education, and with it of the American project at the height of the Cold War. The investment of such values in the literary object sheds some light on the motives behind the vehemence of the critical backlash to Bloom and Hartman surveyed in this chapter's opening pages: "crossing over" means putting into question the supersessionist logic guiding the enterprise from the start.

¹³⁴ Wimsatt, "Day of the Leopards," 881.

¹³⁵ Wimsatt, "Day of the Leopards," 880–81.

¹³⁶ See Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Crossing Over: Literary Commentary as Literature," *Comparative Literature* 28.3 (Summer 1976): 257–76.

“When I wrote, once, that a strong reading is the only text, the only lie against time that endures,” notes Bloom in his essay for *Deconstruction and Criticism*, “one enraged reviewer called my assertion a critic’s sin against the Holy Ghost.”¹³⁷

In *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (1980), Hartman returns to Matthew Arnold’s “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” and reads it against the interpretation of Eliot and New Critics like Wimsatt. Arnold, to recall, had described the critic as Moses, doomed to die in the wilderness without ever reaching the promised land: “[...B]ut to have desired to enter it, to have saluted it from afar, is already, perhaps, the best distinction among contemporaries; it will certainly be the best title to esteem with posterity.” The “promised land” of literature, Hartman argues, is only a “fiction of presence.” “This wilderness is all we have,” he comments. Lost in the wilderness, the critic may either persist in melancholic nostalgia and “live the necessity of interpretation as an exile” (the phrase is Derrida’s); but if the promised land per se is only a fiction, the realization of this fiction liberates the critic into new possibilities. “What if this literature”—i.e., the literature to come—“is not unlike criticism, and we are forerunners to ourselves? Perhaps it is better that the wilderness should be the Promised Land, than vice-versa.”¹³⁸ With these remarks, Hartman “Judaizes” literary criticism.

¹³⁷ Harold Bloom, “The Breaking of Form,” in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 1–37, at 7.

¹³⁸ Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980), 15.

CHAPTER THREE

BAD EXAMPLES (II):

HOW NOT TO READ THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

I call this the *lack of philology*; to be able to read off a text *as text*, without intermingling an interpretation, is the latest[-developed] form of ‘inner experience,’—perhaps one hardly possible....

—Friedrich Nietzsche

...I will also accept the characterization of midrash as the product of a disturbed exegetical sense, but only if we recognize that all exegetical senses are disturbed, including most certainly our own.

—Daniel Boyarin

3.1. “Must we return to midrash?”

“Midrash is, indisputably, a form of literary criticism.... On what grounds can we declare the conclusions of what *we* call literary criticism to be valid interpretation without also including midrash?”¹ So asks James Kugel in “On the Bible and Literary Criticism,” published in 1981 in the third issue of Indiana University Press’s new journal for “Jewish literary history,” *Prooftexts*. The question, to be clear, is rhetorical: Kugel’s essay is a polemic not for but against the

Epigraphs: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke*, ed. Karl Schlechta (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1954), 3:804 (= *Der Wille zur Macht* §479), trans. mine, emphases in original; Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), 18-19, emphasis mine.

¹ James L. Kugel, “On the Bible and Literary Criticism,” *Prooftexts* 1.3 (Sept. 1981): 217-36, at 224, emphasis in original.

contemporary study of the Bible as literature.² Often referred to in academic circles of the period as “the literary approach,”³ such study was then growing in popularity among literary critics in the U.S., the U.K. (especially at the University of Sheffield), and Israel (especially at Tel Aviv University).

Kugel’s rhetorical question was received as a slight by a prominent young biblical scholar and ardent proponent of the literary approach, Adele Berlin. In her curt response, “On the Bible as Literature,” published one year later in *Prooftexts*, she declares: “The Bible is fair game for everyone,” she declares at the outset. “Once the treasured possession of the religious establishment, it has, in modern times, been wrested from their exclusive grasp by secularists of various persuasions. In the vanguard of these secularists stand the literary critics.”⁴ Positioning herself and her colleagues as not merely “secularists,” but the “vanguard” of secularism, Berlin deftly turns the tables on Kugel: it is actually *he* who is doing “midrash”! “Is there a better way to interpret the Bible?” she asks (also rhetorically). “Here Kugel’s line of thought becomes

² As James Adam Redfield observes: “The ‘and’ in [Kugel’s] title is disjunctive, as if to say: ‘The Bible is one thing. Literary criticism? It’s all yours.’” James Adam Redfield, “Behind Auerbach’s ‘Background’: Five Ways to Read What Biblical Narratives Don’t Say,” *AJS Review* 39.1 (April 2015): 121-50, at 129.

³ As Kugel remarks (“On the Bible and Literary Criticism,” 218), a perennial source of confusion for Anglo-American literary critics unfamiliar with the history of biblical scholarship is the German usage of the work *Literarkritik*, literally “literary criticism,” to denote precisely that sort of historical-critical research which the literary approach was supposed to challenge. To avoid this confusion, I will never use “literary criticism” in the sense of *Literarkritik* in this chapter. I instead refer to *Literarkritik* as “source criticism” or “the Higher Criticism,” and bundle it with other methods under the general rubric referred to variously as “the historical-critical method,” “historical criticism,” “scientific criticism,” and *Bibelwissenschaft*. For discussions of the confusion *Literarkritik* has caused among (the scholars that I’m calling) literary critics, see: John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1996), 1-29; and Leland Ryken, “Literary Criticism of the Bible: Some Fallacies,” in Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, James S. Ackerman, and Thayer S. Warsaw, eds., *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives, Volume I* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 24-40, at 26-27.

⁴ Adele Berlin, “On the Bible as Literature,” *Prooftexts* 2.3 (Sept. 1982): 323-27, at 323.

confused. He chides the literary critics.... But his remedy is apparently to return from viewing the Bible as a secular text to viewing it as Scripture (an authoritative religious text). That is merely moving from secular midrash to the more traditional variety.”⁵ In his brief reply to Berlin’s response, Kugel protests this charge, stating that he had not at all meant to advocate a reactionary “return to midrash.”⁶ Despite their directly conflicting views on the question of whether the Bible should or even *can* be read “as literature,” then, Kugel and Berlin must be in agreement on two fundamental points. First, literary criticism is understood by both scholars to be self-consciously secular. Second, no one wants to be caught out doing “midrash.”

Since midrash is *prima facie* a religious discourse, the relation between these two points of agreement is clear: literary criticism worthy of the name must be separated out from midrash. Berlin makes this point explicitly: “[...M]odern literary criticism is not so much an intentional return to midrash as a rejection of source criticism.... Literary criticism becomes true midrash only when it reads its own literary values into the text,” she writes, the implication being that the literary approach would cease to be “truly” itself at the same moment.⁷ Elsewhere in her rejoinder to Kugel, Berlin associates midrash with the rabbinic term *derash* (from the same root, דרש, “to search”), which denotes the “applied” sense of the biblical text. She then links both midrash and *derash* to eisegesis, “the reading of something into a text” (as opposed to exegesis, “the reading out of a text that which is in it”).⁸ Literary criticism, properly speaking, is in turn mapped onto exegesis and *peshat*, the rabbinic term for the “plain” sense of the biblical text. In this chapter, I delve into the history and the discourse of the literary approach to the Bible in the

⁵ Berlin, “On the Bible as Literature,” 325.

⁶ James L. Kugel, “James Kugel Responds,” *Prooftexts* 2.3 (Sept. 1982): 327-32, at 332.

⁷ Berlin, “On the Bible as Literature,” 325.

⁸ Berlin, “On the Bible as Literature,” 325.

later twentieth century, in order to further unpack the stakes of this distinction between criticism-exegesis-*peshat* and midrash-eisegesis-*derash*.

Why the distinction was made at all is explained easily enough. The literary approach, for reasons to be identified below, focused primarily on Hebrew biblical narrative, which it read synchronically; the rabbis, too, read the Bible synchronically. In this respect the two are aligned over against the diachronic reading of the historical-critical method in modern biblical scholarship. Therefore, as James Adam Redfield writes, most of the literary approach's various practitioners feel "obliged to entertain the rabbis as one of the Bible's implied readers and they all must position themselves in relation to midrash."⁹ What interests me here is not so much the fact *that* midrash is a reference point for these scholars as *how* it is a fact. Unanimously, they disavow midrash even as they launch a sustained methodological polemic against the historical-critical method, a polemic in which we might have expected midrash to be enlisted as an ally in synchronic reading, if not an outright antecedent for reading the Bible as literature. Midrash is represented in strikingly similar – and strongly pejorative – ways across the work of scholars whose views are otherwise at odds: Kugel and Berlin, for instance, or Robert Alter and David Damrosch, or, again, Meir Sternberg and Mieke Bal. For all these scholars and their colleagues, midrash figures as a bad example. It is the literary approach's dark doppelgänger – how *not* to read the Bible as literature. "Example" is meant here in an ethical sense as well as a methodological one. Indeed, what is exemplified might be called an ethics of method. What I'm getting at is the peculiar *badness* of midrash's bad exemplarity. Putting some pressure on those moments when the literary approach directly engages midrash, we can get some traction on the ethical imaginary of what I call – in a deliberate emendation of Edward Said's famous phrase—

⁹ Redfield, "Behind Auerbach's 'Background,'" 149.

the “secularist criticism” of late twentieth-century literary studies. (I elaborate the key difference of secularist from merely “secular” criticism in the next section.)¹⁰

As suggested by several prominent critics and intellectual historians including Michael Warner, and Ian Hunter, “critical reading”—the type of reading which has been the pedagogical and research mandate of American literary studies since the mid-1970s—is often represented by its practitioners and its detractors alike as cool, detached, analytical, all the better “to see the object as in itself it really is,” as Matthew Arnold defined “the function of criticism” back in *On Translating Homer* (1861).¹¹ In fact, these recent critics propose, critical reading is an ascetic discipline for the formation of proper subjects, and as such may be found to be saturated with ethical investments, affective dynamics, and even its own worst enemy, ideology.¹² (The seeming invisibility of these aspects is, in fact, a pretty tidy instance of what secularist critics mean by “ideology.”) These all come into view when critical reading defines itself explicitly as secular, secularizing, and secularist, which is to say, when it names and describes—*inscribes*—

¹⁰ I follow Stathis Gourgouris in holding that, if “secular criticism” is to retain any ethico-political edge in view of Said’s religio-phobia, secular criticism as a practice must be distinguished from secularism as an ideology. Cf. Stathis Gourgouris, *Lessons in Secular Criticism* (New York: Fordham UP, 2013), passim. In this chapter, however, I am specifically interested in the problematic ideological element in Said’s thought which Gourgouris, rightly, seeks to overcome (and in which, I think, he basically succeeds). My “secularist criticism” includes Said’s “secular criticism,” therefore, but does *not* include Gourgouris’s “secular criticism.”

¹¹ Matthew Arnold, “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” in idem., *Culture and Anarchy” and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 26-52, at 26. See Chapter 2 for my discussion of Arnold’s definition.

¹² See Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2015); Ian Hunter, “The History of Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 33.1 (Autumn 2006): 78-112; Heather Love, “Close But Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 41.2 (Spring 2010): 371-391; and Michael Warner, “Uncritical Reading,” in Jane Gallop, ed., *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical?* (London: Routledge, 2004), 13-38.

its other as “religious” reading.¹³ If, as I’ll suggest in the first section of the chapter, literary criticism was a normatively secularist discourse in the last three decades of the twentieth century, then no critics were more “obliged,” in Redfield’s phrasing, “to position themselves in relation” to religious reading (of which midrash is the key trope) than those who read the Bible, that most religiously overdetermined of texts, as literature. Thus, when midrash surfaces in this discourse, much is revealed about the implicit ethical values of critical reading.

The first section of the chapter elaborates my notion of secularist criticism, sketching out its ascent to hegemony in late twentieth-century literary studies and clarifying the difficult position into which it put the literary approach. I bring attention to what Charles Taylor calls “subtraction stories” in the writings of the literary approach—that is, its performative institution of its own ideology through the staging of methodology along a temporal axis in which there is always some prior, more fundamental and universal object to be recovered from the mystifications of “religion.” In the second section, I track the development of the literary approach since the end of the Second World War. We’ll see how the emerging resources of Theory and critical reading in the 1960s and 1970s allowed literary critics to narrate a new subtraction story and compete with the long-established historical-critical method for disciplinary control of secularist biblical scholarship. In the third section, I read a diverse selection of academic texts drawn from across the archive of the literary approach. In each case, I tease out the moments when midrash directly or obliquely figures in these texts, showing how the rabbis, as allegedly “religious” readers par excellence, always serve as bad examples through

¹³ Paraphrasing Gil Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008), 48: “[...S]ecularism is a name Christianity gave itself when it invented ‘religion,’ named it other or others as ‘religions.’”

which any critic can rhetorically frame her interlocutors as un-ascetic, un-secular, undisciplined, and uncritical (all of these amounting to the same thing).

Finally, I compare the way midrash is figured in the discourse of the literary approach to the actual texts of ancient rabbinic exegetical literature we call midrash. Focusing on the *peshat/derash* distinction invoked by Berlin as well as the question of narrative (dis)continuity in midrashic reading, I argue that not only do rabbinic texts challenge the picture of midrash presented by the literary approach, but moreover that those very same rabbinic texts also offer an oblique but compelling vantage from which to expose the dynamics of academic debates and the occluded stakes of critical reading.

3.2. *Secularist* criticism

3.2.1. *Is the Bible literature?*

James Kugel's basic objection to the literary approach in "On the Bible and Literary Criticism" is that it dehistoricizes both the biblical text and the act of reading it. For Kugel, the history in question is not the history of the text's production—the focus of the historical-critical method which, in one form or another, has dominated biblical scholarship since the late eighteenth century—but, rather, the history of the Bible *as the Bible*, as a sacred and authoritative canon. "In this connection," he argues, "it is the very differentness of the Bible [from literature] that calls out for consideration. Even today, the Bible presents itself to us as something unique, Scripture, and if we are interested in reading it, that interest is, directly or *par personne interposée*, religious. Whatever the particular approach or interest of a literary critic of the Bible, it will be important for him to be aware of this point of departure."¹⁴ Literary criticism, by

¹⁴ Kugel, "On the Bible and Literary Criticism," 23, italics in original.

“bracketing what used to be the most fundamental aspect of the Bible,” turns the Bible “into a book-that-never-was, the theological book par excellence minus its theology, the Literary Bible. [...] inevitably, it seems... this literary appreciation depends on a severing of the Bible from its exegetical past.”¹⁵

This argument was not unique to Kugel in the early 1980s. Two years later, the president of the Society of Biblical Literature, New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl, repeated it in his annual address: “The Bible as a [literary] classic exists in Western culture with an often undefined but never absent recognition of its being the Holy Scriptures.... I have my doubts that it—or substantial parts of it, at least—would have ever become a classic were it not for its status as Holy Scripture.... It is as Holy Scripture that the Bible is a classic in our culture. Therefore there is something artificial in the idea of ‘the Bible as literature.’”¹⁶ Stendahl’s address and Kugel’s polemic alike recall T. S. Eliot’s well-known 1935 diatribe “against the men of letters who have gone into ecstasies over ‘the Bible as literature,’ the Bible as ‘the noblest monument of English prose.’”¹⁷ Eliot had argued that while

a scientific, or historical, or theological, or philosophic work which is also ‘literature,’ may become superannuated as anything but literature, yet it is not likely to be ‘literature’ unless it had its scientific or other value for its own time. While I acknowledge the legitimacy of this enjoyment, I am more acutely aware of its abuse. The persons who enjoy these writings *solely* because of their literary merit; and we know that parasites, when they become too numerous, are pests. ... Those who talk of the Bible as a ‘monument of English prose’ are merely admiring it as a monument over the grave of Christianity. I must try to avoid the by-paths of my discourse; it is enough to suggest that just as the work of Clarendon, or Gibbon, or Buffon, or Bradley would be of inferior literary value if it were insignificant as history, science, and philosophy respectively, so the Bible has had a literary influence upon English literature not because it has been

¹⁵ Kugel, “James Kugel Responds,” *Prooftexts* 2.3 (Sept. 1982): 327-32, at 332.

¹⁶ Krister Stendahl, “The Bible as a Classic and the Bible as Holy Scripture,” in Harold W. Attridge and James C. VanderKam, eds., *Presidential Voices: The Society of Biblical Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Atlanta: SBL, 2006), 209-15, at 212, emphasis mine.

¹⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (San Diego: Harcourt, 1975), 98.

considered as literature, but because it has been considered as the report of the Word of God. And the fact that men of letters now discuss it as 'literature' probably indicates the end of its 'literary' influence.¹⁸

Eliot, a devout Anglican, was concerned to conserve the Bible's religious authority. For Stendahl and Kugel, the leading goal is different: sound scholarship. According to them, whether or not it is welcomed, the Bible simply *has* that religious authority by virtue of its long history as holy scripture. As Kugel argues, to efface this history is not to free ourselves of it, but merely to blind ourselves to all the ways in which we remain, for better or worse, caught up in it. In fact, the less aware of it we are, the more implicated we are. The consequences of this willful ignorance are twofold. First, the literary approach cannot generate critical insights applicable to what Kugel presents as the *real* Bible, the historical Bible, but only to their "book-that-never-was"; the scientific and pedagogical value of the exercise is therefore doubtful. Second, and more problematic, the literary approach is liable to reproduce unwittingly the dynamics of the religious hermeneutics its practitioners believe themselves to have overcome. Thus, Kugel concludes, "today's literary criticism of the Bible is...something like the present age's 'midrash.'" ¹⁹

Because their own academic research and teaching involve handling so religiously charged and historically freighted a text as the Bible, Kugel and Stendahl experience the question of whether the Bible can, much less should, be read as literature as a live issue. At this point, however, the critique of the literary approach merges with a broader current in literary studies during the 1980s. Reading the Bible as literature is also a live issue for critics whose research and teaching have nothing at all to do with the Bible or religion. In fact, this latter group is even

¹⁸ Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 98.

¹⁹ Kugel, "On the Bible and Literary Criticism," 23.

more anxious than Kugel and Stendahl about the literary approach, which they associate with a dreaded “return of religion.”

The most famous of these is Edward Said, whose 1983 essay collection *The World, the Text, and the Critic* stages a binary contrast between “secular criticism,” which Said valorizes, and “religious criticism,” which Said lambasts. The former is a type of criticism which is “oppositional,” “ironic,” “skeptical,” “reflectively open to its own failings,” “constitutively opposed to the production of massive, hermetic systems.”²⁰ As for the latter: subsequent critics have debated whether Said means “religious” literally or only as a figurative trope for “massive, hermetic systems.”²¹ When Said says, for example, “If a community is based principally on keeping people out and on defending a tiny fiefdom (in perfect complicity with the defenders of other fiefdoms) on the basis of a mysteriously pure subject’s inviolable integrity, then it is a religious community,” the parenthetical clause suggests religion functions here mostly as a figure for nationalism, or perhaps, along the lines of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, as its genealogical predecessor.²² Yet the figurative interpretation of Said’s binarism, religious/secular, still relies on a shared understanding of what *literal* religion is, such that the figures “secular”

²⁰ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983), 26, 29.

²¹ For versions of this critique of Said’s (mostly implicit) religiophobia, see Anidjar, “Secularism”; Khaled Furani, “Said and the Religious Other,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52.3 (July 2010): 604-625; Giles Gunn, “On Edward W. Said,” *Raritan* 23.4 (Spring 2004): 71-78; William D. Hart, *Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), *passim*; Vincent P. Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2006), 31-44. An example of the defensive reading would be Aamir R. Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture,” *Critical Inquiry* 25.1 (Autumn 1998): 95-125.

²² Edward W. Said, “Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community,” in W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *The Politics of Interpretation* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1983), 7-32, at 25. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2016), 1-48.

and “religious” can make any sense to the reader. “Religion” and religion, figurative and literal thus come down in the end to the same thing: “an agent of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism, and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the otherworldly.” Religion “furnishes us with systems of authority and with canons of order whose regular effect is either to compel subservience or to gain adherents. This in turn gives rise to organized collective passions whose social and intellectual results are often disastrous.”²³

Said offers a list of five recent books he considers evidence of “a significant trend” of a “curious veering toward the religious” among major literary critics: Harold Bloom’s *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975), René Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred* (translated 1977), Frank Kermode’s *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (1979), Northrop Frye’s *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982), and, a little incongruously, a volume edited by the death-of-God theologian Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Deconstruction and Theology* (1982).²⁴ Nothing in Said’s discussion indicates that he actually *read* these books before citing them as symptoms of intellectual decadence, but this is irrelevant for his argument: the titles already

²³ Said, *The World*, 290. Note that this list is highly selective. Said leaves out numerous recent titles that would have countered the picture he wishes to paint of contemporary literary critics’ engagements with the Bible, including *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) by Robert Alter, who prior to his biblical scholarship was well-known in American literary studies as a critic of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European novel and of modern Hebrew literature. Most ironic, of course, is that fact that the opening essay of *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, “Secular Criticism,” centers on Erich Auerbach, a critic deeply interested in religious texts and traditions, and never more so than in the opening chapters of the very text Said focuses on, *Mimesis*. Alter, in fact, calls the opening chapter of *Mimesis*, “Odysseus’s Scar,” “a famous essay that could be taken as the point of departure for the modern literary understanding of the Bible” – the very understanding Said seems to deplore. (Robert Alter, “Introduction to the Old Testament,” in Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987], 12-35, at 23).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 291.

reveal the authors to be interested in religious texts, traditions, and themes, and this interest a priori puts their credentials as secular critics into serious question. That this directly contradicts Said's emphasis on the self-reflective responsibilities of criticism gets right to the heart of the problem posed by religion to his argument.

Notably, two of the books Said singles out, *The Genesis of Secrecy* and *The Great Code*, are exercises in reading the Bible as literature. By 1988, the literary approach had become a well-established, even a somewhat "hot" interdisciplinary subfield housed variously in departments of English, comparative literature, Near Eastern languages, religious studies, Jewish studies, theology, and classics.²⁵ It's hardly a surprise, then, that when Jonathan Culler picked up Said's

²⁵ An abbreviated list of books on the topic published in the meantime includes:

- 1983 Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*
Francis Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise*
Edmund Leach and D. Alan Aycock, *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth*
Peter Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative*
- 1984 John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*
Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror*
- 1985 Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*
Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*
Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*
Kenneth Gros Louis and James Ackerman, eds., *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives, Vol. II*
Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*
Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*
- 1986 Harold Bloom, ed., *The Bible: Modern Critical Interpretations*
J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. II*
Frank McConnell, ed., *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*
Peter Miscall, *I Samuel*
Stephen Prickett, *Words and The Word*
Joel Rosenberg, *King and Kin: Political Allegory in the Hebrew Bible*
Charles Wheeler and John Gabel, *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction*
- 1987 Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible*
Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love*
David Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant*

critique of “religious criticism” where *The World, the Text, and the Critic* had left off five years earlier, he let Said’s other examples—Girard’s semiotic anthropology, Bloom’s appropriation of Kabbalah, Altizer’s postmodern Christianity, “the current vogue for Walter Benjamin not as a Marxist but as a crypto-mystic,” Marshall McLuhan, etc.—fall by the wayside.²⁶ In his book *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions*, Culler presents the literary approach as *the* definitive moment when contemporary literary studies betrayed its own admirable legacy:

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, one might say without greatly oversimplifying, Protestants took the Bible to be the Word of God; by the beginning of the twentieth century, this belief was untenable in intellectual circles. What had been responsible for this change was scholars’ and critics’ insistence that the techniques of textual and critical analysis which had been developed for classical literature be applied to biblical writings. Both the lower and the higher criticism (textual criticism and historical criticism) were based on a comparative principle, that Old and New Testament writings should be analyzed in the same way as other ancient texts. The discovery that biblical writings consisted of textual strata undermined, for example, the assumption that Moses had been the author of the Pentateuch. Lowth’s *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum* showed that the prophetic books were poetical, and should be regarded as literary expression. Eichhorn treated the Bible not just as literature but as Oriental literature, identifying different strands from different periods. Bultmann derived from his literary analysis of the New Testament materials and sources the conclusion that only the sayings of Jesus are historical.... Radical skepticism, it has been suggested, is a characteristic result of the literary criticism of the Gospels. This is a worthy legacy of comparative literary research, which I fear we have abandoned....²⁷

Like Said, Culler seems to attribute a magical power of perversion to the biblical text: all but the most “radically skeptical” critical frameworks brought to bear upon the Bible risk being turned into religious talk, or, per Kugel, “midrash.” The logic here is tenuous; why should Robert Lowth, Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, and Rudolf Bultmann, theologians all, count for “secular critics” while Culler’s contemporaries working on the Bible—say, Meir Sternberg, whose

²⁶ Said, *The World*, 292.

²⁷ Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions* (Norman: U. Oklahoma Press, 1988), 80.

Poetics of Biblical Narrative Daniel Boyarin rightly describes as “anything but pious”—does not?²⁸ And why does Culler advise that “we should study the Hebrew Bible not as poetry or as narrative but as a powerfully influential racist and sexist text,” as if these were mutually exclusive?²⁹ Several prominent literary readers of the Bible in the 1980s did, in fact, discuss political dimensions of the Bible (e.g., Sternberg, Mieke Bal, Joel Rosenberg, Phyllis Trible), but their political arguments are made not apart from but precisely *through* their literary analyses of narrative and rhetorical structures.

There is something reflexive about Said’s and Culler’s hostility toward anything that smacks to them of “religion.” I do want to be clear, though, that there’s real precedent here, an Anglo-American tradition of “reading the Bible as literature” that verges, often deliberately, on sacralization. Twentieth-century American literary critics had long been accustomed to mobilizing an Arnoldian theory of literature as “secular enchantment” (which I discussed in Chapter 2) to rehabilitate the Bible as a source of aesthetic and moral authority in a fairly rapidly expanding, secularizing, and pluralizing environment of American education, thus blurring the distinctions between literary exegesis and religious devotion. David Stern describes this strain of Bible-as-literature scholarship well: “Essentially, the literary approach to the Bible was an effort to use the concept of ‘literature’ as a way of...recuperating the humanistic significance of the Bible as a cultural artifact. By placing the Bible under the purview of ‘literature,’ it became possible to argue for its continuing cultural authority as a secular document.”³⁰ In 1906, for

²⁸ Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 40.

²⁹ Culler, *Framing the Sign*, 81.

³⁰ David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1996), 4. However, *pace* Stern, Jonathan Sheehan has since argued at length that the recuperative function of “culture” for the Bible is neither a particularly literary nor a particularly late-twentieth-century phenomenon. Cf. Jonathan Sheehan,

instance, John Hays Gardiner of Harvard's English department wrote that in reading the Bible as literature, he had "assumed the fact of inspiration, without attempting to define it or to distinguish between religious and literary inspiration. The two come together in a broad region where everyone who cares for a delimitation must run his line for himself."³¹ The same ecumenical, almost Rawlsian notion of literature as a "broad region," where literary and religious reading overlap, is still current almost seven decades later in James Barr's *The Bible in the Modern World* (1973): "A purely literary reading of the Bible is something that the church can hope to share with society as a whole. [...] Within Christian faith itself the functioning of the Bible in certain respects has close affinities to the literary appreciation of it."³²

In a volume published the following year, *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, the contributors actively push the adjective "literary" about as far in the direction of the numinous as they can without abdicating their claim to secularity. In the introduction, Gros Louis describes the Bible as "awesome," "magnificent," "marvelous."³³ Leland Ryken writes of "the sheer wonder and delight of literature," its "mystery" and "miracle." "Biblical literature is *alive*," he proclaims.³⁴ In the sole contribution to the volume to acknowledge the Jewish tradition of biblical exegesis, "The Rabbinic Method and Literary Criticism," Kalman Bland goes so far as to entirely dissolve the already-threadbare membrane separating literary and religious reading.

The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005), passim.

³¹ John Hays Gardiner, *The Bible as English Literature* (New York: Scribner's, 1906), vi-vii.

³² James Barr, *The Bible in Modern World*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 1990), 59-60. The classic formulation of the theory of "overlapping consensus" is in John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia UP, 2005), 133-72.

³³ Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, "Introduction," in *Literary Approaches to Biblical Narratives, Vol. I*, 10-15, at 12.

³⁴ Ryken, "Literary Criticism of the Bible," 29, emphasis mine.

Without actually discussing or citing any examples of “the rabbinic method,” Bland openly recommends a literary criticism indistinguishable from midrash (which he conveniently never defines): “[...T]o appreciate the meaning and beauty of Scripture in its fullness, we must not dismiss a single word as mere rhetorical embellishment or as unnecessary verbiage. Only our attentiveness to the latent significance of each and every word and to their contextual relationships will permit us, like the mystics and the rabbis...to know the Bible.”³⁵ Ironically, *Literary Interpretations* was explicitly inspired by the United States Supreme Court’s decision in *Abington School District v. Schempp* (1963), which could be characterized as an instance of legally codified secularism. The Court held in *Abington* that reading the Bible in public educational institutions “without comment,” even if this practice was optional, violated students’ rights under the First Amendment to the Constitution. The decision allowed, however, that the Bible could be read in public schools when integrated into the secular curriculum; the Court offered literary studies as the best candidate for such a disciplinary context.³⁶ The expectation was that this would sufficiently dissipate the Bible’s hallowed aura, but the predominant theory of literature in American education, as a kind of secular enchantment, meant that this aura was

³⁵ Kalman P. Bland, “The Rabbinic Method and Literary Criticism,” in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives, Vol. I*, 16-23, at 16.

³⁶ *Abington School District v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963), quoted in Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010), 77. On *Abington v. Schempp*, esp. in relation to literary studies, see: Joan DelFattore, *The Fourth R: Conflicts Over Religion in America’s Public Schools* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); James W. Fraser, *Beyond Church and State: Religion and Public Education in a Multicultural America*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2016); Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief*, 76-80; David Norton, *A History of the Bible as Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 2:262-72. For a detailed discussion of the juridical development of the idea of the Bible as literature, see Tomoko Masuzawa, “The Bible as Literature?: Notes on a Litigious Ferment of the Concept,” *Comparative Literature* 65.3 [Summer 2013]: 306–324.

immediately reconstituted in a less overt, and thereby even more effectively hegemonic, form (e.g., *Literary Interpretations*).

It's not even a sure bet that, in critical or pedagogical practice, the Bible's sacred aura *can* be separated out through literary reading. As Amy Hungerford confirms from personal experience teaching contemporary American fiction at Yale, the diction and cadence of the King James Version (KJV) have so thoroughly saturated English literary and popular culture, indeed the English language itself, that even the most doggedly secular American undergraduate will be quick to assent to the proposition that the language of, say, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* "sounds biblical" or "feels biblical," even if the student cannot pinpoint exactly *what* is biblical about it.³⁷ As one of the earliest scholars to study the Bible as literature, Richard Green Moulton, had already realized in 1895, the Bible-ness of the Bible is even baked into the conventional visual and material aspects of most modern English editions—the double columns, the nearly translucent paper, the line-breaks between verses, all of which signify to readers that the book before them "is not a secular text and that should be read with an attitude appropriate to the book of truth."³⁸ As Kugel rightly argues in "On the Bible and Literary Criticism," the Bible's lengthy pedigree as the holy scripture of Judaism and Christianity does make it quite difficult to launder

³⁷ See Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief*, 86-96, for her brilliant discussion of the "sound" and "feel" of biblical language in *Blood Meridian*. Hungerford makes much of the fact, which I do not explore here, that *Blood Meridian* is historically coincident with the literary approach. Her argument would be refined, I think, by a more nuanced distinction between the more and the less secularist currents in Bible-as-literature scholarship, which she confusingly collapses into a single discourse.

³⁸ Norton, *History of the Bible as Literature*, 1:169. See Ernest Sutherland Bates's introduction to his *Bible Designed to Be Read as Living Literature* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1936), vii, quoted in Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), 8-9.

this particular book through the putatively secularizing category “literature,” as literary criticism ends up looking an awful lot like religious interpretation.

Furthermore, the primary distinction between reading the Bible as literature and historical-critical scholarship has to do with their respective responses to what Daniel Boyarin calls the Hebrew Bible’s “textual heterogeneity,” a catch-all term for what have been variously referred to as “gaps, repetitions, contradictions,” “heteroglossia,” “discontinuities of readability,” and “frictionality.”³⁹ Between the mid-seventeenth and mid-eighteenth centuries, as the medieval Church’s hermeneutical scaffolding collapsed, Christian biblical exegetes who wished to shore up biblical authority against rationalist critiques gradually came around to the idea that each of the biblical books was the work not of a single author, much less a divine one, but several human authors, whose texts were later synthesized into a sometimes-incoherent whole by a later redactor. The driving question of modern biblical criticism thus became the question of authorship: *Who wrote the Bible?*⁴⁰ For this reason, historical criticism reads instances of “textual heterogeneity” as evidence of seams and stitches, the symptomatic deposits of a complex and occulted history of transmission, composition, and redaction. Such traces can tell the historical critic a great deal about the original texts, the process whereby those texts became the Bible, the people who participated in that process, and the world in which they did so. Such an approach, although often undertaken (especially in the early going) with pious motivations,

³⁹ Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 40, citing Wolfgang Iser; Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992), 4, citing Mikhail Bakhtin; Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans./ed. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 140; Geoffrey H. Hartman, “The Struggle for the Text,” in Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986), 3-18, at 13.

⁴⁰ This question is now a commonplace among general readers as well as academic ones. Richard Elliott Friedman’s *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Summit Books, 1987) had, by the time its second edition appeared with a major publishing house (HarperCollins) in 1997, sold over 250,000 copies.

inadvertently disintegrates and diachronizes the text. The received Bible is taken to be a final mediation that has smoothed out a treacherous terrain of older traditions, variant witnesses, contextual influences, and redactorial interventions, all of which must be navigated in order “excavate,” as Robert Alter puts it, the “original” texts and the people, the world that lay behind them.⁴¹ It is less a book to be read than a palimpsest to be deciphered and classified.

Literary critics, by contrast, tend to read texts synchronically, and thus interpret the Bible’s textual heterogeneity not as the seams of history but rather as elements in the text’s particular way of representing and communicating things. Some critics, like Northrop Frye, even go so far as to read the entirety of the (Protestant) Bible as a synchronic unit, focusing on the larger shape of the canonical narrative from Genesis to Revelation.⁴² The hard emphasis on synchrony—what Meir Sternberg calls a “discourse-oriented” as opposed to “source-oriented” approach—draws some literary readings of the Bible very near to more or less religious developments in modern biblical hermeneutics.

For example, *Redaktionsgeschichte* (redaction criticism), associated in Hebrew Bible scholarship with Gerhard von Rad, takes source criticism for granted and inquires not into the original documents but rather the intentions of the redactor who edited them together.⁴³ In a series of lectures, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch* (1941), the Italian rabbi and biblical critic Umberto Cassuto adopts a redaction-critical approach but reimagines it as literary criticism. For Cassuto, the redactor is a “poet” who

left on the whole of this variegated material all the unmistakable impress of his wonderful spirit, and succeeded in transforming the chaos of the conglomeration of sources into a

⁴¹ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 14.

⁴² See Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1982).

⁴³ On redaction criticism, see Barton, *Reading the OT*, 43-76.

perfect unique harmony, and in fusing all the separate elements into a homogeneous work of art. This is the peculiar attribute of great books that what they take from their sources receives in them a new form; it is integrated, put together and unified ‘as it seemed good to the potter to do’ [Jer. 18:4]. It is impossible for the scholar to solve the problem of their sources without paying heed to the added element, since apart from the material deriving from the sources, and transcending it, there exists something that no investigator can probe, the enigma of the soul of the writer and the mystery of the burgeoning of his literary work.⁴⁴

Cassuto’s claim is secular inasmuch as it makes no reference to religion, but this is secularity in the manner of *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*: under the aegis of “poetry” and “literature,” the numinous is preserved as that “transcendent,” “enigmatic” *something* “that no investigator can probe.” As they undertook the project of a new German translation of the Hebrew Bible, the German Jewish thinkers Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig make similar use of redaction criticism, this time bypassing literature altogether and opting for a forthrightly theological position. In an open letter of 1927, Rosenzweig describes how he and Buber appropriate the redactor:

Our difference from orthodoxy lies in the fact that we cannot, on the basis of our belief in the sacred and thus the special status of the Torah, and in its revelatory character, draw any conclusions regarding either the process of its literary genesis or the philological value of the text as it has come down to us.... We too translate the Torah as one book. For us too it is the work of single mind. We do not know who this mind was; we cannot believe that it was Moses. We name that mind among ourselves by the abbreviation with which the Higher Criticism of the Bible indicates its presumed final redactor of the text: R. We, however, take this R to stand not for *Redactor* but for *Rabbenu*. For whoever he was, and whatever text lay before him, he is our teacher, and his theology is our teaching.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch: Eight Lectures*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2006), 124-25, trans. mod. to highlight the biblical citation (unmarked in Cassuto’s original).

⁴⁵ Franz Rosenzweig, “The Unity of the Bible: A Position Paper vis-à-vis Orthodoxy and Liberalism,” in Rosenzweig and Martin Buber, *Scripture and Translation*, trans. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox, ed. Buber (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), 22-26, at 22-23.

An even sharper turn toward synchronic reading takes place in “canonical criticism,” the method devised by the Protestant theologian Brevard S. Childs. According to Childs, who explicitly presents his method as theological rather than historical, the entire historical-critical enterprise is founded on a sort of category error. Childs argues that historical criticism may tell us a great deal about the world in which the biblical documents originated, but this should not be confused with knowledge about the Bible itself. The hermeneutical significance of the Bible *as the Bible* consists in the included texts’ meaning within the canonical context.⁴⁶ That this is an exact inversion of Kugel’s argument in “On the Bible and Literary Criticism” is revealing. For, to the extent that reading the Bible as literature is congruent with canonical criticism,⁴⁷ it also necessarily invites Kugel’s charge that it is irrelevant to historical-critical scholarship.

What’s strange, then, is not that Kugel, Culler, and Said should be suspicious of the literary approach to the Bible in the 1980s, but rather than their representations of the literary approach should bear such a faint resemblance to the actual scholarship conducted under that informal heading. Unlike *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, which expresses a persistent but by the 1980s increasingly extra-academic perspective on the Bible as literature, the scholars involved in the literary approach—precisely to ward off the re-theologizing effects of synchronic reading feared by their detractors—are especially compelled to take up more vigilantly *secularist* positions vis-à-vis their object than would otherwise be necessary.

⁴⁶ On canonical criticism, see Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), as well as: Barton, *Reading the OT*, 77-103; Frank Kermode, “The Canon,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, 600-610; and James A. Sanders, “The Integrity of Biblical Pluralism,” in Jason P. Rosenblatt and Joseph C. Sitterson, Jr., eds., *“Not in Heaven” : Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), 154-169.

⁴⁷ John Barton, for one, has argued this point at length. See Barton, *Reading the OT*, 140-57.

3.2.2. Secularism and critical reading

The philosopher Akeel Bilgrami urges caution when handling the cognates *secular*, *secularization*, and *secularism*. In its modern usage, says Bilgrami, *secular* “refer[s] innocuously and indiscriminately to all things that are ‘worldly’ in the sense of being ‘outside’ the reach of religious institutions and concerns.”⁴⁸ *Secularization*, meanwhile, denotes a range of “highly general and dispersed social and intellectual and cultural phenomena and processes.... The increase in a society of loss of personal belief in God or the decrease in church- or synagogue- or mosque-going or the surrender of traditional religious habits of dress or prohibitions against pork may all be signs of increasing ‘secularization,’ but they are irrelevant to the idea of *secularism*.”⁴⁹ As Bilgrami explains the distinction: “It should be possible to think that a devout Muslim or Christian or Hindu can be committed to keeping some aspects of the reach of his religion out of the polity, without altogether giving up on being a Muslim, Christian, or Hindu. [...S]uch a person, for all his devoutness, is committed to secularism.... Such a devout person, in being devout, is holding out against the tendencies unleashed by the long social and ideational processes of *secularization*,” without at all compromising his commitment to *secularism*. What, then, is *secularism*? It is a “specifically *political* doctrine” that concerns “something specific (the polity) and attempt[s] to keep it or steer it outside of some specified aspects of [the] reach” of religion.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Akeel Bilgrami, *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2014), 4.

⁴⁹ Bilgrami, *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment*, 5.

⁵⁰ Bilgrami, *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment*, 4-6, emphasis in original.

By “secularist criticism,” I mean any critical discourse that both (1) explicitly or implicitly self-identifies as “secular,” whatever this may mean for its author; and (2) reflexively seizes upon what it calls “religion” as a deserving target of more or less directly political critique. It may do so because “religion” serves as the genealogical antecedent of critical reading’s perennial target, “ideology”; or because “religion” is ideology’s “most harmful as well as dishonorable” iteration, as Kant and Marx have it;⁵¹ or simply because, as a result of both of those reasons, “religion” is a convenient figure for ideology in general, as is the case in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Also implicated in secularist criticism are critical discourses which (3) while not seeking out “religion” as a target, still actively or passively perpetuate secularism as the norm of critical practice.

Secularist critics regard religion not only as something improper to literary studies and the university, but as a political threat to both, which must therefore be “kept or steered” by the literary critic beyond and even against “religion.” As discussed in Chapter 2, since the days of Kant and Humboldt the university has served an exemplary function in modern Western nation-states, which represent themselves both in “the student” as the subject of aesthetic education (*Bildung*) and in the Herderian idea of national(-hemispherical-global-universal) literary canon. As such, the danger posed by religion is indeed political: it threatens the liberties of the student and the scholar. The means of protecting these liberties is “critical reading,” in the sense that I gave this phrase in the Introduction to this dissertation; “secularist criticism” and “critical

⁵¹ Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?,” trans. Kevin Paul Geiman, in James Schmidt, ed., *What is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1996), 5864, at 62; Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction,” in Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1977), 153-65, at 153.

reading” will therefore be used interchangeably in what follows. Critical reading, the rationale goes, is essential for becoming the enlightened subject of a modern liberal nation-state, because critical reading is the skill that allows a subject to protect itself from political abuse by the decidedly this-worldly powers that be.

By 1983, secularist criticism had already been instituted as a disciplinary norm in American literary studies for some time. (Said and Culler may *sound* anxious about “religious criticism,” but the fact that neither feels any need to actually demonstrate *how* religion is politically dangerous belies the fact that their polemics against it are affirmations of hegemony.) A few words about how this happened are in order, since on the face of it that statement may appear to contradict my argument in the preceding chapter. Gerald Graff’s *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* demonstrates that American literary studies has been divided against itself from its mid-nineteenth-century beginnings, along multiple, overlapping axes: right vs. left, pedagogy vs. research, generalists vs. specialists, tradition vs. innovation, hermeneutics vs. poetics, aesthetics vs. science, and of course “humanism” vs. “Theory.” According to Graff, the dialectical interplay of opposing tendencies like these has always been the motor of the discipline’s institutionalization. We saw how the so-called “Yale Critics”’ subversion of the conventional boundary separating the literary object from critical discourse put them into conflict with the conservative inertia of humanists; here, we’ll be looking at the dialectical counterpart to that humanism, the progressive, Theory-affiliated wing of literary studies. While the opponents of the Yale Critics fretted that Theory profaned the literary object’s secular enchantment, here we find that progressive critics like Said and Culler worry their colleagues aren’t being profane *enough*.

There are concrete precipitants behind this particular iteration of the “conflict” of the English faculties described by Graff. As John Guillory argues in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, both the humanists and the group I’m calling secularist critics were reacting to the marginalization of literature as bourgeois cultural capital during a period of great change for their institutions: the massive expansion of student enrollments, the professionalizing of graduate programs, the inflation of the administrative bureaucracy and the dismantling of faculty governance, and the overall financialization, commodification, and technocratization of higher education. One camp aimed to shore up longstanding ideals about the importance of aesthetics, and regarded Theory as the agent or symptom of these disturbing changes; the other regarded the humanists as clinging to a doomed educational model and adjusted their teaching and research to suit new exigencies. That these tendencies coexisted should not puzzle us; if Graff is right, the institution of literary studies probably would not have survived the twentieth century if it had not, so to speak, played offense and defense simultaneously. That said, there is one central facet of literary studies where the progressive tendencies unambiguously won out: the rise of “critical reading” as an essential element of undergraduate education, and the proper responsibility of the literary professoriate. By the end of the 1970s the discipline had largely rearranged itself around this new, marketable mandate. Old-school humanists might dispute some of the newfangled “methods” of critique, and even charge these with being neither methodical nor critical—but few would think to challenge the cherished Enlightenment notion that among the values inculcated by the study of literature was the imperative to be able to read, think, and judge for oneself.

“Critical reading” in the post-Kantian sense is historically and practically (if not definitionally) secularist. Its secularism, moreover, was intensified by the circumstances in which

American literary critics took it up. The Cold War was in full swing, and critical reading proved very useful for overt and subliminal anti-Soviet polemics alike; Soviet totalitarianism could be construed as a “religion” rooted in the ideological mystification and political exploitation of its subjects rather than in rational principles of justice and liberty. Meanwhile, critical reading, its Marxist genealogy notwithstanding, also bore the impressive imprimatur of the Enlightenment’s legacy of liberal humanism, which American cultural and political ideologues—including not a few university professors!—claimed to inherit, champion, and defend. Critical reading was thus right at home in the same institutions which were entrusted with the transmission of national identity through the literary canon. That Theory, with its politically left leanings and “foreign” origins, was often itself accused of being anti-American, totalitarian, and/or ideological, not to mention “religious,”⁵² affirms rather than discredits this view of the discipline. The shared commitment to the demystification of ideology allowed opposing methodological tendencies to coexist in a productive state of permanent conflict over the question of how best to read literature.

At the same time, though, the transmission of the literary canon itself became a site of contention in these increasingly pluralistic institutions. Critical readers on the left argued that canons themselves were functions of political power and ideology rather than objective libraries of, per Matthew Arnold, “the best of what has been thought, written, or said.” And *this* aspect of the discipline’s rearrangement brought literary studies into conflict not just with the humanist old

⁵² See, e.g., Said, *The World*, 291-92: “All of it, I think, expresses an ultimate preference for the secure protection of systems of belief (however peculiar those may be) and not for critical activity or consciousness. . . . There is an increase in the number of special languages, many of them impenetrable, deliberately obscure, willfully illogical. . . . Most distressing of all is the growing resemblance between professed political neoconservatives and the religious inclined critics, for both of whom the privatized condition of social life and cultural discourse are made possible by a belief in the benign quasi-divine marketplace.”

guard of literary studies but also with the ascendant “religious right” in American politics and the concurrent culture wars, in which elite universities’ literature departments—above all, Yale—were notoriously granted a grossly disproportionate prominence. The charges of the destruction of the Western tradition and American culture, especially its *Christianity*, were, and remain, wildly overblown; yet the complaints from conservative critics such as Allan Bloom concerning a left-wing hostility toward religion brewing in literature departments were not without basis in reality.⁵³ Literary studies in this period *was* increasingly unwelcoming to perspectives perceived to be “religious,” no matter how evacuated of positive theological content these perspectives were.⁵⁴ The only thing unusual about the polemics against religion by Said and Culler, then, is how openly they proclaimed a disciplinary ideology that more often went unstated.

3.2.3. Subtraction stories

In light of the two trends sketched thus far—the secularism of literary studies and the tradition of reading the Bible as literature in order to recuperate its sacred aura—the quandary of critical readers interested in the Bible is understandable: simply by reading the Bible as literature, these critics were lumped in with that tradition by their skeptical, secularist colleagues. The hastiness with which the literary approach could be written off as “religious criticism” by those colleagues is more fully explained in light of the history of modern biblical scholarship.

⁵³ See Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

⁵⁴ Consider, for instance, Said’s dismissal of the New Criticism as “manifestly religious” (Said, *The World*, 292), despite the fact that, as we saw in Chapter the New Criticism’s success was partially due to its cunning translation of Christian themes, practices, values, discourses, and structures into secular terms that concealed their religious underpinnings.

Culler's discussion of biblical criticism, while reductive, nevertheless gets at the essential point: one of the major antecedents of all critical reading is the historical-critical method.⁵⁵ Historical criticism, boasting the impressive "scientific [*wissenschaftlich*]" credentials secured for it by nineteenth-century hermeneuticists and historiographers from Humboldt to Dilthey, may with some justice be designated *the science of critical reading*. Indeed, as Michel Foucault writes, critical reading is "historically biblical":

At a time when the governing of men was essentially a spiritual art or an essentially religious practice linked to the authority of a church, to the magisterium of Scripture, not wanting to be governed in that way was essentially seeking in Scripture a relationship other than the one that was linked to the operating function of God's teaching. To not want to be governed was a certain way of refusing, challenging, limiting...the ecclesiastical magisterium. It was a return to Scripture, it was a question of what is authentic in Scripture, it was a question concerning the kind of truth Scripture tells, how to have access to this truth of Scripture and Scripture and perhaps despite what is written, until one arrives at the ultimately very simple question: Was Scripture true?⁵⁶

Ever since 1670, when Benedict de Spinoza "resolved in all seriousness to make a fresh examination of Scripture with a free and unprejudiced mind, and to assert nothing about it, and to accept nothing as its teaching, which [he] did not quite clearly derive from it," historical critics

⁵⁵ See Culler, *Framing the Sign*, 80. Critical reading in the tradition of Spinoza, Kant, Marx, and Foucault (to name a few) was marginal in literary studies during the period of its institutionalization in the first half of the twentieth century; the "closeness" of the New Critical method, while indispensable for later practices of critical reading, mystified rather than criticized the literary object, as I argued in some detail in Chapter 1. In biblical scholarship, however, critical reading remained the disciplinary bread and butter from the mid-eighteenth century into the twentieth. Critical reading did not regain authority in American literary studies until very late in the discipline's development, with the rise of Theory at the end of the 1960s. This may explain why well into the 1980s, as Meir Sternberg complains, biblical scholars not well-versed in up-to-date literary criticism still "entertain[ed] an extreme 'art for art's sake' view" of literature and literary studies, as Meir Sternberg complains, specifically regarding Kugel's "On the Bible and Literary Criticism" (Sternberg, *Poetics* 34).

⁵⁶ Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?," trans. Kevin Paul Geiman, in *What is Enlightenment?*, 382-98, at 385.

have claimed to see the biblical text “as in itself it really is,” liberated from “the influence of dogma, tradition, legend, and concern of the authority of Church or Synagogue.”⁵⁷

This is what Charles Taylor, in his monumental *A Secular Age* (2007), calls a “subtraction story,” meaning “stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process—modernity or secularity—is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside.”⁵⁸ The subtraction story contrasts with the secularization narrative discussed in Chapter 1, the melancholy story told by Matthew Arnold and his successors. While both involve “subtraction” in the sense that religion disappears, in the Arnoldian story this is posited as a loss which the narrator hopes will be restituted or recompensed, whereas in the second story the loss of religion itself *is* the restitution of the secular. In both stories, religion is in the past, but in the first, the re-enchantment story, religion is originary and only separates out from nature later on. In the

⁵⁷ Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel, ed. Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 8-9; Matitahu Tsevat, “Common Sense and Hypothesis in Old Testament Study,” *Vetus Testamentum Supplements* 28 (1974): 217-30, at 217.

On the history of the historical-critical method in biblical scholarship, see Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1974); Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1956); Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010); William Neil, “The Criticism and Theological Use of the Bible, 1700-1950,” in S. L. Greenslade, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Bible, Vol. 3: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1963), 238-93; James Samuel Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000); Henning Graf Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); Jonathan Sheehan, *Enlightenment Bible*.

⁵⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2007), 22.

second, religion is neither originary nor natural. The secular substrate, the universal essence of human being, *precedes* religion. This latter story, the subtraction story as Taylor defines it, is the narrative that undergirds secularist criticism. Hence, in Said's critique of "religious criticism," he describes religion as "an agent of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism, and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the otherworldly." Religion "closes" off, interrupts, or diverts the flow of that which, it is implied, had formerly been (at least potentially) free and open—the human capacity for critical thought which Said presents as a secular constant, whether or not it is actualized.⁵⁹

In a recent book, Susanna Lee has compellingly argued that secularism is "not a concept, philosophical or otherwise, but a narrative category," "a narrative structure, even a narrative strategy."⁶⁰ Following Jean-François Lyotard's theory of narrative performativity in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Lee asks us to consider how the well-known narrative dimension of what Taylor calls our "secular age" is not merely a neutral retrospective description but a rhetorical, performative act—that is, how the ideology of secularism has come to be institutionalized and naturalized through ceaselessly repeated acts of persuasive narration.⁶¹ Taylor writes, "it is a crucial fact of our present spiritual predicament that it is historical; that is, our understanding of ourselves and where we stand is partly defined by our sense of our having come to where we are, of having overcome a previous condition. ... In other words, our sense of where we are is crucially defined in part by a story of how we got there."⁶² But of course, as

⁵⁹ Said, *The World*, 291, emphases mine.

⁶⁰ Susanna Lee, *A World Abandoned by God: Narrative and Secularism* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2006), 13-14.

⁶¹ See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U. Minn. Press, 1984).

⁶² Taylor, 28-29.

Augustine famously recognizes in the first book of the *Confessions*, we only know how we got to where we are because of the stories we have been told about what we ourselves cannot empirically verify; the subject thus only consciously understands the present age as “secular,” “disenchanted,” “subtracted,” because narratives to that effect circulate throughout the culture and underwrite its institutions. Every scholarly methodology is also a narrative; Foucault’s rejection of “traditional history” in favor of a Nietzschean “genealogy,” for example, is partly to be explained in precisely in these terms, as a critique of the teleological momentum intrinsic to the narrative mode of historiography.⁶³

Here is a subtraction story: “The Bible is fair game for everyone. Once the treasured possession of the religious establishment, it has, in modern times, been wrested from their exclusive grasp by secularists of various persuasions. In the vanguard of these secularists stand the literary critics.” In just three sentences, Adele Berlin has told the whole tale, rewriting the received narrative of biblical scholarship. The identification of herself and her colleagues as “the vanguard” of secularism points up her deviation from the historical-critical line, where the *historical* critics constituted the vanguard and the literary critics played the role of the “religious establishment” jealously seeking repossession of the Bible. To be sure, the basic plot remains the same: the Bible was “once” the possession of the religious establishment, but, thanks to the interventions of secularist critics, it is no longer so. Like historical criticism, Berlin’s subtraction story does not posit an essential transformation of the Bible, but rather of the conditions of its reading. When the critics “wrest” the Bible from the clutches of religion, they are only making the Bible available “for everyone”—and not, as James Kugel argues, fashioning an entirely new

⁶³ See Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 368-92.

and different Bible of their own. The Bible, a universally accessible, secular object, thus precedes its appropriation by “the religious establishment.” But, according to Berlin, the academics who restore to us the ability to read the Bible in something like its “original” state are literary critics, not historical critics. Which is to say that in the beginning, the Bible was literature.

Berlin’s subtraction story is told again and again by practitioners of the literary approach in order to score more deeply the secularity of their methods. For Charles Wheeler and John Gabel, whose *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction* has gone through four editions since its initial publication in 1986, the Bible as literature is a “common heritage” accessible not to a limited interpretative community of coreligionists or other insiders, but rather to everyone: “Reading the Bible as literature should not be uncomfortable for persons who hold the religious view...and it places no demands upon the many persons who...take a skeptical or noncommittal view of the Bible.... Later—and separately—anyone who chooses to should be able to return to viewing the Bible as a repository of religious truth.”⁶⁴ While this notion of “common heritage” appears as well in the arguments for reading the Bible as literature-*qua*-secular re-enchantment, the bulk of the epistemological burden has shifted. Whereas a critic like Kenneth Gros Louis uses the idea of “common heritage” to protect the private religious commitments of religious readers by asking secular readers to give something up—their skepticism—Wheeler and Gabel shift responsibility for the preservation of a noncoercive public discourse to the religious reader. It’s the religious reader who is asked to give something up: she must temporarily bracket her *private* beliefs in order to participate in the *public* life of the polity whose shared “heritage” is a

⁶⁴ Charles B. Wheeler and John B. Gabel, *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), 3-4, emphasis mine.

literary canon inclusive of the Bible. (Moreover, even as they make this demand of the religious reader, Wheeler and Gabel rhetorically understate its pressure: literary reading, they suggest, merely makes the religious reader “uncomfortable,” while religious reading imposes “demands” upon the secular reader. The secular reader is now the vulnerable one.) The subtraction story inheres in that idea of bracketing. Precisely because it can be bracketed, religious interpretation of the Bible is exposed as subsequent to and founded upon literary reading.

The same story is found in Alter’s *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. Attempting to assuage the religious reader’s “discomfort” with reading the Bible as literature, Alter writes: “This sort of critical discussion...far from neglecting the Bible’s religious character, focuses attention on it in a more nuanced way.”⁶⁵ Literary reading can enhance religious reading, but this methodological benefit travels down a one-way street: *from literature to religion*, never the reverse. In their introduction to one of the major documents of the literary approach, *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, Alter and his coeditor Frank Kermode make a similar point during an upbeat discussion of “the coming together of religious and secular criticism.” Religious readers, Alter and Kermode write, are “taught...that their studies may be greatly enhanced by attention to secular methods,” while secular readers “discover...that the Bible, to which few of the most influential critics had of late paid much attention, is simply of such quality that they have neglected it to their immense cost.”⁶⁶ The jarring rhetorical asymmetry is only intensified by a sentence structure designed to imply balance. One group, passively, “is taught” new methods of reading by the other; the other, meanwhile, actively “discovers” an object which it already knows how to read well. In the

⁶⁵ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 12.

⁶⁶ Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, “General Introduction,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, 1-8, at 3.

exchange—if it can be called that—literature gains a text to add to its pantheon without difficulty, and religion receives a secular education.

The subtraction story is also narrated whenever one of the literary approach's practitioners bristles at the formulation "reading the Bible *as* literature," as if this were but one option among others. In the subtraction story, the literary critic does not read the Bible as anything other than what it is – which is literature. Hence Alter:

The notion of 'the Bible as literature,' though particularly contaminated in English by its use as a rubric for superficial college courses and for dubious publishers' packages, is needlessly concessive and condescending toward literature in any language. (It would at the very least be gratuitous to speak of 'Dante as literature,' given the assured literary status of Dante's great poem, though the *Divine Comedy* is more explicitly theological, or 'religious,' than most of the Bible.) ... Rather than viewing the literary character of the Bible as one of several 'purposes' ..., I would prefer to insist on a complete interfusion of literary art with theological, moral, or historiographical vision.⁶⁷

And Sternberg: "Biblical narrative is a work of literature. Not just an artful work; not a work marked by some aesthetic property; not a work resorting to so-called literary devices; not a work that the interpreter may choose (or refuse) to consider from a literary viewpoint...; but a literary work. The difference is radical. Far from matched by whim or violence, the discipline and the object of inquiry naturally come together."⁶⁸ As Sternberg's rhetoric insinuates, the literary approach's subtraction story doubles as a critique of historicism: if the Bible and poetics "naturally" come together because the Bible simply *is* literature, and there is only one Bible to "go round," what does this say about the historical-critical method?

The historical-critical method narrates its procedures as the recovery of "original" documents long obscured by religious ideology. The origin is the telos: historical criticism seeks

⁶⁷ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 20.

⁶⁸ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 2.

the texts behind the religious canon, and then the authors, the world, of which the texts are “relics, probably distorted in transmission, of a past one need[s] to recover as exactly as possible.”⁶⁹ Spinoza told this story provocatively in the mid-seventeenth century; two hundred years later, it was no longer controversial, having been constantly reiterated in the meantime as the historical-critical method was refined, strengthened, popularized, and institutionalized. As Hermann Gunkel sums it up in his 1914 essay, “What Remains of the Old Testament?”: “Science [*Wissenschaft*] has brought it [the Bible] down from heaven and set it up in the midst of the earth.”⁷⁰

Early scholarship on the aesthetic qualities of biblical texts, like Robert Lowth’s groundbreaking *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1741-50), shared this subtraction story; Lowth’s lectures, although now often credited as a major antecedent of the literary approach, were a province of historical criticism rather than a challenge to it. Already by 1782, however, when Johann Gottfried Herder published the first volume of *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, the aesthetic had been enlisted as an alternative to the disintegration, diachronization, and demystification imposed on the Bible by the new historical-critical method. This line, like secularization itself, had only grown more deeply entrenched by the time Matthew Arnold definitively recast it in the 1870s. To biblical scholars, and later to secularist literary critics as well, reading the Bible as literature appeared frivolous, regressive, ideological, indeed religious—and above all, uncritical.⁷¹ Perceived as the negation of not simply *a* but *the* critical

⁶⁹ Alter and Kermode, “General Introduction,” 1.

⁷⁰ Hermann Gunkel, *What Remains of the Old Testament?*, trans. A. K. Dallas, reprint (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 19, trans. mod.

⁷¹ See, e.g., David Robertson’s *The Old Testament and the Literary Critic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). Robertson’s book exemplifies the pitfalls of a methodologically unsound literary approach. Eager to distance his work from religious interpretation – a distastefulness which he does not at all pull off – Robertson walks right into the trap pointed out by Kugel in “On the Bible and

enterprise par excellence—the negation, indeed, of critique itself—reading the Bible as literature added back to the text what the historical critics had subtracted. (As we have already seen, this was in fact the objective of some Bible-as-literature scholarship, and even when it wasn't, the synchronic methods of literary critics still sometimes brought their readings into alignment with religious hermeneutics.)

The result, at best, was a laissez-faire academic culture around the Bible, in which the historical critics and the literary critics, each viewing the other's method as irrelevant if not inimical to her own reading of the Bible, simply did not communicate, much as twentieth-century historical critics increasingly did not communicate with religious readers outside of liberal theological circles. Even then, though, the historical critics had already become identified with serious, scientific, secularist criticism. The terms had been set such that movements toward synchrony, especially without a strong basis in historical criticism (as in redaction criticism), were bound to fall short of the standards of critical reading. So “the Bible as literature” became a popular phenomenon, epitomized in the early twentieth-century by “reader's Bibles,” which selectively excerpted and reformatted the KJV to resemble a modern novel, and a pedagogical one—there is a reason why “the Bible as literature” often recalls college course catalogues—

Literary Criticism.” “No one disputes,” Robertson writes in the opening chapter, that the Bible “was originally written as applied literature: as history, liturgy, laws, preaching, and the like.” That said, he tells us he is going to read it as “pure literature” – literature written to be considered as literature – anyway (Robertson, *The OT and the Literary Critic*, 3). If, as Robertson openly admits, he is wrenching the object to fit a category artificially imposed upon it, then his inquiry can tell us nothing about the Bible. What, then, is the point of the endeavor? Robertson justifies his work by abdicating any semblance of scientific inquiry: “The assumption that the Bible is imaginative literature is arbitrary. No one forces us to make it, nor does the Bible itself demand that we make it. We make it because we want to, because literary criticism can yield exciting and meaningful results” (4). “Excitement” and “meaning” – both *highly* subjective criteria – are substituted for “accuracy” and “explanation” as the critical objectives. At this point, Robertson's argument becomes indistinguishable from the “secular enchantment” approach to the Bible.

long before it was a respectable research itinerary. “It is a little astonishing that at this late date literary analysis of the Bible...is only in its infancy,” comments Alter in “A Literary Approach to the Bible” (1975), but this tardiness is not really astonishing at all; it is exactly what we should expect given the history of both disciplines. The literary approach dates, in fact, to exactly Alter’s own “late date.”

This can be attributed, in two ways, to Theory. First, French structuralism had by the early 1970s made inroads into biblical scholarship; while historical criticism remained the discipline’s methodological bread and butter, increasing space was carved out for synchronic reading practices.⁷² The journal *Semeia*, published by the Society of Biblical Literature beginning in 1974, was especially well-known as an organ for more adventurous uses of semiotics in biblical scholarship. Second, and more important, the rise of Theory gave rise to critical reading as the disciplinary mandate of literary studies. The latter development freed up the terms of critical reading themselves—set for so long, when it came to the Bible, by historical criticism—for reinvigorated contestation, allowing literary critics to compete for authority over the Bible. The laissez-faire division, writes Sternberg, was simply no longer tenable: “They speak as if there were one Bible for the historian, another for the theologian, another for the linguist, another for the geneticist, still another for the literary critic. But there are not enough Bibles to go round, and even Solomon’s wisdom cannot divide the only one we do possess among the various claimants.”⁷³

⁷² On biblical structuralism, see Barton, *Reading the OT*, 101-39; Robert M. Polzin, *Biblical Structuralism: Method and Subjectivity in the Study of Ancient Texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

⁷³ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 17.

3.3. How the Bible became literature

3.3.1. In the beginning

By the 1970s, even some biblical scholars had grown exasperated with the excesses, the blind spots, and the rank speculations of historical criticism. Matitiahu Tsevat argues that historical criticism falls short of being truly “scientific” because it “all too often does not submit its cognitive claims to the challenge of such evidence as exists or might theoretically exist,” falling back instead upon implicit “commonsensical” norms and hypotheses. For instance, Tsevat writes, when discussing matters of authorship historical critics make “implicit recourse to ‘first principles’ possessing prima facie plausibility, principles such as putative universal characteristics of such phenomena as the writing of books, the behavior of authors, or the operation of literary influences. It is presupposed that authors do this and do not that.”⁷⁴

As Foucault observes, the criteria for determining authorship in modern philology have not changed much from the four enumerated by St. Jerome in the late fourth century: consistency of quality, consistency of doctrine or theme, consistency of style, and consistency of historical reference.⁷⁵ But, asks Regina Schwartz in a penetrating meta-critique of historical criticism on the Davidic narrative, *do* Jerome’s criteria hold up, 1500 years later? *Do* authors always produce stylistically, doctrinally, qualitatively, and chronologically consistent documents?

Here is one of the many source theories: a historian or historical school wrote a strand that bridges Judges to Kings according to a coherent principle, that Israel’s fate was determined by its responses to the law in Deuteronomy.... That part was written in exile, from the point of view of a hope for an Israel that had failed. However, amid all of the

⁷⁴ Tsevat, “Common Sense,” 217-18. For another example of an intra-disciplinary critique of historical criticism, see Wolfgang Richter, *Exegese als Literaturwissenschaft: Entwurf einer alttestamentlichen Literaturtheorie und Methodologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971).

⁷⁵ Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?,” trans. Josué V. Harari, in Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, 205-222, at 214.

narratives describing the disobedience and failures of Israel, there was also a recognizable drive to idealize David. The contradiction between the pessimism of the Deuteronomistic historian and the optimism about David is resolved by separating the documents. To be coherent, one document must believe one thing...and the other document must believe something else.... There simply cannot be contradiction, for narrators are consistent, histories are consistent, and they must have consistent ideologies.⁷⁶

Schwartz, a poststructuralist, is more suspicious than Tsevat; she questions whether even a text which we positively know was penned by a solitary authorial subject—say, *Absalom*, *Absalom!*—is bound to be consistent and coherent on the level of intention. But let's suppose, for the sake of comparison, that *Absalom*, *Absalom!* really is thus bound. This supposition is irrelevant in the case of the Hebrew Bible, since both Tsevat and Schwartz see that the problem in the case of Samuel is precisely that it is *not* like *Absalom*, *Absalom!*: we do not know whether one person or many wrote Samuel, nor do we know for sure within which generic frame the writer(s) intended Samuel to be read—as we do in the case of *Absalom*, *Absalom!*, which is presented to us as a “novel” by an author well-known as a writer of “fiction,” William Faulkner.⁷⁷ In the case of the Bible, even the *possible* generic frames themselves are

⁷⁶ Regina Mara Schwartz, “The Histories of David: Biblical Scholarship and Biblical Stories,” in Jason P. Rosenblatt and Joseph C. Sitterson, Jr., eds., *“Not in Heaven”: Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), 196.

⁷⁷ Imagine receiving *Absalom*, *Absalom!* as a collection of fragments, with no awareness that it is a novel, no knowledge of Faulkner or his other writings, nor any certainty as to the identity or singularity of its author. It is *possible* that the only thing that would save an interested scholar the trouble of sorting the book's various narratorial strands into “real” letters, diary entries, records, and historiographical accounts, of combing through archives at Harvard and in Mississippi, is the quickly verifiable fact that there has never been a Yoknapatawpha County.

For more on the relationship between Faulkner's narrative strategies in *Absalom*, *Absalom!* and historical-critical scholarship on the Hebrew Bible, see Chloe Blackshear's remarkable study, *Between the Figure and the Text: David Stories in Late Twentieth-Century Prose* (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2018), 96-144. See also Robert Alter, *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010), 78-113.

speculatively reconstructed from the Bible and other contemporaneous Near Eastern texts. Thus, Schwartz continues,

To a surprising degree (surprising, because most of us assume that these decisions about sources were based only on linguistic data), the criterion of a consistent sympathy or ideology or plot continuity, whether pro- or anti-monarchical, pro- or anti-Saul, pro- or anti- whomever or whatever the scholar chooses to focus on, has been *determining* in separating strands of narrative and ascribing authorship. [...W]hen two basic sources did not resolve all the contradictions, more narrative strands had to be isolated to account for them. ...Note how blithely P. Kyle McCarter, the scholar who wrote the impressively scholarly Anchor Bible commentaries on 1 and 2 Samuel, can take for granted in his introduction that *his* demand for coherence is also felt by his readers: ‘Numerous internal thematic tensions, duplications, and contradictions stand in the way of a straightforward reading of the story.’ What does he mean by a ‘straightforward’ reading of the story? [...]s he defining ‘straightforward reading’ in his sentence tautologically to mean the kind of reading we do when there are no ‘thematic tensions, no duplications or contradictions’ – ‘straightforward reading’ as simple reading?⁷⁸

On this view, biblical scholars have projected their own ideology—their “common sense”—*onto* the biblical text, so that they can find nothing in it except what they themselves have put there.

A strong historical-critical analysis, one that passes Tsevat’s test, can persuasively claim to have elucidated the history of the biblical text, although the elucidation necessarily remains speculative. (The documentary hypothesis, for instance, although contested in its many specifics, nowadays passes often enough as fact in academic and liberal-theological circles.) There is thus a spatiotemporal topology, and a narrative, underlying historical criticism. In chronological order, there is (1) the author and whatever received traditions the author reworks; (2) the history of the text from composition to redaction to canonization to transmission; (3) the text itself that results from this process; (4) the critic’s act of reading the received text. Schwartz upends this topology: first of all, there is the object itself (the text), then the critic’s act of reading it; everything else ([1] and [2]) are effects of reading. In good Foucauldian fashion, cause and effect

⁷⁸ Schwartz, “Histories of David,” 196-97, emphasizes in original.

are inverted: since the evidence of textual history is supplied by the text itself, the text may be said to *cause* its history. “History” is but a reader’s retroactive explanation for some interpretative difficulty in the text. If “the function of criticism” is “to see the object as in itself it really is,” Schwartz argues that historical criticism is a hindrance, not a help, to the enterprise of biblical criticism.

The first literary critic to tell the subtraction story employed by Schwartz was Richard Green Moulton, who taught literature at the University of Chicago in the 1890s and who was generally several decades ahead of his time in matters of theory and method. In the second edition of his monograph *The Literary Study of the Bible* (1899; first edition, 1895), Moulton employs imagery that draws out the topology implicit in the story. Historical criticism, he argues in his preface, “*goes beyond* the text of Scripture to a *further* inquiry into the authority of the existing text, its mode of composition, the dates and surrounding conditions of its authorship,” whereas literary criticism “*stops short* at the question of what we have in the text of the Bible, without examining how it has come to us.”⁷⁹ If we do not know what we are reading, our attempts to explain its history are likely to be misguided.

While Moulton’s argument went unheeded by historical critics at the time, in the 1980s its moment had arrived. In their introduction to *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, Robert Alter and Frank Kermode sharpen Moulton’s claim for literature’s priority over history to a polemical point:

If we were asked to state more positively why we have approached the subject as we have done, we should replay as follows. First of all, the Bible, *considered as a book*, achieves its effects by means no different from those generally employed by written language.

⁷⁹ Richard Green Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible: An Account of the Leading Forms of Literature Represented in the Sacred Writings, Intended for English Readers*, 2nd ed. (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1899), vi, emphases mine.

This is true whatever our reasons for attributing value to it – as the report of God’s action in history, as the founding text of a religion or religions, as a guide to ethics, as evidence about peoples and societies in the remote past, and so on. Indeed, literary analysis *must* come first, for unless we have a sound understanding of what the text is doing and saying, it will not be of much value in other respects.⁸⁰

Even in such prestigious achievements of historical criticism as Wellhausen’s *Prolegomena*, Alter and Kermode continue, “the fact remained that the biblical texts were valued less for *what they actually were* than for what they told us about other putative texts or events to which there was no direct access. What has happened now is that the interpretation of the texts *as they actually exist* has been revalidated.”⁸¹ Joel Rosenberg—author of the *Literary Guide*’s chapters on Samuel, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel—refers to “the multiplicity of [the Hebrew Bible’s] sources” as “alleged,” dismissing its relevance to his concerns in a single sentence.⁸² Comments like these siphon the historical criticism of authority. Instead of critical, it is ideological; instead of objective, it is subjective; instead of science, it is fiction; instead of rigorous, it is tenuous and unsound. It deals with texts that don’t “actually exist.” (A mirror image, this, of Kugel’s argument in “On the Bible and Literary Criticism.”) Impatient and undisciplined, historical critics “go too far” when they ought to “stop short,” and in so doing lose sight of “the object as in itself it really is.” Point for point, historical criticism and literary criticism have switched positions in both the spatiotemporal topology and the qualitative hierarchy.

Sternberg rightly points out that this rewriting of the subtraction story could simply “be reversed by historicists. There is no ‘existing text’ and hence nothing to be ‘truly interpreted,’ they would say, until the best version (and, more generally, context) has been established in the

⁸⁰ Alter and Kermode, “General Introduction,” 2, emphases mine.

⁸¹ Alter and Kermode, “General Introduction,” 4, emphases mine.

⁸² Joel Rosenberg, *King and Kin: Political Allegory in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), ix.

light of its exact historical development. Each claimant thus imagines a two-stage process, where he in effect makes the text that the other than receives for further treatment.” Both the literary critic and the historical critic, he insists, “must perforce combine the two viewpoints throughout, incessantly moving between given discourse and inferred source in an endeavor to work out the best fit, until they reach some firm conclusion. The order of this whole process of shuttling has no interest, because it remains as subjectively variable as the process itself is a logical constant of all pattern-making. What actually varies...is not the temporal but the conceptual priorities.”⁸³

While Sternberg’s exasperation at what amounts to critics chasing their own tails around the hermeneutical circle is not unwarranted, it is one thing to remember that everyone has to enter the hermeneutical circle somewhere and that every entrance has its methodological pros and cons, and quite another thing altogether to actually shuttle between source and discourse in the manner Sternberg prescribes. As David Damrosch remarks, even Sternberg fails to execute this maneuver. He undercuts his own recommendation with a “sweeping critique of the entire field of historical study.” Sternberg never actually makes use of historical criticism’s methods or findings, even when it seems most applicable, because, Damrosch writes, “it threatens to deprive him of the material with which we most likes to work”—that is, the “gaps” of the narrative.⁸⁴ “The practice,” as Sternberg himself writes of Moulton, “is truer than the theory.”⁸⁵ For all his overtures toward a synthesis of historical criticism and the literary approach, Sternberg’s

⁸³ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 18-19. David Damrosch gives a variation on this argument in *The Narrative Covenant: Transformations of Genre in the Growth of Biblical Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987), 30: “Even in recent literary discussions, however, there still remains a pronounced tendency to assert the need for a sharp methodological choice between historical and literary methods.... The question would better be how these perspectives can interact, rather than which is to be master.”

⁸⁴ Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, 23-24; cf. Sternberg, *Poetics*, 13.

⁸⁵ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 19.

“conceptual priorities” actually issue consistently in the same subtraction story told by Berlin, Alter, Kermode, and Rosenberg:

For better or worse, most of our information is culled from the Bible itself, and culling information entails a process of interpretation, where source abjectly waits on discourse. There is no escaping this necessity—though, again, many would like to and may even pretend they do. Source-oriented critics often imply that they deal in hard facts and consign ‘aesthetic’ analysis to its fare at the none too reliable hands of the literary coterie. If seriously entertained, this is a delusion, bearing the name of positivism with none of its excuses and facilities. *There is simply nothing here to be positive about*—no, or almost no, facts concerning the sources of the Bible apart from those we ourselves make by inference from the Bible as source. The movement from text to reality cannot but pass through interpretation. If the Bible is a work of literature, therefore, nobody can evade the consequences.... It is this enforced movement from discourse to source by way of interpretation that allies genetic criticism with that branch of acrobatics known as lifting oneself up by one’s bootstraps. But then, it’s either acrobatics or nothing.⁸⁶

3.3.2. *Hintergründigkeit*

That subtraction story is phenomenological: the literary approach attempts to rigorously separate out what historical criticism had conflated, the object and its subjective interpretation. When the “history” at stake is no longer textual prehistory but rather the history of the Bible *as the Bible*—that history of religious authority which, according to James Kugel, the literary approach delusively believes it can bracket—the subtraction story moves from the domain of phenomenology to history. In the beginning was literature, not only in the sense that even historical criticism is a reaction to literary features, but now also in that the Bible became the Bible *because* of its literary qualities. In other words, as Rosenberg nicely puts it, “the Bible’s value as a religious document is intimately related to its value as literature.”⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 16-17, emphasis mine.

⁸⁷ Joel Rosenberg, “Meanings, Morals, and Mysteries: Literary Approaches to Torah,” *Response* 26 (January 1975): 67-94, at 82.

That is the contention of the German Jewish philologist Erich Auerbach in his virtuosic commentary on Genesis 22 in “Odysseus’s Scar,” the opening chapter of Auerbach’s masterpiece, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946)—a reading of biblical narrative which Alter aptly calls “the point of departure for the modern literary understanding of the Bible.”⁸⁸ Famously, Auerbach argues in “Odysseus’s Scar” that biblical narrative is *hintergründig*, “mysterious” (or, if one wishes to retain the connection to *Hintergrund*, “background-y”), in contradistinction to the Homeric epics, which Auerbach calls *vordergründig* (“superficial,” “foreground-y”).⁸⁹ Auerbach’s discussion of the three-day journey Abraham and Isaac take to Moriah illustrates beautifully what he means by *hintergründig*.

...God gives his command, and the story itself begins: ...it unrolls with no episodes in a few independent sentences whose syntactical connection is of the most rudimentary sort. In this atmosphere it is unthinkable that an implement, a landscape through which the travelers passed, the servants, or the ass should be described, that their origin or descent or material or appearance or usefulness should be set forth in terms of praise; they do not even admit an adjective: they are servants, ass, wood, and knife, nothing else, without epithet; they are there to serve the end which God has commanded; what in other respects they were, are, or will be remains in the dark [*im Dunkel*]. A journey is made, because

⁸⁸ Alter, “Introduction to the OT,” 23.

⁸⁹ In the 1953 English edition, Willard Trask translates *hintergründig* as “fraught with background.” Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Trask, 50th anniversary ed. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003) 12; cf. Auerbach, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, 2nd ed. repr. (Basel: Francke Verlag, 1994), 14. Citations of *Mimesis* henceforth refer to this English edition; whenever I have modified the translation, I have done so with reference to this German edition.

“Fraught with background,” while not entirely inaccurate, amps up the drama of the formulation more than seems to me to be necessary, blurring some of the finer articulations of Auerbach’s argument in the process. As we shall see in a moment, it is indeed the *Hintergründigkeit* of biblical mimesis which makes it “fraught,” but the word *hintergründig* on its own does not convey the tension. However, as Matthew Johnson reminded me when commenting on an early draft of this chapter, Auerbach *did* oversee the translation process and approved the English version before it went to press, so I don’t want to overstate the distortion or lay the blame for it wholly with Trask.

Auerbach’s notion of *Hintergründigkeit* has recently been treated at greater length by others. See esp. James Adam Redfield, “Behind Auerbach’s ‘Background,’” on the reception of this notion in the discourse of the literary approach.

God has designated the place where the sacrifice is to be performed; but we are told nothing about the journey except that it took three days, and even that we are told in an enigmatic [*rätselvollen*] way: ...on the third day [Abraham] lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. That gesture is the only gesture, is indeed, the only occurrence during the entire journey of which we are told; ...it is as if, while he traveled on, Abraham had looked neither to the right nor to the left, has suppressed any sign of life in his followers and himself save only their footfall. Thus the journey is like a silent progress through the indeterminate and contingent, a holding of the breath, a process which has no present, which is inserted like a blank duration between what has passed and what lies ahead....⁹⁰

What makes the three-day journey properly *hintergründig* is its unexplained quantitative determination. For some reason never given by the narrator, the journey is measured. “Three days!” exclaims Auerbach. Why *three*—why not two, or four, or...? Why number the days at all? At this point the three-ness of the days becomes significant—but significant of *what*? The fragmentary narration discloses almost nothing, and what it *does* disclose seems so arbitrary, so “contingent” amid the generally “indeterminate” field of the narrative, that it conjures up a kind of phantasmatic intentionality: it hints at some unknown motivation, some subliminal connection, some unexpressed meaning. “Three such days positively call out for the symbolic interpretation which they later received [*Solche drei Tagen rufen die symbolische Ausdeutung, die sie später gefunden haben, geradezu herbei*].”⁹¹ That combination of secret purposiveness and extreme reticence is *Hintergründigkeit*, “mysteriousness.”

One effect of narrative *Hintergründigkeit* is a potent aura of “autocracy [*Alleinherrschaft*]”:

The Bible’s claim to truth is not only far more urgent than Homer’s, it is tyrannical—it excludes all other claims. The world of the Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to be a historically true reality—it insists that it is the only real world.... All other scenes, issues, and ordinances have no right to appear independently of it, and it is promised that all of them, the history of all mankind, will be given their due place within its frame, will be subordinated to it. The Scripture stories do not, like Homer’s court our favor, they do

⁹⁰ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 9-10, trans. mod.

⁹¹ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 10.

not flatter us that they may please us and enchant us – they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels.⁹²

Auerbach continues:

Let no one object that this goes too far, that not the stories, but the religious doctrine, raises the claim to absolute authority; because the stories are not, like Homer's simply narrated 'reality.' Doctrine and promise are incarnate in them and inseparable from them; for that very reason they are mysterious [*hintergründig*] and enigmatic [*rätselvoll*], containing a second, concealed meaning. In the story of Isaac, it is not only God's intervention at the beginning and the end, but even the factual and psychological content which comes between, that is dark [*dunkel*], merely touched upon, mysterious [*hintergründig*].⁹³

Crucially, then, for Auerbach it is not the biblical God whose sanction makes the Bible both authoritative and *deutungsbedürftig* ("in need of interpretation"), but precisely the other way around: God is an *effect* of the Bible's *hintergründig* mimesis.

Auerbach is clearly aware of how counterintuitive this claim is. "It will at once be said," he anticipates, "that this is to be explained by the Jews' particular concept of God, which was wholly different from that of the Greeks. True enough – but this constitutes no objection. For how is the Jews' concept of God to be explained? Even their earlier God of the desert was not fixed in form and content, and was alone.... The Jews' concept of God is less a cause than a symptom of their mode of comprehension and representation."⁹⁴ Thus, because it's God who, in Genesis 22:1, "come[s] from somewhere, ...enter[s] the earthly realm from some unknown heights or depths," the reader learns to associate the *Hintergrund* of the story with God.⁹⁵ "Since

⁹² Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 14-15, trans. mod.

⁹³ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 15, trans. mod.

⁹⁴ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 8, trans. mod. One might be forgiven for mistaking this for a line from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's critique of Ludwig Feuerbach in the first part of *The German Ideology*, which like *Mimesis* has its theoretical roots in Vico's *New Science* and Hegel's philosophy of history. Somewhat surprisingly, we are still awaiting a detailed comparison of history and ideology in Marx and Auerbach.

⁹⁵ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 10.

so much in the story is dark and incomplete, and since the reader knows that God is a hidden God, his effort to interpret it constantly finds something new to feed upon. Doctrine and the search for enlightenment are inextricably connected with the physical side of the narrative....”⁹⁶ *Hintergründigkeit* produces *Deutungsbedürfnis*, and “the Jews’ concept of God” is one way of responding to that need for interpretation.

And not only God: as Auerbach’s reading of the *Akedah* (Binding of Isaac) story unfolds, it becomes apparent that he considers the phenomenon of biblical canonicity itself to be an effect of the same narrative phenomena. From the moment that the ancient Israelites had before them two distinct *hintergründig*, *deutungsbedürftig* narratives, they perceived these narratives as bound together in a world-historical trajectory by their shared qualities and by reference to the formless, placeless, absolutely authoritative deity with whom those qualities were metonymically associated. The biblical canon is initiated by the immanent dynamics of biblical mimesis: “If the text of the biblical narrative, then, is so greatly in need of interpretation [*deutungsbedürftig*] on the basis of its own content, its claim to absolute authority forces it still further in the same direction.... The greater the separateness and horizontal disconnection of the stories and groups of stories in relation to one another...the stronger is their general vertical connection, which holds them all together....”⁹⁷ By this stage, a text with no intrinsic *Hintergründigkeit* of its own could potentially be drawn into the biblical canon on the basis of its difference from the texts already canonized, for the very juxtaposition of unlike texts generates *Hintergründigkeit*, now at the level of the entire canon. From this friction between the different sources and books, sparks fly, interpretation ignites. Once the canon is sealed, then begins the proliferation of commentary,

⁹⁶ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 15.

⁹⁷ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 15, 17.

including rabbinic midrash and the typological appropriation of the Hebrew Bible as Christianity's "Old Testament."

Meir Sternberg, despite his jabs at "Odysseus's Scar," elaborates this basic claim into a full-fledged poetics of biblical narrative.⁹⁸ The uncanny juxtaposition of the contingent and the indeterminate, the revealed and the concealed in the Bible's *hintergründig* mimesis creates a highly peculiar epistemological dynamic between the reader and the text, one in which the narrator of the Bible seems to have total access to information—"omniscience"—but skillfully withholds it in order to reduce the reader to a position of informational dependency on the Bible's "absolute authority." The 500-plus pages of *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* amount to a careful tracking of the many strategies and consequences of this epistemological asymmetry. It is this asymmetry which, according to Sternberg, makes the Hebrew Bible an exemplary instance of "ideological literature," and the experience of reckoning with one's own relative ignorance in the face of such ideological literature is "the drama of reading" Sternberg refers to in the book's subtitle. For Sternberg, as Daniel Boyarin comments, "it does not matter...if the inscribing of God as author of the Torah is a product of human work and therefore a fiction or an effect of actual divine authority," because "God is the *implied* author of the Torah. This is not a theological or dogmatic claim but a semiotic one."⁹⁹

Two consequences follow. First, Kugel's critique of the literary approach is countered: the interest in reading the Bible, which Kugel says is "directly or *par personne interposée* religious," is reframed. Religious interest is merely one form of *literary* interest, one reaction among others to narrative *Hintergründigkeit* and omniscience. Second, the basis of that religious

⁹⁸ E.g., Sternberg, *Poetics*, 232, 268, 494; Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978), 84-85.

⁹⁹ Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 40, emphasis mine.

interest—the postulate of divine authorship or inspiration – is also reframed as a literary effect. (“The Jews’ concept of God is less a cause than a symptom of their mode of comprehension and representation.”) God, “the implied author of the Bible,” thus takes his place alongside the authors and redactor postulated by Wellhausen (J, E, D, P, R). In the literary approach’s subtraction story, all these authors, from God on down to the Redactor, are retrospective constructions. Harold Bloom’s fanciful reconstruction of the J text in the surprise bestseller *The Book of J* may lack any scientific basis whatsoever, but this is precisely the thesis behind Bloom’s exercise: if *all* notions of biblical authorship are fictions, each with its own way of accounting for the manifest qualities and problems of the text, and if *none* can finally afford us access to the “original” text, then why not elect the hypothesis which opens up the richest, most satisfying reading?¹⁰⁰ Indeed, in accepting the source-critical division of the Pentateuch, Bloom’s challenge to historical criticism is in its own way more effectively subversive than those he criticizes, which prefer to ignore modern biblical scholarship.¹⁰¹

Sternberg finesses the point further in the opening chapter of *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*. The literary approach is not asserting its methodological priority over against religious interpretation and historical criticism by rejecting authorial intention, he argues, although it might appear this way, because there simply is no authorial intention to speak of in the case of the Bible. Religious interpretation and historical criticism wind up on the other side of a dividing line from the literary approach because they postulate an authorial intention for which, as Tsevat reminds us, no empirical evidence exists. It does not matter whether one

¹⁰⁰ See Bloom, “The Author J”; Harold Bloom, “From J to K: or, the Uncanniness of the Yahwist,” in Frank McConnell, ed., *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), 19-35.

¹⁰¹ Bloom, “The Author J,” 13-14.

believes the author is the final arbiter of meaning—which is, *mutatis mutandis*, the belief of both the religious and historical readers—because there is no method for appealing to the Bible’s authors which is not, at bottom, both circular and speculative. Thus, Sternberg declares, what concerns the literary critic of the Bible (no matter whether it concerns the same critic in other cases, e.g. *Absalom, Absalom!*) ought to be what he calls “embodied” or “objectified” intention. Objectified intention “no longer figures as a psychological state consciously or unconsciously translated into words. Rather, it is a shorthand for the structure of meaning and effect supported by the conventions that the text appeals to or devises: for the sense that the language makes in terms of the communicative context as a whole.”¹⁰² Historical criticism, on this view, fails to respond to the text’s conventions and structures; consequently it ends up even farther away from “the object as in itself it really is” than does religious interpretation. At this point, the literary approach’s subtraction story converges with a better-known one whose articulation in the late 1960s is a defining moment in the rise of Theory and the turn to critical reading in literary studies: the eclipse, or as Roland Barthes has it, “the death” of the author.

3.3.3. The science of literature

As attested by the two most famous announcements of the author’s fall from grace, Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” (1968) and Foucault’s “What is an Author?” (1969), while this fall took place across the entire terrain of literary studies on both sides of the Atlantic, it was in foremost an event in and an effect of French structuralism. The structuralist linguistics inaugurated by Saussure, writes Barthes, “show[ed] that the whole of enunciation is an empty

¹⁰² Sternberg, *Poetics*, 9. See Annabel Patterson, “Intention,” in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds., *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1995), 135-46.

process, functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person of the interlocutors. Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is never more than the instance saying *I*: language knows a ‘subject,’ not a ‘person,’ and this subject, empty outside every enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language ‘hold together,’ suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it.”¹⁰³

Among the many upheavals set in motion by the authorial subject’s reduction to a function of language was the final collapse, already underway since the late eighteenth century, of a hermeneutical premise which had gone more or less uncontested, although much modified, since Aristotle. In the first chapter of *Peri hermeneias*, his treatise on logical discourse, Aristotle held that every utterance is the expression of the speaker’s intended meaning.¹⁰⁴ Even anti-intentionalist theories of literature, such as the New Criticism, did not so much challenge the Aristotelian premise as exempt literary discourse from it through recourse to the aesthetic; and, as Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels notoriously argued in their 1982 screed “Against Theory,” any literary theory which allows for the very possibility of linguistic meaning, however indeterminate, is necessarily founded upon the presumptive intended meaning of an authorial subject.¹⁰⁵ Structuralism’s intervention—which Knapp and Benn Michaels’s essay does not successfully put into question—was to posit the determination of the subject by linguistic convention. On this view, the author cannot control his text’s meaning, not simply because he

¹⁰³ Barthes, *Image Music Text*, 145.

¹⁰⁴ On Aristotelian intentionalism in rabbinic hermeneutics, cf. Daniel Boyarin, “*Pilpul*: The Logic of Commentary,” in idem., *The Talmud – A Personal Take: Selected Essays*, ed. Tal-Hever Chybowski (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 47-68.

¹⁰⁵ See Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, “Against Theory,” in W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 11-30, as well as the other essays collected in the same volume. For a thorough critique of “Against Theory,” cf. Peggy Kamuf, *Signature Pieces: On the Institution of Authorship* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988), 177-200.

cannot control who reads the text and how, but more fundamentally because no subject has authority over language; it's quite the other way around. It follows that, no matter whether the author is Bloom's J, Rosenzweig's *Rabbenu*, Wellhausen's Deuteronomist, William Faulkner, or God himself, the very notion of *the* meaning of a text, which the critic deciphers, must be cast aside.

In short, the death of the author means the closure of hermeneutics as the business of the literary critic:

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained'—victory to the critic. Hence there is no surprise in the fact that, historically, the reign of the Author has also been that of the Critic.... In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath; the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it....¹⁰⁶

If the literary critic is not in the business of interpreting literary works, what *is* his business?

Literary criticism, Barthes argues in *Criticism and Truth* (1966), is to be, not "a science of content," but "a science of the conditions of content, that is to say of forms. What interests it [criticism] will be the variations of meaning generated and, as it were, capable of being generated by works...."¹⁰⁷ The word which emerges in the wake of structuralism to describe this "science of the conditions of content," the *how* rather than the *what* of literary signification, is: *poetics*.

¹⁰⁶ Barthes, *Image Music Text*, 147.

¹⁰⁷ Roland Barthes, *Critique et vérité* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), 57, quoted and trans. in Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975), 118.

In *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957)—a book which launched a quasi-structuralist turn in North American literary criticism a full decade before the key French structuralist texts had made their transatlantic voyages—Northrop Frye writes that poetics is the “gospel” of literary criticism, without which criticism, the “science of content,” is doomed to be “a mystery-religion.”¹⁰⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, meanwhile, defines poetics explicitly in contradistinction to “interpretation”: “Interpretation, which is sometimes also called exegesis, commentary, *explication de texte*, close reading...or even just criticism (such a list does not mean we cannot distinguish or even set in opposition some of these terms), is defined...by its aim, which is to name the meaning of the text examined.” Opposite interpretation, Todorov sets “the “science” of poetics: “Poetics...does not seek to name meaning, but aims at a knowledge of a knowledge of the general laws that preside over the birth of each work.... It is not the literary work itself that is the object of poetics: what poetics questions are the properties of that particular discourse that is literary discourse.”¹⁰⁹

The intellectual sources of poetics are, as Alan Mintz observes, diverse and international: Russian Formalism, the Prague Circle of linguistics, French structuralist semiotics, the American New Criticism, and Frye’s Jung-influenced myth-criticism all feed into poetics in the 1960s, although it is the Russians and the French who inform it most palpably. While the best-known exponents of poetics have thus been Francophone structuralists (Barthes, Todorov, Gérard Genette, A. J. Greimas) or American followers of that French scene, like Jonathan Culler, in the

¹⁰⁸ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), quoted in Jonathan Culler, “Foreword,” in Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977), 7.

¹⁰⁹ Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction to Poetics*, trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: U. Minn. Press, 1981), 3-6.

late 1960s there sprung up a Hebrew poetics, founded at Tel Aviv University by Benjamin Hrushovski. Of “the Tel Aviv School of poetics,” Mintz comments:

Hrushovski does not wish to evoke an antihumanistic image of the critic as a number-cruncher in a white coat (although quantification is clearly useful in such pursuits as prosody and stylistics); science [Hrushovski’s word: מדע] means the disciplined application of a body of tools to the study of literature, as opposed to a conception of criticism as an essentially intuitive *art* without objectively valid rules or methods. As a systematic science, poetics is committed to the comprehensive investigation of literature as a phenomenon of human culture; poetics aspires to exploit all useful tools within this endeavor and to address all aspects of literature, high and low, canonized and uncanonized.¹¹⁰

Two things are important to notice about Hrushovski’s project. The first is the dismantling of canonical hierarchies between high literature and low, popular culture, which puts the poeticist in a position to read a wider range of objects than, for example, the New Critics. The second is that the Tel Aviv school, while “international” in its reach, is also a Hebrew discourse. Hrushovski founded two literary journals, one Hebrew (*Ha-Sifrut*) and one English (*PT*), and much of the school’s energies, in both venues, were directed at Hebrew and Yiddish literature. These two aspects of the project—the relaxing of canonical boundaries and the focus on Hebrew—converge at a specific point in the Hebrew literary tradition. I mean, of course, the Bible.

Robert Alter has written eloquently of what he calls “the double canonicity of the Hebrew Bible.” That is, the Bible is canonical as the sacred text of two major world religions, on the one hand, and as a formidable literary work in all societies shaped historically by those religions, on the other. In the case of modern Hebrew literature, as Alter shows in a discussion of Bialik, the canonicity is actually triple, for the Hebrew Bible is also the foundation of modern Hebrew and the most prominent point of literary reference for all Hebrew writers, whether or not they are

¹¹⁰ Alan Mintz, “On the Tel Aviv School of Poetics,” *Prooftexts* 4.3 (1984): 215-235, at 218.

religious Jews.¹¹¹ The question of whether or not the Bible is literature certainly arises in this context, but it is differently charged than in Anglo-American literary studies, because the entrance of biblical language into the literary vernacular happens at the beginning of the Hebrew literary tradition, rather than in the sixteenth century. (Hence, in his justly celebrated entry on Hebrew prosody for the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Hrushovski's survey begins with the Hebrew Bible and works its way forward through the centuries to contemporary Israeli poetry.)¹¹²

For this reason, the first rigorous attempt at a poetics of Hebrew biblical narrative was published in *Hasifrut*: Meir Sternberg and Menakhem Perry's controversial essay on 2 Samuel 11-12, "The King Through Ironic Eyes: Narrative Devices in the Biblical Story of David and Bathsheba, with Two Excurses on the Theory of the Narrative Text" (1968).¹¹³ Sternberg

¹¹¹ See Robert Alter, *Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000), 21-62 and 97-150; Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose: Modern Fiction and the Language Revolution* (Seattle: U. Wash. Press, 1988).

¹¹² Benjamin Hrushovski, "Prosody, Hebrew." In Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds., *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 2007), 16:595-623. Accessed online, *Gale eBooks*, 22 October, 2020: https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX2587516123/GVRL?u=chic_rbw&sid=GVRL&xid=9534a625.

¹¹³ See Meir Sternberg and Menakhem Perry, "The King Through Ironic Eyes: Narrative Devices in the Biblical Story of David and Bathsheba, with Two Excurses on the Theory of the Narrative Text," *Hasifrut* 1 (1968): 263-292. Cf. Boas Arpali, "Caution! A Biblical Story: Comments on the Story of David and Bathsheba and the Problems of Biblical Narrative" (Hebrew), *Hasifrut* 2 (1970): 580-597; Uriel Simon, "An Ironic Approach to a Biblical Story" (Hebrew), *Hasifrut* 2 (1970): 598-607; and Perry and Sternberg's rebuttal to Arpali and Simon, "Caution! A Literary Text: Problems in the Poetics and the Interpretation of Biblical Narrative" (Hebrew), *Hasifrut* 2 (1970): 608-663. Much of the essay appears in English in reworked form as Chapter 6 of Sternberg, *Poetics*, 186-229.

As we have seen to be the case for all iterations of the literary approach, Sternberg and Perry's article put them at odds with both religious and historical approaches to the Bible. See Mintz, "On the Tel Aviv School," 231-33: "When the texts to be studied are specifically Jewish, the demands of poetics can seem even more preemptory. Because it assigns a subservient role to interpretation, poetics devalues the Jewish content of Jewish literature. Poetics privileges theory and requires interpretation to serve it, to render unto Caesar, as it were, what is Caesar's.... When these higher laws of literature become the goal of literary study, then the texts of Jewish literary tradition become, on the one hand, just as good as any others in disclosing these laws,

continued to publish in Hebrew on the poetics of biblical narrative through the 1970s. The first book-length elaborations of the poetics of biblical narrative appeared a decade later, again from Israeli authors: Jacob Licht's *Storytelling in the Bible* (1978) and Shimon Bar-Efrat's *The Art of the Biblical Story* (1979).¹¹⁴ The literary approach to the Hebrew Bible that arose in the Anglo-American context in the intervening years—Rosenberg's "Meanings, Morals, and Mysteries" and Alter's "A Literary Approach to the Bible" both appeared in 1975—was affiliated practically if not programmatically with poetics, and like the work coming out of Tel Aviv, the structuralist precipitants led to a much heavier stress on narrative than poetry.¹¹⁵

and, conversely, interesting and important only to the degree that they do so. Poetics filters out the specific and particularistic: time, place, people, i.e., everything which comprises the Jewish content of Jewish literature. ... Interpretation, of course, has its dangers. When you interpret you unavoidably come up with meaning, and when it is Jewish literature that is being interpreted, this meaning just as inevitably is going to have something to do with the modalities of Jewish existence at a given historical moment."

¹¹⁴ See Jacob Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1978); Shimon Bar-Efrat, *The Art of the Biblical Story* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Ha-Poalim, 1979). See also Bar-Efrat's English-language expanded and revised version, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989).

I would note as well the early contribution of Meir Weiss, *The Bible and Modern Literary Theory* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1962), translated and expanded as *The Bible from Within: The Method of Total Interpretation* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984). Weiss's book, while more rooted in both modern biblical criticism and in rabbinic tradition than the literary approach and falling closer in the end to biblical structuralism, anticipates biblical poetics in important ways, namely the hard emphasis on intrinsic, synchronic reading. I have not treated Weiss's work in this chapter because neither Alter nor Sternberg appears to have been influenced by his work; *The Bible and Modern Literary Theory* appears in the bibliographies of neither *The Art of Biblical Narrative* nor *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*. Adele Berlin does include both that book and three articles in German by Weiss in her bibliography for *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, but does not engage any of these texts directly in the body of the book itself. Shimon Bar-Efrat, on the other hand, explicitly notes his intellectual debt to Weiss in *Narrative Art in the Bible*.

¹¹⁵ In this respect, the most representative texts of the literary approach in English are Alter's *Art of Biblical Narrative*, Berlin's *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, and Sternberg's *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*.

That's not to say, however, that there was no literary attention paid to biblical poetry. In the early 1980s, three major monographs on the topic appeared in English: James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981); Robert Alter,

There are additional reasons, having to do more generally with the Bible and the history of biblical scholarship, why poetics became the general methodological context for the literary approach to Hebrew biblical narrative. Most obvious are the aspirations of the major poeticists, like Todorov and Hrushovski, to the status of scientists—a status which suited very well the peculiar predicament of the literary reader of the Bible, given the ongoing struggle for critical viability on a terrain dominated by historical criticism. (Unsurprisingly, “The King Through Ironic Eyes” elicited a flurry of complaints from biblical scholars who felt Sternberg and Perry’s methods were inappropriate for biblical study.) Poetics supplied literary critics with a strong claim to seeing the object as in itself it really is.

3.3.4. Against interpretation

The flipside of this claim is a persistent reproach, often shading into outright denigration, of interpretation. Like literary and historical approaches to the Bible, the interrelations of poetics and interpretation are, ostensibly, symbiotic, even circular. “Interpretation both precedes and follows poetics,” writes Todorov.¹¹⁶ It precedes poetics, because there is no reason to want to learn *how* literature in general means what it means unless we already desire to know *what* particular literary works mean; it follows poetics because we cannot interpret what the text means until we know how it means. As with Sternberg’s attempted reconciliation of literature and history within the hermeneutical circle, this apparently balanced account of the relationship between poetics and interpretation doesn’t quite make it into Todorov’s own practice: the “interpretation” that precedes poetics is an assumption, but the actual *act* of interpretation always

The Art of Biblical Poetry (New York: Basic Books, 1985); and Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985).

¹¹⁶ Todorov, *Introduction*, 7.

comes second. Furthermore, interpretation does not see the object as in itself it really is, but, on the basis of what is really “there” in the object, imposes something *additional* onto the text, supplementing the objective with the subjective. “Poetics aids interpretation,” Adele Berlin writes in *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*—but it aids it by curbing it, circumscribing its activity and reminding it to be plausibly accountable to the structure of the object it interprets.¹¹⁷ Yet even this accountability cannot make an interpretation finally objective—it can only minimize the ideological distortion it wreaks upon the text. To follow the distinction made by nineteenth-century German hermeneuticists, “interpretation (*Hermeneutik*)” is an “art [*Kunst*],” not a “science [*Wissenschaft*]”; it involves something more than the rule-bound technical analysis of the object (“criticism [*Kritik*]”), and to the same degree, interpretation is therefore uncritical.¹¹⁸

As Rosenberg points out in “Dual Vocations: The Biblical Scholar and the Biblical Storyteller” (1985), the title of Adele Berlin’s 1983 monograph is misleading: *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* never actually gets around to doing the interpretative work for which the poetics is allegedly a propaedeutic.¹¹⁹ In fact, the literary approach—which, at this point, could also be defined as “biblical poetics”—evinces a strong investment in the continued separation of poetics from interpretation. Hence Berlin, in “Literary Exegesis of Biblical Narrative” (1991), criticizes several colleagues—Alter, Rosenberg, Peter D. Miscall, J. P. Fokkelman, Yair Zakovitch, Moshe Garsiel, and James C. Nohrnberg—for “obscur[ing] the

¹¹⁷ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 17.

¹¹⁸ On these issues in nineteenth-century German hermeneutics, see Peter Szondi, *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. Martha Woodmansee (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), *passim* but esp. 121-34.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Joel Rosenberg, “Dual Vocations: The Biblical Scholar and the Biblical Storyteller,” *Prooftexts* 5.3 (September 1985): 287-295.

distinction between the strategies that the Bible uses in composing its narratives,” which are objective and knowable by science, “and the strategies that the reader uses to interpret them,” which are subjective and divivable by art. “To put it more succinctly, *hermeneutics has been mistaken for poetics*.”¹²⁰ This mistake is not innocent, because it involves confusing subject and object, art and science, uncritical and critical, confusions which, in literary studies during the early 1980s, arrived laden with negative value for all the reasons we have been tracking here.

Most of all, interpretation is consistently, and pejoratively, construed as *religious* across the whole terrain of secularist criticism. This construal is achieved through a series of tropic associations. Interpretation entails belief in meaning; belief in meaning entails belief in the sovereign subject who controls, “limits” and “closes off” that meaning, in Barthes’s phrasing; and the sovereign subject is, especially for the French thinkers who inform the American discourse of Theory, only a hypostasis of God. For poetics, the problem is less the philosophical one of the historical migration of sovereignty from God to the human subject than the ineluctably *a posteriori* nature of all authors, be they divine or mortal or something in between: “The Author, when *believed in*”—note the religious undertone of Barthes’s verb, *croire*—“is always conceived of as the past of his own book: a book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a ‘before’ and an ‘after’.... In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate.” Thus Barthes writes in “The Death of the

¹²⁰ Adele Berlin, “Literary Exegesis of Biblical Narrative: Between Poetics and Hermeneutics,” in “*Not in Heaven*,” 120-28, at 120, emphasis mine. Cf. Bernard M. Levinson, “The Right Chorale: From the Poetics to the Hermeneutics of the Hebrew Bible,” in “*Not in Heaven*,” 129-53.

Author” of “desacralizing the image of the Author,” of the writer as a “hand, cut off from any voice.”¹²¹

Foucault, too, distinguishes between interpretation and poetics—translated into his congruent terms, “commentary [*commentaire*]” and “criticism [*critique*]”—with the former once again explicitly associated with religion. This association holds for Foucault even when the text in question is not a sacred text, simply because of the inherited structure of authority and meaning.

Commentary questions discourse as to what it says and intended to say; it tries to uncover that deeper meaning of speech that enables it to achieve an identity with itself, supposedly nearer to its essential truth; in other words, in stating what has been said, one has to restate what has never been said. In this activity known as commentary which tries to transmit an old, unyielding discourse seemingly silent to itself, into another, more prolix discourse that is both more archaic and more contemporary—is concealed a strange attitude toward language: to comment is to admit by definition an excess of the signified over the signifier; a necessary, unformulated remainder of thought that language has left in the shade—a remainder that is the very essence of that thought, driven outside its secret—but to comment also presupposes that thus unspoken element slumbers within speech, and that, by a superabundance proper to the signifier, one may, in questioning it, give voice to a content that was not explicitly signified. By opening up the possibility of commentary, this double plethora dooms us to an endless task that nothing can limit: there is always a certain amount of signified remaining that must be allowed to speak, while the signifier is always offered to us in an abundance that questions us, in spite of ourselves, as to what it ‘means.’ Signifier and signified thus assume a substantial autonomy that accords the treasure of a virtual signification to each of them separately; one may even exist without the other, and begin to speak of itself: commentary resides in that supposed space. But at the same time, it invents a complex link between them, a whole tangled web that concerns the poetic values of expression: the signifier is not supposed to ‘translate’ without concealing, without leaving the signified in an inexhaustible reserve; the signified is revealed only in the visible, heavy world of a signifier that is itself burdened with a meaning that it cannot control. Commentary rests on the postulate that speech is an act of ‘translation,’ that it has the dangerous privilege images have of showing while concealing, and that it can be substituted for itself indefinitely in an open series of discursive repetitions; in short, it rests on a psychologistic *interpretation* of language that shows the stigmatas of its historical origin. This is an *exegesis*, which listens, through the prohibitions, the symbols, the concrete images, through *the whole apparatus of Revelation, to the Word of God*, ever secret, ever

¹²¹ Barthes, *Image Music Text*, 144-46, emphasis mine.

beyond itself. For years we have been commenting on the language of our culture from the very point where for centuries we had awaited in vain for the decision of the Word.¹²²

Louis Althusser similarly opposes critique, which he calls simply “reading [*lecture*],” to an “interpretation [*interprétation*]” always coded as religious: interpretation is “the religious myth of reading.”¹²³ In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari derisively refer to hermeneutics as a veritable pathology, “interpretosis.” And who is that has been infected with, become demented by, interpretosis? Who else, but “the interpretive *priest*, the seer,” “one of the despot-god’s bureaucrats”!¹²⁴

Already in the mid-1960s, this pejorative view of interpretation had made its way into the avant-garde of American literary criticism, chiefly through the influence of Barthes and French structuralism. Barthes’s foremost American exponent in the 1960s, the writer Susan Sontag, notoriously attacked interpretation in 1966 as nothing less than “the revenge of the intellect upon art.” Homeric allegory, Philo, the rabbis, the Church Fathers, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud are all disparaged in Sontag’s polemic, which concludes with the plea that “the function of criticism”—pointed allusion to Arnold—ought to be “to show how it [the work of art] is what it

¹²² Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. Alan M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage, 1994), xvi-xvii. Foucault makes the same distinction elsewhere in his writings of the 1960s and early 1970s. In the *Discourse on Language* (1971), for instance, he follows Barthes in connecting the dyad of commentary and criticism to the author-function and its contemporary deconstruction, respectively. See Foucault, *The Discourse on Language*, trans. Rupert Swyer, in Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language* (New York: Vintage, 2010), 215-238, at 220-22; Foucault, *The Order of Things*, trans. Alan M. Sheridan-Smith (New York: Vintage, 1994), 78-81. But, cf. Walter Benjamin’s rather different distinction of “commentary [*Kommentar*]” and “criticism [*Kritik*]” in “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*,” trans. Stanley Corngold, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, et. al. (Cambridge: Belknap, 1996), 1:297-360, esp. 297-320.

¹²³ Louis Althusser, “From *Capital* to Marx’s Philosophy,” in Althusser et. al., *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2015), 9-72, at 15; see also 13-29 passim.

¹²⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia: A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U. Minn. Press, 1987), 114, emphasis mine.

is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.”¹²⁵ In 1981, confronting an American critical landscape transformed by Theory, Fredric Jameson clashed with a secularist institution so hostile to any and all “interpretation,” “commentary,” or “hermeneutics” that he found himself compelled to stage his book *The Political Unconscious* as a counter-polemical in defense of hermeneutics.¹²⁶

To be “against interpretation,” as Sontag titled her essay, is synonymous with being critical, secularist, and politically oppositional—these all being one and the same. Barthes writes, representatively:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God)... In precisely this way literature [*la littérature*] (it would be better from now on to say ‘writing’ [*l’écriture*]), by refusing to assign a ‘secret,’ an ultimate meaning, to the text... liberates what may be called an *anti-theological activity*, an activity that is truly *revolutionary* since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law.¹²⁷

The anti-theological and the revolutionary, the religious and the political opposition, are thus fused in the rejection of the “Author-God” and, with him, interpretation.

Science, insofar as it is unreflective about its own epistemological conditions and presents itself as authoritative, universal, and objective, is implicated in Barthes’s list of “hypostases.” While the fairness of this characterization is questionable,¹²⁸ it serves the literary

¹²⁵ Susan Sontag, *Essays of the 1960s and 1970s*, ed. David Rieff (New York: Library of America, 2013), 14, 20. This is, interestingly, a rather Jewish list of “interpreters.”

¹²⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981), 21. See also Colin Davis, *Critical Excess: Overreading in Derrida, Deleuze, Lévinas, Žižek, and Cavell* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2010).

¹²⁷ Barthes, *Image Music Text*, 146-47.

¹²⁸ For postmodern reflections on the epistemological conditions of science, see Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (London: Routledge, 1991), 183-202; and Stephen Toumlin, “The Construal of Reality: Criticism in Modern and Postmodern Science,” in W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *The Politics of Interpretation* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1983), 99-118.

approach well by positioning the historical-critical method of biblical scholarship under the rubric of religion. If, as Regina Schwartz argues, “history” is a retrospective construction by the subject in response to empirical features of the literary object, then historical criticism turns out to be not just subsequent to literary criticism, but, in fact, an *interpretation* of the text rather than a description of it. Historical criticism and religious interpretation are collapsed into a single figure of uncritical reading: belated, secondary, subjective, undisciplined, excessive, vulnerable to (when not actively perpetuating) ideological mystification. The historical-critical subtraction story, which positions historical criticism as *opposed* to all these things, is just one more, especially deceptive veil thrown over the object.

Of course, each new subtraction story is an attempt both to dislodge *and* to appropriate scholarly authority. Thus, as we have seen in the work of Sternberg and Berlin, the literary approach installs itself in the very place of the historical-critical method it deposes, as poetics, the “science of literature.” This apparent contradiction does not cause the literary approach to undermine its own authority, but rather generates the possibility of meta-methodological critiques of its own methodology; the more insistently the literary approach submits its own procedures to critical contestation, the more it affirms its superiority to the allegedly unreflective, positivist historical criticism. The major voice here is that of the Dutch-born narratologist Mieke Bal, author of a trilogy of books marshalling the resources of structuralism, deconstruction, feminism, and psychoanalysis to offer compellingly subversive readings of well-known biblical narratives. In a pair of harsh missives, “The Bible as Literature: A Critical Escape” (1986) and “Literature and Its Insistent Other” (1989), Bal bitingly observes that the literary approach’s lingering attachment to the ostensible value-neutrality, objectivity, and universal authority of science leads its practitioners to spurn theoretical perspectives which might have helped them to

reflect on their own historicity and interestedness, that is, their ideology. For Bal, following Barthes's dictum that "[t]he capital sin in criticism is not ideology but the silence by which it is masked," a properly *critical* reading of the Bible ought to demystify the text's ideology.¹²⁹

By ideology, Bal doesn't quite mean what Jonathan Culler does when he advises that literary critics should read the Bible "as a powerfully influential sexist and racist text." She argues that no text is, by itself, ideological. It is, rather, *readings* which are ideological. Texts are never univocal, they may always be read otherwise; an ideological reading is one in which, consciously or unconsciously, the difference constitutive of textuality as such is effaced in order to produce a univocal reading. Thus, to say that the Bible is "sexist and racist" is, despite the critical intention behind the statement, no less ideological than the readings Culler thinks he is indicting. Accordingly, the history of the biblical text and its career as the Bible take a backseat to the reader's historicity and ideology, with all its embedded assumptions, lacunae, biases, interests, desires. Bal insists, then, that her readings of biblical narratives "should not be considered as yet another, superior interpretation that overthrows all the others. My goal is rather to show, by the sheer possibility of a different reading, that 'dominance' is, although present and in many ways obnoxious, not unproblematically established. It is the challenge rather than the winning that interests me. For it is not the sexist interpretation of the Bible as such that bothers me. It is the possibility of dominance itself, the attractiveness of coherence and authority in culture."¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1972), 257.

¹³⁰ Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987), 3.

With this declaration, Bal locates herself in opposition to every other critic writing about the Bible as literature—whether they are in favor of it or against it. She differs from fellow feminist biblical critics like Phyllis Tribble and Esther Fuchs in that she “do[es] not claim the Bible to be either a feminist resource or a sexist manifesto. That kind of assumption can be an issue only for those who attribute moral, religious, or political authority to these texts, which is precisely the opposite of what I am interested in.” She differs from historical criticism in that she does not seek “to ‘restore’ an ‘original’ or even a privileged meaning. Such an attempt is self-contradictory...since the illusion of origin is disturbed by the evidence of textual criticism.” She differs from the literary approach (Sternberg seems to be the implied target) in that she does not think “modern narrative theory replaces the divine voice as the authority that fixes meaning.” And she differs from James Kugel by rejecting his “claim that the poetics of the Bible is so alien to our theories that the latter are pointless in relation to the former. Such cultural relativism veils an as yet unresolved belief in the authority of origin.”¹³¹ Notice how each interlocutor is criticized for “believing” in authority as the ultimate arbiter of the text’s meaning—whether this means the social authority of the Bible as a sacred text (Tribble), the authority of the poetics of biblical narrative (Sternberg), or the authority of historical origin (Kugel and the historical critics). To *believe* in authority is to be ideologically mystified and, therefore, uncritical.

Bal herself is not exempt from the heated struggle for methodological priority in which the rest of the practitioners of the literary approach, whom she criticizes for this very reason, are engaged. While she says her readings are *not* intended as “another, superior interpretation that overthrows all the others,” doesn’t this humility itself become the new badge of authority? By disavowing authority, she marks herself off from the pack as the only non-ideological reader of

¹³¹ Bal, *Lethal Love*, 1.

the Bible. Yet even as she repeats against the literary approach the same polemic the literary approach directs against the historical-critical method, like Sternberg (and Edward Said) before her Bal ends up failing her own test. She consistently mobilizes religion as a trope for ideology. In “A Critical Escape,” she charges Sternberg of being a closet theologian, citing as evidence Sternberg’s argument that God is the “implied” author-narrator of the Bible.¹³² As Daniel Boyarin counters, “theology” is actually the *opposite* of that argument’s consequence, since it is the replacement of author-as-origin to author-as-effect which allows Sternberg to critically read the poetics of biblical narrative as a machine for the reproduction of ideology. “There is absolutely no consequence from [Sternberg’s] claim that God is the implied narrator of the Bible to a proposition that God indeed exists or that God, existing, is like this or like that, and only that type of proposition could make Sternberg’s text into a theology. [...G]iven that Sternberg’s statement can be given a relatively innocent interpretation, what is it that motivates the threatening reading that Bal gives it? If Bal’s dubbing of Sternberg’s reading as theology is invalid, what is it that she is getting at...?”¹³³

What motivates Bal’s reading is her *own* ideology—namely, secularism. It’s because Bal is unreflectively opposed to religion that she can so casually mobilize the trope throughout her writings on the Bible without even once stopping to interrogate or justify it. In her overhasty aversion to anything that scans at a glance as “religious,” Bal misreads Sternberg to the point of making him say the opposite of what he actually argues. Not only is she not free of ideology, then—as she would be the first to admit, no one ever is—but she is not even reflective about her

¹³² Mieke Bal, “The Bible as Literature: A Critical Escape,” *Diacritics* 16.4 (Winter 1986): 70-80, at 72-73.

¹³³ Daniel Boyarin, “The Politics of Biblical Narratology: Reading the Bible like/as a Woman,” *Diacritics* 20.4 (Winter 1990): 31-42, at 33.

own ideology, despite the fact that ideological self-reflectivity is precisely what, she argues, makes critical reading *critical*.

Make no mistake: secularist criticism does not purport to be a view from nowhere. Nothing could be further from Said's project in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. But it repeatedly turns out that even the secularist critic's relentless naming of her own situatedness requires something to be excluded, erased. By troping religion as ideology, the secularist critic is able to critically read every other iteration of ideology; the exposure of "religion" for what it is – a trope – would pose a serious conceptual problem for the discourse of secularist criticism. And so religion must be troped as ideology, with interpretation getting caught up in the dragnet as a metonym for religion. This tropic complex, intrinsic to secularist criticism, is well illustrated by a parallel between Bal's "Literature and Its Insistent Other" and Berlin's "Literary Exegesis of Biblical Narrative" (discussed above). In her essay, Bal attacks Alter and Kermode for deliberately excluding feminist and deconstructive approaches from *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. She warns her reader that the *Guide* "should not be mistaken for what it is not. It is religious rather than literary."¹³⁴ Now Berlin, what with her faith in poetics as "the science of literature," is exactly the kind of scholar Bal reproaches in her writings on the Bible. Yet in her essay Berlin issues a warning neatly congruent with Bal's, as if by design: *Don't mistake religion for literature; don't mistake hermeneutics for poetics*.

As a subtraction story, of course, secularism demands *something* to subtract, and this something must always be "religion." Each new subtraction story recasts the roles, sometimes placing older subtraction stories in the position of "religion," but the drama plays out the same

¹³⁴ Mieke Bal, "Literature and Its Insistent Other," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57.2 (Summer 1989), 373-383, at 382.

way every time. In this regard, secularist criticism has a certain cunning, in the Hegelian sense of “the cunning of reason [*die List der Vernunft*].”¹³⁵ If Bal cannot help but get caught up in the very contest for authority she deplures, this is because she wants to tell a subtraction story, too. For she does postulate an object, “the text itself” – it is just that she argues that we *cannot* “see the object as in itself it really is.” The text, constituted by its difference from itself, cannot be comprehended within an interpretation. Through a practice of self-reflective, highly suspicious counterreading, though, the critical reader can performatively demonstrate that difference, thereby exposing the ideological repressions at work in every putatively “coherent” reading. Such readings become “religious.”

3.4. Wild interpretation

3.4.1. Bad examples

In Erich Auerbach’s reading of Genesis 22, the religious exegete and the literary critic are implicitly compared: both notice and respond to the textual heterogeneity of biblical narrative in ways that resist the disintegration and diachronization of historical criticism. Yet the literary critic is compelled to refuse identification with the religious exegete. In Auerbach’s text this refusal is performed rather than proclaimed. He first constructs a parallel between the reader of the Bible and the figure of Abraham in Genesis 22:1: “God...has *called* to [*gerufen hat*]” Abraham, and Abraham responds—as Franz Kafka memorably puts it in his ironic commentary

¹³⁵ On *die List der Vernunft*, see G. W. F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans./ed. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), 12-18.

on the same verse – “with the promptness of a waiter”:¹³⁶ *hinnei*, “Here I am.”¹³⁷ Later, the *hintergründig, deutungsbedürftig* narrative itself is said to “call out for” “subtle probing and interpretation [...*Vertiefung und Ausdeutung, es ruft sie herbei*].”¹³⁸ Even as Auerbach finely analyzes how the poetics of biblical narrative gives rise to this “call” for interpretation, and valorizes it over against the superficial, downright *uninterpretable* poetry of the Homeric epics, he never actually responds positively, himself, to that call.¹³⁹ That is, Auerbach does not say *what* the story of Abraham and Isaac means, he only argues *that* it means (something), and tries to show *how* it means whatever it means.

Here Auerbach adopts a position of critical restraint that distinguishes him sharply from Abraham, who in his immediate answer and assent to the voice from the *Hintergrund* figures a quintessentially religious—that is, uncritical—reader; the rabbis who comment upon the Torah after its canonization, like Abraham, respond immediately and promptly to the text’s call, identifying this call with the same voice of God that Abraham hears. At the same time, though, Auerbach resists the temptation to refuse the call altogether, as the historical critics do when the very gaps that “call out for” interpretation are taken to be traces of textual history. As a literary critic, he stands right on the borderline between these poles, facing the rabbinic side but never stepping over into it. The literary critics who follow in Auerbach’s footsteps, as we’ve seen, reproduce this gesture of double refusal. They resist the specious alternative of religious

¹³⁶ Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1961), 41.

¹³⁷ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 8-9. *Hinnei* appears in Auerbach’s text in transliterated Hebrew; significantly, it is the first non-German word in *Mimesis* (barring the English epigraph), a fact with ethico-political implications which, unfortunately, we cannot address here.

¹³⁸ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 15, trans. mod.

¹³⁹ On Homer’s uninterpretability, see Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 13-14.

interpretation and historical criticism, both of which exceed the narrow confines of literary criticism proper.

For the literary approach, both of these excessive readings are ideological and uncritical; they are both interpretations supplementing the more essential literary reading; and they are both therefore “religious.” But although there are many religious ways to read the Bible—including the Arnoldian reading of the Bible as literature—it is the rabbis who become the literary approach’s emblematic figures of “religious” reading. The word “midrash” enters into this discourse as its bad example: how *not* to read the Bible as literature.

In what does the “badness” of midrashic exemplarity consist? Midrash is, as Gerald Bruns writes in his essay on “Midrash and Allegory” for *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, “extravagant.” “For midrash,” he continues, “always seems”—here I must interject: to whom?—“to be going *beyond the text* in the manner of *transgression*—going *too far*, saying not only what the text does not say but also what the text, taken by itself, does not appear to warrant.”¹⁴⁰ Midrash, imagined as extravagant, excessive, and, in another phrase of Bruns’s, even “wild interpretation” (a redundant formulation, since interpretation is always “wild,” i.e., religious, in the view of secularist criticism) circulates throughout most of the texts associated with the literary approach to the Bible, although it is almost always confined to the margins.¹⁴¹

That many expressions of this view of midrash are ambivalent, combining genuine affection with methodological rejection, only heightens the effect of the critical disavowal. For instance, Sternberg praises the rabbis in the preface to *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*,¹⁴² and

¹⁴⁰ Gerald L. Bruns, “Midrash and Allegory: The Beginning of Scriptural Interpretation,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, 625-44, at 629, emphasizes mine.

¹⁴¹ Bruns, “Midrash and Allegory,” 632.

¹⁴² Sternberg, *Poetics*, xiv.

he frequently invokes them in order to praise them for their acute sensitivity to the textual heterogeneity—what he calls, following Wolfgang Iser, the “gaps”—of Hebrew biblical narrative. The contradictory answers to questions about Esther’s canonical authority and scribal composition given in BT *Megillah* 7a and BT *Bava Bathra* 14b-15a are “variant answers to a single question that no discipline can afford to ignore.”¹⁴³ Yet, as in Auerbach’s text, recognizing the exigency of the question is decidedly not the same thing as responding to the question positively.

Sternberg continually couples his praise of the rabbis with denigrations of their hermeneutical moves. On 1 Samuel 13:1, ... בְּמֶלְכוֹ שָׁאֵל בֶּן-שָׁנָה (‘‘Saul was one year old when he began to reign...’’), Sternberg writes: ‘‘The rabbis, predictably, found a way out by twisting ‘one year’ [בֶּן-שָׁנָה] into the figurative meaning of newborn innocence. But then their very wrenching betrays their awareness of the dilemma, and their choice to wrench the sense in order to save the wording dramatizes the antithesis between their doctrinal commitment and the literary interpreter’s pragmatic orientation to the received text.’’¹⁴⁴ Establishing the rabbis’ ‘‘awareness of the dilemma’’ posed by the number in the Masoretic text, Sternberg acknowledges midrash’s similarity to literary criticism, only to immediately set about undercutting this likeness. The rabbis ‘‘predictably’’—so, this is not an isolated incident—‘‘twist’’ and ‘‘wrench,’’ they read ‘‘figuratively,’’ they are motivated not by pragmatism but by a ‘‘doctrinal commitment’’ which the literary critic does not share. Sternberg’s most illuminating critique of midrash appears in his

¹⁴³ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 58-59.

¹⁴⁴ Sternberg, *Poetics* 14. Cf. BT *Yoma* 22b, ‘‘It is written: *Saul was one year old when he began to reign*, which cannot be understood literally, as Saul was appointed king when he was a young man. R. Huna said: This verse means that when he began to reign he was like a one-year-old, in that he had never tasted the taste of sin...’’; and *Targum Jonathan* on 1 Sam. 13:1, ‘‘As a one-year-old child, in whom there is no guilt, was Saul, when he became king....’’

chapter on narrative gapping. There, midrash exemplifies “*illegitimate* gap-filling...launched and sustained by the reader’s *subjective* concerns...rather than by the text’s own norms and directives.” Midrash is “often based on assumptions that have no relevance to the world of the Bible..., receive no support whatever from the textual details, or even fill in what the narrative itself rules out. Where there’s a *will*, the midrash will always find a way.”¹⁴⁵

Other prominent critics associated with the literary approach offer similarly double-edged accounts of midrash as at once exceptionally well-attuned to narrative problems in the Bible yet too “doctrinally committed” and “wild” to offer much more to the literary approach beyond a cautionary tale of how not to read the Bible. Adele Berlin calls midrash “basically a literary approach, in a sense, and they [the rabbis] were certainly close readers of the biblical text. And, indeed, some of the Midrash’s concerns are also the concerns of modern poeticists. ... But there is a crucial difference between midrashic ‘poetics’ and our own. *The Midrash never completely frees itself from meaning*, from semantic explorations of what we would consider to be poetic phenomena.” After illustrating this midrashic failure to “completely free itself from meaning” with a passage from *Bereshit Rabbah* on Genesis 34:25, Berlin extends her criticisms from midrash to cover “most of the history of biblical interpretation.”¹⁴⁶

Apropos of Genesis 38, Robert Alter reminds us in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* that

the two verbal cues indicating the connection between the story of the selling of Joseph and the story of Tamar and Judah were duly noted more than 1,500 years ago in the Midrash: ‘The Holy One Blessed Be He said to Judah, You deceived your father with a kid. By your life, Tamar will deceive you with a kid. ...The Holy One Blessed Be He said to Judah, You said to your father, *haker-na*. By your life, Tamar will say to you, *haker-na*’ (*Bereshit Rabbah* 84:11-12). This may suggest that in many cases a literary student of the Bible has as much to learn from the traditional commentaries as from modern scholarship. The difference between the two is ultimately the difference between

¹⁴⁵ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 188, emphases mine.

¹⁴⁶ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 17–18.

assuming that the text is an intricately interconnected unity, as the midrashic exegetes did, and assuming it is a patchwork of frequently disparate documents, as most modern scholars have supposed. ... With their assumption of interconnectedness, the makers of the Midrash were often as exquisitely attuned to small verbal signals of continuity and to significant lexical nuances as any 'close reader' of our own age.¹⁴⁷

So far, the rabbis and the literary critic, here Alter, are aligned by virtue of their synchronic approach to "gap-filling" over against a common opponent, the historical critics. Next, however, Alter establishes his differences from midrash on two fronts, one which criticizes midrash for its departure from the "*real* narrative continuum" and another which implies it is too ideologically straitjacketed by religious commitments to be relied upon:

First, although the midrashists did assume the unity of the text, they had little sense of it as a *real* narrative continuum, as a coherent unfolding story in which the meaning of earlier data is progressively, even systematically, revealed or enriched by the addition of subsequent data. What this means practically is that the Midrash provides exegesis of specific phrases or narrated actions but not continuous readings of the biblical narratives: small pieces of the text become the foundations of elaborate homiletical structures that have only an intermittent relation to the *integral* story told by the text. The second respect in which the midrashic approach to the biblical narratives *does not really recognize their literary integrity* is the *didactic insistence* of midrashic interpretation. One might note that in the formulation recorded in the passage just cited from *Bereshith Rabbah*, God Himself administers a moral rebuke to the twice-sinning Judah, pointing out to him the recurrence of the kid and the verb 'to recognize' that links his unjust deception of his father with his justified deception by Tamar. That thematic point of retaliation, as we have seen, is intimated in the biblical text, but without the suggestion that Judah himself is conscious of the connections. That is, in the *actual* literary articulation of the story, we as audience are privileged with a knowledge denied Judah.... The Midrash, on the other hand, concentrating on the present moment in the text and on underscoring a moral point, *must make things more explicit than the biblical writer intended*.¹⁴⁸

Thus the rabbis are praised for reading like Alter *and* criticized for not reading like Alter. In the first regard they, like him, are synchronic readers; in the second, they are actually not synchronic

¹⁴⁷ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 10–11. The citation and transliteration of *Bereshit Rabbah* has been altered to match my citation style, and the translation has been slightly modified.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 11–12, emphases mine.

enough despite their dazzling knack for stringing together disparate biblical texts. At every turn, they are framed as not reading “the text itself” and failing to “recognize” the “actual,” “real” nature of the text which the literary critic manages to correctly perceive.

The polemical possibilities of this idea of midrash are readily apparent. By labelling an opponent’s work midrash, a critic can promote herself to a position of secularist-critical authority vis-à-vis that opponent. Hence Sternberg, his characterization of midrash as “illegitimate” reading notwithstanding, is criticized by Bernard Levinson for being a “rabbi”:

Although Sternberg invokes modern literary theory – the terminology of poetics – to formulate his synchronic method, in fact his respect for the integrity of the text and the intentionality of its details derives much of its inspiration from the great tradition of ancient rabbinic exegesis. . . . He implicitly employs rabbinic conceptions of the text’s coherence and the purposiveness of its details to restore to biblical studies a concern with meaning – with what and how the text communicates – often absent in critical scholarship. Indeed, he begins his book by invoking the ‘ancient rabbis’ whose ‘interpretive genius’ and deftness with biblical language he praises, while noting his ‘variance from their premises.’ Rabbinic exegesis thus provides Sternberg with an important methodological counterpoint to the primarily analytical or dissecting force of conventional diachronic criticism.¹⁴⁹

Levinson’s argument here verges on ad hominem; it simply does not stand up to mild scrutiny. Logically speaking, why should taking some “inspiration” from the rabbis, whose “premises” Sternberg rejects in the passage from *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* Levinson cites—as *Levinson himself points out*—compromise Sternberg’s methodology? The vague notion of “interpretive genius” does not translate into practical techniques of reading which could then be compared with Sternberg’s approach. And if his “conceptions of the text’s coherence and the purposiveness of its details” are “implicitly” rabbinic, then some evidence should be logged in support of the claim—and yet none is given. Finally, when Levinson suggests that Sternberg’s

¹⁴⁹ Levinson, “Right Chorale,” 132–33, quoting Sternberg, *Poetics*, xiv.

poetics is intended “to restore to biblical studies a concern with *meaning*—with *what* and how the text communicates,” he attributes to Sternberg a hermeneutical motivation dramatically at odds with the whole project of biblical poetics. Yet Levinson proceeds with the argument anyway, because the goal here is persuasion, not demonstration. The insinuation that Sternberg is “implicitly rabbinic” casts aspersions upon the integrity of his secularist-critical methodology, priming the reader for Levinson’s eventual critique of *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* as “a secular narrative theology.” (The textual evidence for the latter claim is, again, presented as though it said the opposite of what it actually says.)¹⁵⁰

Berlin also uses midrash as a point of comparison for literary readings of the Bible she wants to criticize or debunk. Discussing the relationship (or perhaps the lack thereof) between the story of Rachel in Genesis 29-31 and the story of Michal in 1 Samuel 17-18, Berlin surveys readings of these two narratives by Alter, Miscall, Fokkelman, Zakovitch, Garsiel, Nohrnberg, and Rosenberg, and then dismisses them all as midrashic: “There are certainly interbiblical allusions and parallels, but the ones I have been citing [between Rachel and Michal] are not they. It strikes me that to compare the Michal and Rachel stories in the manner described above is rather like making a *gezerah shavah*, a type of analogy used in rabbinic exegesis. In other words, this is an exercise in hermeneutics.”¹⁵¹ Alter is singled out as “a great literary *darshan*,” a label which, despite appearances, is rather less than a compliment coming from Berlin. She then submits Alter’s discussion of parallels between Genesis 37 and Judges 8 to an extended and unflattering comparison with *Bereshith Rabbah* on Genesis 25:25.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Levinson, “Right Chorale,” 143, commenting on Sternberg, *Poetics*, 231-32.

¹⁵¹ Berlin, “Literary Exegesis,” 122-24.

¹⁵² Berlin, “Literary Exegesis,” 124-25.

Alter, in fact, is repeatedly singled out by others for being insufficiently “critical,” and this deficiency is always presented by implying a methodological link with midrash. Mara Benjamin has argued that Alter’s literary approach has a “tacit theological agenda,” pointing to Alter’s citations of midrash in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* as evidence. But Benjamin is getting the methodological valence of midrash for Alter’s argument precisely backwards. The rabbis are, as she has it, “a kind of prescient literary-critical voice” for Alter, but their prescience consists *only* of their knack for identifying problems, not in solving them; Alter swiftly withdraws his affiliation with midrash by objecting to its methods and conclusions.¹⁵³ The references to midrash which supposedly make Alter’s methodology “theological” are actually symptomatic of his *resistance* to a theological agenda, tacit or otherwise; a few pages later, in fact, he reprimands Michael Fishbane for being too invested in the religious meaning of biblical texts, “finally less concerned with poetics than with homiletics.”¹⁵⁴

In *The Narrative Covenant*, Damrosch states that Alter has an “affinity for rabbinic thought,” despite the fact that, as we have seen, the very passage from *The Art of Biblical Narrative* Damrosch cites as evidence is actually no less critical of midrash than anything in Sternberg’s or Berlin’s books (whose respective discussions of midrash receive no attention at all from Damrosch).¹⁵⁵ Damrosch argues that Alter’s neglect of historical criticism “brings Alter’s position squarely within the great tradition of rabbinical midrash.”¹⁵⁶ (As in Berlin’s text, the adjective “great” seems to function mainly to soften the blow.) Despite the thesis of Damrosch’s

¹⁵³ Mara H. Benjamin, “The Tacit Agenda of a Literary Approach to the Bible,” *Prooftexts* 27.2 (Spring 2007): 264-74, at 266.

¹⁵⁴ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 16, referring to Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken, 1979).

¹⁵⁵ Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, 303.

¹⁵⁶ Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*

book—that historical criticism and the literary approach need to be integrated in order to overcome the methodological limitations of both—literary criticism drops out of the picture entirely here, swallowed up by a jarring binaristic opposition between historical criticism and midrash. Most instructively, while Damrosch’s objectives would seem to put him at odds with Berlin’s defiantly synchronic literary approach, his ultimate criticism of Alter repeats hers quite precisely. Alter’s rejection of deconstruction’s “agnosticism about all literary meaning” is glossed by Damrosch as an “exten[sion] to secular literary analysis [of] the rabbinic drive toward totalizing interpretation.”¹⁵⁷ Like Berlin, Damrosch regards the reader who wants the text to mean something as a *darshan*. That Alter is demonstrably not “doing midrash” is irrelevant. As with Levinson’s and Bal’s critiques of Sternberg, it’s the polemically motivated rhetorical framing of an interlocutor as “midrashic,” “hermeneutical,” “religious,” “theological” that gives force to each successive critic’s claim to be *more* critical, *more* secular, to see *better* “the object as in itself it really is.”

At their most conciliatory, practitioners of the literary approach bring up midrash as mere figure for secular methods of critical reading, by which it is immediately replaced. Rosenberg begins his brilliant study *King and Kin* with the provocative assertion, “Whatever the literary history involved, Genesis is...nothing short of a companion work to 2 Samuel, a ‘midrash,’ if you will, upon the Davidic history.”¹⁵⁸ Safely ensconced in inverted commas and marked as figurative by the deferential “if you will,” “midrash” is already reduced from its historical actuality to a “companion work” to the text it interprets. Henceforth, Rosenberg barely refers to midrash at all—the rabbis are mentioned on just six of *King and Kin*’s 255 pages—and as a

¹⁵⁷ Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, 303-04.

¹⁵⁸ Rosenberg, *King and Kin*, xiii.

description of the relationship between Genesis and 2 Samuel, “midrash” is quickly swapped out for Rosenberg’s preferred master-trope, “allegory.” But allegory, too, is traditionally associated with religious exegesis, so it’s no surprise that before the first chapter, “The Question of Biblical Allegory,” is over, Rosenberg has invoked the idiosyncratic appropriations of allegory by Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man in order to quietly fold allegory, the book’s central term, into the discourse of more acceptable contemporary literary theories.¹⁵⁹

Meanwhile, coming from a feminist perspective, Ilana Pardes uses midrash to the same ends as do Sternberg, Berlin, and Alter. She cites *Bamidbar Rabbah* 1:2 in order to show how the rabbis notice the same narrative “gaps” in Numbers to which a literary reader must also respond. But, she hastens to add, “I do not mean to turn the Midrash into a feminist response to the Bible. ... Rather, I have evoked the Midrash to accentuate biblical heteroglossia.”¹⁶⁰ So the upshot of the reference to midrash is that its antiquity independently verifies the presence of the gaps and the applicability of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism to the biblical text—the actual exegeses of the rabbis are irrelevant. As is the case with Rosenberg, Pardes is not critical of midrash, but the limited role she allots it in her argument evinces an awareness of midrash’s reputation as a species of “wild interpretation” which cannot by itself supply a viable critical methodology.

¹⁵⁹ See Rosenberg, *King and Kin*, 2-46, esp. 15-20. See also Rosenberg’s main theoretical reference points: Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 159-235; Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays on the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: U. Minn. Press, 1983), 187-228; and Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1979). For an interesting contrast of how the categories of “the religious” and “the secular” differently inflect Benjamin’s vs. de Man’s theories of allegory, cf. Asad, *Formations*, 62-66.

¹⁶⁰ Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 160-161n7.

3.4.2. The pleasures of reading

There is an erotic charge to those representations of midrashic “wildness.” Instead of analyzing the biblical narratives, like good secularist critics, the rabbis give into temptation and indulge their hermeneutical desires, reading for what they *want* rather than what is “actually” there in the text. The rabbis, thus represented, interpret rather than critique, and by interpreting they get what they want from the Bible, namely, its meaning and relevance to the ethical life their community. Their relation to the biblical text is well described by Barthes’s notion of the “desire” or “pleasure” of reading:¹⁶¹ in the intimacy of their attention, their apparent pursuit of any interpretative line that strikes their fancy, their playfulness, their ceaseless returning to the well of the text to draw up yet another bucketful meaning, the rabbis may fairly be said to be erotically immersed in the Bible. They love the text, they love to read it and interpret it and ponder it and learn from it and talk about it. Their attentions suggest a feeling toward every jot and tittle on par with how Elisa New feels about Emily Dickinson’s enigmatic dashes: “One longs to write about them, wrestle with them, explicate them – but never to finish with them.”¹⁶² As Barthes demonstrates in *S/Z* (1970), there is a way in which interpretation per se is always a function of desire, of the erotic relationship of text and reader. The “hermeneutic code” he tracks throughout Honoré de Balzac’s novella *Sarrasine* comprises what is best described as a seduction: the repeated, partial disclosure of tantalizingly incomplete information which gives the reader to imagine what remains unsaid.¹⁶³ From this slant, we may say that one reads because

¹⁶¹ See esp. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975), passim.

¹⁶² Elisa New, “Pharaoh’s Birthstool: Deconstruction and Midrash,” *SubStance* 17.3 (1988): 26-36, at 30.

¹⁶³ See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975), passim; and Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984), 37-61.

one's interest has been piqued, because one *desires to know* what the text is concealing, to discover the truth, to be in on the secret.

But critical readers are not supposed to get what they want. In loving or craving meaning from the text, the reader proves too attached to it to be properly critical. Hence, echoing the opening of Kant's essay on *Aufklärung*, Berlin chastises the rabbis for not "freeing" themselves from their slavish devotion to the notion that texts mean, and Damrosch charges Alter with clinging to a naïve, uncritical faith in the objectivity of "literary meaning." As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick laments in her now-famous introduction to *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (1997), critical readers are so committed to the hermeneutics of suspicion that they are unable to own up to desire and experience its satisfaction. These "paranoid" readers, as she calls them, chronically deny themselves any pleasure other than the masochistic *frisson* of finding their suspicions confirmed.¹⁶⁴ Pleasure, precisely because its presence or absence is, supposedly, clear to the subject—usually, I know when I feel good and when I do not—falls into that domain of the self-evident and natural which it is the critical reader's job to expose as actually historically contingent and politically compromising. Critical readers suspect pleasure of being a lure, deployed to manipulate, distract, mollify, or persuade unenlightened subjects in the interests of power. Pleasure, therefore, is never acceptable as the end, in itself, of critical reading. If pleasure is experienced, critical reading has only just begun, for now that pleasure should be demystified: its sources must be named, its political interests exposed, its naturalness denaturalized.

Michael Warner rightly points out, however, that since the advent of "literature" in the modern sense, most non-professional readers have tended to read in order to *feel* pleasure, not to

¹⁶⁴ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), 123-51.

suspect it: “They identify with characters. They fall in love with authors. They mime what they take to be the authorized sentiment. . . . They warm with pride over the national heritage. They thrill at the exotic and take refuge in the familiar. . . . They cultivate reverence and piety. . . . They get caught up in suspense. They laugh; they cry. They get aroused. . . . They lose themselves in books. . . .”¹⁶⁵ Most dangerously, in the eyes of the critical reader, is the Coleridgean “suspension of disbelief” which, taken to extremes, is liable to end up being indistinguishable from plain old belief. Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, Austen’s *Catherine Morland*, and Flaubert’s *Emma Bovary* ironically exemplify Western literary culture’s worst-case scenarios of uncritical reading, the more (*Don Quixote*, *Northanger Abbey*) or less (*Madame Bovary*) comical humiliation of the reader by a world he or she believes to have been created in the image of the chivalric tale, gothic novel, or lurid romance rather than the other way around. Nor is this uncritical belief in literature confined to the *contents* of literary works: from Richardson’s *Pamela* to Goethe’s *Werther*, Western literature offers plenty of canonical examples of real readers whose failure to critically construe the fictional narratives they consume has scandalous effects.

These readers may not be confusing literature with divine law, but their naïve acceptance of the text’s truth brings them close to the rabbinic reader of the Hebrew Bible as imagined by Auerbach and Sternberg. According to Auerbach, the Bible’s

claim to truth. . . is tyrannical—it excludes all other claims. The world of the Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to be a historically true reality—it insists that it is the only real world, is destined for autocracy. All other scenes, issues, and ordinances have no right to appear independently of it, and it is promised that all of them, the history of all mankind, will be given their due place within its frame, will be subordinated to it. The

¹⁶⁵ Warner, “Uncritical Reading,” 13. “Lost in a book” is in fact the title of a monograph on this subject. See Victor Nell, *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988), esp. 1: “Reading for pleasure is an extraordinary activity. The black squiggles on the white page are still as the grave, colorless as the moonlit desert; but they give the skilled reader a pleasure as acute as the touch of a loved body.”

Scripture stories do not...court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please and enchant us—they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels.¹⁶⁶

Auerbach's point is restated by Sternberg in terms of a categorical opposition between "fiction" and "historiography." Challenging Alter's assertion that "prose fiction is the best general rubric for describing biblical narrative," Sternberg argues that biblical narrative "illegitimizes any thought of fictionality on pain of excommunication."¹⁶⁷ Daniel Boyarin comes down, with qualifications, on Alter's side of the debate by pointing out that when Sternberg says the Bible demands we "suspend our disbelief," Sternberg is drawing this notion of suspension from "a practice which belongs in our culture to the reading of fiction, not historiography."¹⁶⁸ As we saw earlier, though, Sternberg's thesis is that belief is elicited through the strategic deployment of particular narrative techniques—a view which Alter shares—and so I confess I don't see how Boyarin's intervention makes a difference. Whether the Bible is conceived of as prose fiction or historiography, both Alter and Sternberg hold that its poetics precedes and produces its authority. Critical reading allows the reader to keep the Bible at a distance, to read it without believing in it (be it temporarily or definitively). As Saba Mahmood writes, "unlike religious belief, critique is predicated upon a necessary distantiation between the subject and object and some form of reasoned deliberation. This understanding of critique is often counterposed to religious reading

¹⁶⁶ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 15.

¹⁶⁷ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 24; Sternberg, *Poetics*, 34.

¹⁶⁸ Daniel Boyarin, "Placing Reading: Ancient Israel and Modern Europe," in Jonathan Boyarin, *The Ethnography of Reading* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1993), 10-37, at 25-30. See also Daniel Boyarin, "Take the Bible for Example: Midrash as Literary Theory," in Alexander Gellay, *Unruly Examples: The Rhetoric of Exemplarity* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), 27-47, which again treats the Sternberg-Alter debate. Cf. Raphael Loewe, "The 'Plain' Meaning of Scripture in Early Jewish Exegesis," in Joseph G. Weiss, *Papers of the Institute of Jewish Studies, London, Vol. 1* (Lanham: UP of America, 1989), 140-85, at 172-75, on the meaning of מַשָּׁל (*mashal*) as "fiction," in the sense of "not factually true," in rabbinic exegesis. I discuss Loewe's article in more detail below.

practices where the subject is understood to be so mired in the object that she cannot achieve the distance necessary.”¹⁶⁹ Mahmood means “religious” literally, but it could just as easily be taken in Said’s figurative sense, because pleasure reading and religious reading function, in the critical imaginary, as the two faces of a single uncritical coin. Whether it’s truth or entertainment the reader seeks, either way she is likely to get what she wants.

¹⁶⁹ Saba Mahmood, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?,” in Talal Asad, et. al., *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, 2nd ed. (New York: Fordham UP, 2013), 58-94, at 84.

See also Asad, *Formations*, 10-11: “The present discourse about the roots of ‘Islamic terrorism’ in Islamic texts trails two intriguing assumptions: (a) that the Qur’anic text will force Muslims to be guided by it; and (b) that Christians and Jews are free to interpret the Bible as they please. For no good reason, these assumptions take up contradictory positions between text and reader: on the one hand, the religious *text* is held to be determinate, fixed in its sense, and having the power to bring about particular beliefs (that in turn give rise to particular behavior) among those exposed to it – rendering readers passive. On the other hand, the religious *reader* is taken to be actively engaged in constructing the meaning of texts in accordance with changing social circumstances – so the texts are passive.... A magical quality is attributed to Islamic religious texts, for they are said to be both essentially univocal...and infectious.... In fact in Islam as in Christianity there is a complicated history of shifting interpretations, and the distinction is recognized between the divine text and the human approaches to it.”

Asad’s point is well taken. However, what I am trying to show in this chapter is that the Jewish and Christian Bibles, too, are imagined by Western secularists to be “magical” in similar ways. *Pace* Asad, I think that in all three cases the text is liable to be active *or* passive, because the decisive difference is not in the text but the disciplinary formation of the reader. “Fundamentalist” Christian and Jewish readers are also understood as vulnerable to manipulation by the scriptural text, and if the assumption about the Qur’an’s magically coercive power is more widespread in the political media today, this is because Muslims tend to be figured far more monolithically than Christians or Jews as unenlightened, uncritical readers. (Even Jonathan Culler is careful to specify that he is repulsed only by the biblical justifications of Israeli policies by Orthodox Jewry, not Jewish biblical interpretation in general.) If I am right, then while the asymmetry Asad detects is doubtless due in part to this reductive representation of Muslim readers as uncritical, the truly damning implication of his observation is the persistent belief among Western secularists that the Qur’an is, in fact, not more magical but rather *more bloodthirsty* than the Jewish and Christian scriptures. The upshot is another iteration of the irony I’ve been tracking throughout the chapter: the secularist picture of religion is itself an ideological mystification which forecloses certain social possibilities.

On the literary dimensions – both poetic and disciplinary – of the Qur’an, cf. Hoda El Shakry, *The Literary Qur’an: Narrative Ethics in the Maghreb* (New York: Fordham UP, 2019).

Critical reading, in this light, is a discipline of subject-formation, a learned and repeated technical practice of self-denial, an economic regulation of readerly desires. It may even be called, as indeed it has been by Geoffrey Galt Harpham in a remarkable book, “ascetic.” “A properly ‘critical’ act of reading,” Harpham writes, “is marked by the confrontation of a certain impulse or ‘libidinal position’ with a limit.... Interpretation can thus be conceived as an issue of desire...., an issue of ascesis, of the double energy of impulse and limit, self and nonself.” Harpham, however, imagines the “limit” as constituted by the alterity of the text; in the discourse we are examining here, the text actually does “engage...our wishes and longings”—unless we are sufficiently sovereign to put a brake on the libidinal process of reading.¹⁷⁰

3.4.3. In search of the plain sense

In the eyes of Berlin and Damrosch, a critic like Alter is inadvertently “doing midrash.” The title of Alter’s book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, already betrays from the start a naïve faith in “art” that reeks, to the poeticists, of aesthetic mystification and the desire to restore what secularist criticism has subtracted. In the grand closing statement of his book, Alter writes of things forbidden: “pleasure,” “delight,” “artfulness,” “imaginative play,” and “enjoyment.”¹⁷¹ He believes that “by learning to enjoy the biblical stories more fully *as stories*, we shall also come to see more clearly *what they mean to tell us* about God, man, and the perilously momentous realm of history.”¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1987), 239-40.

¹⁷¹ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 234-35.

¹⁷² Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 235, emphases mine.

In “On the Bible as Literature,” as I noted earlier, Berlin associates literary criticism not only with secularism, but also with exegesis and *peshat*; midrash, by contrast, is associated with eisegesis and *derash*. Literary criticism sticks to the plain sense, holding itself back from *derash*’s exorbitant, alluring flights of association, distortion, interpolation, and assorted other types of hermeneutical fancy and fun. “Literary criticism,” Berlin writes, “becomes *true* midrash only when it reads its own literary values into the text.”

Peshat and *derash* are themselves rabbinic terms, and the rabbis did not exclusively or even primarily practice the latter: there is much in the midrashic literature which could be considered *peshat*. Berlin’s dyads are designed to point up the (valorized) asceticism of critical reading. Whereas the rabbis, unable to control themselves, start with *peshat* and extend into *derash*, the literary critics rigorously limit themselves to *peshat*. If they lapse into *derash*, their discourse becomes “true midrash” and, therefore, ceases to be critical. *Peshat*, then, is what everyone has in common: everyone reads *peshat*, but only some readers go “beyond” *peshat* to *derash*, just as everyone can read the Bible as literature, but only some will then want to “return” to reading it as holy scripture. The distinction thus recapitulates Berlin’s subtraction story about the Bible being “fair game for everybody.”

The idea that midrash is distinguished by its deviation from *peshat* is widespread. It shows up even in the work of professional historians of ancient and medieval Judaism. Geza Vermes, for example, writes that the rabbis “took care to distinguish between a *peshat* or plain sense and a *derash* or derived sense of scripture.”¹⁷³ But how accurate is this idea? The distinction Vermes and Berlin refer to is not well-attested by rabbinic texts of the tannaitic and

¹⁷³ Geza Vermes, “Bible and Midrash: Early Old Testament Exegesis,” in P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Bible, Volume 1: From the Beginnings to Jerome* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970), 199-231, at 223.

amoraic periods (the periods during which the major midrashic anthologies were compiled). The earliest rabbi to whom a hermeneutical distinction of *peshat* and *derash* is attributed in rabbinic literature is R. Abbaye, who designates a pair of interpretations of Ben Sira as *peshat* and *derash*, respectively, in BT *Sanhedrin* 100b. As Raphael Loewe glosses the passage, “for Abbaye, whereas פשט dispenses with any fortuitous link [between two texts], דרש requires such a link as its starting point.” In the Bavli, contemporaries of R. Abbaye are quoted as using *peshat* to denote the explicit meaning of a text and those implications, including the converse, which may be logically derived from this meaning. But this usage of *peshat* was not firmly established; while, as Loewe continues, “for Abbaye’s contemporary Rava...the term *peshat* apparently did mean the natural and explicit meaning of the text,” a generation later “it was possible for R. Kahana, though a talmudist of many years’ standing, to have remained in ignorance of it.”¹⁷⁴ In fact, Loewe argues, there is no basis for the notion of

‘plain literalism’ as a formal branch of rabbinic exegesis ought, up to the end of the period of the Talmuds and the midrashim, be abandoned. [...T]he gropings in that direction are but sporadic and scarcely ever more than semi-articulate; and...in effect patient of much subjective twisting. ... If we look for a self-conscious positive concept of plain exegesis up to the end of the talmudic period we shall, I think, look in vain, even though the occurrence of exegetical remarks that qualify for the description ‘plain’ may be empirically demonstrated. The conventional distinction between *peshat* and *derash* must be jettisoned. The subjective element can never be completely eliminated from the study of a text....¹⁷⁵

Earlier and sharper than the barely articulated rabbinic distinction of *peshat* and *derash* was the one drawn by patristic and medieval Christian exegetes between the literal and the

¹⁷⁴ Loewe, “‘Plain’ Meaning,” 162, 164, 164-65, 165-66. See W. Bacher, *Die älteste Terminologie der jüdischen Schriftauslegung*, cited in Loewe, “‘Plain Meaning,” 154n43 and 162n101. Loewe’s examples for these statements are BT *Sanhedrin* 100b and BT *Ketubot* 38a-b.

¹⁷⁵ Loewe, “‘Plain’ Meaning,” 180-81, 183. The last sentence is illustrated with R. Judah’s definition of Torah as *midrash Torah* in a halakhic context in BT *Kiddushin* 49a-b.

figurative senses of scripture. Rabbinic interpretation was associated by the Church Fathers with the literal meaning of scripture, because the Jews rejected the typological interpretation of the Hebrew Bible as Christianity's Old Testament; midrash was, in this sense, reading according to "the letter" rather than "the spirit." Thus, the literal sense was known as the *sensus Judaicus* as distinguished from the *sensus spiritualis* or *mysticus*. For Origen and his followers, the Jews were a *carnalis populus* ("people of the flesh," rather than the spirit) and *amici litterae* ("friends of the letter").¹⁷⁶

The designation of the literal sense as "Jewish" in part affirms the notion that "it was on this ground of *peshat* that Jews and Christians met as Bible scholars in a common search for the truth of the Bible, irrespective of their theological presuppositions," as Erwin Rosenthal suggests,¹⁷⁷ but it is also the case that the tropes of the *sensus Judaicus* and the *carnalis populus* were themselves "theological presuppositions" of Christian exegetes, and highly polemical presuppositions at that. From the Christian perspective, the Jews *only* read literally, refusing to relinquish from the letter. While this might initially seem to align the rabbis with critical reading, the Christian figuration of the letter as the "flesh" of the Word, the carnal and worldly dimension, made the rabbinic refusal to take that extra step into the opposite of ascetic figures; rabbinic rigor was symptomatic of carnal, undisciplined, indulgent reading, giving into worldly desires. In his commentary on Psalms, Augustine writes:

The Jew carries a book, from which the Christian believes. Our librarians are what they have become, just as it is customary for slaves to carry books behind their masters, so that those who carry lose, and those who read gain.... So what kind of reproach is it, brethren, when they read this verse and they who are themselves blind turn toward their own

¹⁷⁶ Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, "The Study of the Bible in Medieval Judaism," in G. W. H. Lampe, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Bible, Volume 2: The West from the Fathers to the Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969), 252-79, at 256.

¹⁷⁷ Rosenthal, "Study of the Bible," 256.

mirror? The appearance of the Jews in the holy scripture which they carry is just like the face of a blind man in a mirror; by others he is seen, by himself not seen.¹⁷⁸

“What the Church holds against the Synagogue is not so much its blindness as its stubbornness,” comments Geoffrey Hartman, “its continuance in blindness. The chosen people might have seen the truth. It is not God who limits their role: they limit themselves until their vision becomes opaque.”¹⁷⁹ Instead of reading what, as Berlin puts it, “is there in the text”—the Hebrew scriptures’ foretelling of the coming of Christ—the rabbis will do anything, in this polemical caricature, *not* to understand the text correctly. Their love of the letter becomes excessive when, running up against the limits of (what the Christians say is) the “plain sense,” they opt to keep going rather than confront what that “plain sense” really means.

Hartman reads this Christian anti-Judaism through Kant’s essay on *Aufklärung*: “Israel...refuses to be mature, to emerge from its self-imposed minority.”¹⁸⁰ The comparison is illuminating. Critical reading, as Foucault argues, may be “historical biblical,” but the subtraction story secularist criticism tells about itself begins, not with “secularization” (whenever *that* is said to have commenced), but with the Christian supersession of the Jews. Once the reader has removed, through the ascetic practice of critical reading, what Paul specifically refers to as “the veil of Moses” (2 Cor. 3:13-16, commenting on Exod. 34:29-35), “the text itself” may finally be read for what it “actually” means. The trope that the post-Kantian tradition of critical reading continually recirculates is the New Testament trope of the jealous Pharisee or the medieval one of the arcane, obstinate rabbi, reconfigured and retrofitted for each fresh conflict of

¹⁷⁸ Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms*, quoted and trans. by Jill Robbins, *Prodigal Son / Elder Brother: Interpretation and Alterity in Augustine, Petrarch, Kafka, and Lévinas* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1991), 6, Latin at 146-47n16, trans. mod.

¹⁷⁹ Geoffrey H. Hartman, “Meaning, Error, Text,” *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985): 145-49, at 148.

¹⁸⁰ Hartman, “Meaning, Error, Text,” 148.

interpretations—or subtraction stories. Even within Judaism, the rabbis solidified the distinction between *peshat* and *derash* for polemical rather than strictly hermeneutical reasons during the medieval dispute with the Karaites.¹⁸¹ The notion of a reliable distinction, operative in rabbinic midrash as a hermeneutical principle, between the plain and applied senses is both retrospectively imposed and polemically motivated. On Berlin's own terms, the distinction of *peshat* and *derash*, thus conceived, is itself *derash*. She is reading her own literary values into the rabbinic text, and thus her own critical writing becomes “true midrash.”

In “The Plain Sense of Things,” his contribution to *Midrash and Literature*, Frank Kermode suggests that “the plain sense of things is always dependent on the understanding of larger wholes and on changing custom and authority.”¹⁸² However, Kermode adds—and as Kafka's parable “Before the Law” hints—authority may turn out to be in the eye of the beholder. It is subject to constant historical, linguistic, hermeneutical, traditional, and cultural change. So the plain sense is “always changing”:

Time itself changes it, however much authority may resist. It must, of course, do so. And it cannot do so if it fails to preserve its foundation text; and, short of keeping that text out of unauthorized hands, it cannot prevent readers from making their imaginative additions.... Among the thousands of commentators there have been literalists of the imagination and also extravagant poets. But all have in their measure to be creators, even if they wish to imagine themselves at the end of imagination...; there may be silence, but it is silence of a sort, never zero silence.¹⁸³

“Authority” is the keyword. *Peshat* itself, as Loewe demonstrates, had in Hebrew of the tannaitic and amoraic periods the basic meaning not of “plain,” “literal,” or “clear,” but of “authoritative.” “[...T]he corollary of the teacher's power to teach,” he argues,

¹⁸¹ See Rosenthal, “Study of the Bible,” 257.

¹⁸² Frank Kermode, “The Plain Sense of Things,” in *Midrash and Literature*, 179-94, at 190.

¹⁸³ Kermode, “The Plain Sense of Things,” 191, 193.

is the acknowledgement of that power: indeed, it is upon such acknowledgement that the authority of what he teaches ultimately rests. ... What an 'authoritative' teacher has to teach will, it is true, generally secure immediate recognition as being 'authoritative' if it is popularly palatable and palpably in line with tradition; but where innovations are concerned, if they are of a radical character, acknowledgement of the innovator's 'authority' will not usually be forthcoming unless his own transparent sincerity and force of character command it. The scales are weighted in favor of conservatism. *Peshat*, therefore, means *authoritative teaching* in two possible senses. Either...teaching propounded by an authoritative teacher, or teaching recognized by the public as authoritative, since familiar and traditional.¹⁸⁴

By way of conclusion, I want to suggest that the literary approach does read *peshat*, in this precise rabbinic sense—and not in the sense of Berlin's *derash* on the word *peshat*.

The literary approach posits the literary text as “the text itself,” the fundamental object, the universally available substrate over which the veil of religion is thrown. It posits this in practice even when, as in the case of Sternberg, in theory the critic insists on the circularity of source and discourse and the attendant need to shuttle back and forth between the two. And it does this even when, as in the case of Bal, the critic's thesis is that the object cannot be totally comprehended. Thus we are frequently told of the reality behind the illusion; of things prior, “history,” which turn out to be things posterior (a reversal familiar to readers of the Gospels); of the actual and the ideological; of objects and subjects. Distancing himself from midrash, Alter criticizes the rabbis for lacking a “sense of it [the biblical text] as a *real* narrative continuum.” Deviating from what's “real,” the narrative continuum, that is, the *peshat*, the rabbis of *Bereshith Rabbah* instead “provide...exegeses of specific phrases or narrated actions but not *continuous* readings of the biblical narratives: small pieces of the text become the foundations of elaborate

¹⁸⁴ Loewe, “‘Plain’ Meaning,” 180-81.

homiletical structures that have only an intermittent relation to the *integral* story told by the text.”¹⁸⁵

Put a little historical pressure on this notion that the biblical narratives are *properly* wholes which the rabbis then slice and dice at will, and its chronological purchase grows tenuous. When John Locke complained, in the posthumously published *Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* (1707), that the division of the Bible into chapters and verses impeded newly literate readers’ appreciation of its larger narrative units, he was not calling back nostalgically to a time when the Bible *was* read continuously—Catholic exegesis was, if anything, less continuous than Protestant exegesis—but, on the contrary, offering “something of an innovation”;¹⁸⁶ it was only with “certain perverse uses of the book” that developed in Locke’s lifetime, such as novel-reading, that “the teleological drive from page to page mitigate[d] against dipping about or turning back,” as Peter Stallybrass wittily puts it.¹⁸⁷ Indeed, the codex technology itself—“the technology that Christianity had used and refined from the second century CE”—was, Stallybrass reminds us, deliberately adopted by early Christians to distinguish their Bible from that of the Jews. The ability, supplied by the codex, to “flick...back and forth between the Jewish scriptures, the Gospels, and the Epistles” is not innocuous, but materializes a *theological stance* toward the Old Testament.¹⁸⁸ This stance was largely retained, contrary to received stereotypes, by Protestant “literalism,” so often credited with “initiating the

¹⁸⁵ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 11, emphases mine.

¹⁸⁶ Warner, “Uncritical Reading,” 30.

¹⁸⁷ Peter Stallybrass, “Books and Scrolls: Navigating the Bible,” in Jennifer Andersen and Elizabeth Sauer, eds., *Books and Readers in Early Modern England: Material Studies* (Philadelphia: U. Penn. Press, 2001), 42-77, at 46-47. The first volume of John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, which probably did more than any other single book to promote continuous reading in Christian Anglo-America, appeared in 1678.

¹⁸⁸ Stallybrass, “Books and Scrolls,” 50.

practice which novel-readers would later naturalize.”¹⁸⁹ “When cultural critics nostalgically recall an imagined past in which readers unscrolled their books continuously from beginning to end, they are reversing the long history of the codex and the printed book as indexical forms. The novel has only been a brilliantly perverse interlude in the long history of discontinuous reading,” writes Stallybrass. “To imagine continuous reading as the norm in reading a book is radically reactionary: it is to read a codex as if it were a scroll, from beginning to end.”¹⁹⁰

It would seem, then, that Alter’s notion of a biblical narrative as a “real continuum” is one inherited from the modern history of the novel, which is itself a radical upending of the longer history of the codex as a technology for *dis*continuous reading. This is not surprising; in his professional capacity, Alter came to the Hebrew Bible after first establishing himself as a scholar of modern English, French, and Hebrew prose fiction. But the genealogy of narrative continuity—European, Protestant, bourgeois—is important to bear in mind, because it helps us see how Alter’s understanding of biblical narrative, which he compares to “prose fiction,” is no closer to something verifiably “actual,” “real,” or “objective” than the midrash he criticizes for the same reason. The rabbis did, it’s true, read scrolls, not codices, but their scroll-bound reading of the Bible is hardly as smooth as the contrast with the Christian codex implies. The rabbis may jump from one part of the canon to another on the most audacious or tendentious of links, but midrash doesn’t stand out, in the history of Jewish and Christian Bible-reading, as *especially* discontinuous. Alter’s reading, however, *does* stand out—as especially *continuous*. From a rabbinic perspective, in fact, the continuity of contiguous elements within a large chunk of text

¹⁸⁹ Stallybrass, “Books and Scrolls,” 48. Cf. Patrick Collinson, “The Coherence of the Text, How It Hangeth Together: The Bible in Reformation England,” in W. P. Stephens, ed., *The Bible, the Reformation, and the Church* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 84-108.

¹⁹⁰ Stallybrass, “Books and Scrolls,” 47-48.

does not tell us much about the synchronic unity of the biblical text. For the rabbis, it is rather the discontinuous discourse of part and part which performatively restates the wholeness of the whole. “There is no early or late in the Torah.”

To read biblical narratives continuously and progressively, from beginning to end, is not a modern invention. The rabbis, of course, were not ignorant of biblical narratives, even if these do not constitute the main unit of rabbinic interpretation; they loved to spin off narratives of their own—elaborations of biblical narratives, pseudobiographical stories about the sages themselves, and the *meshalim*. But continuous and progressive reading is a modern *imperative*, one with roots in literary fiction and historical-critical scholarship. That it seems so natural that Alter is tempted to call its object “real” only points up the fact that this style of reading is *peshat*, an authoritative teaching which has been “popularly received, and transmitted into the body of conventional or ‘orthodox’ opinion.”¹⁹¹ This is not to proffer another subtraction story, yet another critical method to enter into the interminable game of academic one-upmanship, but simply to recall that much *peshat* began as *derash*, and that a literary reading of the Bible might do well to start by asking on whose authority the traditions of secularist criticism have been passed down, and whether there is anything to learn from its bad examples.

¹⁹¹ Loewe, “Plain Meaning,” 180-81, 183.

CHAPTER FOUR

RE-CIRCUMCISIONS:

JUDAISM AND PSYCHOANALYSIS IN SUSAN HANDELMAN'S

THE SLAYERS OF MOSES

So the aphorisms of the fathers are confirmed: *One mistake always produces another!*

—Leopold Zunz, “Etwas über die rabbinische Literatur”

No one gets through here, least of all with a message from a dead man. —
But you sit by your window and dream it to yourself, when evening comes.

—Franz Kafka, “An Imperial Message”

4.1. Séance with Freud

At Yale University in the autumn of 1988, the historian of Judaism Yosef Yerushalmi delivered the annual Franz Rosenzweig Lectures. His topic, originally proposed in 1986, was Sigmund Freud's last published book, *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* (1939).¹ When the lectures were published in 1991 as *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable*,

Epigraphs: Leopold Zunz, “Etwas über die rabbinische Literatur,” trans. James Adam Redfield, in Christine Hayes, ed., *Classic Essays in Rabbinic Culture and History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 27–42, at 39; Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1961), 14, trans. mine.

¹ The standard English translation of the Freud's text is *Moses and Monotheism*, a rendering which loses some crucial resonances of the German; I will refer to it throughout by my own translation of the title, *The Man Moses and Monotheistic Religion*, or *The Man Moses* for short. Quotations are from Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage, 1967); where I have modified the translation, I have done so with reference to Freud, *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion: Schriften über die Religion* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1975).

Yerushalmi attached to it a preface acknowledging that the text might prove controversial: “I would merely hope,” he writes,

that I shall be criticized for what I have said and done, not for what I never intended to say or do. Indeed, old-fashioned as it may sound, the question of an author’s conscious intentionality and the belief that such intentions are to a large extent recoverable by the reader are among the pivots of this book. This does not mean that I hold that the effort at linkage between author and reader exhausts the possibilities of the act of reading.²

Yerushalmi proceeds to “indicate those of my intentions that are most liable to be misunderstood, and I shall do so in the most succinct manner possible, by stating them negatively.” The first three of these are:

1. This book is not an attempt to prove that psychoanalysis is ‘Jewish,’ though eventually it is concerned to inquire whether Freud thought it to be so, which is a very different matter.
2. The book itself is not intended as an exploration of Freud’s life or Jewish identity except insofar as these become vital to explore the meaning of *Moses and Monotheism*.
3. Except for the depth and intensity of Jewish identity and commitment, and a rejection of any interpretation that would regard *Moses and Monotheism* as a repudiation of that identity or even ambivalence toward it, this book does not attempt to reach closure on any of the themes of which it treats. On the contrary, one of its central purposes is to reopen questions concerning Freud which have generally been regarded as foreclosed in the scholarly literature.³

Yet these stipulations are belied by the fifth and final lecture in *Freud’s Moses*, “Monologue with Freud.” In this lecture, a virtuosic 19-page apostrophe addressed directly to the ghost of “Dear and most highly esteemed Professor Freud,” Yerushalmi weaves together a variety of sources, from rabbinic midrash to *The Man Moses* to Anna Freud’s speech occasioned by the founding of the Sigmund Freud Professorship at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

² Yosef Yerushalmi, *Freud’s Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993), xvii.

³ Yerushalmi, *Freud’s Moses*, xvii–xviii.

The apostrophic mode allows Yerushalmi to achieve an unsettling rhetorical effect: by framing his monologue as a “monologue *with* Freud” (rather than merely an address *to* Freud), riddled with deference to the “Professor” and questions that go unanswered, and moreover by staging its oral delivery at Yale as permitting the “audience [to] eavesdrop,”⁴ Yerushalmi performs humility and openness to error with the one hand while simultaneously positioning himself in the position of the authority to “speak in [Freud’s] name.” For the ghost of course cannot respond, being a fiction, although it is frequently invited to:

Professor Freud, at this point I find it futile to ask whether, genetically or structurally, psychoanalysis is a Jewish science; that we shall know, if it is at all knowable, only when much future work has been done. Much will depend, of course, on how the very terms *Jewish* and *science* are to be defined. Right now, leaving the semantic and epistemological questions aside, I want only to know whether *you* ultimately came to believe it to be so.

In fact, I will limit myself even further and be content if you answer only one question: When your daughter conveyed those words to the congress in Jerusalem, *was she speaking in your name?*

Please tell me, Professor. I promise I won’t reveal your answer to anyone.⁵

Yerushalmi thus gets to set the terms of the lecture and to preordain its argumentative conclusion while appearing to do exactly the opposite.

For instance, on the first page of the monologue, Yerushalmi writes: “In what is at issue here, indeed has been so all along, we both have, as Jews, equal stake. Therefore in speaking of the Jews I shall not say ‘they.’ I shall say ‘we.’ The distinction is familiar to you.”⁶ But would Freud himself have accepted this initiation into the first-person plural “we,” “the Jews”? There

⁴ Yerushalmi, *Freud’s Moses*, 81.

⁵ Yerushalmi, *Freud’s Moses*, 100, italics in original.

⁶ Yerushalmi, *Freud’s Moses*, 81. The allusion appears to be to Freud’s opening sentences. See *Moses and Monotheism*, 3; *Der Mann Moses*, 25: “To deny a people the man whom it praises as the greatest of its sons is not a deed to be undertaken lightly—especially by one belonging to that people. No consideration, however, will move me to set aside truth in favor of supposed national interests.”

is, in fact, plenty of evidence to suggest—contrary to the third stipulation in the preface to *Freud's Moses*—that Freud was far from unambivalent on this point, having “claimed his distance from Judaism on account of his own break with Jewish practice and tradition.”⁷ But Yerushalmi will not allow Freud’s own disavowal to stand: in a moment of what Jacques Derrida, in his critique of *Freud's Moses*, refers to as “archive fever [*mal d’archive*],” Yerushalmi leverages not only the apostrophic form but also evidence from the Freudian archive—in this case, a Tanakh which Sigmund Freud owned as a child and which his father Jakob had rebound and gifted to him on his thirty-fifth birthday, now with a Hebrew *melitzah* inscription—to “recircumcise”⁸ Freud, that is, to recall him to the Jewish fold despite himself. As Sarah Hammerschlag explains, for Yerushalmi, “Freud belongs to the Jewish community by virtue of his ability to understand its terms”—here, Jakob’s *meltizah*. “This is a knowledge that cannot be effaced and will be recalled to him as counterevidence against his own denials.”⁹ Yerushalmi distinguishes this type of Jewish identity from the religious practices and traditions which Freud deliberately renounced; the latter is “Judaism terminable,” the former “Judaism interminable.” Derrida calls this “recircumcision,” first, because Jakob’s *melitzah* literally and figuratively recalls Sigmund’s own circumcision (“In the seventh of the days of your life the spirit of the Lord began to move you”; “I have put upon [the Tanakh] a cover of new skin”),¹⁰ and, second, because like the physical rite of circumcision, Yerushalmi’s apostrophic “we” and

⁷ Sarah Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2010), 213; cf. Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses*, 11.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Mal d’archive : une impréssion freudienne* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1995), 68; Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1996), 42. Due to the problems it poses for translation, I refer to this text by its French title throughout.

⁹ Hammerschlag, *Figural Jew*, 213.

¹⁰ Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses*, 71.

his deployment of the archive alike interpellate Freud as Jewish in such a fashion that the dead man, like the infant, can neither consent nor respond:

By definition, because he is dead and thus incapable of responding, Freud can only acquiesce. He cannot refuse this community at once proposed and imposed. He can only say ‘yes’ to this covenant into which he must enter one more time. Because he will have had to enter it, already, seven or eight days after his birth. *Mutatis mutandis*, this is the situation of absolute dissymmetry and heteronomy in which a son finds himself on being circumcised after the seventh day and on being made to enter into a covenant at a moment when it is out of the question that he respond, sign, or countersign. Here again...Freud hears himself recalled to the indestructible covenant that this extraordinary performative engages – ‘I shall say “we”’ – when it is addressed to a phantom or a newborn.¹¹

This is what makes the apostrophe so unsettling: despite his performance of deference to the “father” of psychoanalysis, Yerushalmi actually functions in his monologue as a figure of that “father’s” father.

That gesture of “recircumcision”—its motives and its problematics—will preoccupy us in the present chapter. In the first three chapters of this dissertation, I’ve showed how a legacy of anti-Judaism in literary studies produced association developed in the 1970s and 1980s between, on the one hand, midrash and the writings of the Yale Critics, and, on the other, midrash and literary readings of the Hebrew Bible deemed insufficiently critical; I have been especially concerned to point out that this association is drawn up because of the historical and structural aspects of the discipline rather than as a consequence of the Jewish identity of any particular author. In this chapter, however, I want to explore how one American literary critic, Susan Handelman, relocates the affinity between midrash and Theory in authorial identity. I have begun this chapter with Yerushalmi’s reading of Freud because Freud’s contested Jewishness and its relevance for the interpretation of *The Man Moses* are very much at stake here: in her

¹¹ Derrida, *Mal d’archive*, 67–68; Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 41–42.

book *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (1982)—which I briefly discussed in Chapter 1, above—Handelman uses Freud’s own discourse, that is psychoanalysis, to “recircumcise” Freud and, in so doing, to establish a Jewish genealogy for Theory in the late twentieth century. In this respect Handelman anticipates Yerushalmi, but she is also thinking within an already established line concerning Freud, Judaism, and Jewishness, including the work of authors like David Bakan, John Murray Cuddihy, and Marthe Robert.¹²

At the heart of Handelman’s psychoanalytic interpretation is her original concept, which has much affinity with Harold Bloom’s quasi-Freudian thought, of the “heretic hermeneutic,” which functions much like Yerushalmi’s notion of “Judaism interminable” to recircumcise, that is, to shift identity beyond the purview of subjective sovereignty. In *The Slayers of Moses*, the

¹² The key antecedents here are David Bakan, *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1958); John Murray Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Lévi-Strauss, and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974); and Marthe Robert, *From Oedipus to Moses: Freud’s Jewish Identity*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New York: Anchor Books, 1976). In the years immediately following the publication of *The Slayers of Moses*, academic interest in Freud and Jewishness exploded; unlike Yerushalmi’s book, most of this later work challenged the arguments of Bakan, Cuddihy, Handelman, and Robert. See, e.g.: Peter Gay, *A Godless Jew: Freud, Atheism, and the Making of Psychoanalysis* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987); Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Antisemitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986); Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* (London: Routledge, 1991); Gilman, *The Case of Sigmund Freud: Medicine and Identity in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993); Gilman, *Freud, Race, and Gender* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993); Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1997); Alys Eve Weinbaum, *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004); Jay Geller, *On Freud’s Jewish Body: Mitigating Circumcisions* (New York: Fordham UP, 2007); and esp. Eliza Slavet, *Racial Fever: Freud and the Jewish Question* (New York: Fordham UP, 2009).

On the other hand, Ken Frieden’s *Freud’s Dream of Interpretation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) elaborates Handelman’s argument via a fairly technical comparative reading of *The Interpretation of Dreams* alongside biblical, Second Temple, rabbinic, patristic, Alexandrian, and medieval Jewish sources on dream-interpretation. *Freud’s Dream*, it’s worth noting, was positively blurred by Handelman.

“heretic hermeneutic” names the deep structure of the Judaic tradition, conceived as a chain of displacements. In the first part of this chapter, I describe how Handelman articulates this concept of the heretic hermeneutic. In the second part, I explore the implications for Handelman’s argument of her odd choice to include in her roster of “slayers of Moses” a solitary non-Jewish author: Jacques Lacan. Reading the argumentative structure of *The Slayers of Moses* for its (typo-)logic of repetition, I argue that Handelman ultimately relies upon a Pauline “spiritualization” of a genetically and ethnocentrically defined Jewish identity to stage a more radical claim for the “heretic hermeneutic” of Theory than she initially appears to do. Bruno Chaouat, a harsh critic of what he regards as the covert complicity of post-Sartrean French philosophy’s reconfiguration of Jewish identity with “the new antisemitism” remarks that Handelman’s heretic hermeneutic universalizes the particularity of Jewish identity: “Imagine that: you could read Derrida and Lacan...and basically fulfill Jewish law and the 613 *mitzvot*! Why, then, bother studying Torah? ...Why keep kosher? It [becomes] possible, indeed, to be a Jew, to feel Jewish, merely by...[r]eading, deconstructing, disseminating meaning, and splitting hairs—that was so Jewish, even rabbinic, or so we [are] told.”¹³ Chaouat’s account, which proceeds from his own narrow definition of what counts for Jewish identity, is exaggerated—Handelman neither makes nor even implies any claim about the relationship between the heretic hermeneutic and halakhic adherence—but he is right to seize on the strangeness of her argument’s stakes, her simultaneous fetishizing and universalizing the position of *Jew*.

Another reason for opening my discussion with *Freud’s Moses* has to do with Derrida’s critique of Yerushalmi’s interpretation of Freud in *Mal d’archive*. Derrida’s disagreement with

¹³ Bruno Chaouat, *Is Theory Good for the Jews?: French Thought and the Challenge of the New Antisemitism* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2020), xviii.

Yerushalmi ultimately comes down to his contention that Yerushalmi has fundamentally misunderstood the anarchic nature of signification per se. As Derrida points out, “circumcision” is itself already a *sign* for Jewish identity; Yerushalmi’s “recircumcision” thus amounts to a sign of a sign, or, a trope, which puts circumcision into circulation as something that can be re-signified and is thus vulnerable to all the appropriation—citation, falsification—which constitutively haunts all language as such. As we shall see in the third section of this chapter, this debased form of signification which draws attention to its spectral repetition is what Derrida calls “literature.” Derrida’s concept of literature is integral for understanding how “recircumcision” works in *The Slayers of Moses*, because it is precisely during her reading of Derrida’s 1975 essay on the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature, “Le facteur de la vérité,” that Handelman misinterprets Derrida, and furthermore it is only on the basis of this misinterpretation that the Pauline concept of the heretic hermeneutic can successfully perform its recircumcising function.

4.2. Genealogy is not a metaphor

The logic of Handelman’s argument in *The Slayers of Moses* is already established by the end of its opening sentence: “Modern criticism is haunted indeed.”¹⁴ The reader will be forgiven for finding this opening confusing, however, because in the “Methodological Preface” that ensues, Handelman emphasizes repeatedly, italics and all, that her argument is *not* “historical” but “structural” in method:

¹⁴ Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982), xiii. This text henceforth abbreviated in citations as *SM*.

To try to prove that a Jewish background has some influence on even the most avowedly secular Jews is a difficult and complicated task. Even if one leaves this question entirely aside, the fact remains, however, that there are striking and profound *structural* affinities between the work of some of our most recent and influential (Jewish) thinkers like Freud, Derrida, and Bloom, and Rabbinic models of interpretation.... Perhaps, then, it is an appropriate moment to try to illuminate some of these theological specters haunting contemporary criticism. In this work...I have sought not so much to trace the *historical* influence of Christianity or Judaism on the history of criticism as to examine by a comparative method the general *structural* models of interpretation, which may roughly be labeled Rabbinic and Patristic, and their relation to theories of meaning in certain thinkers. [...] I by no means intend to imply...that Freud, Lacan, and Derrida are Rabbinic simply because some of the same principles resurface in their work. The main issues constantly are: What do these principles reflect about the authors' understanding of texts, meaning, language, and interpretation? ...I have concentrated on Freud, Lacan, Derrida, and Bloom because they seminal thinkers and major influences on literary study today. (In addition, all but Lacan are Jewish.)¹⁵

As David Stern points out in his review for *Prooftexts*, "Moses-side: Midrash and Contemporary Literary Criticism" (1984), the very organization of *The Slayers of Moses* immediately puts these claims into question. Part I deals with the ancients (Plato, Aristotle, the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, Paul, Philo, Origen, Augustine, the rabbis), Part II with the moderns (Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Harold Bloom).¹⁶ Part I is even titled "*Historical* Background: The Interpretive Agon of Greek, Jew, and Christian," although the preface that precedes it has just insisted that the purpose is not to provide *historical* background but rather a *structural* point of comparison. Part II, meanwhile, is called "The Slayers of Moses: Freud, Lacan, Derrida, Bloom, and the Dark Side of Displacement." Handelman's rhetoric tells the very story she insists she is not telling and doesn't want to tell. If Moses was slain, he must have lived; for something to be displaced, it must first have been in place. (We will revise these seemingly obvious statements when we turn to Derrida later in this chapter.) The reference to Freud's *The Man*

¹⁵ *SM*, xv–xvii, emphases in original.

¹⁶ David Stern, "Moses-side: Midrash and Contemporary Literary Criticism," *Prooftexts* 4.2 (May 1984): 193-204.

Moses recalls that book's obsessive concern with repetitions, transmission, traditions. The recurring references to ghosts, specters, and hauntings—Shakespeare's *Hamlet* will be quoted before the preface is done—likewise evoke a diachronic plot: a life, a death, a ghostly return or lingering. The word "emergence" in Handelman's subtitle implies a prior submergence, just as "resurface" in the passage quoted above implies that "the same principles" must once have been above the surface before going under.

The "structuralist midrash" Handelman promises in the "Methodological Preface" is nowhere to be found in *The Slayers of Moses*.¹⁷ It was foreclosed from the start—from the moment she chose to arrange the chapters chronologically. The reader's passage from Part I to Part II, from the first chapter to the last, from the ancients to the moderns inscribes a historical narrative into the book whether Handelman means for it to do so or not. Perhaps the "structural affinities" between midrash and literary theory might have been foregrounded had Handelman inverted the order of the two parts—but then again, this might not have helped much at all, since the reader is sure to know in advance that the modern thinkers are modern and the ancient ones, ancient. It is the cutting-edge contemporaneity of the four modern authors, their "major influence" on literary theory of the early 1980s, that is supposed to be the source of the book's attraction. The implied reader of *The Slayers of Moses* is established as belated, not just chronologically but also intellectually, with respect to Freud, Lacan, Derrida, and Bloom; likewise, it's the archaism of those ancient texts which makes the "emergence" of their "principles" in modern so scandalous as to merit a monograph.

Signs continue to proliferate throughout the "Methodological Preface" that Handelman is actually deeply invested in a historical argument. The most intriguing of these, as well the most

¹⁷ *SM*, xv.

controversial, are the parenthetical qualifications. “To try to prove that a Jewish background has some influence on even the most avowedly secular Jews is a difficult and complicated task. Even if one leaves this question entirely aside, the fact remains, however, that there are striking and profound *structural* affinities between the work of some of our most recent and influential (Jewish) thinkers like Freud, Derrida, and Bloom, and Rabbinic models of interpretation...” If Handelman *isn't* “trying to prove that a Jewish background has some influence on even the most avowedly secular Jews,” then why mention that Freud, Derrida, and Bloom are “(Jewish)” at all? If it *does* matter that they are “(Jewish),” then what is Lacan doing in *Slayers* at all? Alternatively, if the “structural affinities” with midrash are present in Lacan’s texts no less than in Derrida’s, Bloom’s, or Freud’s, then why does Handelman bother pointing out, again using parentheses as rhetorico-typographical alibi, that “(...all [four modern authors] *except Lacan* are Jewish)”?

For, prefatory proclamation notwithstanding, Handelman does, in fact, set out “to prove that a Jewish background has some influence on even the most avowedly secular Jews” in *The Slayers of Moses*, much as Yerushalmi, *his* preface notwithstanding, sets out to prove as much about Freud. She’s correct about this being “a difficult and complicated task,” not only because of the dubious nature of the proof but also because of how the terms *Judaism*, *Jewish*, and *Jew* operate here. Describing the Protestant assumptions of twentieth-century philosophical hermeneutics, Handelman writes that these arose “in a milieu that had excluded Jews from participating in its intellectual, mercantile, and general cultural life since the Middle Ages. And yet,” she continues, “this exclusion of the Jews ultimately goes back to the great debate precisely over the issue of interpretation – interpretation of the Bible. This original conflict of interpretation, we may say, led to the rejection of the Jewish interpretive science of

psychoanalysis two thousand years later.”¹⁸ This passage draws Stern’s attention in “Moses-cide”: “In what concrete sense is it possible to say that the original conflict of interpretation—when, presumably, Christianity parted from Judaism in the first and second centuries—*led* to the rejection of psychoanalysis nearly two thousand years later?” he asks. “Furthermore, does Handelman mean that psychoanalysis was attacked *because* it was a Jewish science? Or—this would seem more likely though it would still have to be proven—because its founder was Jewish? But if so, what does this have to do with hermeneutics?”¹⁹ Was psychoanalysis rejected as a “Jewish science” out of anti-Judaism, which is to say, as a conflict between hermeneutical methodologies? Or was it, rather, out of antisemitism, in which case the issue was an ethnocentric prejudice of a hegemonically Christian culture?

Actually, *The Slayers of Moses* isn’t ambiguous at all on this point. In her Freud chapter, Handelman explicitly states that it was the former (anti-Judaism). In the sentences Stern quotes, she even seems to locate the genesis of any racialized antisemitism that Freud experienced in the primal scene of that late-ancient exegetical schism over the interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures, etiologically subordinating subsequent developments in the history of Jewry to that moment. Even when the Jews are the target of racial enmity, it’s implied that this is really only a “displacement” of the conflict of interpretations in the first and second centuries CE. There is thus nothing contingent or material in Handelman’s account of Jewish history; from Paul the Apostle (to whom we’ll return shortly) on through to the rejection of psychoanalysis, it is a Jewish way of reading biblical texts—*midrash*—which sets in motion the lachrymose juggernaut of oppression and catastrophe.

¹⁸ *SM*, 130.

¹⁹ Stern, “Moses-cide,” 199.

Despite her tendency to read all of Western history as the echo of a primal conflict of Judaic and (Greco-)Christian interpretations, which would seem to imply anti-Judaism rather than antisemitism, Handelman nevertheless narrates a history with a streak of ethnocentric essentialism. The conflict of interpretations she sketches in Part I of *The Slayers of Moses* is never simply a question of how to interpret the Hebrew Bible in light of Christian messianism. The continuity of anti-Judaism and antisemitism in her narrative relies on a concept of midrash as the hermeneutic proper to a particular group of people defined by common kinship and shared experiences and traditions, even a biologically determined psyche. When midrash is imagined as innate to the psyche of the Jews as a noncontingently defined kin group, modern racial antisemitism becomes an *effect* of the Christian repudiation of midrash in late antiquity; “Jewry” names an ethnic continuity across this whole history, but their ethnic difference becomes the object of hatred only with the emergence of the scientific idea of race in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Stern suggests in a sentence that describes well Handelman’s project, one motive for the midrash-Theory connection in the 1980s was the quest for “a genealogy, a precursor, for theory itself.” In Handelman’s thinking, though, this “genealogy” is no longer the intellectual-historical metaphor it is for, say, Friedrich Nietzsche or Michel Foucault. In *The Slayers of Moses*, Judaism *literally begets* Theory²⁰—via the medium of Jewishness. “Judaism” and “Jewishness,” then, even as they name different phenomena, are fundamentally inextricable (which makes Handelman’s claim for “Judaism interminable” even stronger than Yerushalmi’s). The historical structure whereby Judaism begets Theory is what she calls the “heretic

²⁰ Technically, it begets only psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and Bloom’s theory of the anxiety of influence—but since Handelman maintains that these are the three most “influential” theories in postmodern literary criticism, it’s fair to summarize her claim as holding that Theory *at large* is genealogically Jewish. How this works even in the case of non-Jewish authors, we shall see below.

hermeneutic.” This phrase names what Handelman considers to be the essential structure of the Judaic tradition and of Jewish subjectivity: a deviation from the received, normative orthodoxy.

Handelman conceives of Judaic tradition as a chain of interpretative “heresies”—reversals and displacements—beginning with the rabbinic doctrine of Oral Torah, or perhaps even earlier, with Moses’s breaking and replacement of the tablets bearing the Written Torah given to him by God at Mount Sinai. The Written Torah itself thus construed as a break, a deviation from the inaccessible yet still authoritative original Word. Handelman argues that “Freud, Derrida, and Bloom attain a priority and authority over those traditions to which they were heirs.... All of these acts are seizures of the original texts of tradition, and at the same time, affirmations of fidelity—which then become...the real tradition; and these masterly interpreters become the Moses figures who bring the revelation to the people....”²¹ A certain interpretation of the famous “Oven of ‘Akhnai” aggadah from BT *Bava Metsi’a* 59b supplies Handelman with a neat allegory for her concept of Judaic tradition: the rabbis cite the Written Torah in order to exclude from consideration God’s own interpretation, via the *bat kol*, of the halakhah; as Elijah reports to R. Nathan, though, the rabbis’ appropriation of divine authority delights rather than disturbs the-Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He, who “laughed and said, My children have defeated Me! My children have defeated Me!”²² God is not troubled by the rabbis’ interpretation of the Written Torah, for this Written Torah itself authorizes their subversion; this displacement of authority is the very structure of the tradition. She finds a second allegory in Kafka’s parable of the leopards (the same parable treated by Wimsatt, Hartman, and Kermode in earlier chapters). In Handelman’s allegorical interpretation, Freud, Derrida, and Bloom are figured as the leopards.

²¹ *SM*, 206.

²² See *SM*, 40–41 for Handelman’s comments on the ‘Akhnai aggadah; cf. Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, 33–37 and 138n38–40.

As they are assimilated to the ceremony, Theory is assimilated to the Judaic tradition it displaces: “A crucial aspect of the dynamic of Rabbinic thought is its ability to absorb its own inversions...to absorb its rebelling sons...to absorb interpretive reversal and the sufferings of history back into itself, making it appear as if they had been hidden in the father-text all along, awaiting only the proper time for revelation.”²³

As the title of *The Slayers of Moses* hints, Freud—especially but not only the late Freud of *The Man Moses and Monotheistic Religion*—is a crucial point of reference. According to Handelman, Freud’s “revolt against the paternal authority” is “at the same time a return to and identification with a kind of Jewish paternity that stood opposed to and repressed by the Western, Greco-Christian tradition. [...B]y overthrowing the Hellenistic Gentile culture and uncovering its dark side, Freud could at the same time defend both himself and his father. Perhaps it was also the return of Freud’s own Rabbinic repressed....”²⁴ Freud’s concept of the return of the repressed furnishes Handelman with a powerful justification for dismissing and/or appropriating any disavowals of Judaism or Jewish identity by her selected modern authors, since it allows her to invoke the alterity of the unconscious as the locus of tradition’s cunning and thus to elude whenever convenient the problem of authorial intention. The “Rabbinic repressed” *will* return, often without the subject becoming conscious of this return and in inverse proportion to the subject’s welcoming it. “The history we choose to write, the analogies we selectively perceive, the interpretations we construct, are functions of desire, and that desire is ambivalent,” writes Handelman, and “Freud’s interpretations of the dream and of his own Jewish heritage bear all the marks of these distortions of desire.”²⁵ He who most vehemently resists the tradition is therefore

²³ *SM*, 195.

²⁴ *SM*, 143.

²⁵ *SM*, 162.

its greatest exemplar. If Freud, Derrida, and Bloom did not wish to become “Moses figures,” then, she suggests, they shouldn’t have refused to become Moses figures! Of Bloom, she comments: “We can only leave him with his own grim formula: Reject your parents vehemently enough, and you will become a belated version of them, but compound with their reality and you may partly free yourself.”²⁶ Yet since “partial freedom” is precisely the structure of the parental reality, that is to say of Judaism, this partial freedom cashes out as no freedom at all, but only the other name of a particularly Judaic double-bind. Either way, “even the most avowedly secular Jews” are called to *teshuvah*: Judaism terminable or Judaism interminable is the only choice you have.

Unless, of course, you aren’t Jewish. This much Handelman makes clear when she dismisses Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics as “concerned to create a new hermeneutic based on a specifically Christian form of theology,” even though, despite its Protestant intellectual background, Gadamer’s theory of tradition in *Truth and Method* (1960)—as a prejudicial inheritance the subject cannot escape, only engage in a more or less self-consciously “destructive” dialectic—bears a remarkable resemblance to Handelman’s own ideas about the “heretic hermeneutic.”²⁷ And Handelman herself notes that Gadamer’s hermeneutics and Derrida’s deconstruction both owe a great deal to the work of the (decidedly *not* Jewish) philosopher Martin Heidegger—yet despite this common philosophical background, Derrida is counted as a “slayer of Moses” while Gadamer is not.²⁸ (It is possible that this is due to an

²⁶ *SM*, 222.

²⁷ *SM*, 16; see also *SM*, 123 and 130. Gadamer presents his concept of tradition in *Truth and Method*, trans. Donald Marshall and Joel Weinsheimer, rev. ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). For an overview of Gadamerian hermeneutics, see Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994), 106–23.

²⁸ See *SM*, 16. Marlène Zarader’s *La dette impensée : Heidegger et l’héritage hébraïque* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990) posits that Martin Heidegger’s philosophy is furtively structured

underestimation on Handelman's part of her own conceptual proximity to Gadamer, but such an underestimation would then itself be predicated on the notion that because Gadamer is not a Jew, his work does not merit closer consideration. Oddly, Handelman's 1985 essay "Fragments of the Rock: Contemporary Literary Theory and the Study of Rabbinic Texts" has a quotation from *Truth and Method* as an epigraph: "A truly historical thinking must also think its own historicity."²⁹ Clearly, by 1985—if not earlier—Handelman was aware of the overlap between her work and Gadamer's, which might have, but did not, occasion a revision of her argument in *The Slayers of Moses*.)

The "Rabbinic repressed" exists only in the unconscious of the *Jewish* subject, who is thereby always already entangled in the traditional chain of the heretic hermeneutic as a consequence of genetic inheritance. Thus Handelman manages to collapse the distinction Yerushalmi tenuously lets stand between Judaism terminable and interminable. Indeed, her argument is even more ingeniously foolproof than his, since the repressed content exceeds and in a sense opposes the conscious control of the subject. Although Derrida and Bloom were both still living in 1982 and could technically have protested her interpretations, this would accomplish nothing; like the Mechanical Turk in the opening aphorism of Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" (1940), the alterity of the unconscious is guaranteed to win every match.³⁰

by a "Hebraic heritage" that he systematically effaces. Whether or not one finds Zarader's argument persuasive, the fact that she finds enough evidence to feel confident venturing it at all suggests that the common Heideggerian background of Gadamer's hermeneutics and Derrida's deconstruction could just as easily have been taken by Handelman as a reason to *include* Gadamer in her discussion—unless, as I am arguing here, an ethnocentric definition of Jewishness is the essential criterion.

²⁹ Susan A. Handelman, "Fragments of the Rock: Contemporary Literary Theory and the Study of Rabbinic Texts," *Prooftexts* 5.1 (January 1985): 75–95, at 75.

³⁰ See Walter Benjamin, *Ausgewählte Schriften 1: Illuminationen*, ed. Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag), 251.

As Derrida argues in “Le facteur de la vérité,” to which we’ll turn later in this chapter, psychoanalysis gives itself the right to *convert* any evidence which does not fit its deductive framework into evidence that does.³¹ In this case, psychoanalysis allows Handelman to convert signs of disaffiliation from the covenant back into (unconscious) confessions of filiation to the covenant. Neither Derrida nor Bloom, much less the deceased Freud, can “respond, sign, or countersign.” Once inscribed, in a single blow (or cut: *coup*), into the covenant with God and this identity, *Jew*, “if not against his will, then without his will,” the Jew can always be recalled, reinscribed, “recircumcised.”³² Handelman thus postulates a Jewish essence that marks the Jew’s psyche no less than it does the Jew’s penis—and, depending on where one falls on the question of genetics, perhaps the psyche *more* than the penis.³³ This psychic mark shows up, most importantly, as that special Judaic/Jewish way of reading texts—the “heretic hermeneutic.”

³¹ Cf. Jacques Derrida, “Le facteur de la vérité,” in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1987), 411–96.

³² Hammerschlag, *Figural Jew*, 208.

³³ It is telling that all the modern “slayers of Moses” discussed in the book are men, as are the five authors treated in Handelman’s second book: Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, Emmanuel Lévinas, Franz Rosenzweig, and Chaim Potok. As are, for that matter, all the authors she lists in the “Methodological Preface” as those she *wishes* she had been able to include in *The Slayers of Moses* (*SM*, xvii): Franz Kafka, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, and Jorge Luis Borges.

Cf. Jacques Derrida’s remarks on circumcision as the figure of Jewish identity in relation to women: *Schibboleth : pour Paul Celan* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1986), 99: “Tout homme alors est circoncis. Traduisons, selon le même trope : donc aussi toute femme – la sœur même”; “A Testimony Given...,” in Elisabeth Weber, ed., *Questioning Judaism*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004), 39–58, at 40: “For me, ‘circumcision’ could mean on the one hand the singular alliance of the Jewish people with their God, but just as well, on the other hand, it could figure as a sort of universal that we find not only in men but also in women, and in all peoples of the world, whether or not they have thought of themselves as chosen or singular.” Cf., additionally, Susan E. Shapiro’s remarks on the trope of circumcision and the gendering of the French philosophical figure of “the Jew” in “Écriture judaïque: Where Are the Jews in Western Discourse?,” in Angelika Bammer, ed., *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), 182–202

The Rabbinic repressed returns again, as of course it must, in the last two chapters of the book, “Reb Derrida’s Scripture” and “The Critic as Kabbalist: Harold Bloom and the Heretic Hermeneutic.” In both cases, Handelman emphasizes these later authors as readers of Freud: the Bloomian texts of interest are the explicitly Freud-indebted works on what Bloom names “the anxiety of influence,” while the Derridean texts treated at greatest length include his writings directly engaging psychoanalysis, “Le facteur de la vérité” and “Freud and the Scene of Writing” (1967) as well as those concerned with Jewish themes (“Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book” and “Violence and Metaphysics” [both 1964]). The psychoanalytic inflection is not just a matter of the texts’ content, though – her interpretations, too, are expressed in a Freudian idiom. Handelman reads Derrida’s *Glas* (1974), a book “written shortly after the death of Derrida’s father, just as *The Interpretation of Dreams* was written after the death of Freud’s father,” as “the displacement of the Father, and reappropriation-repetition...of his Scripture. ...Derridean deconstructionism, like psychoanalysis, is a repetition of the structure it seeks to analyze. In deconstructionism, we have again Holy Scripture, the return of the Rabbinic repressed.”³⁴ In both the Freud and Derrida chapters, “the father” (the biological parent) and “the Father” (the Judaic tradition and, ultimately, God) are often treated as interchangeable, the former a synecdoche for the latter—although Freud himself would all but certainly have inverted the synecdochic hierarchy! The concepts of the heretic hermeneutic and the Rabbinic repressed facilitate Handelman’s unannounced shuttling between father and Father.

Unlike Freud’s “archive” and Derrida’s *Glas*, Bloom’s writings are less readily interpreted as autobiography. However, *Moses and Monotheism* is again Handelman’s major

³⁴ *SM*, 166.

reference point, this time with emphasis on the Father rather than the father. Just as Freud, in *Moses*,

both identified with and rebelled against Judaism, taking revenge on the Gentile world with the Jewish science of psychoanalysis and usurping the Jewish father at the same time—so Bloom identifies with Kabbalah and uses it to revenge himself.... Like Freud and Derrida, Bloom's identification with the Jewish tradition is negative and dialectical. His misreadings of Kabbalah come, I think, from his own attempt to resolve the problem of his own belatedness, his own exile from Scripture, from Judaism; his exile as a critic from text, commentator from creativity. In part, this exile is resolved by making 'exile' the precise metaphor for the act of creation and interpretation. This is a resolution in the Jewish mode, ...as the raising of the Jewish historical condition into a paradigm of existence: to be is to be exile; to create is to endure catastrophe; to make texts is to already interpret; absence is presence.³⁵

By "the Jewish historical condition," Handelman means "exile," but not the historical exile in Babylonia or the Diaspora after 70 CE so much as the transhistorical, fundamental Jewish "exile from the Word": the condition of being belated with respect to the Father, the condition of finding oneself always already having been circumcised, of being after the breaking of the tablets. This is what David Stern means when he calls *The Slayers of Moses* "theologizing" in his review. If the rabbis' heretic hermeneutic is an "archaic heritage" that genetically persists as a repressed thought, a type of psychic circumcision, in the unconscious of "even the most avowedly secular" Jewish subjects—Freud, Derrida, Bloom—then, despite the fact that Handelman narrates a history stretching from Moses at Sinai to Theory at Yale, the "worldly" element (in Stern's Saidian diction) ceases to matter at all. "The Jewish historical condition" is paradoxically evacuated of historicity.

The extent of Handelman's "theologizing" of history is all the more apparent when we compare it to José Faur's *Golden Doves with Silver Dots*, a book often mentioned in the same

³⁵ *SM*, 221–22.

breath as *The Slayers of Moses*. The reviews for Faur's book echoed many of the complaints levied at Handelman's (see Chapter 1, above). Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, for instance, comments that Faur

is not merely content with arguing that one can embrace new developments in critical theory and at the same time remain a committed Jew. He also wants to make a much stronger claim, namely, that the developments of recent theory are already anticipated if not explicitly discovered in the Judaic tradition...giv[ing] Judaism a privileged position vis-à-vis other traditions, particularly Greek philosophy, but also including Christianity and Islam. Faur follows Handelman in claiming that recent criticism only rediscovered what classic Jewish thinkers knew all along.³⁶

Aligned as their projects are, Handelman and Faur part ways on a crucial point. Faur's book, whatever its other flaws, actually *does* attempt the structural comparison Handelman promises in her "Methodological Preface." In *Golden Doves*, the only historical claim to speak of is the basic fact that the rabbinic sources are much older than the literary-theoretical ones. Faur "theologizes," indeed "Judaizes," Theory on the basis of congruent concepts and methods. Although certain modern authors cited in *Golden Doves* could have facilitated a literalized genealogy such as Handelman constructs (Derrida, Freud, Edmond Jabès), Faur doesn't pursue that line of thought. Consequently, his roster of modern authors is more methodologically diverse than Handelman's and includes several non-Jews, since Jewish identity is irrelevant to Faur's argument: Roland Barthes, Émile Benveniste, Maurice Blanchot, Jorge Luis Borges, and Ferdinand de Saussure all feature prominently. Theory is Judaized in *Golden Doves*, but unlike in *Slayers*, Judaism does not literally beget Theory. Whatever lesson Faur wishes for his readers to learn about the superiority of rabbinic Judaism is weakened, however, by his aversion to establishing a (literal or figural) genealogical relation between the two. He suggests that Theory

³⁶ Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "When the Reader is in the Write," *Prooftexts* 7.2 (May 1987): 194–205, at 196, 200.

“rediscovers” what the rabbis already figured out a very long time ago, yet since this rediscovery is not tied directly to rabbinic sources, by the same token it could be argued that Theory actually *discovers* the secular core of a hermeneutical system the rabbis had been unable to comprehend except through the veil of theology. In other words, while Faur’s theologizing intent is by no means hidden, nevertheless there is nothing in *Golden Doves* to prevent its comparative argument being rewritten as what Charles Taylor calls a “subtraction story” (see Chapter 3, above). *Slayers* cannot be rewritten as a subtraction story. Even though Handelman, like Faur, compares midrash and Theory, the comparison itself is far less important than the historical narrative that generates it. Although Faur’s theologizing is more explicit, Handelman’s is more total in its comprehensive integration of the texts she reads through the gesture Derrida calls “recircumcision.”

4.3. “This intellectual kinship”

4.3.1. Whatever happened to Jacques Lacan?

My reader may have noticed that Jacques Lacan has barely figured at all in the preceding discussion. This is not my doing, though; it’s Handelman’s. At just ten pages, Lacan’s chapter in *The Slayers of Moses* is noticeably the book’s shortest, hinting once again that when Handelman notes in the preface that Lacan alone among the “slayers” did not come from a Jewish background, this difference matters more for her argument than she signals. The three Jewish “slayers,” Freud, Derrida, and Bloom, are repeatedly mentioned together as a triumvirate throughout the book, right up to the last page of *Slayers* (p. 223). Lacan, however, is mentioned in the Bloom chapter only once, on pp. 203–04: “[...A] specific Rabbinic concept of truth, which, as formulated by Scholem, links Freud, Lacan, Derrida, and Bloom (and describes much

modern literary theory)... In this light, the traditional Rabbinic emphasis on the letter of the text, so scorned by Christian commentators, clearly becomes part of a larger sensibility about language and meaning shared by Freud, Lacan, Derrida, Bloom, and the Yale School.” This is the last time Lacan’s name appears in *Slayers*—20 pages before the end of the book, and 38 pages after the preceding mention of Lacan, on p. 165. Overall, Lacan is mentioned on just 15 pages—including the chapter devoted entirely to him—of the book’s total 227 pages.

That Lacan should be largely absent from *Slayers* is baffling, given how in the preface Handelman credits the following passage from Lacan’s text “Radiophonie” (1970) as her original inspiration for the book:

To add once more to what Freud maintained, a trait that I believe decisive: the unique faith that he had in the Jews’ not faltering in the trembling of the truth. In the Jews, whom he otherwise does not spare the aversion he confesses, through the use of the word *occultism*, for all that has to do with mystery. Why?

Why else, if not because the Jew, since the return from Babylon, is the one who knows how to read, that is to say, because the Jew distances himself from the letter of his language, finding the interval in order to play, there, at interpretation?

Of which one [interpretation] is eminently distinguished here, that one being *Midrash*.

Indeed, for this people of the Book, the only [people] to affirm itself as historical, never to utter a myth, Midrash represents a prior mode of which modern historical criticism may well be nothing but the bastardization. For if the Jews take the book literally, it is not in order to force it to support more or less patent intentions, but rather because of... its materiality: to draw, from that which its combination makes obligatory by proximity (therefore involuntary), from that which the variations of grammar impose as an inflectional choice, another meaning from the text; even to imply that which the texts neglects (to reference), the childhood of Moses for example.

Isn’t this somewhat like what Freud wished so much, to the point of making it his final message, to make known about the death of Moses?³⁷

³⁷ Jacques Lacan, “Radiophonie,” *Silicet* 2-3 (1970), 80–81, quoted in French in Jeffrey Mehlman, “The ‘Floating Signifier’: From Lévi-Strauss to Lacan,” *Yale French Studies* 48 (1972): 10–37, at 32-33, trans. mine. To my knowledge this Lacanian text remains untranslated.

The relevant footnote in *The Slayers of Moses* reveals that Handelman encountered this passage not in “Radiophonie” itself but as a quotation, in French, in Jeffrey Mehlman’s essay “The ‘Floating Signifier’: From Lévi-Strauss to Lacan,” published in the 1972 *Yale French Studies* on psychoanalysis and structuralism.³⁸ There, Mehlman contrasts Lacan on Freud and midrash with David Bakan on Freud and kabbalah. In *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition* (1958), Bakan had argued that Freudian psychoanalysis was a “continuation” of the kabbalistic tradition, a thesis Mehlman finds “rather unconvincing.” “[...L]ittle could be more symptomatic of the divergence in the French and American perceptions of Freud,” Mehlman adds, “than Lacan’s Freud as (metaphorical) repetition of Midrash and Bakan’s as (metonymical) continuation of Kabbalah.”³⁹ The metaphor/metonym dyad is lifted from Lacan himself, who in turn derived it from Roman Jakobson, and it shows up as one of the most important binary couples structuring Handelman’s argument in *The Slayers of Moses*. Handelman, however, deploys these same terms quite differently: for her, metonym is associated with the playful rabbinic embrace of *différance*, metaphor with the logocentric metaphysics of Greek philosophy and Christianity. Mehlman’s gloss on “Radiophonie” equates metaphor with paradigm and parataxis, and metonym with syntagm and hypotaxis: Lacan’s Freud does not continue the midrashic tradition, but nevertheless repeats its structures, whereas Bakan’s Freud actually participates in and perpetuates kabbalistic tradition. Handelman’s literalization of genealogy proceeds to extend precisely that element of Bakan’s argument singled out for criticism in “The ‘Floating Signifier,’” even though there is no question that she is familiar with Mehlman’s essay. Her argument is metonymic, syntagmatic, and hypotactic in Mehlman’s sense, whereas, to

³⁸ See *SM*, xv and 231n3.

³⁹ Mehlman, “Floating Signifier,” 33.

compare them once again, Faur's would be metaphorical, paradigmatic, and paratactic. Or, in Handelman's own terms: her argument is *historical*, Faur's *structural*.

It's strange, then, that in her Lacan chapter, "The Analyst as Scribe: Jacques Lacan and the Return of the Father's Name," Handelman suddenly writes as though she has fully registered Mehlman's critique of Bakan. The method reverts to the structural comparison she promises in the preface but never delivers elsewhere in *Slayers*. Throughout this chapter, she emphasizes points of perceived resemblance between Lacanian psychoanalysis and her own presentation of midrash in the first half of the book. Among these are the Saussurean notions of the arbitrary signifier and the differential nature of meaning; the Jakobsonian account of metonymy and metaphor; the centrality of "the letter"; the symbolic mediation of a transcendental plenitude associated with the father and the phallus; and the concept of *le Nom du Père* ("the Name of the Father"), which Lacan himself explicitly and repeatedly linked to the unpronounceable name of God in the Hebrew Bible, יהוה.⁴⁰

Yet this comparative approach never really leads anywhere. Nothing in Handelman's account of midrash discloses something in Lacan's thought which could not have been shown without midrash, nor does Lacanian psychoanalysis add anything new to what she has already said about midrash (or about Freud, for that matter). More problematically, the Lacan chapter's methodological incongruity undermines the book's argument as it has been developed over the first five chapters and would continue to be advanced in the remaining two. Although, as noted above, *The Slayers of Moses* is divided into two parts, it is not really the internal division between those parts but rather the Lacan chapter which cuts, bifurcates the book. On the one

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. A. M. Sheridan-Smith, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (London: Hogarth Press, 1977), 248.

hand, the methodological shift inadvertently exposes how far from a structural comparison the rest of the book really is; on the other hand, the chapter also subverts the historical narrative by raising the possibility of an “emergence of rabbinic interpretation in modern literary theory” that would have nothing to do with Jewish genealogy and “the return of the Rabbinic repressed.”

And so the question is: Just what is Jacques Lacan doing in *The Slayers of Moses*?

4.3.2. “If Freud was Moses...”

The most compelling point of correspondence Handelman finds between Lacanian psychoanalysis and the Judaic tradition is her likening of the analyst’s therapeutic role as the one who “returns” to the subject its own mutilated “Word” to “the attempts of Ezra to bring the Jews back to the promised land, to recover their history and make the laws contemporary, to adjust the structures of their present life to one that must never be forgotten, the story of which must be told from generation to generation: one long, elaborate talking cure.”⁴¹ This comparison, like the others, doesn’t lead anywhere—it’s the last sentence of the chapter. But it’s just this location at the end of the chapter that makes it interesting in the context of *The Slayers of Moses* as a whole. It paraphrases the ending of the *previous* chapter, “Solomon-Sigmund, the Son of Jakob”:

Perhaps only one who belonged to and felt himself to be a part of a people of exile could have transformed the hermeneutics of historical understanding from the cool philosophical abstractions of Dilthey and the Protestant nineteenth-century schools of historicism to a passionate confrontation with the inner lost and pained self and its differing. *Remember* is the theme that permeates both the Bible and Jewish history. In place of what is lost...the Temple, the land, the glory of the nation...is study, analysis, interpretation—and, as for Freud, no immediate grace, but only a continuing narrative. (152, emphasis in original)

⁴¹ *SM*, 162.

“Remember is the theme”; “one [life] that *must never be forgotten*.” “No immediate grace, but only a *continuing narrative*”; “one *long, elaborate talking cure*.” The echoes are not coincidental. The repetition of the ending of the Freud chapter in the ending of the Lacan chapter *performs* the interminable narrative vigil that both passages describe.

This repetition also points up the importance of repetition as one of the book’s main narrative devices. It reminds us, for example, of another chain of citational prefigurations and echoes woven throughout Handelman’s text as a sort of leitmotif, one that again implicates Freud and Lacan. In the first sentence of the Lacan chapter, Handelman writes: “If Freud was Moses, he had more than one aspiring Joshua.”⁴² She is alluding to a letter Freud wrote to Carl Jung in 1909, which she had already quoted in the Freud chapter. In the letter, Freud tells Jung: “If I am Moses, then you are Joshua and will take possession of the promised land of psychoanalysis, which I shall be able to glimpse only from afar.”⁴³ But this is not the first time the exclusion of Moses from the promised land has been mentioned in *The Slayers of Moses*. Twice—on the last page of the preface and the penultimate page of the final chapter on Bloom—Handelman alludes to the ending of Matthew Arnold’s 1864 essay “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” (a passage we already encountered in Chapter 2’s discussion of the New Criticism and the Yale Critics):

Still, in full measure, the sense of creative activity belongs only to genuine creation; in literature we must never forget that. But what true man of letters can ever forget it? ... The epochs of Aeschylus and Shakespeare make us feel their pre-eminence. In an epoch like those is, no doubt, the true life of literature; there is the promised land, towards which criticism can only beckon. That promised land it will not be ours to enter, and we shall die in the wilderness; but to have saluted it from afar, is already, perhaps,

⁴² *SM*, 153.

⁴³ Sigmund Freud to Carl Gustav Jung, 7 January 1909, in *The Freud/Jung Letters: The Correspondence Between Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung*, trans. Ralph Mannheim and R. F. C. Hull, ed. William McGuire (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974), 196–97.

the best distinction among contemporaries; it will certainly be the best title to esteem with posterity.⁴⁴

As *Slayers* progresses, Moses and Joshua steadily accumulate intertextual significances. For Arnold and Hartman, Moses is the modern literary critic and Joshua a messianic literature still to come; for Freud, Moses is Freud himself and Joshua is Jung; for Handelman, Moses is Freud and Joshua is Lacan. And that's not all. Jeffrey Mehlman's "The 'Floating Signifier,'" the 1972 text in which Handelman first read the quotation from "Radiophonie" that became the point of departure for *Slayers*, turns out at this point to be more than incidentally relevant.

As the title of Mehlman's essay suggests, it has two parts, one dealing with Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* (1950) and the other with "Radiophonie." Interestingly, both of these texts are marked by the authors' sense of devotion to their intellectual "fathers," Marcel Mauss and Sigmund Freud. In passages that Mehlman finds occasion to quote, both Lévi-Strauss and Lacan articulate their relationships to these "fathers" via the figure of Moses. In the third chapter of the *Introduction*, Lévi-Strauss writes: "Why did Mauss halt at the edge of those immense possibilities, like Moses conducting his people all the way to a promised land whose splendor he would never behold? I am impelled to seek the reason, not from any wish to criticize, but out of a duty not to let the most fruitful aspect of his thinking be lost or vitiated."⁴⁵ Here is Mehlman's gloss: "Lévi-Strauss's intellectual task and ultimate homage to

⁴⁴ Matthew Arnold, "Culture and Anarchy" and *Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 51. Geoffrey Hartman, to recall from Chapter 2 above, used this passage as an epigraph and as inspiration for the title of his 1980 book, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980), vii and 1–15. Susan Handelman reviewed Hartman's book for *The Wordsworth Circle* 12.3 (Summer 1981), 202–05, when she would have been revising her 1979 doctoral dissertation for publication in 1982 as *SM*. Her review opens with a discussion of Hartman's use of the Arnold passage.)

⁴⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, trans. Felicity Baker (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 45.

this Moses—*like Freud's*—will be to slay him: to demonstrate that Mauss was most 'himself' not in his conclusions but in the margins of 'those chaotic pages, which still resemble a rough draft.' ...Lévi-Strauss's ultimate project will be to reveal that Mauss—Moses, the 'father'—was unconscious."⁴⁶ Lévi-Strauss argues that a *faithful* reading of Mauss's work discloses insights which remained inaccessible to their author—he proposes to read the letter of Mauss's text *more faithfully than Mauss himself*. (Later, Mehlman writes similarly of Lacan: "It is as if the side of Freud most resonant for Lacan is not his gaze at a hidden center, but his displacement of the center into the margins.")⁴⁷

Lacan's work, too, comprises an explicit rereading of the letter of the "father's" text. His career involved a sustained critique of the "betrayal" of Freud by post-Freudian psychology and psychoanalysis. Over against these misinterpretations of Freud, Lacan calls for a "return to Freud," "for which," as he states in "The Freudian Thing" (1955), he voluntarily "assumes...the role of herald."⁴⁸ In the same essay, he declares that "the meaning of the return to Freud" was to be nothing other than "a *return to Freud's meaning*," to the true and proper sense of the Freudian text.⁴⁹ ("The Freudian Thing" also explicitly identifies the Viennese psychoanalysts displaced by the *Anschluss*—whose plight Freud narrates in the double preface to the third part of *Moses and Monotheism*—as Jews: "It was on the waves of hate's tocsin and discord's tumult—the panic-stricken breath of war—that Freud's voice reached us, as we witnessed the Diaspora of those who transmitted it, whose persecution was no coincidence.")⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Mehlman, "Floating Signifier," 21-22, emphasis mine.

⁴⁷ Mehlman, "Floating Signifier," 26.

⁴⁸ Lacan, *Écrits*, 334.

⁴⁹ Lacan, *Écrits*, 337, emphasis mine.

⁵⁰ Lacan, *Écrits*, 335. See Freud, *Der Mann Moses*, 65–68; Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 66–71.

Like the Lévi-Strauss of the *Introduction*, who discovers Mauss's greatest insights in the margins of the Maussian text, Lacan means for his return to the letter of the Freudian text to be *more faithful to Freud* than Freud's own understanding of this text could possibly have been, not as a criticism of Freud but on the basis of Freud's thought—for Freud's great discovery was, precisely, the encryption of the subject's unconscious in the subject's own discourse. Even as his zeal for Freud takes on the attributes of dogmatism, Lacan's writings do not simply reproduce Freud's patent statements: instead, Lacan brings to bear on the Freudian text methods and ideas from linguistics (Saussure, Jakobson), anthropology (Lévi-Strauss), and philosophy (Hegel, Heidegger). In this sense Lacan's "return to Freud" is also a surpassing of Freud's own limitations: another "Moses," another "Joshua," in Lévi-Strauss's terms. All of which is to say that "The 'Floating Signifier'" is more than just Handelman's point of entry the Lacanian corpus. The title of *The Slayers of Moses* itself alludes to Freud's *The Man Moses* indirectly, *via Mehlman's paraphrase*—a paraphrase, moreover, that appears in his discussion of Lévi-Strauss's reading of Mauss ("Lévi-Strauss's intellectual task and ultimate homage to this Moses—like Freud's—will be to slay him"), not his discussion of Lacan's reading of Freud. Mehlman's essay supplies Handelman with a further determination of the weave of citations, comparisons, figurations, repetitions around which she surreptitiously constructs the historical narrative of *The Slayers of Moses*.

We have already seen how repetition, in the form of the return of the Rabbinic repressed, is central to Handelman's thesis. Many of the repetitions in her narrative—for example, in the cases of Freud and Derrida—link modern Jewish authors up with a chain of tradition going all the way back to Moses at Sinai. This leads to the interpretation of *The Slayers of Moses* as an essentializing, triumphalist work; that is how, for example, both Stern and Eilberg-Schwartz read

it. Yet because not *all* of the repetitions operate this way—consider, for example, Lacan—we have to ask whether the argument of *Slayers*, inasmuch as it depends on such repetitions, might not be inconsistent with itself. When we examine the repetitions that deviate from that argument, however, we will find that these “inconsistent” repetitions *are consistent among themselves* and point toward a different interpretation of the book.

4.3.3. “The promised land of psychoanalysis”

Freud and Lacan are the most important Moses-Joshua couple for Handelman’s purposes. However in alluding to Freud’s letter in the opening sentence of the Lacan chapter (“If Freud was Moses, he had another aspiring Joshua”), Handelman reminds us that the recipient of this letter was not Lacan, who was just seven years old in January 1909, but Carl Gustav Jung—a fact which cannot be overlooked given what we shall soon see is the centrality of letters arriving (or not) at their addressees in her readings of Lacan and Derrida.

The eventual schism between Freud and Jung was not wholly determined by their respective religious and racial backgrounds—Freud the assimilated Austrian Jew, Jung the son of a pastor in the Swiss Reformed Church—but neither can these be called irrelevant. They inflected not only the falling-out but also the intellectual bond that preceded it. Freud wrote to Karl Abraham in 1908 that, unlike Abraham, Jung did not share “my intellectual constitution because of *racial kinship*. [...A]s a pastor’s son he [Jung] finds his way to me only against great inner resistance. His association with us is the more valuable for that. I nearly said that it was only by his appearance on the scene that psychoanalysis escaped the danger of becoming a

Jewish national affair.”⁵¹ Abraham responded: “I freely admit that I find it easier to go along with you rather than with Jung. I, too, have always felt this *intellectual kinship*. After all, *our Talmudic way of thinking* cannot disappear just like that.”⁵² “If Freud was Moses,” then Jung’s mission as his Joshua was to de-Judaize (*entjuden*) psychoanalysis, to make it palatable and accessible in Gentile intellectual circles.

In 1909, Freud was many years off from the theory of an Egyptian Moses he eventually presented in *The Man Moses*; even the essay on Michelangelo’s *Moses* was still four years away. We can therefore assume that when he writes of Moses and Joshua, he is doing so in accordance with the biblical genealogy, in which Moses is an Israelite (although he was raised in the Egyptian court)—as is Joshua. Although Joshua’s succession of Moses is not a patrilineal succession, it *is* a succession *internal* to a homogeneous kin-group, the “children of Israel.” For Freud, though, it’s this particularity, the sense that psychoanalysis risks becoming “a Jewish national affair,” that leads him to elect Jung as his Joshua, and so we cannot simply read past the discrepancy between the psychoanalysts and the biblical figures. The importance of Jung consists precisely in his *not* sharing Freud’s “racial kinship” and the “intellectual constitution,” the “Talmudic way of thinking,” which is mysteriously attached to that kinship. No sooner has Freud articulated the biblical figure than he has put its coherence into question.

Jung is Freud’s Joshua in an allegorical sense—for Freud has departed, here, from the letter of the Hebrew Bible. Is he not reading Moses and Joshua through the typological hermeneutic of Christianity, performing on the text of Deuteronomy an exegetical operation

⁵¹ Sigmund Freud to Karl Abraham, in *A Psycho-Analytic Dialogue: The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Karl Abraham, 1907-1926*, ed. H. Abraham and E. Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), 34, emphasis mine.

⁵² Abraham to Freud, in *A Psycho-Analytic Dialogue*, 36, emphases mine. Note the slippage from Freud’s “racial kinship” to Abraham’s “intellectual kinship.”

derived from the Apostle Paul? If the “promised land of psychoanalysis” is a universal one detached from the “Jewish national affair,” Freud would then be not only Moses, but Moses *as a (Christian) figure of Judaism* – the Old Testament. Jung, in turn, would therefore be not only Joshua, but Joshua *as a figure of Christianity* – the New Testament. The passage from wilderness to promise land, Moses to Joshua, Freud to Jung is also the passage from Judaism to Christianity, Old to New Testament, particularity to universality.

In Christian typology, though, Moses is also interpreted as a figure of Jesus Christ, which gives one more turn of the screw to Freud’s allegory. As Freud is to Moses is to Jesus, so Jung is to Joshua is to *Paul*: he is the one who takes up the Christian proselytizing mission, preaches to the Gentiles, and spiritualizes the Law by interpreting scripture in light of Christ. To take Freud’s biblical allegory seriously requires a brief detour through Paul’s allegorical interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.

4.3.4. Figural genealogy

Paul’s “hermeneutic key” to interpreting the Hebrew Bible in light of the messianic event is the dualistic metaphysics authorized, even demanded, by Christ’s incarnation: a being at once human and divine, Christ crucified and Christ resurrected. In *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (1994), Daniel Boyarin has cogently demonstrated how Paul’s Christianized philosophical dualism allows him to map hermeneutics, ontology, and theology onto one another: the world we know is not the only one, but is rather the carnal aspect or representation, the figure, of a higher spiritual world. Paul’s hermeneutic coordinates the dual nature of Christ with a theory of language in which “meaning as a disembodied substance exists prior to its

incarnation in language”—in Pauline terms, spirit and letter.⁵³ The letter of language, like the body of Christ, is finite, material, and particular—hence, “the letter kills,” inasmuch as literal significance is bound by its carnal particularity and so may eventually be exhausted, while “the spirit gives life,” i.e., it transcends those limitations (2 Cor. 3:6). Along with the division of language into letter and spirit there comes a concomitant pair of exegetical methods: the literal reading, “interpretation ‘according to the flesh,’” and the figural reading, “interpretation... ‘according to the spirit.’”⁵⁴ Literal interpretation is a reading only of the particular carnal hypostases of a universal, spiritual meaning that cannot be disclosed except through reference to Christ’s dual nature—which is to say, except by figural interpretation, by typology and allegory. We must not lose sight of Paul’s conviction that allegorical exegesis is *not* a departure from the sense of Scripture, but a *more rigorous reading* that takes seriously the implications of Christ’s incarnation for the nature of scriptural language itself.

Paul’s allegorical hermeneutic is most fully demonstrated in a commentary on Genesis 16–21:

Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman [cf. Gen. 16–19]. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise. These things are an allegory: The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written: ‘Be glad, barren woman, you who never bore a child; shout for joy and cry aloud, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband’ [Isa. 54:1]. Now you, brethren, like Isaac, are children of the promise. At that time the son according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit [cf. Gen. 21]. It is the same now. But what does the Scripture say?

⁵³ Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1994), 14.

⁵⁴ Boyarin, *Radical Jew*, 15. See, e.g., Romans 9:5, Galatians 4:23.

‘Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman’s son.’ Therefore, brethren, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman. (Gal. 4:21–31, trans. mod.)⁵⁵

The critical moment in this allegory is Paul’s reinterpretation of the conception of Isaac in Genesis 21:1. In Genesis 16, Ishmael is conceived by Abram and Sarai’s slave, Hagar, because Sarai herself is barren; this conception is natural, through sexual intercourse. In the next chapter, God establishes the covenant with Abram (now *Abraham*), promising him that despite being a hundred years old, he will conceive another son, this time with Sarai (now *Sarah*): “I [God] will bless her [Sarah], and she shall be a mother of nations, the kings of peoples shall be of her.... Sarah, your wife, shall indeed bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac, and I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him” (Gen. 17:15, 19). Isaac’s conception in Genesis 21:1 is described as follows: “And the Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did unto Sarah as he had said [וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה לְשָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר].” It’s unclear whether the conception itself occurs entirely through divine action or whether God only rendered Sarah fertile, allowing Abraham and Sarah to conceive through sexual intercourse (since we know from Genesis 16 that Abraham is not impotent). Either way, Paul’s interpretation is tenable, inasmuch as in both cases something impossible has happened via divine action in the world—but Paul does play up the possibility that Abraham and Sarah did not have intercourse. Isaac is Abraham’s genetic offspring, but he is conceived only because God makes good on his covenantal promises in Genesis 17 and 18.

⁵⁵ All citations of Paul are from *The Writings of Saint Paul*, ed. Wayne A. Meeks and John T. Fitzgerald, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2007). The translation used in this edition is the New International Version (NIV), however I have modified the translation for tighter fidelity to the Greek where necessary.

Read through the lens of Paul’s Christian-dualist hermeneutic, the conception of Isaac—either with divine assistance or entirely through divine action—generates a *figural genealogy*. To be a Jew “according to the flesh,” one must be descended, as Ishmael is, from Abraham. (Converts to Judaism, whose existence would seem to trouble this notion, are renamed *ben Avraham* or *bas Avraham*. As Boyarin writes: “The convert is adopted into the family and assigned a new ‘genealogical’ identity.”)⁵⁶ But Paul argues in Galatians 3 “that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit” (v. 14), so that the Galatians “are all *children of God* through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, *then you are Abraham’s seed*, and heirs according to the promise” (vv. 26–29, my emphases).

This genealogy is *figural*, not *figurative*, following the helpful distinction drawn by John David Dawson: “Figurative interpretation is based on a conception of language as a series of tropes in which nonliteral meanings replace literal meanings; in contrast, figural reading generates a figurativeness that is nonliteral. [...T]he Christian interpretation of the Old Testament...is figural—that is, rather than predicated on an anti-literalism, Scripture’s figurativeness is not nonliteral; its figurativeness is an extension rather than obliteration of the literal sense of the texts.”⁵⁷ Figural genealogy is not a mere figure of speech—those who belong to Christ are not *as though* they were Abraham’s seed, they really *are* Abraham’s seed. The literal sense is extended in the figure, not replaced by a trope. In Boyarin’s phrasing, Paul “does

⁵⁶ Boyarin, *Radical Jew*, 241.

⁵⁷ John David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2002), 15.

not radically devalue the body [or the literal] but nevertheless presupposes a hierarchy of spirit and body,” that is, a hierarchy of figural and literal.⁵⁸ “In Christ Jesus,” the Galatians truly are “Abraham’s seed,” because to be descended from Abraham—to be a “true Jew” (Rom. 2:2–29)—ceases, in light of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to be strictly speaking a matter of the body, of *ethnos*, of sexual reproduction and kinship. Since Paul maintains his hermeneutic is rigorously consistent with the evidence of Christ, he can claim without entirely devaluing the literal genealogy of the Jews that the figural genealogy is the *more truthful interpretation* of the text.

To give a related example, Paul spiritually reinterprets the covenantal rite of circumcision. In Romans 2:25–29, he proclaims:

Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. If those who are uncircumcised keep the law’s requirements, will their circumcision not be regarded as circumcision? The one who is uncircumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, break the law. A person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is circumcision of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person’s praise not from other people, but from God.

Circumcision here is still a marker of “the children of God,” but it is no longer a literal, fleshly marker. It transcends its old semiotic function as the marker of (male) Jewish *ethnos*, which is rendered *adiaphora* (a matter of indifference) by Christ. The cut of circumcision becomes, as it were, a “floating signifier.” Thus, to be circumcised still means to be a member of “Abraham’s seed”—it is not the relation between the terms, but rather the terms “circumcision” and “Abraham’s seed” themselves which have been translated into spiritual concerns that now

⁵⁸ Boyarin, *Radical Jew*, 15.

potentially encompass persons of any ethnic group.⁵⁹ Hence: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Paul’s argument in Galatians that the Gentile converts, once baptized, are *figurally* descended from Abraham via the promise bears upon Freud’s biblical allegory and his nagging concerns about the Jewishness of psychoanalysis. Here we need to make a fine distinction between the possibility of psychoanalysis becoming a “Jewish national affair” and the notion of a particularly Jewish “intellectual constitution” transmitted genetically as a memory-trace. Freud himself makes a version of this distinction in a 1913 letter to Sandor Ferenczi criticizing the effects of racist ideology on scientific discourse: “There should not be such a thing as Aryan or Jewish science. Results in science must be identical, though the presentation of them may vary.”⁶⁰ Freud is separating what the anti-Semites had deliberately conflated: (1) the identity of the scientist; (2) the form of the scientific inquiry, i.e., its presentation and methodology; (3) the content of the scientific inquiry, i.e., its findings. Freud’s position is that it is unacceptable for (1) to affect (3): when any extrinsic factor – say, the scientist’s political views – influences the results, science itself is compromised. He is also saying, though, that (1) does not *necessarily* affect (3) so problematically. It is possible for a Jewish scientist to produce universally relevant research; by the same token, the scientist could be *not* Jewish and still produce results “identical to” those of the Jewish scientist. This is Jung’s role in Freud’s biblical allegory of psychoanalysis: Jung-Joshua-Paul proves that psychoanalysis is not a “Jewish national affair,” that one may arrive at the same ideas without being ethnically Jewish. While Freud’s position on

⁵⁹ See also Romans 11:1–21, esp. vv. 17–21.

⁶⁰ Sigmund Freud to Sandor Ferenczi, 8 June 1913, in *The Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Sandor Ferenczi*, trans. Peter T. Hoffer, ed. Eva Brabant, et. al. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), 1:491.

(1) and (3) is clear, the articulation is more ambiguous when it comes to (2). He is explicit that two scientists' approaches may be very different yet still produce compatible results, but does (1) affect (2)? In the letter to Karl Abraham, Freud plainly acknowledges that he and Abraham share an "intellectual constitution" due to their common ethnic heritage, which makes it "easier" for Abraham to follow Freud than Jung. Freud also tells Abraham that Jung "finds his way to me only against great inner resistance," as one who, not being a Jew, is excluded from that heritage, but Jung nevertheless *does* "find his way." These writings by Freud together suggest that he considers it possible to do psychoanalysis without being a Jew, yet without discounting the contribution his own Jewishness may have made to the development and form of psychoanalysis (but, crucially, *not* its results).

The upshot of the biblical allegory, then, is that by leading psychoanalysis from the Jewish wilderness to the universal promised land, Jung would detach the Jewish science from Jewish *ethnos*. Jung is Freud's spiritual son, his figural progeny. As in Paul's allegorical reading of Genesis 16-21, that genealogy is not strictly a figure of speech. Insofar as he *is*, in fact, a psychoanalyst, Jung is circumcised "inwardly." Proselytizing the Freudian gospel among the Gentiles, he could—Freud hopes—attract new converts, regardless of their literal genealogies and ethnic backgrounds. These, after all, ought to be *adiaphora*, as he tells Ferenczi. (In that letter, do we detect a faint echo of Gal. 3:26–29?)⁶¹

⁶¹ As Eliza Slavet points out (*Racial Fever*, 65–66), while it's not clear whether Freud was familiar with the Pauline Epistles at this point in his career, by the 1930s he certainly had studied them, for Paul plays a small but crucial role in *Moses and Monotheism*; see Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 88. For a finely detailed analysis of Freud's complicated interpretation of Paul in *Moses and Monotheism*, see Matthew J. Peterson, "Pathogenesis: Freud's Paul and the Question of Historical Truth," *Continental Philosophy Review* 55.1 (2022): 35–53.

Jung, of course, did not live up to Freud's biblical expectations. Or did he? As Eliza Slavet shrewdly observes, in "On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement" (1914) Freud criticizes Jung in terms that pointedly evoke differences between rabbinic and patristic biblical hermeneutics.⁶² According to Freud, Jung made psychoanalysis palatable to non-Jewish audiences by rereading Freud's theories of infantile sexuality and the family romance *figuratively* (not, we should be clear, figurally), thus cleansing these theories of their scandalous implications by making them say something other than they appear to say. Jung "eliminate[s] what is objectionable in the family-complexes, so as to find it again in religion and ethics. For sexual libido an abstract concept has been substituted.... The Oedipus complex has merely a 'symbolic' meaning."⁶³ If Jung is Paul, he is the wrong kind of Paul, one for whom spiritualization equals non-literalization. Jung is a figurative rather than figural reader, a vulgar supersessionist.

Here, though, Handelman picks up the biblical allegory where Freud had left off. At the outset of "The Analyst as Scribe," she writes: "If Freud was Moses, he had more than one aspiring Joshua." Which returns us to Lacan.

4.3.5. "The family of philosophy"

"For the letter kills, but the spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6). Twice in *The Slayers of Moses*, Handelman uses this verse as an epigraph. The first use is before the fourth chapter, "Escape from Textuality: The Fulfiller of Signs," which discusses the Jesus, Paul, Philo, Origen, and

⁶² See Slavet, *Racial Fever*, 65–67.

⁶³ Sigmund Freud, "On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement," in Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans./ed. James Strachey and Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 14:1–66, at 62, quoted in Slavet, *Racial Fever*, 66. The *Standard Edition* henceforth abbreviated *SE* in notes.

Augustine. The second is before the Lacan chapter, “The Analyst as Scribe.” In the second case, it is immediately succeeded by a passage from Lacan’s “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious: or, Reason Since Freud” (in *Écrits*, 1966): “Of course, as it is said, the letter kills while the spirit gives life...but I also ask how the spirit could live without the letter. The spirit’s pretensions would nevertheless remain indisputable if the letter hadn’t proven that it produces all its truth-effects in man without the spirit having to intervene at all. This revelation came to Freud, and he called his discovery the unconscious.”⁶⁴

Like the other repetitions in *Slayers*, this one may look merely decorative—it is, after all, a matter of epigraphs—but it is doing more work for the argument of the book than it appears. Although Handelman casts Lacan as Joshua, she is using him as a figure of Paul, as Freud does with Jung. The famous “chain of tradition” passage from M. *Avot* stipulates Joshua’s continuation, not alteration, of Moses’s custody of the Torah:

Moses was sanctified by the cloud and received the Torah at Sinai, as it is said, And the glory of the Lord abode upon Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered him six days (Exod. 24:16).... By the hand of Moses was the Torah given at Sinai, as it is said, And He wrote them on two tables of stone, and gave them unto me (Deut. 5:19). ...The Torah which the Holy One, Blessed Be He gave to Israel was given by the hands of Moses only, as it is said, Between Him and the children of Israel: Moses merited becoming God’s messenger to the children of Israel. ...Joshua took over from Moses, as it is said, And thou shalt put of thy honor upon him, that all the congregation of the children of Israel may hearken (Num. 27:20). The Elders took over from Joshua....⁶⁵

Lacan’s relationship to Freud is not represented by this account of Judaic tradition. We saw earlier in “The Freudian Thing” how Lacan explicitly pronounces himself the faithful interpreter—not simply the faithful transmitter—of the Freudian text. Since Freud had theorized

⁶⁴ Lacan, *Écrits*, 423–24. For the use of 2 Cor. 3:6 as an epigraph by Handelman, see *SM*, 83 and 153; cf. *ibid.*, 156–57.

⁶⁵ *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, trans./ed. Judah Goldin (New Haven: Yale UP, 1955), 3–4.

the subject's inability to master his own discourse, Lacan's claim to read in the Freudian text that which had not been apparent to its author amounts to "partial freedom," an authorized transgression. This relation is the "heretic hermeneutic" Handelman finds allegorized in the "Oven of 'Akhnai" aggadah and Kafka's parable of the leopards.

Again, though, because Lacan is not a Jew—not included, that is, among the "children" by whom God is happy to be "defeated"—the "Oven of 'Akhnai" aggadah doesn't represent the Freud–Lacan relationship, either, so much as it figures the Freud–Lacan relationship in the fashion of the Old Testament's figuration of the New in Paul's hermeneutics. The difference between R. Joshua's reading of the Written Torah in the talmudic story and Paul's is that the latter opens the text to those outside the Jewish *ethnos* by figurally spiritualizing circumcision in light of Christ. Lacan, likewise, opens up the "Jewish national affair" of psychoanalysis by *reading* the Freudian text, proving that it is possible to learn, through intensive studying, Freud's "talmudic way of thinking," even if one has not inherited the memory-trace of the "Rabbinic repressed."⁶⁶ The Rabbinic repressed, in other words, is not strictly a genetic heritage—though it may also be that—but the effect of careful study of an authoritative text handed down by the (figural) father. By studying Freud's text, Lacan spiritualizes it. This is not a poor replacement for literal genealogy, but an extension of it. In a passage from *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* quoted by Handelman, Lacan himself draws attention to the same biblical story as does Paul in Galatians (ch. 16–21), noting the "transbiological character of paternity" in

⁶⁶ As Gérard Haddad has argued across multiple texts, Lacan may well have had access to, and taken inspiration from, Judaic sources including the Talmud; this would only bolster Handelman's argument, although she had not read any of Haddad's work when she composed *SM*. See Gérard Haddad, *L'enfant illégitime : Sources talmudiques de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Hachette, 1981); Haddad, *Le péché original de la psychanalyse : Lacan et la question juive* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007); and, in English, Haddad, "Judaism in the Life and Work of Jacques Lacan," trans. Noah Guynn, *Yale French Studies* 85 (1994): 201-16.

“the tradition of the destiny of the chosen people.”⁶⁷ It is this transbiologization of “the Jewish science” that, as Handelman interprets him, Lacan introduces into the formerly biological chain of tradition.

Hence, when Handelman first introduces the heretic hermeneutic in *The Slayers of Moses*, the list of hermeneuts she includes is more consistent with her initially essentializing, ethnocentric argument than it initially seems to be: “We may now read *Jesus, Paul*, Freud, and Freud’s most recent interpreters, Derrida, Lacan, and Bloom as all sharing in a particular mode of Jewish interpretive heresy....”⁶⁸ When even Jesus and Paul are reclaimed for Judaism—after having played Judaism’s antagonists in the book’s fourth chapter, “Escape from Textuality: The Fulfiller of Signs”—not via historical reference but through Handelman’s concept of the heretic hermeneutic, there seems to be no limit to what can be “Judaized,” recircumcised, brought back into the Jewish fold: Jung, for instance, is recircumcised in his very uncircumcision. Indeed, Christianity itself is represented a Judaic heresy, not just in its origins but its whole trajectory. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud argues that Christianity is a neurotic reaction to the archaic heritage of the primal murder of the father; in *The Slayers of Moses*, Handelman reproduces this argument but with the added twist that this neurotic reaction is itself an authentic expression of Judaism.⁶⁹

At one point, Handelman describes her four “slayers of Moses” as a “line of Jewish prodigal sons” (166). The biblical allusion here is revealing of the stakes of her project. As Jill Robbins has shown in detail, the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15 functions in the New

⁶⁷ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 248, quoted in *SM* 158-59.

⁶⁸ *SM* 139, emphasizes mine.

⁶⁹ See *SM* 83–122, 129–52.

Testament and in early Christian theology as an allegory of the Christian supersession of the Jews:

[...T]he prodigal son's journey—a movement of departure from and return to home and self—figures the very detour of the self that constitutes Christian hermeneutics and its economy of salvation. It underwrites all narratives of personal conversion.... So central is the prodigal son's story to the Christian imagination, describing as it does God's mercy towards sinners, that it has been called 'the Gospel of the Gospel.' The elder brother's story—if he has a story at all, for he neither departs nor returns—is on the periphery. The 'outside' in which he serves his father is a place of complaint and unredemption. ... In giving voice to what readers of the parable have called 'a legalistic merit doctrine,' the elder brother figures the Jew in, and in relation to, the gospel. [...I]n the...Christian hermeneutical use of the reversal of primogeniture, the relationship between prodigal son and elder brother figures the...relationship between the two testaments. The anthropological conflict is in fact a conflict of interpretations, for the elder brother who is passed over in favor of the prodigal son figures a Hebrew Bible which has been rendered an elder testament. What critics have identified as the elder brother's fanatical adherence to the letter of the law compares unfavorably to the plenitude of grace the prodigal son's story teaches. ... The elder brother testifies to the Old Testament's insufficiency. He is the prooftext....⁷⁰

For Handelman, by contrast, the prodigal son ends up a Jew, not despite but because of his rebellion against the (Judaic) father. But the elder brother does not become less Jewish by contrast with his younger sibling; notice that Handelman has nothing to say in *Slayers* about those Jews who are happy to commit to normative orthodoxy, or those who choose not to live in diaspora and emigrate instead to Israel—they are, simply and unproblematically, Jewish. Both brothers in Jesus's parable are Jews, filially (re)committed to the Father, as is Jesus himself. No subject, however ethnically removed from Jewish genealogy, is exempt from the heretic hermeneutic's power to convert deviation into tradition. The parentheses from the "Methodological Preface" thus do not insulate Lacan from the dynamics of Judaic tradition, but rather mark him off as the point of its spiritualization.

⁷⁰ Jill Robbins, *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother: Interpretation and Alterity in Augustine, Petrarch, Kafka, Lévinas* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1991), 10–11.

The next chapter of *The Slayers of Moses*, “Reb Derrida’s Scripture,” narrates Derrida’s relation to Lacan as another link in the chain of the Judaic heretic hermeneutic, although it’s unclear whether Handelman considers Derrida’s “father” (or “Father”) to be Lacan, or Freud, or his biological father, or the rabbis, or God, or some combination of these. The Derridean text in question is his lengthy critique, in “Le facteur de la vérité,” of Lacan’s 1957 seminar on Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Purloined Letter”:

Without becoming too deeply involved in the endless complexities of Lacan’s and Derrida’s readings and counter-readings of ‘The Purloined Letter,’ we might suggest nevertheless that the theme of the purloined letter can characterize our entire problem of Rabbinic versus Patristic hermeneutics. For, as we have stressed, it was above all the question of the nature of the letter, the integrity of the text which was at stake. Stealing the ‘letter’ is stealing the text, stealing Scripture, and transferring meaning elsewhere. It might be said that Paul stole the letter from the Jews and tried to abolish it by transcending it through the spirit. And Freud stole the letter from the Jews by displacing Moses, their greatest prophet, the father of their religion and giver of the letter of the law itself.⁷¹

As Handelman reads Lacan, his “return to Freud” is a reaction “against the theft of the letter from Freud” by psychologists who misinterpret Freudian theory, even as it is also a supersession of that theory. Derrida, she claims, then attempts to purloin “the letter” out from under Lacan’s nose. Derrida “accus[es] Lacan of the sins against which the Jewish prophets always inveighed: reification, pinning the signifier to the signified, and idol-worship – or ideal-worship – the idolization of this ‘transcendent signifier.’”⁷²

At first, Handelman’s interpretation of Derrida seems to revert back from the structural comparison of the Lacan chapter to the literal genealogy of the Freud chapter.

“Deconstructionism...might be seen as one attempt to cure the neurosis of the Jew in exile.”⁷³

⁷¹ *SM*, 163.

⁷² *SM*, 163–64.

⁷³ *SM*, 175.

Yet aside from a dubious gloss on a passage from *Glas* and the pointed, but unelaborated, observation that, like Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *Glas* was written while the author was mourning his father, there is no discussion of Derrida's biography in the chapter.

Meanwhile, Handelman schematizes Derrida's thought in terms of the Jew/Greek opposition, with "Jew" and "Greek" naming intellectual heritages rather than genetic ones. "Like Freud," Handelman writes, Derrida

has his own species of family romance within the family of philosophy, where he can subvert his Jewish-Greek origins.... Derrida's dissemination is as much a dissimulation as Freud's pretended exegesis of the biblical text in *Moses and Monotheism*. But the Jewish prodigal sons cannot completely forego Scripture. To attack the European psyche and the holy logos, to attempt to overturn Western man from within and without is an act of revenge by the exiles – and yet again a defense of the Jewish father. They will try, nevertheless, to recapture the 'purloined letter,' to redeem Scripture from the abuses it has suffered at the hands of Greeks and Christians. And they will accomplish their victory, above all, through acts of interpretation.... There will always perhaps be war between Jews and Greeks, war over Scripture.⁷⁴

The literal family romance—including the very longstanding one that, as Handelman interprets Freud, stretches back to the ancient "fathers," the rabbis, even to Moses and before him God—is sublated and spiritualized as a conflict within "the family of philosophy." Derrida's Jewishness turns out to be irrelevant, or at least, not decisive, after the Pauline spiritualization of psychoanalysis by Lacan. It is no longer possible to tell who is and isn't a "slayer of Moses," a "Jewish prodigal son." Derrida's Jewishness may have influenced him, just as Bloom's or Freud's may have done, but as readers of Freud and Lacan, they are spiritually or intellectually (*geistig*, Freud's word) circumcised anyway. The genetic inheritance is *adiaphora*. While Derrida plays the role of rabbi to Lacan's Paul in "Reb Derrida's Scripture," Handelman doesn't

⁷⁴ *SM*, 177.

go so far as to revise her presentation of Lacan as spiritually circumcised; his figural Jewishness is contested by Derrida, but both thinkers end up Judaized.

The floating signifier, now psychic rather than (or in addition to) physical and acquired rather than (or in addition to) innate, circulates ever more deliriously as Handelman's dialectical plot unrolls. Every category is converted into its opposite, and eventually they all converge in a single point of generalized uncertainty as to the meaning of Jewishness. Is there *anyone* whose heart, if not his flesh, *isn't* circumcised? Handelman concludes the book with the following sentence: "The lines become crossed: who knows now which is the holy, and which the profane; which the leopards, and which the priests?" (223). In her review, Shira Wolosky finds this aspect of *The Slayers of Moses* especially maddening: "Too extreme a line-drawing is combined with a rather strange line-blurring.... At this point it becomes unclear what is Jewish and what is not, what is tradition and what is not."⁷⁵ The only thing which isn't Judaized, by the end of the book, is the Greek philosophy she discusses in the first chapter. And when Jesus, Paul, Spinoza, Jung, Lacan, and Luke's prodigal son are all reclaimed for Judaism, as they are in the end, there's no longer any way, much less any point, in delineating between those to whom the "letter" of Torah is proper and those who have purloined it.

One consequence of this argument is to advance a bold claim for the vital importance of the Judaic tradition for the West, elevating Judaism to a stature rivaling Greek philosophy and displacing, so to speak, Christianity (which, as a neurotic reaction to the anxieties of Judaism, is for Handelman ultimately only a heretical Judaism). The identitarianism of the argument is paradoxical, though: the value of Judaism consists in the self-understanding it makes possible for

⁷⁵ Wolosky, review of *SM*, 280.

the Jewish subject, an understanding of the subject as exiled, even or especially when at home. What happens to the political stakes when the category *Jew* is so radically dilated?

On my reading, the conclusion toward which *The Slayers of Moses* tends is as follows: *any* discourse and *any* identity which can be linked to the heretic hermeneutic, and thereby Judaized, is fundamentally *unheimlich*, out of place, not-quite-identical even to itself. Thus, her proposal is not for Jewish scholars to disengage from the discourse of secular criticism on account of their particularity, but rather for everyone to recognize the particularities of identity and the fictionality of a purified, neutral, universal scene of encounter and deliberation. It would then follow that, contrary to David Stern's critique in "Moses-side" and "Literary Criticism or Literary Homilies?" (both discussed in Chapter 1, above), Handelman is not really opposed to the "secular criticism" of Edward Said's *The World, the Text, and the Critic*—a criticism always open to self-reflective recognition of its own unconscious investments in the material, the worldly, the political⁷⁶—but is opposed to the way in which Said's (and Stern's) *naming* of that ideal criticism as "secular" inadvertently reinstates the secularist norms which, on her view, have compelled the effacement and disavowal of Judaism since the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. This is, implicitly but palpably, a post-Holocaust argument, in that it calls into doubt the viability or desirability of Jewish integration into the modern secular nation-state.

Ordinarily we would call it a Zionist argument, too. Yet Handelman pointedly concludes *The Slayers of Moses* with a resounding affirmation of diaspora as the existential condition proper to the Jewish subject. Because displacement constitutes the deep structure of the heretic hermeneutic, to be displaced is therefore, *unheimlich* as it sounds, to be truly at (Jewish) home.

⁷⁶ Cf. Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983), 26.

The upshot is the celebration of deracination as an authentically Jewish form of life.

“Displacement...is the only way to survive the endless displacements of Jewish history.

Displacement is a necessary revision and recreation of a text which is the only anchor of a people displaced in space. Displacement, in other words, is both the condition of and the answer to exile” (*SM* 223). Or, in the words of one of Handelman’s “slayers of Moses,” “a letter always arrives at its destination.”⁷⁷ In a contemporaneous essay, “Our Homeland, the Text” (1985), the French-American Jewish literary critic George Steiner urges a similar vision of diaspora as the foundation of authentic Jewish values. Although Steiner concedes that “nation-states live by the sword” and therefore declines to pass judgment on the political and military actions of Israel, he expresses anxiety over the contradiction involved in the state’s existence: by *rooting* the Jews in a political territory, doesn’t the institution of the State of Israel actually *deracinate* the Jews from the very deracination which constitutes, paradoxically, their rootedness?

In Jerusalem today, the visitor is taken to the ‘Shrine of the Scrolls’.... In this exquisite building are kept some of the Dead Sea Scrolls and priceless biblical papyri. It is a place of poignant, if somewhat sepulchral, radiance. One’s guide explains the hidden hydraulic mechanism whereby the entire edifice can, in the event of shelling or bombardment, be made to sink safely below ground. Such precautions are indispensable.... But such precautions are also a metaphysical and ethical barbarism. Words cannot be broken by artillery, nor thought live in bomb-shelters. Locked materially in a material homeland, the text may, in fact, lose its life-force, and its truth-values may be betrayed. When the text *is* the homeland, even when it is rooted only in the exact remembrance and seeking of a handful of wanderers, nomads of the word, it cannot be extinguished. Time is truth’s passport and its native ground. What better lodging for the Jew?⁷⁸

Steiner’s version of the argument leads him into a direct confrontation with Zionism’s existential dangers for the very people in whose name the State of Israel was founded. Later Jewish critics

⁷⁷ Lacan, *Écrits*, 30.

⁷⁸ George Steiner, *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1995* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1996), 326-27.

of Israel to Steiner’s political left, including Judith Butler and the Boyarin brothers, would add that the re-placement of Jewry has of course entailed the further “ethical barbarism” of the displacement of *another* people from their homeland.⁷⁹ These painful questions do not arise in Handelman’s case, however, because unlike Steiner—for whom a pedagogical tradition is the mechanism of transmission for the core Jewish value of “bookishness” he valorizes in his essay—Handelman regards Jewish “bookishness” as *both* learned and consciously reproduced, on the one hand, *and* as the genetically transmitted archaic heritage, on the other. This doesn’t rule out Zionism as an option, but it does siphon any imperative force from that option by rejecting the idea that Israel is the *proper* home of the Jewish subject. Since any of the possible originary displacements—the primal murder of the father in *The Man Moses*, Moses’s breaking of the tablets of the Law at Sinai, the *tzimtzum* (צמצום)⁸⁰ of Lurianic kabbalah, Abraham’s departure from his homeland in Genesis 12—far predate the destruction of the Second Temple and the beginnings of the Jewish diaspora, a territorial reclamation cannot indemnify the Jewish psyche from its inherited repressions, its sense of being always already in exile.

This reading of Handelman’s texts brings her very close to William Connolly’s proposal for a “postsecular” (better to say: postsecularist) politics of identity, in which identity is precisely “desanctified,” *not* sacralized. As the philosopher of religion Tyler Roberts comments of Connolly’s work (and this would apply to Handelman’s also): “Another way to put this is to suggest that Connolly’s postsecular vision pluralizes and thus politicizes identity. In fact, it politicizes everything, leaving no private space in which human beings can avoid the fact that

⁷⁹ Cf. Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity,” *Critical Inquiry* 19.4 (Summer 1993): 693–725; Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2013).

⁸⁰ See Handelman’s discussion of Bloom’s interpretation of (Scholem’s interpretation of) Isaac Luria, *SM* 216–18.

their commitments, dispositions, and beliefs are contestable and subject to negotiation. Nothing is ‘natural,’ everything is contestable.”⁸¹ In fact, and again contrary to Stern’s interpretation of Handelman, not only does this argument not encourage Jewish scholars to abdicate the scene of secular criticism, but it positively imposes upon them the demand *not* to do so. For it is only by being not-at-home in the universal that the Jewish subject becomes exemplary for a postsecularist thinking. Unfortunately, as we have seen, Handelman makes this case via a historical narrative predicated on the coercive “recircumcision” of persons such as Freud and Derrida who openly refuse or complicate their own Jewish identities, as well as those who never laid claim to Jewishness in the first place. Built into *The Slayers of Moses* is an automatic justification of this move: by reading Freud and her other “slayers of Moses” against themselves, Handelman takes up her rightful place as the latest link in the chain of Judaic tradition, becoming herself a slayer of Moses.

4.4. Truth and its double

4.4.1. The purloined letter

The treatment of Jacques Derrida’s critique of Jacques Lacan’s seminar on Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Purloined Letter” is the most important moment in Handelman’s narrative articulation of the heretic hermeneutic, for it’s there, that literal genealogy is proven *adiaphora* as the figural “letter” is engaged by a writer of Jewish descent. As I indicated at the outset of this chapter, though, Handelman’s reading of Derrida’s critique as an oedipally inflected struggle for mastery

⁸¹ Tyler Roberts, “Toward Secular Diaspora: Relocating Religion and Politics,” in Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, eds., *Secularisms* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008), 283-307, at 287-88; see 294-98 for a comparative treatment of Connolly’s postsecularism, “Postmodern Jewish Philosophy,” and the Boyarins’ work on diaspora. For “desanctified identities,” see William Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: U. Minn. Press, 2000), 146.

over the letter misconstrues the most important aspect of Derrida's argument in "Le facteur de la vérité," namely the potentially anarchic dissemination of the sign. In this section, I'll review what Derrida actually contends and show how Handelman's misinterpretation of his text points up some of the problems with her Pauline concept of the heretic hermeneutic in *The Slayers of Moses*. This is not merely an exercise in correction, however, because Derrida's critique cannot be understood as a mere displacement of psychoanalytic logocentrism by deconstructive dissemination (which is how Handelman characterizes it); what Derrida argues for in "Le facteur de la vérité" and a handful of other texts I'll discuss here is not the impossibility of a letter arriving at its destination, but rather the impossibility of *guaranteeing*, as Lacan does at the end of the seminar, that "a letter *always* arrives at its destination."⁸²

In "The Purloined Letter," the political drama of the story revolves around an incriminating letter which has gone missing. The most sophisticated methods of ratiocination fail to discover the letter, which is finally discovered in the most obvious place, in plain sight, by Poe's detective hero, Dupin. In overtly Pauline as well as Saussurean terms, Lacan writes that the materiality of the signifier, the "letter," differs from the signified, the "spirit," by virtue of its "singularity":

[...T]he materiality of the signifier...is singular in many ways, the first of which is not to allow of partition. Cut a letter into small pieces, and it remains the letter that it is.... Language hands down its sentence to those who know how to hear it: through the use of the article employed as a partitive particle. Indeed, it is here that spirit—if spirit be living signification—seems, no less singularly, to allow for quantification more than the letter does. To begin with, through the very discourse that allows us to say, 'this discourse *full* of meaning'..., just as it allows us to recognize *some* intentionality.... But for the letter itself, whether we take it in the sense of a typographical element, of an epistle, or of what constitutes a man of letters, we commonly say that what people say must be understood *à la lettre*..., that *a letter* is being held for you at the post office, or even that you are well versed in *letters*—never that there is (some amount of) *letter* [*de la lettre*] anywhere,

⁸² Lacan, *Écrits*, 30.

whatever the context, even to designate late mail. For the signifier is a unique unit of being which, by its very nature, is the symbol of but an absence. This is why we cannot say of the purloined letter that, like other objects, it must be *or* not be somewhere but rather that, unlike them, it will be *and* will not be where it is wherever it goes. ... It is the imbecility of the realist who does not pause to observe that nothing, however deep into the bowels of the world a hand may shove it, will ever be hidden there, since another hand can retrieve it, and that what is hidden is never but what is not in its place...as a call slip says of a volume mislaid in a library. And even if the book were on an adjacent shelf or in the next slot, it would be hidden there, however visible it may seem there. For it can *literally* [*à la lettre*] be said that something is not in its place only of what can change places—that is, of the symbolic. For the real, whatever upheaval we subject it to, is always and in every case in its place; it carries its place stuck to the sole of its shoe, there being nothing that can exile from it.⁸³

So a letter—grapheme or epistle—when torn to pieces “remains the letter that it is,” an irreducible material unit of the symbolic order. Because it is a piece of the ruined whole, even the fragment of the letter is still properly itself. Put otherwise: “Since it can be made to take a detour,” since it can be displaced, “hidden,” purloined, “it must have a trajectory which is proper to it. For we have learned to conceive of the signifier as sustaining itself only in a displacement...because of the alternating operation at its core that requires it to leave its place, if only to return to it by a circular path.”⁸⁴

Despite the fact that the signifier is by definition displaced and so both is and is not “where it is wherever it goes”—which is why the actual *contents* of the letter do not matter for any of Poe’s characters, only the desire of each character to possess it—it turns out, then, as Derrida will write in “Le facteur de la vérité,” that this meaninglessness itself becomes the proper meaning of the letter for Lacan:

The signifier has its place in the letter, and the letter refinds its proper meaning in its proper place.... Its meaning counts for little, it cannot be reduced to its meaning. But what the Seminar insists upon showing, finally, is that there is a single proper itinerary of the letter which returns to a determinable place that is always the same and that is its

⁸³ Lacan, *Écrits*, 17.

⁸⁴ Lacan, *Écrits*, 21.

own' and if that mean (what is written on the note in circulation) is indifferent or unknown for our purposes..., the meaning of the letter and the sense of its itinerary are necessary, unique, and determinable in truth, that is, as truth.⁸⁵

In Lacan's case, Derrida continues, this truth is castration, "woman as the unveiled site of the lack of a penis, as the truth of the phallus, that is, of castration. The truth of the purloined letter is the truth, its meaning is meaning, its law is the law.... The truth is 'woman' as veiled/unveiled castration."⁸⁶ Lacan, in short, makes "The Purloined Letter" into an *allegory* of psychoanalysis; this is why Derrida charges psychoanalysis with reserving the right to convert every phenomenon into evidence of its own truth, so that the discourse of psychoanalysis "finds itself" everywhere.⁸⁷

It is this allegorical move of Lacan's, the conversion of the itinerary of the meaningless signifier into the signifier's meaning, which Derrida criticizes in "Le facteur de la vérité." He does not dispute that this *might* be its meaning, but rather challenges that this meaning is "necessary, unique, and determinable in truth, that is, as truth." In other words, Derrida reads Lacan as getting exactly right the constitutive difference of the sign from itself, its split into material letter and spiritual meaning, which ensures that the purloined letter both is and is not where it is; at the same time, Lacan fails to grasp the implications of this difference for the notion of truth, in all its necessity, singularity, and determination. As Derrida elaborates in a slightly earlier essay, "Signature Event Context" (1971), the differential constitution of the signifier—or, writing (*l'écriture*)—leaves it open to a structural indeterminacy:

It is here that *différance* as writing could not longer (be) an (ontological) modification of presence. My 'written communication' must, if you will, remain legible despite the absolute disappearance of every determined addressee in general for it to function as

⁸⁵ Derrida, *Post Card*, 437.

⁸⁶ Derrida, *Post Card*, 439.

⁸⁷ Derrida, *Post Card*, 413.

writing, that is, for it to be legible. It must be repeatable—iterable—in the absolute absence of the addressee or of the empirically determinable set of addresses. This iterability...structures the mark of writing itself.... A writing that was not structurally legible—iterable—beyond the death of the addressee would not be writing.... Let us imagine a writing with a code idiomatic enough to have been founded and known, as a secret cipher, only by two ‘subjects.’ Can it still be said that upon the death of the addressee, that is, of the two partners, the mark left by one of them is still a writing? Yes, to the extent to which, governed by a code, even if unknown and nonlinguistic, it is constituted, in its identity as a mark, by its iterability in the absence of whoever, and therefore ultimate in the absence of every empirically determinable ‘subject.’ This implies that there is no code—an organon of iterability—that is structurally secret. The possibility of repeating and therefore of identifying, marks is implied in every code, making of it a communicable, transmittable, decipherable grid that is iterable for a third party, and thus for any possible user in general.⁸⁸

Two consequences follow. First, the signifier cannot be inoculated against falsification or appropriation, because it must be iterable in order to signify at all: “To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a kind of machine that is in turn productive, that my future disappearance in principle will not prevent from functioning and from yielding, and yielding itself to, reading and rewriting.”⁸⁹ Second, the signifier’s “essential drifting, due to writing as an iterative structure,” means that it cannot have an absolutely proper meaning, but only at best a relatively stable one within a given context.

The most obvious example of such a context is subjectivity; the meaning of the signifier is typically interpreted with reference to whomever has spoken or written it. But—and this is the key to the critique of Lacan—what happens when we do not *know* who has written it? And since even the most “necessary, unique, and determinable” of signifiers, such as a signature, is iterable and therefore falsifiable, when we are dealing with written texts we never really are absolutely certain who is the authorial subject whose intentionality serves as the hermeneutical context. Of

⁸⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1982), 315.

⁸⁹ Derrida, *Margins*, 316.

course, this minimum of indeterminacy does not always pose a problem, practically speaking; if it did, no communication would ever take place. The relative certainty, for example, that Derrida is the author of both “Signature Event Context” and “Le facteur de la vérité” enables me to read these texts as intentional productions of the same authorial subject. There is, however, one domain where this relative certainty is no longer enough to secure the hermeneutical context: literature.

In “Signature Event Context,” the category of “literature” enters the discussion via a quotation from J. L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). In the second lecture collected in that book, Austin qualifies his discussion of performative felicity in language by bracketing literary language:

[...A]s utterances our performatives are also heir to certain other kinds of ill which infect all utterances. And these...we are deliberately at present excluding. I mean, for example, the following: a performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem.... This applies to any and every utterance—a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use....⁹⁰

Although Austin’s concepts of constative and performative utterances are supposed to liberate his philosophy of language “from the authority of the value of truth, from the opposition true/false, at least in its classical form,” this liberation is belied by his characterization of literature as “unserious,” “parasitic.”⁹¹ The literary signifier is “hollow or void” because of its peculiar relationship to truth: it simultaneously posits and withdraws its truth. This double gesture of positing and withdrawal—what Derrida describes as literature’s asking *pardon de ne*

⁹⁰ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, quoted in Derrida, *Margins*, 324–25.

⁹¹ Derrida, *Margins*, 322.

pas vouloir dire (“pardon for not meaning”)⁹²—is directly related to the political context in which literature is possible, as discussed in Chapter 2 above. In literature the author is “free to say anything and everything” because even as we understand the text to be the work of its author, we do not—socially, politically, juridically—understand its words in the hermeneutical context of that author’s subjective intentions. The words spoken by a fictional narrator are written by the author, but they are not the author’s words: they are “hollow or void,” they mean and do not mean (*pardon de ne pas vouloir dire*). Or, as Derrida puts it in “Le facteur de la vérité”: “For example, the truth. But is truth an example? What happens—and what is dispensed with—when a text, for example a so-called literary fiction—but is this still an example?—puts truth onstage?”⁹³ Everything is as if in scare-quotes, a citation without origin, which is to say that the literary signifier not only does not have a proper place, is always already displaced, but, furthermore, that literature points up this displacement as it “infects all utterances.”

Derrida painstakingly demonstrates that in order to make “The Purloined Letter” an allegory of psychoanalysis’s truth, Lacan has to extract the two scenes he discusses, the “primal scene” and its repetition, from a more complexly structured narrative sequence of repetitions, frames, commentaries. In the conclusion of “Le facteur de la vérité,” he draws attention to the ending of Poe’s story, when Dupin tells his friend that he replaced the purloined letter with a counterfeit “(so far as regards externals) which I had carefully prepared at my lodgings; imitating the...cipher, very readily, by means of a seal formed of bread.” Dupin continues, in the closing words of the story

⁹² Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death & Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills, 2nd ed. (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2008), 119.

⁹³ Derrida, *Post Card*, 414.

“[...I]t did not seem altogether right to leave the interior blank—that would have been insulting. ... So, as I knew he would feel some curiosity in regard to the identity of the person who had outwitted him, I thought it a pity not to give him a clue. He is well acquainted with my MS., and I just copied into the middle of the blank sheet the words—

“—*Un dessein si funeste,
S’il n’est digne d’Atrée, est digne de Thyeste.*”

They are to be found in Crébillon’s “Atrée.””⁹⁴

“Play of quotation marks,” comments Derrida: the last sentence “can be equally attributed to the author of ‘The Purloined Letter,’ to the narrator, to the author of the avenging letter (Dupin).”

But even if the hermeneutical context makes it relatively clear that these words should be

“attributed to” Dupin, this does not clarify the matter: “But this last word, aside from the invisible quotation marks that border the entire story, Dupin is obliged to cite between quotation marks, to recount his signature: this is what I wrote to him and this is how I signed. What is a signature between quotation marks? And then, within these quotation marks, the imprimatur itself is a citation.”⁹⁵ In its final word, then, Poe’s text stages a performative (a signature) which is rendered “hollow or void.” It both says and does not say what it appears to say, it is proper to no subject.

Lacan’s seminar registers none of this, however. Lacan lops off the elaborate framing device, turning a square into a triangle, and he determines the indeterminate literary work in order to convert it to psychoanalysis. What he misses when he effaces the literariness of the text, then—and it is no accident, as Barbara Johnson has shrewdly observed, that Derrida’s critique of Lacan now starts to sound a little like another repetition of the jockeying for the purloined letter

⁹⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Purloined Letter,” in John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, eds., *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), 3–27, at 23.

⁹⁵ Derrida, *Post Card*, 494–95.

in the story⁹⁶—is precisely what literature exposes as a structural risk “infect[ing] all utterances”:
“This essential drifting, due to writing as an iterative structure cut off from all absolute responsibility, from consciousness as the authority of the last analysis.”⁹⁷ This “drifting” is inscribed “in and as the open, the very open, letter that is fiction,” in light of which Derrida cannot accept Lacan’s claim that “a letter *always* arrives at its destination.”⁹⁸ For to say that the letter always arrives is thus to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the signifier:

[...A] letter can always not arrive at its destination. Its ‘materiality’...[is] due to its divisibility, its always possible partition. It can always be fragmented without return, and the system of the symbolic, of castration, of the signifier, of the truth, ...etc., always attempts to protect the letter from this fragmentation.... *Not that the letter never arrives at its destination, but it belongs to the structure of the letter to be capable, always, of not arriving.*⁹⁹

It is not coincidental that, almost a quarter-century after the initial publication “Le facteur de la vérité,” Derrida will take up an undelivered letter, Franz Kafka’s lengthy *Brief an dem Vater*, and a story which concludes with a reference to the “Dead Letter Office” for undeliverable mail, Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” as exemplary instances of what he means when he says “literature.”¹⁰⁰ The crucial point is that even a letter which does in fact arrive could have, as a matter of structural principle, gotten lost; likewise, a letter which never arrives is not errant to begin within but *gets* lost or purloined. Dissemination, to translate this back into Derridean terms, haunts every utterance as an ineluctable possibility; literature names the institution which

⁹⁶ See Barbara Johnson, “The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida,” in Shoshana Felman, ed., *Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982), 457–505.

⁹⁷ Derrida, *Margins*, 316.

⁹⁸ Derrida, *Post Card*, 443.

⁹⁹ Derrida, *Post Card*, 444, emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁰ See Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 75–76 and 133–39.

plays up this possibility. Truth and literature are not opposites, but doubles: literature as counterfeit truth.

This distinction between opposition and doubling is indispensable for making sense of Derrida's whole philosophical project from the 1960s onward. In his most famous essay, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1966), he differentiates "two interpretations of interpretation":

Turned toward the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediacy is therefore the saddened, negative, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play whose other side would be the Nietzschean affirmation, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. This affirmation then determines the noncenter otherwise than as loss of the center. And it plays without security. For there is a sure play: that which is limited to the substitution of the given and existing, present, pieces. In absolute chance, affirmation also surrenders itself to genetic indetermination, to the seminal adventure of the trace. There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play....¹⁰¹

A common misinterpretation of this oft-quoted passage understands Derrida to be a partisan of the second interpretation of interpretation, the Nietzschean "joyous affirmation of the play of the world." However, Derrida, explicitly rejects the idea that anyone might opt for one or the other:

There are more than enough indications today to suggest we might perceive that these two interpretations of interpretation—which are absolutely irreconcilable even if we live them simultaneously and reconcile them in an obscure economy—together share the field which we call, in such a problematic fashion, the human sciences. For my part, although

¹⁰¹ Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), 427; Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1978), 292, trans. mod.

these two interpretations must acknowledge and accentuate their difference and define their irreducibility, I do not believe that today there is any question of choosing....¹⁰²

In another essay collected in the same volume, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book” (1964), Derrida again writes of these “two interpretations of interpretation,” now named “rabbi” and “poet” rather than “Rousseau” and “Nietzsche,” but still differentiated as nostalgia and adventure:

Poetry is to prophecy what the idol is to truth. It is perhaps for this reason that in Jabès the poet and the Jew seem at one so united and disunited, and that the entire *Livre des questions* is also a self-justification addressed to the Jewish community which lives under heteronomy and to which the poet does not truly belong. Poetic autonomy, comparable to none other, presupposes broken tablets. ...

Between the fragments of the broken tablets the poem grows and the right to speech takes root. Once more begins the adventure of the text as weed, as outlaw.... The necessity of commentary, like poetic necessity, is the very form of exiled speech. In the beginning is hermeneutics. But the shared necessity of exegesis, the interpretive imperative, is interpreted differently by the rabbi and the poet. The difference between the horizon of the original text and exegetic writing makes the difference between the rabbi and the poet irreducible. Forever unable to reunite with each other, yet so close to each other.... *The original opening of interpretation essentially signifies that there will always be rabbis and poets. And two interpretations of interpretation.*¹⁰³

Derrida’s objective here is to “acknowledge and accentuate” the “difference” between these “irreducibly” double interpretations of interpretation, not to depose and replace the one with the other (except insofar as the one has enjoyed unproblematic sovereignty within philosophical discourse).

In her chapter on Derrida in *The Slayers of Moses*, however, Handelman interprets Derrida’s texts as calling for just such a deposition and replacement: “Like Freud, like Paul, like Jesus, Derrida, in spite of all, is another in the line of Jewish prodigal sons, who try to perpetuate

¹⁰² Derrida, *L’Écriture et la différence*, 427–28; Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 293, trans. mod.

¹⁰³ Derrida, *L’Écriture et la différence*, 102–03; Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 67, trans. mod, emphasis mine.

the law in its own transgressions, indeed who make the very concept of ‘perpetuating the law through its transgressions’ the center of their theory. Derridean deconstructionism [*sic*] is a repetition of the structure it seeks to analyze.”¹⁰⁴ The latter sentence is doubtless correct, but it would be more accurate to say that Derrida demonstrates how the repetition of a structure discloses its iterability and thus its constitutive potential for dissemination. “[...T]he theme of the purloined letter,” writes Handelman,

can characterize our entire problem of Rabbinic versus Patristic hermeneutics. For as we have stressed, it was above all the question of the nature of the letter, the integrity of the text which was at stake. Stealing the ‘letter’ is stealing the text, stealing Scripture, and transferring meaning elsewhere. It might be said that Paul stole the letter from the Jews and tried to abolish it by transcending it through the spirit, And Freud stole the letter from the Jews by displacing Moses, their greatest prophet, the father of their religion and giver of the letter of the law itself. Lacan reacts against the theft of the letter from Freud and tries to return it to its place. ...Derrida...accus[es] Lacan of the sins against which the Jewish prophets always inveighed: reification, pinning the signifier to the signified, and idol-worship—or ideal-worship—the idealization of this ‘transcendent signifier.’ But what will Derrida then do to counter Lacan’s subtle theft of the letter? Erect a new religion of *Writing*....¹⁰⁵

The tell here is the reference to *the* letter, which, as in Lacan, is an irreducible unit of signification. If there were only one letter to go around, then there would be no way for Derrida to proceed except to claim it for himself: “But is not the reinstatement of the trace also theological[?]” asks Handelman. “Is not the trace dialectically related somehow to all it negates?”¹⁰⁶ Derrida’s argument, though, is precisely that the letter is not *one*. The zero-sum game of Father and “Jewish prodigal son” works only so long as the possibility of dissemination is bracketed and the letter remains proper to itself. This does not exempt Derrida from the game of one-upmanship (or rather “one-downmanship,” as Johnson argues), but it does alter the stakes

¹⁰⁴ *SM*, 166.

¹⁰⁵ *SM*, 163–64.

¹⁰⁶ *SM*, 174.

of the competition for mastery, since no one can finally possess *the* letter.¹⁰⁷ For every rabbi, the possibility of a poet.

4.4.2. The biographical frame of reference

The rabbi–poet dyad in Derrida’s essay on *The Book of Questions*, a 1963 volume by the Franco-Egyptian poet Edmond Jabès, directs us to the implications of the deconstructive concepts we have been tracing here—iterability, dissemination, literature—for thinking about Judaism and Jewishness. Jabès’s text is populated by a cast of fictional rabbis, sages whose aphoristic utterances unfold exegeses of an absent scripture. In his essay and its sequel, “Ellipsis” (1967), Derrida participates in this literary play on rabbinic authority by rehearsing the gesture with which Poe closes “The Purloined Letter.” He concludes the first Jabès essay with a quotation from *The Book of Questions*:

Henceforth, so that God may indeed be, as Jabès says, *an interrogation of God*, would we not have to transform a final affirmation into a question? Literature would then, perhaps, only be the dreamlike displacement of this question:

“*There is the book of God in which God questions himself, and there is the book of man which is proportionate to that of God.*”
*Reb Rida*¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Johnson, “Frame of Reference,” 465. On the lure of mastery in Derrida, see Sarah Hammerschlag, “A Poor Substitute for Prayer: Sarah Kofman and the Fetish of Writing,” in Hammerschlag, Constance M. Furey, and Amy Hollwood, *Devotion: Three Inquiries in Religion, Literature, and Political Imagination* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2021), 97–172, esp. 148–59.

¹⁰⁸ Derrida, *L’Écriture et la différence*, 116; Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 78, trans. mod., italics in original. See Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, trans. Rosemarie Waldrop (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1991), 1:20. Handelman has a full essay treating Jabès’s poetry in the same manner as the four “slayers of Moses” in *SM*; cf. Susan A. Handelman “‘Torments of an Ancient Word’: Jabès and the Rabbinic Tradition,” in Eric Gould, ed., *The Sin of the Book: Edmond Jabès* (Lincoln: U. Nebraska Press, 1985), 55–91.

(“Play of quotation marks.”) The imaginary rabbi from Jabès’s text, “Reb Rida,” has a name that resembles Derrida’s own, so that this concluding quotation seems to function as a pseudonymous signature, “a signature between quotation marks”: Derrida signs the essay in such a way as to hollow out the performative act of signing, just as Jabès’s own literary miming of rabbinic exegesis both evokes and siphons rabbinic authority. Derrida then *repeats* this repetition of Jabès’s mimicry in the closing lines of “Ellipsis,” the last essay in *Writing and Difference*:

If nothing has preceded repetition, if no present has kept watch over the trace, if, after a fashion, it is the ‘void which reempties itself and marks itself with imprints,’ then the time of writing no longer follows the line of modified present tenses. What is to come is not a future present, yesterday is not a past present. The beyond of the closure of the book is neither to be awaited nor to be refund. It is *there*, but out there, beyond, within repetition, but eluding us there. It is there like the shadow of the book, the third party between the hands holding the book, the deferral within the now of writing, the distance between the book and the book, that other hand.

Opening the third part of the third *Book of Questions*, thus begins the song on distance and accent:

“*Tomorrow is the shadow and reflexivity of our hands.*”
*Reb Dérissa*¹⁰⁹

“Reb Dérissa,” too, reads as an encrypted “signature between quotation marks”; it also seems to evoke the French *risée*, meaning “laughingstock.” Whose word is this—Jabès’s? Derrida’s? Reb Dérissa’s? As a literary utterance, the word is not absolutely proper to any subject; the additional wrinkle Derrida gives this demonstration is that it folds rabbinic authority into its citational abyss. As Derrida argues in “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” this folding has everything to do with the question of who counts as Jewish:

But traditionality is not orthodoxy. Others, perhaps, will articulate the ways in which Jabès *also* severs himself from the Jewish community, assuming that this last notion here has a sense, or has its classical sense. He does not sever himself from it only insofar as

¹⁰⁹ Derrida, *L’Écriture et la différence*, 436; Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 300, trans. mod., italics in original. See Jabès, *Book of Questions*, 1:381.

concerns dogma, but more profoundly still. For Jabès, who acknowledges a very late discovery of a certain way of being part of Judaism, the Jew is but the suffering allegory: ‘*You are all Jews, even the antisemites, for you have all been designated for martyrdom*’ He must justify himself to his blood brothers and to rabbis who are no longer imaginary. They will reproach him for this universalism, this essentialism, this skeletal allegorism, this neutralization of the event in the realms of the symbolic and the imaginary. . . . In this coincidence of the self and the self, he is more and less Jewish than the Jew. But the Jew’s identification with himself does not exist.¹¹⁰

Jabès’s “certain way of being part of Judaism” is his literary “hollowing out” of rabbinic discourse, which makes him “more and less Jewish than the Jew.” It is a participation which also effects a disaffiliation, a gesture Derrida’s “signatures between quotation marks” then redouble.

The implication here is that the signifiers of “being part of Judaism”—say, the title “Reb”—are, like all signifiers, in principle iterable and therefore liable to be disseminated. In his essay for the collection *Midrash and Literature*, “Shibboleth,” Derrida suggests that circumcision, too, is one of these signifiers. Like a signature, which is supposed to serve as testament to the presence and intentional consent of a unique subject, circumcision records on the (male) human body an event that “takes place just once,” “one time only,” that is, the incision of the knife into the foreskin.¹¹¹ Unlike most other scars, however, which function as records of the event of wounding, circumcision signifies something beyond this event—namely, the initiation of the infant into the covenant with God—just as the signature does not testify merely to the act of writing, but to the identity of the subject who writes. Circumcision is thus already in

¹¹⁰ Derrida, *L’Écriture et la différence*, 112; Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 74–75, trans. mod., italics in original; see Jabès, *Book of Questions*, 60–61.

¹¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Schibboleth : pour Paul Celan* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1986), 11; Derrida, “Shibboleth,” trans. Joshua Wilner, in Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986), 307–48, at 307. For more a detailed treatment of Derrida’s thinking of circumcision in this and other essays, see Hammerschlag, *Figural Jew*, 201–28. For extended discussions of this essay in particular, see also Michael G. Levine, *A Weak Messianic Power: Figures of a Time to Come in Benjamin, Derrida, and Celan* (New York: Fordham UP, 2014), 63–79; Marc Redfield, *Schibboleth: Judges, Derrida, Celan* (New York: Fordham UP, 2021), esp. 36–49.

circulation as a sign, and as a sign, it can be put “between quotation marks.” In his commentary on Paul Celan’s poem “Einem, der vor der Tür stand [To the one who stood before the door]” in “Shibboleth,” Derrida explores the paradox of the iterable sign which is supposed to function as the *shibboleth* confirming a unique and indivisible membership in the covenant.

The mark of an alliance, it also an index of exclusion, of discrimination, indeed of extermination. One may, thanks to the *shibboleth*, recognize and be recognized by one’s own, for better and for worse, for the sake of participating and the ring of alliance on the one hand, but also, on the other hand, for the purpose of denying the other, of denying him passage or life. One may also, because of the *shibboleth* and exactly to the extent that one may make use of it, see it turned against oneself: then it is the circumcised who are proscribed or held at the border, excluded from the community, put to death, or reduced to ashes....¹¹²

Shibboleths—and circumcisions, that is, the shibboleth as the “circumcised word” mentioned by Celan in “Einem, der vor der Tür stand”—exceed the control of those they mark. A subject has some control over the identifications they claim; a person may be circumcised according to halakhic prescription and disavow the identity *Jew*. But such a subject cannot control the frame of reference, the *context* (to return to “Signature Event Context”) within which the sign circulates and is read. Thus someone may refuse the identity *Jew* and nevertheless be interpreted and interpellated, “for better and worse,” by others as a Jew—by other Jews, perhaps, but also, as Derrida intimates, by those who would do violence to Jews. We have encountered this problematic before; it is precisely the “recircumcision” Derrida criticizes in Yerushalmi’s reading of Freud and whose dynamics we have been following through *The Slayers of Moses*.

Indeed, Handelman performs the same recircumcision on Derrida that she did on Freud. She recalls him to “Judaism interminable” by setting biography as the determining frame of

¹¹² Derrida, *Schibboleth*, 111; Derrida, “Shibboleth,” 346.

reference for his writing. The most acute tension in this respect arises from her comments on the following passage from Derrida's book *Glas* (1974):

In Algeria, in the middle of a mosque the colonists would have transformed into a synagogue, the Torah, brought forth from behind the curtains [*derrière les rideaux*], is promenaded in the arms of a man or a child.... Maybe the children who watched the pomp of this celebration, even more those who could lend it a hand, dream about it for a long time after, in order to organize all the pieces of their lives.

What am I doing here? Let's put it that I am working at the origin of literature by miming it. Between the two.¹¹³

This passage, Handelman states, is

obviously autobiographical.... *Glas* was written shortly after the death of Derrida's father, just as *The Interpretation of Dreams* was written after the death of Freud's father, facts which have much to do with the nature and structure of both works. Indeed, what *is* Derrida doing here: ...the Jewish child's inspiration at the absence of the Father, or truth behind the veil, an inspiration that allows him to place his autobiography in that place, producing the 'origin' of literature.¹¹⁴

The issue here is not that the passage is *definitely not* autobiographical—it very well might be; Derrida did grow up in Algeria—but, rather, that it is *not definitely* autobiographical, or, more precisely, that even as autobiography it would already be exposed to certain literary effects. (Derrida is emulating here the ambiguously autobiographical fictions of Jean Genet, whose writings are the main topic of the column of *Glas* in which this passage appears.) The passage offers, once again, truth and its double, and “autobiography” as a written text is constructed precisely “between the two”: religion and literature, nostalgia and play, rabbi and poet, fidelity and betrayal. And, once again, we get an encrypted signature, a “signature between [the two] quotation marks” like “Reb Rida” and “Reb Dérissa”: *derrière les rideaux*. So Derrida signs the

¹¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1974), 268b–69b; Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: U. Nebraska Press, 1986), 240b–41b.

¹¹⁴ *SM*, 165–66.

passage, but in such a way as to put the indexical authenticity of the signature into ironic doubt. In a sense, Handelman's interpretation *is* invited by the passage—but this invitation is a ruse, a lure for the reader who expects from a text the unmediated truth without remainder. It is a trap, that is, for a reader like Handelman. In short, she reads Derrida in much the same manner that Derrida argues Lacan reads Poe: without registering the full extent of the indeterminacy of signification.

Handelman, as we have seen, constructs much of her argument about the heretic hermeneutic in *The Slayers of Moses* through repetitions: tropes and citations across the book rhetorically stage the return of the rabbinic repressed. This rhetorical performance, however, depends on the rigid determination of the repetitions; the letter, so to speak, must always arrive at its destination. Accordingly, *The Slayers of Moses* cannot tolerate what Derrida calls “literature”: a repetition which shows up the original itself as always already “hollow and void.” This is most evident in the Lacan chapter, in which Handelman employs a typological hermeneutic to “spiritualize” the “talmudic way of thinking” which had heretofore been indissociable, as a psychic essence, from the embodied substrate—a hereditary, racial conception of Jewishness, “Judaism interminable.” The Pauline moment in the narrative of the second half of *The Slayers of Moses* inadvertently concedes the detachability of the rabbinic repressed and the heretic hermeneutic from Jewish heredity and genealogy. Handelman's gesture here is thus rightly described, like Yerushalmi's archival zeal in *Freud's Moses*, as what Derrida terms “recircumcision.” The very act of discursively *repeating* the interpellation of the subject as a Jew exposes circumcision itself as already caught up in the “general economy” of dissemination; even as recircumcision thus functions violently to reinterpellate Freud and Derrida as Jewish subjects, “for better and for worse,” it also raises the question of just who has the authority to

perform such a “*coup de théâtre*.”¹¹⁵ That is to say, the hermeneutical context or frame of reference is secured, the drift of dissemination bracketed, through some exertion of force, some sovereign decision.

It will be helpful at this point to revisit the opening of M. *Avot*. Last we read of this text, “Joshua took over [custody of the Torah] from Moses, as it is said, And thou shalt put of thy honor upon him, that all the congregation of the children of Israel may hearken (Num. 27:20).

Avot continues:

The Elders took over from Joshua, as it is said, And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work of the Lord, that He had wrought for Israel (Judg. 2:7). The Judges took over from the Elders, as it is said, And it came to pass in the days when the judges judged (Ruth 1:1). The Prophets took over from the Judges, as it is said, And though I have sent unto you all My servants the prophets, sending them daily betimes and often (Jer. 7:25). Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi took over from the Prophets. The Men of the Great Assembly took over from Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, and they said three things: *Be deliberate in judgment, and raise many disciples, and build a fence around the Torah*.¹¹⁶

Handelman takes the “fence around the Torah” for granted: repetition, in *The Slayers of Moses*, is always part of the tradition, even when this repetition is spiritualized in a Pauline fashion, as in Lacan’s “return to Freud.” The very need for the “fence around the Torah,” however, belies the possibility of its dissemination—“presupposes broken tablets,” as Derrida has it in the first Jabès essay.¹¹⁷ There are thus two interpretations of repetition: one determinate (repetition as tradition), the other indeterminate (repetition as dissemination). To take Derrida’s argument more seriously than Handelman does would require, as he insists at the end of “Structure, Sign, and Play,” being

¹¹⁵ Derrida, *Mal d’archive*, 61; Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 37.

¹¹⁶ *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, trans./ed. Judah Goldin (New Haven: Yale UP, 1955), 4–5, trans. mod.

¹¹⁷ On scriptural canonization and hermeneutical authority in rabbinic Judaism, see Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997).

sensitive to the *necessary* doubling of these interpretations; remaining alert to the constitutive risk of dissemination that haunts tradition; and resisting the temptation to posit the priority of tradition before dissemination.

In a later essay, “Abraham, the Other” (2003), Derrida figures this exigency through Franz Kafka’s Kierkegaardian exegesis of the *Akedah* narrative from Genesis 22. There are, Derrida comments there, two interpretations of God’s call to Abraham in Genesis 22:1. Perhaps God calls to Abraham; but how does Abraham know that it is he to whom God has called, and not some “other Abraham,” as Kafka proposes? How to know that this call, like a letter, has reached its proper destination, and not erred from its set itinerary, or been purloined along the way and replaced with a counterfeit?

[...A]nyone responding to the call must continue to doubt, to ask himself whether he has heard right, whether there was no original misunderstanding; whether it was in fact his name that was heard, whether he is the only or the first addressee of the call; whether he is not in the process of violently substituting himself for another.... It is possible that I have not been called.... That there should be yet another Abraham....¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Le dernier de Juifs* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2014), 125–26; Derrida, “Abraham, the Other,” trans. Gil Anidjar, in Bettina Bergo, et al., eds., *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham UP, 2007), 1–35, at 34.

CHAPTER FIVE

“NO SIN TO LIMP”:

GEOFFREY HARTMAN’S ETHICS OF ERROR

The Messiah will come when he is no longer needed,
he will come only on the day after his arrival, he will
come not on the last day, but rather on the very last.

—Franz Kafka, “The Coming of the Messiah”

5.1. Indeterminacy and polysemy

The distinction between the two interpretations of repetition discussed in the preceding chapter—Susan Handelman’s interpretation of repetition as tradition, Jacques Derrida’s interpretation of repetition as dissemination—is restated in an important *Critical Inquiry* article of 1988, David Stern’s “Midrash and Indeterminacy,” as the distinction between (midrashic) “polysemy” and (deconstructive) “indeterminacy.” As with tradition and dissemination, Stern’s polysemy/indeterminacy distinction turns on the “fence around the Torah” prescribed in *M. Avot* 1, and on the doctrine of Oral Torah.

According to the rabbis, not only the Written Torah but also the Oral Torah—the rabbis’ own authoritative, canonized discourse—was revealed to Moses at Sinai. From God’s perspective, the two Torahs together constitute a unified plenitude: “Everything is in it [Torah],” as Ben Bag-Bag once said. In the same sentence, however, Ben Bag-Bag also instructs the

Jewish exegete to “Turn it [the Torah] and turn it....”¹ The meaning that was already revealed at Sinai is disclosed “in the language of humankind” as the exegete “turns” the Written Torah over and over. A famous talmudic aggadah relates how Moses, the prophetic medium of the Sinaitic revelation himself, was still only human and so could only understand the words of the Torah from his timebound perspective. When God treats Moses to a glimpse of Rabbi Akiva teaching at a *beit midrash* in the future, Moses cannot make sense of the rabbi’s lesson.² As Michael Fishbane writes, “revelation is accompanied by a prolepsis or encapsulation of the future achievement of rabbinic interpretation. The written text thus mediates between the original verbal revelation of God at Sinai and the ongoing discourses of the sages in history. Paradoxically, the divine Word unfolds through human speech. As exegetical act and event, this human speech is midrash.”³

What makes midrash especially distinctive is that, as a direct consequence of the doctrine of Oral Torah, the anthologized Midrashim contain an accretion of interpretations without needing to systematically elaborate a cohesive, progressive understanding of the Written Torah. Instead, midrash is allowed a proliferation of exegeses from various rabbis of diverse periods in Jewish history, sometimes resulting in series of interpretations which not only diverge from one

Epigraph: Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1961), 80, trans. mine.

Sections of this chapter appeared in the article “‘No Sin to Limp’: Critique as Error in Geoffrey Hartman’s Essays on Midrash,” *Naharaim* 16.1 (June 2022): 53–77, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/naha-2022-0002>, and are reprinted here with the permission of the publisher, Walter de Gruyter GmbH.

¹ M. *Avot* 5:22. There are textual and interpretative issues with this particular aphorism of Ben Bag-Bag’s, but the translation and emendation given here reflect how Hartman understands it, as alluded to in Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Third Pillar: Essays in Judaic Studies* (Philadelphia: U. Penn. Press, 2013), 90: “Everything is in the text.”

² BT *Menachot* 29b.

³ Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 10.

another but even appear contradictory. The rabbis often introduce such alternative readings with the formula דבר אחר (*davar acher*, “another word”). As Stern stresses, this should not be taken as license for hermeneutical anarchy. Not only do we need to remember that the “idealized picture of interpretive pluralism” conveyed by the dialogical forms of much rabbinic literature is a conscious editorial construction,⁴ but, just as importantly, on the rabbis’ terms their interpretations are historical disclosures of a total meaning already revealed at Sinai. “Opinions that...may appear contradictory or mutually exclusive are raised to the state of paradox once traced to their common source in the speech of the divine author.”⁵

This is what Stern calls “polysemy,” as counterposed to “indeterminacy.” Indeterminacy he attributes to Theory, and specifically to Geoffrey Hartman, who articulates the concept in *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* as an elaboration of the Derridean critique of the “absolute determinability” of “the prerequisites of a context” in “Signature Event Context” (see Chapter 4, above). For Hartman, indeterminacy is “the absence of one and only one context from which to view the flux of time or the empirical world, of one and only one method that would destabilize all but itself, of one and only one language to rule misunderstanding and prevent misunderstanding.” The possibility of contradictory meanings for a single text does not disclose the plenitude of a transcendental totality, but is instead a “commentary process [of] taking away, modification, elaboration, of previous meanings” by a parade of historically situated subjects.⁶ Stern rightly contends that this is not an accurate description of rabbinic hermeneutics, which assume, first, a transcendental backstop (the divine

⁴ David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1996), 37.

⁵ Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 33.

⁶ Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980), 270–71.

authorship of Torah), and, second, the canonization of Written Torah. As James Kugel puts it, “midrash is an exegesis of biblical verses, not of biblical books. The basic unit of the Bible...is the verse, and...there simply is no boundary encountered beyond that of the verse until one comes to the borders of the canon itself.”⁷ Together, these measures constitute part of the Mishnah’s prescribed “fence around the Torah”; within these bounds, דבר אהר means polysemy rather than indeterminacy.

Stern’s argument in “Midrash and Indeterminacy,” however, is not a straightforward debunking of midrash “as an antecedent or counterpart of...poststructuralist literary theory.” He writes that although “multiple interpretation in midrash bears little connection to the notion of indeterminacy,” the latter concept

nonetheless...may still remain a significant category for understanding our reading of midrashic discourse. This lack of equivalence between midrash and the theoretical categories we use to read it may not be purely negative knowledge. [...]t may help us to see a little more clearly the very conditions of our own theorizing. ... Scriptural exegesis, midrash, is not identical with literary theory or simply reducible to it. What a theoretical reading of midrash can contribute is precisely an understanding of the difference between midrash and theory.... The difference separating these conceptions is at least one sign of the distance that interpretation has traveled in the course of history.⁸

In Chapter 4, we saw how Susan Handelman fails to track this “travel” in *The Slayers of Moses*: no matter how astray the “letter” of Torah goes, for Handelman it is always in the same place. In this chapter, I want to ask whether, and how, there might be a way to get something other than “negative knowledge” from the difference between midrash and Theory. Is the insight that there are two interpretations of repetition the end of the line?

⁷ James L. Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash,” in Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986), 77–103, at 93.

⁸ Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 16–17, 38.

I pursue this question through a reading of two essays about midrash from the mid-1980s by Geoffrey Hartman, the same critic whose account of indeterminacy furnishes Stern with his foil. Hartman's writings on midrash diverge from the contemporaneous undertakings of Handelman and José Faur, in that Hartman is pointedly not interested in effacing the distinction between midrash and Theory, either in a structural (Faur) or historical (Handelman) sense. Neither are his essays on midrash attempts to "do midrash" himself, or to write "religious criticism," as has sometimes been suggested by commentators.⁹ He is clearly aware that he may be taken this way, and so stipulates that his "motives in studying midrash are not pure. I am a raider of the lost ark looking for treasure. *It is not for the sake of heaven I study...*"¹⁰ Instead, I argue that Hartman takes up midrash—which is referred to in his writings as early as the mid-1960s and which, he notes in his 2007 memoir, he was fascinated by as a boy living in exile from Nazi Germany—as part of a sustained attempt to conceptualize "critique" in light of deconstruction. The role of midrash in this project is elusive; it serves as a hermeneutical model for Hartman, but it is a model viewed, as Stern suggests in "Midrash and Indeterminacy," from across the abyss of historical difference. That is, Hartman registers fully the distinction between polysemy and indeterminacy. Yet reflecting on indeterminacy's very difference from polysemy allows Hartman to mount a complex argument for critique as historical. Thus, his call for the

⁹ See Alexander Freer, "Faith in Reading: Revisiting the Midrash-Theory Connection," *Paragraph* 39.3 (2016): 335–57, at 338. Elisa New, for instance, compares Hartman on Emily Dickinson positively to *Shemoth Rabbah* on Exodus 1:16, commenting bluntly, "As Hartman: so midrash." Elisa New, "Pharaoh's Birthstool: Deconstruction and Midrash," *SubStance* 17.3 (1988): 31. See *Midrash Rabbah*, trans./ed. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, 3rd ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1983), 3:18–19.

¹⁰ Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Third Pillar: Essays in Judaic Studies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 85, emphasis mine.

“restitution” of midrash is not a plea for critics to “do midrash,” but to understand more deeply the historicity of their own discourse.

Hartman’s starting point is, as the title of *Criticism in the Wilderness* indicates, Matthew Arnold’s 1864 essay “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” which we have already encountered in the preceding chapters. Perhaps surprisingly for a member of Yale’s deconstructive “hermeneutical mafia,”¹¹ Hartman is passionately committed to the Arnoldian definition of critique as “the endeavour, in all branches of science, to see the object as in itself it really is.”¹² Yet where some may hear scientific arrogance in the last words of this dictum, Hartman’s thinking begins by taking seriously the phrase in its entirety, including the qualifier: critique is not seeing the object as in itself it really is, but the *endeavor* to do so. If one wishes to see the object as in itself it really is, this presumes that the naïve perception of the object is insufficient; thus, the critic must see the object otherwise. If, however, the critic presumes to know *in advance* what this seeing-otherwise will disclose, then this is not really seeing-otherwise at all. (This problem is a variation on the “hermeneutical circle” theorized by Heidegger and others.) Hartman’s notion of critique proposes that the endeavor to see the object as in itself it really is cannot consist in a pure, reliable calculation. It must involve “*dar[ing] to go wrong*,” as he puts it in “The Struggle for the Text” (1986), a necessary risk of error.¹³

By “error,” to follow Hartman’s Yale colleague Paul de Man, I do not mean merely a mistake. Mistakes, as Stanley Corngold explains, are for de Man (and, I would argue, for

¹¹ William H. Pritchard, “The Hermeneutical Mafia: or, After Strange Gods at Yale,” *Hudson Review* 28.4 (Winter 1975–76): 601–610. Pritchard’s infamous essay is, in part, a review of Hartman’s book *The Fate of Reading*.

¹² Matthew Arnold, “*Culture and Anarchy*” and *Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 26.

¹³ Geoffrey H. Hartman, “The Struggle for the Text,” in *Midrash and Literature*, 3–19, at 9.

Hartman, at least the Hartman of the 1980s) “without truth value: trivial, in principle corrigible according to a norm already known.” Unlike mistakes, which involve no daring, no exposure to the unknown or the surprising, errors “impl[y] a truth” insofar as they deviate from what is “already known.”¹⁴ To read critically means to accept the possibility of turning out to have been wrong in a non-trivial way. Error, in this sense, is not antithetical to Hartman’s critical ethos, but constitutive of it. And since the literary critic’s objective is to understand the meaning of a given text (while this is of course open to contestation, that is indeed how Hartman views his own role), it follows that we must “talk of meaning and error together, as if error were part of the structure of meaning.”¹⁵ This structure is inspired or modeled by—but *is not identical to*—the midrashic דבר אחר דבר.

However, it is not modeled *only* on midrash. Hartman does not take the rabbis as absolutely unique in the history of interpretation; in his 1976 essay “Crossing Over: Literary Commentary as Literature,” he cites the essays of György Lukács, the fragments of the German Romantics, and Jacques Derrida’s monumental *Glas* (1974) as exemplary instances of critical

¹⁴ Stanley Corngold, “Error in Paul de Man,” in Jonathan Arac, Wlad Godzich, and Wallace Martin, eds., *The Yale Critics* (Minneapolis: U. Minn. Press, 1983), 90–108, at 92. In general I think Corngold’s distinction between error and mistake in de Man’s texts holds up, albeit with the caveats that, first, the concepts (errors with and without truth-value, respectively) are not consistently named, respectively, “error” and “mistake” by de Man; and, second, that I do not find the larger critique of de Man that Corngold mounts on the basis of this distinction to be convincing. Cf. de Man’s (typically hostile) reply to Corngold, “A Letter from Paul de Man,” *Critical Inquiry* 8.3 (1982): 509–13, as well as Marc Redfield’s careful reappraisal of the mistake/error distinction in “Mistake in Paul de Man: Violent Reading and Theotropic Violence,” in Martin McQuillan, ed., *The Political Archive of Paul de Man: Property, Sovereignty, and the Theotropic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2012), 103–18.

¹⁵ Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Minor Prophecies: The Literary Essay in the Culture Wars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 151.

texts that “dare to go wrong.”¹⁶ Alongside dispelling the notion that Hartman seeks to “do midrash,” part of the task of reassessing Hartman’s increased attention to midrash in the 1980s lies in asking why, given the relative familiarity of these other examples to his primary audience of scholars of English Romantic poetry, he takes up rabbinic sources and centers them in his writings from this period of his career.

The answer has to do with a social and ethical burden of critical writing, which Hartman names “restitution”: the duty of the critic to “exercise its power to revalue an alienated practice.”¹⁷ On the face of it, Hartman’s idea of restitution sounds like the (by now familiar) calls for canons and curricula to be more inclusive and representative. Hartman himself does understand restitution to related to such efforts at expanding the canon, which he regards sympathetically, yet with palpable political ambivalence, in his 1992 Wellek Library Lectures at the University of California, Irvine (published in 1997 as *The Fateful Question of Culture*).¹⁸ Hartman, who helped found Yale University’s undergraduate Judaic Studies program in 1981 as well as the university’s Fortunoff Archive for Holocaust Testimonies in 1979, was certainly in favor of Jewish inclusion in American and more broadly Western culture on both the imaginary and material levels, and the “restitution” of midrash doubtless had a part to play there. Yet this is not all that Hartman means by restitution. Indeed, he critiques the discourse motivating canon reform—a discourse usually termed “multiculturalism” when he spoke at Irvine, and now generally assimilated to the notion of “identity politics”—for its delusive belief that it is

¹⁶ See Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 189–213. In addition to “Crossing Over: Literary Commentary as Literature,” Hartman devoted an entire book, *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981) to Derrida’s *Glas*.

¹⁷ Geoffrey H. Hartman, “Criticism and Restitution,” *Tikkun* 4.1 (1989): 29–32, at 31.

¹⁸ See Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Fateful Question of Culture* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997), esp. the sixth lecture, “A Culture of Inclusion,” 165–204.

postmodern, that it has overcome the dynamics of mourning and attachment at the heart of the aesthetic ideology of the modern West: “Multiculturalism remains undertheorized and seems as unrealistic as the cosmopolitanism it intends to replace,” thus entailing many the same dangers.¹⁹ The restitution of midrash therefore has a second aspect, one directed at the memory of its very exclusion from the Western canon: “[...L]ittle is more important today than to remind secular literary studies of the richness and subtlety of those strange rabbinic conversations which have been disdained for so long in favor of more objective and systematized modes of reading.”²⁰ It is history itself—the history of the “disdain” for midrash—which lends urgency to the project of restitution; this is, as we might expect, a decidedly post-Holocaust idea of critical responsibility.

Yet again, though, Hartman’s view differs from those it apparently resembles. The call for restitution is not simply a version of “Never forget [the Shoah],” which Emil Fackenheim proposes as the “614th commandment.”²¹ While he would certainly not deny the ethico-political value of remembrance, Hartman’s ambivalence toward identity politics shows his aversion to a move like Fackenheim’s, which would locate the Holocaust in a sacralized position. To reconstitute midrash and to remember the Holocaust are ethical obligations for the critic, in Hartman’s view, precisely because they point up, and intervene in, the temptation not to critique. Thus, the restitution of midrash and the idea of critique as error are *necessarily* related in Hartman’s thinking—the one leads to the other, and vice-versa—even as he refuses to valorize midrash as an *essentially* superior to other hermeneutics. These linked ideas are made possible by Hartman’s

¹⁹ Hartman, *The Fateful Question of Culture*, 181. For a compact overview of Hartman’s relationship to identity politics, see Pieter Vermeulen, *Geoffrey Hartman: Romanticism After the Holocaust* (London: Continuum, 2012), 122–23.

²⁰ Hartman, “The Struggle for the Text,” 8–9.

²¹ Cf. Emil L. Fackenheim, *God’s Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 67–104.

deployment of the concept of indeterminacy, understood as a consequence of deconstructive iterability. What he offers us, therefore, is not the midrash–Theory connection as recircumcision (as in *The Slayers of Moses*), but the midrash/Theory difference as something other than “negative knowledge.”

5.2. The confidence-man

Midway through “The Struggle for the Text,” his essay for *Midrash and Literature* on the story of Jacob’s struggle with the angel in Genesis 32:21–32, Hartman pauses and quotes from Sigmund Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*:

‘It is no sin to limp,’ Freud writes.... He knows his *démarche* in this treatise has not been as straightforward, not as logical or scientific as he might wish; and I can only repeat Freud’s genial self-defense. For you may wonder what is literary about my reflections so far. Am I not constructing a homily or midrash, and so competing with the Rabbinic sages instead of separating out a literary field with its own distinctive boundary?²²

It would be easy enough to accept Hartman’s justification for this citation at face value: “I can only repeat Freud’s genial self-defense.” But repetition proves to be precisely what is at stake in the citation as well as in Hartman’s articulation of the scripture/literature, or midrash/criticism, difference, and—much as when, reading a rabbinic text, one must compare a citation with its “original” biblical context—we can only begin to unpack what Hartman is doing here when we read him alongside Freud.

“It is no sin to limp” is the last sentence in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud has just confessed that his investigation of the death drive has exhausted his intellectual capacities. It is

²² Hartman, “Struggle for the Text,” 8.

possible, he admits, that this whole line of inquiry will turn out later to have been an error, to lead to a dead end.

This is bound up with countless other questions which it is not currently possible to answer. We must be patient and wait for further means and opportunities for research. And we must also remain prepared to abandon any path that we have been following, if it appears not to lead to anything good. Only those believers [*Gläubige*] who demand of science [*Wissenschaft*] a replacement for the forsaken catechism [*ein Ersatz für den aufgegebenen Katechismus*] could blame a researcher for developing or even transforming his views. For the rest, let a poet (Rückert in his *Makamen des Hariri*) console us about the slow progress of our scientific knowledge:

What one cannot do by flying, one must do by limping.

...
*Scripture says, it is no sin to limp.*²³

Here Freud sketches a distinction between religion and *Wissenschaft* (“science,” broadly construed). Freud views religion as a transcendental guarantor of certainty. After all, is there a more prominent instance of a discourse that is “always right” than a divinely revealed scripture? “It is, however, vouchsafed to no text except Scripture, in which meaning has ceased,” a text “without the mediation of meaning” which “in its literality belongs to the true language, to truth and dogma” and in which “language and revelation are unified without tension,” wrote Walter Benjamin, to be the “stop” for the “flow” and “abyss” of language.²⁴ Against the security of revelation, Freud pitches *Wissenschaft* as a trial of uncertainty, a state of unsettledness. He voices wariness toward a modern tendency to supplement a superseded religious dogma with enlightened *Wissenschaft* as “ersatz” religion. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of *Wissenschaft*. If *Wissenschaft* “is most itself and, if the paradox may be tolerated, most unlike

²³ Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (Leipzig: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1921), 64, trans. mine, italics in original.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Ausgewählte Schriften I: Illuminationen*, ed. Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), 62, trans. mine.

itself at the moment when it starts turning into an organized dogma”²⁵ as Edward Said says of critique, which is to say, when it takes up an ironic and self-critical position vis-à-vis its own premises, then for Freud (and Said) religious discourse is most like itself when it is most like itself, i.e., when it transcendentalizes its truth-claims. Having set up this opposition between religion and *Wissenschaft*, Freud introduces at the very last moment of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* a third discourse: literature.

For it is not only Freud who writes, “It is no sin to limp,” but also the German Romantic poet and Orientalist Friedrich Rückert. The quotation is from Rückert’s 1826 translation of a twelfth-century Arabic text, the *Maqamat* by Al-Harīrī of Basra. But it is not only Freud, Rückert, or even Al-Harīrī who writes, “It is no sin to limp,” for those words are a quotation from the Qur’an: “It is no sin to be blind, it is no sin to limp, it is no sin to fall ill. Whosoever obeys Allah and His Messenger, He shall admit into Gardens beneath which rivers flow. Whosoever turns back, He shall punish most painfully” (48:17).²⁶ The qur’anic text seems to apply straightforwardly to Freud’s situation in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: we could interpret the quotation as saying that religion assuages the scientist during the ordeal of thinking. Yet Freud doesn’t quote the Qur’an; the fragment is presented explicitly as literature, not scripture; he refers to it as the words of a “poet”—and a *German* one, at that—rather than a prophet. In its literary setting, the qur’anic verse means something quite different than we are led to expect.

The *Maqamat* recounts the adventures of Abu Zayd, an itinerant confidence-man; in the specific *maqama* Freud quotes, Abu Zayd approaches the narrator, Al-Harith, in the guise of a limping beggar who purports to have fallen from his former position as a wealthy man of society.

²⁵ Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 29.

²⁶ *The Qur’an*, trans. Tarif Khalidi (London: Penguin, 2008), 421, translation modified.

Hearing the beggar's tale of woe, Al-Harith takes pity and offers him a gold coin if the beggar can extemporaneously recite a poem in praise of the coin. The beggar does, and an impressed Al-Harith offers another gold coin if the beggar can improvise a second poem, this time censuring the coin instead of praising it. The beggar again complies, and, since the two coins are identical, his ability to recite equally eloquent poems of praise and blame constitutes a display of profound rhetorical skills. This gives away his disguise: Al-Harith now recognizes that the beggar is actually the infamously well-spoken confidence-man, Abu Zayd. Scandalized, he reprimands Abu Zayd for exploiting his sympathies, even going so far as to feign a limp! The *maqama*, like *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* after it, concludes with Abu Zayd's retort, delivered in the form of yet another impromptu poem:

I limp, but not because it's fun to limp,
I limp to eat, limp to drink.
...
What one cannot do by flying, one must do by limping.
It's much better to limp than to fall down.
Scripture says: *It is no sin to limp.*²⁷

In this final poem, Abu Zayd cites Qur'an 48:17 as scriptural justification for limping despite being able to walk. But this is exactly the *opposite* of what the verse means in its Qur'anic context, where it exempts the lame from certain active forms of service. The very citation of scripture, therefore, is just another ersatz limp. Both the limp and the verse, like any disguise, function by repeating forms the intended mark of the confidence-game already knows. The

²⁷ Friedrich Rückert, *Die Verwandlungen des Abu Seid von Serug, oder die Makamen des Hariri*, 7th ed. (Stuttgart: Verlag der J. G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, 1878), 2:17–18. On Rückert's Orientalist poetics, see Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), esp. 138–41. Thanks to Samantha Pellegrino for her assistance with translating and interpreting the Qur'anic text and its citation by Al-Hariri.

impression made by the limp and the aura of sacred authority attaching to the citation of scriptural language thus share a structure of repetition—what Derrida names “iterability” in “Signature Event Context.” As Hartman notes in “The Struggle for the Text,” scripture is received as always already mediated: “[...D]ivinely inspired or not, it speaks, as the rabbis said, in the language of man.”²⁸ Structurally speaking, even a text “set apart” is iterable. It can be cited, and if it can be cited, it is open to Abu Zayd’s ironic appropriation.

There is a second level of meaning to the quotation. If Abu Zayd could get money another way—if, figuratively, he could “fly”—he would, but he cannot, so he feigns a limp instead, which gives his dissimulations in general the figurative status of a “limp.” In which case, the Qur’anic verse is actually meant straightforwardly: if you can’t fly (come by your living honestly), it’s no sin to limp (come by it dishonestly). This applies as much to citing the Qur’an as anything else: if you can’t fly (cite the Qur’an straightforwardly), it’s no sin to limp (cite ironically). As an effect of its iterability, then, the citation oscillates undecidably between truth and falsehood, sincerity and irony, flying and limping—between scripture and literature.

With this in view, the ending of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* reads very differently. Freud’s comparison is not between the scientist and the lame man, as it first appears, but rather between the scientist and the confidence-man, the one who *pretends* to be lame. In light of this, the idea that Freud initially seems to intend the former comparison is precisely a function of the latter comparison. The theme of the comparison is not so much the slowness of scientific advancement as it is the privilege that Freud demands: the privilege of transforming his views and reversing the course of his thinking. Like Abu Zayd, who changes his professed opinion concerning about identical gold coins in response to Al-Harith’s new requirement for payment,

²⁸ Hartman, “Struggle for the Text,” 3, alluding to BT *Zevachim* 108b.

so Freud reserves the right to change his mind—not because he is inconsistent by nature, but because he is only human and so cannot predict what new information or exigencies may come to light in the future. That is why *Wissenschaft* must not be confused for religion: *Wissenschaft*, being an entirely human discourse, lacks the transcendental foundation of scripture. So, *Wissenschaft* must remain free to radically alter, even negate, whatever it asserts as true on the basis of the available data, methods, and theories. So, what “consolation” can religion, thus conceived, offer a scientist? To appeal to scripture at this point would mean that the scientist exempts some truths from *any* future interrogation, which would make him into an ersatz priest.

It is therefore to literature, not scripture, that Freud must turn for consolation. Not just any literature, either, but this specific fragment from Rückert’s *Maqamat*. In the context of Freud’s opposition between scripture and *Wissenschaft*, the citation schematizes a tripartite relationship between language and truth. First, there is scripture, in which language and truth are proper and identical, a unity sealed by scripture’s transcendent, revealed origin. Second, there is literature. Since literature is a human discourse, its language is not proper or identical to truth, but it (“limpingly”) mimes, repeats, or cites the transcendently secured propriety and identity that language bore to truth in scripture. Third, there is Freud’s own discourse, *Wissenschaft*. Like literature, *Wissenschaft* is a human discourse, and lacks the transcendental foundation enjoyed by scripture. Whereas literature ironically plays with the gap between language and truth, *Wissenschaft* still “endeavors...to see the object as in itself it really is,” to arrive at a total understanding of the world. This is why the scientist can take an approximation of consolation from literature *in the place of scripture*: like *Wissenschaft*, literature is not transcendent, even or especially when it most appears to be (i.e., when it cites scripture).

By signing *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* with this literary repetition of the Qur'an, Freud gestures toward a perfection of human knowledge which is yet to come. He is, of course, committed to the project of *Wissenschaft*. The book is a serious attempt to understand the repetition compulsion. As Freud is not God, though, he cannot claim to have been absolutely correct, to have seen the repetition compulsion as it really is. He cannot fly, so he limps. What he *can* be sure of is that he has participated in the ongoing endeavor of expanding and refining human knowledge, even if, as it may turn out later, only in the mode of error. If the argument of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is wrong, Freud has at least eliminated one more hypothesis from a perpetually unfinished list.

Like Freud's quotation in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Hartman's quotation in "The Struggle for the Text" seems straightforward; and as in Freud's case, when we review its sources, the quotation turns out to be doing more than it appears to do. When Hartman quotes Freud quoting Rückert translating Al-Harīrī representing Abu Zayd quoting the Qur'an, he redoubles the dynamic Freud sets up between scripture, literature, and *Wissenschaft*.²⁹

5.3. Wrong turns

"The Struggle for the Text" asks whether, and how, it is possible to read the Hebrew Bible critically. This question is occasioned by the opposition of two hermeneutics: midrash and the

²⁹ Hartman's most extensive consideration of Freud is "The Interpreter's Freud," in Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Easy Pieces* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 137–54. Although I do not treat that essay here, Hartman's account of Freudian psychoanalysis in it is compatible with my discussion of the Freud quotation in "Struggle for the Text," with its tripartite schema of scripture, *Wissenschaft*, and literature. For example, in "The Interpreter's Freud" Hartman discusses the simultaneous similarity between and conflicting premises of psychoanalytic and religious discourse, and subjects both a literary text (one of Wordsworth's poems) to a psychoanalytic interpretation and a Freudian text (a passage from *The Interpretation of Dreams*) to a literary close reading.

modern, *wissenschaftliche* historical-critical methods of the “Higher Criticism.” As Daniel Boyarin argues, both the rabbis and the Higher Critics respond, in many cases, to the same textual phenomena, which he calls “gaps” and “textual heterogeneity,” and which Hartman terms “frictionality.”³⁰ These are moments when, as Roland Barthes writes, the text becomes a “discontinuous” bricolage of “narrative entities which to some extent run free from an explicit logical articulation.”³¹

The Higher Critics interpret these “gaps” as symptoms of the Bible’s complex textual history of composition, transmission, compilation, and redaction. To recall from Chapter 3, this interpretation is guided, as Regina Schwartz contends, by the philological assumption of authorial unit: “to be coherent, one document must believe one thing.”³² The Higher Criticism therefore often responds to gaps by “analyz[ing] a unified, authorless narrative back into its redacted and blended strands” and “introduc[ing] a...geologically structured sense of time into the development of Scripture.”³³ As Hartman points out, the whole of the biblical narrative under discussion in his essay (Genesis 32:21–32, the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel) may be understood in historical-critical terms as an interpolation into the otherwise smooth progression from Gen. 32:20 to Gen. 33:1. “Nothing readies us for this event,” which “is not necessary to the sequence of events. We could omit it and still have a continuous narrative—indeed, a more

³⁰ Hartman, “Struggle for the Text,” 13.

³¹ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans./ed. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 140. Barthes is commenting here on the same biblical narrative (Gen. 32:21–32) Hartman discusses in “Struggle for the Text.” Hartman criticizes Barthes’s interpretation in “Struggle for the Text,” 14–15.

³² Regina M. Schwartz, “The Histories of David: Biblical Scholarship and Biblical Stories,” in Jason P. Rosenblatt and Joseph C. Sitterson, Jr., eds., *“Not in Heaven”: Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 192–210, at 196.

³³ Hartman, “Struggle for the Text,” 13.

continuous one.” In fact, although Jacob is renamed “Israel” in 32:28, in Gen. 33 he is still referred to as “Jacob.” “[...T]he struggle by night is clearly an episode that has inserted itself,” on the historical-critical view, into a preexisting narrative.³⁴ However, Hartman remains unconvinced by this approach, which ultimately substitutes divine revelation with a rational, teleological conception of *Weltgeschichte*, making scientific historicism into, as Freud says, “a replacement for the forsaken catechism.”

At the other end of the hermeneutical spectrum are lies midrash. Since midrash maintains that the whole of Torah was revealed at Sinai, the rabbis cannot read diachronically in the manner of the Higher Critics, as this would imply a differentiation at the origin. Instead, they read in a manner which, even as it atomizes the text into verses, words, even individual letters and diacritical marks, makes any “one portion of the text ...illumine” any other.³⁵ Boyarin argues that “the interpreter who is not willing to adopt a diachronic reading strategy of dissolution of the text is forced to interpret...”³⁶ What links midrash and the Higher Criticism, despite their (otherwise almost utter) incompatibility, is that each claims to “see the object as in itself it really is” and has recourse to a transcendental perspective—God or history—in which to ground this claim. If, as I contend, Hartman conceives of critical reading the way Freud conceives of *Wissenschaft*—as a discourse of the “limp,” which, even as it “endeavour[s] to see the object as in itself it really is,” can only proceed by risking error—then neither midrash nor the Higher Criticism is an option.

³⁴ Hartman, “Struggle for the Text,” 5–6.

³⁵ Gerald L. Bruns, “Midrash and Allegory: The Beginnings of Scriptural Interpretation,” in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 625–44, at 626.

³⁶ Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, 56.

Hartman's predicament stands very much in the shadow of the Higher Critics, in that he is a secular reader who can no longer accept the doctrine of biblical revelation. Quoting the biblical scholar Gerhard von Rad's statement that "becoming literature meant in a sense an end for this biblical material, which until this had had a varied history behind it," Hartman adds that "the proper task of...exegesis is to keep the Bible from becoming literature. Becoming literature might mean a material still capable of development turning into a closed corpus, a once-living but now-fossilized deposit."³⁷ Because of his historical situation, Hartman cannot read the Bible as scripture; the status of its discourse has shifted. Recall, though, what happened to scripture when it was put into general discursive circulation in the *Maqamat*: Abu Zayd's displacement of religious authority did not turn the Qur'an into a historical document, but a literary one. Its discourse became undecidably ironic, "betwixt-and-between," a limp which might or might not be false.³⁸ To relate critically to such a text demands not the objectivity of historical-critical scholarship, which would "correct" "errors" in the text. Rather, a critical hermeneutic would be able to register the possibility of a limp that is not necessarily a deficiency, would "endeavor...to see the object as in itself it really is," would be detached from the desire to make the text mean one thing and one thing only.

Hence, Hartman proclaims: "The only virtue I can claim for the literary study of the Bible is, therefore, that while it can hardly be more imaginative than the [rabbinic] masters of old, *it can dare to go wrong*."³⁹ He elaborates on this point in the later essay "Midrash as Law and Literature" (1994): "The secular critic, of course, has a choice between negative and redemptive

³⁷ Hartman, "Struggle for the Text," 9, quoting Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 18.

³⁸ Hartman, "Struggle for the Text," 10.

³⁹ Hartman, "Struggle for the Text," 9.

approaches, while the religious interpreter does not. The *darshan* cannot stay in the negative.”⁴⁰

As these statements suggest, Hartman, “the secular critic,” exercises a hermeneutical freedom exceeding that of those “masters of old”—and yet it is from those selfsame masters that he learns how to exercise it. From rabbinic polysemy, in other words, Hartman learns the deconstructive lesson of indeterminacy which, as Stern argues in “Midrash and Indeterminacy,” the rabbis themselves would not have tolerated *per se*.⁴¹

In one respect, though, midrashic polysemy and deconstructive indeterminacy are not as far apart as Stern would like. No single rabbinic interpretation claims to be the *ultimate* one, the absolute exhaustion of scripture’s hermeneutical potential. As Gerald Bruns writes,

the whole orientation of Scripture is toward its future, not toward its past. The Bible is prophetic rather than expressive in its structure. This is perhaps why the Bible has proved such a stumbling block to historical criticism and the doctrine of Romantic hermeneutics which says that understanding a text means understanding it as well and even better than its author did. For what is at issue with respect to the Scriptures is not what lies behind the text in the form of an original meaning but what lies in front of it where the interpreter stands. The Bible always addresses itself to the time of interpretation.... Revelation is never something over and done with or gone for good or in danger of slipping away into the past; it is ongoing, and its medium is midrash....⁴²

This is not so different from the ideas of *Wissenschaft* and critique elaborated by Freud and Hartman, who likewise hold the possibility of future understanding. The major divergence between Hartman and the rabbis, then, is that for the rabbis the future reading does not undermine its precedents, only “turns” the text anew. For Hartman, revelation is “over and done

⁴⁰ Hartman, *Third Pillar*, 90.

⁴¹ See Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 38.

⁴² Bruns, “Midrash and Allegory,” 627–28. This is nicely reflected by an exegesis of Gen. 1:1 in *Bereshith Rabbah*, when R. Yonah explains why the Torah begins with the letter א: “Just as the א is closed at the sides but open in front, so you are not permitted to investigate what is above and what is below, what is before and what is behind.” *Midrash Rabbah* 1:9, translation modified. See also Walter Benjamin, *Illuminationen*, 261.

with ...gone for good.”⁴³ The structure of דבר אהר, without the “fence,” now becomes a structure of indeterminacy: scripture becomes literature.

Reading Gen. 32:21–32, Hartman picks up on just the sort of textual gap that would attract the attention of the rabbis (and of the Higher Critics) in vv. 25–27.

25. (a) Then Jacob was left alone, (b) and there wrestled a man with him until dawn.
26. (a) When he saw that he prevailed not against him, (b) he touched the socket of his hip, (c) and the socket of Jacob’s hip was dislocated as he wrestled with him.
27. (a) He said, “Let me go, for the day is dawning.” (b) But he said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”⁴⁴

“There is something twisted here,” Hartman writes, “because while it is Jacob who is wounded, it is his antagonist who immediately pleads for release.”⁴⁵ Where the Higher Critics would posit an imperfect fusion of sources, and Rabbi Berakiah (in *Bereshith Rabbah* 77:3) engages in what Yitzhak Heinemann memorably called “creative philology” on a single word in v. 25b, “wrestled [וַיִּאָבֵק, *vayye’aveq*],”⁴⁶ Hartman instead “dares to go wrong” by reading the text without attempting to correct it, decide it, or preserve it. First, Hartman suggests that the issue lies with the designation of Jacob’s opponent as a “man [אִישׁ],” a noun that seems to undermine the whole

⁴³ Bruns, “Midrash and Allegory,” 628.

⁴⁴ Translation mine, from the MT in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, ed. Karl Elliger, Wilhelm Rudolph, et al., 4th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997). I use the *BHS* versification, which differs from the English translation in the King James Version used by Hartman for “Struggle for the Text.” When quoting Hartman, I have emended his versification to correspond to *BHS*.

⁴⁵ Hartman, “Struggle for the Text,” 11.

⁴⁶ See *Midrash Rabbah* 2:712. “We do not know who was victorious, whether the angel or Jacob,” R. Berakiah comments of the confusion, which is exacerbated by the ambiguities of the singular masculine pronouns throughout the narrative. “Since, however, it is written, *And there wrestled a man with him until dawn* [וַיִּאָבֵק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר], it follows: Who was covered with dust [אָבַק, *abak*]? The man who wrestled with him.” Deriving וַיִּאָבֵק from אָבַק, and since it is the “man” who is the subject of the verb וַיִּאָבֵק, R. Berakiah reasons that the wrestling bout concludes with the “man” covered in dust, i.e., on the ground. Thus, he can say that the biblical text itself stipulates Jacob as the winner of the fight, even though Jacob is wounded.

point of the story, the renaming of Jacob as Israel, with “its connotations of a consecrating contact with divinity.”⁴⁷ But: דבר אהר. On the other hand, it makes sense that the opponent is called a man, since it *also* seems to contradict the story to have an angelic being susceptible to wounding or defeat. Then again: דבר אהר. On yet another hand (which is *not* a dialectical synthesis of the first two),⁴⁸ perhaps the incoherence stems from the presence of the name “Jacob” [יַעֲקֹב] in v. 26c. If this word were not there, after all, “[t]he first ‘he’ could...be Jacob rather than the angel.” Then the text would read: “When he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the socket of his hip, and the socket of ~~Jacob’s~~ [his] hip was dislocated as he wrestled with him.” In that case, it would relate how Jacob, “by that blow—a low blow—assured victory for himself. This could be consistent with the Jacob we know, the trickster who gains the blessing by deceit.”⁴⁹

Hartman offers three interpretations of Gen. 32:25–27, each generated by the same narrative gap. None of his interpretations account for all the evidence deposited in the biblical text. The first interpretation cannot tolerate the presence of the word “man,” the second cannot tolerate its absence, and the third requires the omission of Jacob’s name. The reading, by his own omission, is wrong. And yet: דבר אהר. Doesn’t each interpretation enrich or refine our understanding of the narrative? The first interpretation, precisely in its error, reminds us of the consecration of Jacob/Israel, the important point of this story for the overarching plot of Genesis; the second, in its error, highlights the divinity of Jacob’s opponent, without which that consecration could not happen; and the third deepens our sense of Jacob as a trickster, even, we

⁴⁷ Hartman, “Struggle for the Text,” 11.

⁴⁸ See Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, “Introduction,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ix–xiii: x.

⁴⁹ Hartman, “Struggle for the Text,” 11.

might say, a confidence-man.⁵⁰ He is a “wanderer” who “dwells in the space of...the double camp on this and the other side of the river,” who “must always emerge” from “doubleness and duplicity,” a pattern that commences with his birth as Esau’s twin and which this very story reinscribes through the renaming of Jacob as Israel.⁵¹ The reading, like Freud’s argument in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, may not be right, but it still advances our understanding of the biblical narrative. Hartman “turns [the text] and turns it.” Each turn respects the presence of the gap instead of sublimating it or dissolving it; each turn departs from the letter of the Bible—more than either the rabbis or the Higher Critics would probably accept.

Are these wrong turns? Not for a reader who does not seek an absolute truth (theological or historical) from the text. Just as it would be wrong to say that Freud does not really want to explain the repetition compulsion, it would be mistaken to read Hartman as if he were preaching hermeneutical anarchy, as if he did not believe that the text has a meaning or did not earnestly yearn to understand this meaning. Since this meaning cannot be finally decided, since the critic is only human, the reading remains partial, open to revision. This is critique as Hartman theorizes it: a method of reading that is unembarrassed by its mere humanity and does not cover over the possibility of its own error. Resisting the lure, in either a religious or a secularist guise, of transcendentalizing his own authority, Hartman inscribes his limping turns, his indeterminate דבר אחר, into the final, redacted version of his reading. With every turn of the text, he sees the object otherwise on the way to seeing it as in itself it really is. That endeavor will never be finished. Like Moses, Hartman writes in “Meaning, Error, Text,” he will at best be “vouchsafed only a Pisgah-peek.”⁵² In “The Function of Criticism,” to recall from Chapter 2, Matthew Arnold

⁵⁰ See *Midrash Rabbah*, 2:210–11.

⁵¹ Hartman, “Struggle for the Text,” 10, 12.

⁵² Hartman, *Minor Prophecies*, 153.

identifies the critic with “the generation that was destined to perish in the Sinai desert.” As Hartman comments, though, “this wilderness is all we have.” Arnold’s view depends on a “fiction of [self-]presence,” the messianic belief that “our errand in the wilderness would end.”⁵³

Hartman’s eschewal of this messianism is vital for his project. As noted above, midrash is just one of several places where Hartman locates a concept of critique as error, and so the question arises as to *why* he devotes much of his work from the 1980s and early 1990s to valorizing midrash specifically. The answer to this question is given in “Meaning, Error, Text” when Hartman opposes midrash and critique to a certain messianism.

5.4. Messianicity, history, judgment

5.4.1. Critical restitution

In “Meaning, Error, Text,” Hartman contrasts rabbinic polysemy with another late-ancient biblical hermeneutic: Christian typology, which reads the entirety of the Hebrew Bible as Christianity’s “Old Testament,” a series of figural prognostications of the events of the Gospels. Hartman presents typology as “consoling toward historical time, which remained, even after Christ’s advent, a ‘waiting in patience.’ Figural typology, the instrument of the Church, enriched that time and sustained the believer.”⁵⁴ On his view, typology “is forcefully anagogical, expunging the reserve of Hebrew Scripture as if it were blindness rather than insight,” assimilating it to a master-code whose sealed economy of type and antitype, concealment and revelation ensures that every historical event has a true, definite, ultimate meaning which can be known.⁵⁵ Typology’s power to make history legible in the light of the messianic event of Christ

⁵³ Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 15.

⁵⁴ Hartman, *Minor Prophecies*, 152, emphasis mine.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

has the unfortunate effect of polemically reducing every other interpretation of the Hebrew Bible to a “Judaizing” error, a “wrong turn.” Thus, the medieval Church “degraded” midrash as

blind while investing it with a missed or dismissed capacity for illumination.... The Synagogue... was depicted as blind, and judged culpable. It failed to see what it transmitted: it could not read its own message of deliverance. The Church considered this failure an act of God, similar to when He hardened Pharaoh’s heart. The Exodus, the liberation of Egypt, becomes in Christian interpretation a ‘type’ or ‘figure’ of the very release from spiritual bondage effected by Christ and not fully understood by the Hebrews. This concept of error, which combines an idea of inevitability with a judgment of blame, is indeed a scandal.⁵⁶

The success of this messianic hermeneutic made Christianity appealing and ultimately led to typology’s coincidence, in the Church, with political power. At this point, Christian anti-Judaism, which is among other things a hermeneutical “resistance” to midrash, is not innocent.

Hartman draws an anti-Judaic through-line from the Pauline Epistles into modernity, and particularly German modernity, by alluding here to Immanuel Kant’s famous essay on

Aufklärung:

What the Church holds against the Synagogue is not so much its blindness as its stubbornness; its continuance in blindness. The people might have seen the truth, belatedly. It is not God who limits their role; they limit themselves until their vision becomes opaque. Israel, then as now, refuses to be mature, to emerge from its self-imposed minority.⁵⁷

From Paul through Kant, it is not just the dichotomies of blindness and insight, ignorance and enlightenment, darkness and illumination that trouble Hartman, but also the presumption that one could ever know *in advance* what is and is not true. “To see the object as in itself it really is” ceases to be possible when the interpreter presumes to know how to recognize it.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 150–52.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 152. Cf. Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?,” trans. James Schmidt, in Schmidt, ed., *What is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 58–64: 58.

When this presumption converges with institutionalized authority, the results can be dangerous. The messianic foreclosure of historical contingency finds its most extreme expression in modernity in the aesthetic ideology of identity, especially racial nationalism. As Marc Redfield writes, National Socialism's figurations of both German/Aryan and Jewish/Semitic identity are typological in structure: race is the teleological fulfilment of an embodied promise, "the instantiation of the stereotype as the mechanical reiteration of a caricature."⁵⁸ Nazism, then, is for Hartman the dark apotheosis of a hermeneutic which seeks to indemnify itself against the possibility of going wrong.

"Meaning, Error, Text" is an essay about Nazism and the Greco-Christian hermeneutical presuppositions that Hartman believes underwrite it. Accordingly, Hartman's distinction between a midrash that fosters the "reserve" of future meanings and a typology that "expunges" this reserve in a drive toward certainty and univocity already amounts to the strongest possible polemical claim in favor of "restituting" midrash. The implication is that the disparagement of midrash by the Church is *historically* (but not essentially) an indirect source of Nazi ideology, and that it is not accidental that Judaism is targeted in both cases. Hartman comes very close to saying outright that, had Christianity not required the hermeneutical repression of midrash, there might not have been an "Auschwitz" to be "after" at all. Therefore, restitution must not be viewed as a belated gesture of compensatory inclusion in the hegemonic culture.⁵⁹ The inclusion of midrash would also transform that culture by opening it up to the alterity and contingency of

⁵⁸ Hartman, *Minor Prophecies*, 150; Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 24.

⁵⁹ Hartman meditates on the importance and the limitations of inclusive cultural representation as a political goal at length in his Wellek Library Lectures, published as *The Fateful Question of Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). See also Pieter Vermeulen's comments on this aspect of Hartman's thought in *Geoffrey Hartman: Romanticism After the Holocaust*, 100–31.

the future, with all its potential for surprise. The identification of alterity with midrash and of midrash with Judaism only intensifies the power of this restitution: it becomes impossible to forget that the very tradition that now challenges the West to become more ethical is also the tradition of the victims of the West's worst tendencies. That is why Hartman makes midrash, not the essay or the fragment, into the exemplary source for an alternative conception of critique as error. Again, this is not a call to "do midrash" but to read midrash and learn from it:

The impossibility of speaking the truth once and for all, of stabilizing meaning or memory through canonized textual closure, is the issue. Not to acknowledge the validity of commentary...as it reenters the primary, even the sacred, text and discloses that the latter too is layered, stratified, mediated...is to neglect the secularity of literature. Only the literalism of fundamentalist faiths could serve as an excuse for this neglect. Such fundamentalism in a post-prophetic age is, however, too much like messianism in its furor and intransigence.⁶⁰

Although "Meaning, Error, Text" predates Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (1993), Hartman's simultaneous promotion of openness to the future, on the one hand, and his condemnation of messianism, on the other, evokes the distinction drawn in *Specters of Marx* between *messianism* and *messianicity*, where Derrida's rhetoric evokes the prophet Elijah:

Awaiting without horizon of the wait, awaiting what one does not expect yet or any longer, hospitality without reserve, welcoming salutation accorded in advance to the absolute surprise of the *arrivant* from whom or from which one will not ask anything in return..., just opening which renounces any right..., messianic opening to what is coming, that is, to the event that cannot be awaited as such, or recognized in advance therefore, to the event as the foreigner itself, to her or to him for whom one must always leave an empty place, always, in memory of the hope.... It would be easy, too easy, to show that such a hospitality without reserve, which is nevertheless the condition of the event and thus of history (nothing and no one would arrive otherwise, a hypothesis that

⁶⁰ Hartman, *Minor Prophecies*, 154. The connection between Hartman's work on midrash and his work on trauma, testimony, and the Holocaust, as well as his own original lyric poetry, is explored in more detail by Vivian Liska in *German-Jewish Thought and Its Afterlife: A Tenuous Legacy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 154–62.

one can never exclude, of course), is the impossible itself, and that this condition of possibility of the event is also its condition of impossibility, like this strange concept of messianism without content, of the messianic without messianism....⁶¹

“The secularity of literature,” for Hartman, is just such a messianicity: it entails holding in reserve a possible place for something unknown which is still to come. This emptying-out of messianicity is enabled precisely by the deconstructive notion of iterability, for the possibility of citation destabilizes protocols for identifying the Messiah or calculating the date of the messianic arrival; put differently, and to repeat, openness to the future includes openness to the possibility of being wrong. Derrida warns in his essay on Paul Celan for *Midrash and Literature*, “Shibboleth,” that the *arrivant*, “the foreigner itself,” might be recognizable as the prophet Elijah, but it might also be unrecognizable even as human; it might be, as one of the Celan poems he discusses suggests, the golem, a figure which vividly stages the iterability of the signifiers of human being.⁶² Like Derrida, who uses Celan’s allusions to the *shibboleth* story from Judges 12 as a way to comment upon the political violence which can follow from a forgetting of iterability, Hartman sees in the “furor and intransigence” of a hermeneutic that seeks to “speak...the truth once and for all” a fear of error whose connection to anti-Jewish violence is not coincidental.

Nazism as messianism: Adolf Hitler was a “Messiah-figure” of sorts, onto whom his German supporters projected their desire for a determinable future without surprises.⁶³ But those

⁶¹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), 65. Derrida also discusses the messianic figure of the prophet Elijah in “Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce,” trans. Tina Kendall, Shari Benstock, and Derek Attridge, in Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Attridge (Abingdon: Routledge, 1992), 253–309.

⁶² See Jacques Derrida, “Shibboleth,” trans. Joshua Wilner, in *Midrash and Literature*, 309–48, at 342–47.

⁶³ Hartman, *Minor Prophecies*, 150.

Germans were not the only ones to be overly confident in their estimation of him, as Hartman demonstrates in a commentary on a 14 March 1924 article from the *Boston Evening Transcript* with the headline “Trial Farce.” The article describes the treason trial of Hitler and his associates in mocking tones, comparing the defendants to the playing-card army from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. “Obviously,” Hartman writes,

the unpredictable career of one of the defendants, Adolf Hitler, puts these judicial proceedings in a new light. Whether or not the trial was a farce, deserving... ‘international volleys of laughter,’ one cannot but wonder how long it took for the world to take Hitler seriously. Not to take him seriously was a tactic that might have worked, but did not; and it raises peculiar questions concerning our failure to interpret especially political events. We seem to be unable to measure them, to guess at their future resonance.⁶⁴

It might have worked, but it did not. The journalist here is lured by the “temptation” of “codification or canon-making,” the fear of having been wrong, and the desire to “foresee” and even to shape what the present would come to mean from the future’s perspective. In an unwitting twist on a Marxian dictum, the journalist seeks to judge Hitler’s political ambitions a “farce,” only for this judgment itself to turn out to be tragically wrong.⁶⁵

“Meaning,” Hartman warns, “does not remain stable.”⁶⁶ It is humbling to read “Trial Farce” and be confronted with just how wrong even a reasonably well-informed judgment can be. When we, who *know* what Hitler turned out to be capable of, narrate history, this type of error tends to be forgotten. Yet such errors of judgment are not, as the dedicatee of Hartman’s essay would say, merely “mistakes”; they contributed to the historical outcome which proves them to have been wrong. Hartman would have history be written in the light of rabbinic

⁶⁴ Hartman, *Minor Prophecies*, 149–50.

⁶⁵ Cf. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *The Marx–Engels Reader*, 594–617: 594.

⁶⁶ Hartman, *Minor Prophecies*, 149.

interpretation, with the “wrong turns” inscribed into the record rather than glossed over, expunged, or redacted, farces jostling with tragedies. Such a text would remind us of the limits that the future imposes on critique, which must always “dare to go wrong.”

What might that text look like? Perhaps it would resemble a text by Sigmund Freud, who in his old age fled to England to escape the Nazis just as did the young Geoffrey Hartman—not *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, but one of Freud’s other infamously speculative late works, his own unorthodox exercise in biblical exegesis: *The Man Moses and Monotheistic Religion*, a book methodologically torn between *wissenschaftlich* and novelistic impulses. *The Man Moses* comprises three essays, written at three different points during the 1930s; they are collected without revision, leading to an oddly repetitive and self-revising argument. Most peculiar of all is the third essay, the only one not previously published; this essay, “Moses, His People, and Monotheistic Religion,” is preceded by its own preface—or, rather, *two* prefaces. In the first preface, composed in Vienna sometime before March 1938, Freud comments on the unstable political situation in Europe and declares that he will not publish the blasphemous third essay on Moses for fear of upsetting the Catholic Church, whose protection the (largely Jewish) Viennese psychoanalytic community is counting. In the second preface, composed from London in June 1938—after the *Anschluss*—Freud admits he was wrong:

The exceptionally great difficulties which have weighed on me during the composition of this essay dealing with Moses—inner misgivings as well as external hindrances—are the reason why this third and final part comes to have two different prefaces which contradict—indeed, even cancel—each other. For in the short interval between writing the two prefaces the outer conditions of the author have radically changed. Formerly I lived under the protection of the Catholic Church and feared that by publishing the essay I should lose that protection. . . . Then, suddenly, the German invasion broke in on us and Catholicism proved to be, as the Bible has it, but a ‘bent reed’ [*schwankes Rohr*].⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage, 1967), 69, translation modified with reference to Freud, *Der Mann Moses und die*

Relying on the Church, to recall Hartman's formulation about "Trial Farce," might have worked, but it did not. *The Man Moses* thus bears within the traces of historical exigencies: the pressures that kept Freud quiet, on the one hand, and those which drove him to publish, on the other. The double preface is a type of historical scar, a record of traumatic exposure of Freud's thinking and judgment to history and futurity. He does not replace the first preface with the second, nor does he emend his text to reflect what he now knows to be true. Instead, he preserves his own error.

Similarly, Hartman inscribes his own errors of judgment into the structure of his 1991 essay collection *Minor Prophecies: The Literary Essay in the Culture Wars*. Here, "Meaning, Error, Text," the 1985 essay written to commemorate Paul de Man, is reprinted—*after* the 1988 essay "History and Judgment: The Case of Paul de Man," Hartman's lengthy reflection on the controversy that erupted in late 1987 when it was revealed that de Man had written for the Belgian collaborationist newspaper *Le Soir* during the Nazi occupation and had published at least one blatantly antisemitic article therein.⁶⁸ By printing these two essays out of chronological sequence, Hartman renders it impossible to read "Meaning, Error, Text" except in the light of the scandal about which Hartman did not know—could not have known—when he wrote it. Hartman and Freud both exploit the editorial occasion of collecting essays (a genre whose name, not irrelevantly, means "attempt") into a book to point up how they dared to go wrong.

monotheistische Religion: Schriften über die Religion (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1975), 67. The allusion is to Isaiah 42:3.

⁶⁸ For a range of responses to this scandal, see Werner Hamacher et al., eds., *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989). Hartman does not have an essay in this volume, but he did publish two responses, both in 1988: "Blindness and Insight: Paul de Man, Fascism, and Deconstruction," *The New Republic* 198.10 (March 7, 1988): 26–31, and "History and Judgment: The Case of Paul de Man," *History and Memory* 1 (1988): 55–84.

As it happens, the antisemitic piece de Man wrote for *Le Soir*, “Les Juifs dans la littérature actuelle” (1941), argues that “a solution to the Jewish problem that would aim at the creation of a Jewish colony isolated from Europe would not entail, for the literary life of the West, deplorable consequences. The latter would lose, in all, a few personalities of mediocre value and would continue, as in the past, to develop according to its great evolutive laws.”⁶⁹ De Man’s text here exemplifies precisely the messianism of Nazi aesthetic ideology as described by Hartman in “Meaning, Error, Text”: the “temptation” of “codification or canon-making,” that is, the desire to “expunge” the reserve of difference in order to achieve total self-presence inoculated against precarity; a thinking that would be “always right.” Speaking of Western literature’s “great evolutive laws,” the young de Man apparently believed himself capable of predicting the future. He fell under the spell of the same belief that Hartman, invoking the mature de Man’s own concept of “error,” indicts in “Meaning, Error, Text”—the very belief against which Hartman issues his call for a restitution of midrash.

In its textual form, then, *Minor Prophecies* structurally records Hartman’s own ignorance of de Man’s wartime journalism, while the juxtaposition of the two essays also enacts a polemic against those who would exploit the wartime journalism in order to discredit de Man’s contributions to the study of literature. Hartman appropriates de Man’s concept of error and turns it back on de Man, demonstrating how a text’s meaning is not in its author’s ultimate control. In his memoir, *A Scholar’s Tale: Intellectual Journey of a Displaced Child of Europe*, Hartman records the uncanny effects of this authorial un-sovereignty: “My work, I have been told, beings in too many references, too many other voices, so that it is often difficult to arrive at a clear

⁶⁹ Paul de Man, “The Jews in Contemporary Literature,” trans. Martin McQuillan, in McQuillan, *Paul de Man* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), 127–29, at 129.

sense of where I stand. There are moments, moreover, in which, when others quote me, I do not immediately recognize my own thoughts. ... Was that really my hand? Did I know what I was saying?”⁷⁰

5.4.2. The forms of scholarship

The bibliographical facts of *Minor Prophecies*—the republication of previously published essays—suggests another way in which midrashic polysemy influences Hartman’s understanding of critical indeterminacy, namely the ethics of the essay form itself.

The essay—from the French for “attempt”—is, as Hartman notes apropos of György Lukács’s *Soul and Form* (1910), “consciously occasional”: “[...]n the essayistic mode everything, including the ending, is always arbitrary or ironic.” The essay is emphatically timebound, so that as soon as it has been published, it is already belated; this is exemplified in heightened form by Freud’s *The Man Moses*, some twenty-nine years later, wherein the first preface to the third of the book’s essays had to be supplemented by a second recontextualizing its claims. Thus the historicity of the essay form leaves it “open,” Hartman writes, to the future, including the possibility of being wrong. In this sense the essay is “a secret relative of the Romantic ‘fragment’: it acknowledges occasionalism, stays within it, yet removes from accident and contingency that taint of gratuitousness which the mind is always tempted to deny or else to mystify.”⁷¹ As Lukács argues, anticipating the end of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: “The essay can calmly and proudly set its fragmentariness against the petty completeness of scientific

⁷⁰ Hartman, *Scholar’s Tale*, 40–41.

⁷¹ Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 195.

exactitude or impressionistic freshness.”⁷² The occasional nature and thus the irony of the essay form are redoubled when the essay itself is re-collected, re-published. *Minor Prophecies*, as we have seen, uses this irony to its advantage, quietly making an argumentative point through the juxtaposition of texts whose meanings are transformed both by the passage of time and by their relation to each other.

Hartman sees this same play of historicity, irony, and openness to the future at work in genres besides the essay. In “Crossing Over,” the same essay in which he discusses *Soul and Form*, he takes up Derrida’s *Glas* as an example which is not an essay in the conventional sense, but which effects a radicalization of the occasional, fragmentary structure Hartman and Lukács find in the essay. While the two columns of *Glas* comprise essays on, respectively, G. W. F. Hegel and Jean Genet, the typographical hijinks of the book render both columns difficult to follow, as fragments of other essays continually puncture “the line of exegesis,” which, Hartman comments, “tend[s] to be as precariously extensible as the line of the text.”⁷³ In *The Slayers of Moses*, Susan Handelman explicitly compares *Glas* to Talmud:

In the standard edition of the Talmud, a brief part of the Mishnah is set in the center of the page, followed by the Gemara’s discussion and commentary. The commentary of Rashi is printed to one side and that of the tosafists on the other side. Bordering these columns are additional notes, cross-references, glosses, emendations, and comments by later authorities. ... The central pattern of the text surrounded by commentary was followed in other basic works of Rabbinic thought. (This is also the format of Derrida’s *Glas*, discussed in Chapter 7.)⁷⁴

⁷² György Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock, ed. John T. Sanders and Katie Terezakis (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), 33.

⁷³ Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 206.

⁷⁴ Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982), 47. Other, more recent commentators have also suggested that *Glas* is “talmudic,” from Henry Sussman, *The Task of the Critic: Poetics, Philosophy Religion* (New York: Fordham UP, 2005) to Federico Dal Bo, *Deconstructing the Talmud: The Absolute Book* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

The last sentence is simply incorrect—*Glas* does not follow this “central pattern.” There is no text at the center of *Glas* which is surrounded by commentary; at the “center” of *Glas* is precisely a difference, the margin between the Hegel and Genet columns (into which morsels of text sometimes drift). If the attempt to link *Glas* to Talmud is misguided, however, Derrida’s “tangled, contaminated, displaced, deceptive” book—if it is a book, which Hartman says is “hard to affirm”—does illustrate, in an extreme sense, the formal and hermeneutical resonances between midrash, the fragment, and the essay in light of deconstruction.⁷⁵ *Glas* is, Hartman comments in *Criticism in the Wilderness*, “deliberately, all margins.”⁷⁶ It is nothing *but* citations and occasional commentaries, a palimpsest of situated, partial exegeses on originals which, at least in the Genet column, themselves send up the notion of a true original.

Just as Hartman is concerned to reconstitute midrash not by “doing midrash” so much as miming its דבר אחר from a secular, “limping” perspective, the point of his remarks on *Glas* is not that he or anybody else ought to write more books like *Glas* (although this alternative future of American literary studies is amusing to imagine). Rather, he is proposing *Glas* as an especially acute instance of the historicity of critique. Its unusual form dramatizes the condition of the critic who remains “in the wilderness,” which, Hartman would argue, is every critic who does not regard her object of interpretation as divinely revealed. The restitution of midrash would remind such critics—all critics—of the dangers, up to and including fascism, that ensue from the repression of their own finitude.

⁷⁵ Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 204.

⁷⁶ Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, 142.

That, I think, is what Hartman means by his pronouncement at the end of “Midrash as Law and Literature” (1994), a statement we have already encountered more than once in this dissertation. To cite it one last time:

As for the future, and the field that may eventually be created by the awareness that midrash and literary study take of each other, I can say only one thing with confidence. A knowledge of midrash will prove more interesting for the literary critic than a knowledge of literary criticism for the scholar of Jewish texts. Ask not what deconstruction [read: Theory] may do for midrash; ask what midrash may do for deconstruction.⁷⁷

Notice, though, that Hartman shifts into a rhetoric of certainty concerning the future: he knows “only one thing with confidence,” that the knowledge of midrash “*will* prove more interesting for the literary critic” than a knowledge of Theory for the rabbinicist. As David Stern implies when he half-cites these lines in the introduction to *Midrash and Theory* (see Chapter 1, above), this prediction turned out to be wrong. Literary critics had already begun to forget about the midrash–Theory connection by the time Hartman’s essay appeared in print. So in this, his last essay on midrash, Hartman lapsed from the mode of critique as “daring to go wrong” he had worked out in the 1980s. Hartman wagered on the future of American literary studies, and lost—but perhaps it is better to have lost than not to have risked being wrong at all. After all, it’s no sin to limp.

⁷⁷ Hartman, *The Third Pillar*, 101.

CONCLUSION

Geoffrey Hartman's midrash-influenced defense of the essay form as the proper vehicle of critique recalls a similar argument for the essay advanced by Hartman's contemporary Edward Said, in the introduction to *The World, the Text, and the Critic*—a book published in 1983, that is, one year after *The Slayers of Moses* and smack in the middle of the Theory boom: 1983 was the year of Paul de Man's death and René Wellek's accusation that Theory was “destroying literary studies.” In his introduction, Said writes that the essay is the genre for what he calls “secular criticism”—critical writing which is “skeptical, secular, reflectively open to its own failings.”¹ The essay, for all the reasons Hartman lays out in his remarks on midrash, on *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, on *Glas*, and on Lukács, “is constitutively opposed,” Said claims, “to the production of massive, hermetic systems. [...T]he essay—a comparatively short, investigative, radically skeptical form—is the principal way in which to write criticism. ... Were I to use one word consistently along with *criticism* (not as a modification but as an emphatic) it would be *oppositional*. ... ‘Ironic’ is not a bad word to use along with ‘oppositional.’”²

At various points throughout this dissertation, most especially in the Introduction and Chapter 3, I have taken issue with Said's idea of secular criticism, noting that it may be better described as *secularist* criticism (for reasons I shall revisit momentarily). Yet here he seems to think of critique, and the essay, in terms almost identical to those we find in Hartman's essays: the essay is critical because it is historically conscious, “reflectively open to its own failings.” For Hartman, too—in contradistinction to Susan Handelman, for example—critique and the

¹ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983), 26.

² Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 26, 29.

essays which enact it are “secular,” which in his case meant that it proceeded from the basically Derridean premise that the “two interpretations of interpretation” (and of repetition) are mutually constitutive, coextensive, inextricably doubled: as soon as there is scripture there is, *in principle* if not always in historical practice, the possibility of ironizing it. Said’s own notion of secular criticism is opposed to “religious criticism,” or what David Stern, citing Said, calls “the theologizing of criticism” in *The Slayers of Moses*. What does Said mean by “religious criticism”?

In the conclusion to *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, he clarifies that religious criticism is a name for, first of all, “Theory,” in the full metonymic force of the word as I have used it in this dissertation: deconstruction, rhetorical reading, the Yale School, “New Haven”.... The closing pages of the book lambast Theory, what with its supposed “appeals to what cannot be thought through and explained, except by consensus and appeals to authority...the extra-human, the vague abstraction, the divine, the esoteric...the contemporary Manichean theologizing of ‘the Other.’” Said invokes theory’s “varieties of unthinkability, undecidability, and paradox together with a remarkable consistency of appeals to magic, divine ordinance, or sacred texts,” its “liberations from the human and the circumstantial,” its “increase in the number of special languages, many of them impenetrable, deliberately obscure, willfully illogical,” its “*basically uncritical religiosity*.” He indicts “the current vogue for Walter Benjamin not as a Marxist but as a crypto-mystic” and charges theorists with “ultimate[ly] preferring the protection of secure systems of belief (however peculiar those may be)” over “critical activity or consciousness.” “Once an intellectual,” Said concludes *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, “the modern critic has become a cleric in the worst sense of the word. How their discourse can once again collectively become a truly secular enterprise is...the most serious question critics can be

asking one another.”³ On this view, theory reproduces a type of intellectual elitism modeled on religious authority.

Yet Said doesn’t adduce all “religions” equally here. He figures religion in the image of a premodern, illiberal bibliolatry. Jacques Derrida is described as writing “in the spirit of a kind of negative theology,” using “quasi-theological terms” like *l’écriture* to “move...us *into* the text” rather than, as Said says secular criticism should, “*in and out*” of the text.⁴ (Think, here, of Derrida’s pronouncement in *Of Grammatology* that “there is no outside-the-text.”)⁵ Which “religion” or “religions” does Said frame, perhaps unconsciously, as text-obsessed, “basically uncritical,” “deliberately obscure, willfully illogical”? And might another “religion,” because it has proven compatible with the epistemological and political norms of secularism, escape the brunt of Said’s critique? Does he not “Judaize” Theory here—a move which, furthermore, seems to correspond to Said’s own self-figuring of the secular critic in the image of the wandering Jew, as if he were imputing tropes associated with the Jewish “religion” to Theory while positively

³ Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 290–92.

⁴ Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 183–84. See also 304 n. 7. Said’s characterization of theory as “religious” bibliolatry persists in literary studies today alongside the burgeoning discourse of “postcritique.” In a recent article, Heather Love criticizes theory for its alleged hypocritical investment in the “values of humanism” which, she maintains, are at bottom derived from religion. See Love, “Close But Not Deep,” 371–72: “The link between the richness of human experience and processes of textual interpretation can be understood...through the origin of philosophical hermeneutics in practices of divination.... If the encounter with a divine and inscrutable message was progressively secularized in the twentieth century, the opacity and ineffability of the text and the ethical demand to attend to it remain central to practices of literary interpretation today. Given the subsumption of many aspects of religion into the concept of culture after the Enlightenment, it is not surprising that these sacred aspects of hermeneutics should survive into the era of secular modernity. What is more surprising is that its humanist aspects have such a continued presence in supposedly anti- or posthumanist literary studies.”

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), 158.

resignifying a putatively secularized figure of the wandering Jew?⁶ At the very least, a reading of Hartman's essays on midrash such as the one offered in Chapter 5 above ought to force a reconsideration of *both* the imputation of "religion" to Theory *and* the assumption that serious interest in religious hermeneutics is incompatible with an ethical vision of critique as error. After all, it is precisely midrash which furnishes Hartman with both a model for critique and a historical case study in the dangers of not being, as Said would have it, a secular critic.

Yet consider alongside, or rather opposite, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* a different, more recent vein of literary-critical thinking. Since about the turn of the millennium, scholars in literary studies, anthropology, and the history and philosophy of science, among other humanistic and social-scientific disciplines and fields, have grown increasingly preoccupied with litigating the methodological value of "critique" and its constitutive "hermeneutics of suspicion," understood as the long-term legacy, in both research and pedagogy, of Theory.⁷ Broadly known as

⁶ See, most infamously, Edward W. Said, "My Right of Return," in Said, *Power, Politics, and Culture*, ed. Gauri Viswanathan (New York: Vintage, 2001), 443–458, at 458: "I'm the last Jewish intellectual. You don't know anyone else. ... So I'm the last one. The only true follower of Adorno. Let me put it this way: I'm a Jewish-Palestinian." But consider as well Said, *Freud and the Non-European*, ed. Christopher Bollas (London: Verso, 2004), and the praise of Erich Auerbach in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 1–29.

⁷ For some representative examples of these various stripes of postcritique, see, e.g.: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003); Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?: From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (Winter 2004): 225–48; Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading," *Representations* 108.1 (Autumn 2009): 1–21; Heather Love, "Close But Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," *New Literary History* 41.2 (Spring 2010): 371–91; Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010); Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2015); Lisa Ruddick, "When Nothing is Cool," in Angelika Bammer and Ruth-Ellen Boetcher-Jones, eds., *The Future of Scholarly Writing: Critical Interventions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 71–85; Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies After Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2017); Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, eds., *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham: Duke UP, 2017).

“postcritique,” the various projects constellated under this heading charge theory, critique, and the hermeneutics of suspicion with being myopic, chauvinistic, restrictive, pernicious to mental health, hypocritical, politically impotent or complacent, an instrument of neoliberal domination,⁸ and/or just plain exhausted. In perhaps the most infamous of these polemics, Bruno Latour disparages critique for desiring to be right: “Do you see now why it feels so good to be a critical mind? Why critique...has become such a potent euphoric drug? You are always right!”⁹

In a more nuanced critique of critique, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes that the “mandatory” character of Theory’s suspicious hermeneutics “fits oddly into its new position in the tablets of the Law,” writes Sedgwick.¹⁰ Sedgwick diagnoses this self-indemnifying tendency as a paranoid apotropaic against surprise: the critic who is “always right” is never caught off-guard.¹¹ Even if we grant that critique sometimes ends up assuming the very position of mastery it sets out to challenge, this charge elides the middle of the story. It confuses what critique is and how it works with the intention of the critical subject and the effects critique has tended to have within given institutional settings, as if all these things were indistinguishable or their causal imbrications were inevitable. It seems telling that Sedgwick adduces the image of Moses bearing the tablets of the Torah from Sinai in order to make this point: Theory, with which Sedgwick has a decidedly more

Alternatively, for an excellent discussion of critique which historicizes and relativizes it without opposing it per se, see Michael Warner, “Uncritical Reading,” in Jane Gallop, ed., *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical?* (London: Routledge, 2004), 13–38.

⁸ Interestingly and, I think, quite rightly, a trenchant new critique of postcritique by Patricia Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair: US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique* (Durham: Duke UP, 2021) reverses this particular charge through a careful historicization of the movement’s intellectual roots.

⁹ Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,” 238–39.

¹⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 125.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 130.

sympathetic and complex relation than Latour and the postcritical critics, is again figured not only in the image of religion, but of Judaism specifically.

Much of postcritical writing couches the call for a refreshing, salutary recuperation of the aesthetic, regularly couching their calls in a post-*secular* register. For example, Rita Felski—probably the literary scholar most closely identified with postcritique—advocates for alternative hermeneutics enabling “encounters with the numinous, the transfigurative, the inexplicable,” “presence,” “epiphany, ecstasy, self-surrender,” “self-abandonment, rapture, intoxication,” “a sense of being mesmerized, hypnotized, possessed,” “solace, pleasure, hope,” “the ineffable.” Gathering all of these terms under the heading of “aesthetic enchantment,” Felski suggests that they are modeled on “religious experience” yet, as *aesthetic* enchantment, nevertheless remain located in the politico-epistemic realm of “the secular.”¹² Once we’ve taken stock of the continuity between Christianity and secularism as well as of the empirical heterogeneity of religious forms of life, we can no longer accept Felski’s simplistic opposition of the religious and the secular, nor her statement that aesthetic enchantment is modeled on “religion” yet remains “secular.” After all, *which* religion does she mean? And whose positions and traditions afford them ready access to the secular, “aesthetic” varieties of experience she celebrates? There are serious normative claims about both literature and religion baked into that celebration, which I want to tease out through a discussion of the term Felski and her colleagues counterpose to aesthetic enchantment: “the hermeneutics of suspicion.”

That formulation originates with the 1961 Terry Lectures at Yale University delivered by the French Protestant phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur, published in 1965 as *Of Interpretation: An*

¹² Rita Felski, “Entanglement and Animosity: Religion and Literary Studies,” *Religion & Literature* 48.2 (Summer 2016): 189–195, at 191–92.

Essay on Freud. In Ricoeur’s account, the hermeneutics of suspicion—represented by the three nineteenth-century “masters of suspicion,” Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud—is the antithetical moment of a dialectical progression. The hermeneutics of suspicion is the negative reflection of what Ricoeur calls “the hermeneutics of faith,” meaning the disclosure of *kerygma* and the “manifestation and restoration of meaning” in the religious symbol. Ricoeur’s concept of religion here is unmistakably Christian, beginning with his celebration of the symbol as a coincidence of, indeed an *incarnation* of the universal in the particular, the signified in the signifier, the spirit in the letter, the transcendent in the mundane. Unlike the hermeneutics of faith, he writes, the hermeneutics of suspicion “lacks the *grace* of imagination, the upsurge of the possible[.] And does not this grace of Imagination have something to do with the Word as Revelation?” (Note that Ricoeur capitalizes the I in *Imagination*, the P in *Parole*, and the R in *Révélation*.)¹³ It’s no accident that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are all generally regarded as corrosive debunkers of religious ideology, perhaps especially Christianity; this reputation precedes them and directly serves Ricoeur’s theological argument. The dialectical narrative that begins with the hermeneutics of faith and passes through the hermeneutics of suspicion reaches its synthetic climax in, once again, the hermeneutics of faith. But, he adds, this is “[n]o longer, to be sure, the first faith of the coalman, but the second faith of the hermeneut, a faith which has undergone critique, a *post-critical* faith. ... It is a rational faith, because it interprets, but it is a faith, because it seeks through interpretation a second naïveté.”¹⁴

¹³ Paul Ricoeur, *De l’interprétation. Essai sur Freud* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965), 44; Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale UP, 1970), 36, trans. mod., emphasis mine. For a detailed account of the hermeneutics of suspicion in Ricoeur’s entire corpus, see Alison Scott-Baumann, *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (London: Continuum, 2009).

¹⁴ Ricoeur, *De l’interprétation*, 36–37; Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 28, trans. mod., emphasis mine. For a recent discussion of postcritique that acknowledges the appearance of the

The “first faith of the coalman” is a reference to a medieval legend in which Satan tries to tempt an illiterate coalman by inviting him to rationally defend his Christian faith.¹⁵ Because the coalman’s faith is based on assent to the authority of the Catholic Church rather than the subjective hermeneutical encounter with scripture, it is an absolute faith, but also irrational and even harmful. It keeps the coalman subjugated to the arbitrary authority of the priestly elite of the medieval Church. As Immanuel Kant would put it, this is an unenlightened, “immature [*unmündig*]” faith.¹⁶ Although the legend ends with Satan confounded, one can just as easily imagine him more like Milton’s Satan, employing rhetoric and Socratic reason to draw the coalman’s attention to the empty tautology of his belief and the social position into which it locks him. In other words, a longer view of the story would lead to what we call “modernity”: to the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, to *Aufklärung*, and to the rational, skeptical, historicist and scientific critique of biblical revelation inaugurated by Spinoza and others. If, per Michel Foucault, critique may be defined as “the art of not being governed so much,” then at a time when political and religious authority converged in papal sovereignty, critique

was essentially seeking in Scripture a relationship to...God’s teaching[...] a certain way of refusing, challenging, limiting...the ecclesiastical magisterium. It was a return to Scripture, it was a question of what is authentic in Scripture, of what was actually written in Scripture, it was a question of what kind of truth Scripture tells, how to have access to

word in Ricoeur’s text, see Stephen Best, “*La foi postcritique*, on Second Thought,” *PMLA* 132.2 (2017): 337–343.

¹⁵ See Fleury de Bellingen, *L’étymologie ou explication des proverbes françois, divisée en trois livres par chapitres en forme de dialogue, avec une table de tous les proverbes contenus en ce traicte* (The Hague: 1656), accessed online via *ProQuest Early European Books*, 23 October 2021:

<<http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/books/letymologie-ou-explication-des-proverbes/docview/2090306416/se-2?accountid=14657>>.

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?,” trans. James Schmidt, in Schmidt, ed., *What is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1996), 58–64, at 58.

this truth of Scripture in Scripture and perhaps despite what is written, until one arrives at the ultimately very simple question: Was Scripture true?¹⁷

The satanic temptation, we might say, is the hermeneutics of suspicion: it is the temptation to want not to be governed so much. Unchecked, suspicion brings about what Max Weber, citing a poem by Friedrich von Schiller, called the “disenchantment [*Entzauberung*]” of the modern world.¹⁸

Ricoeur is no antimodernist; rather, what he’s after in *Of Interpretation* is an *other* modernity, a modernity which does not follow the suspicious path into disenchantment. To curtail the deleterious effects of the hermeneutics of suspicion, Ricoeur proposes to sublimate it dialectically: the plenitude of the symbol not only survives its critique but is even tempered by it, enriched by it. Faith achieves its own fulfilment through critique. If this story sounds familiar, it’s probably because it recalls the one told by a different—but, then again, not *too* different—hermeneutical theorist also named Paul.

Felski orients her 2015 book *The Limits of Critique* around Ricoeur’s phrase “the hermeneutics of suspicion” because her polemical aim is to get traction on the thick texture of critique, its constitutive but often obscured affects and attachments. Ricoeur’s phrase serves Felski, as it does Sedgwick, by foregrounding the general *affect*, “suspicion,” that slices across the terrain

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?,” trans. Kevin Paul Geiman, in Schmidt, ed., *What is Enlightenment?*, 382–98, at 385.

Interestingly, Foucault also identified Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx as the exemplary suspicious hermeneuts in a 1964 paper, although it’s not clear whether he was aware of the argument of Ricoeur’s Terry Lectures, which had not yet been published in French. Cf. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Freud, Marx,” trans. Jon Anderson and Gary Hentzi, in Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 269–78.

¹⁸ For Weber on *Entzauberung*, see Max Weber, *Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures*, trans. Damion Searls, ed. Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon (New York: NYRB Classics, 2020). For a relevant discussion of Weberian *Entzauberung* (and its Schillerian roots), see Jason Ānanda Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2017), 76–86 and 269–301.

of particular critical methodologies.¹⁹ Felski doesn't ask, though, just what Ricoeur actually meant by the phrase, or how it functions in the context of *Of Interpretation*, or what his objectives were in opposing suspicion to faith. In taking up Ricoeur's notion of the hermeneutics of suspicion without acknowledging, much less engaging, the argument that notion serves, Felski at once inadvertently elides the theological stakes of Ricoeur's ideas *and* imports his theological assumptions wholesale into her own plea for aesthetic enchantment, trailing a historical accretion of implicit value-judgments.

This move constructs the theorist as dogmatically committed to the hermeneutics of suspicion despite its limited utility for the majority of readers of literature. The theorist is held to subordinate the phenomenal experience of the aesthetic object to an intellectualized, abstracted, and interminable language game; the theorist gets snagged on the letter at the expense of the spirit, peels apart the signifier and the signified, declines the option of reconciliation, refuses teleological progress, opts out of a universal community. Theorizing requires training in special languages and takes place in insular academies seized by verbose debates over obscure points of interpretation. The theorist will say anything about the text except that it is exactly what it appears to be, because the moment that the text is acknowledged to be what it appears to be, the theorist loses the position of authority which theorizing affords. The theorist asks question after question after question.... Again the figure of the theorist and the figure of the rabbi converge.

At odds on nearly everything, Said and Felski reach agreement on two points. First, they agree that the problem with the discipline of literary studies is Theory; and, second, they agree that the religious and the secular respectively name transcontextually stable, internally coherent, binaristically opposed categories. But the content of those categories shifts and slides drastically:

¹⁹ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 125. See Felski, *Limits of Critique*, 6.

in the one instance, “bad” religion is Judaized while secularism is valorized; in the other, secularism is Judaized while “good” religion is valorized; and in neither instance does the author appear cognizant of the problematic decisions involved in these maneuvers. Well, which is it? Is Theory *too much* like religion, per Said? Or is it *not enough* like religion, per Felski? Is it insufficiently critical, or overly critical? Does it enchant or disenchant, mystify or demystify? The fact that Theory stays in fixed position as the target of these contrasting polemics, each of which is expressed terms of the religious and the secular, indicates just how unhelpful these questions are doomed to remain so long as those categories themselves elude self-critical reflection on the part of those who normatively, if unconsciously, deploy them—even when they do so only figuratively, as in *The Limits of Critique* and *The World, the Text, and the Critic*.

From this vantage, “postcritique” names only another, more or less stagnant expression of a dynamic intrinsic to thought whenever it fails to reckon with the “shaping influence” of what Anidjar so incisively recounts as its own *Christian* history of supersession and secularization, a history that trails a concomitant anti-Judaism.²⁰ The overlap of Said and Felski furthermore suggests that if there is a way out of this predicament, it will not consist merely of flipping the switch, of privileging “religious criticism” over secular criticism, the hermeneutics of suspicion over aesthetic enchantment, or, indeed, midrash over logocentrism (to which it cannot be cleanly opposed).²¹ At the same time, it’s necessary to consider this strange turn of the rhetoric of literary studies—from Said’s exemplary anti-Judaism, in the name of secular(ist) criticism, to Felski’s

²⁰ Michael W. Kaufmann, “The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Discipline,” *New Literary History* 38.4 (Autumn 2007): 607–27, at 614. See David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: Norton, 2013).

²¹ See Daniel Boyarin, “Midrash and the ‘Magic Language’: Reading Without Logocentrism,” in Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart, eds., *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments* (London: Routledge, 2005), 131–40.

exemplary anti-Judaism, in the name of aesthetic re-enchantment—as a consequence of the material conditions of the humanities, and American higher education generally, in the present. Literary critics are, it seems to me, casting about for a rationale to justify their discipline’s existence as every aspect of the profession and the institutions it serves deteriorate at accelerating rates; it is not surprising to encounter, at such a moment, the resurgence of investments in the aesthetic. What the continuity between Said and Felski shows, however, is that this resurgence is not really a progression or innovation, much less a solution, because the institutional dynamics that gave rise to the midrash–Theory connection in the first place—that gave rise to *Theory* in the first place—have never really been worked through.

What would it mean, staring down the end of one’s own discipline, one’s own institutional home, to “dare to go wrong”? To learn, from and with “erroneous” readers from the rabbis to the Yale Critics, how to think towards some end other than “being always right”? In 1996, the same year that Stern’s *Midrash and Theory* appeared, Marc Redfield pointed out that the “institution of literature is hardly invulnerable. It is at best two centuries old, and in its fully bureaucratized form is a twentieth-century phenomenon, which one day will no doubt pass from the earth.”²² The very category of “literature” might not survive a critique which takes its religious inheritances seriously, which remains open to the possibility of being wrong. Only then, in a future that, as Foucault puts it, critique (and critic) “will not know and...will not be”—*only* then would it make sense to speak of being *post-critical*.²³

²² Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996), 37.

²³ Foucault, “What is Critique?,” 383.

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