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Fragments of the Rock: Contemporary Literary Theory and the Study of Rabbinic Texts—A Response to David Stern

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## CONTROVERSY

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### Fragments of the Rock: Contemporary Literary Theory and the Study of Rabbinic Texts— A Response to David Stern

Hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people's theories and an oblivion of one's own.

—Terry Eagleton

Reading is not an innocent activity. It is charged with artifice, and to refuse to study one's modes of reading is to neglect a principal source of information about literary activity.

—Jonathan Culler

The meaning of the text does not lie "behind" it (in the mind of the author, the original social setting, the original audience) nor even "in" the text itself. Rather the meaning of the text lies *in front of* the text—in the now shared question, the now common subject matter of both text and interpreter.

—David Tracy

A truly historical thinking must also think its own historicity.

—Hans-Georg Gadamer

In his review of my book *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* in the May 1984 issue of *Prooftexts*, David Stern discussed his many difficulties with my work and his dislike of much contemporary literary theory. My purpose in writing this response is not to try to correct all his 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, in the field of Jewish Studies in general). By methodology, I mean the broader question of *interpretation*.

The debate between David Stern and myself, I think, is essentially about

how we should read and what kinds of questions we should put to these texts. In what kind of conversation or dialogue should we engage them? Who shall authorize these questions and on what bases? What are the authentic questions and in what way are they "Jewish" questions? How do seemingly "neutral" formalistic literary questions relate to theological questions about the meaning of these texts? Are the questions of a Freud, or Bloom, or Derrida to be part of the dialogue we carry on with midrash? The deeper issue here, I believe, is the very ambiguous nature of the academic and "critical" study of Judaism at present.

What, then, is the proper model for "critical" thinking in a postmodern world? How is the question of how we today interpret midrash similar to that of the founders of the "Science of Judaism" in the nineteenth century—that is, what is the *history* of these texts? For example, to what degree is the "correct" interpretation of a midrashic or rabbinic text a historical referent, a social or political context, an historically parallel non-Jewish text—or the story of its redaction, composition, editing? Is the *meaning* of midrash the story of its "history," the history it "represents" and "reflects"?

And since midrash is, in the end, a *verbal* artifact, a linguistic object, and thus "literature," what does it mean to perform a literary analysis on midrashic texts? What mode of literary analysis is proper? Moreover, what is the relation of the literary to the historical? And what is the relation of these secular methodologies to sacred texts?

For among Stern's major complaints about interpretation in modern literary theory are its "ahistoricism," "totalizing" nature, "lack of ethics" and "the least regard for hermeneutical loyalty or respect." The rabbis did not disdain history, Stern writes, and these ahistorical literary theorists stand in direct opposition to what he calls "the very force of history, of historical change, that created the need for the entire interpretive project [midrash] in the first place"—and also to the pious attitude the rabbis held towards the Torah, to their "happy satisfaction," "contentment" and fidelity to the text even while taking "the most daring liberties with its language."

Stern is also bothered by whether the two traditions of interpretation I outline (rabbinic and patristic) are "to be treated as historical phenomena. Or are they to be understood as theoretical models which perhaps evoke some historical reality but are not responsible to historical fact." He concludes that my problem is that I "want it both ways": if I intend to articulate the structural difference, he 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 fleishigs. In his view, because I have mixed them up, and because the sacred and secular have gotten mixed up in literary theory, the whole project just isn't kosher. Writers like Freud, Derrida, and Bloom (sometimes) are not to be attached to Jewish interpretive tradition because they are theoretical, anxious, Oedipal, alienated, unfaithful, and the rabbis are historical, satisfied, happy, and content.

Is the argument here that only the "faithful" and "content" are proper interpreters of rabbinic texts? And "faithful" by whose standards? For surely any "modern, critical" interpretation of rabbinic texts is also bound to be, by definition, anxious and alienated to some degree. Certainly those scholars who founded the Science of Judaism were in their own way anxious and alienated,

and trying somehow to retrieve and recreate a tradition they could no longer be faithful to in the classical manner.

Moreover, this condition of distance or estrangement from the “original” meaning of a text is the very condition of interpretation in general. Interpretation always assumes some kind of lack, need, gap to be filled—even rabbinic interpretation. For even repetition is a kind of interpretation. There is, for example, the “repetition” of the Oral Law, therefore given the name *Mishnah*. The root of this word שנה, interestingly, means simultaneously to repeat, to differ, to change, to study, learn, teach. Every repetition, this etymological wisdom teaches, inevitably involves a difference, a change, an interpretation.

Furthermore, the rabbis claimed for this oral tradition (both legal and non-legal) the status of Torah. Stern, though, says that the rabbis attained their “happy satisfaction” by “relinquishing any claim to rivaling the biblical tradition in their own compositions, by disowning the ambition for their writing to be anything more than commentary, elaboration, extension. By choosing not to compose Scripture or anything approximating or pretending to be Scripture. . . .” This is a rather strange statement, for though they did not appropriate the literary *form* of Scripture, as he knows well and mentions elsewhere, they called their interpretations Oral *Torah*, and claimed that their source was Sinai. To invoke the authority of Sinai, for whatever reason, is a most ambitious claim I would say. As Simon Rawidowicz has explained, their concept of the Oral Torah was a “revolution from within,” a “second beginning” to Israel, a *bayit sheni* (“Second House”). The rabbis of this Second House (roughly from Ezra to the close of the Babylonian Talmud) in his view, freely reshaped and recreated the materials they had inherited from the First House (the written Scriptures) in an interpretive battle born of the tension between continuation and rebellion, tradition and innovation, attachment to the text and alienation from it. Their work, Rawidowicz asserts, is thus a model for all interpreting because it teaches how to “uproot and stabilize simultaneously; to reject and preserve in one breath. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

Yet, as Stern notes, there is “very little explicit acknowledgment of the actual historical circumstances that affected their interpretation of Torah.” This is one of the cruxes of the problem. What is the relation of language, interpretation, and history—and precisely how did the rabbis conceive of “history”? How did it affect their views and interpretations of Scripture? Moreover, what is the place of our own modern concept of history in understanding theirs and their literature? My argument throughout will be that Stern has a naive notion of both history and interpretation which leads him to a very idealized view of the rabbis and forecloses many useful methods and possible insights into rabbinic literature.

This problem, I believe, 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 Heinemann, Kadushin, 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 the literary methods and theories discussed during their times by literary scholars. Alas, most rabbinics scholars today continue this neglect of current literary scholarship even as they claim to employ “literary” analyses.

To clarify the role of contemporary literary theory, and to better understand this aspect of the debate between Stern and myself, I need first to review briefly the way rabbinics scholars have studied midrash until now.

# 1

## History, Historicism, and Theory

The *Wissenschaft des Judentums* or “Science of Judaism” (the origin of the modern critical study of Judaism) was from the beginning quite concerned with the literary characteristics of texts, and borrowed its ideas of literariness and literary criticism from the kinds of “scientific” and philological analysis done with secular texts in German universities at that time. And in the nineteenth century, “scientific” meant essentially “historical” study because the discipline of history for varying reasons was then in its golden age, and historicist modes of thinking prevailed in philosophy, art, linguistics, architecture, biology, and so forth; historicism was the paradigm of knowledge.

The critical analysis of sacred texts, writes Ismar Schorsch, shared the same “boundary ambiguity as the sacred analysis of secular texts” and was part of the attempt to separate history from theology, secularize the sacred history of the Jews and rewrite it “in the national idiom of European intellectuals.”<sup>2</sup> There are two points here: (1) at root and by definition, the critical study of Judaism is an ambiguous hybrid of sacred and secular without a clear boundary line, and (2) the project of secularization was thoroughly ideological—the Science of Judaism, as is well known, had its own quite unscientific agendas amongst which were apologetics and religious reform. History became the new authority for Jewish life, “the functional equivalent of halakhah and philosophy in the medieval world.”<sup>3</sup> As Nahum Glatzer puts it: “This almost dogmatic construction came to occupy the status previously held by religion.”<sup>4</sup> This last comment reveals some of the paradoxes of the method and begins to underline the point I will make throughout this essay: a neutral methodology is an illusion; methodology is always a form of “ideology” and often displaced theology. Or, history and theory are always intermixed. Moreover, this is the very condition of knowing.

One of the most eminent modern historians, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, recently published some provocative meditations on the ideological problems of modern Jewish historiography in his book *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. As he puts it: “History becomes what it had never been before—the faith of the fallen Jews.”<sup>5</sup> The central distinction Yerushalmi formulates in this book is between modern secularized “history” and classical Jewish “memory.” He defines memory as the traditional Jewish sense of the *meaning* of history, a meaning in the context of Jewry’s relations to God and Torah, not the immanent causal laws of the historical process. Jewish collective memory, Yerushalmi argues, is

radically different from the historical consciousness of the modern historian, and it was the decay of the former that led to the creation of the latter. Until the post-Enlightenment era, the historian was never the custodian of Jewish memory:

... meaning in history, memory of the past, and the writing of history are by no means to be equated. In the Bible, to be sure, the three elements are linked, they overlap at critical points, and, in general, they are held together in a web of delicate and reciprocal relationships. In post-biblical Judaism, they pull asunder.<sup>6</sup>

In the talmudic era, however, Jews in effect did not write history. The historian, Yerushalmi recognizes, is thus cast into an odd position in relation to the material: "Classical rabbinic literature was never intended as historiography, even in the biblical, let alone the modern sense, and it cannot be understood through canons appropriate to history alone. . . . The assumptions and hermeneutics of the rabbis were often antithetical to those of the historian, and generally remote from ours even where we are not historians."<sup>7</sup> Rabbinic literature, in other words, is essentially ahistorical. Unlike certain portions of the Bible, rabbinic literature did not try to preserve the historical events of its own time; its methods are often anachronistic. In Yerushalmi's lovely phrase, "the rabbis seem to play with Time as though with an accordion, expanding and collapsing it at will." For the concern of the rabbis was the *meaning* of history, the invisible life under the material surface and spectacle of power of the nations.

When we begin to realize that the problem in the study of midrash is one of *meaning* and how meaning is created, especially in a time of retreat from history to the text of Torah, we need to have a special set of interpretive tools. We need to focus as much on "the meaning of meaning," the rabbis' concept of interpretation, their relation to the words of Scripture, the concept of language and textuality as we do on what midrash "reflects" of its historical background. And we need, therefore, a concept of literature, language, and interpretation able to take us further than the historicist mode of thinking and into areas which form-criticism, philology, classification of genres, and so forth do not penetrate despite the valuable insights they have yielded.

Yerushalmi's level of hermeneutic sophistication leads him to a hermeneutic humility which is much to the point, for he recognizes that modern historiography is but one of any number of alternative and valid ways to perceive and organize the past. It has advantages and deficiencies, and is by no means "an ultimate triumph of historical progress, but . . . an historical fact historically conditioned, something to be taken with utmost seriousness, but not to crow about."<sup>8</sup>

History has long been dethroned from its position as reigning discipline; in fact, history has become prey to the same intense theoretical debates about its nature and essence as literature. The nature of history as a mode of knowing and constructing reality, and the nature of historical explanation are all controversial issues. For history, after all, is narrative, a mode of selecting and constructing a discourse. The way the "story" is told cannot be separated from what the story purports to represent and from the kinds of explanation offered. And "storytelling" of course, is also a form of literary activity.

Hayden White has written extensively and perceptively about the nature of narrative in historiography, the literary and rhetorical aspects of history writing. The historian does not simply find the "facts," and then clearly "represent" or "mirror" them as they are. As observer, the historian, like the postmodern scientist, is not a pure detached spectator but comes to the material with a set of codes, conventions, frameworks which in part generate the very data sought. Moreover, since the historian's medium of interpretation is language, and language is not a transparent mirror either, the very nature of language, the play of figuration, the rhetoric inevitably involved in constructing a story will shape and transform the data.

For White, using the insights of modern narrative and literary theory, the key is the way in which the very language of the narrative is never simply a "copy" of the events described, but a strategy of "making meaning," imposing certain structures that can never be said to "inhere" in events, but which are conventions of language and thought.<sup>9</sup> The critical questions, then, must be posed as much to the stance of the narrator/observer and the status of language itself as to the data or objects observed.

## 2

### Modernism and Postmodernism

This move to a critical self-consciousness, to a critique of the observer's position, this recognition that the observer's stance can never be pure, disengaged, "objective" is what in part distinguishes *postmodern* from *modern* science, philosophy, art, literary theory and so forth. I want to dwell on this distinction somewhat because one of my central arguments here is that the field of rabbinics, and to some extent "Jewish Studies" in general—unlike the rest of the human and natural sciences—has not really come to terms with the nature of postmodern knowledge, for the nature of postmodern knowledge and interpretation is quite different from that of the modern era, the era in which *Wissenschaft* and the critical study of Judaism arose.

The era of the modern concept of the scientific observer as a detached spectator whose eye is transparent and who sees things objectively, as they are "in themselves," dates from the mid-seventeenth century to about 1920. Postmodern science, however, views the observer—whether of atoms or allegories—as always and inevitably a participant as well: an interpreter. We are always participants because we are always *making meanings* not "finding facts." Writes Stephen Toulmin: "What puzzles a scientist about any phenomenon is less the question, What is *true* about this? than the question, What can we *make* of this?; and there the interpretive element is quite explicit. What P.F. Strawson calls a 'conceptual framework,' and Bakhtin—a little misleadingly—an 'ideology,' the theoretical physicist thus calls a 'treatment.'" There are, then, a variety of available and justifiable "interpretive standpoints" in any scientific discipline—and the same should hold true, I am arguing, for the discipline of rabbinics. These interpretive standpoints, moreover, are neither absolute nor arbitrary. They are determined by many facts including the conventions of particular professional



communities, the kinds of questions asked, previous interpretations and so forth. What we need, in other words, is a postmodern Science of Judaism.

The point again is that the “referent” of these interpretations, their “object” is never a pure thing in itself. Reference, rather, is a matter of *frames of reference*. The very questions asked already constitute a framing: Toulmin notes that “scientific discoveries are typically arrived at not by generalizing from preexisting *facts* but by providing answers to preexisting *questions*.”<sup>10</sup> In this sense, interpretation will always be circular; to understand anything one must already have “framed” it, have a pre-understanding, presuppositions and assumptions. There is no neutral, value-free presuppositionless knowledge. This is what Heidegger called the famous “hermeneutic circle.”

There is no way out of this circle; it constitutes the very condition of knowing. The essential intellectual and critical task, then, is to understand how one is situated inside this circle. Interpretation thus always demands a double reading: self-interpretation along with the interpretation of objects, which are now understood precisely to be *interpretations*, not “the thing itself.”

Thus, contrary to Stern’s accusations that modern literary theory (though here we should more accurately say “postmodern” literary theory) is constituted by “totalizing, impersonal, authoritative systems” whose “inventors avoid the challenges and risks of critical consciousness,” contemporary literary and interpretive theory is excessively “critical”—critical of the very foundations of knowledge, critical of idealizing views of history and interpretation, and critical of simplified views of the relation of literature and history. Above, all, critical of what has been appropriately dubbed the “dogma of immaculate perception.” Thus in his review, Stern makes vague appeals to “history” as if to some all-encompassing explanatory principle, but he never defines precisely what he means. History then becomes a kind of mythic principle.

There are, then, fundamental differences between Stern and myself not only in our answers to, but in our very conceptions of the questions: What “reality” do rabbinic texts “represent”? How do our interpretive techniques, in turn, constitute or recreate another “reality” to these texts? And, What is a text? What is the nature of language? Stern fulminates against the emphasis placed on the “Text” in contemporary literary theory because he sees it as an act of “intellectual idolatry.” He fails to understand that this emphasis on the text, and what is called “textuality” is part of the larger understanding of the nature of interpretation I have been discussing. That is, we recognize that we do not have direct access to “realities,” things in themselves, but only texts, linguistic tapestries, accounts, attempts at interpretation in the medium of words. The tapestry is not a translucent window, nor a direct mimetic “copy.”

This recognition has deep implications for the nature of criticism. Stern raises the issue of the function of modern criticism and argues that “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 of the texts we read, against our powers of reason and better judgment. . . . [this is a] profoundly secular background. . . .” Now Matthew Arnold is the epitome of late nineteenth-century thought, and it is not accidental that Stern would adduce him to define the goal and nature of literary criticism. Not only, of course, have contemporary criticism



and science abandoned the idea of “things as they really are,” but Stern has misread Arnold and not understood the history of modern criticism.

Arnold, in fact, embodies the dilemmas and paradoxes of the project of secularization which I have been discussing throughout. As a poet, Arnold is famous for mourning the “melancholy, long withdrawing roar” of the “Sea of Faith” in “Dover Beach.” Arnold’s solution was to give poetry a religious destiny and religion a poetic destiny. As Eugene Goodheart explains, “for Arnold, literary culture reveals the hidden meaning of Christianity. . . . literary and social interests are intimately related to one another because the process of secularization discloses the religious function of both literary and social life.”<sup>11</sup> Arnold derived the phrase which Stern cites, “to see the object as it really is from Wordsworth who envisioned the poet as carrying out this task: But the object for Wordsworth and Arnold was not a mere thing of the world; it was a transparency of transcendental meaning,”<sup>12</sup> which would rival the secular scientific view. Arnold’s view of literature was thoroughly ideological, a displaced theology precisely of the sort I describe in my book.

In contrast to Stern’s idealized view, the history of modern criticism has always been ideological, partisan, and oftentimes quasi-theological. One need only think of as central a figure as T.S. Eliot whose views on culture and criticism became thoroughly and ardently polemically Christian. And, as Geoffrey Hartman argues, it is both the nature and function of criticism to be creative, to be aggressive, speculative, philosophical, to have what he calls a “symbiotic” not “parasitic” relation to art. There is no rigid distinction between what the critic is and does, and what the artist is and does—or between commentary and text. Attempts to “purify” critical language are in his view dangerous and intolerant of dissent. Be it New Criticism or scientific semiotics, these projects, Hartman shows, have strong religious overtones and may be seen as displacements of religious feelings.

Hartman’s insights into the creative nature of critical activity and the relation of text and commentary parallel aspects of the interpretive mode of the rabbis, and the relation of Scripture and midrash. Stern, however, cannot really account for the “creativity” of the rabbis; he sees their “daring liberties” as a result of pious subservience to Scripture, happy satisfaction, and renunciation. Most surprising in Stern’s castigation of contemporary literary theory for being “idolatrous,” “totalizing,” not skeptical and critical enough is Stern’s own unwillingness to cast a truly critical eye on the rabbis—to suspect the ideal picture of their contented piety; his view of them, in fact, itself seems far more deferentially theological and totalizing.

That much of their literature emanates from a period of great turmoil and catastrophe to which they make only oblique references should make one suspect a less than simple and happy relation of language, text, history, and theology. The historical events are not mirrored but deflected, transformed, restructured, defended against. In his work on Kabbalah, Harold Bloom links poetic images, rhetorical tropes, and psychic defense mechanisms in his “dialectics of revisionism.” Stern highly praises Bloom’s *Kabbalah and Criticism* as “the first book on Jewish mysticism to give its reader a ‘feel’ for Kabbalah, a palpable sense of psychic energies that pulsate through those esoteric bloodlines. . . .” Do not “psychic energies” also “pulsate” in midrashic literature? Why admire this kind

of interpretation for Kabbalah and forbid it for midrash? (And, as we know, many of the rabbis cited in the midrash such as R. Akiva also engaged in kabbalistic speculation.)

In his recent work, David Roskies has examined the relation of anguish to literary code and form. He seeks to understand what pre-existing patterns, codes and contexts structure Jewish memory. "Memory," he notes "is an aggressive act."<sup>13</sup> Roskies locates what he calls "the Jewish dialectical response to catastrophe." Ancient archetypes are used in two ways. One is a literal recall, to affirm historical continuity; the other is "sacred parody," to acknowledge the discontinuity. The rabbinic period developed this tradition and, Roskies argues, it was passed on to medieval Ashkenazic Jews and taken up again by modern Eastern European Jewry.

As Michael Fishbane has shown, Scripture itself already contains proto-midrashic processes, interpretive revisions, amplifications, and reworkings.<sup>14</sup> The rabbis, Roskies argues, thus continued and expounded a tradition of inner-biblical midrash, of "subjecting the earlier canon to radical interpretation by means of subtle reformulations. . . ." The reinterpretation is especially radical in the inversion of Scripture in sacred parody, an act of "defiant affirmation," an expression and deflection of anger. "The sacred text is put to irreverent use, but what triggers this response on the part of individual sufferers is their desire to imitate the sacrilege, to disrupt the received order of the text in the same way as the enemy, acting at the behest of God, disrupted the order of the world."<sup>15</sup> This response is a "symbolic inversion" and kind of "countercommentary." Sacred parody, Roskies argues, was the beginning of the human writing of history. This "poetics of sacrilege" consoled even as it bordered on blasphemy. This is not exactly Stern's picture of happy contentment. And it is also a different picture of Jewish memory than Yerushalmi's because the nature of language and literature are viewed not as the simply "mythical" versus the "historical" but as a complex set of structuring codes and signs.

3

### Language, Literature, and Rhetoric

The point is that the field of rabbinics and Jewish history need a far better and more sophisticated understanding of both "literature" and "language." In recent years, it is true, Jacob Neusner and his students have criticized former historical methods as unsophisticated; they have recognized that the concept of history is problematic, and have come to doubt precisely how much actual historical knowledge can be wrested from the rabbis. William Scott Green criticizes earlier students of rabbinic literature for their naive "mimetic" view of the rabbis, and argues that rabbinic documents cannot be seen as simple reflections of their times. He points out the additional problem of rabbinic literature—the lack of much outside documentation; the context of the documents is the documents themselves. Thus Green argues that Mishnah is better described as "fiction," to use his word, not representation or mimesis; it is a literature removed from social reality.<sup>16</sup> Yet here Green stops, as if to use the word "fiction" was a

solution. This is somewhat like Stern's appeal to "history." The nature of fiction and reality, the problems of representation again are topics of immense discussion in recent philosophy, linguistics, literary theory, etc., yet Green appears unaware of any of this, and when he turns to his analysis of rabbinic texts he simply uses a variant of form criticism and hunts down "lexical units."

Form criticism originated in biblical studies around the turn of the century with Hermann Gunkel, and has just about played itself out in study of the Bible. Rabbinics, however, still holds fast to it. Form criticism bills itself as a kind of "literary" approach trying to decipher the forms—literary "types," genres—which developed from oral tradition and directly express the experiences and life of the community (*sitz im leben*) which gave rise to them. Paul de Man's critiques of the "formalism" of the literary school of New Critics applies as well, I would argue, to form criticism in biblical and rabbinic studies. They both commit what de Man calls "the archetypal error: the recurrent confusion of sign and substance."<sup>17</sup> In other words, they do not understand that language is not a natural object but a medium, and that there is no unmediated experience. Literary or figural language is defined precisely by the *gap* between sign and meaning, between form and the experience that produces the form. It is the distinctive property of language to be able to hide meaning, to mean other than what the literal sign appears to say, to mean on many levels, not just the surface, and this tendency is especially pronounced and self-conscious in literary language. Thus literary form is not transparent. "Instead of containing or reflecting experience, language constitutes it. And a theory of constituting form is altogether different from a theory of signifying form." Form, de Man argues, is:

never anything but a process on the way to its completion. The completed form never exists as a concrete aspect of the work that could coincide with a sensorial or semantic dimension of the language. It is constituted in the mind of the interpreter as the work discloses itself in response to his questioning. But this dialogue between work and interpreter is endless.<sup>18</sup>

Form, then, constitutes the hermeneutic circle itself; one cannot get "through it" to "what the text really meant." Neusner's definition of "the smallest unit of formal analysis," which for Mishnah he calls the "cognitive unit" unwittingly betrays this hermeneutic circularity:

A cognitive unit is the formal and formalized result of a single cogent process of cognition, that is, analysis of a situation and statement of a rule pertaining to it, or some other, similar intellectual process. The Mishnah's smallest whole and irreducible literary-conceptual units are the end-result of a single sequence, or process of, thought.<sup>19</sup>

The tautologous nature of this definition indicates the truth of de Man's perception. The forms we create and project, though, will certainly yield valuable insights about the text; the point, though, is not to reify them, treat them as objectified things which then foreclose the interpretive process. There are many kinds of "constituting" and "signifying" forms operating at many levels.

Richard Sarason in "A New Agendum for the Study of Midrash" also recognizes methodological problems and writes that midrash has been studied in three ways which have never been enough integrated: 1) literary and philological

studies—which, he says, have been conceived far too narrowly; 2) historical studies of *sitz im leben*; 3) attempts at conceptual studies of rabbinic thought-processes. Literary studies, he notes, have not been joined to the study of rabbinic conceptualization, and he asks for a “phenomenological” analysis in which we would learn more about the rabbis from their very forms of expression. (Sarason apparently does not mean philosophical phenomenology but a variant of form criticism.) He too argues that the documents themselves are the primary context for any historical or conceptual analysis, and the context is the “inner rabbinic process of ordering, shaping, transmitting tradition.” The “literary encapsulations,” the “interweaving of form and content” constitute our “only hard historical data.” He thus concludes his article on the need for new approaches to the study of midrash by saying that we need “to get back to the words on the page”: “All that we can learn about the specific nature of the midrashic literature and the thought-world of the rabbis is to be found in the lines of the texts.” We need more “exegesis of the texts themselves” which “asks basic questions of the literature with attention to the specific literary context and larger generic and conceptual traits.”<sup>20</sup> But again, the word “literary” is used here without any reference to the work of literary and linguistic scholars and seems to be employed as a synonym for studies of form and genre. Most literary critics, even those not attached to many of the newer schools of literary theory, would have a hard time recognizing what is “literary” in the literary studies of many rabbinics scholars.

The underlying issue, I reiterate, is the concept of language and meaning held by these rabbinics scholars. The central question here is whether language—the fabric of the text—is a transparent mirror, an empty vessel which “reflects” or “encapsulates” things, or is language, the very medium in which we think and conceptualize, an opaque phenomenon with its own movements, forces, internal structures which mediate our knowledge and, in a way, speaks us as much as we speak it?

Modern literary theory (as we have seen in de Man’s case) has attacked the idea of language as simple “expression,” that is, the idea that the language of a literary work is little more than an expression of its inner meaning. This concept of language maintains that meaning somehow predates language; language is viewed as a neutral secondary instrument to give the meaning “form” and “express” it. As Terry Eagleton writes:

The hallmark of the “linguistic revolution” of the twentieth century, from Saussure and Wittgenstein to contemporary literary theory, is the recognition that meaning is not simply something “expressed” or “reflected” in language: it is actually *produced* by it. It is not as though we have meanings, or experiences, which we then proceed to cloak with words; we can only have the meanings and experiences in the first place because we have a language to have them in.<sup>21</sup>

The myth of science is to have a transparent language which effaces itself before being, or things, which somehow does not contaminate and infect the objects it describes. But there is no pure metalanguage; or as Yeats put it in another context: “Who can know the dancer from the dance?” Reading becomes a form of writing, or producing meaning, and the lines between text and com-

mentary blurred. Now the Science of Judaism, and most midrash study done today assumes this pure, transparent critical language which would allow the interpreter a distant, objective position. Like other critical theories which posit such a language, it maintains itself by acts of exclusion and by trying to restrain the figural play of language and signification, which is then seen as "artificial" and "forced." Yet as post-structuralist critics point out, there is no "ordinary" language; all language involves the slippery play of metaphor, figure, rhetoric, including the language of historical narrative, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and so forth . . . and surely midrash.

Thus, one of the most striking characteristics of midrash study is that it has tended to ignore precisely those aspects of midrash that makes it so "literary," so disruptive a discourse . . . the things that make it midrash. Midrash scholars, on the whole, have tended to read midrash *literally*, seeking a literal meaning which then becomes a historical meaning, or finding the "original" text, or uncovering the story of its redaction. As a *mode of reading*, though, midrash takes delight in precisely those aspects of language to which post-structuralist criticism has alerted us. It is acutely sensitive to the semantic overflow of language, and the rhetorical nature of Scripture as something to indulge, as a key to the very vitality and meaning of the text, a field of play somehow connected to the very divinity of the text itself, and that is what is so extraordinary. For these extreme puns, transpositions, acontextual readings, reversals of meaning, "free" associations which midrash accomplishes are claimed to be Torah.

When confronted with some of the extremity of its techniques, even as sophisticated a rabbinics scholar as Saul Lieberman labels them "far-fetched" and "artificial," "strained," "forced," a case of the rabbis acting like the rhetors of Greece "twisting the law."<sup>22</sup> For example, among those techniques which Lieberman calls "merely literary conceits" is the *אסמכתא* "support" or "proof-text." Proof-text, of course, is also the term chosen by the editors of this journal to designate their endeavor of "Jewish literary history." In what sense does a rhetorical figure found or generate a "literary history"? Our editors define proof-texts as "the scriptural passages used by the rabbis to legitimate new interpretations." On the literal (or "strictly historical") level, though, these verses appear not to bear out the meanings they are adduced to support. In what sense, then, are these texts "proof" for the interpretations they are used to support? In what sense is there a "literal" meaning and how does it constrain other meanings adduced from verses or entirely new meanings? In what sense also can a non-literal, i.e., nonhistorical interpretation of midrash itself be then "merely a literary conceit"? Is the endeavor to attach modern literary concerns to the proof-texts of classical Jewish sources also literary conceit?

The wars between philosophy and rhetoric, "direct, undistorted truth" and "literary conceit" were fought long ago in Greece, and philosophy triumphed with the dream of a pure language of presence which clearly and simply reflected its objects. Rhetoric was demoted to a "twisted discourse," a mere catalog of tropes, devices, a theory of style as ornament, artifice, and something external to serious, honest truth. Recent literary theory asserts that, on the contrary, rhetoric is the very *inside* of language, a serious cognitive mode in itself which structures our thinking. Philosophy, too, argue Richard Rorty, Derrida, and de Man, is itself a kind of writing, a rhetoric.

It is also all the more surprising that Stern would condemn me for using the post-structuralist rhetorical concepts of language and texts, when he himself in another article written on midrash claims to take a "rhetorical" approach and acknowledges his debt "particularly to Paul de Man who has greatly influenced my approach."<sup>23</sup> Now Paul de Man was the figure most responsible for introducing and legitimating post-structuralist, and especially deconstructionist literary theory in this country. It has been said that American Deconstruction was born in the late sixties with de Man's essay "The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida's Reading of Rousseau." And de Man was at the very center of what opponents of contemporary literary theory have dubbed the "hermeneutic mafia" of Yale deconstructionist critics. Or in Stern's terms, "intellectual idolaters" and "totalizing ahistoricists."

Stern ignores the deep philosophical basis of de Man's understanding of rhetoric and reading. For de Man, the question of reading is complex, a philosophical issue that is inseparable from questions of epistemology (how do we know what we know). To understand literary language, one must investigate the *cognitive* status of language, the relation of signs to meaning, of consciousness to experience, of language to nature. The "twists" and "conceits" of rhetoric, in de Man's view, constitute the essence of language; all language is figural but literary language is self-consciously so:

For the statement about language, that sign and meaning can never coincide, is what is precisely taken for granted in the kind of language we call literary. Literature, unlike everyday language, begins on the far side of this knowledge; it is the only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression.<sup>24</sup>

Thus de Man entitled his second book *Allegories of Reading*, for in his view, allegory is the mode of reading, writing, and speaking which embodies this knowledge; in allegory, that is, the sign points to something other than its literal meaning—allegory, as its etymological root indicates, is "other-speaking." In allegory, unlike symbol, sign never coincides with substance, but instead refers to other signs. Allegory is thus also de Man's model *for* reading and interpreting. The inevitable error is to literalize, to read literally, to reify signs, to try to blind oneself to the inherent figural nature of all language and reading. Yet this blindness, de Man finds, is also directly connected to insight. In his analysis of contemporary critics he finds that "a paradoxical discrepancy appears between the general statements they make about the nature of literature (statements on which they base their critical methods) and the actual results of their interpretations. Their findings about the structure of texts contradict the general conception that they use as their model."<sup>25</sup> This paradox might well explain Stern's own inconsistency, his critique of the very concept of language and reading which underlies his own rhetorical interpretation of midrash.

One of the reasons many other midrash scholars also have been blind to these literary aspects of midrash may have to do with the way the Science of Judaism shattered the theological unity of traditional Jewish texts. It needed then to assert order, propriety, and causality from elsewhere and the literalized concept of "history," as we have seen, served this purpose. Contemporary literary theory, so involved with rhetoric, figuration, the semantic proliferation of lan-



guage is too close to the traditional internalist methods of classical rabbinic interpretation. Moreover, the midrashic way of reading and sense of language is opposite to the whole modern critical enterprise which depends on an instrumental, nonfigural idea of language as transparent. But in recognizing language as opaque, postmodern literary theory enables us to return to the language of premodern religious texts with a new seriousness—to study how they signify, not just to catalogue lists of rhetorical figures as either borrowings from the Greeks, or rabbinic distortions and twisting of Scripture.

This raises the issue of the relation between the rabbis and Hellenistic culture, one that Stern presses in his review. He misstates my position as a claim that “Greek culture and rabbinic Judaism were irreconcilable opposites.” I am not talking about “culture” in general but specific attitudes towards language, meaning, and texts; moreover, there were important differences as well. Stern also insists that I claim *all* the differences between Judaism and Christianity can be reduced to their respective exegetic procedures. Again, this is Stern’s own literalistic and reductive view of my argument. He also argues that what scholarship in rabbinics of the last century has taught us is that “rabbinic Judaism adapted and transformed the ideas of Hellenistic civilization to serve its own purposes, sometimes to make this the fount of its religious system,” including such ideas as the study of Torah. He cites Lieberman’s demonstrations of parallels between certain unusual rabbinic techniques and similar ancient forms of dream interpretation which prove, claims Stern, that “the rabbis treated the textuality of the Torah as they did precisely because there already existed an exemplar for their views in the ways dreams were read in the ancient world.” Lieberman’s actual analysis of the relations of rabbinic interpretation to the Hellenistic background in fact is more complicated. For instance, Lieberman shows similarities between formal rabbinic and Greek rhetorical patterns, but in many cases concludes the coincidence is accidental, as in the case of the thirteen middot of R. Ishmael and the principles of Hermogenes. He does think it likely that the *terminology* for identifying exegetic principles could well have been borrowed from the traditions of the Greek rhetors.<sup>26</sup>

I am not arguing about the real influences of Hellenistic culture on the rabbis or precedents for interpreting dreams. The point is that not only are there similarities, there are also *differences*, just as there are similarities between Genesis and the Enuma Elish, and also important distinctions. Moreover, Stern implies that if we have found some of the origins, precedents, or causes, we have then understood the *meaning* of the phenomenon. To use an analogy: I may understand something about Elizabethan England, and I may know that possible sources for *Hamlet* might have included the “Amleth” story of Saxo Grammaticus’ *Historica Dania* and Belleforest’s “The Hystorie of Hamblet, Prince of Denmarke,” and an earlier but now lost Hamlet play by Thomas Kyd. I may also know something about the Elizabethan conventions of revenge tragedy from other works by Kyd and Marston and find parallels between *Hamlet* and Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy*. Yet important as this knowledge is, it does not explain why *Hamlet* is *Hamlet*, nor does this kind of literary history examine the cognitive value of *Hamlet* as literature. For Shakespeare has used some of these precedents but totally transformed them in his play, and there are also entirely new elements in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, a different consciousness about the world, about language

and meaning (this is a play excessively concerned with words and their relations to things, with how to “read” an enigmatic reality, with the problems of knowing anything directly, with the nature of symbolic language). The question is just how the *transformation* took place; what are the differences between the rabbis and the Greek rhetors; what new notions of text and meaning evolved?

## 4

### Hammering on the Rock

Just what the rabbis’ “intentions” were is impossible to know, and it is difficult to determine how self-conscious they were as interpreters. One passage in which they do clearly reflect on the way meaning is created from the text is the famous commentary in the Talmud (San. 34a) on the verse in Psalms 62:11, “Once has God spoken, twice have I heard this.” Explains the Gemara, “This was in accord with the school of R. Ishmael which taught that the verse, ‘Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces’ (Jer. 23:29) **וּכְפָטִישׁ יַפְצֹץ סֵלַע** means that just as the hammer splits the rock into many fragments, so may one verse be divided into many meanings **כְּפָטִישׁ יַפְצֹץ סֵלַע מִתְחַלֵּק לְכַמָּה נִיצוּצוֹת כֵּן מִקְרָא אֶחָד יוֹצֵא לְכַמָּה טַעְמִים**.”

The simile is especially interesting and a good description of the hermeneutic situation; it implies that the creation of meaning comes from a certain violent, explosive, shattering act which releases a plurality of meanings. R. Ishmael then identifies the rabbinic activity of splitting up verses, atomizing and fragmenting them, as part of the way the divine language itself operates. The verse is like a rock—something hard, obdurate, a ground—but something that needs to be broken open in an aggressive act. This explosive force is the same which energizes the divine language. But the hammer is now taken into the rabbis’ hands, and God’s word is now identified with their hammering activity. Divine language seems to mean a fecundity within the language itself, an open rhetorical potential.

As usual, however, there is a difficulty here. The verb the Gemara uses to describe the hammer’s splitting the rock into many fragments *mithalek*, is reflexive. This would imply that the *hammer* is split, or splits itself into many fragments—not the rock. Logically, the verb used should be *mehalek*. Is the hammer splitting the rock, or vice versa? 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 anvil were broken but the sapphire remained intact. Rav Shmuel, on the other hand, maintains that he has a tradition which reads the verb as **מִחַלֵּק**—the rock is split. The Maharsha says no, the hammer is split; the hammer is like the *yetser hara*, the evil inclination, which will be broken up and melted down by the fire of Torah. For **סֵלַע** (“rock”) also means “coin.” Coins are made of metal and iron and have human likenesses imprinted upon them. When a coin becomes old, dated, and invalid, fire is used to soften it, and then it is hammered to reshape and reform it. So also, he concludes, the fire of Torah will eliminate the form of a person who is dominated

by the evil inclination, and the person will acquire a new *tsurah*, a new shape entirely. The Torah, then, is like a fire and hammer; the iron of the coin is broken and reshaped by the iron of the hammer.

Another gemara in Shabbat 88b has the same problematic passage, but here the ambiguous verb is replaced by the passive form *nehlak*. The hammer "is broken" into many pieces. Tosafot commenting on this passage remind us of the problematic מתחלק in the other version, and conclude that even though it says in one place that the Torah is the hammer which does the breaking, and in another that the hammer is the evil inclination which is broken, a totally opposite meaning, "Don't worry, one verse may be divided into many meanings." אין לחוש מקרא אחד יוצא לכמה טעמים. A good version, indeed, of the hermeneutic circle.

In a way, this passage is talking about the nature of the divine word and its interpretation. But which is hammer and which rock? R. Ishmael begins by reading the verse self-referentially; rock is made to signify the verse of Scripture, thus justifying a breaking up of the literal meaning of the verse and a plurality of meaning. 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 Heinemann to Neusner 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 of history, literary theory and so forth, get split apart by a resistant sacredness in Scripture? Or do they split and open up new meanings of sacred texts? How are these "openings" related to older theological meanings? Does the opening place us on the inside or the outside of the text; and what now defines inside and outside?

In a famous passage in *Pirkei Avot* 5:21, Ben Bag Bag says הפך בה והפך בה דכלא בה. This line is often translated as "learn it and learn it [the Torah] for everything is in it." Again, however, the verb is problematic. *Hafakh* means "turn over, turn about, turn into, invert, turn back, change, overthrow, upset." A better translation would be "Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it" or "turn in it." How do we turn the text? In literary terminology, *turns* of language, figures of speech, are called *tropes* from the Greek *tropus*, which translates as "turn." How do the troping within language, the troping of the critic upon language, and the troping of the rabbi on Scripture all relate? Are tropes and turns the deformation of meaning, or the very essence of language?

Turning can also be caused by blockage and avoidance. How is a turning of the text also a return: the only way back or forward is the way around. In what way is commentary always the inevitable detour through a labyrinth? The rabbis had to get around the problem of closure of the canon, the loss of the direct, oracular voice of God, the destruction of the Temple. They had, then, to turn and turn Scripture, reopen it by turning it over on itself. And this they accomplished by focusing on its rhetorical, its literary aspects. For here both literary and theological language share the same paradoxical aspect: we can only say what we mean by meaning other than what we say. Yet what is the source of this "otherness"? For the rabbis, turning and turning somehow tapped into the very essence and force of the divine language spoken by the Infinite Other. Turning of language on itself into the depths of meaning is what the rabbi, poet,

and critic all do. But for the rabbi, this twisting and turning bores deep into the depths of God's word. Language mediates between the Jew and God in the most profound way. As Maurice Blanchot has written:

What we owe to Jewish monotheism is not the revelation of the one God; it is the revelation of the word as the place where men can be in rapport with what excludes all rapport—the infinite Distance, the absolute Stranger. God speaks and man speaks to him. There is the great accomplishment of Israel.<sup>27</sup>

But what is "divine language," "God's word"? God's language is autonomous, wholly immanent and self-reflexive. God looked into the Torah and created the world, say the rabbis; the referent of the world is Torah, not vice versa. Because God's language is self-reflexive, it can be turned over and over on itself, and these turns create pockets, enclosures, openings where man and God speak together, where human and divine language meet. But contemporary literary theory does not assume a divine guarantor of language, a stable connection between word and thing, or sign and meaning; on the contrary, it focuses on the gaps and voids. Where a de Man would perceive only emptiness, the rabbi would perceive an opening to the divine. But perhaps one needs to empty out in order to open up. Such was the insight of the Kabbalists: for God to create the world, they said, he had first to contract himself, withdraw, create an empty space. And so they also opened the language of the Torah in extraordinary ways.

I finally want to consider Stern's comments, then, on my reading of Scholem, Kabbalah, and Bloom, for they sum up the main issues; and Scholem was particularly aware of the importance of the philosophy of language. Stern thinks that I have a "mistaken view of Judaism [again we are debating theology] derived from an incorrect reading of Gershom Scholem . . . partly based on David Biale's controversial reading of Scholem as theologian." Stern thinks Scholem did not view Kabbalah as having heretical tendencies nor embodying the dialectic of revolt against tradition and identification with it that I point to as repeating itself in a distorted way in the writings of certain modern Jewish thinkers. (Stern again misrepresents my description of these thinkers as a "calling them to teshuva." My position clearly is that theirs is a distorted and ambivalent relation to Judaism but a real one nonetheless.) Stern claims that despite its "metahistorical or theological implications, Scholem's stated historiographical project was to restore Kabbalah to its rightful place in Jewish history."

Again, this depends on Stern's naive and literalistic view of both history and theology. In fact, Scholem said that his original desire and interest was to write a "metaphysics of Kabbalah," and in dealing with this material claims that he was drawing out "implications" of the Kabbalists, positions not clearly stated by the mystics. Many of these implications, upon close inspection, appear strikingly similar to some of Scholem's own metaphysical positions. As he wrote in the 1937 letter to Zalman Schocken, Scholem was attracted to Kabbalah because of what he calls his "intuitive affirmation of mystical theses which walked the fine line between religion and nihilism."<sup>28</sup> In many of his studies, he writes of the tensions inherent in mystical experience, tensions between revolt and tradition, mysticism and nihilism. For example, in his essay "Kabbalah and Myth," he describes Kabbalah as a mythical reaction against monotheism and notes the

severe strain this puts on Judaism: "The lives and actions of the Kabbalists were a revolt against a world which they never wearied of affirming. And this of course led to deep-seated ambiguities."<sup>29</sup> He views as one of their extraordinary accomplishments their opening up the concept of revelation. And in his well-known essay, "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism" he describes this process of opening and connects it to certain modes of thinking about language and Scripture of the earlier rabbis: "In a way they have merely drawn the final consequences from the assumptions of the Talmudists concerning revelation and tradition as religious categories."<sup>30</sup> Scholem considers the rabbis' claims of Oral Torah as part of divine revelation implicit in Written Torah as "fictitious" and their projection of Oral Torah back to Moses as "absurd."

The larger point here is that Scholem's Kabbalah is precisely just that: *Scholem's Kabbalah*—an interpretation based on certain assumptions Scholem held about meaning, history, and language. Scholem's "stated historiographical project" did not arise in a vacuum, and it was penetrated by ahistorical and theological ideas at many points. Scholem's views about language were strongly influenced by his friendship with the German-Jewish literary critic Walter Benjamin, to whose memory *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* is dedicated: "To the friend of a lifetime whose genius united the insight of the metaphysician, the interpretive power of the critic, and the erudition of the scholar." Scholem thought Benjamin's greatness was as a philosopher of language, and a close reading of Benjamin's work, especially the essay on language he wrote when he and Scholem were together in Switzerland and Germany in Scholem's formative years, reveals very strong connections between Scholem's later conceptions of the nature of language in Kabbalah and Benjamin's own meditations on the philosophy of language, a subject far too complex to delve into here. Without Scholem's own deep immersion in philosophy and linguistics and his exposure to Benjamin, he most likely would not have become as effective a historian and interpreter of Kabbalah.

And despite Benjamin's later turn to his own brand of eccentric Marxism under the influence of Brecht, Scholem continued to read Benjamin as a "theologian marooned in the realm of the profane." His theological insights did not disappear, Scholem thinks, but became "esoteric knowledge."<sup>31</sup> Benjamin's theories of criticism, language, and textuality are now of prime interest in contemporary literary theory. His relation to Jewish tradition was as anxious, belated, ambivalent, eccentric, and "profane" as that of other contemporary literary theorists for whom Stern has no use. I think, though, that Scholem would have had far more use for them; in fact, Scholem turns to the poet's belief in language, to the mystery of language as the redemptive possibility for modern Judaism. This is the concluding paragraph of his essay on "The Linguistic Theory of the Kabbalah"; this subject was to be his original doctoral dissertation topic, but he was not to write it until he was in his seventies:

There are times like our own in which tradition can no longer be handed down, in which tradition falls silent. This, then, is the great crisis of language in which we find ourselves. We are no longer able to grasp the last summit of that mystery that once dwelt in it. The fact that language can be spoken is, in the opinion of the Kabbalists, owed to the name, which is present in

language. What the value and worth of language will be—the language from which God will have withdrawn—is the question which must be posed by those who still believe they can hear the echo of the vanished word of the creation in the immanence of the world. This is a question to which, in our times, only the poets presumably have the answer. For poets do not share the doubt that most mystics have in regard to language. And poets have one link with the masters of the Kabbalah, even when they reject Kabbalistic theological formulation as being still too emphatic. This link is their belief in language as an absolute, which is as if constantly flung open by dialectics. It is their belief in the mystery of language which has to become audible.<sup>32</sup>

This passage, rich and elusive, draws together theology, history, language, and mysticism in a remarkable way. These are the interconnections I have been discussing throughout—not just in the language of the rabbis but in the language of criticism as well.

Yerushalmi's meditations on the separation of Jewish history and Jewish memory have an elegiac tone. He laments, "Many Jews today are in search of a past, but they do not want the past that is offered by the historian . . ." and so, they turn to "literature and ideology [and] await a new, metahistorical myth, for which the novel provides at least a temporary modern surrogate."<sup>23</sup> Despite the insight of these remarks, Yerushalmi's rigid distinctions between history, ideology, literature, and myth leads to an impasse. What recent critical theory, what postmodernism have taught us is how these realms continue to interpenetrate even today. Perhaps a postmodern interpretation of Judaism could help reunite Jewish history and Jewish memory, history and theology, midrash and literature. But to move Jewish Studies, the critical study of Judaism forward, we need to be more self-reflexive. "Philosophical knowledge," writes Paul de Man, "can only come into being when it is turned back on itself." That constitutes the essence of a truly critical stance.<sup>24</sup> As de Man also notes, though, before we generalize about literary texts, we have to learn how to *read*, and the possibility of reading can never be taken for granted. Students of rabbinic texts, of Jewish Studies in general, need, once more, to learn to read anew.

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## NOTES

1. Simon Rawidowicz, "On Interpretation" in Nahum Glatzer, ed., *Studies in Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia, 1974), p. 42.

2. Ismar Schorsch, "Introduction—Ideology and History in the Age of Emancipation," Heinrich Graetz, *The Structure of Jewish History* (New York, 1975), p. 5. See also Schorsch's recent work, "The Emergence of Historical Consciousness in Modern Judaism," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 28 (1983): 413–38.



3. Schorsch, p. 10.
4. Nahum Glatzer, "The Beginnings of Modern Jewish Studies," in Alexander Altmann, *Studies in Nineteenth-Century Jewish Intellectual History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), p. 34.
5. Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, 1982), p. 86.
6. *Ibid.* p. 14.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 17, p. xvi.
9. Among White's writings see: Hayden White, "Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination," *History and Theory* 14 (1975): 48-67; *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973); "The Burden of History," *History and Theory* 5 (1966): 114-34; "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," *History and Theory* 23 (1984): 1-33; "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980): 5-27. This issue of *Critical Inquiry* is devoted to the theme "On Narrative" and has contributions by major theorists in this field. See also recent books by Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1 (Chicago, 1984) and Paul Veyne, *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology* (Middletown, Conn., 1984).
- James Young has applied these insights to the problem of Holocaust literature and criticism: "Insofar as 'the facts of' the Holocaust must eventually obtain only in their narrative and cultural reconstructions, the interrelated problems of literary and historical interpretation might now be seen as conjoining in the study of 'literary historiography'. . . . This is to suggest that the 'history of the Holocaust' is not only shaped *post factum* through the narrativization of its events, but that these events were initially determined to some extent by the schematic ways in which they were apprehended, expressed, and then acted upon. The manner in which history is literarily and structurally mapped might thus be said to weave itself back into both the course and text of historical events." "Holocaust Literary Criticism," *Midstream* (June/July 1984): 39-41.
10. Stephen Toulmin, "The Construal of Reality: Criticism in Modern and Postmodern Science," *Critical Inquiry* 9 (1982): 107, 95. On this subject see also the work of Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962), Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, 1982) and also Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, 1979).
11. Eugene Goodheart, "Arnold at the Present Time," *Critical Inquiry* 9 (1983): 454-56.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 459.
13. David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), p. 10.
14. Michael Fishbane, "Revelation and Tradition: Aspects of Inner-Biblical Exegesis," *Journal of Biblical Interpretation* 99 (1980); "Torah and Tradition," in D. Knight, ed.; *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, 1977), pp. 275-300, and the forthcoming *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
15. Roskies, pp. 19-20.
16. William Scott Green, "Reading the Writing of Rabbinism: Toward an Interpretation of Rabbinic Literature," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51 (1983): 194. See also the special issue of *Semeia* edited by Green, *Law as Literature* 27 (1983).
17. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (1971; rpt. Minneapolis, 1983), p. 136.
18. de Man, pp. 232, 32.
19. Jacob Neusner, "Redaction and Formulation: The Talmud of the Land of Israel and the Mishnah," *Semeia* 27 (1983): 125. See also Neusner's recent book *Midrash in Context: Exegesis in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia, 1983). The method here too is form-criticism, but the book also contains an excellent bibliography on midrash at the end, compiled by Lee Haas, the most comprehensive and up-to-date I have seen.

20. Richard Sarason, "Toward a New Agendum for the Study of Rabbinic Midrashic Literature," *Joseph Heinemann Memorial Volume*, ed. Ezra Fleischer and Jakob J. Petuchowski (Cincinnati and Jerusalem, 1981), pp. 181–85.
21. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, 1983), pp. 60–61.
22. Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York, 1962), pp. 63, 68.
23. David Stern, "Rhetoric and Midrash: The Case of the Mashal," *Prooftexts* 1 (1981): fn. 1, p. 282.
24. de Man, p. 17.
25. *Ibid.*, p. ix.
26. Lieberman, pp. 56–68. See also W. Sibley Towner, "Hermeneutical Systems of Hillel and the Tannaim: A Fresh Look," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 53 (1982): 101–135.
27. Maurice Blanchot, "Être Juif," *L'Entretien Infini* (Paris, 1969), p. 188 [translation mine].
28. This letter is published for the first time in David Biale's book, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), pp. 74–76 (original German text on pp. 215–16). In part of it he writes: "Three years, 1916–1918, which were decisive for my entire life, lay behind me: many exciting thoughts had led me as much to the most rationalistic skepticism about my fields of study as to intuitive affirmation of mystical theses which walked the fine line between religion and nihilism.  
I later [found in Kafka] the most perfect and unsurpassed expression of this fine line, an expression which as a secular statement of the Kabbalistic world-feeling in modern spirit, seemed to me to wrap Kafka's writings in the halo of the canonical. . . . For today's man, that mystical totality of 'truth', whose existence disappears particularly when it is projected into historical time, can only become visible in the purest way in the legitimate discipline of commentary and in the singular mirror of philological criticism. Today, as at the very beginning, my work lives in this paradox, in the hope of a true communication from the mountain, of that most invisible, smallest fluctuation of history which causes truth to break forth from the illusion of 'development.'" The years 1916–18 were also those of his intense association with Walter Benjamin whom he joined in Switzerland in 1918 where Benjamin was writing his doctoral dissertation.
29. "Kabbalah and Myth," *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (1960; rpt. New York, 1969), p. 98.
30. "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism," *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1971), p. 293.
31. Scholem, "Walter Benjamin," *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (New York, 1976), pp. 187, 194. See also Scholem's "Walter Benjamin and His Angel" in the same volume, pp. 198–243, and his account of their relationship in *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (1975; Philadelphia, 1981). Of Benjamin, Scholem wrote: "What thinking means I have experienced through his living example." These words indicate how seriously Scholem took Benjamin's literary reflections as a form of theology. Theodor Adorno, another friend of Benjamin's wrote of him: "He transposed the idea of the sacred text into the sphere of the enlightenment, to which according to Scholem, Jewish mysticism itself tends to culminate dialectically. His 'essayism' consists in treating profane texts as though they were sacred. This does not mean that he clung to theological relics, or as the religious socialists, endowed the profane with transcendent significance. Rather, he looked to radical, defenseless profanation as the only chance for the theological heritage which squandered itself in profanity," in Adorno's *Prisms*, trans. S. Weber (1967; Cambridge, Mass. 1981), p. 234.
32. Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala," *Diogenes* 79–80 (1972): 194.
33. Yerushalmi, p. 96.
34. de Man, p. 16.