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## Freud's Midrash: The Exile of Interpretation

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*For the Letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*

2 Corinthians 3:6

*Of course, as it is said, the letter killeth while the spirit giveth life . . . but we should like to know, also, how the spirit could live without the letter. Even so, the claims of the spirit would remain unassailable if the letter had not in fact shown us that it can produce all the effects of truth in man without involving the spirit at all.*

*It is none other than Freud who had this revelation, and he called his discovery the Unconscious.<sup>1</sup>*

Jacques Lacan

*To what were the words of the Law to be compared before the time of Solomon? To a well the waters of which are at a great depth, and this cool and fresh, yet no man could drink of them. A clever man joined cord with cord and rope with*

*rope and drew up and drank. So Solomon went from figure to figure, and from subject to subject, until he obtained the true sense of the Law.*

Midrash on the Song of Songs, Rabbah i, I

In an interview later published as *Radiophonie*,<sup>2</sup> Lacan considered Freud within the exegetical tradition of the Rabbinic Midrash. This startling estimate ought not to be dismissed as a usual perverse Lacanian delight in enigmatic allusion. Freud and the Rabbis share, above all, a distinctive emphasis on interpretation, a particular perspective on the idea of "text." In both the Midrash and psychoanalysis, the text, whether of Bible, dream, or symptom is "overdetermined"; that is, it has multiple embedded meanings that demand methodic interpretation. Freud recognized that the distinguishing characteristic of psychoanalysis lay in its being "an art of *interpretation* . . ."<sup>3</sup> The material produced by the patient's associations was to be considered as though it hinted at a concealed meaning, and the task of psychoanalysis was to discover this hidden meaning.<sup>4</sup>

Lacan writes:

Pourquoi sinon de ce que le Juif depuis le retour de Babylone, est celui qui sait lire, c'est à dire que de la lettre il prend distance de sa parole, trouvant là intervalle, juste à y jouer d'une interprétation.<sup>5</sup>

(Except that ever since the return from Babylon, the Jew is he who knows how to read. This means that he withdraws from his literal utterance so as to find an interval which allows the game of interpretation.)

[Note on translations: Lacan's French is full of puns, intentionally ambiguous, and diabolically difficult. The editors are responsible for translations from the French when no published English sources are available.]

It is Lacan's perception that the historical condition of the Jews—Exile—is intimately connected with the rise of interpretation and reading. Interpretation of the present word from the past letter arises in the Exile (psychically and historically) and is a movement predicated on both separation and return, a finding of self in what has been lost. Lacan is referring above to the first exile of the Jews after the fall of the Temple in 586 B.C.E. and the deportation to Babylon. In the interval, until the return of the Jews in 539 B.C.E., the generation that had possessed the immediate memory of the Land, the Temple, and the Torah died out. Those who returned with Ezra came to a strange land, spoke a new tongue, and had absorbed new customs and ideas. In the moment of return and with the intention of rebuilding the Temple and recovering the identity of the people of Israel, Ezra had to be-



come an interpreter to bridge the gap:

For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord,  
and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgment.

Ezra 7:10

So they read in the book of the law of God distinctly, and  
gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.

Nehemiah 8:8

### The Midrashic Tradition

Before considering further the relation of interpretation to psychoanalysis, linguistics, and the Midrash, we should find it profitable to explore the origin and meaning of the Midrashic tradition itself. The verb used above and translated in the King James Version as "to seek" is, in Hebrew, *lidrosh*, and from that comes the word *Midrash*. *Lidrosh* means "to search," "to study," "to investigate"; and Midrash developed as both a rigorously defined exegetical method and the large compilation of writings resulting from its application to the Scriptures. Midrash is a search for the inner meaning of a given Biblical text as Freud's method was a search for the inner meaning of a dream text or a symptom. The Bible was considered an all-inclusive storehouse, with meaning for every aspect of life. The dream, likewise, for Freud was the "royal road to the unconscious," the great repository of the psyche containing archaic individual and collective treasures for man.

The first Midrashim were interpretations of the Pentateuch, expositions of Biblical texts. These interpretations sought not only to deduce judgments and reconcile contradictions, but also to integrate other laws (*halakhot*) that had grown up from custom (*minhag*) or tradition (*kabbalah*) or enactment (*takkanot*) back into the preexisting Written Law of Moses making it the basis for contemporary meaning. "Law" is a bad translation of the Hebrew *Halakha*, which comes from the verb meaning to "to walk." The sense does not have the abstract rigidity of the Roman *lex*, but the very practical "path" in which to live one's life. As the Biblical scholar Robert Gordis puts it, the Midrashim were intended "to fill in the *lacunae* of the known records."<sup>6</sup> One can immediately think of the same vocabulary and the same work used for dream interpretation in the search for the unconscious connections underlying apparently contradictory or incomprehensible meanings. The distortions, condensations, and displacements of the dream-work mediate the latent meaning of the dream thoughts and the manifest meaning of the remembered dream text. In the same way, the distortions, displacements, and condensations of the interpretive activity



of the Rabbis mediated the latent meaning of the Torah and the manifest meaning of the given text. The Rabbis sought to penetrate the inner meaning of the law; the interpretation was an exegesis, a reading "in" of what was already there. Thus any new *halakha* was tied to the Written Law in an internal way, considered to be embedded in the letter and disclosed in the Midrash. The Rabbis were not, to their minds, adding anything new but only bringing forth what was already there: "Even that which a distinguished disciple was destined to teach in the presence of his master was already said to Moses at Sinai" (Peah 17a).

Although *Halakha* dealt with essentially legal material or traditions, there were also Midrashim on nonlegal material, or *Aggadah*, a word derived from the verb meaning "to say" or "to tell" and translatable as "narratives" or "stories." The *Aggadah* was a compilation of legend, history, folk wisdom, anecdotes, parables, sermons, and so on, in which the relation to the given Biblical text was far looser than in the *Halakha*. The relation of all these interpolations to the written text could range from very close to freely associative. The Rabbis themselves realized that "the *halakhot* concerning the Sabbath, the offerings of the Festivals, and the diversions of sacred things to secular use are mountains hanging by a hair for they consist of little Bible and many *halakhot*" (Hagigah I.8).

Eventually, towards the end of the first century B.C.E., the methods of interpretation were codified by Hillel into seven rules or *middot* (meaning "measurements"), from which were derived the thirteen rules of Rabbi Ishmael and the thirty-two rules of Rabbi Eliezer. Hillel's rules were these: "light and heavy"—inference from the lesser to the greater; "equal decision"—discernment of analogies and comparisons; deduction of general implications from one or more than one passage; more precise statement of the general by reference to a particular and vice versa; use of one passage to interpret another; use of the whole context to elucidate a verse or passage. (Sifra, introd. 1:7).

Toward the end of the second century B.C.E., two tendencies towards exegesis crystallized, one favoring a stricter and more limited interpretation, and the other a wider and freer mode. Rabbi Ishmael's school produced Midrashim in the former more legal and logical method of interpretation, laying down the rule that "the Torah speaks in the language of men" (Sif. Num. 112). Rabbi Akiba, on the other hand, held that every verse, indeed every word, letter, particle, conjunction, repetition, every flourish and horn of each letter (and assuredly every phoneme) held many meanings. Among other Talmudic rules that opened the law to freer interpretation was *Gematria*, the numerical equivalent of a word. For example, the name of Eliezer, Abraham's servant, has the same numerical value as the number of soldiers (318) Abraham took to battle (Gen 14:14). The Midrash, therefore, states that Abraham sent only Eliezer into the battle (Gen. R. 43:2). *Notarikon* (shorthand) was the rule for interpreting the letters



of a given word as the initial letters of other words. *Al tikrei* ("do not read . . . but") changes the reading of the vowels of a word to convey a different meaning. For example: "It says, 'And the tables were the work of God, and, the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables' (Ex. 32:16) Read not *harut* (graven), but *herut* (freedom), for no man is free but he who labours in the Torah" (Avoth 6:2). These word plays and intentional misreadings, distortions and interpolations, were exactly the phenomena to which Freud directed his attention in the dream, in wit, in symptoms, and in the psychopathology of everyday life, an attention that outsiders to both Rabbis and psychoanalysis consider nonsensical.

With this variety of interpretive method, an Oral Law grew up that consisted of *Halakha* and *Aggadah* that were not based on the Written Law at all, and it came to be known as the Mishna. As a means of clarifying the difference between the Mishna and the Midrash, the following example will suffice: The Mishna declares simply without explication, "Civil cases are to be tried by three judges." (Sanhedrin 1:1). The Midrash, however, explains that *because* the word *Elohim* is used by the Bible three times in describing the procedure to be followed in the case of theft, we therefore know that civil cases must be tried by three judges (Mekilta Ex. 22:7). The Mishna and Gemara together comprise the Talmud, which is a Mishna on the Mishna.

The Law, then, was the result of one thousand years of interpretive activity from Ezra to the Amoraim. In post-Talmudic times, codification, exposition, and commentary continue to this day.

Surveying this broad scope of Biblical interpretation, one might be tempted to see at work a spirit of freer and freer interpretation, evolving farther and farther away from the literal meaning of the text (if one can speak of such a thing). During the period of the rise of the Oral Law, in fact, there was some controversy over its validity. Again the movement was away from the immediacy of the Word (prophecy) through distance and loss (exile) to a return and attempt at recovery (interpretation). When the Temple was finally destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E., the Pharisees saved Judaism by turning a sacrificial cult into a religion of worship as study. In place of sacrifice, which is substitutive or, in linguistic terms, "metaphorical," there is interpretation, which is contiguous and "metonymical." Here we can rejoin the Lacanian discussion.

### Metonymy and Interpretation

Exile or loss breeds desire for return to the Land, or to the Full Word. To rebuild the Temple and interpret the Torah is, as has been seen, an attempt to recover the past. In a psychoanalytic perspective however, the project of desire for recapture of the lost object is im-



possible to fulfill. Desire for the lost object can be desire for a fusion, merger, or loss of self, which is collapse of differentiation and nothingness. Endless metonymy, an endless chain of signifiers, or an endless play of interpretation is the result. As Lacan formulates the metonymic structure,  $f(S \dots S') S \sim S(-)s$  where

The sign - placed between ( ) represents here the retention of the line - which in the original formula marked the irreducibility in which, in the relations between signifier and signified, the resistance of meaning is constituted.<sup>7</sup>

In linguistic terms, the inadequacy of signifier to signified constitutes a resistance of meaning. That is, the line which divides the signifier from the signified in the formula for the sign,  $S^{er}/S^{ed}$ , indicates the predetermined inability of the signifier to merge, to become *one* with the signified. Hence also, the desiring subject and meaningful object are "barred" from each other. On a larger scale—subject and object, consciousness and other, interpretation and text are irrevocably separated. There can be metonymical "multiplication" of signifiers, but no true coincidence, no crossing the line, breaking the barrier between signifier and signified.

In a metaphoric structure, however, as opposed to metonymic, there is a certain collapse and crossing over, identification of  $S^{er}$  and  $S^{ed}$ , postulating more of a relation of identity between the two. One of the main points of contention between Judaism and Christianity was precisely in Christianity's "literalized" metaphor, its replacing of Interpretation with Incarnation. The apostle Paul, in making the crucifixion of Jesus the substitutive sacrifice, saw his new faith as effecting a kind of leap over the bar, a vertical slash across the linear chain of Rabbinic interpretation (+). "To this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds, but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed" (2 Cor. 3:15). Jesus, for Paul, was then the end of the law, and the law was sin. Paul connects the law, in fact, with desire and repression:

If it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me.

Romans 7:7

The end of history, the time of unfulfilled desire, is immanent as is the return of Jesus; the New Testament only becomes written down in the interval of waiting, in the gap between the final coming and the present moment.

Within the metaphorical relation, however, metonymy is reestablished and the gap of desire is crossed: word becomes for Paul the



full Logos. The text is no longer linear, interpretive, written—but the body and personhood of Jesus with which the believer unites as an immediate member.

Paul and the New Testament writers make predominant use of allegory as a mode of interpretation because it posits a one-to-one relationship between the manifest and latent meanings. The latent meaning is Jesus, who is a determined fixed center, a mediator and resolver of oppositions, the ultimate Sign, the referent for every other signifier. In Rabbinic interpretation, however, the central Word, the Name of God, is not pronounceable; and no one can see the face of God and live. His unpronounceable Name means, "I am what I am": pure identity in relation to itself, the power of pure presence that cannot be incarnated as a man, but that originates a historical relation in a covenant through which every man attains to God but does not become Him. The relation between man and God in Judaism is contiguous, not substitutive—man is in God's image, but God is not of man's substance. The Rabbinical interpretation, therefore, predicates statements about the Subject but never collapses the sentence, the linear collective historical experience, into the Subject, the Word, the timeless Son.

In the New Testament, the "Old" Testament text is seen as a foreshadowing of Jesus and all history is subsumed in the figures of his life, which becomes patterns for the Christian timelessly to repeat rather than successively interpret. Jesus as ultimate Referent "rends the veil" as a transcendental and transparent symbol outside the network of signification and refers alone to himself; and at the final coming, says Paul, we shall see "face to face." Jesus, for the Christian, is the final interpretation and end of the Law.

### Freud and the Midrashic Tradition

Freud, however, with his tragic view of life and his stern recognition of the reality principle, remains firmly within the metonymical interpretive tradition of the Jews, for whom the great "I am" was unspeakable and an object of desire. If content is ungraspable and God is not to be imaged, one must approach indirectly—through covenant, law, interpretation, analysis, all of which might be seen as compromise formations—as Freud said dreams were compromise formations by which one tried to satisfy and renounce the claims of the id simultaneously.

As Freud also recognized, the separation from the object of desire engenders ambivalence. The impossibility of fulfilled desire initiates a counter-movement aimed at destruction of the object (and the giving of a new law) as well as a turning towards interpretive recovery. Interpretation, Freud notes, is also concealed transgression. Derrida (another scion of Rabbis) derives two types of interpretation from this ambivalence: one that seeks to decipher an origin free from free-play



"and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation"; and the other, "which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms free-play and tries to pass beyond man."<sup>8</sup> Freud is most certainly situated in the first category, searching for original acts, instincts, and so on (for example, the mythical murder of the father by the primal horde) and living like an exile the necessity of interpretation—which is, as has been seen, a paradigmatically Jewish mode.

Freud's fascination with the figure of Moses took on some of this ambivalence both about interpretation and his own Jewish heritage. Freud then applied his interpretive model to the famous statue of Moses by Michelangelo (here the analogue would be dream-thought as artist's intention, artistic process of creation as dream-work, finished statue as manifest content). He directed his attention, like that of Midrashic search, not to the main features but to the seemingly insignificant details, of the statue comparing his method with psychoanalytic technique:

It, too, is accustomed to divine the secret and concealed things from the unconsidered or unnoticed details, from the rubbish-heap, as it were, of our observations.<sup>9</sup>

In Freud's view, the statue embodies Moses in the act of restraining himself for the sake of his greater cause from destroying the tablets of the law. Freud implies that he, too, for the sake of his own greater cause of laying down the laws of psychoanalysis likewise heroically had to restrain himself in the face of the resistance, contempt, and "idolatry" of his contemporaries. Freud seemed to identify with Moses as lawgiver, both revering him and overthrowing him in the same primal relationship to the father that Freud traced in *Totem and Taboo* and that manifested itself in *Moses and Monotheism*. The theory is that the Jews killed Moses because they found his Law insupportable and afterwards revered him, refusing to face the guilt of their act. Freud must also have felt some guilt at his destruction of Judaism in *Moses and Monotheism*, for his writings concerning his identification as a Jew are contradictory.

Freud's reading of the Bible in *Moses and Monotheism* reflected his ambivalence, and his interpretation of Biblical interpretation is a revealing key. He claims that the Biblical account of Moses is actually a product of a struggle between two opposing forces: one sought to transform and falsify it, turn it into its opposite; the other sought to piously maintain the story as it stood. Hence there are striking omissions, repetitions, contradictions in the text. The distortion of a text, says Freud, is like a murder, the difficulty being not with the deed itself, but in doing away with the traces.<sup>10</sup> One might find these two processes working within Freud and standing as a model for the interpretative act in general, aside from their particular relation to Freud's Judaism, psychoanalysis, and Rabbinical distortion in the Midrash.



Commenting on this passage in relation to Lacan's discussion of Freud in the Midrashic tradition, Jeffrey Mehlman points out the paradox of Midrashic interpretation: "In order to be preserved the text must be interpreted, opened up, violated. And such is the anomaly—a law perpetuated in its own transgression—which Lacan hints at in alluding to Freud's slaying of Moses—or deconstruction of Monotheism—as his final interpretive feat."<sup>11</sup> Repression is unconscious textual distortion, as is interpretation. In this sense, interpretation is analogous to the dream-work as it operates on the latent content. In Lacanian terms, distortion is the sliding of the signified under the signifier, and displacement is a "veering off meaning that we see in metonymy, and which from its first appearance in Freud is described as the main method by which the Unconscious gets around censorship."<sup>12</sup> A little further on in *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud adds that distortion also means "to put in another place," describing it as metonymical displacement: "That is why in so many textual distortions we may count on finding the suppressed and abnegated material hidden away somewhere, though in an altered shape and torn out of its original connection. Only it is not always easy to recognize it."<sup>13</sup> Just as the dream-work effects a compromise formation simultaneously revealing and concealing, satisfying and suppressing, so interpretation represses and transgresses.

Rabbinic interpretation, like dream-work and analysis, could turn laws into their opposites. By the use of a restrictive interpretation, any practical application of a law could be effectively made impossible. In the case, for instance, of a rebellious son, a passage in Deut. 21:18–21 says he must be stoned to death. The Rabbis claimed that the law applied only if the son committed the transgression within three months of the age of 13 and only if the trial were completed in the same time. About this verse, they wrote: "There never has been a stubborn and rebellious son, and never will be. Why then was the law written? That you may study it and receive reward."<sup>14</sup> Again, the movement is from the immediate act of sacrifice to the prolonged time of study and the play of signification, from the manifest to the latent, the closed to the open. The openness of interpretation led to many conflicts, and the Talmud contains transcripts of debates and discussions setting opinions from different centuries side by side in dialogue.

Nevertheless, as far afield as their discussions carried them, no matter how many free associations were spun out of a particular word or verse, the Rabbis insisted on the letter; they never swerved from their belief that the Oral tradition was embedded in the Written. They maintained the general hermeneutical principle that "no Biblical text may be divorced from its simple meaning" but also that "he who translates a verse according to its literal form is a falsifier" (Shabbos 63a; Yevamot 24a). In the same way, Lacan would say that the Unconscious insists on the letter; for Freud, the manifest and latent meanings are not to be opposed to each other but rather are organically related



through the activity of the dream-work. Here it is crucial to note that for Freud *dream* is a verb; the meaning is to be sought in the dream-work of distortion, condensation, and displacement rather than in any latent content (just as Rabbinic interpretation is a process, not a penetration of singular substance). Freud, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, warns against analysts who

seek to find the essence of dreams in their latent content and in so doing they overlook the distinction between the latent dream-thoughts and the dream-work. At bottom, dreams are nothing other than particular *forms* of thinking. . . . It is the dream-work which creates that form and it alone is the essence of dreaming.<sup>15</sup>

Freud seems to be edging close here to structuralist dissolution of content for form and essence for context. For Lacan, the central connection between psychoanalysis and Midrash lies precisely in the area of the precedence of the interpretive formal play of relation within the letter:

En effet pour ce peuple qui a le Livre, seul entre tous à s'affirmer comme historique, à ne jamais proférer de mythe, le Midrasche représente un mode d'abord dont la moderne critique historique pourrait bien n'être que l'abâtardissement. Car s'il prend le Livre au pied de sa lettre, ce n'est pas pour la faire supporter d'intentions plus ou moins patentes, mais pur de sa collusion signifiante prise en sa matérialité: de ce que sa combinaison rend obligé de voisinage (donc non voulu), de ce que les variantes de grammaire imposent de choix désinential, tirer un dire autre du texte: voire à y impliquer ce qu'il néglige. . . .<sup>16</sup>

(In effect, for this people who have the Book, the only people who proclaim themselves a historical people, the only ones who never proffer myth, Midrash first of all represents a mode of which modern historical criticism is but a bastardization. It takes the Book literally not in order to allow this literalness to support more or less obvious intentions but to allow collusion of signifiers to be taken as such, as materials. What is joined together is not willed but a result of proximity, and grammatical variants dictate choice of inflections. Another statement must be drawn from the text so that the omitted is implicated.)

Thus there would be no one single referent or essential meaning transcribable in an allegorical way—no hidden essence to penetrate, no static center but rather the possibility of many interpretations in a play



with the formal structure of a dream or Biblical text. The psychoanalytic interpreter, like the Rabbi, must then also displace the center of his rational analytic consciousness and *partake* of the very thought-process that is the object of his interpretation; he must abandon his scientific objectivity and remove and invoke his own Unconscious and powers of free association in the process of understanding his patient. For that reason precisely, *The Interpretation of Dreams* is as much autobiography as medical analysis. Freud is not at a safe remove from the objects of his analysis. The Freudian Midrash was a search into every dark corner of the self as text and, like the Rabbis', was concerned with off-centered phenomena such as word-play, anagrams, acrostics, bad jokes, things that seemed meaningless and insignificant. Interpretation must attune itself to, and become itself, a form of dream-work (thereby bridging the gap and trying to reappropriate the object which is itself the pursuit of happiness).

Nevertheless, interpretation is not an arbitrary play of nonsense; the interpreter searches for and assumes meaning, even though meaning is not determined. The meaning is not *in* the text as essence but *in* the process of interpretive play both for Freud and the Midrash, in their distortions, displacements, and condensations. Judaism never articulated dogmas because the Oral Torah opened up the Written Law, as has been seen, to an infinite number of interpretations predicated on the unspoken "I am" and the confession, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." The Rabbis wrote: "Is not My word like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" (Jer. 23:29)—as the hammer causes numerous sparks to flash forth, so is a Scriptural verse capable of many interpretations" (Sanhedrin 34a). Likewise, for Freud,

... There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; ... and which ... adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. ... The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium.<sup>17</sup>

Meaning, then, is found in a locus or what Freud elsewhere calls a "nodal pin." The nodal point or close meshwork corresponds to what Lacan calls the *point de capiton*, which he compares to the buttons on a mattress of a couch—locus, not essence. For Lacan, the sign, therefore, though not meaning anything, signifies in an endless, related chain of signification without content; the signifying letter of the Unconscious "insists."

Now one might conceive of the Midrash in an analogous sense,



with the text as a kind of finite determinant and the interpretation as the indeterminate and free weave of play over it. The act of interpretation, in linguistic terminology, is the moment of actual speech (*parole*) making concrete and evident the implicit abstract structure of the language (*synchrony*) in response to historical events and needs (*diachrony*). The implicit or latent constituents of the Written Law are the hidden structure whose dialectical relation to the diachronic Oral interpretation constitutes an inclusive system. In the same manner that the abstract structure of a language is implicit in its spoken and temporal manifestations, the Rabbis likened their interpretive activity to that of a man who has been given wheat from which to make fine flour and flax from which to make a garment.

The clothing imagery of the Rabbis is the same figure used by Lacan:

Ce qui du temps lui fait étoffe n'est pas emprunt d'imaginaire, mais plutôt d'une textile où noeuds ne diraient rien que des trous qui s'y trouvent.<sup>18</sup>

(Such as makes the stuff of time is filled not with the imaginary but with the textile whose knots would not say anything but for the holes that it holds. [JPP])

Likewise, the word *text* itself comes from *texere* meaning to "weave"; and the name given to the divisions of the Mishna, *Massechtiyot*, comes from a Hebrew root also meaning "to weave," although badly translated as "tractate." If the flax is the synchronic element, the garment is the diachronic weave. In the weaving process of interpretation the same elements are at work as in the weaving together of the dream as text and the same indeterminate noncentered meanings. Indeterminacy of belief is not the same as allegorical interpretation, where the hidden meaning is concealed as another essence in the figure; the flax, similarly, is not concealed by the garment.

Freud, as we have seen, warned analysts not to consider the latent meaning as an essence and also posited the unlimitedness of interpretation. Although Lacan maintains that Freud's method is "metaphorical," it would be better, I think, to characterize it as "metonymical," or perhaps "analogical." There is an important difference to be made between analogy and metaphor, for as explained previously, metaphor lends itself to effecting an "ontological leap" over the line separating signifier and signified. Christianity literalizes Jewish metaphors, makes the Word into a Body, Logos into a divine man. The correspondence of terms in metaphor is so close as to allow the *substitution* of one for the other. Christianity, then, is a religion of sacrifice, i.e., substitution. Allegory is also *substitutive*. Psychoanalysis is not allegory. The interpreter perceives analogies not identities. The distance be-



tween meaning, desire, and object always remains. Therapy is the process of continuous interpretation, not immediate salvation. The logos never becomes incarnate (except, perhaps, in neurotic symptom). The language of psychoanalysis itself becomes the central substance, the object; and interpretation is perpetual.

## Conclusion

Thus the Freudian and Rabbinic interpretations are far more historically oriented, as Lacan realized—the Bible claiming to be a historical Book alone among all. For Freud, archaism was archaeology: he saw the nature of the psyche collectively and individually in historical terms. The history we choose to write, the analogies we selectively perceive, the interpretations we construct, are functions of desire, and that desire is ambivalent. Freud's interpretation of dreams and of his own Jewish heritage bears all the marks of desire, which, as we have said, is ambivalent. Freud's interpretation of dreams and of his own Jewish heritage also bears all the marks of the distortions of desire. Lacan's technique likewise maintains:

In order to liberate the subject's Word, we introduce him into the language of his desire, that is into the primary language in which, beyond what he tells us of himself, he is already talking to us unbeknownst to him, and in the symbols of the system in the first place.

What we teach the subject to recognize as his Unconscious is his *history*—that is to say, we help him to perfect the contemporary historization of the facts which have already determined a certain number of the historical turning points in his experience.<sup>19</sup>

And in that we may perceive a fine description of the Midrash as well or 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.

Thus, finally, psychoanalysis and the Midrash are both concerned with what Lacan called "deciphering of the Word . . . a deliverance of the imprisoned sense."<sup>20</sup> Interpretation is the lost consciousness seeking to recover itself. "It is necessary to find the subject as a lost object,"<sup>21</sup> says Lacan, after Freud; and despite his and Freud's and all the other modern dialecticians' professions of stoic atheism, the comment echoes the ancient, traditional religious advice that only he who loses himself will find himself.



There is a Rabbinic legend that when Moses ascended to heaven, he found God ornamenting the letters of the Torah with crownlike tips. God told Moses that there would be a man called Akiba who would, by interpretation, base mounds of *halakhot* on each tip of the letters. When Moses asked to see this man, he was told to go back eighteen ranks. When he did so, he found that he could hear the discussion well enough, but he was not able to understand what was being said.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps had he gone back another eighteen ranks he might have heard Freud, too.

## Notes

1. Jacques Lacan, "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious," in *Structuralism*, ed. Jacques Ehrmann (New York: Doubleday-Anchor), p. 117.
2. Jacques Lacan, "Radiophonie," 2/3 (Paris, 1970), in Jeffrey Mehlman, "The 'floating signifier': Levi-Strauss to Lacan," *Yale French Studies*, 48 (1972), pp. 9-37.
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