AJS ASSOCIATION FOR JEWISH STUDIES
# NEWSLETTER

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## Editorial

After several years, the **Newsletter** of the Association for Jewish Studies has finally reappeared. We hope that the new **Newsletter** lives up to the high standards of its predecessor and continues to provide an important forum for the exchange of ideas and information among the members of the AJS. Although the important function of reviewing books has now (appropriately) fallen to the **AJS Review**, the new **Newsletter** sees itself as more than a place to list conferences, fellowships, and new appointments. We would like the **Newsletter** to contain lively articles on the state of Jewish Studies as a scholarly discipline, on new programs and teaching methods, on controversial issues that effect us as Judaica scholars, and on such nuts-and-bolts issues as computer software.

This first issue contains two interesting pieces which challenge us to explore the relationship of Jewish Studies both to the world of scholarship and to the Jewish people. Susan Handelman's article, "The State of Contemporary Literary Criticism and Jewish Studies," provides a sobering assessment of that relationship, and raises important questions about the dialectic between the secular and the sacred in Jewish Studies. Gershon Hundert's "The Impact of Jewish Studies on Jewish Life on Campus," deals specifically with the question of whether Jewish Studies professors have an obligation to raise the Jewish consciousness of their students. Both articles reveal the important fact that Jewish Studies is still self-consciously trying to define itself within the university, still struggling with issues of religious import even as it asserts its objectivity and dispassionate concern for scholarly truth. Despite their shyness about the term *Wissenschaft des Judenthums*, both Handelman and Hundert know that the concerns of the *Wissenschaft* movement are still with us, over 150 years later. Perhaps our field is healthier for that concern.

The sheer number of conferences certainly indicates that Jewish Studies is both lively and extensive. Last year, conferences were held at universities and institutions all over the country. Two major themes emerged in last years conferences: Israel, occasioned by its fortieth birthday, and the work of S.Y. Agnon, occasioned by the 100th anniversary of his birth. This year's conferences promise to be more eclectic. The program of the 1988 AJS Conference can be found on p. 9 of this **Newsletter.** The sessions and papers look very exciting and interesting. Incidentally, the March 1988 edition of *Moment* magazine contained a very positive review of last year's AJS conference. Hershel Shanks, the new editor, touted the conference as a place where someone could "learn about the world of Jewish scholarship — in the best, disinterested sense." He lauded the session on antisemitism and Yerushalmi's talk on the history of Jewish hope, and concluded that more sessions should be devoted to general scholarly issues and more papers should be presented by senior scholars.

At last year's conference, several of us thought that it would be a good idea to find out about the backgrounds, careers, and scholarly production of AJS members. Sociologist Rela Monson volunteered to prepare a short questionaire and to do a statistical analysis of the results. We would appreciate if you would answer her questionaire, found on p. 8, and return it to her at Gratz College as soon as possible. We will report the results in a future edition of the **Newsletter**.

In conclusion, let me repeat Ruth Wisse's request of all of us at last year's conference. We should make a point of sending copies of our books and articles to the National Library in Jerusalem. In addition, we should think about ways to help Judaica scholars in other parts of the world, especially in the Soviet Union. Jewish Studies is clearly flourishing in North America, in Israel, and in Western Europe in ways that our *Wissenschaft* forebears would not have dreamed possible. It is up to us to make sure that trend continues.

Marsha Rozenblit
Editor

## IN MEMORIAM

### Alexander Altmann

The passing of Alexander Altmann leaves a void and a legacy. One of the last surviving members of an illustrious company of German-Jewish scholars, Altmann demanded the most from everyone he worked with. As a teacher he had high expectations of his students. In his courses at Brandeis he assumed that his students could understand the fine points of his arguments. As founding editor (together with Nahum Glatzer and Jacob Marcus) of the Judaic Studies series at the University of Alabama Press, he had high expectations of authors who submitted their manuscripts for consideration, thereby setting the standards for the series. He expected a great deal from his colleagues as well. Not infrequently he would vote to reject a manuscript of a well-known scholar because, as he put it, it was not his best work. Earlier, he set equally high standards for the *Journal of Jewish Studies*, which he edited when he lived in England.

His legacies to the world of scholarship include his seminal writings on medieval Jewish and Muslim philosophy and mysticism; his studies of Saadya Gaon, Isaac Israeli and Maimonides; his definitive biography of Moses Mendelssohn; and his many students at the Institute of Jewish Studies, Manchester, and at Brandeis, Harvard, and Hebrew Universities.

Altmann began his career in Germany. Following the publication of his doctoral dissertation in 1931 on Max Scheler's metaphysics, Altamann

# The State of Contemporary Literary Criticism and Jewish Studies

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**Author's Note:** *The following are remarks delivered in response to a presentation by Geoffrey Hartman at a conference at Indiana University in November, 1987 on "The Study of Jews: Their History, Religion, and Culture in Multidisciplinary Perspective." Our session was on "Literary Studies" and I was asked not to deliver a formal paper, but to make some observations about the major issues as I saw them.*

The aim of our deliberations, our conference brochure states, is to contribute to the "systematic articulation of the aims and methodologies of Jewish Studies." The first point I must make is that in the post-structuralist condition of literary studies today, we have a general abhorrence of the "systematic;" and we have no consensus on the appropriateness of any single method or even on the set of works which should constitute the literary "canon." I can't resist here quoting Will Rogers who said, "I don't belong to any organized political party — I am a Democrat." Even though I am tempted to say, "I don't have any systematic articulation — I'm a literary critic," I would not go as far as T.S. Eliot who maintained, "There is no method except to be intelligent."

Literary study today is both wonderful and vexing. We have been very much obsessed with the so called post-modern condition and we have spent an enormous amount of time and energy over the past twenty or so years struggling with epistemological and hermeneutic issues from linguistics, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and political thought. We have been intoxicated with theory; we have radically questioned the foundations of our discipline; we have even asked whether there is indeed any such special thing as "literature" — something distinctive and apart from the non-literary.

And we are now fighting factional wars among feminist critics, deconstructionists, Marxists, reader-response critics, psychoanalytic critics, semioticians, new historicists, plus various combinations of the above. In addition, we still have some tried and true old liberal humanists and philological textual critics. As Terry Eagleton, a Marxist semiotician, puts it, "Literary criticism is rather like a laboratory in which some of the staff are seated in white coats at control panels, while others are throwing sticks in the air or spinning coins. Genteel amateurs jostle with hard-nosed professionals, and after a century or so of 'English' they still have not decided to which camp the subject really belongs."[1]

One answer to these territorial struggles has been to "internationalize" the disputed zone. We have people who want to disband literature departments and put "cultural studies" in their place, where we would study as Eagleton puts it, "signifying practices in our society from Moby Dick to the Muppet Show, from Dryden and Jean-Luc Goddard to the portrayal of women in advertisements and the rhetorical techniques of government reports."[2]

If one agrees with this position, that the province of literary studies is the study of the effects of language, of how language means, how it represents and affects the world (as opposed to annotating and commenting on "great works"), then literary critics seem to have a plan for covert domination of all fields of knowledge. For if all knowledge in the university comes to us mediated through language and texts, the first and last stop would be with experts in the way language works and how texts mean: literary critics.

But the question of how language "means," and what is the truest version of the world, has divided poets and historians from the time of Aristotle. Is the "real" meaning or referent of a text social and historical, or as deconstructionists have argued, does language have its own enigmatic independent life which endlessly complicates the whole issue of what it refers to and what its possibilities are? Or are the social and historical realms themselves "textual" in nature, "narrative-rhetorical constructs" that are highly "literary"? (On this issue, I come down on the side of Lily Tomlin, who thinks that "Reality is a collective hunch.")

The obsession with the nature of linguistic meaning, however, has led much recent literary theory to personify "Language" as if it were an autonomous entity that knows and does things independently of human will or subjectivity. It is as if a person or society were an "effect" of linguistic and textual forces, not vice versa. As Harold Bloom puts it, language here becomes a kind of "Demiurge replacing the self-as-Abyss or even self-as-Jehovah" in modern thought.[3]

Like Jewish Studies, the study of the modern non-classical languages was professionalized only in the last one hundred years or so.[4] A crude sketch of the history of English studies might be as follows. When English literature first entered the university as a legitimate subject, it took over the dominant model of typical nineteenth century scholarship, i.e., historical philology, bibliography, lower textual criticism, editing manuscripts, and so forth. Then, with the rise of the so-called New Criticism in the early part of this century, criticism swung over to an intense formalism, to a belief in the autonomy of the text and its independence of authorial intention or historical reference, to assertations about the special essence of literature as a unique kind of knowledge embodied in its particular aesthetic forms. In the last twenty or so

1. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 199.

2. Eagleton, p. 207.

3. Harold Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) p. 19.

4. A superb and highly readable account of the history of English studies is Gerald *Graff's Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

years, under the influence of currents in French and German thought, literary criticism became became intensely self-reflexive and self-critical. Having left the comfortable nest where they analyzed just the author's great "words on the page," critics now find themselves in the thickets of philosophical and linguistic theory, and the struggles of political ideology. Everything was "put into question," from the definition of what a "text" even is to the political role of the critic. One of the most familiar strategies in literary studies today is to unmask or "demystify," as we now say, everyone else's hidden ideology — not to replace it with a neutral, objective criticism, but to argue more strenuously for one's own ideology, superior because it is "self-conscious" and strenuously willed.

## II

In following the history of Jewish Studies as it has moved from beit midrash to yeshiva to seminary to university, I often have a sense of deja-vue. Both in approach and in subject matter, we critics are always worrying about what is specifically "literary" about "literature" — and Jewish Studies has a similar problem of what is or should be "Jewish" about Jewish Studies. But the more we try strictly to define and limit these fundamental terms, the more elusive and impossible they become. I'm reminded of what my favorite storyteller, Garrison Keiller, said about his mythical town of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota: "Lake Wobegon is a real place — as long as you don't go looking for it." Both Jewish Studies and literary studies also wonder who should be working in their fields, and how they should be trained, and how they fit into the university and relate to other disciplines. But here is the central problem for this discussion, which relates to the problematic way in which we define the powers of language in literary studies: the relation of sacred and secular. This is an issue which is infinitely complex and which I can only briefly raise here.

I remember my sense of confusion at the first Association for Jewish Studies meeting I ever attended when, after the first communal dinner was over, small prayer books *(benchers)* were distributed imprinted with the AJS logo, and a communal recitation of the *Birkat ha-Mazon* ensued. As a Jew, I am familiar with those prayers, and have a considerable collection of *benchers* from various occasions (but none from the Modern Language Association or American Academy of Religion). I can't imagine how a non-Jew at the conference might have felt at that moment, but that gesture symbolized to me the ambivalence and duality at the heart of academic Jewish Studies.

Later, at a session on literary theory and the study of Jewish texts, after a discussion of Derrida, Saussure etc., one of the panelists, a prominent Jewish Studies scholar, warned, "We who are inside the tradition have to be careful about what theories we import from outside." This statement implies that the criteria for the validity of literary theories had to be "the tradition," some undefined theological essence, or faithfulness, as opposed to ideas developed by secular people who had no overt link to Judaism. That remark only illustated once more that whenever anyone begins to talk about "subjectivity or objectivity," "the nature of meaning," or the "meaning of meaning," even the "study of signifying practices," we are, at bottom, talking about world-views, beliefs, politics, ethics, ideas of what is the good.

This perplexed and pained crossing of sacred and secular is also at work in literary theory. For the literary and religious impulses have always been intermixed; poets and prophets are always like Jacob and Esau vying for the same blessing. Even the category of "literature" itself, as opposed to "scripture" or "Torah" or "Gospel," already involves some act of profanation, as Geoffrey Hartman has shown in his essay on "The Jewish Imagination."[5] And that profaning act is not, in the end, problematic for a literary critic. After all, literary studies has never had a Jerusalem, a yeshiva, a sacred tradition of holy interpreters inspiring an ongoing community of people living and dying according to its precepts. Not even Oxford or Harvard fits that bill.

But the intermingling of sacred and profane in the field of Jewish studies as it arose from the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* has always been problematic. We don't need to repeat at length here the warfare of religious ideology underlying the origins of Jewish Studies as it criticized traditional orthodox Jewish understanding of text and history, and then constructed another ideology to argue for its own scholarly legitimacy in the modern university.

Jewish Studies hasn't really yet gone through the wringer that literary studies had subjected itself to over the past twenty years. There are, of course, several younger scholars already using various new critical methods including feminist criticism, semiotics, and deconstruction on classical Jewish texts in Hebrew and Yiddish. And Yerushalmi's rather elegaic volume *Zakhor* itself strikingly questioned the value of the foundation of Jewish studies, the historiographic project, to Judaism in his meditation on the difference between Jewish history and Jewish memory. History, he wrote became the "faith of the fallen Jews."[6]

On the whole, though, as literary critics have radically questioned and deconstructed literature as an academic institution, Jewish Studies has been asserting and constructing itself in the universities. Jewish Studies has sought to justify itself as a legitimate realm of objective scholarly inquiry, just like any other — a part of the study of human civilization that has a rightful place in the university. It claims not to be interested in helping Jewish students find their identities, nor aiming to save Judaism. (I think this might come as a surprise to many of the wealthy community donors whose generous endowments undergird so many Jewish Studies programs.)

Although Jewish Studies likes to portray itself in an objective way, and not as some internal Jewish attempt to bolster Jews, Judaism, and Jewish identity, the situation is more complex. In a religious studies department, for instance, it's not uncommon to find a Protestant Christian teaching Buddhism. In America, Jewish Studies is filled with many young Jews who themselves find in it a kind of intellectual modern Jewish identity. Arthur Green has eloquently analyzed the dilemmas and dual allegiances of Jewish Studies professors in his essay "Jewish Studies and Jewish Faith." And Daniel Elazar has written at length of the new sociological phenomenon of "The

5. Geoffrey Hartman, "On the Jewish Imagination," *Prooftexts* 5 (1985), pp. 201-20.

6. Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), p. 86.

Professor as Jewish Spiritual Leader" where in many spheres, "professors (both of Jewish and other academic subjects) have come to rival rabbis as sources of spiritual inspiration, not to speak of their influence as interpreters of Judaism and articulators of accepted Jewish values."' For Elazar, this recently acquired status of the Jewish professor is a mixed blessing. Green agrees, but he adds that in Jewish Studies, despite some of the corrosive effects of the critical study of Judaism, the effect of such scholarship has also "provided a clearing of the air and helps to set Jewish theology on a creative and modern — or post-modern — course."[8]

The main point here is that the place of Jewish Studies raises the larger issue of just how knowledge is defined, how it is structured into disciplines in the contemporary university, and how those structures are continually challenged and evolve. Lately, the university itself has been under especially virulent attack as incoherent, oppressive, and immoral by figures as diverse as Allan Bloom on the right and Michel Foucault on the left. Foucault has elaborated on the complicity of power and knowledge, of "disciplining" and punishing. Bloom thinks that the contemporary university is undergoing the same crisis of relativism, historicism, and nihilism that destroyed German universities in the thirties, culminating in the collusion of Heidegger with the Nazis.

I hope you will not feel as if I have digressed too much from our topic. But the issues of power, knowledge, discourse, authority, institution, discipline, the attack on reason, the disparity of truth and method are at the very center of contemporary debates about literary meaning, the status of the English Department, and the fate of the universities.

## III

So what should Jewish Studies do? Should it eagerly follow literary studies into this post-modernist, self-reflexive, disputatious, theoretical, and ideological place — somewhat like the rabbis who entered the *pardes* of mystical interpretation, but out of which only one emerged sane and alive?

My answer is mixed. On the positive side, I am quite glad that in English departments today we write and read literature far differently than when I was in college. Literary studies is a less monolithic, more intellectually vigorous, and interdisciplinary field. True, it is heterogeneous, diffused, and somewhat chaotic, but that reflects the condition of post-modern knowledge in general.[9] Because its scope has broadened, literary theory is being read by legal theorists at Harvard pondering textual interpretation, by architects interested in "how buildings mean" (yes, there are even deconstructive architects[10]), and by anthropologists interested in the symbolic aspects of social meanings. And literary critics in turn are reading Heidegger, Kant, Foucault, Freud, Marx, and the midrash, as well as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Moby Dick and the muppet show.

On the other hand, due to institutional and economic factors, Jewish Studies is *already* interdisciplinary within the university. Most programs draw their faculty from various fields, and have faculty lines in different departments. Though it hasn't gone through a radical philosophical self-critique like literary studies, Jewish Studies in its boundary ambiguities, its hybrid nature, its crossing many fields and lack of dominant center, represents in a strange way, the "post-modern" ideal towards which literary studies is now lurching.

So instead of seeking its "systematic articulation," Jewish Studies could use the model of literary studies to affirm and exploit this diffusion as its "epistemic truth" (if you will forgive this expression), the cognitive embodiment of the way in which a dispersed people has wandered through the history and literature and culture of almost every nation. But that would require a different, more self-reflexive way of being interdisciplinary, and a further willingness to enter into the thickets of contemporary philosophy, epistemology, and linguistics, not only for "practical applications to Jewish texts" but for reflections on the very "discourse" of Jewish Studies and its practitioners. If so, I think there would also be less of the anxiety of influence and turf war that I sometimes sense about the "intrusion" of people from other fields into Jewish Studies.

On a deeper level, Jewish Studies in the university is part of the larger overall confrontation of Judaism with modernity. Jewish Studies will always have a somewhat tortured commingling of sacred and profane. Scholarly investigations into Jewish history and religion do affect the theologies of modern Jews as Jewish Studies circulate back and forth into the rabbinical seminaries, and from the pulpit to the congregation.

But literary, sociological, or historical studies of Jewish texts do not necessarily lead to a "Jewish" understanding of these texts--nor should they. From a scholarly point of view, who, after all, is to define what is appropriately "Jewish" and what isn't? The "signifying practices" of the Jewish people are not those of Moby Dick to the Muppet Show, but Moses to the Marx brothers, not what Jews do "Jewishly," but whatever Jews do.

Where, in conclusion, does this leave us? I do not think it necessary for Jewish Studies to become paralytically self-reflexive, or to try to define the essence of Judaism, or defend the faith. But to use the buzzwords of literary criticism, it too, should ask, "What is the status of our discourse? Who speaks it, to whom, and for what?" The great nineteenth-century paradigms of "system" and "neutral, objective knowledge" no longer compel the construction of knowledge in the late twentieth-century university.

I am, I fear, finally leaving you with chaos. If so, perhaps I can take heart from the fact that chaos has actually become one of the most innovative fields of scientific research. What would the founders of the rigorous "Science of Judaism" have made of that, I wonder? My own College Park campus at the University of Maryland is now a finalist for a National Science Foundation

*Cont'd. on page 16*

7. Daniel J. Elazar, "The Professor as Jewish Spiritual Leader," *Conservative Judaism*, Summer, 1986 reprinted in *Zionist Ideas* 16 (1987), p. 55.

8. Arthur Green, "Jewish Studies and Jewish Faith," *Tikkun* 1 (1986), pp. 87-88.

9. I do not have the space here to discuss the complex issue of "Modernism and Post-Modernism" but an interesting summary of the trends and the debate is Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). See also Ihab Hassan *The Postmodern Turn* (Athens: Ohio State University Press 1987) and J. Rajchman and Cornel West, *Post-Analytic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). I have also discussed the epistemological and hermeneutic issues of contemporary critical methodology as applied to Jewish Studies in my essay "Fragments of the Rock" in *Prooftexts* 5 (1985), pp. 75-103.

10. See for example the architect Stanley Tigerman's recent book on the Jerusalem Temple, *The Architecture of Exile* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988) inspired by Deconstruction, or the work of Peter Eisenmann.

*Handelman, cont'd.*
grant to become, the campus public relations newsletter tells me, a "Center in Chaos."

But the word "chaotic" in "chaos theory" does not mean "random" but "purposeful disorder," i.e. the intricately complex and unpredictable variations of phenomena woven around a set of repetitive rules. "Chaos is when something manages to be both simple and infinitely complicated at the same time."[11] Examples of such random and regulated patterns are traffic flows, snowflakes, stellar orbits, fractal geometry, and the dripping of a faucet... a list to which I would add "Jews" and "literary texts."

Indeed, chaos theory might be a wonderful mode for the interpretation of human history and texts, or an intriguing model for the seeming chaos of human contingency and divine providence at work in Jewish history and literature. It is precisely this indeterminacy as a tension between the divine plan and the disorderly character of historical events, God's will and refractory human freedom, disorder and design that for Robert Alter is the key to the literary narrative realization of the Bible, especially Biblical prose.[12]

So, I'll leave you with chaos and with a story I heard from a Jew whom you might think of as a paradigm of order, a Lubavitcher Hasid. The Hasid was out in the middle of a city in one of his "Mitzvah Mobiles" trying to persuade secular Jewish passersby to perform the *mitzvah* of putting on *tefillin*. He stopped one man, affirmed that the man was Jewish, and asked him to lay *tefillin*. Retorted the angry passerby, "Look, I don't want to have anything to do with any organized religion!" Responded the Hasid, "Don't worry, we're completely disorganized."

11. Rudy Rucker, review of James Gleick, *Chaos: Making of a New Science*, *Washington Post Book Review* (11/1/87), p. 3.

12. See Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), especially the first two chapters.

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