

Old Ideas in a New Setting

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This paper discusses and compares two concepts of text and modes of interpretation: the *postmodern* and the *rabbinic*. The primary focus is on this phenomenon which we call literary postmodernism which has been discussed, criticized and praised, from an increasing number of perspectives over the past few decades; but which we still, for various reasons, cannot quite define. It is generally regarded as an undermining of the conventions of our literary tradition, and perceived as an innovation in modern culture; though we still disagree about when it began and certainly about where it is taking us. It is often presented as a new way of looking at narrative mechanisms which have been forgotten or suppressed in our literary canon. My proposition, however, is that the postmodern phenomenon is not a new way of reading and writing: It is a way of seeing which in several respects resembles ancient rabbinic modes of interpretation so closely that we may begin to consider it as *old ideas in a new setting*.

This comparison between the postmodern and Jewish modes is in some respects nothing but yet another attempt to look at current theory from another angle; and indeed one which is not quite *kosher* in the Western literary tradition. For the rabbinic mode is exotic, it is ancient and full of ideas in which we may delight, but have not always taken seriously as a mode of rational thought. The Jewish canon abounds in legends, myths, and mysticism, and, although it has existed as an undercurrent in our culture for millenia, it has generally been perceived as quite alien to our own - if not in opposition to it, or simply wrong. So rabbinic thought has not been regarded as relevant or particularly useful to an understanding of Western tradition: Christianity made its own 'new,' and allegedly true, covenant with God, and while rooting itself in Hellenism, a grand literary tradition was eventually established of easily recognizable genres and well-ordered narratives whose author guaranteed their authenticity, composed in a language which supposedly conveys truth and meaning.

The rabbinic tradition, however, is less concerned with these issues. It transgresses our conventionally established boundaries between textual unities and categories, it disseminates signification, and perceives commentary as original and creative as primary texts. So, significantly, does postmodern literature and theory. And as such it effectively undermines the cornerstones of our literary convention and does away with the idea of the work of literary art as a unity immediately decipherable. The postmodern mode cannot be classified as an 'ism,' or as a paradigm, since it undermines those very distinctions by its incorporation of elements from other modes, genres, styles, and maintains a radical fluidity in its self-definition(s). It does not present itself as a uniform framework with fixed ideas about literature, but rather as a heterogeneous domain which cuts across traditionally established boundaries between fact and fiction, primary and secondary, cause and effect. Nor do postmodern writers present themselves as authors in command of their literary universe who convey truth and meaning. They perceive their

medium as arbitrary, incapable of accurate representation, since language is opaque and cannot signify specifically or accurately.

The postmodern writer is first and foremost a reader. His or her writing is inevitably allusive, and thus intertextual, relating to other writings in a given canon, and since it disregards the distinction between genres, it allows itself to move freely, often playfully, between them, postmodern literature is also interdisciplinary. So, we have a concept of text as decisively heterogeneous, incorporating elements from a variety of genres and disciplines which regards itself as a reading rather than as an original work.

If we then look at *Midrash*, we find a mode of interpretation which is relevant and eminently applicable to the postmodern since it closely resembles, or, as Jill Robbins argues, it is a "literary criticism which produces literature about literature".¹ Midrash is a method of reading which locates and discusses inconsistencies in Scripture and commentary alike and which, significantly by employing material from a wide variety of sources and disciplines, attempts to fill in the gaps, as it were, to suggest other possible readings, to unearth additional meanings. It is an interplay of commentary and invention which buries itself within the text with which it concerns itself, and as such it undermines the distinction between primary and secondary and transgresses the boundaries between genres and disciplines in its interweaving of sources.

So, in both modes we thus find a concept of text and a mode of interpretation which disregards Western literary conventions concerning representation, primary and secondary material, homogeneity, and the production of meaning. Similar to the *darshan*, who, as Marc Bregman argues, "may sometimes offer different interpretations of the same verse,"² contemporary writers will foreground the instability of meaning and the subjectivity of interpretation by presenting a given event from different perspectives and by leaving endings open. The reliability of the narrator is thus undermined, and the universe he or she presents situates itself entirely within the realm of fiction and the play of language.

Babel, Trawling Nets, and Blank Spaces

The undermining of the presumes unity between words and meaning and the endless deferral of significance are frequently flaunted in current theory, and references to the scattering of tongues after Babel is widely referred to for instance in the writings of Paul Auster. In *The New York Trilogy* Peter Stillman Sr. has devoted his life to retrieving the original transparent language in which signifier and signified were joined, and as he wanders through the streets of Manhattan naming broken or discarded items found in the gutters, his routes, when traced on a map of the city, literally form letters, each day another, until finally spelling: the tower of bab(el). The diffusion of language is also a central theme Julian Barnes's novel *Flaubert's Parrot* where the protagonist in search of

¹ Robbins, 1991, 15.

² Bregman, forthcoming.

the original parrot portrayed in *Madame Bovary* discovers that no less than fifty specimens match the description. Barnes's image of the stuffed parrot as the authorial voice strongly alludes to the story in Genesis 11, not merely because of the large number of equally possible originals, but also since the parrots had been sold to decorate private homes and were thus irretrievably scattered.

The dissemination of meaning, however, is not a post-structuralist discovery. It has always been a premise in kabbalistic perceptions of the text. In Lurianic cosmogony the word was severed from the essence already in the primordial creative act. The *Ein-Sof* initially carved His name on the ether and from the Tetragrammaton emerged the first vessel, *Adam Kadmon*. The light from the letters, however, was so powerful that it burst, shattered into fragments which were subsequently pieced together in the form of the universe. Creation is thus inherently fractured, breakage fundamental to the way the world is construed, perceived, and mediated, the form severed from the essence. "The alphabet is the original source of language," as Scholem says, "and at the same time the original source of being."³ And the Kabbalists read Scripture accordingly. They regard the gaps in the text, the margins, the blank spaces, as equally significant as the printed signs. Language, in Isaac the Blind's perception,⁴ is white fire printed on black fire.

Like the kabbalistic and midrashic discourses, postmodern theory and criticism is preoccupied with the gaps in the text, with contradictions, and with the multiplicity of meaning. It perceives writing as a trawling net designed to catch fish, as Julian Barnes has famously said; as collection of holes, as it were, tied together by words. It presents a framework of images, meanings, and references, but consider, Barnes suggests, what is not caught in it: "there's always far more of that."⁵

The current pursuit of all that which escapes through the blank spaces in the text is remarkably similar to the midrashic focus on the gaps in biblical narratives. The *Darshan* will take a passage such as Abraham's offering of Isaac, the *Akedah*, and speculate about all that which is not mentioned in the story: 'What did father and son talk about as they were climbing up the mountain?' 'Was Abraham not tempted to offer a smaller sacrifice, or indeed as Kierkegaard suggests he should have done, to offer himself rather than Isaac?' 'Why did Isaac twice in Genesis 22 say "Father" if not to appeal to Abraham?'

These gaps, that which lies between the lines, "tantalize" contemporary writers and theorists, as Julian Barnes points out, and the answer to his question, "Do the books that writers don't write matter?"⁶ is evident in both postmodern and rabbinic respects: the absent and the present are interconnected, and there would be no text without the margins. As Isaac Heinemann argues about the midrashic approach to Biblical language,

³ Scholem, 1972, 75.

⁴ See Scholem 1990, 287-289.

⁵ Barnes, 1985, 38.

⁶ Barnes, 1985, 121, 115.

"the idea which the author wishes to communicate - which is what we want to get out of the text - is actually only found 'between the lines'."⁷ The parchment is as important as the ink, the blank spaces as significant as the signs which punctuate them. The number of things said in Scripture and postmodern writings alike is infinite, residing in the margins, between the sentences, signs, vocables.

If representation is thus inevitably rendered inadequate and language arbitrary conveying no specific meaning but always a series of meanings, there are no single truths, no closure, no final release or fulfillment, indeed no happy endings. There is only discourse, the process of interpretation and mediation: for the rabbinic scholar and for contemporary readers and writers. As Scholem frequently points out in relation to the Jewish canon, the text commands commentary and interpretation. The Torah is considered as infinite as the source from which it originates, and everything is already in it, but it must be interrogated, mediated, read, and in a sense re-written to remain alive. Levinas emphasizes the interrelationship between the Jew and Scripture: "it is books that have nourished Israel. A strange diet, indeed, of celestial foods!"⁸ and in the essay significantly entitled *Loving the Torah more than God*, he maintains that "Jewish identity is inscribed in these old documents".⁹ So the text is always open to interpretation, indeed in need of interpretation. The text, as George Steiner argues, "is home; each commentary a return,"

whether they are seen as positive or negative, the 'textual' fabric, the interpretative practices in Judaism are ontologically and historically at the heart of Jewish identity.¹⁰

If we look at contemporary fiction, we find a number of authors inscribing themselves in their narratives: Kurt Vonnegut does it effectively in *Breakfast of Champions* when confronting his protagonist in the street; Paul Auster enters his *City of Glass* as the concerned writer; Lawrence Durrell's series of narrators in *The Avignon Quintet* contemplate how to successfully kill off their protagonists.

This authorial entry into the fiction is intended to flaunt the fact that the writer's existence is entirely determined by his writing, defined by it, thus reducing his or her reliability while disseminating the author's voice and intention within the domain of language, and effectively leaving the text in the hands of its readers, to the mercy of interpretation. Postmodern writing thus becomes a play of ambiguities and paradoxes where no reading is accurate or true, but merely a version among an infinite number of equally adequate versions.

⁷ H. Bregman, forthcoming.

⁸ Levinas, 1989, 199.

⁹ Levinas, 1990, 53.

¹⁰ Steiner, 1985, 7.

In the Egyptian-French Jewish poet, Edmond Jabès's domain of poetry and poetics, the authorial function is problematized to the extreme, and his perception of reading eminently captures and combines the rabbinic and the postmodern:

For reading is perhaps nothing but replacing a word with all those which have deciphered it.

This exemplary kind of reading the Jew has practiced for centuries.¹¹

In postmodern theory, no text is original or primary. It is inevitably always an intertextual interweaving of readings. The rabbinic perception of the text, however, differs from the postmodern in the sense that Scripture is sacred. The *Torah* holds the truth, but it is arbitrary, postponed or 'broken' in the play of language. Still in both modes, the book, with or without a capital B, presents no definite answers, no specific signification or meaning, but rather an infinite number of meanings, thus posing and prompting infinite numbers of questions: about itself and about our readings of it. It is the recognition that the book is not a self-explanatory unity, but rather an interaction between text and commentary, which has sustained the dynamism of rabbinic exegesis for millenia. And it is the very same recognition which has been retrieved in postmodern theory.

Intertextuality and "the jews"

In the postmodern period, intertextuality constitutes a major element in literary and theoretical discourses, not, as Pfister complains, to the extent that "the production of art and literature under these auspices become a recycling of waste material rather than an act of creation",¹² but rather in recognition of the ongoing dialogue between texts, and of their lack of unity and originality.

The rabbis, however, have always practiced reading and writing in close dialogue with other discourses, earlier as well as in anticipation of later interpretations. "The defining feature of midrash," Boyarin suggests, "is precisely this all-pervasive and open intertextuality,"¹³ and if we follow such theorists as Hartman and Budick, Boyarin, and Robbins, it has become accepted as the sovereign element in rabbinic exegesis of relevance to current theory. The principle of intertextuality governs midrashic tradition in a number of ways: the composite nature of the text as a mosaic compiling overt and covert references to other commentaries; the dialogical pattern where arguments are contested in and between early and late discourses, a field where ambiguities are opened or re-opened and new problems pursued. Midrash is a pluridimensional domain of radical openness, inquiry, and polysemic import where the notion of single authorship is

¹¹ Jabès, 1986, 531.

¹² Pfister, 1991, 208.

¹³ Boyarin, 1987, 553.

invalidated. A non-mimetic, intralinguistic field whose reference is solely to itself and to other texts, midrash thus offers a model of reading and writing for postmodern theory and discourses where signification is perpetually deferred backwards and forwards interlocked in and between difference and sameness, in self-glossing texts composed of supplementary writings whose origin is traces of other interpretations.

If we turn to Roland Barthes' well-known essay, *From Work to Text*, we find in his seven-point definition of text several analogues to the midrashic mode, particularly in the perception of the text as a "methodological field...which exists only as discourse." Barthes's essay, originally published in 1971, heralded the radically heterogeneous trend which characterizes postmodern thought, and it is striking how closely it resembles fundamental features in the midrashic tradition: As well as the rabbinic, Barthes's concept of 'Text' "is experienced only in an activity, a production",¹⁴ in the ongoing discourse between mediators. Signification in this field, Barthes argues, is governed by "a serial movement of dislocations, overlappings, and variations", and like the midrashic (inter)text, the postmodern is neither mimetic nor metaphoric, but metonymic:

The logic that governs the Text is not comprehensive (seeking to define "what the work means") but metonymic; and the activity of associations, contiguities, and cross-references coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy.¹⁵

Barthes' definition, furthermore, of text as a linguistic field, decentered and governed by irreducible plurality comprehends the radically dialogic domain of Midrash, whose producer is never a single author, but a network of discourses where every reader becomes a writer and vice versa. "The Text," Barthes concludes, "is read without the father's signature."¹⁶

The postmodern writer and the rabbinic scholar alike work, read and write within and between texts, and the radical textualization, the preoccupation with the functions and activities of writing, prompt the characteristic identification with the text. The Jew, Steiner says,

lives, enacts privately and historically, a written writ, a promissory note served on him when God sought out Abraham and Moses, it is because the 'Book of life' is, in Judaism, literally textual, that the Jew dwells apart.¹⁷

¹⁴ Barthes, 1980, 74-5.

¹⁵ Barthes, 1980, 76.

¹⁶ Barthes, 1980, 78.

¹⁷ Steiner, 1985, 12.

It is because the Jew 'dwells apart' that Jean Francois Lyotard has employed "the jews"¹⁸ as a concept, marked by inverted commas and the lower case to represent that which is characteristically postmodern. Lyotard is not speaking about the Jewish people with a capital J, but about representatives of a mode of thought and a perception of the world as essentially textualized. Lyotard's "jews" represent the unrepresentable, an absence of originality, an absence in writing which Western culture has strived hard to repress. And the "jews" - be they the rabbis or contemporary thinkers - are the guardians, he argues, of "the memory of forgetting." They remind us of all that which we have attempted to forget or eliminate while vigorously defending the entities of being and presence. As Lyotard says, the "jews" are what cannot be domesticated in the obsession to dominate, in the compulsion to control domain, in the passion for empire, recurrent ever since Hellenistic Greece and Christian Rome. "The jews," never at home wherever they are, cannot be integrated, converted, or expelled. They are also always away from home when they are at home, in their so-called own tradition, because it includes exodus as its beginning, excision, impropriety, and respect for the forgotten.¹⁹

Lyotard is not employing or re-inscribing Judaic modes of interpretation in his theories. In a sense he does more than that: he identifies that which is distinctively postmodern with the Jewish, and his lowering of the case effectively marks the fact that the distinction does not denote a specific category, such as the Jewish people. It embodies a wide range of readers, writers, mediators, who represent that which is prominent in current theory, who represent a decisive divergence from the dominant tradition of Western modernity: postmodernist theorists, critics and writers, significantly, as "the jews."

En Route to Jerusalem

When crossing the boundaries between disciplines a series of contextual differences and methodological difficulties will inevitably occur. In this discussion of a concept of text and a mode of interpretation as a possible common ground between current literary theory and rabbinic thought, such complications derive primarily from a certain inapplicability of terminology and from the irreducible difference in the perceptions respectively of the text as secular and sacred, and however numerous and striking the resemblances between the two modes, the problem of the extra-textual will remain unsolved. Another difficulty is, on the one hand, that the rabbinic tradition is rich and complex, and does not readily lend itself to simple generalizations, and on the other that the postmodern phenomenon essentially defies definition. We can discuss aspects, characteristics, perceptions, but we cannot capture these frameworks in their entirety, since they both embrace a wide variety of trends, differences, and contradictions.

¹⁸ In Lyotard, 1993.

¹⁹ Lyotard, 1993, 70, 93-4.

Nevertheless, in view of the similarities between the rabbinic and postmodern concept of text and mode of interpretation, we can argue that current theory is in not a new way of looking at literature, but in a sense an innovative re-cycling of old ideas deriving from the Jewish tradition. It is the insistence on interpretation in both modes, it is both their foci on the written word, their perception of language as equivocal; it is the heterogeneity of the writings produced in both modes, the dynamism and the fluidity, the all-inclusiveness which characterizes both. Of course we could also with varying degrees of success pursue certain affinities between the postmodern and medieval or even romantic ways of reading, but several of the major theorists in this century have been more or less aware of rabbinic thought as a dynamic model of play and inquiry which poses a series of questions of relevance to contemporary theory. I am here thinking of what has been called the line from Freud through Benjamin to Derrida, but there are others whose impact on current theory has been decisive and whose involvement in Jewish thought has increased our awareness of it: Levinas in the domain of philosophy, Bloom in literary criticism, there is Kafka, and even Gershom Scholem whose eminent studies of the Kabbalah are widely read. It is important to emphasize, however, that we are not talking about deliberate attempts to Judaize Western culture. We are not examining causes and effects, but affinities; and it is not the Jews who have set out to Judaize contemporary theory: it is contemporary theory which, through its various shifts away from the dominant tradition, is beginning to resemble rabbinic thought.

Postmodern theory is preoccupied with discourse, with processes rather than results, with movement, and we could argue that it embarked on its journey in Athens and is now rapidly approaching Jerusalem.

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