

The Invisible Wound

Jewish Poetics, Modernity, and the Return of the Repressed

by

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of English

Middle Tennessee State University

2023

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Dedicated to Jakob and Silas, who inspire me to play,
and who, in their own, endlessly inventive play, exemplify the hope of Jewish continuity.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation could not have been written without the loving support of my family—my parents, Rami Shapiro and Debbie Flanigan, my wife, Agapi Theodorou-Shapiro, and my two sons, Jakob and Silas. Their patience, encouragement, and faith sustained me throughout the process. Nor could this project have been completed without the support of my committee, whose guidance helped to give it shape and whose insights, questions, and conversation proved, time and again, invaluable. I cannot thank all of you enough.

Abstract

This dissertation explores a narrative in which, in the process of its own subject formation, Western culture produced a salvific but antisemitic fantasy of Judaization which shaped its approach to aesthetics. Over centuries, that aesthetic vision would be systematized by writers and thinkers like St. Paul, St. Augustine, and Geoffrey Chaucer. In time, it would come to inform the development of modernism—an influence I track through the work of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot (who rejected it), as well as Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) and Wallace Stevens (who embraced it). At the same time, and rather ironically, it would also provide modern Jewish writers with an entry point—albeit an overdetermined one—for engaging and revising the tradition of Western aesthetics. I argue that, due in part to the interventions of Jewish artists, notably Louis Zukofsky, this fantasy produced a counter discourse within modernism, some of whose practitioners, both Jewish (e.g. Zukofsky) and gentile (e.g. H.D. and Stevens), came to see in Jewishness, or in the Jewish approach to language and textuality, something subversive and vital, something which—though derided as sacrilege—might yet prove energizing to a new generation of modern artists. Through a mixture of New Historicist, New Critical, poststructuralist, and deconstructive approaches, this dissertation investigates the roots of antisemitic aesthetics in the Western tradition, traces that dispensation into modernity, and then examines the counter discourse produced by Jewish writers—itsself an alternate mode of modern poetics based in the Jewish philosophy of language and in the practice of rabbinical hermeneutics—as well as its influence on non-Jewish writers and on the development of literary modernism.

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Preface

In Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), the protagonist, a Jewish American tourist on a hunt for his family's pre-Holocaust history, tries to explain to his gentile Ukrainian translator and tour guide that he can't possibly get into the car the tour company provided because it's inhabited by a deranged dog, and the protagonist has a long-standing fear of dogs, having been attacked by one in his childhood. As evidence, the protagonist raises up his shirt, ostensibly to display a scar left by his mauling, but... there is no scar to be seen. Or none that any but he can perceive.

The scene is played for laughs, but it makes a serious point. Jews are burdened by invisible wounds: the wounds of history, which may not always register on the body but certainly do in the mind, where, regardless of actual experience, they produce a deep, personal imbrication with the collective memory of Jewish trauma and the communal experience of antisemitic othering. These wounds, therefore, are bound with the construction and experience of Jewish difference, and as such are partly responsible for constituting Jewish identity. This is why the tour guide's failure to witness the protagonist's wound in Safran Foer's novel is such a significant one. It is not simply a failure to notice a fading or faded scar, but a failure to recognize—that is to legitimate—the traumatic mark of the protagonist's narrative, his private mythology, and thus a failure to recognize—again to legitimate—his subjectivity. It is an erasure. Or at least a failure of legibility.

The problem of Jewish legibility rankles in part because it comes from all sides, within and without, not to mention because it is attended, as evidenced above, by the ever-present threat of erasure. By way of further example, let me share two anecdotes. When I was in my late twenties, I worked for a year or two as a clerk at a big box bookstore called Hastings. One night, shortly after Christmas, while cashing out my register, I fell into a conversation with my neighboring clerk, who asked me if I'd had a good Christmas that year. It was late, near closing, and I was tired. Without blinking an eye, I told her all about my family's wonderful Chanukah celebration, but without ever mentioning that it *was* a Chanukah celebration. It was just, in that moment, easier somehow. But, half an hour later, walking to my car in the parking lot, I stopped short, overcome suddenly by the feeling I'd deleted myself.

Then, some years ago, I was booked on a flight that got badly delayed at La Guardia. There was some doubt whether, in fact, we'd be able to board a plane that day. To kill time, I went wandering around the gate. At a kiosk, I met an Orthodox Jew, booked on the same flight, who—in the midst of small talk—mentioned that if our plane didn't leave soon, he would be forced to spend the night sleeping on the airport floor, as sundown would mark the beginning of Shabbos and he would at that point, due to the injunction against performing labor on the sabbath, be unable to board the flight or book a hotel. Naively, I offered my sympathies, and mentioned that I understood, as I too was Jewish. The silence that followed was pained. Nothing was said, but in that moment, I am ninety-nine percent sure that my Orthodox companion looked me up and down and thought to himself, “Nu, so, this is a Jew?”

What these anecdotes demonstrate is that, regardless of how powerfully Jewish identity may be felt internally, still it requires some degree of deliberate performance to be made legible; what is more, its legibility is conditional, dependent on the audience's receptivity, and whether any other ideological or cultural screens interpose themselves to block or distort the transmission. These are, to be fair, the experiences of a largely assimilated Jew. But it hardly matters. Even the markers of Orthodoxy must be performed. In every encounter, it seems, Jewish legibility is at stake. This is a problematic into which I hope to intervene. Not on a grand scale, and certainly not, God forbid, to define Jewish identity, which I hope to leave as much as possible where it belongs, i.e., in contention; no, rather I propose to define, or better to map, one strange and fascinating corner of Jewishness, a single facet of Jewish cultural identity: and one which lies reasonably within my purview as a scholar of Jewish literature and of modern and contemporary American poetry. I'm referring to the practice of Jewish poetics. Or much more specifically, to modern Jewish American poetics.

Perhaps I should pause a moment to define poetics. Even Wikipedia offers a reliable definition, stating that poetics refers to "the theory of structure, form, and discourse within literature," which really is quite serviceable. Poetics is the philosophy, the theory or set of theories, that accounts for a given body of writerly behaviors: the gestures, rhetorical moves, and tropes that attend the work of a given writer or group of writers. It is, then, quite palpably, a matter of identity: of identity on paper, *textual* identity. I propose to ask whether the Jewish poem has a legible identity of this sort.

I am far from the first to ask the question. Debates about the character of Jewish poetry—what it is, what it does, how it relates to Judaism and to the surrounding

culture—have been ongoing for... well, more-or-less forever. Even debates about the character of Jewish American verse span several decades. The contemporary debate arguably begins around 2003, which is when, at the behest of the American Jewish Historical Society, Paul Miller and Charles Bernstein convened a conference they titled “Secular Jewish Culture/Radical Poetic Practice.” The conference brought together a range of Jewish scholars and poets to discuss the shape of the Jewish poem and its relation to Jewish (secular) culture, and it inaugurated a renewed interest in the field of Jewish poetics—which since the 1970s, when Cynthia Ozick and Harold Bloom brutally (and wrongly) dismissed the entire canon of Jewish American verse as derivative, had been languishing. The conference, however, blew the lid off, generating an anthology of critical essays alongside a heap of related articles and books still in print today, some twenty years on.

None of which, as it happens, agree on very much. Two Jews, five opinions, as the old saying goes. So, the shape of Jewish poetics remains subject to contestation and revision, riven by faults and lacunae (not least of which is the whole question of the secular v. the religious—though I find the distinction to be somewhat overblown). I will not resolve the debate, either in its entirety or in its particulars. But I will contribute to it. However, the field of Jewish poetry is large, extending over several millennia and passing through countless cultural matrices along the way. Consequently, a comprehensive study is somewhat less than feasible given limitations of space, time, and scope. Rather, I have elected to focus my investigation of Jewish poetics more narrowly on the period of modernity, and on the Jewish modernisms emerging in America during the beginnings of the twentieth century.

The choice is personal, corresponding to my areas of expertise and interest, but it is also, I hope, pragmatic. Susan Handelman, in her groundbreaking work *The Slayers of Moses* (1982), argues that during the early modern period, the field of American literature begins to undergo what she calls a Jewish turn—that is, an acute adoption of heretofore disallowed tendencies of interpretive and compositional praxis which bear significant structural similarities to key concepts in the Jewish philosophy of language and in the practice of rabbinical hermeneutics (that is, the explication of holy writ). In time, Handelman claims, these tendencies would have direct bearing on the development of the poststructural and deconstructive schools of critical theory and on the emergence of postmodernity as the American cultural dominant.

My own argument is more limited, and I hope, somewhat more nuanced. I take issue with the inherent triumphalism of Handelman's argument, and with the notion that either modernity or postmodernity can be read off as essentially Jewish endeavors—though I also think Handelman's argument may be considerably less essentializing than some of her critics have claimed. Further, I acknowledge the vital importance of the conceptual overlap she diagrams. And I think Handelman is basically correct that there is a discernible Jewish turn happening in American culture in the modern period which does indeed contribute to the advent of postmodernity; it's just a more complicated and, in some ways, tenuous turn than Handelman at times makes out. As a minor addendum, I would suggest that Handelman's Jewish turn can be traced not only through theory, her preferred object of study, but through literature, and specifically through poetry. I contend in this regard that the Jewish turn finds its start in the radically materialist linguistic play engaged in by Jewish American poets—and gentile poets working in a

similar vein—nearly a century prior to the dawn of postmodernity proper. In this sense, it might be worthwhile to speak of the long postmodern, a period extending back through modernity, or earlier, to account for the development of those initially avant garde and, again, notably proto-poststructuralist or quasi-deconstructive strains that would eventually work their way into postmodernity.

But more importantly, I would also suggest that the Jewish turn cannot simply have emerged from nowhere; it is, rather, linked to patterns of Jewish American immigration, which spiked considerably between the mid-1800s and 1924, bringing a far more intense Jewish cultural admixture to bear on the American scene and inaugurating an intensive push for assimilation that would prove uniquely, though only partially, destabilizing to the mainstream American cultural milieu. And that is because the real culprit, if culprit is the word, behind Handelman's Jewish turn is, in my assessment, something Jonathan Freedman calls the cathexis to high culture, an assimilative process by which newly minted American Jews looking to acquire the cultural capital necessary to gain entry into the middle and upper-middle classes appended themselves—largely via higher education—to the traditional aesthetic ideologies and canonical discourses of the Western dispensation (*Temple of Culture* 13). It is due to this process, necessitated by the assimilative drive affecting Americanizing Jews, that Jewish artists and intellectuals found themselves in dialogue with an aesthetic philosophy that, it turns out, was not only fundamentally at odds with Judaism, but which had *already* defined its own version of a Jewish poetics and indeed its own version of the Jew. Navigating this prefiguration, negotiating—or renegotiating—the terms of Jewish identity (whether textual or actual) made available by the Western dispensation, became a central concern of Jewish

American modernism, leading Jewish American poets of the period to engage the Western dispensation in ways designed to detourn it, to reveal its limitations and to open it to certain forbidden and decidedly *other* influences.

That is the story I hope to tell in the following pages. Rather than a broad overview, however, I will opt for a single extended example. Perhaps the chief example of the sort of detournment managed by Jewish poets of the period occurs with Louis Zukofsky's *Poem Beginning 'The'* (1928), an *ars poetica* and, in a sense a parody of, though more accurately an answer to, the modernist problematics explored by T.S. Eliot especially, if by no means exclusively, in *The Waste Land* (1922). Here, bouncing off Eliot, Zukofsky lays out his own response to the crisis of modernity and the Jew's apparent place within it, and in the process creates a hybridized poetics, combining the authentically or organically Jewish with the fantasy projections of Jewishness conjured by the discourses of the West, which combination he then plays contrapuntally against the dominant tradition—itsself derived from a fusion of Greek and Christian aesthetic philosophies—in order to agonistically refashion the whole of Western poetics in his own, i.e., in Jewish, terms.

Zukofsky's experiment in *'The'* did not go unnoticed. It was published by no less a critical personage than Ezra Pound in his magazine *The Exile*, a small publication, but one that was nevertheless well established among the practitioners of the literary avant garde—a key demographic given that we are discussing a cultural shift these very writers had a hand in bringing about. Indeed, Zukofsky's significance—if not his influence—is considerable. As Mark Scroggins writes, borrowing from Henry James: Zukofsky himself was 'the first-generation [Jewish] American infusion into twentieth-century

literature,' and would bring all the energy, vitality, and linguistic multiplicity of his immigrant upbringing to bear upon the project of renovating English-language poetry” (23). What is more, Zukofsky’s poem has proven indispensable to the development not only of modern but of contemporary poetry as well. If the essays included in *Radical Poetics/Secular Jewish Culture* (the anthology born out of Miller and Bernstein’s conference) are anything to go by—wherein, according to the index, Zukofsky is mentioned some twenty-two times in a range of different texts—the man is a fairly major figure, having produced a body of work which in its contours articulates much that is now part and parcel of Jewish American poetry and much too that contributed to the development of the (non-denominational) L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E movement. All this to say that if we wish to examine a figure or a poem emblematic of the Jewish turn in modernity which also features considerable implications for our contemporary moment, Zukofsky and ‘*The*’ seem an excellent fit, and as such will, some chapters from now, be dealt with as the chief test cases for my developing theory of Jewish American modernist poetics.

But one really cannot comprehend modern American Jewish poetry without some understanding of what it was reacting against. And one really ought not embark on a study of Jewish poetics in any event without at least some sense of the various pitfalls that attend such an investigation. With these caveats in mind, then, my study begins a few steps away from its subject. I begin, in Chapter One, with a discussion of problems and methods, an accounting and a charting through of the dangers inherent in theorizing a Jewish poetics, including though not by any means limited to, the essentializing and totalizing tendencies occasionally at work in Handelman’s analysis.

In Chapters Two and Three, as a way of providing a context for the negotiations modern American Jewish poets had to make with the Western tradition, I explore the premodern roots of the antisemitic projections so often found in modernist writing—with particular attention paid to three influential thinkers: St. Paul, St. Augustine of Hippo, and Geoffrey Chaucer. Chapter Four, then, turns to modernity itself, to trace the influence of premodern aesthetics on modernism and to limn the roles assigned to the Jew and the Jewish in that discourse, with special reference to Wagner, James, Pound, and Eliot.

With Chapter Five I provide a theoretical discussion of Jewish American modernist poetics to establish the core principles of that poetics and to better define the relationship between emerging Jewish American poetic methodologies and those of modernism proper. To test and elaborate my theory, and to ground it in some actual, honest-to-God poetry, I move, in Chapter Six, to a detailed close reading of Zukofsky's *Poem Beginning 'The'*, which as noted, articulates a pointed critique of modernism, not least its imbrication with Platonic idealism, while at the same time plying (and promoting) a Jewishly inflected poetics that deploys various language games to scramble the established verities of modernism proper. Thus, the poem brings about a revisioning of modernism, thereby, in as much as one poem can be said to prompt a shift in the zeitgeist, conjuring Handelman's Jewish turn quite nearly out of thin air.

Chapter Seven, meanwhile, moves outward to include two non-Jewish canonical modernists—Wallace Stevens and H.D.—whose work appears to bear some resemblances to both the Jewish philosophy of language and to Jewish interpretational or compositional modes. The idea here is to explore the reach and influence of Jewish poetics, and to ask whether (a) it is possible for a poem written by a gentile writer to

behave Jewishly; (b) it is viable to read such a poem Jewishly, and (c) how a writer with no stake in Judaism might come to write a 'Jewish' poem. There is, of course, a further question: how to relate the Jewishly inflected work of writers like Stevens and H.D to Jewish poetics on the one hand or to its fantasy doppelganger on the other so as to determine to what extent they too are engaged in affecting a Jewish turn in modernism. The conclusion then considers the implications of the study for poetics specifically and criticism broadly.

What, though, is the ultimate utility of this project? What is it for? What does it do? Well, for one thing it expands the purview of Handelman's analysis and adds further evidence to her theorized Jewish turn. For another it complicates that analysis, arguing the turn is not an entirely organic affair. It emerges rather out of a negotiation between Jewish writers and thinkers and their own distorted reflections, as projected onto them by a modernist discourse infected with an ancient revulsion, to wit: a revulsion of the other, expressly a revulsion of the Jew. And it involves too the work of non-Jewish writers. In some cases, these gentile modernists made organic connections to Jewish culture, while in others their experiments with Jewish methodologies or with Jewish compositional modes was derived directly from the same artificial and ironically, antisemitic projections of the Western imagination Jewish writers themselves had to contend with. And so, the Jewish turn turns out to be 'Jewish' in some very strange and unexpected ways, indeed.

Of course, the project also contributes to an understanding of the nature of Jewish poetics and its relation to mainstream American poetry. In this regard, I argue that, per Handelman, core concepts in Jewish American modernist poetics derive from religious precepts in Judaism while also paralleling the Jewish philosophy of language and the

practice of rabbinical hermeneutics, in particular its radical textual materialism—that is, its openness to language games as a legitimate source of meaning making, as well as its openness to contradiction, paradox, polyvocality, and the deferral of telos. And yet simultaneously, the Jewish poem, or rather the modern Jewish American poem, engages a complex play with its own shadow self, appropriating and complicating its Western discursive counterpart, appropriating and complicating on the one hand the methodologies of modernism as well as, on the other, those anxious fantasies of cultural Judaization that in so many cases underpin modernist writing. In keeping with a theory of poetic trouble floated by Maera Y. Shreiber, the modern American Jewish poem aggravates the wound of its origin (2).

On a related note, the project offers up a unique reading of Zukofsky's *'The'* which synthesizes and extends critiques conducted by John Tomas, Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, and Maera Y. Shreiber to situate the poem both as emblematic of Handelman's Jewish turn and as expressive of it. Meanwhile, in its work with Zukofsky and with non-Jewish modernists, the project contributes to a debate began by Hank Lazer, in the pages of *Radical Poetics/Secular Jewish Culture*, regarding the materiality of the Jewish poem. The question Lazer asks is whether a Jewish poem becomes legibly Jewish in its behavior rather than by measure of its content or by way of its author's provenance. As a hokey test of what Lazer feels to be a fundamental flaw in this argument, he offers up a reading of Fanny Howe, wherein he argues that the Catholic poet is writing extremely Jewishly (18-31). Lazer is being ironic, but the thing is, it really is possible for non-Jewish poets to write Jewishly, because the Jewish poem really is material. And not only material in that

it engages the materiality of language, but also in the sense that it refers to a quantifiable set of linguistic behaviors, which anyone can pick up and play with, for good or ill.

Finally, in the theory of the punctum, or wound, which provides a major theme for the study, but which comes up most significantly in my discussion of the relation between Jewish poetics and Western culture, and then again in the consideration of implications in the conclusion, the project offers what I hope are useful observations regarding the anti-hegemonic potential of othered literatures, which while often caught up in a cycle of repression and return may yet at times disrupt that cycle, and even turn it ever so slightly against itself.

But to go back to Safron Foer for a moment, and to the tragicomic scene of the absent or missing scar, what I think this project is finally about is an attempt to recognize the wound. The story of Jewish poetics is in a sense the story of a wound... an invisible or occluded wound, one that inheres in the Western psyche as a result of its own subject formation, as the advent of Christianity split the developing West from its Judaic roots; the violence of that rupture left a scar: one that has long since been treated and so is sometimes difficult to see. Yet the pain of that remembered trauma leaves a trail that can be tracked through the discourses of Western aesthetics into the discourses of modernism, and then backwards through the intervention of Jewish poets, writers, artists, who adopted that aesthetic as a twin of their own, so that at long last they might make themselves legible even in the borrowed clothes of a discourse that had expelled them.

1 Reading the Jew in the Modern

Any critic wishing to trace Jewishness within modernist aesthetics has a problem. The problem is that the procedure has already been executed, and not kindly, within the discourses of antisemitism. As Neil Levi points out in the introduction to *Modernist Form and the Myth of Jewification* (2014), “the antisemitic interpretation of modernist form is integral to the history of European modernism” (3). I would add that it is integral to the history of American modernism as well, for—as we shall see—the selfsame interpretive framework is everywhere on display in the works of a number of significant American modernists, even if it is taken more or less on loan from British and European writers.

Whichever side of the Atlantic one looks to, though, the broad topology of this interpretive impulse remains relatively stable. The general argument runs as follows: the formal innovations of so-called modern art, regardless of type or genre, figure forth the debilitating infection of a once robust Anglo-European cultural tradition by a “mobile, dangerous, pervasive, and contagious Jewish spirit” (Levi 3); they are an expression, in short, of the Judaization of that tradition. Judaization, meanwhile, is both symptom and cause of an imagined catastrophe defined by “a radical loss of social, cultural, and subjective integrity, coherence, autonomy, and self-possession” rooted in the sphere of aesthetic value but metastasizing through the whole of the body politic (Levi 5).

As Levi notes, described in these terms, this catastrophe appears the very image of modernity itself; however, Levi also points out that antisemitic critics have been at pains to disrupt that comparison, “consistently taking modernist form to be Jewish

because it belongs to, draws upon, or reverts to an inert past, either moribund or dead, and refuses to recognize the needs of the present and the demands of the future (5). In this way, the antisemitic critique of modernist form draws upon the discourse of supersessionism to “contest the terrain of modernism” by dissociating the modern from the modernist; that is to say, by criticizing all those works and forms we associate today with modernist art and literature as somehow *improperly* modern (Levi 5). For Levi, the crucial point is this:

in the antisemitic interpretation, modernist form is identified with the figure of the Jew insofar as both modernism and the Jews are regarded as *matter out of place*—to cite the anthropologist Mary Douglas’s famous definition of dirt—meaning, in this instance, that which does not belong within the aesthetic sphere, the nation-state, or the realm of human culture. (Levi 6)

But if contemporary attempts, including my own, to interpret modernist form as somehow Jewish would of necessity reject both the supersessionist and abject-ifying aspects of the antisemitic critique, there is nevertheless a disturbing and unavoidable connection between them. Scott Spector, in his article “Modernism without Jews: A Counter-Historical Argument” (2006), makes this exact point, noting a structural similarity between what he calls antisemitic antimodernism and its “philosemitic triumphalist counterpart” (616). Both readings, he explains, rely upon “a story of [the Jews’] emancipation-assimilation-integration where presence immediately becomes omnipresence, and participation becomes hegemony (of a surreptitious kind), leading to the emergence of modernism” (616). Spector also notes that both positions are

“dependent on the twin premises that modernism is Jewish, and yet that modernism’s Jewishness is somehow hidden and needs to be revealed” (616).

For his part, Levi concurs, though the structural similarity is less important to him than what he feels to be a fallacy at work in both positions, namely that they each “posit Jewishness as a kind of abstract essence” and then proceed to draw “unmediated analogies and identifications” (6) between modernist aesthetic practice and a set of fundamentally fetishized notions of Jewishness: e.g. Talmud-like commentary, diasporic dispersal of meaning, [and] a complex engagement with the biblical Second Commandment” (13). The danger, then, in undertaking a Jewish reading of modernism is that one ends up simply inverting the terms of the antisemitic reading while reifying its premises and methodology.

And this is not the only problem critics engaged in a Jewish reading of modernism must account for, though it may well be the most significant and potentially damning. Still another problem arises from the way in which the project is imbricated with the imperatives of the contemporary moment. First, there is a need—common to much postwar thought—to distance both critic and culture from the specter of antisemitism through a series of “pollution rituals,” one of which involves the performance of a reactionary philosemitism that lauds certain canonical modernists, such as Joyce or Beckett, as “non-Jewish Jews, as Judaic authors” (Levi 10). This “phobic approach” to modernism, as Levi calls it, produces Jewishness as a panacea, a rhetorical move which, since Jewishness in the antimodern critique is a disease, clearly falls into the category of inversions warned against by Levi and Spector alike.

The second issue involves the need, on the part of assimilated American and European Jewry, to enact a return to or recovery of Jewishness. That impulse is well documented by Jules Chametzky and his fellow editors in “Wandering and Return,” the fourth section of their *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* (2001). Chametzky et al. point out that, though Jews are at this moment in American history “deeply embedded in the social structures of [the] nation... the success of acculturation has led to rapid assimilation and has posed a serious threat to the welfare of the Jewish American community” (979). The same could be said, though not perhaps with the same intensity, of European Jewry. Responses to this threat, while wildly varied, nevertheless speak to a widespread “determination to reclaim Jewishness as a way of organizing one’s experience” (986). As Jonathan Freedman explains in *The Temple of Culture* (2000), this determination is often expressed in attempts to “reify Jewish identity as a way of coping with its always-already-de-essentialized reality” (25).

One characteristic example of such an attempt can be seen in what Bob Perelman has called “genealogical back-formation”: a process by which writers and critics in search of an authenticating Jewish hook upon which to hang an innovative aesthetic or critical praxis (such as modernism) look into the ancient past and discover that Jews have long been aesthetic and critical innovators; or alternatively, in an equally problematic move, they rewrite or revise the modernist canon in ways that activate its supposed latent “Jewishness” so as to recast their own engagement with modernism not as a form of assimilation but rather as a gesture of Jewish continuity (“Addendum: On the Jewish Question” 52). Any conclusions drawn through such a procedure, however, would—like

those drawn from the phobic approach—be subject to charges of circularity and ahistoricism.

Given the pitfalls enumerated so far in theorizing a relation between Jewishness and modernism, it would not be too surprising if critics simply washed their hands of the whole enterprise. Yet one cannot resolve that Jewishness and modernity are incommensurate, or that Jewish and modernist aesthetic practice did not coincide provocatively within the modern cultural milieu. For one thing, such a resolution reiterates the antisemitic critique, marking the Jewish as matter-out-of-place within the field of modernist studies. For another, the claim is patently false. Jewish culture does not exist in a vacuum; nor can it be contained in a ghetto. Cultural cross-pollination is inherent to the diasporic condition, or else why the concerns about Judaization and/or assimilation in the first place? That Jewish cultural producers wrestled with the conceits of the modernist aesthetic program and that their innovations upon that program might have played a role in its historical development hardly seems a radical position to take. Indeed, as Levi, drawing on the work of Amir Eshel and Todd Presner, acknowledges: there are Jewish modernisms, bodies of work operating at once within the modernist and Jewish aesthetic traditions which, by dint of their hybridity, open up new possibilities for both (13).

Still, one must be wary. The hazards of inversion, of reification, of fetishization are real, as are the lures of revisionist apologetics and genealogical wish fulfillment. They are not to be ignored or waved away. How then to proceed? How can critics productively theorize the Jewish as it came to inhere in the modern?

Contradictory as it may seem, the first thing to do is dispense with the notion of ‘the Jewish’ itself, which is to say: do away with the idea of an essential Jewishness or essential Jewish aesthetic that one might locate within the interstices of modernism as one locates lost keys between couch cushions. Put plainly: Jewish identity and praxis are too fractious and contentious for that. As Jonathan Freedman has it, “Jewishness... is an endless dispute—a quarrel—that has been going on since at least the destruction of the Second Temple and that doubtless preceded it” (*Temple of Culture* 26). One need not search overlong for examples. The Talmud comes to mind aptly enough as a centuries deep palimpsest of overlapping interpretive and legal disputes. Therein—whatever resolutions are tentatively reached—the opposing opinion is always recorded and, even in the case of the starkest disagreements, as for instance those between Hillel and Shammai, it is said: “*Elu v’elu divrei Elohim Chayim*,” these and these are the words of the living God. Or one might recall the biblical story of Jacob who, in a story central to Jewish self-conception, struggled with the nameless angel and was himself renamed *Yisrael*, the God wrestler.

Clearly, a certain antinomian agonism inheres in Judaism, as does a radical embrace of contradiction and indeterminacy. It is tempting therefore to imagine the Jewish as commensurate with a quasi-postmodernist or proto-poststructuralist de-essentializing impulse. And yet, to do so is to ignore the equally powerful and opposite impulse to shore up Jewish identity against the forces that would dissolve it. That impulse too has a robust history, trackable from the Babylonian exile, when the rabbis, responding to the Jews’ displacement, “shifted the locus of Jewishness from a land-based to a matrilineal matrix of identity,” on through the Enlightenment, when the *Wissenschaft der*

Judenthums sought a rational, scientific basis for Jewishness and the *Hassidim* responded with a full-throated espousal of pure mysticism, and into our contemporary moment, where ethnic, religious, cultural, and civilizational accounts of Jewishness abound, each insisting on their absolute rightness, their own exclusive reality (Freedman, *Temple of Culture* 26).

We cannot then position Jewishness as either this or that: a stable, unified tradition or a diffuse, self-deconstructing one; it is neither. It is both—*Elu v'elu*, as the rabbis say. This is why the notion of Jewishness as dispute is so helpful, providing as it does “a field on which a collective identity can be forged, then broken and remade” (Freedman, *Temple of Culture* 27). The appeal of Freedman’s definition is that it allows for multiple formulations of Jewishness and presumes that any given formulation will remain contingent and contested, as well as temporary. Utilizing Freedman’s definition enables critics to avoid the fetishized construction of Jewishness as abstract essence which Levi warns so vehemently against, taking an approach intended not to uncover some ultimate Jewishness hidden in the workings of the modern, but instead to observe the disputed and disputing Jewishnesses emerging from the encounter between particular Jewish artists and the aesthetic field of modernism, and then to put those Jewishnesses in conversation with each other in order to see what common valences for discussing a Jewish approach to modernist aesthetics become available (as well as what sites of tension exist). Whatever picture of Jewishness critics develop from those observations should be understood as entirely utilitarian or heuristic, rather than as in some way ontologically binding.

So much for the Jew as essence, then. Or almost. Because the problem inheres not only in the act of analyzing Jewish modernisms, but in the very selection of which texts to analyze. One presumes that a Jewish aesthetics emerges from a Jewish text. But what on earth is a Jewish text? A text produced by a Jew? But then, who is a Jew? And is the identity of the author really equivalent to the identity of the text? So, we find ourselves back where we started, with the necessity of defining—and the risk of overdetermining—Jewishness. There is no way around the question, nor any straightforward answers. What I would like to propose is not an answer to the question of who qualifies as a Jew or what qualifies as Jewishness, but rather a theory of entanglements. It is my contention that one may be or become entangled in Jewish identity and its various disputes in multiple overlapping and even competing ways, and that it is through these entanglements that critics might recognize a text or its author as legibly Jewish.

The issue of a text's entanglement with Jewishness may prove easier to parse than that of a flesh and blood person. Indeed, Joshua Louis Moss provides a reasonable taxonomy of Jewish textual entanglement in his *Why Harry Met Sally: Subversive Jewishness, Anglo-Christian Power, and the Rhetoric of Modern Love* (2017). Moss' taxonomy combines criteria developed by a range of disparate critics—including Nathan Abrams, Susan Gillman, Henry Bial, Joseph Litvak, Daniel Boyarin, Erin Gradd Zivin, Hasia Diner, Deborah Dash Moore, Ella Shohat, Karen Brodtkin, and others—and as such presents a suitably inclusive set of lenses through which to discern the various ways a text may be read as plausibly Jewish.

According to Moss, to speak of a text as Jewish may mean, first, that the text contains explicitly Jewish characters or explicitly Jewish themes. Alternatively, it may

also mean that the text behaves or performs in a way that, by dint of convention (cultural, rhetorical, linguistic, et al), readers can readily identify as Jewish. Or it may mean that Jewishness provides a necessary interpretive context for the work. Any one of these criteria is sufficient, but it should be noted that they are likely to exist in combination or even in competition with each other. In keeping with Moss' increasingly abstracted progression, then, we may imagine that a Jewish text is any text in which Jewishness, either explicitly or by implication, has some significant bearing on the text's construction of meaning (10-11), which is to say that a Jewish text is a text in which the presence or (conspicuous) absence of the Jew functions as an integral part of the text's semiotic apparatus, and wherein the representation or non-representation of Jewishness is therefore fundamentally *at stake*.

So far so good. However, it must be noted that in this construction it does not actually matter whether the text in question has been produced by a Jew. This is by design. As Moss notes: "author intent and auteur theory are... deemphasized in this study. I do not view work produced by Jewish-born writers, directors, musicians and other artists as Jewish simply because of their personal biography" (14). But while Moss' approach has the advantage of scope, it will not serve here. To speak of Jewish culture, Jewish aesthetics, or Jewish modernisms is to invoke the language of ethnography, and for an ethnographic study to have coherence requires that the artifacts or texts analyzed be created by members of the culture under scrutiny—otherwise the object of study will be obscured, even lost. As such, it seems unavoidable that if we are to speak of Jewish modernisms, we must speak not only of Jewish texts, but also of Jewish authors. Which is to say of Jews, of members of the tribe.

I use the word “tribe” advisedly, as Jews have never fit easily into the categories which the rationalizing projects of the Enlightenment and of burgeoning European and American nationalism sought to fit them. Despite my framing of this project as ethnographic, Jewishness is not at last reducible to ethnicity, nor to the expression of religious faith, nor to racial identity, nationality, or language. Jews speak a range of languages: Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino, and others. We are multinational, multiracial, multiethnic. As for religion, from a Halachic perspective (that is, the perspective of Jewish law) a Jew remains a Jew regardless of whether she or he professes a particular set of beliefs or maintains a given set of proscribed practices. The tribe, as it were, has fuzzy boundaries—and they tend to shift depending on which specific Jewish community, or which individual Jew, one is talking to.

Which is not to say Jewish identity has no boundaries. It is, in the end, a structure of belonging. Perhaps we may say, tentatively, that Jews are a people, a family, held together by a shared story, mythological and historical, a shared ethics, rooted in mitzvot¹ and in the prophetic call to “do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly,” a shared hope for a more fair and equitable world, and a shared respect for reason, argument, and doubt (Shapiro “One Foot Judaism” 4). To this list, one also ought to append the notion of a shared culture, including a shared, if wildly varying, set of customs, traditions, and folkways. Jews are Jews because their sense of subjectivity, their sense of self, in whatever combination and to whatever degree, is bound up with and emerges from an ongoing entanglement with and dispute over these five things (give or take).

¹ Literally, “commandments,” meaning the 613 commandments laid out in the Torah.

I am aware, of course, that there is a certain irony in my attempt to delimit the parameters of my discussion of Jewish identity and textuality. Earlier, I argued that this was precisely what one ought not to do. To the charge of contradiction, I can only plead guilty. But construction of these terms is nonetheless necessary if one is to make curatorial choices at all. In gathering a body of texts to analyze, one must have some criteria for selection. So, as this study is concerned, Jewishness of text or person will be treated as a porous, shifting, unstable category, made (more or less) legible by engagement with the set of entanglements outlined above. To extend the point, if we are to theorize a Jewish poetics, we really have no choice but to define one, even at the risk of falling into overdetermination or fetishization because, while these are real risks, we shall see that in the history of Western aesthetics, the category of the Jewish has long been overdetermined and fetishized in exactly the way Spector and Levi complain of. Yet, counterintuitively, it is precisely this fact that enables both the emergence of Jewish modernisms and a Jewish revisioning of the modernist tradition. The fetish and the real are oddly connected in this case. That said, my defining a Jewish poetics, like my selection of authors, ought to be understood as provisional rather than absolute, and the theoretical apparatus I have deployed can and should be subject to critique and revision.

A further caveat: despite my concern with selection, which I maintain remains an important issue for any study of Jewish poetics, this particular study of Jewish American poetry has been limited to a single major figure: Louis Zukofksy. Zukofsky is a compelling choice not least because, as a poet-critic in the Eliotic mold, he self-consciously interrupted modernist aesthetics and revised them in Jewish terms; what is more, his early masterwork, *Poem Beginning 'The'* is an *ars poetica*, limning a unique

theory of Jewish modernist poetics. And that theory, that methodology, had some meaningful effects, giving rise to the Objectivist school, the most significant intervention into English-language modernism by any group of Jewish writers working in the early 20th century. In the intervening decades, meanwhile, Zukofsky's oeuvre has become a critical trove for those critics, like myself, interested in exploring modern and contemporary Jewish poetics. With that said, then, Zukofsky ought to serve well enough as exemplar. His work, *'The'* in particular, will act as a test case for my developing theory of Jewish modernist poetics and its relation to literary modernism.

Since I have expounded a definition of what may constitute Jewishness in literature, it is both natural and necessary to float a definition of modernism as well. The parameters in this case are well established. Modernism is that movement in culture and the arts that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (roughly between 1890 and 1945) in response to the widespread sense of existential crisis brought on by the various social, scientific, philosophical, political, and technological upheavals of the period. It is typified, obviously, by works (to choose only those most relevant to this study) including T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, as well as works like Wallace Stevens' *Harmonium* and H.D.'s *Trilogy*, alongside an array of other texts. Modernism is, of course, a wide umbrella term encompassing an array of at times irreconcilable aesthetic and intellectual positions, but there are certain features or conditions that provide commonality: e.g. the idea that 'the modern' is constituted by a radical break with the past, its traditions, its thought, its ways of living, and its modes of representation; also, the idea that modern subjectivity is typified by alienation; the idea that community has become atomized; the idea that the experience of daily life has

become fragmented and abstract. Modernist aesthetics express, comment upon, and reproduce these conditions, largely by means of extreme formal experimentation: be it Cubist, Futurist, Surrealist, Dadaist, Imagist, Objectivist, Vorticist, what-have-you. It should go without saying that this is merely a thumbnail sketch of modernism and of modernist aesthetics. Scholars have devoted countless pages to exploring the subject in minute detail and from every conceivable angle; and there are of course any number of internal debates to contend with as well—debates which may well have some bearing on this study. But in so far as it is necessary to establish a baseline definition, one hopes this small gesture should suffice.

At this point, we have parsed the question of the Jewish (and the modern) and outlined an approach that hopefully avoids (though perhaps only nearly) the risk of overdetermination or essentialization endemic to anti and philosemitic criticism alike. But to adequately address the problems associated with theorizing the imbrication of the Jewish and the modern, a second reconceptualizing move is necessary. We must rethink antisemitism, particularly the role it played in the development of modernism. That role is complicated, multivalent, and contradictory, but whatever else one may say of it, it had the effect of materializing the Jew at the center of modernism's formal enterprise. As Levi has it: "both aesthetic modernism and modern antisemitism seek formal solutions to the problem of how to render intelligible the experience of modernity" (4). In each case, the solution arrives in the figure of the Jew, which:

provides both a personification and an explanation of otherwise unrepresentable, disorienting experiences that, in modernity, are associated with a kind of crisis,

whether subject formation, transformations in economic, political, and aesthetic value, or the experience of change itself. (9)

In this formulation, the Jew becomes the primary metaphorical vehicle for working through the various crises of modernity; or at least, certain ideas about Jewishness. The Jew produced by aesthetic modernism and modern antisemitism is, naturally, not an actual Jew, but a negative projection: i.e., a residual image expelled from the self, representing whatever aspects of the self a subject is incapable of incorporating (Levi 7). The Jew is rendered as a fantasy repository for whatever appears intolerable or existentially threatening about modernity, i.e., a manifestation of the abject. How critics and artists respond to or work with that figure may be understood as symptomatic of their negotiation with the peculiar anxieties that attend their experience of the modern condition.

The theory of projection is a useful one. It goes a long way to explaining how, for instance, “modernist works of art and literature that were neither by nor about Jews came to be understood as Jewish” in the antisemitic imaginary (Levi 4). And it goes a long way to explaining why the figure of the Jew plays such a persistent role in the works of various canonical modernists. It is also useful in that it allows critics to treat the figure of the Jew discursively, and thus to interpret the deployments of the Jew in modern art more subtly, alive to the particular incorporations, appropriations, revisions, inversions, and disavowals that mark a given work’s relation to that discourse.

Yet the theory of projection and the discursive approach it facilitates are not entirely adequate ways to theorize a link between the Jewish and the modern as they tend to leave Jews off to one side. Under the auspices of projection, the image of the Jew is an

entirely circular construction, and Jews—real ones—have no part in it, though they can and have been victimized by it. But as Stephen Beller argues in *Antisemitism: A Very Short Introduction* (2015), this arrangement minimizes the “complex dialectic” involved in the development of antisemitism which, however uncomfortable it is to acknowledge, was in fact “influenced by the actual condition and behavior of actual Jews” (3). The same might be claimed for modernism, whose formal and rhetorical engagement with the figure of the Jew cannot finally be divorced from the historical context in which it emerged: a context that included (in America) a massive flood of actual Jewish immigration and (in Europe and America) the accelerating movement of actual Jews from the margins and into the mainstream of society.

This is not to say, by any means, that Jews are to be held responsible for antisemitism, modern or otherwise. Such a position would be repugnant. It is rather to insist that one not absent Jews from the discussion. For, after all, to imagine projection as pure fantasy is to unduly privilege the projecting subject over the object of projection. And there is something to be said about that object. As Levi argues, no two objects of projection are quite alike. They are material, having certain properties that enable, or disable, a specific range of mimetic operations. In Levi’s terms, they are *screens*, and as with ordinary projection screens, their qualities shape the image produced upon them (Levi 7). An image projected on a brick wall is not the same as an image projected on fabric, an image projected on a green fabric is not the same as an image projected on red, or black, or white. Just so, constructions of the Jew in the modern imaginary (whether anti or philosemitic) cannot but contend with, and respond to, the fabric of modern Jewish life, i.e., the lived conditions and cultural practices of actual modern Jews. Not

that this projection has any true fidelity to its object; it doesn't. But it should be acknowledged that even as the projective apparatus externalizes the un-incorporable from the subject, it also appropriates, exaggerates, and distorts those features of the object that can be bent to its purpose.

Yet even this reformulated theory of projection is not quite sufficient. For in imagining the projective object as a passive receptacle for the subject's fantasy, it neglects the ways in which that object inevitably responds to the projection placed upon it. It might be better to think of the projective object not as a plain fabric screen, but as one with reactive properties, like the thermochromic fabrics currently used by Nike and Converse to produce shoes whose color shifts when they are exposed to heat. Granted, the analogy is a bit facetious; however, the point is not. And the point is that there is a reciprocal relation between the fantasy projections of antisemitism, or of the antisemitic critique of modernism, and Jewish artists' and writers' negotiations with both modernism and modernist aesthetics.

How could there not be? After all, as Freedman explains, because fantasies of the Jew played a crucial role in the construction of modernism and its archetypes, they acted with figuring force upon Jews assimilating into the modernist milieu. It was in part by "donning the garb" provided for them by modernism's projective gentile fantasies of Jewishness that Jews themselves found entry into the culture industries of the twentieth century and negotiated a place for themselves in the field of Anglo-American high culture (Freedman, *Temple of Culture* 8). Or, as Tamar Garb writes:

The "Jew in the Text" of Western culture... permeates the speech of actual Jews, those men and women negotiating the crisis of modernity from their position as

Jewish subjects, speaking in... [a] borrowed tongue and from a body on which was [already] inscribed their ineluctable difference. (“Modernity, Identity, Textuality” 27)

The point is well taken. Just as we cannot afford to imagine Jewishness as eternal, essential, or even ontologically stable, we also cannot afford to imagine it as existing somehow outside of or isolated from the developments of Western cultural discourse. It is, in fact, intimately bound up with that discourse. As David Nirenberg demonstrates in *Anti-Judaism*, both the Jew and Judaism have long been impressed into rhetorical service in Western discourse as a sort of antipodal semiotic category, under the rubric of which all manner of oppositions may be arranged and managed (Nirenberg 1-6). In this capacity, Jewishness has been critical. The encounter with Jewishness “should not,” Nirenberg writes, “be understood as some archaic or irrational closet in the vast edifices of Western thought. It [is] rather one of the basic tools with which that edifice was constructed” (6). To be a Jew in the West, then, is to be imbricated in that anti-Jewish discourse and so—out of pure necessity—to articulate oneself through it.

Now, there is a very old and very unfortunate tendency in writing about Jews’ negotiations with and within Western culture to fall back on the figure of the self-hating Jew: the Jew who internalizes the Western construction of Jewish difference and comes to embody it. I have no desire to reiterate that tired trope. Yet Garb and Freedman are correct. Jews “had to come to terms with the patterns of thought that constructed them,” i.e., with the discourses that framed Jewishness in the Western imaginary and that authorized a Jewish presence within certain cultural and social spheres. If we are speaking of modernity, this means navigating a complicated legacy: threading the needle

of thought about Jews from Paul to the German Enlightenment, up through Mathew Arnold and his contemporaries, and on through Wagner, James, Eliot, and Pound (Freedman, *Temple of Culture* 20).

One should note too, that this intellectual legacy includes both anti and philosemitic iterations of the Jew. This is crucial. The antisemitic imagination was not alone in shaping the fantasies of Jewishness that Jews negotiated as they sought a place within modernity. Philosemitism played a part as well. Indeed, for this reason Bryan Cheyette, in *Constructions of the Jew in English Literature and Society* (1993), eschews the anti/philo distinction entirely—along with its built-in moral judgments—preferring instead to speak of a broader Semitic discourse which encompasses both (xii).

Such a move is advantageous, because as Freedman and Cheyette each note, the philosemitic imaginary positions the Jew as a stand-in for the modern artist, whereas the antisemitic imaginary bars Jews from the role by positioning them as poseurs or parasites. It is inevitable that, to come to voice within the precincts of aesthetic modernism, Jewish modernists would have to parse the tensions and contradictions of their dual positioning. Only by examining the operations of both discourses, then, alongside Jews' interactions with them, can critics fully account for the complexity of the Jewish cathexis to modernism. This then will be my approach: to historicize the emergence of Jewish modernisms by reading them not only as engaging with the texts and practices of the particular Jewish communities of the period, but also as responding to—assimilating, revising, rejecting—elements of the Western Semitic discourse in which they were enmeshed.

This approach may also help to better account for the repetitions and inversions that critics such as Levi and Spector have observed within those readings of modernism, which, like my own, seek to link its formal experimentation with certain ideas about Jewishness. Since Jewish modernisms emerge in negotiation with Semitic discourse, traces of that discourse may well remain in—or wholly make up—the individual texts of those modernisms. For critics to point this out is no error. So while it may be quite true, for instance, that the comic deformations of English performed by Leo Rosten's 1937 immigrant character Hyman Kaplan² recall, on the one hand, the antisemitic idea, floated by Wagner and Eliot (amongst others), that the Jew is somehow anti-language, and on the other, the postmodern and poststructuralist image of the Jew as a figure of linguistic free play, this does not mean that Rosten has either, in the former case, internalized the tropes of antisemitism or, in the latter, enabled a philosemitic fantasy. Nor should it mean that critics who point out that Kaplan's play with English recalls certain interpretive practices typical of rabbinic Torah study be accused of importing that reading into the text out of some preformed anti or philosemitic framework.

Rosten does in fact position the Jew as synonymous with semiotic slippage and the free play of signifiers. He does so precisely because his character, Kaplan, materializes at the intersection between the discourses of antisemitic antimodernism and rabbinical hermeneutics, both of which, though with entirely different emphases, put a premium on the Jewish propensity for language games. Rosten's Kaplan thus finds himself in the midst of an impossible articulation, for it is in the presumptively

² By way of example, Kaplan refers to Shakespeare as Shakesbeer and poetry as poyetry; also, following Yiddish pronunciation, he mistakes ceaser for scissor and vice versa; these sort of errors are typical of the character and pepper his dialogue whenever he speaks.

assimilative and self-effacing gesture of adopting standard American English that he most eloquently, if paradoxically, reveals his entanglement with the particularities of Jewish identity. Yet that identity cannot be recognized for what it is; it appears only as aberration or error—malapropism, mispronunciation, a mangling of syntax—and only becomes legible when *made subject* to the terms of a Semitic discourse that would reify or erase it. This is the heart of Kaplan’s problem, as well as of the problem of the Jewish cathexis to modernity which Rosten wishes his readers to consider: Kaplan the would-be American, the not-a-Jew, who in the very act of not-a-Jewing, Jews himself anew; and then again Kaplan-the-Jew, the Jew-*qua*-Jew, but one whose Jewishness cannot be authorized or authenticated except by recourse to a set of contrived and constraining “Jewish” tropes pulled from the dominant culture. To paraphrase Monty Python, “They did the nose and the hat,” indeed.

This, to borrow from Isaac Rosenfeld, is the situation of the Jewish modernist, perhaps even the very condition of Jewish modernity: a condition of belatedness (shared by any number of marginalized peoples at different points in history) in which one is tasked with speaking oneself into subjectivity using a quasi-alien discourse within which one has always already been subject-ed. What results from this condition is, as Freedman explains, a “dialectical wrestling” expressed—in the case of Jewish modernists—through an interlocking series of affinities, contradictions, reversals, and ironic accommodations, all of which involve a shifting, ramifying relation between at least three terms: assimilating Jews who seek to enter the terrain of high culture; ideas and ideals of culture and art that significantly trope or were themselves constructed in relation to Jewishness... and a prevalent but shifting anti-Semitic

cultural dispensation particularly but not exclusively among the elites who formed the center of intellectual and literary culture (Freedman, *Temple of Culture* 54)

Parsing the complexities of these relations is the job of any critic who wishes to analyze Jewish modernisms, and in addition, any critic wishing to analyze the figure of the Jew as deployed within modernism more generally, for as Jewish writers and artists worked the figure of the Jew, they produced new figurations which then shaped the perceptions and uses of the Jew in works by Jewish and gentile artists alike.

Regardless, the point is that the repetitions and inversions of Semitic discourse warned against by Levi, Spector, and others can be best understood by contextualizing them as part of Freedman's dialectical wrestling match: first, by seeing them as an innate part of the work performed by the texts under analysis, and second by seeing them as a continuation of that wrestling in a new context. Freedman does exactly this in the latter half of *The Temple of Culture* when he turns his attention to investigating the ways in which Jewish critics of the post-war period treated the work of Henry James—a writer for whom the figure of the Jew performed a crucial function. Their work, according to Freedman, is marked as much by the assimilative pressures of the Academy—a space “whose operative ideals and dominant style of response were white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant and centered on narratives of Anglo-Saxon identity and authority”—as it is by the need of these newly minted Jewish academics to push back against and transform that space in ways that might accommodate their Jewishness (*Temple of Culture* 158).

Criticism is not after all without motive, nor is it separable from history or cultural politics. Like art, criticism is inescapably situated, and as such will appear symptomatic

of its authors' cultural and historical positioning as well as of whatever institutional pressures may bear upon its creation.

While a work of scholarship is no place for personal biography, as a critic I bring a certain amount of baggage to this project. I am a Jew, the son of a rabbi, who's kosher is spotty and whose Hebrew is worse, who is intermarried and raising two interfaith children, and yet who is nevertheless devoted to studying Jewish identity, history, and literature—albeit through a set of tools (sociology, anthropology, and critical theory) derived outside Judaism. I am a Jew, moreover, who reads racially as white and has experienced the privileges of that reading, while at the same time feeling its inherent shakiness and inadequacy. As an American Jew, I am assimilated and at ease, yet quietly restless and resentful, knowing the cost of that ease, the loss of the markers of my difference. Craving difference, perhaps cultivating it, like Finkelkraut's imaginary Jew, but fearing it, too. Not least because of antisemitism, of course, especially at a time when violence against Jews is again making headlines; but more so because I fear that I enter Jewish difference, my own identity as a Jew, as much through simulation as anything else. Standing in front of my class, reading aloud the Jewishly inflected speech of Leo Rosten in a mock yiddisher accent one-part Mel Brooks' Yoghurt, a borscht belt send-up of *Star Wars*' Yoda, and one-part Eddie Murphy's Saul, the old Jewish guy from the barber shop scenes in the film *Coming to America*. A performance of nicked performances, then, signifying Jewishness through its own reified stereotype. A subjectivity both conflicted and conflicting, then; though I find pleasure in it too, in the awkwardness, the sheer absurdity, of my position.

I bring all this up simply to make the point that I may be especially vulnerable to some of the critical errors and missteps called out earlier in this chapter. For instance, one might complain that my attempt to identify a trace of Jewishness in the works of non-Jewish modernists comes dangerously close to antisemitic anti-modernism, which views modernism as secretly infected by Jewishness, as well as to Levi's "phobic approach," which, as noted, attempts to cleanse modernism of the taint of antisemitism by extending a kind of honorary Jewishness to its practitioners and thereby rehabilitate it for contemporary use. I suppose there may be some unconscious need in me to rescue modernism from antisemitism in this way, perhaps to excuse my investment in it, but if so, the need is deeply buried. I am not aware of any call to it. Rather, I recognize the fact that modernism is imbricated with Semitic discourse, that it has often defined itself by a working through of the figure of the Jew. But this is the very reason modernism proved such a rich ground for Jewish engagement in the first place; moreover, it is through Jewish artists' engagement with this embedded Semitic discourse that Jews too made modernism, seeding it with their own variations on and disputes with Jewishness. And that is what I am interested in: not in uncovering in modernist aesthetics damning evidence of Jewish corruption, nor in white washing it, but rather in tracking the growth of those Jewish seeds, to see what branches, what blooms, they engendered.

One might also complain that in my work with Jewish modernisms I risk falling prey to the tendency toward genealogical backformation red-flagged by Perelman as an instance of circular reasoning and ahistoricism. Here, too, I think the risk minimal—though the warning is well taken. To apply, say, a purely deconstructive critique when investigating the potential for Jewishness in the work of a canonical modernist like H.D.

would indeed be a mistake. For while it is true that H.D.'s linguistic play bears a structural similarity to the hermeneutical language games of the rabbis, that similarity is not in and of itself sufficient evidence that H.D. is somehow writing Jewishly. A more quantifiable link to Jewish culture is required, such as H.D.'s long and intimate association with Sigmund Freud, whose psychoanalytic method, especially as regards the dream work, also echoes the rabbis' hermeneutical praxis, and whose influence, H.D. herself acknowledges, directly informed the development of her poetics. In any case, yes, one ought not map an amorphous, reified and/or fetishized notion of Jewishness onto a text or writer with only a nominal connection to Jewish culture. But where more concrete and specific biographical or historical connections can be established, and when those connections can be shown to have substantial bearing on the work under analysis, one really ought not ignore them either.

Such that, when a writer like Wallace Stevens deploys a figure as pointedly and provocatively Jewish as the rabbi—a minor fixture in certain of his poems—critics really ought not fold him into the existing criticism without comment, which is more-or-less what has been done. The erasure of Jewish difference in such a context is a grave oversight, not because it occludes some essential Judaism at work in the text, but because it effaces the cultural particularities of the rabbi and obviates the responsibility to consider the specifics of Stevens' engagement with him. Further, in both cases—that of Stevens and H.D., and perhaps in other cases as well—neglecting the trace of a Jewish influence impoverishes criticism itself, blinding critics to an axis of countercultural theory and praxis which has been long embedded within the Western tradition and which remains a source of liberatory potential.

I have dealt, however, with only one part of Perelman's critique, because his concern over the retroactive 'Jew-ing' of modernism also derives from his sense that contemporary Jewish artists and critics may be motivated in their research as much by an investment in the project of Jewish continuity as by an investment in the work of intellectual history. Like Chametzky, he is aware that Jewish acculturation (especially in America) has continually bred a panicked demand by diasporic Jews to recover or shore up an identity we fear may be teetering on the brink of a self-inflicted extinction. The weird paroxysms of guilt and irrationality stemming from this fear are well captured by the Yiddish poet Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, who in his 1934 poem "My Only Son" records the unhinged monologue-ing of a Jewish father who cannot get through to his rapidly assimilating American son, a son he imagines will refuse to pray the Kaddish (the Jewish prayer of mourning) for him when he dies:

—Waddya mean Kadesh?

De ol' kike from stinkin' Polan' dragged wit' 'im

Some yaysh-may-raberry—

to hell vit it—dat's right. (60-3)

The appalling nature of the son's rejection—sounding as it does an ugly note of internalized antisemitism—might be alarming, if not for the fact, revealed in the poem's opening lines, that the wayward boy is only a year-and-a-half old, and the whole litany of his failures and transgressions therefore nothing more than a worried parent's paranoid projection. This is not to say that the threat of Jewish assimilation is insignificant, but rather that Jews' perception of that threat can be, quite on its own, a formidable force. Nothing in this poem is more palpably real than the father's terror, which proves in the

end a distorting lens through which to view the world. That capacity for distortion is what Perelman rightly cautions critics against, though for him the distortion runs the opposite direction: seeing, because we so desperately wish to, a through-line of defiant Jewishness in texts that are not especially Jewish at all, or that are at pains to redact Jewish particularity in the interest of a more properly modernist universalism.

The problem looms most precipitously over this study because I am directly implicated in it. The arc of my scholarship has, over the years, bent toward a reengagement with Jewishness; and that reengagement is at least as personal as it is scholarly. In looking to the cultural negotiations performed by Jewish modernists, I am in a sense searching for a usable past, a way of navigating the tensions of my own positionality—as a Jew, an American, a critic, a writer. Further, I am interested in bolstering the continuity of Jewish cultural production. The question of how a work may engage Jewishness, especially at the level of textuality, of materiality, is one that interests me as a question of the history of diasporic Jewish cultural production, of course, but also as a question of futurity, of the shape of Jewish cultural production to come. This interest is not, I think, a sin. Criticism may look forward as well as back. It may, to borrow a term from Marshall McLuhan, probe.

But all this is somewhat beside the point, since Perelman's real criticism is aimed not merely at the danger of misreading, but at the act of reading itself. Perelman is intensely skeptical, if playfully so, about the idea that there can be any such thing as Jewish textual praxis. Certainly, he acknowledges Jewish subjectivity and Jewish subject matter—two of the criteria for Jewish textuality laid out earlier—yet he asks what happens if those undeniable elements are redacted and one looks purely at method. This

is what Jules Chametzky et al. refuse to do as the editors of *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* (2001), which makes overtly Jewish subject matter a core criterion for inclusion. In doing so, however, they rather dodge the issue. Is Louis Zukofsky writing more Jewishly in *Poem Beginning 'The,'* which directly addresses the issue of Jewish assimilation, than in *A*, where such prototypically Jewish concerns go unremarked? What, Perelman asks, is Jewish about Gertrude Stein, her poetics, style, mechanics, rhythm? And, he goes on, “if we simply leave it that Stein’s writing is Jewish because of its ever-present textual play, then isn’t Joyce’s writing utterly Jewish” (54)?

To answer in the affirmative is to have defined Jewishness out of existence. Perelman does, however, offer a workaround. He posits—only, I suspect, half-seriously—a “homeopathic” approach to the Jewishness of a text, arguing paradoxically that the less overtly Jewish a text appears, the more intensely Jewish it may be (55). This is comedy as much as criticism: a send-up perhaps of Pound, who wrote that ‘not a jot or tittle of the hebraic [sic] alphabet can pass into the text without danger of contaminating it’ (qtd. in Perelman 53), though at the same time also a barb lobbed at those critics, like me, who in our desire to unearth the Jewish elements of a text may come unfortunately to resemble him. Still, there is one moment in Perelman’s discussion of homeopathic criticism that resonates. It arrives in the form of a grammatical analogy. “Common sense,” Perelman writes, “uses the adjective Jewish to refer to Jews; homeopathic criticism uses the adjective Jewish to refer to an undiscovered or not yet fully realized substantive. There’s no noun yet; only the adjective pointing suggestively” (56). Perelman here recalls Derrida, at least in so far as he invokes the absence endemic to language, the *différance* hovering between signifier and signified. And maybe that is the

best way to understand this study. Not a search for Jewishness as noun, but for the Jewish as an adjective: for the signifiers, the gestures and traces, that point suggestively to a referent always already slipping away, there and not there, a word whose name we recognize but cannot quite speak.

2 St. Paul and the Origins of Anti-Jewish Aesthetics

One cannot adequately chart the emergence of Jewish modernisms without first accounting for the fact that modernism itself arrives thoroughly soaked in Semitic thinking,³ which is not to characterize modernism as Jewish, but to point out that modernism partakes in that curious but pervasive habit of Western discourse which one might call “thinking with Jews.” Thinking *with* Jews is not the same as thinking *about* Jews; nor is it the same as thinking in conversation with Jews. In truth, it has little to do with either. Jews, as such, rarely come into it. Rather, thinking with Jews means deploying the Jew, Jews, or Jewishness as a marker or category, the sign of “a set of ideas and attributes with which... [to] make sense of and criticize [the] world” (Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism* 3).

The precise set of ideas and attributes attested to by the Jew in this signatory mode is unstable. One might go so far as to say that this very instability is responsible for making the Jew such a productive and enduring term. But if the content of rhetorical Jewishness is subject to change, its discursive role is not. It is, always, antipodal, oppositional: its function to clarify and delimit the borders of some other category, some other way of seeing, reading, making, or being in the world. It is also, if not always then

³ I use the term “Semitic thinking” here in the sense that Bryan Cheyette uses the term Semitic discourse: that is, to signify the whole field of racially inflected discourses on the Jew, whether such discourse be defined by philo- or antisemitic projections.

all too frequently, antinomian: a marker of error, waywardness, corruption, even criminality. To invoke the Jew is to inscribe, to figure forth, and generally to privilege his opposite. So, the Jew comes to operate as the dark mirror of the developing West, a rubric under which all manner of ontological, theological, political, and aesthetic oppositions may be (have been and still are) arranged and managed.

This habit of mind, which David Nirenberg refers to as anti-Judaism, pervades Western culture and is “one of the basic tools with which that edifice was constructed” (*Anti-Judaism* 6). To recount its history thoroughly, however, would require far more space than can be afforded here. Nevertheless, since Jewish modernists came to voice navigating an intellectual climate wherein their Jewishness was already ensnared in a bramble of prior figurations, and since responding to this entanglement was a necessary precondition of their work, some attempt to trace “the labor done by Judaism in the workshops of Western thought” (2) remains essential.

What is required, more specifically, is a map of the Jew’s function in the discourse of Western poetics as it pertains to modernism. But modernist constructions of the Jew are hardly *sui generis*. Their contours are limned from much earlier sources, and so we must turn to those sources if we are to comprehend modernism’s engagements with the Jew as a rhetorical figure as well as the complications faced by Jewish writers who wished to participate in literary modernism. But the corpus of premodern anti-Jewish literature is vast. I will, therefore, confine myself to outlining the role played by the figure of the Jew in the work of three crucial pre-modern thinkers: St. Paul, St. Augustine of Hippo, and Geoffrey Chaucer. Paul, as he is arguably *the* foundational thinker in this history, will be dealt with first in this chapter; Augustine and Chaucer follow in the next.

These writers, though by no means alone in deploying the Jew as a way of working through questions of aesthetics, nevertheless produce a particularly virulent set of associations which in time come to form the theoretical core, the DNA, of the most significant and pervasive anti-Jewish strain within modern poetry.

In the search for the viral origins of anti-Judaism in modernist poetics, and indeed for the origin of Western anti-Judaism itself, the apostle Paul is patient zero. To be fair, the trail of anti-Jewish thought extends back quite a bit further than him. Nirenberg tracks it through antiquity, and many of the tropes of that earlier tradition inform Paul's writing; yet the importance of Paul is hard to underestimate. Through his writing, the Jew becomes an essential pedagogical figure within the discourses of Christianity, a negative pole or shadow subject against which Christian writers and thinkers perform works of self-definition and self-critique (Nirenberg, *Aesthetic Theology* 13). Through his writing, as well, the term *Judaization* and the threat it embodies enter the Christian lexicon. Moreover, as result of the pervasive influence of Pauline Christianity—adopted by Rome in the fourth century CE and dispersed thereafter throughout the Western world—the habit of anti-Judaism metastasizes, spreading across a range of intellectual, philosophical, and artistic endeavors at once secular and religious.

Paul's work with Judaism, or rather with the figure of the Jew, is important for another reason too, one more germane to this study: it codifies the Jew and Judaism as essential terms within a long-running epistemological debate over the nature of aesthetics and the legitimacy of representation, of poesis, as a means of realizing truth. The roots of this debate lie in what Nirenberg calls the transcendental turn of classical philosophy, which posits on the one hand a "skepticism toward what we know through the senses—

that is, toward aesthetics, from the Greek *aisthanesthai*, “to perceive by the senses” and on the other a commitment to “the proposition that while there are no eternal and unchanging truths to be found in our physical world, such truths...do exist on a different plane of being (*Aesthetic Theology* 2). This alienation, this split between seeming and being, between the sensate and the transcendent, extends to the individual, alienating soul from body, and is reified in linguistic terms by the representative gap divorcing signifier from signified (3).

The philosophers of the classical period therefore approached aesthetics with extreme skepticism and sought to articulate a kind of knowing that would cut through the noise of the sensate world and perceive instead the truth of the transcendent reality beyond it. Plato, for instance, in *Cratylus*, argues that “language is not truth, but only imitative sound,” that the signifier bears no real relation to the signified, and that as such “he who follows names in the search of things...is in great danger of being deceived” (qtd in Handelman 4-5). His solution is to urge his readers to seek truth in ideas, in the immutable forms that transcend representation, linguistic or otherwise (Handelman 5). Aristotle concurs, taking up—despite other differences—Plato’s assertion that “discourse and being are not coterminous” and that “the central act of knowing is a movement *beyond* discourse:” that is, beyond representation, which is always concerned with sensate particulars, and toward the rational perception of universal forms: a “direct intellectual vision” of what is (7-8).

Early Christian writers followed suit, exhorting their fellow Christians to turn their attentions away from the things of this world and toward the otherworldly, “to see through the outer, ‘fleshy’ appearance of things, persons, texts, and into their ‘spiritual’

interior (Nirenberg, *Aesthetic Theology* 4). But in Christian discourse, the difference between these two modes of perception gets mapped onto the distinction between Christian and Jew (4). Indeed, throughout the synoptic gospels, figures of Judaism—e.g., priests, scribes, Sadducees, Pharisees, etc.—are regularly deployed “to exemplify the dangerous disjuncture that exists in the world between appearance and truth” (Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism* 74).

While it is common enough for Christian writers to train this sort of negative projection on Jewish figures, it is equally common for it to appear as an internal threat, inherent even within ostensibly Christian subjects. Thus, Matthew depicts the apostles themselves as having fallen into Jewish error when they misread Jesus’ warning to “Keep your eyes open, [and] be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and the Sadducees” as a warning against consuming actual bread, rather than a metaphor for eschewing the erroneous teachings of the Jews (Matt. 16:5-12 qtd in Nirenberg, *Aesthetic Theology* 5). Here, the apostles’ literalism marks their recidivism. The very act of misinterpretation—collapsing the spiritual tenor of Jesus’ metaphor into its merely material vehicle—impugns their faith, revealing internalized pharisaic (read: Jewish) inclinations.

Note that the apostles’ error is an aesthetic failure as much as a religious one. To read Jesus’ warning as the apostles do is to abandon spirit for flesh, mistaking the needs of the soul (salvation) for the needs of the body (bread); at the same time, it is also to abandon proper reading, which passes through signification to knowledge, moving beyond representation to an apprehension of the real (Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism* 77).

Proper reading, in this sense, is allegorical, and this approach is also symptomatic of the

imbrication between early Christian aesthetic theology and classical philosophy. For the Greeks, allegory is an act of semiotic substitution, whereby the true referent of a given utterance is temporarily displaced by figuration. Proper reading of an allegory restores the true referent to its place and cancels out the figurative term, which is now understood as an “ornament” or “alien deviation” (Handelman 88). This is precisely what the apostles have failed to do. They have not “kept [their] eyes open” as Jesus warned, but instead fallen into a spiritual blindness which privileges the figural over the referential. In this way, they reveal themselves as always already at risk of the seduction embodied by that Pharisaic yeast, always already at risk of committing the cardinal Jewish error: an idolatry of the letter commensurate with idolatry of the flesh.

Why, though, is this error coded Jewish? What enables the gospel writers to hang these aesthetic and theological transgressions around the necks of the Jews? The answer to that question, of course, lies with Paul, or more specifically with the text of his epistles. Composed sometime between the 50s and 60s CE, the epistles comprise some of the oldest extant Christian writings—or to be more accurate, proto-Christian writings—and provide an invaluable record of the intellectual development of what would become the early Church. ‘Intellectual development’ is a rather inadequate term, though, because in fact the epistles call for nothing less than a “cognitive revolution” in first century thought (Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism* 53). As Paul, riffing on Isaiah, puts it in 1 Corinthians:

I am going to destroy the wisdom of the wise and bring to nothing the understanding of any who understand. Where are the philosophers? Where are the experts? ... Do you not see how God has shown up human wisdom as folly? Since in the wisdom of God the world was unable to recognize God through wisdom, it

was God's own pleasure to save believers through the folly of the gospel. While Jews require signs (*semeia*) and the Greeks look for wisdom (*sophia*), we are preaching a crucified Christ: a scandal to the Jews, to the gentiles foolishness. But to those who have been called, whether they are Jews or Greeks, a Christ who is both the power of God and the wisdom of God. (qtd in Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism* 53)

To parse this passage and to unpack the revolution Paul is proposing necessitates a return to the transcendent problematics of classical philosophy and to a significant rift on that subject which emerges between classical philosophy and Jewish thought. We know the Greeks recognized an inherent gap between signifier and signified as well as an analogous gap between human perception and ontological reality, and that consequently they located true knowledge outside both the material and representational spheres. Such knowledge, Susan Handelman explains, exists neither in words nor in things, but in Ideas, in the "realm of immutable forms" (4). Handelman calls this a "silent ontology" because it moves the seeker of truth away from language and toward purely rational sign systems such as mathematics (4-5).

From a Jewish standpoint, though, the Greek's silent ontology is wholly backwards. The disparity between Jewish and Greek thought on this matter is discernible even at the linguistic level. In Greek, the word for "word" is *onoma*, a term synonymous with *name*; but in Hebrew, the word for "word" is *davar*, and it means both word and thing. So, in the Greek imaginary, words and things are separate entities, the one symbolizing the other, and the semiotic relationship—per Aristotle—a matter of convention rather than natural sympathy (Handelman 16); but in the Jewish imaginary,

word and thing are intimately related, the signifier coincident (if not coterminous) with the signified. There is, in the Jewish construction, an “originary unity between word and thing, speech and thought, discourse and truth” which is disrupted by the Greek Enlightenment (Handelman 4).

This is not to say that word and thing are identical in Jewish thought, but rather that their signifying relationship is reversed; that in the Jewish imaginary, language provides the grounds of being. Consider that in the Torah, creation is spoken into existence: “God said, ‘Let there be light;’ and there was light” (*The Contemporary Torah*, Genesis 1:3). Here, language rather than being is a priori. The signifier at once precedes and prefigures the signified; the word creates and sustains the thing, comprising its fundamental character (Handelman 32). This understanding goes some way toward explaining why in Judaism, in contrast to classical philosophy, hermeneutics rather than empirical analysis operates as the primary means of ontological investigation. Paul himself alludes to this point when he claims that Greeks seek wisdom (*sophia*), uncovering the abstract forms that govern the real, where Jews prefer to engage with signs (*semia*), interpreting Torah as a means of participating in the semiotics of creation. In any case, the crucial distinction is this: where classical philosophy imagines aesthetics as separate from ontology, Judaism imagines the two as intimately connected.

Paul is cognizant of this distinction and aims to resolve it by synthesizing the Greek and Jewish ontological frameworks. This is his cognitive revolution. He imagines, in the figure of Christ crucified, a fusion of the material and contingent with the transcendent and immutable, a fusion of the signifier with its signified that redeems the intolerable gap between representation and reality, knowing and being, by subsuming it

within the totalizing figure of the Word made flesh. In light of that totality, neither philosophy nor hermeneutics can survive. To seek the truth through empirical analysis or through textual interpretation is hopeless because just as covering an eye causes a person to misjudge depth, either approach flattens perception, distorting reality. In place of Greek empiricism and Jewish hermeneutics, Paul proffers faith as the medium best suited to the apprehension of truth. The operation of faith appears absurd from the perspective of classical philosophy because it is not amenable to logical proof. At the same time, faith appears scandalous to Jews because it denudes the word, dematerializing it, stripping away its originary status and obliterating its generative function. However, the scandalous folly of faith is precisely the point. For Paul, faith in Christ supersedes both classical philosophy and Judaism, sublimating both within “a new creation” (*The Bible, NIV*, Gal. 6:15) defined by a state of continual affirmation (i.e., faith) that in its articulation reifies, and in so doing realizes, the divine unity of thought, word, and being.

Paul implies as much in Galatians 3:28, where he writes “there is neither Jew nor Greek... for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Paul’s universalizing impulse is on full display here. Faith absolves Jew and Greek alike, negating their respective difference and enabling their mutual incorporation within the emergent fellowship of Christ. However, apparently, the absolution and incorporation of the Jew would prove uniquely difficult. For it is the Jew and not the Greek, nor any of the other pedagogical figures deployed by Paul, who became the archetypal exemplar of aesthetic and spiritual error within Christian discourse. That this is the case owes much to the fact that the first Christians were themselves Jews and that early Christianity itself remained entwined with Judaism, partaking of both an overlapping textual tradition and overlapping folkways as well.

Early Christian thinkers therefore found themselves preoccupied with the contradictory task of establishing Christianity's distinction from Judaism while at the same time invoking Judaism as a source of legitimating authority.

Paul himself provides a critical example of this problematic when, later in Galatians, he addresses the question of whether gentile followers of Jesus ought to be expected to adhere to Jewish law, specifically to the dietary laws and the law requiring circumcision. The question was a pressing one and had generated a fair amount of disagreement amongst the apostles (Nirenberg, *Aesthetic Theology* 11). Paul's position was that gentiles who professed their faith in Jesus need not, indeed should not, take up these normative Jewish observances. His argument proceeds along familiar lines. In the case of circumcision, Nirenberg explains, Paul claims that

circumcision... was a bodily sign whose spiritual meaning was "faith." Gentile followers of Christ were already circumcised in this higher, truer, spiritual sense and did not need the body of the sign. On the contrary, if they took on the bodily aspect, they were opting for the material rather than the spiritual and revealing themselves as "separated from Christ" by the "self-indulgence of the flesh".

(*Aesthetic Theology* 12; Gal. 5:2, 4, 16-18).

In this example, Paul relegates Jewish praxis to the category of metaphorical vehicle while appropriating the tenor of that praxis (the Abrahamic covenant which halachic observance symbolizes) to serve as a legitimating agent, securing the integration of gentile converts within the burgeoning proto-Christian community. Judaism thus serves a double function, on the one hand authorizing the gentile conversion while on the other delimiting the theoretical and practical limits of early Christian identity. Crucially,

the structure of Paul's distinction rests primarily on issues of aesthetics, and more specifically of poetics, because as Paul articulates it the question of early Christianity's relation to Judaism comes down to a question of what constitutes a proper attitude to language. That attitude operates far more in the Greek mold than the Jewish, comprising a movement away from language, a movement from the signifier to a signified that lies beyond its reach. To put it simply, Paul reads Jewish law as an allegory for faith in Jesus.

Paul uses the same procedure when he addresses Jewish dietary laws in Galatians 2:11-20—a scene referred to as the incident at Antioch. In this moment, Paul confronts the apostle Peter and his followers, upbraiding them for the hypocrisy of refusing to eat with gentile converts who do not follow the kosher dietary restrictions when, prior to the arrival to the area of certain respectable representatives of the pro-Jewish observance camp, they had done so without issue. Paul argues that it is absurd for any follower of Christ to insist upon the observance of Jewish law when, as a believer, one has already affirmed the primacy of faith over works. He writes:

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the Gospel, I confronted Cephas [Peter] in front of them all, 'You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile.... How is it then that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? We who are Jews by birth... know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified. (Galatians 2:14-16)

Here again Paul's argument operates against Jewish particularism, dissolving any vestigial Jewish barriers to engagement with the teachings of Jesus. But whatever his

intent, the fact is that his universalism comes at the expense of the Jews. As we saw earlier, Paul's position is that the material must give way to the spiritual, the word give way to the idea, the signifier yield to that which it signifies. In keeping with that trajectory, Paul once again reads Jewish praxis allegorically, and since, as noted, in the classical Greek conception the metaphorical term in an analogy is understood as merely ornamental, or worse, wholly alien, it can and must be displaced by its proper referent. Judaism and its material trappings must be given over. To imagine otherwise, to insist on the primacy of works over faith, of the signifier over the signified, is, in Paul's original phrasing, which the NIV translation above papers over: *to Judaize* (Lt. *iudaizare*, Gk, *ioudaizein*).

This verb, which Paul coins but uses only once in the epistles, will eventually come to operate as a shorthand for any number of heretical impulses within Christianity and its attendant aesthetic theology—whether they originate with Jews or not. And for the most part, they do not. As Nirenberg points out, Paul's target in this and other similar moments is not Jews per se, nor for that matter Jewish followers of Christ. Rather, for Paul, Judaizing “designated the damning displacement of *gentile* believers' attention away from Jesus' spiritual message and toward the literal commandments of the Jewish tradition” (13). For Paul's redactors and for later Christian thinkers and artists, the word Judaizing would operate somewhat more broadly as a term signifying any “*Christian's* erroneous orientation of attention away from the spirit and toward the flesh, the letter of scripture, and material things of this world” (Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism* 13).

Still, this emphasis on Christian malfeasance does not exculpate the term of its anti-Jewish structure or of its antisemitic effects. Because even as Judaizing shook loose

its relationship to actual Jewish practices or beliefs, it made indelible the association between the sign or image of the Jew and the risk of spiritual contamination. As Nirenberg explains, “Within the Christian logics we are discussing, ‘Judaism’ threatens anyone making his or her hesitant way through this transitory world of flesh” (*Anti-Judaism* 13). Moreover, the so-called Jewish threat was internalized. There existed in every Christian, or proto-Christian, “a potential Jew” who, left unchecked, would inevitably lead one into temptation, if not at last to apostasy and damnation (13). It’s not hard at this point to observe the conceptual link between the imagined threat posed by this theological specter, Pauline Christianity’s Jewish id, and the imagined threat to national unity posed by the alien Jew in the discourses of enlightened Europe or even in the imagined threat to literature posed by the corrupting influence of “the hebraic alphabet [*sic*]” which Ezra Pound would rail against in his commentary on T.S. Eliot’s *After Strange Gods (Selected Prose* 302). In all these cases, religious, political, and poetic, the Jew is an infection: a germ in the gentile body; the prescription meanwhile is always the same: suppression, expulsion, annihilation.

Or almost always. Paul does not go quite so far. He can’t. After all, at the time of his writing, Christianity did not exist, at least not as a separate theological proposition. It remained a primarily Jewish sect with Judaism its foundation. Paul cannot, then, as later writers will, subject the Jew so thoroughly to abjection nor excise Judaism from his theological project. His remedy to the Jewish problem is appropriation,⁴ but it too proves

⁴ The term is a poor fit, since, as Paula Fredrikson points out, it reifies an ahistorical dichotomy between Paul the Jew and Paul the Christian which simply does not carry into his own life” (63), wherein Paul remained committed to Judaism both before and after his vision on the road to Damascus. Still, the term is theoretically useful, in that it accurately captures the rhetorical structure of Paul’s treatment of the

a poisonous prescription. To see what Paul is doing in this regard, we must turn once more to Galatians: in particular, to Paul's reinterpretation of Jewish genealogy.

According to Jewish tradition, the Jews are descendants of Abraham, but Abraham had two sons: Ishmael, born of an ill-conceived union between Abraham and his servant Hagar, and Isaac, born in fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and his wife Sarah. Of the two, only Isaac is understood to be the inheritor of the covenant between God and Abraham. After his birth, Ishmael is cast out, while Isaac becomes Abraham's sole heir. It is from Isaac, therefore, rather than from Ishmael, that Jews traditionally trace their ancestry. Not so, however, for Paul. He writes:

...Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as a result of a divine promise. These things are [to be taken] figuratively. The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mt. Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: this is Hagar. Now Hagar... corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.... Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise.... Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman. (Galatians 4:22-31)

In a radical revision of the traditional reading, Paul appropriates the Jews' genealogical claim to the Abrahamic covenant and arrogates it to himself and to his

Abrahamic lineage in Galatians, where—quite contra-*halacha*, he arrogates that lineage to the community of Christ while pruning unbelieving Jews decisively from the family tree.

fellow believers in Christ. Jewish identity, as a category, is neither erased nor overcome. It remains essential to early Christian self-conception, but it has been split in two: on the one hand, there is “present Jerusalem”, yoked to Mosaic law, to the flesh, and to slavery; on the other, there is “spiritual Jerusalem,” linked to God’s promise and to freedom (Nirenberg 56-7). But if Paul maintains the category of Jewishness, and even grants it salvific potential, he nevertheless renders the position of his present Jerusalem—and thus of normative Judaism—entirely untenable. The implications of the pernicious binary he creates become immediately apparent, as Paul himself is moved to expel the Jews from the fellowship of Christ, writing “But what does Scripture say? Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman will never share in the inheritance of the free woman’s son” (Galatians 4:30). The Jew, qua Jew, has no place here.

Which brings us to the moment in 2 Corinthians where Paul crystalizes his aesthetic theology and the Jew’s place within it in a single, unforgettable phrase: “for the letter kills, but the spirit gives life” (3:6). Paul makes this declaration in the context of discussing the new covenant represented by his proto-Christian faith. As in Galatians, Paul positions that covenant as an extension of Jewish principles which nevertheless renders Jewish praxis and Jewish law moot. Again, Paul’s theology is structured around a transcendent ontology skeptical of aesthetics which locates truth in the realm of ideal forms, outside the sphere of the material, and outside the sphere of representation, linguistic or otherwise. And again, Paul produces a binary arrangement which assigns to the Jew and Judaism all the negative polarities of his construction—the material body, language, contingency, and ultimately death—while assigning to faith in Christ an opposing set of positive attributes: the Spirit, meaning, immutability, eternal life. Much

of Paul's approach will strike readers as familiar at this point, but it's worth lingering over for its play with a small constellation of related ideas, e.g., language, transience, and death, which gathers force and resonance as Paul elaborates his point. He writes:

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is

freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:7-18)

Paul returns in this passage to the theme of supersession he established in Galatians but in a different vein. Whereas in Galatians Paul took aim at Abraham, here the target is Moses and the text of what Paul calls "the old covenant," i.e., Torah. Paul's argument is straightforward enough: Moses and his Torah are wholly surpassed by Jesus' new covenant, which displaces the Mosaic dispensation and offers a direct apprehension of the divine that Torah cannot touch. The primary shortcoming of the Torah, meanwhile, as well as of the Judaism that grows out of it, is that it is mired in text and textuality, or perhaps more accurately, in signification, which Paul—via the Greeks—associates not only with the material, but also with the transitory. For him, the signifier is a mediating figure, and as such always already passing away, always already moving toward its own obliteration in the final apprehension of the signified. Which is why Paul contrasts the law written in ink or carved on stone tablets with the law written by the Spirit on the human heart. Where the latter is embodied, present and wholly alive, the former is disembodied, dissociative, inert.

The Jews' error, as Paul constructs it in the figure of the veil, lies with their inability to discern this distinction, and indeed with their perverse tendency to elevate the signifier and thus to confuse or invert what Paul sees as the proper representational order. As Paul notes, in Exodus, when Moses descends from Mt. Sinai to present the Torah to the people Israel, his face is illuminated with the radiance of God; but the radiance fades, and so Moses veils himself to prevent the Israelites from witnessing that

diminution. In Paul's reading the veil takes on two meanings: it represents on the one hand the Jews apparent inability to acknowledge the transitory nature of the written law and on the other their stubborn refusal to recognize the subordinate status of the signifier in relation to the signified—that is, the subordinate status of the letter to the spirit and its ultimate incarnation in Christ. Paul imagines the Jews as fetishists of the word.

Paul is not projecting here; or anyway he is not *only* projecting. These sorts of anti-Jewish or antisemitic constructions often emerge in a complex dialectic with “the actual condition and behavior of actual Jews” (Beller 3). Such is the case here: for the word, the letter, the text—truly, all the concomitant relations of signification—are indispensable to Judaism. To quote the anthropologist Melvin Konner, “There can have been no time when there were Jews but no text because text was of their essence. They belonged to it even more than it belonged to them. They very nearly worshipped it” (1).

This is not hyperbole. By the time of Paul's writing, there were functionally two Judaisms operating in tandem with each other: one focused on the rituals of the Temple as administered by the priesthood, and the other focused on Torah interpretation as facilitated by scribes and teachers such as the Pharisees. This second, Torah-centric Judaism likely had its origins in the Kingdom of Josiah, where, in approximately 622 BCE, the scroll of Deuteronomy first appeared. Deuteronomy rendered Torah study itself “a kind of devotion to God” and as such propagated a “parallel religion” rooted in private and communal reading and in hermeneutical discussion and debate (Konner 39). So, while Judaism in Josiah's time remained officially centered around Temple worship, sacrifice, and other rituals, the lives of Jews were now pervaded by a new form of observance: one more democratic, accessible, and intimate than they had previously

known. But if the discovery of Deuteronomy planted the seeds of Torah Judaism, the Babylonian captivity brought it to full flower. To return to Konner:

To say that the Babylonian exile was a cultural watershed for the Jews is an understatement. Their cities were crushed, their Temple destroyed, their leaders killed or captured; and yet, as before and since, they found strength in weakness. New leaders and teachers arose in exile, and as much as the people longed for the Temple, they had to find a substitute for its priesthood and sacrificial ritual.... They turned to abstractions because they had no choice....

The new faith-in-exile had to center on the Torah (Konner 38)

Even when the Babylonian captivity ended and the Temple was rebuilt in Jerusalem (in 515 BCE) Torah-centric Judaism continued apace, integrated with renewed Temple observance as “a fully realized and legitimate form of worship” (Konner 45). In the ensuing centuries, Torah Judaism grew in importance and complexity, eventually comprising a large and intricate body of extra-biblical teachings which, in the first century CE, was known as the “traditions of the fathers” (Schiffman 3). After the fall of the second Temple in 70 CE and the Jews’ expulsion from Jerusalem in 135 CE, this “vast corpus of traditions” would be redacted into the core texts of Rabbinical Judaism: the Mishnah, Midrash, and Talmud (Schiffman 3), all three of which remain essential to Judaism today. In short, a Torah-centric Judaism whose primary mode of worship was reading and interpreting the biblical text was indeed a vital force in Jewish life during the period of Paul’s writing, and it is not therefore inappropriate for Paul to identify Jews or Judaism with a religious devotion to text or textuality.

Nor is it inappropriate for Paul to imagine that there is something exceptionally material about Judaism in this regard. As noted, in the Jewish imaginary, language is a priori. The signifier does not *represent* the signified. It *constitutes* the signified. Consequently, Torah cannot be read metaphorically (nor for that matter analogically). The text is not, for Jews, a vehicle for some external referent which, once grasped, must displace it. Instead, text operates metonymically, as a particular embodiment or instance of the referent. This notion applies at a granular level, so that individual words, letters, and even diacritical marks, become imbued with semiotic potential and are understood as essential to the production of meaning. What we have in the Jewish approach to hermeneutics is a radical textual materialism wherein meaning is not positioned *outside* language, but rather emerges from language, from the system of signs itself, instantiated through the matrix of linguistic relationships that make up the body of the text (Handelman 62-5). Moreover, because meaning in the Jewish approach is so wholly imbricated with the system of signs, it can never be wholly resolved. As Handelman explains, where in Greco-Christian hermeneutics, meaning is arrived at via a process of transference, a process of substitution and cancelation which effaces difference—the signified superseding the signifier—in Jewish hermeneutics meaning arises out of juxtaposition, contiguity, and association, processes wherein difference is maintained, where resemblance never becomes identity, “as if” never becomes “is,” and where the signifier, along with the representative tension it embeds—the ontological gap between word and thing—cannot be canceled or overcome. Jewish hermeneutics, therefore, is always propositional (Handelman 55)

Paul's antipathy to the letter must be understood in this context. Ultimately, his critique of Moses and the Mosaic dispensation derives from his recognition that Jewish aesthetic theology as articulated in Torah-centric, textual Judaism is antithetical to the proto-Hegelian logic of his own burgeoning Christian philosophy. It quite literally disables the substitution—Spirit for letter—at the heart of the Christian project. Which is why the letter, in Paul, has such destructive agency. In so far as it insists on the autonomy of the signifier, it permanently reinscribes its difference from the signified, and in so doing blocks the signified from becoming, thereby, in transcendental terms, committing a sort of linguistic deicide. The letter kills, indeed.

However, Paul's rejection of Jewish hermeneutics and its attendant aesthetic philosophy is inconsistent and incomplete. He remains tethered to the Jewish tradition and to Jewish hermeneutical praxis. Even in 2 Corinthians, Paul avails himself of that praxis, basing a portion of his argument on the Jewish hermeneutical principal *kal v'chomer*. As Susan Handelman explains, the term translates roughly as "from the light in weight to the heavy" and refers to a species of logical amplification or diminution, a movement from a minor premise to a major or vice versa, an argument a fortiori (52). Per Handelman, "the simple kal v'chomer would be, 'If A has X, then B certainly has X.' In its more complex form, it becomes, 'If A, which lacks Y, has X, then B, which has Y, certainly has X'" (53). Paul employs this mode of reasoning when he argues that if the old ministry, Judaism, though mired in the transitory, death-bound materiality of the letter, nevertheless "came with glory," the new ministry, the ministry of the Spirit, which, having shed the veil of Jewish devotion to the signifier, perceives at last the eternal living signified, must be even more glorious.

Paul's use of a Jewish hermeneutical principle in 2 Corinthians is understandable. By his own admission in Acts 22:3-5, Paul had been well trained in that methodology by his teacher Gamaliel—himself a student of Hillel's (Schiffman 3). Nor does it stand out as unique; Paul employs Jewish hermeneutical techniques consistently, if haphazardly, throughout the epistles. But it is more than just an amusing contradiction. As Judith Butler argues (by way of Lacan) the production of a coherent and legible identity always involves psychological trauma, a severing of the subject into self and other: a divorce between that which can be recognized and incorporated into the self and that which cannot. But as is the manner of trauma, this process is recursive. The other cannot be done away with. It remains, repressed but recurring, conditioning the self's continual dissolution and reconstruction (Butler 235-36). Something of the same process is at work in the epistles, with Christian aesthetic theology cast in the role of the self and Jewish aesthetic theology cast in the role of the other.

And this is as specifically true of the *kal v'chomer* in 2 Corinthians as it is of any of Paul's lapses into Jewish hermeneutics. Consider that, running parallel to Paul's *kal v'chomer* argument is another, more classically syllogistic set of predications: "all true ministries bring glory; Judaism is a true but lesser ministry, therefore Judaism brings a lesser glory; the ministry of Jesus is a truer and greater ministry, therefore it brings a greater glory." Here, all the relations are relations of class or type. The important step is to show that Christianity and Judaism are species in the same genus—both, indeed, are authorized entirely by their identification with that genus. But that is not how *kal v'chomer* works at all. There is no authorizing universal category within *kal v'chomer*. The method of predication is based not on the cancellation of difference, but on the

“perception of resemblance despite difference” (Handelman 53-54). One might even go so far as to say that difference is the authorizing term, for in the complex version of *kal v’chomer*, the *lack* of similarity propels the amplification: If A, which *lacks* Y, has X, then B, which *has* Y, certainly has X.”

Here is the specter of a Jewish aesthetic difference which poses a significant threat to the thrust of Paul’s theological reasoning. Recall that Paul wishes to collapse the distinction between the representative and the real, between the flesh and the spirit, in a form of divine synthesis. He writes: “We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image” (2 Corinthians 3:18). This sort of synthesis, while being perfectly plausible within the relations of Greco-Christian thought, is not, however, permitted by *kal v’chomer*, which maintains an ongoing distinction between terms. A does not become B, nor may their differences be effaced, because it is precisely their dissimilarity that enables the transfer of meaning between them. Paul’s use of *kal v’chomer* in this passage then becomes like the proverbial fly in the ointment, a bit of Jewish grit left to trouble the workings of an otherwise finely calibrated Christological rhetoric. That trace is not negligible. It marks the embedding of a disallowed Jewish sensibility within Greco-Christian aesthetics, and indeed that sensibility will recur, haunting the construction of the Western cultural edifice and even in time conditioning its reimagining.

So where does all this leave us? What can we say, at last, of Paul and his contribution to anti-Jewish poetics within Western aesthetic discourse? We can say that without him, it would not exist. At least not in the form it has taken. Because Paul’s epistles produce its defining character—mapping a Christological ontology onto Greek

aesthetic philosophy—as well as its defining set of rhetorical topoi: the Jew is blind; the Jew is a literalist; the Jew is a materialist, exiled in the letter as in the body, and as such bound up in the death of the body, which is also, from the Greco-Christian perspective, a counterpoint to the death of metaphor, i.e. the evacuation of the vehicle of metaphor in favor of the realization of some emergent truth. And so the Jew, with Paul, becomes superfluous, a vestige of the old spiritual dispensation, to be discarded in favor of a newly incipient transcendence—a cognitive revolution, but one in which the Jew has no place. One in which, as at this point seems only too well established, the Jew is he who, by definition, does not belong: outsider, foreigner, stranger; the Jew is grist, the Jew is grime, the Jew is dirt.

3 Augustine, Chaucer, and the Grounds of Modernist Poetics

By defining the Jew as resolutely other, Paul's epistles also hold the dubious honor of instantiating a major problem of Christendom itself, since by positioning the Jew as the perennial other of Greco-Christian aesthetic theology, Paul's writing precipitates the Jewish question, which has less to do with Jews—except when it leaves us slaughtered—than with purifying the body of Christendom, or the West, of its own moral horror. This too, one may lay at Paul's door. The heavy leg work, however, was done by his redactors, and by the dozens upon dozens of thinkers and writers across multiple centuries who followed his lead and aped his rhetoric. Regardless of Paul's intent, one of the more tangible results of his play with the figure of the Jew was the development of a powerful and deeply destructive strain of Christian thinking known as the *argumentum contra Iudaeos*, the argument against the Jews.

That argument experiences especially fervid development in the second century as internecine Christian conflict drove debates about proper Christian behavior and belief. Those debates in turn expanded the scope of Paul's initial rhetorical onslaught to encompass all manner of calumny. Here, Christian theological concerns mingled with ancient Roman prejudice and the mothballed accusations of a wide range of anti-Jewish sentiments collected from the far corners of Empire. Add to that a tradition of intra-religious Jewish conflict and its accompanying damning rhetoric, and the result was a

toxic admixture of anti-Jewish fantasy encompassing everything from the Jews' stiff-necked perversity to early iterations of the blood libel and the charge of deicide.

Again, one must acknowledge the fact that the argument contra Iudaeos was deployed primarily as a means of policing Christians, not Jews—though Jews might also find themselves on the receiving end of it. The argument functioned ostensibly as “a species of forensic rhetoric, the art of framing a persuasive case against an opponent by caricaturing that opponent’s position” (Fredriksen “Augustine and Thinking” 2). The method is not unlike the cry of “Pharisee” in the evangelical world today (a denuded echo of Paul’s original complaints), a caution and disavowal—a warning sign: turn back, wrong way, dead end. Thus, “by availing themselves of the rhetorical ammunition of anti-Judaism, these contestants [i.e. writers on any side of an intra-religious debate] could authorize their views, back light their arguments and frame their fights by appeals to [Christian] Scripture,” invoking a legitimizing grounds for their arguments while simultaneously undermining their opponents’ case as rooted in a spiritually perilous (i.e. a Judaizing) misunderstanding (“Augustine and Thinking” 1). According to critic Paula Fredriksen, who echoes Nirenberg on this issue, such “intra-Christian exchange of anti-Jewish insults became one of the drive wheels of patristic theology” (“Augustine and Thinking” 1).

Unsurprisingly, then, the argument contra Iudaeos experienced another period of growth following the ascension of Constantine and the conversion of the Empire. Though Constantine hoped to unite the fractured Roman world through the imposition of Christianity, the initial, rather counterintuitive result was increased division as “imperial sponsored creeds and other notionally consensus building efforts led to

heated debates, regional rivalries, splits within urban churches, rounds of episcopal exiles and other coercive measures” (Fredriksen, “Augustine and Thinking” 2). Once again, the charge of Judaization rang out against the heretics, though with greater stakes for Jews and those attacked as Jews, as now religious issues became a matter of imperial law (2).

The argument *contra Iudaeos* is not identical with the anti-Jewish philosophy of language in the epistles, nor with the modernist iteration of that philosophy, but they do inform each other, and there is significant conceptual overlap. Moreover, the argument *contra Iudaeos* clearly links Paul to the next figure in our triad of premoderns: St. Augustine of Hippo. Despite the large historical gap between the two men, Augustine was deeply invested in Paul, whose writings (along with those of his redactors) shaped Augustine’s thought on an extraordinary array of topics, including Jews. Still, Augustine’s relation to the argument *contra Iudaeos* is complex, perhaps even more so than his relationship to Paul’s legacy in general since, while Augustine often adapts and expands Paul, when it comes to his dealings with the argument against the Jews, his position is contradictory.

As Fredriksen describes, “Augustine... presents [as] both a conspicuous exception to this patristic intra-Christian tradition of anti-Jewish rhetoric, and a no less conspicuous, indeed a ferocious, continuator of it” (2). Augustine’s anti-Jewish rhetoric appears primarily in his sermons, particularly in the one-hundred and twenty-four sermons he gave on the Gospel of John, no less than sixty of which contain “appreciable anti-Jewish material” and somewhere “between fifteen and seventeen [of which] are wholly taken up with it (Efroymson qtd. in Fredriksen “Augustine and Thinking” 6). Nevertheless, it does not appear that Augustine harbored any pronounced personal animosity toward Jews.

Evidence of Augustine's encounters with and/or attitudes toward flesh and blood Jews is scant (Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews* 307-14), and Augustine's later defense of the Jews, and of Judaism, must mitigate against too close an identification between him and his writings in this corpus.

Rather, as his contemporaries and predecessors had done, Augustine availed himself of a ready-made rhetorical weapon. The Jews who appear in his sermons are hermeneutical Jews. Fredriksen explains the hermeneutical Jew as a construct of the argument contra Iudaeos, a "personified teaching device" that stands in for "wrong understandings of [the] scriptures" or alternatively operates as both a positive and negative exemplar: "Not even the Jews do X," "Do you want to act like the Jews?" ("Augustine and Thinking" 7). In a sense, then, the hermeneutical Jew is a punching bag, a straw man: lumpen and misshapen from his many beatings. He bears only a distorted resemblance to actual Jews but embodies anti-Jewish fantasies and in so doing enables a basic mechanism of, in this case, Christian self-identification: that is, the mechanism of expulsion, wherein the boundaries of subjectivity are defined and reinforced by the excision of some other identity comprising an abject composite of all that is illegible or threatening to the subject. Wherever the hermeneutical Jew is invoked, he leads by adverse example—there but for the grace of God go I.

Such is the case whenever Augustine invokes the Jew as Christianity's shadow. Yet Augustine also pens a defense of Jews and Judaism, and this must be accounted for. Fredriksen reports that Augustine's move to what she calls his argument pro-Iudaeos is precipitated by two interlocutors: Jerome, an older member of the Catholic clergy, and Faustus, a one-time "Manichaean colleague" ("Augustine and Thinking" 2). In the former

case, unfolded across a series of letters dating to the 390s and early 400s CE, Augustine roused Jerome's wrath by daring to question his translation of Paul's "Letter to the Galatians." Augustine took especial issue with Jerome's read on the disagreement between Paul and Peter regarding whether gentile converts to Christianity ought to maintain traditional Jewish observance in matters of *halacha*. In Jerome's translation, the disagreement—and Peter's apparent Judaizing—is only a pretense, enabling Paul and Peter to enact a pedagogical play "for the edification of the community" (Fredriksen "Augustine and Thinking" 3). The conclusion of the incident is foregone: as Paul argues, the law has been superseded and the maintenance of traditional Jewish practice is no longer necessary. Peter is in the wrong.

Augustine objects first that Paul would never bear false witness and that to impugn Paul with the charge of lying, even for pedagogical reasons, would present a dangerous precedent that could undermine the truth claims of the entire New Testament (Fredriksen "Augustine and Thinking" 3). Fredriksen is keen to highlight Augustine's emerging—arguably quasi-rabbinical⁵—concern with reading the Bible "in a way that

⁵ The hermeneutical method of the rabbis is called PARDES, an acronym encapsulating four levels of textual interpretation: *peshat* (the literal), *remez* (meaning "hint" and comprising an awareness of the various contradictions, lacunae, inconsistencies, et al in the text), *drash* (a metaphorical understanding, reached by theorizing around the hints in the text), and finally *sod*, a mystical revelation exceeding the bounds of analysis. But while it is tempting to see this method as hierarchical, that reading is incorrect. For the rabbis, all four levels of meaning operate simultaneously, providing equally valid readings even when those readings are contradictory. Augustine's assertion that one must read literally as well as figuratively mirrors the rabbinical insistence on the integrity of *peshat* even in the face of the understanding of *drash* or the revelations of *sod*. Intriguingly, it may be no accident that Augustine's pro-Iudaeos material partakes—in some form—in Jewish hermeneutical methodology. A similar pattern emerges much later in the work of HD and Stevens who avail themselves of Jewish methodologies and figures as a means of contravening the dominant traditions of modernism, or more broadly the dominant traditions of Western culture: an indication perhaps that even at this early date, the argument contra -Iudaeos was having an unintended effect, activating the very latent antihegemonic or countercultural potentialities it wished to suppress and in so doing, in a sense, materializing its own long-feared nemesis.

respected its ‘historical’ or ‘literal’ (*ad litteram*) or ‘specific’ (*proprie*) meanings as well as its spiritual, figural ones” (3), Augustine objects that there is no reason to imagine that Paul and Peter themselves were not practicing Jews. Indeed, Augustine imagines they would be so since Christ himself followed the law and since, by extension, God must—at least at the time—have vouchsafed its demands (3).

Augustine had already elaborated this argument extensively in the response to Faustus’ *Capitula* he penned circa 276. Faustus, for his part, took the standard Manichean line, vigorously attacking “Catholic teachings on creation, incarnation, and (bodily) resurrection; on the authority and integrity of the New Testament scriptures, and on the Church’s double canon of Old and New Testament” (Fredriksen “Augustine and Thinking” 4). Much of the argument is based in the writings of the mid-second century theologian Marcion, the first to compile a Christian canon. Marcion’s canon, however, does not include Torah or Tanakh (the so-called Old Testament). Marcion rejected both as he rejected the dispensations of *halacha* generally. For him, Judaism is wildly off-base. Its God is a fleshly god, a lower divinity or *kosmokrator*:

a god who made flesh, blessed flesh, commanded fleshly *lateria*; who enjoined marriages and procreation; who ordered men into battle, or who slew them himself; and who established a fleshly Law (focused as it was on circumcision, food, and blood sacrifices). (Fredriksen, “Augustine and Thinking” 4)

Following Paul—who wrote, “I know that nothing good dwells in my flesh (Romans 7:18)—Marcion and later Faustus and the Manichees generally found “the fleshly body... evil” (*Augustine and the Jews* 111). As such, they could not imagine that this bodily-oriented Jewish god might have anything whatsoever to do with the neo-Platonic High

God of the New Testament, the God of Ideal forms: “unique, perfect, good, changeless, incorporeal, utterly transcendent, and so on” (65). Nor could they imagine that Judaism might be in any way connected to His gospel of “spirit, love, grace, and eternal life” (“Augustine and Thinking” 4). Instead, they imagined that Jesus, and all the prophets before him stretching back to Moses, had in fact come not to fulfill the law but to abrogate it, not to transform Judaism but to condemn it (*Augustine and the Jews* 111). Thus, Marcion rejected not only Jewish religious practices but also the scriptures they were based on. He argued, further, that any instances in the canonical New Testament in which Jewish practices or scriptures were praised or defended must be instances of textual corruption inserted by later Judaizers to deform the faith. Purging Christianity of such influences meanwhile would perfect the faith, revealing its wholly spiritual and decidedly un-Jewish character (“Augustine and Thinking” 4).

Faustus borrowed a great deal from Marcion, but he augmented Marcion’s arguments by couching them in anti-Jewish rhetoric drawn from the North African Catholic theologian Tertullian whose own writing had, ironically, originally been directed *against* Marcion (Fredriksen “Augustine and Thinking” 4). Here, then, is a perfect demonstration of Nirenberg’s contention that consistency is no hallmark of anti-Judaism and that, indeed, the rhetorical Jew may serve in any role, so long as it is the role of adversary. Faustus’ rhetorical bid put Augustine in an awkward position. Tertullian’s arguments were already integrated into the rhetoric of North African worship—and so familiar to, even internalized by, both Faustus’ and Augustine’s audience. Worse, read as Faustus read them, they implicated the Church, positing that Catholics were the inheritors of an untenable contradiction vis-à-vis their attitude toward Jewish law. In this regard,

Faustus elaborated Tertullian's rejection of the Jews as a people so perversely worldly as to have required a fleshly law to constrain them. God, in Tertullian's construction, had no real interest in such bodily ablations but understood the idolatrous Jews' stiff-necked need for them and, what is more, encrypted the law so that—properly read, i.e., spiritually read—it could be understood for what it truly was: a “code for Christ” (Fredriksen “Augustine and Thinking” 4). Faustus saw in Tertullian evidence of the Catholic Church's revulsion of the Jews, Jewish law, and the Jewish scriptures, and argued that Catholic resistance to Manichaeism was wrong headed on that front, and moreover that the Catholic dual canon, embracing both Old and New Testaments, alongside official Catholic reverence for the former, was intolerably hypocritical (4).

Augustine could have responded from Tertullian's own playbook. After all, Tertullian hadn't rejected Jewish scripture or Jewish law outright. He rejected the Jews: a people so innately, idolatrously materialist that only a materially quantifiable law might curb their appetites. But the law itself, Tertullian wrote, is an allegory. It speaks of physical things as a means of representing the spiritual. The law therefore is not the problem. The Jews have merely failed to interpret the law properly. Augustine might have taken much the same tack, deflecting Faustus' assault onto the Jewish people and claiming that both the scripture and its derivations in *halacha* might be understood allegorically. As a nice anti-Jewish corollary, he might even have argued that Faustus' refusal to see that allegorical angle amounted to a breed of Judaizing (Fredriksen “Augustine and Thinking” 4).

Yet this is precisely what Augustine does not do. Instead, he counters with much the same argument he used with Jerome, that Scripture must be understood literally and

in its particulars: if the text reports that God gave the Law to Moses at Sinai and praised the Jews for following it, then the text means what it says—without corruption and without the need for any hermeneutical house-cleaning. Further, and far more provocatively, Augustine asserts that regardless of the fleshly preoccupations of the law and scripture, the Jews were correct in their interpretation and justified in their observance:

‘The Jews were right to keep all these things:’ immersions and seasons and food laws and *most* especially blood sacrifices and circumcision—because only by doing so could they have enacted the law by their behavior, in the flesh, in historical time. (Augustine Faust. 12.9 qtd in Fredriksen “Augustine and Thinking” 5)

In this way, the salvific teleology of Christianity becomes dependent on Jewish religious observance—at least in this pre-Christian period. But after all, Christ himself kept the commandments, so even then, fulfillment of the law must indeed be fulfillment of God’s word.

To be sure, post-resurrection, the observances of the synagogue were to be discarded. The spiritual tenor of their message had been discerned, so to hang on to those practices in the wake of their obviation could only be perverse. That as a matter of history they had clearly *not* been discarded, that the Jewish community had continued to practice and to elaborate their ritual observances over the course of centuries, often under significant duress, could only be a sign that such perversity was somehow vouchsafed by God. Augustine’s argument runs like this: “[The continued practice of the Jews is a marvel to be greatly respected (*revera multum mirabile*)...The Jewish nation under

foreign monarchs whether pagan or Christian has never lost the sign of their law, by which they are distinguished from all other nations and peoples (*c. Faust 12.13* qtd. in Fredriksen 5). Note the phrasing around “*sign of their law* [emphasis mine].” For Augustine, *halacha* was already a sign, that is a signifier for some other signified, i.e., the incarnate Christ. Here, though, *halacha* comes to operate not just spiritually, but socio-politically: like the Mark of Cain, a sign of both divine displeasure and of protection (5). The displeasure was easy to see. Scattered amongst the nations, the Jews lived as second-class citizens everywhere they settled—abject, debased, subject to restrictive regulation and to acts of violence. The protection, on the other hand, was apparent in their survival as a coherent people and in the incomprehensible—but indispensable—resilience of their faith. This is not merely a validation of Jewish practice in the time of Jesus. It is a validation of contemporaneous Jewish practice as well (5).

Whence such protection? For what reason were the Jews and their Law preserved? Why would God maintain the old dispensation or keep the once Chosen dangling on a fraying string? Why? In a word, to be a sign. That is Augustine’s position on the utility of Jewish existence. It is known as the “witness doctrine,” and it argues that the Jews, their scriptures, and practices must be preserved so that the Jews may continue to act as unwitting witnesses for Christ. For Augustine, the Jewish scriptures, read properly, prophesy the coming of Jesus. Meanwhile, the Jews’ rejection of Jesus, foretold as it was in scripture, proves scripture’s accuracy. So Jewish existence both aids the spread of Christian prophecy, as the Jews carry it wherever they go in their peripatetic exile, and confirms its veracity, as their continued unbelief, paired with their abject stature, demonstrates their hermeneutical error and, as a corollary, the obvious rightness

of the Christian interpretive framework. As Augustine put it, “They testify to the truth by their not understanding it” (*Faust.* 16.21 qtd in Fredriksen “Augustine and Thinking” 5). The argument is as disappointing as it is circular since it only appears logical if one assumes the premise—that the text of Tanakh prophecies Christ—to be true. But that is hardly its most dizzying feature. Rather, that distinction belongs to the idea that Augustine’s witness doctrine ought to be understood somehow as an argument pro-Iudaeos. Fredriksen makes this claim in her article “Augustine and Thinking with Jews,” and she makes a much more concerted version of it in her book *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism*. The claim is surprising since elsewhere Fredriksen’s criticism is nuanced, incisive, and insightful—and I quite clearly owe her a significant debt of scholarship—yet on this point we part ways.

A defense of Jews and Judaism is not what the witness doctrine is. As a matter of imperial law, it meant that Jews were at least nominally protected from death, forced conversion, or ban: “no monarch whether pagan or Christian will ‘kill’ Jews... that is, will force them to stop living as Jews (Augustine *Faust.* 12.13 qtd in Fredriksen, “Augustine and Thinking” 5). Yet one would not call such safeguards robust. They do not, for example, guarantee Jews’ rights, carve out a place for them in civil society, provide for equal opportunity, create new possibilities for Jewish life or practice, or curb even for an instant any of the pronounced abuse heaped on Jews within Christian lands during any part of the Middle Ages. The witness doctrine provided a rationale for the fact of the Jews’ continued existence. It did not uplift the community.

Also, one might argue convincingly that the witness doctrine is itself fundamentally antisemitic. That it instrumentalizes Jewish suffering seems almost too

obvious. For if one were to perceive in the world happy and prosperous Jews, rather than miserable, downtrodden ones, one might not conclude so quickly or so easily that their faith had betrayed them. The witness doctrine, then, only really functions if/when the Jewish community is wretched—and that is because, according to the doctrine, Jews can only function as the right kind of witnesses when they are wretched. Suffering is a prerequisite.

Moreover, the witness doctrine is not merely antisemitic but anti-Jewish. The teleology it embeds implicitly inscribes a historical progression away from Judaism, duplicating Paul's secessionist theology and once again relegating the Jew to the position of expendable metaphorical vehicle, instrumentalizing Jews themselves in the process. So, while there may have been certain positive practical effects of the witness doctrine, those effects are limited: ultimately, the doctrine is rather more contra than pro-Iudaeos in its theory and structure.

So much then for the argument contra-Iudaeos, at least as it appears in Augustine's writings. But we are not quite ready to move on from Augustine. While Augustine's engagement with the argument contra Iudaeos allows us to track the imbrication between his work and anti-Judaism, it does not allow us to see how that relation impacted his understanding of rhetoric or poetics. For that, we must turn to *De Doctrina Christiana* or *On Christian Teaching* (ca. 397-496), which is, according to critic D.W. Robertson, "the single most important work on exegesis [in the medieval period]" and one whose philosophy "had a large share in creating the pattern of a culture which endured in the West throughout... the Middle Ages" and on into the Renaissance (qtd in Handelman 111).

What one does not see a lot of in *de Doctrina*, however, are Jews. Though the occasional figure may amble through the text, Jews do not—as they often do in other texts by other writers of the period—play an outsized role in Augustine’s theorizing. When they do appear, however, they do so in their typical guise as pedagogical characters. For instance, when Augustine discusses the “correct discernment of ambiguous signs,” he focuses on the “twin dangers in scriptural interpretation: understanding figurative expressions literally and literal expressions figuratively” (Fredriksen “Augustine and the Jews” 193). Jews, writes Augustine, are especially prone to the former error, reading *ad litteram*, i.e., carnally, and thus missing the higher spiritual meanings of scripture: “failing to raise the mind’s eye above physical creation in order to absorb eternal light” (*Christian Teaching* 3.5, 9 qtd in Fredriksen 193). Jews remain, in Augustine as in Paul, and throughout the argument contra Iudaeos, enslaved to the letter as to the flesh.

Still, *de Doctrina*, coming late in Augustine’s career—around 396—coincides roughly with Augustine’s work in *Against Faustus*. As such, the text contains elements of Augustine’s quasi-defense of Judaism. So it is that Augustine comes to argue that Jewish enslavement is of a different character than that of the other nations (*Christian Teaching* 3.6,10 qtd in Fredriksen 193). For the gentiles are enslaved—or would have been prior to hearing the Good News—to *useless* signs, signs of terrestrial, rather than divine authorship, lacking the power to enlighten. The Jews, meanwhile, are enslaved to *useful* signs (*signa*), that is, signs ordained by God to lead followers to true revelation—and indeed the more spiritual amongst them, such as the prophets, did receive that blessing. For this reason, according to Augustine, the Holy Spirit blessed humanity with the

comforts of scripture specifically through the auspices of the Jewish people (*Christian Teaching* 3.9,13 qtd in Fredriksen 193).

So far, so typical. Alluding to the witness doctrine, Augustine once again carves out a seemingly legitimizing space for Judaism that turns out to be a supersessionist trap. The figure is relatively uninteresting, as we have seen it before and as it largely reiterates Pauline tropes. Nonetheless, Susan Handelman argues that Augustine's engagement with, and even hostility toward, Jewishness is more pronounced in *de Doctrina* than it may appear—certainly more pronounced than an examination of Augustine's hermeneutical Jews would suggest. The problematic is buried in the deep structures of Augustine's argument where, Handelman claims, *de Doctrina* reinscribes the ancient conflict between Greek and Jewish thought on the relationship between language and ontological truth. That irrepressible demon rears its hoary head again.

We can begin to see what Handelman is referring to if we consider the distinction Augustine makes between useful and useless signs. A sign is useless when it lacks a transcendental signified, useful when it has one. This is why the Jews' adherence to scripture is justified, even if their reading is not. Scripture points beyond itself, beyond the system of culturally coded, "terrestrial" signs, to a true vision of the real embodied in Christ. What we have in this passage then is another instantiation of Greco-Christianity's silent ontology, privileging a post-linguistic apprehension of reality; indeed, privileging the notion that reality itself is extra-linguistic. But as noted, that notion is in and of itself anti-Judaic, opposed as it is to the Jewish conception of creation as fundamentally linguistic in nature.

The depth of Augustine's opposition to the linguistic model of reality is readily apparent in at least two places in *de Doctrina*: first, in Augustine's handling of what he calls the "aesthetics of obscurity" (Handelman 112) and second, in his theory of signs. Let's begin with the former. In Book II, Ch. 6 of *de Doctrina*, Augustine tackles the issue of obscurity or ambiguity in figurative language. He argues, in part, that humanity takes a unique pleasure in similitude, and for this reason figurative language is preferred over direct expression in scripture—though the cause of that pleasure Augustine neglects to address. He proceeds to an example in which he interprets a passage of scripture wherein the Church is compared to a beautiful woman: "Thy teeth are as flocks of sheep, that are shorn, which come up from the washing, all with twins, and there is none barren among them." Augustine opines on the effectiveness of the metaphor, reading the teeth as saints cutting men off from spiritual error and the sheep as men, now newly baptized and shorn of worldly care, together creating and tending the "two precepts of love" (whatever they are) with "no one of them sterile in this holy fruit" (*On Christian Doctrine* 36-8 qtd in Handelman 112).

The interpretation, in Handelman's words, is "rather awkward" (113), but its true awkwardness lies in its insistence that the figure has been sufficiently read at all. Augustine, as Handelman is careful to illustrate, approaches the passage from a typological perspective, seeking "an abstract pattern, or symbolic one-to-one equivalent of meaning" that might allow him to translate the passage into its proper context: a description of the Church. Augustine does not entertain the possibility that obscurity might lead to multiple meanings (as do the rabbis), nor does he seek to infer meaning from the words themselves or from the play between them. The intended referent is

absolute and subsumes all other possible semantic valences (Handelman 112). For him, and—because of him—for Christian aesthetic theory through the Renaissance, figuration is construed as a hint or clue, leading humanity to discover a higher spiritual meaning, which once realized, annihilates the original figure (Handelman 113).⁶ That is the problem. Augustine’s interpretation overdetermines meaning, stressing the univocality and utility of the text. For Augustine, D. W. Roberts writes, “figurative expression is not of any value itself; it is valuable only as an adjunct to the intellectual search for truth....it is obvious St. Augustine was not concerned with any spontaneous associations his experience may have led him to have with teeth and sheep” (qtd in Handelman 113). Far from illuminating the text, then, Augustine’s reading serves only to denude its metaphor, stripping it of linguistic accoutrements and thus of the possibility of polysemy, yet again demonstrating the Greco-Christian tradition’s anti-Jewish “devaluation of the concrete aspects of language [in favor of] an abstract sense removed from the matrix of [words]” (Handelman 113).

With that, we arrive at Augustine’s theory of signs. Augustine’s great innovation was to understand the theory of signs as a theory of language. Prior to his writing, discussions of the sign in Greek philosophy, Roman rhetoric, and Christian theology were largely confined to nonlinguistic theories of inference (Handelman 113). Moreover, Augustine was the first to include the role of interpreter in his account of how signs function, adding “a psychological dimension to the concept of the sign” (Handelman

⁶ Augustine’s reading of figuration superficially recalls the rabbi’s hermeneutical methodology in its recognition that the text contains hints (*remez*) which invite interpretation, but Augustine’s apparent need “fix” or “freeze” a single, preferred interpretation falls short of the rabbi’s more radical embrace of ambiguity as indicating a simultaneity of multiple meanings.

113). Like Aristotle, Augustine conceived of the sign as something which, in its being, involved the being of some other, absent thing such that prints or tracks might be a sign of passing animals, for example (112, 113). Augustine's tripartite sign-structure, meanwhile, follows from the Stoics, who also subdivided signatory relations into three parts including signifier and signified, though Augustine replaces the Stoic's concept of the object—i.e., that which exists outside the play of signification—with a consideration of audience (112).

It may appear that by reinstating the hearer as a term in the construction of the signifying relationship, Augustine displaces the object and catapults us back into the system of signs—since the psyche, per Freud, is a morass of signification, and since the audience are themselves *signa* in both Aristotle's and Augustine's sense; that is, images of something else: the image—Biblically speaking—of God. Thus, in what Harold Bloom might call a strong misreading, Augustine's sign-system seems weirdly Jewish in its arrested contradictions: at once strikingly fragmented and yet wholly self-referential. A whole theology might be made from such a figure. But this is not Augustine's interest and runs directly against his intentions.

More significant for our purpose is the distinction between Augustine's theory of signs and Aristotle's, especially when it comes to their respective positions on the ontological nature of words. For both Augustine and Aristotle, written words are signs of spoken ones, and spoken words are signs of things. And both recognized that different communities might speak different languages, such that words and meanings might not maintain stable relations. But for Aristotle, spoken words are also signs of movements in the soul, and there is a sympathy between word and thing—even if that relation is neither

stable nor exact. Not so for Augustine. As Handelman posits, “The gap between word and thing become even more exacerbated here in Christian thought” (116), and with that the gap between Jewish and Christian hermeneutics as well.

Jewish hermeneutics never abandons the sign. Indeed, the sign is the crucial site of creation, whereby word calls thing into being. To limn the particulars of the word is to comprehend the divine structure, the only true reality, of the thing. Augustine takes the opposite position, privileging not words but vision: the apprehension of truth in the absence of mediation, without Paul’s wordy, gossamer veil to get in the way. “The movement from words to silence,” Joseph Mazzeo writes, “from signs to realities, is the fundamental presupposition of Augustinian allegorical exegesis” (qtd in Handelman 116). Ultimately, that movement must perforce leave text behind as an ancillary burden: “Thus a man supported by faith, hope, and charity... does not need Scripture except for the instruction of others. And many live by these three things in solitude without books” (Augustine *On Christian Doctrine* 30-33 qtd in Handelman 115). To paraphrase Handelman, from a Jewish perspective such a life is unthinkable (115).

But the final cancelation of the sign is without doubt the endgame of Greco-Christian hermeneutics as Augustine defines it. For language itself in Augustine’s conception is a condition of the Fall. After all, language is a desiring machine, but the object of its desire is always already absented from the scene of articulation. This absence enables linguistic multiplicity. That is to say, the absence of a transcendental signified necessitates the play of signifiers. That absence, that play, is unbearable to Augustine: “the loss of a stable referent that grounds the literal and proper meaning of words is a manner of exile” (Handelman 120). The idea is not unique to Augustine but is endemic to

Christianity and can be tracked back, naturally, ineluctably to Paul. As Handelman explains:

the Christian desire... is to escape the deferral and mediation of the text and language for a communion with pure presence. Language, interpretation, argument, and play of difference hinder the immediacy of direct union. For the Christian, the fact that language involves the absence of its referent is an unbearable circumlocution. [For this reason] Paul seeks to rend the veil of the text, attain the pure presence of the ultimate referent, collapse differentiation, bridge the gap between all signs and the ultimate signified. Jesus, as the word-become-flesh, redeems language, returns substance to shadows, collapses text, time, history, and the distance between man and God. And absolute presence means the end of language, the text, the law. (89)

In this sense, Christ's fulfillment of the law, promised in Mathew 5:17, comes to literal fruition: Jesus embodies the Word, not as sign—not as the *imago dei*—but as sacrament, a transmogrification of the flesh, now imbued with the Holy Spirit. Christ appears not as a representative of the divine, but as its realization. He is the son who is the father, the sign that is its origin, the Kantian *Ding an sich*: the thing itself independent of representation. But in that miraculous apparition lies the silencing of signification, the cancelation of all relations of reference.

This attitude explains the pride Augustine apparently took in the Church's gradual sloughing of certain unwieldy (possibly Jewish?) religious signs since the Resurrection: "We are not heavily burdened with the use of certain signs whose meaning we understand; rather we have few in place of many... and these are very easy to perform...."

Such are the sacrament of baptism and the celebration of the Body and Blood of the Lord” (Augustine *Confessions* III.8 qtd in Handelman 117). Note that the signs which are discarded are those “whose meanings we understand,” i.e., those forms, those vehicles, whose tenor has been ascertained. Signs of this type are properly disposed of, as their referent is known and thus their signifying capacity exhausted. But sacrament transforms the signatory relationship. Indeed, within the sacramental relation, signification is entirely disabled. The sacramental referent is not marred by unpalatable absence; it is wholly present in the sacrament, which ought to be read as a speech act, fulfilling in the moment of expression the ablution of baptism or the spiritual unification of communion, thus canceling itself as a sign in the process, since the sacrament, in the moment of its embodiment, no longer *refers* to anything at all. It is one with the referent in perfect utility, perfect univocality.

For Augustine, this is the ultimate in signification. Or rather, non-signification. Anything less is idolatry—or to be more accurate, Judaizing. Though Augustine does not use the word, he nevertheless associates Judaism with a tendency to adhere to signs *qua* signs and classifies that adherence as spiritual entrapment: a form of slavery (Handelman 117). Christian liberty, meanwhile, consists precisely in the freedom from signs; that is, in an escape from referentiality into fulfillment (117). So yet again, deploying the figure of the Jew makes legible a tricky issue in Christian metaphysics and delimits the borders of proper Christian belief and behavior—or in this case, Christian interpretive praxis.

Here too, there is tension with the object, meaning that the anti-Jewish fantasy is not entirely a fabrication, but bears some trace, however distorted, of actual Jewishness. Jews do indeed adhere to signs, but not in the sense that Augustine means. The Jews’

conception of the real was never, like the Greeks', fragmented into sign and signified: "There is no primal division between word and thing in Jewish thought, and no conception of reality in terms of Greek metaphysics or of truth as a totally self-identified present being. Jews adhere to signs because reality innately is constituted as linguistic for them" (Handelman 117). What is more, in a lovely reversal, Augustine's adherence to sacraments is idolatrous from the Jewish perspective, constituting an adherence to reified signs that in their insistence on absolute and immediate presence place themselves at odds with history, with time, with the sequential nature of human existence and with the natural unfolding, in time, of God's word (117). Augustine's sacraments are, to the Jews, so many golden calves.

Here we witness the systematization and, due to Augustine's remarkable influence on Christian thought, institutionalization of the twinned anti-Jewish and anti-linguistic tendencies latent in Paul. As John Freccero points out, Augustine's theory of signs, with its elevation of sacrament and its rhetoric of incarnation, renders poetics idolatrous in precisely the Jewish mode: an attempt to make words mean *without* a transcendental signified, without the grounding, authorizing presence that transforms them from empty signifiers into realities in their own right (Handelman 117).

Remarkably, Augustine carries this hostility to the word into his account of the creation in Book VI of the *Confessions*, wherein he challenges the traditionally Jewish view by arguing that the divine Word is of a different character than human speech: it is not "the linear, syllabic speech that is sounded and dies away, a speech expressed by the motion of some created thing subject to the laws of time" (Handelman 117). Rather, the Word is co-eternal with God. As such, it is indivisibly whole and cannot be made subject to

disintegration into linear phonemes or syllables that disclose their meaning in sequence: “for your Word is not speech in which each part comes to an end when it has been spoken, giving place to the next, so that finally the whole may be uttered. In our Word all is uttered at one and the same time” (Augustine *Confessions* XI:7 qtd in Handelman 119).

Thus, creation cannot be spoken into existence in the Jewish sense—sequentially, *ex-nihilo*—for such a thing would require in the first instance an atomization of the Word and in the second the existence of some physical mouthpiece “through which the words could be temporally spoken.” Within the Augustinian conception, this is an impossibility. Rather, creation proceeds *in toto* from the pre-existing Word, which following John was with God and which, simultaneously, was God (Handelman 118). History and semantics are yoked here, in a move that in some ways echoes the Jewish view of creation and presages Jewish modernist experiments in Objectivism. However, both are obviated, both cancelled in Augustine’s conception, for as Augustine imagines it, the failure of language to apprehend truth stems directly from its imbrication in time, which in turn renders it unacceptably synecdochic or metonymic, always in the position of substituting some inadequate part—some time-bound, incomplete utterance—for the revelation of the final and complete (divine) whole.

In contrast, synecdoche and metonymy are mainstays of Jewish hermeneutics, and non-fulfillment is arguably its fundamental mode, as Augustine seems aware (Handelman 88, 90, 117). Thus Jewishness—both Jewish identity and Jewish cultural praxis—materialize, in Augustine as in Paul, within a web or net of overdetermined associations; the Jew is a slave; the Jew is idolatrous; the Jew is a creature of time, trapped in the motion of history; the Jew adheres to language, and as such is marked as a postlapsarian

figure, a symbol of fragmentation, of the broken, the endlessly desiring, the permanently displaced. How convenient, then, for the modernists, that in the Jew they might discover such a potent metaphor. For if, as is routinely asserted, the experience of alienation and fragmentation, a feeling of being trapped in the indifferent sequences of history, was at the heart of the crisis of modernity, then Eliot is perfectly correct to have diagnosed the Jew—or at least the hermeneutical Jew—as its progenitor, writing in “Burbank with a Baedeker, Bleistein with a Cigar,” “the rats [and the rot for which they stand] are underneath the piles, the jew [*sic*] is underneath the lot” (22-3).

The gap between Augustine and Eliot is wider even than that between Augustine and Paul: a gap not only between centuries but also between theory and practice. Something must bridge that chasm. And something does. Literature. Rather a great deal of it. More than might be covered in this chapter. Freccero reports, for instance, that both Dante and Petrarch incorporate Augustinian sign theory, and in particular his notions of idolatry, into their respective works in the form of an overarching concern with the poetics of presence (Handelman 118). Indeed, within the Western literary canon, there is hardly any way to avoid the anti-Judaism embedded in Greco-Christian aesthetic-theology.

As English language literature goes, though, one need look no further than Geoffrey Chaucer’s 1387 *Canterbury Tales* for a salient example of the practical, poetical expression of anti-Jewish polemic. The prime instance therein is “The Prioress’s Tale,” which has long been notorious for its “linking of sadism, sentimentality, and anti-Semitism” (Price 197). The “Tale” tells the story of a seven-year-old Christian boy, kidnapped, murdered, and interred in a privy by the Jews of his town for the crime of

singing a hymn to the Virgin Mary as he crossed through their neighborhood on his daily commute to and from school. Following in the mode of the Marian miracle genre of which the story is part, the litle clergeon's body refuses to die, and he continues his hymn even from the depths of the excrement-filled pit into which he has been cast. His singing alerts the local authorities, who recover his body and proceed to torture and execute not only his murderers, but any amongst the Jews who knew of the crime: which, given that the Prioress only refers to Jews as a unit, may mean the city's entire population of Jews. This done, the clergeon's body is relocated to a nearby Cathedral, and his soul at last "borne away to Heaven" by the Virgin herself (Rambuss 77-8).

For obvious reasons, much criticism of "The Prioress's Tale" has parsed the question of Chaucer's feelings toward Jews, regarding which the critical consensus, rooted in the work of Florence H. Ridley (1964), has been that Chaucer's text simply reifies the virulent antisemitism common to the Middle Ages as a whole (Rex 107-8). Some critics, notably Richard Choeck (1950) and more recently Richard Rex (1984), dissent from this view, making the case that the evidence for Chaucer's bigotry is circumstantial and that, contra modern assumptions, a scripturally informed tolerance for Jews would likely have pertained in Chaucer's intellectual and social milieu (Rex 109)—a fact which suggests that Chaucer's deployment of antisemitic tropes in "The Prioress's Tale" may be ironic: a critique rather than a reification of popular medieval attitudes (Rex 122-3).

The question of Chaucer's antisemitism is beside the point, because even if intended satirically, the sheer number and surprisingly nuanced functioning of the anti-Jewish tropes in the text nevertheless render them essential to the "Tale's" construction

of meaning. One must perforce presume that Chaucer imagines his audience well-versed enough in such material to track a complex engagement, meaning that the text, satirical or not, nevertheless demonstrates the deep imbrication of these tropes within the broader culture of literate Christendom. But Chaucer's text also reiterates many of the concerns—with univocality, with the suppression of polysemy, with the articulation of a pure or sacramental subjectivity and the cancellation of the relations of signification—which pertain in Greco-Christian aesthetics, and it does so through a decidedly anti-Jewish lens, spinning the same sorts of connotative webs around the figure of the Jew as do Paul and Augustine. Here too, then, the implication is that the associations made between the Jew and these broader issues of Christian hermeneutics would themselves prove readily legible to Chaucer's audience, indicating their widespread adoption by the culture at large. That the text was written in English, the language of the people, rather than in the official language of the Church, Latin, only furthers the point, exhibiting the popular reach of both antisemitism and anti-Judaism respectively alongside their incorporation into the nascent tradition of English literature.

Moreover, "The Prioress's Tale" is particularly useful to this study in that it foregrounds a problematic that might, catapulted forward in history by several centuries and appropriately revised, be made to stand in for the crisis of modernity and to prefigure the modernist engagement with the aesthetics of anti-Judaism. In *Modernist Form and the Myth of Jewification* (2014), Neil Levi makes the case that the crisis of modernity is best understood as a crisis of subjectivity—that is, a crisis precipitated by the "traumatic recognition of the fundamental meaninglessness of socially inscribed identity" as well as by the recognition that the conditions under which one's identity, or rather subjectivity,

may be articulated are themselves essentially absurd. He argues concomitantly that, for many modernist writers, this specific understanding comes to legibility through the fantasy of Judaization (171). The “Prioress’s Tale” too engages in a fantasy of Judaization, one whose distortions and deformations similarly stem from a crisis of subjectivity experienced by the speaker, in this case the Prioress herself, Madame Eglentyne. What emerges from her anxious imaginings is an antisemitic screed, to be sure, but it is also a brilliant assay into the difficulties of subject-authorization in a historical moment marked by patriarchy and the abjection of women both generally and within the Church. For this reason, it may be read also as a guide to the modernists’ engagement with the problem of subject-formation, which in their historical moment is similarly destabilized by the conditions of its articulation—conditions which, though they are markedly different from those faced by the Prioress, nevertheless are similarly caught up in a kind of hysteria re: Judaization.

The discursive role of that fantasy is what is at issue in my analysis. Taking this approach, I follow the trajectory of Chaucer studies which has for the most part left off its debate over Chaucer’s antisemitism (a likely unanswerable question) to focus instead on explicating the rhetorical function of anti-Jewish or antisemitic tropes in *The Canterbury Tales* and in “The Prioress’s Tale” specifically. Broadly speaking, criticism has explored three unique avenues of interpretation in this regard: sociological, exegetical, and feminist. Each, however, utilizes the same basic notion, familiar to us from David Nirenberg but derived from feminist and post-colonial studies, most powerfully from Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) and Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* (1980), that the Jew, in Chaucer as in much of Western literary and philosophical discourse, operates as

an antipodal rhetorical device through which, or rather against which, ideal Western Christian subjectivities, both communal and individual, articulate themselves.⁷

Louis O. Fradenburg's foundational "Criticism, Anti-Semitism, and *The Prioress's Tale*" (1989) provides a case in point. Taking a sociological approach, Fradenburg argues that the antisemitic rehearsals enacted by the Prioress function as a necessary counterpart to her fantasy production of a Christian state free from internal ideological conflict as well as from the exigencies of history. Here, the violence done to the Jews in the "Tale" at once mourns and alibis the "self-repressions and self-silencings inflicted by Christian culture on itself" (82) throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as the Church, plagued by crisis and schism, increasingly came to imagine itself in totalizing terms, stressing "new ideals of organic unity, [and placing] new emphasis on the unity of the mystical body of Christian society, 'nativism' and nationalism" (87). A similar argument is made by Denise L. Despres in her 1994 article "Cultic Anti-Judaism and Chaucer's *Litel Clergeon*." Despres contends that "The Prioress's Tale" may be read as an "elaborate purification procedure" (415) of a type made popular by the teaching tradition imposed by the Fourth Lateran Council, wherein Eucharistic and Marian images were yoked to imply a parity between "individual purity and communal wholeness," and wherein the Jew was habitually figured as a dangerous pollutant—threatening to individual Christians as well as to the communal body-politic—whose symbolic abjection and subsequent expulsion or destruction was ritually re-enacted as part of a drive toward personal and communal salvation (426).

⁷ This basic approach animates multiple theories of medieval Jewish representation, including Kruger's "Spectral Jew," Dahan's "theological Jew," Cohen's "hermeneutical Jew," Biddick's "paper Jew," Tomasch's "virtual Jew," and Despres' "protean Jew."

The connection between the Jew, Mary, and salvation or redemption also forms the crux of the exegetical approach to “The Prioress’s Tale.” A key text in this vein is Richard Rambuss’s 1997 “Devotion and Defilement: The Blessed Virgin Mary and the Corporeal Hagiographics of Chaucer’s *Prioress’s Tale*.” Placing the “Tale” in the genre of Marian devotional, Rambuss focuses on its inscription of a central Marian theme: the reconciliation of flesh and spirit (85) achieved through the invocation of Mary’s body, whose doctrinal status—fully human, yet also the site of the incarnation—bridges the gap between the abject human body and the divine body of Christ (79). Rambuss touches on the role of the Jews only incidentally, treating them as scapegoats: symbols of a prurient fleshy-ness the “Tale” attempts to overcome (91-3). Sunghyun Jang, however, in “The Symbolism of the Pit in the *Prioress’s Tale*” (2013), further contextualizes Rambuss’ point, arguing that the “Tale” reiterates elements of Jewish/Christian theological debates over the status of Mary’s womb and, in its transformation of the Jewish privy into a site of Marian redemption, encompasses “a polemic against Jewish views on Mary’s body” (175).

Feminist critics too have made much of the overlap between themes of redemption/salvation and themes of embodiment/disembodiment in “The Prioress’s Tale,” but have pointed out (quite rightly) that, first, the entire thematic structure is articulated within hegemonic theological and social discourses that are deeply patriarchal, and, second, that it is articulated by a speaker who, as a female clergy member, occupies an extraordinarily compromised and ambiguous position vis-a-vis those discourses. As with the arguments over the “Tale’s” apparent antisemitism, opinions are divided over how to read the Prioress’s response to her situation. Timothy O’Brien (2001), Stephanie

Gaynor (1999), and Mary Llewelyn Price (2008), for example, imagine that the Prioress merely reifies the discourses of patriarchy, with O'Brien claiming that the Prioress engages in a sublimated form of violently heteronormative sexual economics designed to elicit narcissistic masculine desire, and Gaynor and Price claiming that the Prioress engages in an anxious bid for a personal, political, and authorial legitimacy whose terms are largely dictated by the derogatory views on women's bodies and sexual desires sanctioned by Church doctrine. In a related essay, "Reprioritizing the Prioress's Tale" (2013) Lisa Lampert posits that "through the figure of the Virgin and the scapegoating of the Jews, the Prioress presents a tale that shows the important, albeit subsidiary, role of the feminine in Christian piety, a depiction important to her own standing among the pilgrims" (91). On the other side of the debate, Kathleen Hobbs (1999) contends that the Prioress's seeming recapitulation of patriarchal gender norms acts as a cover, enabling her to "vent her frustrations" over women's abjection in the Church, "preserving her own security within her estate while at the same time criticizing the impossibility of her position" (195).

For each of the above critics, the "Tale's" antisemitism functions as the discursive double of its anti-feminism (Hobbs 187), authorizing a figural bleed between women and Jews, which, in turn, permits the symbolic substitution of Jewish bodies for female ones (Gaynor 375)—a move that proves essential to O'Brien's sublimation, Price, Gaynor, and Lampert's legitimation, and the camouflaging of Hobbs' reproach. Yet though many critics of "The Prioress's Tale" mark this overlap, only Gaynor and Lampert analyze it. Gaynor remarks that the Prioress is caught up in a "chain of othering" in which "the fantasy of the murderously perverse Jew... may relieve the pressure on a figure, like the

Prioress, to fill the space of abject other” (378). For Gaynor, the Prioress’s Jews are “the other of the other,” and their invocation as such is necessary to facilitate the Prioress’s assumption of “the position of authorized Christian subject” (378). Lampert agrees but points out that the Prioress and her Jews are also caught up in a hermeneutical debate—one brought on by the Wycliffe controversy and embedded throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. The crucial issue at stake in this debate is the stability or instability of language and its speakers as vessels for the divine Word. In this regard, Lampert argues that “The Prioress’s Tale” is devoted to achieving an absolute and final “ontological fullness” of the Word (Patterson qtd. in Lampert 97) by stabilizing “the production of meaning” (74) in and through language. The “Tale” accomplishes this stabilization by floating a theory of extra-linguistic feminine piety figured forth by the litle clergeon and the Prioress respectfully and shaped largely on the backs of the Jews, who are figured as agents of a corrupt literalism (82).

The overlap in the text between the concerns uncovered by Lampert and Gaynor and those expressed by Paul and Augustine should be clear; similarly, a certain resonance with the anti-Jewish dispensation promulgated by Greco-Christian aesthetics should also be apparent. The Prioress, impressed into Harry Bailey’s tale-telling game, must speak, and speak true, but she must also secure a rather rarefied position from which to do so. As Hobbs explains, that brief is impossible in a patriarchal culture wherein women, and ecclesiastical women especially, come to voice within a discourse fixated on the one hand on reifying patriarchal fantasies of women’s abjection and on the other on elevating women to an almost antiseptic status as conduits for incarnation (187). She writes:

Chaucer's Prioress plays out the unique predicament of the medieval monastic woman, as she must acknowledge her status as a daughter of Eve, doing penance for an inherited and inescapable sin, while she must simultaneously strive to meet the impossible requirements of the Marian ideal. Such a predicament forces the ecclesiastical woman to wallow in her inescapably bodied femininity while trying desperately to meet the standards of a monolithic dogma that requires her disembodiment. (187)

This, then, is a discourse in which the feminine subject is at once exalted and debased. An absurd position, and one far too riddled with contradictions to achieve the ontological fullness expected of a proper Christian subject. In response to this problem, the ingenious Madame Eglentyne turns to the Jews for a solution, producing an other of the other onto whom she may offshore her prior abjection, and whom she may then expel from her tale, thus purifying her subject position and authorizing her telling.

To begin such a reading of "The Prioress's Tale," one must turn first to Chaucer's description of the Prioress in the General Prologue, since readers are there given an initial glimpse of her character and, more importantly, of the problems she faces in producing a legible persona for herself. The key problem, as Price notes, lies with symbolic language (204), or perhaps more precisely with the potential for symbolic interpretation to go awry, producing readings that cut against those that may be desired. This errant potentiality is central to Chaucer's portrait, which, even as it lauds Madame Eglentyne for her modesty, her fastidiousness, her courtly manners and the seemliness of her dress, as well as for her charity and compassion, systematically undercuts each and every one of these attributes, enabling a counter-reading wherein the Prioress appears no longer as a

model of natural womanly grace, but rather as a more or less inept imposter simulating the conventions of upper-class medieval womanhood (Gaynor 384). Thus Chaucer, in his role as pilgrim-narrator, notices that the Prioress “peyned hire to countrefete cheere / Of court, and to been estatlich of menere, / and to ben holden digne of reverence” (139-41). In pilgrim-Chaucer’s eyes, it seems, Madame Eglentyne’s courtly and aristocratic bearing do not appear native to her but affected, the result of her desire to be seen—to be read—as worthy of the respect attached to her station.

As noted, however, the symbolic language—of dress and manners—that Madame Eglentyne deploys in this regard does not always work as she would like. Take for example, Chaucer’s depiction of her eating habits:

At mete wel tyaught was she with alle;
 She leet no morsel from her lippes falle,
 Ne wette hir fyngres in hir sauce depe;
 Wel koude she carie a morsel and wel kepe
 That no drope ne fille upon hire brest.
 In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest.
 Hir over-lippe wiped she so clene
 That in her coppe ther was no ferthyng sene
 Of grece, whan she drunken hadde hir draughte. (127-35)

The tone of these lines registers a certain awestruck admiration for the Prioress’s table manners, which themselves evince a remarkable ability to dematerialize, to disembody, the otherwise hopelessly physical act of ingestion. The Prioress’s concern with this issue is understandable in that, according to the teachings of the Church fathers, “a woman or

young girl is responsible for the preservation of her ‘bodily integrity’ and the containment of her own desire” (Bloch qtd. in Hobbs 189). Eating, of course, figures forth the body’s permeability as both an expression of and response to physical desire; as such, it is metonymically linked to sexuality. The Prioress’s extraordinary delicacy in matters of consumption is thus intended to operate as a sign of her virtue, her chastity—an essential requirement for women’s salvation according to the Church (Hobbs 191). But if this is the case, what is one to make of the foci of Chaucer’s description, which lingers indecorously on the Prioress’s fingers, lips, and breast⁸ and which recalls into spectral being precisely the crumbs and grease stains she so artfully evades?

Clearly, pilgrim-Chaucer’s portrait re-embodies the Prioress; moreover, it does so in a way that renders her not merely as physical being, but as an object of carnal interest. This is problematic enough, since women in the Middle Ages were often held responsible for producing masculine desire and considered de facto unchaste as a result (Hobbs 189). To make matters worse, though, the language of Chaucer’s description (possibly unintentionally, but nonetheless tellingly) permits an intertextual allusion insinuating that the Prioress’s deployment of the signs of chastity is instead a sign of her rampant and transgressive sexuality. The allusion is to Proverbs 30:20: “Such is also the way of the adulterous woman who eateth, and wipeth her mouth, and saith: I have done no evil” (qtd. in Gaynor 386). A similar contradiction is embedded in the motto *Amor vincit omnia* (love conquers all), inscribed on the golden brooch the Prioress wears dangling from a coral rosary around her wrist. The phrase might, of course, refer to God’s love and

⁸ And elsewhere touches upon her “nose tretys”, her “eyen greye as glas,” her “mouth ful small... softe and reed”, and her “fair forehead” (Chaucer 152-4).

signify the Prioress's dedication to a life of the spirit rather than of the flesh. However, the source of the motto is not scriptural; it is secular. The phrase appears in *The Romance of the Rose*, as well as in Virgil's *Eclogues*, and in both texts refers to physical love, to earthly desire and its consummation (Gaynor 386; Hobbs 189). Here again, a bothersome intertextuality interrupts and problematizes the Prioress's use of symbolic speech, smuggling in referents that destabilize her intended meaning, undermining her performance of proper womanly behavior.

What is curious, however, is that the same passage also links that performance, or rather its failure, its hollowness, to Jewishness, or more specifically to a perceived Jewish literalism. In this instance, Douglas Loney argues, the allusion is to "Jesus' censure of the Pharisees' empty ceremonialism" in Matthew 23:25-27: "You make clean the outside of the cup, but within you are full of rapine and uncleanness" (Loney qtd. in Gaynor 386-7). These stacked allusions—to Mathew, to Proverbs, to the *Romance*, to Virgil—illustrate the operation of a literary/symbolic matrix conflating womanhood, gross physicality, transgressive sexuality, polysemy, and Jewish identity. The matrix does not originate with Chaucer. It's entrenched within Greco-Christian aesthetic philosophy. But in keeping with that philosophy, the Prioress must extricate herself from this Jewishly coded matrix if she is to take on the role of authorized Christian subject.

The concern is apparent from the very beginning of "The Prioress's Tale," embedded in the lines where she sets her scene:

There was in Asye, in a great citee
 Amonges Christene folk a Jewerye
 Sustened by a lord of that contree

For foul usure and lucre of vileyne (488-91).

On the one hand, the reference to usury in this passage merely rehashes a standard antisemitic charge. Yet that charge cannot help but recall the usury at work in “The Shipman’s Tale”—the tale preceding the Prioress’ own. Though never called usurious outright, the merchant in “The Shipman’s Tale” is a currency trader, and his practice of creating money from money reflects the scholastic critique of usury, which condemns it on the grounds that, in its sterility and self-sustaining circularity, it distorts the natural process of sexual reproduction and is thus “at odds both with ‘nature’ and with a society built on the principles of natural law” (Lampert 69). The connection between usury and sexual deviance is literalized in the tale by the merchant’s own lack of sexual largesse, by his wife’s turn to adultery (with a corrupt monk, no less), and finally by her portrayal of marital sex as a form of debt repayment akin to prostitution (Lampert 69-71).

And there is another kind of usury at work in “The Shipman’s Tale,” a “verbal usury” that produces “a profligate multiplication of meanings” through playful punning (Lampert 71). The key example of this second type of usury occurs at the close of the tale, where, by means of a pun on the word *taillynge*, the Shipman combines prostitution, usury, and the act of storytelling itself within a single multivalent image. “The Shipman’s Tale” thus lands the Prioress in quite a pickle, rhetorically speaking: as a woman and a member of the clergy, she has been doubly impugned; moreover, since, according to the rules of Harry Bailey’s tale-telling game, she must now follow the Shipman’s story with her own, even her assumption of the role of speaker, her coming to voice, has been made suspect, marked as a tacit admission of sexual-linguistic, *Judaized* perversity. In this context, the Prioress’s invocation of Jewish usury may be read as replicating the negative

projections exemplified earlier by pilgrim-Chaucer. Here, too, the authorial subject transfers internal anxieties onto an externalized other whose abject position in the dominant discourse has rendered him ready-made for the task. But the Prioress's move is also strategic, since it is precisely by shifting the burden of abjection from her own shoulders to those of the Jews—"an other outside *Christianitas*"—that the Prioress opens the discursive space in which to operate as a speaking subject in the first place (Gaynor 378-9).

The Prioress's description of the Jewerye functions much the same way, relocating her anxieties regarding bodily, social, and linguistic integrity to the Jewish quarter of town in a bid to purify and thus legitimize her discursive position. Along these lines, the Jewerye is continually figured as a dangerously liminal space. For one thing, the Jewerye is located "Amonges Christen folk" (Chaucer 489), interrupting what would otherwise be a homogenous Christian social geography. For another, it is "free and open at either end" (494), a fact that marks it as permeable and which may imply the threat of Judaizing. It is also quite probably multi-lingual. The Prioress notes that the Jewerye is well trafficked—"through the street men might ride or go" (493)—and observes that it is located "in a greet cittee" (488). The impression is of a bustling urban thoroughfare, which is likely enough, given that Jewries in medieval Europe tended to be centrally located in populous cathedral cities (Albin 100).

As a residence, a throughway, and a site for trade—for it is here, one assumes, the Jews' money lending takes place—the Prioress's Jewerye would inevitably be linguistically heterogeneous, its air filled with a mingling of tongues: the language Jews spoke amongst themselves—perhaps Judeo-Arabic (given that far Assye would have

included at least some Middle Eastern locales)—along of course with the language of the city itself, and whatever other languages might be spoken by the residents, merchants, and customers in the area. Linguistic multiplicity of this type was seen as a menace by Church officials, who feared that “sonorous commingling” between Christians and Jews would contaminate the hearts of the faithful (Albin 100). The Prioress’s Jewerye, therefore, is a site of deep ontological and linguistic instability, a space that “confuses the boundary between pure and impure” (Despres 424) and so is “hateful to Crist and his compaignye” (Chaucer 492). That this loaded description occurs at the very beginning of the Prioress’s oration is significant, since, to return to Gaynor, by invoking the impurity, the otherness, of the Jews the Prioress gains the authority to speak. Gaynor writes:

By first identifying some people more hateful to ‘Crist and his compaignye,’ than woman, than herself, the Prioress creates more space for her own discourse. She must produce the Jews and mark them as other in order to enter into narrative, into the symbolic order and the great metaphor for it, the game of the *Canterbury Tales*. (380)

Still, producing the Jews as other—as the other-of-the-other, is only half the problem; the Prioress must also distance herself from them, severing the symbolic links that bind womanhood to Jewishness. Only in this way can she create a subjectivity in the Augustinian mode: complete in-and-of-itself, a subjectivity that exists as a real presence outside the realm of recursive signification.

This concern enters “The Prioress’s Tale” at multiple junctures. It explains, in part, why the Prioress locates her tale in far “Assye”—a move that serves as an instance of dissociation, even while it reflects the reality of the Jews’ expulsion from England in

1290CE. An expulsion, moreover, precipitated by accusations of Jewish ritual murder in the case of Little Hugh of Lincoln—a rather infamous case of blood libel in the UK which loosely parallels the Prioress’ narrative. It also may explain the special vehemence with which the Prioress punishes the Jews at the end of her narrative. Many Marian fables end with the conversion of Jews; “The Prioress’s Tale,” however, ends with the Jews’ extermination. Some have found this “final solution” puzzling, but it is easier to parse if one considers that conversion narratives are deeply recursive, predicating the convert’s coming-to-being as a Christian subject upon the hysterical recollection and disavowal of an earlier, non-Christian identity (Kruger 19). In the conversion narrative, therefore, the subject remains haunted, definable only by the constant re-inscription of his or her difference from another, supposedly superseded, self. The Prioress is similarly haunted. She too would produce a stable subjectivity by inscribing it against an abjected other, but the dependence of this relationship on the spectral recurrence of the other, on the trace of *différance* in “the relationality of identity categories” (Gaynor 390), is anathema to her project. Exorcising the Jews from her tale enables her to cover her tracks and obscure her narrative’s symbolic calculus. Converting the Jews, on the other hand, would only throw the equation into sharper relief.

Another example of the Prioress’s attempts at dissociation is embedded in the song she selects for the litel clergeon—her protagonist and narrative supernumerary—to sing. The song is “Alma Mater Redemptoris,” a hymn calling upon the Virgin to intercede on the part of her devout and ease their passage into heaven. The choice is fitting for a range of reasons: it foreshadows the plot of the tale; it invokes the incarnation, and so calls to mind the realization of the Word and the end of referentiality;

and it stresses Mary's status as a pure, inviolate conduit for passage between the flesh and the spirit (Fradenburg 89), thus underwriting the Prioress's investment in physical and linguistic chastity. However, the choice of the "Alma" is also unusual. A more typical choice for a Marian devotional of this type would have been the responsorium "Gaude Maria" (Albin 93). The latter hymn hits the same basic points as the "Alma" but contains an addendum the "Alma" does not. That addendum reads: "erubescat Judaeus infelix, qui dicit Christum Joseph semine esse natum" (may the unhappy Jew blush in shame, who says that Christ was born of Joseph's seed)" (93). Given the centrality of anti-Judaism within "The Prioress's Tale," selecting the "Alma" over the "Gaude" seems like a lost opportunity to augment the tale's themes of Jewish error.

Why, then, does the Prioress make this choice? The answer may lie with the "Gaude's" reference to Joseph's seed, which despite being part of the hymn's castigation of the Jews, nevertheless carries the potential to activate readings that run counter to the Prioress's purpose. As the hymn testifies, Jews do not accept the doctrine of Mary's virginity. What is more, quite a few medieval Jewish polemics refuting the Immaculate Conception argue that Mary was an adulteress (Jang 177). Selecting the "Gaude" as the clergeon's song would therefore risk reproducing the same type of allusive, intertextual link to infidelity and transgressive desire that troubled the Prioress in her portrait. Worse, it would do so, just as her spotless cup did, in the context of Jewish disbelief, thereby reiterating the discursive bond between Jewish perversity and the abjection of womanhood that the Prioress must break if she is to achieve subjective autonomy.

Recognizing an allusion to Jewish anti-Marian polemic in the "Gaude" requires the reader to make a significant lateral leap, and one might argue that the risk of such a

reading is negligible. However, there is another danger involved in the “Gaude’s” reference to Joseph’s seed. It metonymically recalls Joseph’s penis, Mary’s vagina, and the whole process of sexual reproduction. This, the Prioress absolutely cannot have. As evidenced by the General Prologue, the Prioress’s attempts to construct a suitable subject position for herself involve a sanctification of her gender identity predicated on a process of disembodiment or “desexualization” (Hobbs 190). It is for this reason that she represents herself in her Prologue “as a child of twelf month oold, or lesse” (Chaucer 484) and why, in her “Tale,” she identifies so closely with the prepubescent clergeon—a figure “immune to the direction or reception of desire” (Hobbs 191). It also explains her devotion to Mary, who, in any number of theological writings, is herself similarly disembodied and desexualized: she does not menstruate, feels no pain during labor, and retains her hymen even after giving birth (Jang 178-80). In so far as the Prioress aspires to articulate herself and her protagonist as exemplars of the Marian ideal, she cannot afford the “Gaude’s” lapse into gendered physicality—a lapse that might very well remind her audience of her own gendered embodied-ness and subsequent abjection even without the reader’s making a connection to anti-Marian polemic.

With the “Gaude,” as with the cup, the Jewerye, and usury, the reader once again encounters the threat of abjection side by side with the risk of symbolic slippage and the mark of religious and gender difference—a mark bizarrely literalized and historicized by the accidental imaging of Joseph’s circumcised penis, which is not only, in much Christian writing, considered a sign of the feminization of the Jew (Kruger), but also bears mute witness to the very ritual over which Paul accused the Jews of a too staunch adherence to the letter of Hebraic Law. No wonder the Prioress selects the “Alma”

instead. By omitting the reference to Joseph's seed, the Prioress is able to sidestep the hazard of yet another potentially confounding semiotic rupture.

The significance of this move only truly becomes apparent when one recognizes the extraordinarily privileged position the "Alma" holds in "The Prioress's Tale," giving the narrative its motive force. Without the "Alma," the clergeon is never put at hazard, never kidnapped nor murdered, and the Virgin's intercession cannot occur. The "Alma" is privileged in other ways as well. As noted above, the hymn largely duplicates the linguistic project laid out by the Prioress in her Prologue. Like the Prologue's suckling babes and "child of twelf month oold," the clergeon voices the "Alma" *without comprehending it*. "Noght wiste he what this Latyn was to seye," the Prioress tells us, "For he so yong and tendre was of age" (Chaucer 523-4). Even when the clergeon asks an older student on bended knee to "construe and declare" the "Alma"'s meaning, he receives only a basic gloss as to its function and intent, his fellow having "but smal grammar" (528; 531-36). The meaning and power of the "Alma," then, must be understood to reside elsewhere than in the letter of its text, which is conspicuously left out of the "Tale." Indeed, literacy here is made highly suspect, as the clergeon must abandon the study of his Latin school primer (516), despite his certain knowledge that he will be beaten for it (542), in order to devote himself fully to learning the "Alma" "by rote," i.e. by careful listening and repetition (521-2). What seems apparent here is that the "Alma" ought not be read as a semantic entity at all, but rather as an instance of aurality.

Aurality entails a different epistemology than literacy. Literacy, as understood by Augustine and the ancient Greeks, involves a highly abstract form of representation, and as such implies a fundamental disconnect between signifier and signified; aurality, on the

other hand, fuses signifier and signified in a sympathetic vibration that—according to Boethius’ *De institutione music*, the stock musical textbook of the Middle Ages, “unites the incorporeal nature of reason with the body” (Albin 96-7). Once again, we find in “The Prioress’s Tale” that desire for an ontological fullness of speech that might rescue language from its condition of exile as an unstable system of representation predicated on absence and transform it into a conduit for the absolute and final realization of the signified.

The purification of language symbolized by the “Alma” entails not only the supersession of linguistic *différance* but also of gender difference. As the Prioress is careful to inform us, the clergeon learns the Alma neither in the female-dominated space of his home (where his mother is his sole instructor) nor in the male-dominated space of his Latin grammar school (Lampert 74); instead, the clergeon is both instructed in and practices the “Alma” on his twice-daily walk to and from school (Chaucer 549). Certainly, this marks a move into liminal space, and that move is clearly established in the text by the fact that the clergeon’s commute takes him through the Jewerye. However, where the Jewerye is identified chiefly by its disruptions—geographic, social, and aural—the clergeon’s commute is identified by a set of unifying parallelisms:

Fro day to day, til he koude it by rote

...

Fro word to word, accordyng with the note

Twies a day it passed thurgh his throte

To scoleward and homeward whan he wente;

On Cristes mooder set was his entente. (544-50)

The effect is one of a profound ease of movement, a bridging of twinned poles—day-to-day, word-to-word, and school-to-home—all facilitated by the “Alma’s” realization, in and through the body of the clergeon (note the passive construction: “it passed thurgh his throte”), of a perfect devotional channel to Mary, and through her, to Christ. Thus the clergeon himself, in a sense, becomes Mary, becomes disengendered—released from the relationality of both language and identity. As such, he bodies forth the empty signifier—the pure conduit to the referent—and so remains insulated from the danger of abjection that elsewhere in the “Tale” always inheres in the liminal.

Which is not to say the threat has been canceled; it has merely been externalized, dissociated from the clergeon and his performance, as well as, by extension, from the Prioress and her tale. And then, well, everything goes to Hell. Satan arrives on the scene to stir up trouble among the Jews, pointing out that the clergeon’s song is “agayn [their] lawes reverence” (Chaucer 564). The moment is significant for two reasons. The first has to do with Satan’s role as translator and interpreter. Heretofore, the Jews—lacking in Latin—have presumably not understood the words of the “Alma,” and so have been unaware that the clergeon’s musical perambulations through their neighborhood might be read as an act of “scorn” (563). Indeed, the Jews, thus far, have arguably been in much the same position as the clergeon himself, encountering the “Alma” as an instance of aurality. Satan’s translation, however, enacts a return to literacy, rematerializing the hymn’s signifying capacity and consequently enabling the Jews’ (mis)reading. In light of the Prioress’s project—the emptying out of language and the locking down of the potential for polysemy—such a move is not just diabolic, it is deadly, threatening the stability and authority of the speaking subject. So the Jews, immediately upon hearing

Satan's interpretation of the clergeon's song, "conspired / this innocent out of this world to chace" (565-6).

The second issue to consider lies with Satan's invocation of Jewish law. The law Satan refers to in this passage is likely Talmudic law rather than the law contained in the Torah or Pentateuch. Christianity, after all, incorporates the Pentateuch, whereas the Talmud stands outside the Christian purview, having been continuously labeled blasphemous and "demonic" by the Church since around the mid-13th century (Handelman 81). The thinking behind Christianity's excoriation of the Talmud is particularly relevant here. A written record of the oral tradition of rabbinical exegesis and debate, the Talmud constantly eschews resolution or synthesis; instead, it favors a "species of diffracted reading" that supports "the ceaseless play of interpretation" (at times even authorizing completely contradictory understandings), and that, most importantly, approaches Scripture as "process, plural, [an] all-embracing field" of semiotic possibilities (Handelman 81-2). Christian hermeneutics, as enacted by Augustine, tends in the opposite direction, moving toward the subsumption of semiosis by or within a divine, eternal Silence, the unutterable Word to end all words (Handelman 119). In this sense, Satan's observation is apt. The clergeon's singing, with its distinctly Christian emphasis on the supersession of signifier by signified, really is diametrically opposed to the operations of Jewish law. It makes perfect sense, therefore, that upon recognizing this, the Jews would be outraged by the clergeon's intrusion into their socio-linguistic space. It makes even more sense, symbolically speaking, that they would slit his throat, attacking by a literal, violently embodied means, his status as a disembodied medium for incarnational utterance.

Thus Satan's translation, the Jews' misinterpretation, and the clergeon's murder all perform a return to "The Prioress's Tale's" concerns with abjection—i.e., with the vulnerability of the body and the instability of language and identity; however, they do so with a difference. The danger of abjection here is no longer an internal affair. It no longer inheres in the speech act that makes and marks the authorized Christian subject (as it did, for instance, in the "Shipman's Tale's" play with usury, or in the various allusions to adultery in the Prioress's Prologue). Instead, it has been fully alienated, contained, and isolated within the now doubly othered—because quite literally demonized—figure of the Jew: a figure here inscribed as marking the aporetic limit of Christian being.

Nowhere is this function of the Jew made more apparent than in the miserable privy into which the clergeon's killers dump his brutalized body. The privy, of course, is the space of greatest abjection in the "Tale." But it is a curious space, notably for its scatological intensity but more so for its play with absence and presence. Indeed, the clergeon's disappearance into the privy sparks a discursive drama wherein absence and presence are the primary stakes. Seeking her missing son in the Jewerey, the clergeon's mother asks "to every Jew that dwelt in thilke place / to telle hire if hir childe went oght forby" (Chaucer 601-2). The Jews, meanwhile, deny ever having seen him at all. This denial is absurd, as the reader knows full well the child passed through the Jewerey twice a day, every day. Nevertheless, the denial is meaningful in that it reifies the Jews' murder of the clergeon. Destroying the boy's body is not enough; his absence must also be enacted linguistically. He must be spoken into unbeing by means of a lie that, because it is a deliberate misrepresentation of reality, demonstrates the Jews' decidedly un-Christian privileging of the signifier over the signified and that also, because it is designed to put

off the recovery of the clergeon's body, demonstrating the Jews' linguistic tendency to defer presence. Read this way, the allegorical relationship between the Jews' denial of the clergeon and their denial of the Incarnation, much remarked by critics, becomes easier to parse. Both operate as a rejection of the logocentric poetics favored by the Prioress in which language is superseded by the arrival, the coming to presence, of the real. The privy space, therefore, encompasses not only the abjection of the body—the place wherein the clergeon's violated body is hidden as well as where the “Jewes purgen hire entraille” (573)—but also the abjection of existence itself, the subordination of being to the infinite deferrals of language. In fact, the Jewish entrails mentioned in the above line themselves evoke the dangers of language, as they allude to Jewish anti-Marian polemics that figured forth Mary's flatus and her menses as signs of her gross embodiment and wayward desire (Jang 175), once again entrapping the feminine subject in the discourse of abjection via the interposition of a ‘Jewish’ polysemy.

Which may, in part, help to explain why the Prioress asserts herself as a speaking subject so forcefully in the lines describing the clergeon's disappearance into the privy, interjecting into her description an emphatic “I seye” (Chaucer 572) intended, perhaps, to compensate for the clergeon's sudden vanishing. In so far as one takes the Prioress to be, like the clergeon, a conduit for purified utterance (which is, after all, the status she claims for herself in her Prologue), her interjection here serves to vouchsafe the continuation of that utterance and the kind of transcendent subjectivity it supports. The clergeon may be momentarily silenced, but the rarefied, Christological speech act for which he has been the symbol goes on without him, rescued by the Prioress's intervention into, and investment within, her own text. In this way, the Prioress's “I seye,” prefigures Mary's

intervention on behalf of the clergeon and rehearses, yet again, an Augustinian poetics based on the Johannine logic of the incarnation. What is more, it does so in a way that articulates the Prioress as a speaking subject authorized precisely by her resistance to the (apparently) Judaizing force of *différance*.

The discovery and retrieval of the clergeon's body also accords with the Prioress's Augustinian philosophy of language. As noted, Augustine argues that the proper movement for linguistic expression is from word to thing, i.e., *away* from language and toward the realization or materialization of the signified. The recovery of the clergeon's body follows this pattern exactly. Mary's intervention in the privy, her placement of the mysterious greyn upon his tongue, brings the clergeon back to voice—back, indeed, to that purified, “virginal” vocalization the Prioress associates with proper praise. The language of the text in this passage is telling:

O grete God, that parfournest thy laude
 By mouth of innocentz, lo, heere thy myght!
 This gemme of chastite, this emeraude,
 And eek of martirdom the ruby bright,
 Ther he with throte ykorven lay upright,
 He Alma redemptoris gan to synge
 So loude that al the place gan to rynge. (Chaucer 607-13)

Here, the Prioress's description both reintroduces and counters her ongoing concerns with abjection, liminality, and permeability. The clergeon's song, the Prioress reminds us, issues now from his “ykorven” throat: a metonym for the permeability and vulnerability of the physical body as well as for instability of language. Yet this abjected form is now

redeemed by the renewal and perfecting of its operation as a channel for divine self-articulation. Like the Prioress in her Prologue, the clergeon hardly speaks at all, but is instead spoken through. The inviolability of that speech act, moreover, is evidenced by the Prioress's description of the clergeon as both "a gem of chastity" and "a ruby of martyrdom"; both images that reassert the clergeon's desexualized innocence while simultaneously echoing the figure of the "greyn," which, given its Eucharistic qualities, may be read as a stand-in for the Real Presence, that is, the material embodiment of Christ in/as wafer and wine during the ritual of communion. Thus the clergeon is *reauthorized* as speaker/singer by the renewal of his status as a transparent signifier.

Only at this point does his body become recoverable. Hearing "Alma Mater Redemptoris" ringing through the Jewry, "the Cristene folk that thurgh the strete wente" send for the local provost (or magistrate), who arrives in force to bind the guilty Jews and disinter the clergeon, transferring his body "with honour of greet processiou" to a nearby abbey (Chaucer 614-24). Arguably, then, the recovery of the clergeon's body rehearses his murder and disappearance in the opposite direction. Where the clergeon's death tracks a movement from material being into linguistic annihilation, his recovery tracks backward from non-being to articulation to reification in the material world.

Very little happens from here on out. The magistrate puts the Jews to death, having them hung "by the law," thereby putting an end to the semiotic and psychosocial disruptions which elsewhere threatened to upend the symbolic order and corrupt both Christianitas and the authorized/authorial Christian subject. The Jews gone and right order restored, the text closes with two mutually reinforcing silences—one within the "Tale" and the other immediately following. First, the Abbot, after asking the clergeon to

recite his experience in the privy at mass, removes the greyn from his tongue, stopping his speech and releasing him into death (Chaucer 671-2). Afterwards, the clergeon's body is enclosed in "a tombe of marbul stonys cleer" (681), a figure that cancels his earlier internment in the semiotically unstable and abject space of the privy and serves (like the ruby and the gem) as another visual manifestation of an eternal and inviolable purity invulnerable (the marble is clear) to the misprisions inherent in the act of symbolic representation. The Prioress's poetic project is complete at this point, leaving her free to conclude her story with one last paean to Jesus and Mary.

And this is when the second silence asserts itself. In the interlude between "The Prioress's Tale" and Chaucer's "Sir Topas," two lines are set aside to mark the Prioress's audience's reaction to her story. Chaucer writes: "Whan seyde was al this miracle, every man / As sobre was that wonder was to se" (691-2). The implication here is that the Prioress's audience finds themselves unable to speak following her narrative—a remarkable thing, given the tale's place in Harry Bailey's storytelling contest. One might assume that the audience is merely disturbed, but it is also possible to read this silence as a triumph for the Prioress since she has, it seems, at last shut down the troublesome "Jewish" polysemy that plagued her in the General Prologue and expunged the usurious "Jewish" *taillynge* that haunted the opening of her tale, opening a space for herself as a speaking subject which, at least in this moment, is no longer crosscut by multiple contested and contradictory meanings, but is rather fixed or suspended outside language in a place of quiet wonder and "sobre" reverence (691). This space, not coincidentally, also marks the consummation of Augustine's theology of the word, in which the game of signification must give way to "a silence transcending the entire system of discourse"

(Handelman 119). The Prioress, one might argue, here achieves a sort of narrative recapitulation of the Marian miracle, having cast herself in the role of Virgin Mother, and, by chastising the desiring force of language, “ravyshedest down...thurgh [her] humblesse, the Goost... of whos vertu...conceyved was the Fadres sapience (Chaucer 469-72).

But then, the silence following “The Prioress’s Tale” is very short, suggesting a certain limit to the parity between the Prioress’s poetic project and Chaucer’s. As a writer, Chaucer is not likely to invest overmuch in the evacuation of difference, the closing down of polysemy, or the termination of all language games. Indeed, he inserts himself into the Prioress’s silence to resume the pilgrim’s tale telling. What is more, he is invited to do so by a jest of Harry Bailey’s that reintroduces the status of the speaking-subject as a stake in the game of signification: “What sort of man artow,” Bailey asks, “Thou lookest as thou woldest fynde an hare, / For ever upon the ground I se thee stare” (Chaucer 695-7). Bailey goes on to tease Chaucer for his unsociable and “elvyshh,” i.e. otherworldly, behavior (703-4). In this way, the *Canterbury Tales* subsumes the Prioress’s fleeting pause in a return to language and, at the same time, a return to subjectivity imagined specifically as a linguistically structured mode of being-in-relation to others. That the tale of Sir Topas is a romance that, in its hokey plot and hackneyed rhyming, parodies the Prioress’s concerns with chastity and the sanctification of expression adds even more fuel to the argument that one must read an ironic distance into Chaucer’s treatment of the Prioress’s Greco-Christian philosophy of language.

Chaucer’s treatment of the Jews may also be best read through a distancing lens. For while imagining that Chaucer aligns himself with Jewish poetics or with the

hermeneutical philosophy of Rabbinical Judaism would be a step too far, imagining a one-to-one correspondence between Chaucer's deployment of the Jew and that of the Prioress would be equally erroneous. Yes, within the confines of "The Prioress's Tale," the Jews are ready-made scapegoats: a rhetorical means for insulating the feminine speaking-subject from the threat of abjection and of producing and policing the boundary between an authorized/Christian and unauthorized/heretical approach to meaning-making. Yet, in tracing the Prioress' rhetorical contortions, Chaucer also makes visible a sympathetic link between the Prioress and her Jews; they too are caught up in a web of overdetermined discourses that binds them to abjection, delimits their ability to speak, and renders them vulnerable to expulsion and death. And there is, even if only incidentally, something Jewish (with the emphasis on *ish*) in the ambiguities of both Chaucer's silence and his insistence on the continuation of Bailey's game. So, while the Jews are probably not a major concern for Chaucer, his deft handling of the figure of the Jew can at least be said to both reveal and problematize the anti-Judaic tradition, wherein flesh-and-blood Jews are stripped of reality and re-rendered as simulations fashioned in response to the needs of intra-Christian debates over who may speak and how.

But what is ultimately most relevant about "The Prioress's Tale" for this study is its status as a purification ritual. For only by considering the tale from that angle can we come to see how the Prioress' recapitulations to anti-Judaism are necessitated by her attempt to articulate a subjectivity commensurate with the Augustinian theory of signs and the Pauline drive for an incarnational poetics. And only by reading the Prioress this way can we begin to see how the "Tale" might, in its deep structure, duplicate or presage the moderns' own anti-Jewish response to the crisis of modernity. Like the Prioress,

modernist writers found themselves alienated from the terms of their own subjectivities; they too sought a rarified position from which to speak; they too sought to craft a language of ontological fullness; they too devoted themselves to developing an incarnational poetics capable of bridging the gap between word and thing; and they too imagined, by dint of a very long inheritance which this and the previous chapters have endeavored to trace, that somehow, what was well and truly wrong with the culture, with the language, with subjectivity and the terms of its articulation—was... in a word... Jewish. And so, Madame Eglentynes all, they too sought to expunge the taint of Jewishness from their work.

4 Pound, Eliot, and the Jew in the Modernist Imaginary

In 1944, when the Jewish American novelist and pundit Isaac Rosenfeld looked back over the first half of the twentieth century to take stock of what he called “the situation of the Jewish writer,” he painted a melancholy portrait:

The Jews are, everywhere, a minority group. And it is a particular misfortune these days to be a minority group in the United States. A conscious member of such a group is necessarily overconscious: he is distracted by race and religion, distressed by differences which in a healthy society would be considered healthful. The very simple state of being a Jew... has created traumas, fears of violence, defenses against aggression. These are about the worst conditions under which an artist could seek to carry on his work. An artist should first of all have the security of a dignified neutrality. He should be able to consider himself a *mensch mit alle menschen gleich*—that is, an equal, a man among men, a representative even if extraordinary individual. But a Jewish writer unconsciously feels that at any time he may be called to account, not for his art, nor even for his life, but for his Jewishness. (571)

What Rosenfeld is getting at here is that prior to the end of WWII, and arguably for a considerable time after, Jewish writers in American and, for that matter, Europe were likely to be received as Jewish first and writers second, while the quality of their work was as likely to be assessed as a function of its having been penned by a Jewish author as

by any other metric. The internalization of this state of affairs, its metastasis into a psychological fog, obscuring and distorting the artist's relations to life, the world, humanity, was busily alienating Jewish writers from their own artistic capability, since in Rosenberg's construction, artists must be able to conceive of themselves as representative individuals, i.e. people whose experience can stand in for that of someone else, or more accurately for that of a large number of someone else. For Rosenfeld art, by definition, speaks to the universal human condition; any marginalizing condition is a distraction.

Rosenfeld's notion of the artist as "representative man" may appear problematic from a contemporary perspective, reiterating as it does the misogyny that treats masculinity as archetypal and privileging as it does a socio-ethnic and/or racial neutrality of perspective that is, in a European and Anglo-American context, the singular domain of whiteness. Then again, Rosenfeld's adherence to these ideas is not unusual; it is a function of his devotion to the common sense of his time. And to be fair, Rosenfeld does acknowledge—it is his primary point—that this construction makes the role of artist inaccessible to anyone saddled with the burden of double-consciousness. That point, the fundamental point regarding the estrangement of Jewish artists and writers within the milieu of modern art and letters—American or otherwise—is unassailable.

One need not look far for examples. Outside the US, Wagner's infamous "Judaism in Music" comes to mind as a place to start. The essay was penned in 1850, but nevertheless strikes a modernist note, wrestling as it does with several concerns—demographic upheaval, the rise of capital, industrialization, and the passing away of established tradition—that would define the modern period. But while ostensibly about music, the essay is really about art in a broader sense, covering theater, music, and poetry

respectively. These distinctions, however, are hardly more than window dressing.

Regardless of what art he is discussing, Wagner characterizes the Jew⁹ in the same way, so that the argument encompasses the Jew's relation to art and cultural production generally. Discussing the Jew in theater, he writes:

We can conceive of no representation of an antique or modern stage-character by a Jew, be it hero or lover, without feeling instinctively the incongruity of such a notion. This is of great weight: a man whose appearance we must hold unfitted for artistic treatment—not merely in this or that personality, but according to his kind in general—neither can we hold him capable of any sort of artistic utterance of his [inner] essence. (6-7)

Wagner's Jew, then, is a curious creature. Unfit for representation and incapable of self-articulation, he barely exists in a recognizable ontological category at all. Absented so completely from the sphere of subjectivity, the Jew is rendered spectral—weightless, disembodied: a cellophane hallucination (to crib a line from *Chicago*) one might look through or walk by without acknowledging. Wagner's erasure of the Jew from the category of subject is so complete that he even denies the Jew the ability to speak:

The Jew speaks the language of the nation in whose midst he dwells... but he speaks it always as an alien.... The general circumstance that the Jew talks the modern European languages merely as learnt, and not as mother tongues, must

⁹ Throughout this chapter, and indeed through the dissertation as a whole, I have referred to the rhetorical figure of the Jew as it appears in the source material using the masculine singular. The choice is outmoded but is consistent with the grammar of the texts from which that characterization has been derived. This construction is used only to refer to hermeneutical, figural, rhetorical, or other imaginary Jews, and is intended to highlight the artificiality and the limitations of those categories. When actual Jews are referred to, the grammar reverts to contemporary usage.

necessarily debar him from all capability of therein expressing himself idiomatically, independently, and conformably to his nature. A language, with its expression and its evolution, is not the work of scattered units, but of an historical community: only he who has unconsciously grown up within the bond of this community, takes also any share in its creations. But the Jew has stood outside the pale of any such community, stood solitarily with his Jehova in a splintered, soilless stock, to which all self-sprung evolution must stay denied, just as even the peculiar (Hebraic) language of that stock has been preserved for him merely as a thing defunct. Now, to make poetry in a foreign tongue has hitherto been impossible, even to geniuses of highest rank. Our whole European art and civilisation, however, have remained to the Jew a foreign tongue; for, just as he has taken no part in the evolution of the one, so has he taken none in that of the other; but at most the homeless wight has been a cold, nay more, a hostile looker-on. In this Speech, this Art, the Jew can only after-speak and after-patch—not truly make a poem of his words, an artwork of his doings. (7)

So, Wagner paints the Jew as a parasite. A creature whose cultural background, whose home soil as it were, is perennially moribund, and who must perforce seek out a richer soil and a heartier crop—even if those things belong by rights to his neighbor rather than himself. This conceptualization is why for Wagner there is finally no such thing as Jewish art: poetry or otherwise. For art arises, whatever shape it may take, out of sympathy with the life of the Folk or common man, and that sympathy no Jew may possess (9-10). In fact, the so-called “cultured Jew,” that is, the educated, assimilated Jew, is uniquely divorced from it, since adapting to the dominant culture has made him

foreign to his own people and their native customs; yet by the same token—i.e., foreignness—he is unable to take full part in the flowering of the culture he has adhered himself to (10). Hence the Jew “has never had an Art of his own” and, further, “never a life of art-enabling import... a universally applicable... human import....” (10).

What a barren life the Jew must lead. Buried by a culture whose vitality has long since drained away, the Jew has no tradition, in Eliot’s sense, from which to make new expressions, and no way to successfully graft a living praxis onto that hollow root. As a result, the Jew lives an artless existence: neither making art nor living in a way that might be amenable to art. His life a series of weightless transactions, divorced from the drama and poignance of human existence. But of course, the Jew is also a threat. Wagner makes much of the apparent Judaization of Western music, noting that while the Jew is artless, this does not mean he has not developed “a peculiar method of expression” (10).

That mode is repulsive, comprised of only the most vulgar material elements of the borrowed traditions from whence it arises and making of those traditions nothing more than “motleyest chaos:” a “clatter” of plagiarized idiosyncrasies that, in music anyway, bear all-together too much resemblance to the tortured and torturous warbling of the synagogue, which Wagner characterizes not merely as unpleasant but as inherently demeaning: “the travesty of a divine service of song”, so that Jewish music, or any other art, drawn ineluctably back to its depleted origin, inevitably strikes the recipient as “outlandish, odd, indifferent, cold, unnatural, and awry” (10-11). This sense that the presence or action of Jewishness in art must signal some sort of decline is how Wagner makes sense of the success and popularity of modern Jewish artists such as Moses Mendelsohn and Heinrich Heine. As he explains:

The Jews could never take possession of this art.... so long as [it] had real organic life-need in it.... Only when a body's inner death is manifest do outside elements win the power of lodgment in it—yet merely to destroy it. Then indeed that body's flesh dissolves into a swarming colony of insect-life: but who, in looking at that body's self would hold it still for living? (13-14)

The idea is clear enough. Only when the life-force of European art had become hopelessly degraded could the Jew hope to engage it, and then only as a scavenger, an insect whose presence signifies corruption and whose chief labor is to devour the corpse. Wagner's Jew, then, is both a symbol and an agent of the death of culture.

Would that it was solely Wagner's Jew. Alas, it is not. The same sentiments resounded everywhere. Looking across the pond, one is struck by the similarity between Wagner's arguments and those of premier American realist Henry James, who, in 1907's *The American Scene*—a travelogue detailing James' cross-country wanderings during the period 1904-5—gifts us with yet another damning and unforgettable portrait of the Jew. James' portrait arises from the epicenter of Jewish life in America: the Lower East Side in Manhattan. From 1881, when the assassination of Czar Alexander II led the Russian government to enact a slate of scapegoating anti-Jewish legislation, to 1924 when the Immigration Act of that year curtailed Eastern European and Russian Jewish immigration to the US indefinitely, America had been playing host to the largest influx of Jewish immigrants it had ever known. Between 1883 and 1904, some one-and-a-half million Jews from Russia, Romania and Poland arrived in the US. By 1920, that number had reached two million (Chametzky 109). And though most major American cities—notably the West Side of Chicago—had sizeable Jewish communities, none could compete with

the Lower East Side, where hundreds of thousands of new immigrants would choose to remain in the spot where they first set foot on American soil, packing themselves into a small Manhattan warren as dense as seven hundred persons per acre (“The Lower East Side”).

No wonder perhaps that James would experience in this quarter “the sense, after all, of a great swarming, a swarming that had begun to thicken as soon as we crossed to the East side and long before we got to Rutgers Street” (131). Then again, this swarming is not merely a function of population density. It is unique: “There is no swarming like that of Israel once Israel has got its start, and the scene here bristled, at every step, with the signs and sounds, immitigable, unmistakable, of a Jewry that had burst all bounds” (James 131) One wonders what bounds the Jewish community had overstepped, exactly whose property lines had been crossed; but clearly, the boundary is James’. He is, as Jules Chametzky et al put it, “overwhelmed” (109) by the apparent “Hebrew conquest of New York,” the endless, teeming “multiplication” of a people he compares to “large-nosed fish, ants, and ‘human squirrels and monkeys’” (James 131, 133, 134). This “ethnic apparition” or “spectre” discomfits James in no small part because in it he perceives “the Accent of the Future,” an ethnic jabber arising from the local cafes, those “torture rooms of the living idiom”: linguistic, yes, but cultural as well—a kind of English, a kind of America, a kind of American for which there is no “existing literary measure” (133, 139).

Like Wagner, James positions the Jews as a threatening infestation of destructive vermin whose native social milieu comprises a morass of rampant and illegitimate cultural reproductions, the sheer weight of which threatens to tip the national character into incomprehensibility. Here again we are treated to a range of familiar anti-Jewish

tropes. Here too the Jew is abject, stripped of subjectivity, neither representable nor representative. Here too Jewish culture is both moribund and avaricious. And here too the mechanisms of Jewish cultural production are unnervingly profligate, multiplying “with a vengeance,” feeding on the dominant culture, but mixing it with some innate, quasi-metaphysical concentration of Jewishness reproduced in toto with every new iteration like the severed tails of “certain snakes or worms” that grow whole anew once cut (James 133). Thus “the gathered past of Israel mechanically push[es] through,” like some “alien presence climbing higher and higher,” marking the beginnings of a new, yet wholly uncertain American public (James 138-9).

The source of these noxious tropes is apparent. It is, of course, the anti-Judaism of the Greco-Christian aesthetic, whose long, long shadow falls now across the 20th century. Paul and Augustine’s superseded, materialist, death-bound Judaism is here in spades. As is Chaucer’s unnatural, indelicate, but extravagant Hebrew usury (in its erotic, linguistic, cultural, and economic senses—though more on this in a moment). The threat of Judaization, too, inheres in these passages, with both writers positioning the Jew as a detriment to art and to the vibrant life-force that art exemplifies. James is less adamant on this point than Wagner, however, for where Wagner imagines the rise of the Jew as the death of culture, James imagines at least the possible emergence of some new cultural matrix—though it is one for which he feels woefully unprepared and whose arrival he greets with no small degree of anxiety (James 138-9). Yes, Wagner too imagines a future in which the Jew might be integrated into the collective labor of culture, but in his work that integration requires the Jew to undergo a “self-annulment” that amounts to “ceasing being a Jew” (Wagner 14). In the precincts of Wagner’s brave new art world, therefore,

there are no carve outs for Jews. Keeping with the Greco-Christian dispensation, Jewishness is to be wholly expelled.

That said, if there is a significant difference to be found between the arguments of Greco-Christian aesthetics and those of Wagner and James, it perhaps lies in their obdurate hostility to the possibility of Jewish art. Greco-Christian aesthetics rarely, if at all, addresses itself to art made by Jews. It is too much concerned with policing the products and reception of Christian art to turn itself in such an obviously heretical direction. And yet, Wagner and James's critiques are linked through that discourse.

One crucial issue comes down to belatedness, tied at as it is to the supersessionist teleology of history familiar to us from the work of Paul and Augustine. From this perspective, Judaism is illegitimate because it has been outmoded; history (or God) has intervened, and the proper conduit for belief is no longer the letter of the Law but rather faith in Christ. Continued Jewish observance, continued Jewish existence, is decidedly recidivist in this context. That recidivism surfaces in Wagner and James' depiction of Jewish art as well. Wagner, as we have seen, characterizes Jewish artmaking as occurring always already after the fact. Because for Wagner, German music—and perhaps by extension German culture—reached a sort of apogee with Beethoven, after which, no substantial labor remained in the effort (12-14). The Jew's failure to recognize this need for a new cultural dispensation, his continued investment in worn-out artistic forms, duplicates his failure to recognize the realization of the Law in Christ and his stiff-necked insistence on adherence to an otherwise obsolete tradition. Thus: "in this Speech, this Art, the Jew can only after-speak, after-patch—not truly make a poem of his words, an artwork of his doings" (Wagner 7). And this is because, as noted, the Jew has no stake in

the life of the culture. A culture, in Wagner's telling, is the collective labor of a historical community, and Jews have stood outside any such community since time immemorial, save their own, whereas in that case the communities' chief labor (explicating the Law?) has long since been exhausted (Wagner 7). Thus, Jewish art is not art by definition as it is not an expression arising organically from the labor of a shared historical community with its own living artistic tradition.

Similarly, James' Jew too is cast back into history; he is "a skeleton at the feast," a "spectre" of the past, divorced from "the talk of the hour:" i.e., the dynamic animation of the present moment (131). In every iteration of his art—and his being—the old dispensation of Jewishness resurfaces in a pattern of near hysterical re-racialization and artistic detournment. Even when the Jew addresses the future, his ethnic past clings to him and deforms: "The accent of the very ultimate future, in the States, may be destined to become the most beautiful on the globe and the very music of humanity (and here the "ethnic" synthesis shrouds itself thicker than ever); but whatever we shall know it for, certainly, we shall not know it for English—in any sense in which there is an existing literary measure" (James 139). So, while James' loquacious American Jew may well presage the language of tomorrow—a sort of pidgin polyglossia—that coming language will inevitably bear the trace of ethnic origins (Hebraic, et al), and will, by virtue of this fatal ethnic enshrouding, fundamentally displace English and the Anglo-American literary tradition as James understands them. In this way, the accent of the future, howsoever beautiful or musical it may one day prove to be, is marred by the ethnic or racial associations of its origin, and so located outside the bounds of proper expression:

rendered incomprehensible, bewildering, a cause of “exasperation” to the present hearer (James 139). The Jew is out of joint, one might say. Even when he is early, he is too late.

Another pressing issue facing Jewish artmaking, at least as Wagner and James make it out, is usuriousness. The trope is easier to see in Wagner than in James because Wagner discusses it openly. It is the very reason why Wagner must contend with Jewish art in the first place:

From that turning-point in our social evolution where Money, with less and less disguise, was raised to the virtual patent of nobility, the Jews—to whom money-making without actual labour, i.e. Usury, had been left as their only trade—the Jews not merely could no longer be denied the diploma of a new society that needed naught but gold, but they brought it with them in their pockets.... (8)

One can hear, without too much strain, the echoes of the scholastic critique of usury, wherein making money from money, without ‘actual labor,’ is understood as a sterile endeavor: against nature and hostile to any society built on natural principles. In accordance with the theory of collective cultural labor he floated earlier, Wagner here positions the Jew as an interloper: someone who takes no part in the collective, material, or spiritual effort of society, but who nevertheless, by virtue of certain ill-gotten gains, makes his way in it. And Wagner goes further; capitalism itself comes under fire as a patently usurious economic system, while the Jew henceforward becomes the definitive symbol of capitalist society as well as of its attendant corruption of so-called organic culture. In fact, Wagner marks the rise of capitalism precisely by the entrance of the “cultured Jew” into polite company: “henceforward, then, the *cultured Jew* appears in our Society” (8). The cultured Jew, more than the uncultured, represents a threat because the

cultured Jew takes up residence in and makes contributions to the discursive body of a civilization, speeding its decay.

Jewish art is part of this larger problem. Wagner's critique characterizes Jewish art as parasitic and derivative. Jewish art is "mimicked speech," though Jewish artists do not speak so much as merely babble: "just as parrots reel off human words and phrases, but also with as little real feeling and expression as these foolish birds" (Wagner 9). Jewish art then is usurious at its core: an antiseptic reproduction of the modes and tropes of modern art, but without a heart, a soul. Without, to put it all a bit more pointedly, a clear referent, a transcendental signified. Certainly, in this case, the transcendental signified is not God, but the human subject—a move commensurate with modernism's interest in the alienated individual. Yet the Jewish artist, having, as a Jew, no subjectivity to speak of, cannot make this crucial connection to the inner self, cannot thus escape the figural or touch the actual. The Jew remains inside the field of the morphological but outside the semantic: capable of utterance, but not of meaning-making because meaning may not, given the idealism of the Greco-Christian aesthetic, inhere in language or its forms. And so Jewish art, like Jewish speech, is empty (Wagner 9).

James does not address himself to Jewish artmaking as Wagner does, though Jewish speech (we have already seen) is a concern. Nor is James as overtly interested in usury. But there is something in James' discussion of Jewish population growth, Jewish sexual reproduction, that chafes. Perhaps it is that James' depiction is so resolutely asexual. It is inhuman to be sure, a kind of bloodless, Fordist mode of childbearing, in which the psycho-spiritual dispensation of Jewishness becomes atomized into individuals, into constituent parts, but with each so exactly formed to those particulars as

to recall the whole of its origin (James 133). Here, then, the mirror of Wagner's description of Jewish speech, which too is infected with altogether too much Jewishness and which too is unnatural, accomplished via quasi-industrial means. That James, like Wagner, connects Jewish sexual reproduction with Jewish cultural production is also evidenced by his return to the notion of an automatic reproduction of ethnic character in the section of *The American Scene* dealing with the accent of the future, which, as noted, is marred by the indelible stain of its Jewish (and other) ethnic origins and which too is described as having in it something of this mechanical character (James 138-9). So, in James as in Wagner a certain scholasticism pertains which evinces, in matters of Jewish reproduction, cultural or otherwise, a repulsion or disgust at its supposed usurious nature.

Examining James and Wagner in concert allows us to get a sense of the overwhelming antagonism faced by Jewish artists looking to engage the field of modernism as that field emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At the same time, it allows us to limn the contours of the modern anti-Jewish critique, an important move since that critique had at least two contradictory but substantive effects. On the one hand, it produced a negative discourse of Jewish art, barring Jews from cultural production under its terms; on the other, it operated as a "projective fantasy," prefiguring, even generating, the very mode of modernism it sought to dismiss. As Levi explains, criticism like Wagner and James'

presents a blueprint for both the antisemitic interpretation of modernism *and* for a different kind of art, one emancipated from the very things [these critics] claimed to believe were necessary to ground art and guarantee its value. Which is to say

that... before twentieth century artistic modernism was a historical reality, it was an antisemitic dream (38-9).

Levi notes specifically that Wagner offers up a schema for an art focused resolutely on form over content (34), one marked by “alienation and estrangement, the displacement of conventional and expressive syntax, and various modes of cannibalization” as well as by “the freedom to create without labor and suffering, to speak without saying anything, to explore how without worrying about what, to play freely in the history of... forms and styles” (38). One might reasonably claim that James offers up a parallel construction. That such an art bears a striking resemblance to modernism itself is no accident. Per Levi, the Jew of Wagner’s imagination is a negative projection, an embodiment of that which he despises but wishes, almost despite himself, to emulate (38). Critics have not been blind to the overlap. Even Wagner’s contemporaries joked that his depiction of the Jew and of Jewish art resembled nothing so much as himself and his own work (Levi 38). But then, as noted, Wagner’s account materializes out of the same engagements that would come to preoccupy the modernists themselves—i.e., “demographic change, the role of abstract economic and social forces in shaping artistic form and individual psyches alike...[,] the sense that the forms of the past are dead,” and that new forms must therefore be invented (Levi 38)—so it is hardly surprising that his art and theory would trend in that direction.

Also of some (limited) interest is the fact that Wagner may well have harbored anxieties as to his own Jewish background. As Levi has it: “Most scholars trace this concern to Wagner’s suspicion that Ludwig Geyer, who Wagner thought might be his biological father, was a Jew” (29). But Levi also points out that at least one scholar, Paul

Lawrence Rose, argues that Wagner was less concerned with the evidence of genealogy than with that of his own personality, which he felt evinced a “Jewish” egotism and obsession with money (Levi 30). From the standpoint of dime store psychology, then, it seems easy enough to diagnose Wagner’s anti-Judaism as symptomatic of an attempt to navigate the ways in which he himself has been implicated by his own critique of modernity.

James, as it turns out, is in much the same boat. Around the time of the composition of *The American Scene*, James was facing a barrage of criticism “lamenting the obscurity of this style and his involvement in ‘decadent journals,’” all of which served “to heighten the connections between what James felt to be the grounds of his own psychic health—his art—and corruption, madness, and disease” (Freedman *Temple of Culture* 128). Most critics recognize a certain sexual ambiguity in James’ oeuvre (Simon 7), and so it possible, at a time when homosexuality was rapidly being pathologized, that James plausibly felt dangerously exposed as well as artistically uneasy. Indeed, James wrestled with the charges in his correspondence and internalized them in his stories and novellas of the period (128). Meanwhile, the discourse James found himself caught up in—a society-wide debate over supposed cultural degeneracy exemplified by the work of Max Nordau—had already roped in the Jews. Nordau, a Jew himself, had attempted to shift the symbolic burden of degeneracy off the shoulders of the Jew and onto those of the avant-garde artist, a symbol of the effete elitism Nordau saw as plaguing modern society (124-5). So, the connection between the artist and the Jew as vectors of cultural contagion had already been made. Easy enough then, for James to return the favor,

producing—as Madame Eglentyne before him—an other of the other, a convenient rhetorical figure on which to offshore his private anxieties.

Both James and Wagner, then, are if nothing else guilty of falling into the rhetorical habit of thinking with (or rather through) Jews. But it seems fair to argue that they also exemplify Levi's account of modernism, wherein the instability of the modernist subject comes to legibility through a fantasy of Judaization that also serves as a stabilizing force, enabling a rhetorical purification ritual that expels the Jewish corruption and in so doing reauthorizes the subject (171). Modernism, in this regard, remains a weirdly medieval enterprise. Such continuities, though, are not truly shocking, as the radical break modernism presumes to have made with the past is often enough less radical, less total, than advertised. Still, the connection to the Prioress is more than incidental. It signals modernism's continued investment in the Greco-Christian aesthetic and its attendant rhetorical methodologies (and social valences), and it provides critics with a more useful schema than antisemitism for understanding modernism's engagement with the Jew—not a mere recapitulation to a centuries-old bigotry (though it is that) but rather an ongoing negotiation with a discourse fundamental to Western art's self-conception.

But to see that pattern play out in American modernist poetry, we must turn our attention to those doyens of American modernism: Eliot and Pound. The pair is especially notable because as poets and critics, they offer a unique avenue into both the theory and praxis of modernist poetics. Moreover, as gatekeepers of the avant-garde, they were remarkably well positioned to affect the shape of American modernism, and as such the shape of Jewish American modernism. And both, of course, found themselves drawn to

the Jew, bound to the Jew by means of their own investment in and negotiations with the Greco-Christian tradition; thus, both wrestled with Jewish figures in their work.

This tendency is evident outside their work as well. One rather flamboyantly awful example arrives with Pound's commentary on the writing of Gertrude Stein. Here, we find Pound policing the borders of modernist innovation, brutally rejecting Stein's experiments. Lumping Stein together with Joyce as exemplars of a stream-of-consciousness style he found distasteful, Pound wrote: "Gertie and Jimmie both hunting for new langwitch, but hunting, I think, in the wrong ash-pile;" or "this flow of conSquishousness Gertie/Jimmie stuff has about FLOWED long enough" (qtd in Feinstein 8). Eliot too, joined the "oedipus Gertie" pile-on (Pound qtd in Feinstein 8), writing of "postfuturo Gertrude Steino" (Pound qtd. in Feinstein 8): "If this is of the future, then the future is... of the barbarians"; and complaining, in the same vein, that Stein's "crude" methodology amounted to an "ominous" sign of the "vulgar, primitive, and regressive nature of experimental literature to come" (Eliot qtd in Feinstein 8; Feinstein 8).

Vulgar, primitive, crude, barbarous, neurotic, vaguely excremental, of the superseded past yet troubling the future: sound familiar? As Amy Feinstein notes, despite not addressing Stein's Judaism, Pound and Eliot tend to view her and her work through a particularly ethnic prism: "the antisemitic lens of aberrant racial difference" (9). And they are not alone. e.e. cummings, Edmund Wilson, and Virginia Woolf all attempt to bring Stein to heel in terms awash in antisemitic and misogynist symbolism (Feinstein 9, 199). Like James and Wagner before them, these writers "feared that the future of modernism

was Jewish and that the icon[s] of the Judaized modernism they despised [were]... harbinger[s] of the racial and social vulgarities to come” (Feinstein 9).

Yet here again, we find a criticism that, even as it works to delimit the possibilities of modernist writing by defining certain experiments as unacceptably Jewish, nevertheless fosters the popular (mis)conception of modernism itself as a somehow Jewishly inflected mode of production (further unsettling, perhaps, its gentile practitioners) and what-is-more produces, though only in a negative guise, a specifically Jew-ish vision of modernist praxis. I say Jew-ish, of course, because the vision is not organically Jewish, or not wholly so; it develops rather from an admixture of misapprehensions and distortions created by a combination of actual Jewish writing and over a millennia of anti-Jewish discourse. That discourse too, as we have seen, is not entirely without basis in either Jewish theology or Jewish artistic practice: Jewish culture does embrace language as the grounds of being; the rabbis’ interpretive practices are radically materialist and linguistically focused. Plus, Gertrude Stein, and many others, actually were writing works that drew attention to the artificiality and absurdity of language, that called into question the stability of the subject and the status of the author, and that engaged in formal play for play’s sake. It’s as if by responding to these tendencies in modernism, by playing Cassandra and warning the reading public about the coming of a Judaized future, the prophets of early 20th century modernity called that very future into being, creating an overdetermined stylistic niche into which Jewish artists might be fit or might even fit themselves: a crabbed and contested entry, to be sure, but an entry nonetheless, into the dialogues, into the dialogics, of modernity.

This pattern is at work in the poetry of the period as much as the criticism, though I will, for reasons of brevity as well as prominence, reserve my exploration for the work of Pound and Eliot respectively. Pound's antisemitism has been much remarked, but prior to the 1980s, it was widely recognized but not seriously studied. The critical response ranges from full-throated denunciation to tacit or implied endorsement, with most critics opting to explain away antisemitic material as a function of Pound's political investments while also drawing a sharp dividing line between Pound's politics and his poetry (Parker 109). However, with Andrew Parker's 1982 "Ezra Pound and the 'Economy' of Antisemitism," a more substantial criticism began to take shape. Parker's essay marks a turning point in Pound criticism much like that in Chaucer studies, where interest shifts from debating the degree of Pound's antisemitism to investigating its kind: that is, to investigating the function antisemitic rhetoric plays in Pound's work. That shift is essential, and Parker's essay thus provides an important foundation for any critic, myself included, who wishes to parse Pound's employment of Jewish figures. In this regard, Parker claims that Pound's antisemitism is interlaced with his critique of capital, a critique that recalls Wagner's in its assertion that modern commodity capitalism operates by means that are structurally identical with usury, and that usury, almost by definition though more accurately through long association, is the province of the Jew. According to Parker, Pound uses those two words—Jew and usury—so interchangeably that they come to function as synonyms, such that a usurer is "Semitic" in Pound's writing even when that person is not, in fact, Jewish (112). Parker's point finally is that Pound's economic philosophy is largely identical with his philosophy of language and as a result his poetics cannot avoid becoming embroiled in antisemitism; on the contrary,

antisemitism is central (104)—or anyway, anti-Judaism is, since it is not race-hatred, or not only race-hatred, that deforms Pound’s encounters with the Jew, but instead the deep structures of the discourses he engages, discourses which themselves have long deployed the Jew as symbol of usury: that is to say, of an unnatural and self-referential mode of production.

As Shell argues, that the field of literary and the field of the economic are comparable, that they partake in analogous processes of imagination and production, is a fundamental principle of Pound’s writing (Parker 104). Pound draws his economics from Aristotle’s *Politics*, wherein Aristotle distinguishes between “two antithetical forms of exchange: economics as such (*oikonomike*) described as ‘natural,’ ‘original’ and ‘proper’; and ‘wealth-getting’ (*chrematistike*), defined as ‘artificial,’ ‘secondary’ and ‘improper’” (Parker 105). In the former mode, money operates purely as a mediating agent, its function to facilitate commodity exchange and its value generated solely by the commodities it mediates. In the latter mode, however, money is fetishized. It is both the means and ends of exchange: a commodity in its own right; its value detached from its rightful origin in the world of things and (labor) relations and cut loose to grow without “fixed boundary” (Aristotle qtd. in Parker 105). Aristotle censures *chrematistike* as a form of economic incest and links it to usury, arguing that money generated at interest, rather than from exchange—i.e., money breeding money—is a perversion of the natural economic order, just as incest is a perversion of the natural biological order (Parker 105). Pound follows suit, arguing that money—a wholly artificial entity—functions best when it functions transparently; that is, when value extends “naturally” from the system of relations governing production—“the actual existence of goods or the possibility of

producing them” (Pound *SP* 257). When money becomes divorced from that system of “real” relations (in the vulgar Marxist sense), when it begins to accrue value of its own, without regard to production, it becomes like a signifier detached from its signified, vulnerable in the absence of any pragmatic grounding to the generation of excess values, excess meanings, that destabilize the proper economic order (Parker 106).

Pound, in line with Aristotle, defines this process as usury and declares it “contra naturam,” against nature (Pound *GK* 281). He elaborates the point in the *Cantos*:

Stonecutter is kept from his stone
 weaver is kept from his loom
 WITH USURA
 wool comes not to market
 sheep bringeth no grain with usura
 usura is a murrain, usura
 blunteth the needle in the maid’s hand
 and stoppeth the spinners cunning. (*Canto* 45, 20-7)

Here, “usura,” usury, interferes with the processes at the heart of production, interrupting the normal flow of the economy. Usury is, as Parker explains, a “prophylactic, which confounds all ‘natural’ immediacy by inhibiting the biological sequence of generation” (Parker 107):

it stayeth the young man’s courting
 it hath brought palsey to bed, lyeth
 between the young bride and her bridegroom... (*Canto* 45, 43-5)

The result of this prophylaxis is a “blurring of distinctions between objects and values, words and things” that makes the determination of value impossible (Parker 107-8). Not merely at the economic level. Echoing Wagner, Pound asserts that usury is a poison that contaminates the entire society, and that it is directly responsible for the debasement of the arts which themselves seem to have become caught up in a usurious mode: “arbitrary and artificial,” without any “correspondence to reality at all” (MacDiarmid qtd in Parker 108).

The question of whether a sign bears any correspondence with reality is crucial to Pound. It beats at the heart of his economics as it does at the heart of his poetics. Because the threat that Pound perceives is the threat of the wandering signifier, the wandering Jew, a figure of dangerous semantic excess whose accrued meanings distort its relationship to the referent. And just as Pound imagines an idealized, frictionless economy, defined by a one-to-one relation between production and value, so does he imagine an idealized, frictionless language, defined by a close intimacy between signifier and signified. Against this frictionless communication, Pound ranges phonetic writing, letters signifying sounds which signify things. Pound sees writing as a secondary sign system, a representation of a representation, unacceptably removed from the vitality of the real and thus, due to the arbitrariness of signatory relations, unacceptably susceptible to corruption in the form of polysemic excess—in other words, unacceptably Jewish (Parker 116).

Pound extends this criticism to rhetoric itself, arguing in *ABC of Reading* that resistance to the “flowers” of rhetoric is one sign of the health of a civilization, because rhetoric—and more specifically metaphor, which Pound treats as a synecdoche for

rhetoric—is the art of using “language to conceal thought” (33). Metaphor interposes terms, representing one term by means of another; as such, it inevitably produces irreconcilable differences between those terms, an excess of meaning that distracts the reader from the preferred referent and injects new connotative valences of semiotic possibility into the utterance. This semantic bleed is intolerable to Pound, who reads it as a distortion of real meaning very much in the vein of the distortions of real value he associates with usury. As with usury, Pound understands this distortion as a Jewishly-coded civilizational threat, arguing it deforms the character of the nation (Parker 115).

However, Pound’s enmity to metaphor, to phonetic writing as a system, to the excesses of language, which—as in his commentary re: Joyce and Stein—he identifies habitually with a kind of intellectual or aesthetic “squishiness,” is itself a bequest of the Greco-Roman tradition. The same enmity appears in Plato and Aristotle as it does in Paul and Augustine. There too, language is imagined as bound to an unendurable absence (of the transcendental signified) that results in a hysterical overproduction of surplus meanings. There too, this situation is portrayed as a falling off, a diversion from proper order. And there too, a return to order is to be affected via a purification of language—an evacuation of linguistic excess and a stabilization of signatory relations—that works itself out in anti-Jewish terms. With Pound, then, we find ourselves once again in the position described by Levi, wherein a fantasy of Judaization serves to articulate, to make legible and comprehensible, the thorny problematics embedded in the crisis of modernity.

That Pound links both language and usury to the Jew is evident throughout his work. As noted earlier, Pound conflates the latter terms, even creating a cute little antisemitic portmanteau in the form of the term “Jewsury” (Pound *RS* 254). But Pound

also laments the entire system of modern capital as usurious and thus Hebraic (Parker 111). And lest one be tempted by Pound's occasional forays into qualification, his arguments that "the poor yitts' should not themselves be held responsible" for the destruction wrought by "a few big jews" must be tempered by an awareness that Pound tended to imagine usury as a determinative feature of Judaism, such that usury represented a problem for "the whole Jewish people," and whereby "all 'jews, real jews, chazim [pigs]" might be associated with the practice (Pound *Canto 52* p257). As for language, one need only consider Pound's ruminations on Jewish religious texts to see the connection, as Pound characterizes the Torah and Talmud as "all this damn near eastern squish" (*L* 342), using a phrase that, as we have seen, given Pound's customary idiom, indelibly ties the Jew to the conjoined problems of economic and linguistic excess. Similarly, Pound excoriates the Hebrew texts as expounding the "ethos of a nomadic era" (*SP* 66)—a locust-like atavism, exhausting resources and moving on—while at the same time, he attacks their imprecision: "Cabala, for example anything to make the work mean something it does NOT say" (*RS* 284).¹⁰ What ties these varied descriptions together appears to be the Jew's preternatural ability to cross borders, whether sociopolitical (the borders of landed property), economic (the borders of monetary value), or linguistic (the borders of the word). Jewishness is here defined as precisely that quality of excess that overflows demarcation. Jewishness, once dirt, now equals squish.

The point begs further analysis since, from the Pauline perspective of Christian teleology, Judaism is itself quite squishy and excessive. In the Christian imaginary,

¹⁰ Pound here conflates *Kabbalah*, the tradition of Jewish mysticism, with the central text of that tradition: i.e., the *Zohar*. Despite this moment of intellectual laziness, Pound's criticism is not without some validity, as the *Zohar* is indeed profoundly esoteric in its interpretations of Torah.

Judaism finds its fulfillment and completion in the figure of Christ, the word made flesh, who, through his sacrifice, cancels out the intractable *différance* embedded in the act of signification and returns both language and humanity (humanity is created *in the image* of God) to a prelapsarian state of oneness with the signified, in the case of language, or with God, the transcendental signified, in the case of mankind. But Judaism does not in fact evaporate the morning of the resurrection. It persists: a religion whose central ethos is one of absence and loss conditioned by the infinitely deferred possibility of messianic redemption (Parker 114). That obstinate deferral reinscribes the gap between signifier and signified, insisting—contra Christianity, contra the Greco-Christian aesthetic—that exile function as the grounds of being and of discourse alike. To adapt James' point regarding Jewish multiplication, this is excess with a vengeance, reauthorizing a kind of semiotic nomadism, a kind of linguistic and hermeneutic play which rejects any completion, any arche or telos, and foregrounds instead endless metonymic succession (in which sign and referent never coincide). Judaism then is not merely squishy: it is the religion of squish, the sanctification of excess. For Pound, then, the encounter with the Jew becomes a metaphor for the encounter with excess itself, with those “elements [textual, economic, sociopolitical] which remain irreducibly peripheral with respect to a presiding (authorial) consciousness” (Parker 114). This explanation goes some way to explaining Pound's vehemence regarding Jews. Symbolically, the encounter with the Jew is not merely an encounter with the racially or ethnically abject, it is, to quote Derrida as Parker does: an encounter with “the infinitely other” (qtd in 114).

To manage the various aspects of that difficult encounter, Pound settles on two mechanisms: an alternative to traditional money in the form of the stamp scrip developed

by Silvio Gesell, and a new approach to poetics—i.e., Imagism—exemplified by the formal properties of the Chinese ideogram. In both cases, though, the mechanism enacts an antisemitic purification ritual in the Eglantynian mode, evacuating *différance* and sublimating the play of metonymic substitutions to the univocal authority of the signified. In the case of the stamp scrip, what Pound is proposing is a form of money stamped with a time and date after which, unless the owner pays a small fee, the scrip loses a portion of its value. The idea here of course is to encourage the rapid recirculation of monies and to disable hoarding, but it is also to counter the usurious tendencies inherent to any representative system of exchange. That is, to yoke money—the signifier—as closely as possible to the source of its value, the relations of production/consumption, so as to incapacitate its tendency toward fetishization. By rendering money perishable, the scrip duplicates the fungible and temporary state of the goods and services it represents, bringing the monetary system in line with the “natural” processes of the economy such that the scrip may “participate fully in the flux of commodity values” without distorting them (Parker 109). This process, though, is inevitably figured in antisemitic terms, as an assault on the misprisions and deformations of the “Hebraic monetary system” (Pound *SP* 351).

In writing, meanwhile, Pound proposes an analogous approach, an assault on all that too Jewish squish in the form of a style of creative writing that would “go in fear of abstractions,” seeking “direct treatment of the thing,” so as to “render particulars” in a commonly accessible language devoted to *le mot juste*, the right or exact word, and “not the nearly-exact, nor merely decorative word” (Pound “A Few Don’ts by an Imagist”). Pound’s construction of Imagism is almost anti-rhetorical in that it attempts an end run

around the problem of linguistic excess, locking out the figural in favor of *le mot juste* or, to turn to Eliot for a moment, the objective correlative: a set of concrete objects, a situation, a series of events that embody a given emotion rather than represent it (Eliot, “Hamlet and his Problems”). This antirhetorical tendency mirrors the silent ontology of the Greco-Christian aesthetic, a movement away from hermeneutics toward absolute Being. This is where the Chinese ideogram comes in. Having been influenced by Fenollosa’s *The Chinese Written Character* (Parker 116), Pound believed that the ideogram “brings language close to things” (Fenollosa qtd in Parker 116). Why? Because the ideogram is pictorial. At least at its etymological root, the ideogram is “based on a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature” (Fenollosa qtd. in Parker 116). That connection to the origin, that basic correspondence between signifier and signified, constitutes for Pound a decisive advantage over Western phonetic writing systems, which as secondary sign systems (representations of representation) are based wholly on convention rather than natural sympathy and which therefore are made subject to excessive connotative substitutions (Parker 116-17). The ideogram, then, becomes the *ne plus ultra* of imagism: the ultimate example of a language shorn of excess, a signifier that hews as close as may be to its signified and as such forecloses the “Jewish” play of meanings, purifying the utterance—which rather tags Imagism as anti-Jewish even if one may balk at calling it antisemitic.

The trouble with Pound’s solutions is they don’t work. Parker handily knocks holes in both. The stamp scrip is hamstrung by its reliance on State power, which must underwrite the surplus charge on expired scrip. The State, then, rather than “nature,” is the arbiter of value here, and as a result, value is not reconnected to its “natural origin” at

all, but instead funneled back into the arbitrary hands of a tautological power structure, back, that is, into the hands of self-referentiality and usurious excess. The ideogram, meanwhile, is stymied by its status as a signifier. It belongs to the structure of writing and always has (Parker 118). As such, its imagery cannot be read off simply as “realistic.” It does not correspond to but rather abstracts the real, displacing it in the process. More than that, the ideogram is resolutely multiplicative, since as Derrida points out any signifier contains within it the possibility of its own repetition as a necessity of its being a signifier in the first place (Parker 118). Even Pound’s insistence on its purity as an ideogram is absurd. As Parker explains, nonphonetic alphabets like Chinese and Japanese included phonetic elements “from the very beginning”; further, since even phonetic writing owes some of its order to pictorial elements including typography, punctuation, and spacing, “there is” as Derrida has it, “no purely phonetic writing” (qtd in Parker 118).

Consequently, the distinction Pound wishes to draw between the ideogram and phonetic script collapses. Far from representing opposed modes of writing, it would appear each methodology implicates the other. The failure of these mediating systems—the ideogram and the stamp scrip—leaves Pound continually re-exposed to the problem, the threat, of excess, which in turn, thanks to the imbrication of Pound’s personal idiom with the anti-Jewish discourses of the Greco-Christian aesthetic, conditions an almost compulsory response in the form of nonstop antisemitic bloviating. Unable to arrest the sun in its rounds, Pound must rage, rage, against the dying of the light, cursing the night, bemoaning the dusky hues of its old wool hat and coat, the deep shadow cast by its comically overlong nose.

As is the case with Pound, Eliot too has been through the critical ringer on the issue of antisemitism. Just as with Pound, Eliot has garnered his share of defenders and detractors, yet as always with this sort of question (is Eliot an antisemite?) there is less utility in investigating Eliot's character than in investigating his work, asking not whether the work contains antisemitic language (in certain instances, it most assuredly does) but rather what role this antisemitic rhetoric plays in the work, as well as whether and how the structures of anti-Judaism and the Greco-Christian aesthetic inhere in that work, motivating its antisemitism. With Eliot, though, one does not have the luxury—if one can call it that—of an extensive foray into Jew-hatred. Eliot's engagements with the Jew are few, or few-ish in comparison to Pound, though they remain significant for what they can reveal about Eliot's approach to modernity and modernism alike.

As Bryan Cheyette has argued, drawing on Christopher Ricks and Maud Ellman, Eliot's engagements with the Jew, while deeply informed by his conversion to Anglican Christianity from Unitarianism, are also part of a pattern of literary response to the Semitic discourse of the late Victorian period. That discourse produced, and reproduced ad infinitum, structurally incoherent figures of the Jew: figures embodying at one and the same time "the aspirations of an Enlightened state," and thus marking the universalist or incorporationist hope of secular humanism, or alternatively "undermining the essential characteristics of a particularist nation," thus marking the hysterical fear of cultural dissolution (Cheyette 269). The Jew, therefore, is an unruly figure, and functions for Eliot very much in that guise: a disruptive, mystifying force which, pace Pound, blurs distinctions (of race, of class, of community and culture) and as such threatens to unsettle the social order—or worse, to disorder the European Mind.

Following Mathew Arnold, and in line with many of the Victorian and modernist writers Cheyette touches on, Eliot seeks to contain this alarming figure in a “transcendent discourse” (a grand recite) that might, by finally encompassing the enduringly unassimilable Jew, demonstrate the efficacy of a controlling system of thought, typically one managed by a set of fixed, overdetermined binaries (Cheyette 269)—that system, in Eliot’s case, being an authoritarianism bordering on totalitarianism. But despite his protestations of authoritarian zeal, Eliot’s refined irony will not allow his own thought to relax finally into such an easy resolution. Typically, Eliot’s Jew escapes the binaries he is caught in—but then that is exactly the problem, as Eliot’s Jewish free-radical inevitably replicates, spreading a contaminating Jewish confusion wherever he goes. Thus Eliot, like Pound, like James and Wagner, like Madame Eglantyne, falls to conducting both symbolic and rhetorical purification rituals designed to evacuate Jewish uncertainty. And yet, thank again to Eliot’s unshakeable irony, the value of these rituals in Eliot’s work is ambiguous at best, in that the Jew, and the semiotic (Semitic) bleed he represents, remains to trouble the text.

Most of Eliot’s antisemitic work dates to his early period, with the majority appearing in 1920’s *Ars Vos Prec*. Here, we need deal with only three poems: “Gerontion,” “Sweeney Among the Nightingales,” and “Burbank with a Baedeker, Bleistein with a Cigar.”¹¹ We have also to account for the unpublished “Dirge” (a redacted section of *The Waste Land*) along with, when appropriate and largely for

¹¹ “A Cooking Egg” is often included in this list as well, since it too trades in xenophobia and antisemitism, but the poem is a minor work at best, largely negligible, and as such its analysis would contribute very little to a theory of Eliot’s anti-Judaism, which can be ascertained well enough from the other texts in the collection.

context, the lectures collected in 1933's *After Strange Gods* and 1939's *The Idea of A Christian Society* (Julius 44-7). Finally, we must consider *The Waste Land* as well, for while the redaction of "Dirge" cleared it of any overt Jewish references or characters, the poem nevertheless takes part in anti-Jewish discourse, particularly when it addresses itself to language.

Before diving into the work, I'd like to take a moment to consider the roots of Eliot's antisemitism as racialized bigotry so as to better understand how that prejudice functions for Eliot both in the work and in the larger social context which the work, and Eliot himself, inhabit. Such context is supplied by Jonathan Freedman who rewinds the clock back to Eliot's Harvard days, noting that even as Harvard maintained relatively open admissions and welcomed Jewish students, it was also "an incubator of racist, anti-immigrant, and anti-Jewish thinking," embracing race science and eugenics (Freedman "Lessons Out of School" 421). In fact, when Congress passed the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924, Harvard president Abbott Lawrence Lowell advocated new quotas on Jewish enrollment (422). Eliot had already articulated the logic behind those quotas in a letter he wrote to his cousin Eleanor Hinckley in 1915 in which he (faintly) praised Harvard's Jewish undergraduates for being widely read and having "clever mind[s]," but simultaneously accused them of "disordered reading... confused thinking... and utter absence of background and balance and proportion" (qtd in Freedman "Lessons Out of School" 422), finally concluding that "too great numbers of intellectually competitive but undercultured Jews were distorting the student body" (Freedman "Lessons Out of School" 422). Eliot here reveals his own tendency toward racialized-thinking and the extent to which he had already, as a young man, internalized

the link—common in the discourse of the day—between the Jew and the decline of the West.

Yet we can also discern a certain ambiguity in Eliot's attitudes: on the one hand evincing a queasy discomfort with the Jews in his social orbit, while on the other the possibility of tolerance or even a degree of restrained admiration. Eliot's faith cannot be ignored here either, as it appears—though this is speculation—that the quasi-philosemitism of Augustine's defense of the Old Testament and of the Jewish devotions of scripture, long having passed into canon, led Eliot at some point to incorporate something like "the theory of the two Jews" into his thinking. That theory, popularized through various media portrayals of Jews in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, bifurcates Jewish identity into two modes. In one, Jews are figured as links to a "noble spiritual ancestry, documented in the Bible" (Levinson 23), while their centuries long experience of wandering and diaspora makes them ideal "prototypes for America's original European settlers" (26). In the other, however, Jews are figured as "spiritually backward" as well as politically retrograde, resistant to the "New Jerusalem narrative" then ensconced as the "official mythos of American life" (24). The theory expresses a muted racial terror, as Jews were increasingly identified within the discourse of racial otherness surfacing at the end of the century in tandem with the emergence of evolutionary theory (25). This identification dovetailed with earlier Christian constructions of the Jew not only as an alien presence but also as a culturally atomizing force (think of the Prioress' paranoia regarding the potential for contagion contained in Jewish speech).

By the time of Eliot's writing, then, there were two quite distinct types of Jews residing in the American consciousness: the admired "standard Hebrew," symbol of religious purity and historical continuity; and the debased "Sheeney": the racialized, "interloping and basically capitalist 'dirty Jew,'" contradictorily the enemy of progress and the repository of the country's worst anxieties regarding the encroachment of modernity (Levinson 25-26). This latter Jew, while echoing Christian anti-Judaism, also seems to have some overlapping valences with Eliot's critique of the Unitarianism he was raised in, which he saw as infected by a humanism that weakened its moral certainties (Schuchard 2). A Poundian revulsion at the intimation of intellectual or moral squishiness pertains here, as Eliot sides with thinkers like Irving Babbitt and Josiah Royce who pushed back against humanism as a muddling influence on American life (2). Along these lines, Eliot may well be demonstrating another affinity, this time with the poet Charles Baudelaire, whose various down-and-out *dramatis personae*—including Jews—Eliot turns to in his early poems to embody the moral confusions of the modern condition.¹² The point may be extended, as Robert Casillo has shown that in Eliot's writing, as in Pound's, the Jew is often made to function as "the embodiment of intellectual confusion: a negative principle which opposes clarity" of any stripe (Cheyette 271).

For Eliot, then, it may be that his dual encounters with the Jew, both in Christian and secular contexts, led to a bifurcation in his conception of Jewishness that mirrors the

¹² That by 1930 Eliot has abandoned Baudelaire's menagerie as "not wholly perdurable or adequate" ("Baudelaire" 424) to the task he had set it may itself help to explain why the Jew largely disappears from Eliot's later writings.

bifurcation of the Jews. The extent to which Eliot integrated the theory of the two Jews into either his understanding of Judaism or his broader theories of culture cannot be firmly established. Still, the theory does operate with shaping force for Whitman, Longfellow, and Howells, and it would not therefore be too much of a stretch to ascribe to it at least some influence over Eliot if for no other reason than that this more nuanced picture of Eliot's prejudice goes some way to explaining how the poet could bemoan the unsalutary impact of so-called freethinking Jews on society (as he does in *After Strange Gods*) while at the same time defending Jewish religious orthodoxies and befriending Jewish artists and intellectuals like Horace M. Kallen (Schuchard 13-14).

There is, however, more to Eliot's letter to his cousin, perhaps, than this glimpse into the gradations of his prejudice. Freedman, for instance, goes much further, arguing that Eliot's letter speaks beyond his college experience to a broader collision between Jewish and gentile cultural milieus occurring not only at Harvard but also at other academic and social institutions across the country, and crucially, in the salons and little magazines of Greenwich and London where Eliot would forge his poetic career ("Lessons Out of School" 421). In those spaces, Midwestern Americans like Eliot read as outsiders and so found themselves competing with "another set of deracinated outsiders" (Europe and America's fast assimilating Jews) for the opportunity to "make their mark in the sphere of cultural distinction" (425). That competition "structured their work," and all the more so because modernist writers like Eliot, who cultivated a sense of themselves as "exiles, outsiders, others, emigres, wanderers," had to reckon with the fact that their writerly personas bore a rather pointed familiarity to the stereotype (arguably derived from Wagner) of the assimilating, cultured yet parasitic Jews with which they were

“competing for cultural legitimacy and artistic status” (425). Thus, in modernist writing, Eliot’s included, the Jews are often portrayed as oddly sympathetic characters who are, at the same time, a bit too close for comfort. *Mon semblable, hypocrite lecteur*, the Jew is an “illegitimate [quester] after cultural authority and writerly excellence” (425). The pattern has a parallel in the work of Mathew Arnold, who in *Culture and Anarchy*, deploys the Jew—or rather the concept of Jewishness, which he terms Hebraism (and opposes to Hellenism)—to separate himself from the Philistinism of his own national culture and signal his devotion to a larger European project. That modernists like Eliot also defined their work in these terms meant that in this regard as well, the Jew would prove an uncomfortably intimate symbol (Freedman *Temple of Culture* 50). So, we return again to Levi-ite territory, where some disturbance to the subject’s ability to come to voice, in this case both an intramural competition and a sort of racialized discoloring (or guilt by association), gets worked out—or worked through—in the form of the fantasy of Judaization.

That fantasy is perhaps most clearly articulated in “Gerontion.” The poem takes the form of a dramatic monologue spoken by the titular character, a little old man living in a rented house who, while contemplating a dry season, waits for rain. Water and its absence are, of course, important symbols in Eliot’s oeuvre, where water is generally representative of redemption and renewal, while its corollary, dryness, symbolizes the desiccation of a culture whose youth and vitality have been quite literally stolen away by the ravages of WWI. The house itself, too, is a central symbol, representing both the poet/speaker’s spirit and the state of the culture—a typical move in Eliot who, inspired by the Fisher King, imagines the salvation of the former as the renewal of the latter. How

convenient then, that the house—“a decayed house” full of “windy spaces” (Eliot “Gerontion” 7, 16)—happens to be owned by a Jew. The Jew’s status as owner elevates him, privileges him, among the poem’s other characters: they are renters, passing through the house, through history; but the house itself, the moment, the generally withered, degenerate state of the world, these are the Jew’s especial province. Such a connection is natural enough, discursively speaking, as we know the Jew has often been impressed into service as a metonym for the degeneracy of the modern condition. But it may be that Eliot has something more specific in mind.

Among the poem’s cast of characters, only the Jew and the woman who keeps the kitchen are unnamed. A certain classism pertains here, one feels, but regardless, these characters are defined not by their identities but by the descriptions Eliot appends. Where the kitchen maid is an ally, fighting the drafty house for warmth, “poking the peevish gutter” (Eliot “Gerontion” 14), the Jew is allied only with the wind, that shapeless force menacing the inhabitants from outside. Note, too, the cosmopolitanism of the Jew’s background: “spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,/Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London,” the Jew represents at once a lack of proper origin and a peripatetic rootlessness (despite his property ownership) that, if the sneering tone of the line is anything to go by, at the very least triggers the speaker’s revulsion (9-10). Even the Jew’s birth is uncertain, as he is apparently not born at all but rather materializes *ex nihilo* in a café like one of James’ pluripotent Hebrew snakes or worms. The Jew here is a deeply unsettling figure, a figure of anxiety and resentment, but also one representing the emergence of what Derrida might have called a “monstrous” or perhaps “supplemental” subjectivity: i.e., a subjectivity without fixed or fixable origin, operating under the sign of

the wandering signifier, untethered from the signified and so prone to destabilizing excess—and thus, for Eliot (though not for Derrida) a threat (“Structure, Sign, and Play” 240).

Fitting then that the Jew alone among the poem’s cast of characters recurs, the others appearing and then disappearing in their turn. Though the Jew’s second appearance is in another guise, we can perceive his outline in the figure of the “flowering Judas,” which arrives in the poem alongside a dogwood and chestnut, symbols of a “depraved” (read: oversexed) May. A May marred perhaps by the Judas’ particular flowering, pink with the blood of a self-hanged Judas Iscariot, betrayer of “Christ the Tiger” who, a line earlier, ushered in the season with a healthy, youthful “juvinescence” that here has run amok, gone to seed, quite literally, as the blood of Judas now doubles in the syntax with the blood of Christ, the source of Life, so that the oblique communion taken by the residents of the house in the following sequence of lines seems to have been detoured. The sacrament made hollow, ineffective, bungled and botched. Indeed, it seems that here Christ himself is subordinated to the Jew, in that his primary sacrament has been sabotaged, its meaning, its proper referent, blurred.

This sort of semiotic blurring is a major feature of the poem, which is strung together rather by sound than by sense; that is, by means of “empty verbal structures” that employ assonance, consonance, and alliteration to appear syntactical on a first read, but which in fact, on closer analysis, disrupt the syntax, often unsettling or eliding the relation between subject and predicate (Bonds 44). This feature is characteristic of the speaker/poet’s spiritual dissolution and the vacuousness of his thought, both duplicated by the dilapidated state of history itself. All of which are now made legible as symptoms

of a specifically Jewish malady, an existential malaise brought on by living as the representative of an exhausted but stubbornly self-replicating culture. The last part rankles most because the Jew's sterile, metonymic replicating is a perverse yet potent form of regeneration, mocking both the natural multiplication symbolized by spring and the regeneration symbolized by the sacrament, which like the grail in the Fisher King myth dissolves myth into reality, signifier into signified, and cancels, or rather fulfills, the desire endemic to language. Eliot, or perhaps Gerontion, imagines that this sacrament, this divine, Christological consummation alone can save him and his world from death. But all he can access is the unnatural, usurious language of the Jew, whose darkness yet enshrouds the infant Logos, still waiting, "word within a word," as if behind Paul's Mosaic veil, to be born (Eliot "Gerontion" 18). Or maybe he is waiting, instead, to die, as the Jew appears a third time in the ambiguous figure of the "wrath-bearing tree" (Eliot "Gerontion" 47).

What Eliot means by this is anyone's guess, but it's plausibly a reference to the cross, and yet again plausibly a reference to the Judas tree, on which, as noted, Judas dies a suicide. Once again the Jew interferes, doubling and *détourning* the central Western symbol of renewal and rejuvenation, of death undone by death, forestalling redemption with a teasing, recidivist referentiality: a trace that betrays us back into death, into materiality and the death of meaning, back into the web of signification, into a logic of allusion and intertextuality, into, as Eliot has it, "a wilderness of mirrors" ("Gerontion" 65) in which even the Son meets and is arrested by his image, his inversion. That the meeting is less than satisfactory is made tragically apparent by the confusion that descends upon the poem ("unnatural vices/ Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues/ are

forced upon us by our impudent crimes”) as well as by the poet/speaker’s tears, wrung from that selfsame wrath-bearing tree, the only water that appears in the text (44-7). In this way the poet/speaker’s desire for salvation is detoured, its symbolism derailed by the Jew such that an anti-salvific absence reinfects the poem, and the water of life is embittered by grief.

The threat of Judaization inheres in the sheer slipperiness of the language, in the supplementary nature of signification. The threat even implicates Gerontion, as his own imagined symbolic baptism, fighting knee-deep in a salt-marsh, is echoed and deformed by the squatting Jew “who gives rise to a ‘slimy’ [linguistic] excrement which unsettles that which is solid and ‘known’ (Pinkney qtd. in Cheyette 247). In this sense Gerontion (and Eliot as his authorial double) becomes entangled in the various ‘Jewish’ confusions of the poem. We can see here as well Eliot’s tendency to identify with the Jew even as he distances himself, constructing the Jew as an “inhuman racial ‘other’”, of course, but also as a kind of “potential self” (Cheyette 248), a move typical of the discursive overlap between the “Jewish” and the modern more broadly, and indicative—given the Jew’s unsavoriness—of Eliot’s rejection of this all too uncertain iteration of modernity.

Something similar happens in “Sweeney Among the Nightingales,” at least in the sense that it involves a horror of uncertainty, of squishiness, and of a semiotic slipperiness for which the Jew becomes objective correlative. Along these lines, “Sweeney,” Bryan Cheyette has argued, operates fundamentally to confuse its own central metaphor, announced in the poem’s closing, which yokes Sweeney, the titular character, to Agamemnon of Greek myth. Cheyette points out that even taken as it stands, the purpose of the allusion is unclear, and critics have debated whether it is intended to

elevate Sweeney's plight—ensconced in a dive bar, surrounded by plotting prostitutes— or to highlight its unbearable seediness. But Cheyette notes that the poem is populated by a small host of figures, “the person in the Spanish cape,” “the silent man in mocha brown,” and “someone indistinct,” whose presence diffuses that major comparison, blunting its impact (250). As Cheyette argues, “‘Eliot’s poem does not allow the reader to determine the extent to which the categories of Greek ‘thought and emotion’ [can be made to] incorporate” ape-neck Sweeney’s “unconscious animalism”—i.e., his rank debasement, his carnivorous sexuality, his brute vitality (Cheyette 250). The failure is significant, given Eliot’s adherence to the Arnoldian binary associating Hellenism with intellectual clarity—with the ability, that is, to perceive things as they really are (Arnold 136)—since it seems to imply that, like Sweeney’s relation to Agamemnon, the modern condition too is marked by juxtapositions that continually prove indecipherable, illegible, bouncing nauseatingly back and forth between glory and ignominy, defying any attempt at historicization, any attempt to contextualize the moment and make it mean through mythological or historical analogy.

No character, though, embodies this ambivalence, or even this hostility to meaning, more fully than Rachel née Rabinovitch. A notably specific reference in a poem populated by mostly nameless figures, Rachel, like Sweeney, stands out also for her animalism as she “tears at the grapes with murderous paws” (Eliot, “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” 24). Nevertheless, as Cheyette points out, this is largely where the comparison ends because while “Sweeney is positioned... in an historical analogy with Agamemnon, Rachel is introduced precisely because she is outside that history” (251). Cheyette does not elaborate, but perhaps here again we find ourselves in the presence of

the deracinated, of an identity which has been severed from its origin and so become denatured. Rachel née Rabinovitch, the crypto-Jewess, married now, presumably, to someone with a rather better name, an Anglo-American name, a name one presumes might enable plain Rachel Rabinovitch to move, to pass, more easily in polite society. However, the results of this née-ing, this marriage of Hebraism and Hellenism, seem less than ideal, as rather than facilitate her immersion in the latter cultural dispensation, Eliot's naming underscores her disconnection to both, rendering her an exile. The designation is appropriate because Rachel, in the Bible, is indeed a character resonant with that concept, famously weeping by the waters of Babylon over the exile of her sons. But, from her alienated position, our modern Rachel n^èe Rabinovitch can no more connect with Moses than Agamemnon, as both mythologies, both histories, are now equally foreign to her.

Thus, Rachel suffers the same sort of doubled alienation as Wagner's cultured Jew, and fittingly, in a move that mimics Wagner's invocation of parasitism, Eliot depicts Rachel as ravenous, desperately hungry for the cultural/spiritual nourishment she both lacks and has lost. Still, Rabinovitch is ultimately too suggestive a name to ignore. It calls up all the usual antisemitic bric-a-brac; more importantly, it ties Rachel to the rabbis and to their hermeneutical tradition, one precisely opposed to Greco-Christian aesthetics in its radical embrace of supplementarity, and one often derided as overly material, overly fleshy, or even inhuman, animal.

How wonderful, then, that almost as soon as she appears, Rachel née Rabinovitch is atomized across the body of the text, such that many of the poem's ancillary characters seem to have contracted a kind of nascent Jewishness, as they have a nascent animality.

There's the person in the Spanish cape, already thought to be "in league" with Rachel in (maybe) planning Sweeney's (or somebody's) seduction and robbery; there's the silent man, who, another would-be victim, withdraws from the action and watches voyeuristically (like the Jew in "Gerontion," leering—with his sleazy "golden grin"—from "outside a window, leaning in"); and there is the host's indistinct interlocuter, whose conversation is apparently irrelevant, but who—like the clergeon passing through the Jewry—serves to open the bar up to the alluring but potentially damning song of those crooning "nightingales," Sweeney's sirens, hustling Johns out by the "Convent of the Sacred Heart" (Eliot "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" 21-36). It seems finally as if, in pulling back the curtain on Rachel's Jewish background and introducing the potentiality of an at least semi-cultured crypto-Judaism into the poem, Eliot has made it impossible to tell who exactly is a Jew and who is not, that is who exactly is symbolic of an unrepentant animality, materiality, literalism and fleshly consumption, and who is rather a symbol of the fall, the faithful but flawed penitent, recipient of the "mortal blow" that crushes Agamemnon in the poem's epigraph.

The structure of mythopoetic allusion that grounds the poem in a controlling narrative here collapses. We exist in a space of uprooted oppositions, and we do not have sufficient context to read them. The monstrous subjectivity that marks the advent of modernity is embodied everywhere and nowhere. In fact, it closes out the poem in yet another excremental purge as "Agamemnon cried aloud/ and let their liquid siftings fall/ to stain the stiff dishonored shroud." Those liquid siftings recall both Agamemnon's "bloody death" and the squatting Jew of "Gerontion," such that the phrase might refer as easily to the Jewish "slime" that mars that poem (Cheyette 251). Here too a Jewishly

tagged indeterminacy coats everything like a layer of rancid oil. Even Rachel's status as objective correlative is thrown into doubt, as nearly anyone in the poem might be impressed into her role. Once more, Eliot has introduced a mechanism ostensibly intended to identify and contain a Jewish threat, a Jewish confusion over origins, borders, and boundaries, only to find that threat metastasizing, spreading out to encompass the whole. This creeping confusion triggers the speaker's unease and accounts for much of the poem's tone of sublimated terror, which registers perhaps more than anything a Poundian horror of squish expressed via an ironically self-fulfilling paranoia re: Judaization.

With that, we arrive at "Burbank with a Baedeker, Bleistein with a Cigar." Cheyette begins his reading of Bleistein at the heart of the poem, with Bleistein's tell-tale "lustreless protrusive eye" which "stares from the protozoic slime" at a perspective of Venice painted by Caneletto (Eliot "Burbank with a Baedeker" 17-19). The moment operates as a metonym for the entire poem, since, as Cheyette writes, "the radical disjunction between [Bleistein's] diseased 'perspective' on Venice and that of Caneletto is, in short, the subject of the poem" (252). With this point in mind, Cheyette argues that, as in "Gerontion" and "Sweeney," the archetypal Jewish slime symbolically parallels Bleistein's cigar smoke, which too terminally obscures and distorts his view of the image. Cheyette suggests, by way of an allusion to another letter Eliot wrote to Eleanor Hinkley in 1917 regarding the Jewish poet Siegfried Sassoon, that the nature of this particular blindness stems from a uniquely semitic confusion between politics and poetry (252), though perhaps for the savage yet ostentatious Bleistein, "money in furs", the confusion is a Wagnerian one between capital and culture ("Burbank with a Baedeker" 24).

Nevertheless, Cheyette's point holds, as Bleistein's cigar smoke, considered alongside that unformed, prehistoric slime, acts as "an ideal figurative expression of a semitic confusion which obscures the cultural significance of the past (252). Hence, "the smoky candle end of time/ declines" as Bleistein gazes uncomprehendingly at the Caneletto (3-5).

But Bleistein's predicament is also our own. "The rats are underneath the piles/ the Jew is underneath the lot," Eliot writes (22-3), locating Bleistein—whose name means loadstone—smack at the decaying foundations of the city, whose slow sinking correlates to the postwar disordering of European culture and of the European Mind (Cheyette 253). The implication, then, is that Eliot has once more diagnosed this most modernist malady as a form of Judaizing. The threat, perforce, seeps through the rest of the poem, which Cheyette characterizes by way of comparison to the poem's epigraph, this time a mish-mash of references to no less than six separate accounts of Venice from six separate historical moments. The epigraph "borders on smoky incoherence," and its "kaleidoscopic, impressionistic account of Europe's crumbling center captures, in miniature, the method of the poem as a whole, especially its 'multiplicity of partial dramatizations'" (Cheyette 253).

These dramatizations, meanwhile, figure forth the corruption of European culture. The first centers on the phrase "Chicago Semite Viennese," a reference to Bleistein's hybrid background, but—given the poem's title—a reference also likely to Luther Burbank, a Chicago native "acclaimed in 1911 as 'the most ingenious and successful of all [plant] hybridizers'" (Cheyette 254). The line signals the poem's concern with a semitically-tagged hybridization— human hybridization, that is—as the mechanism of

Europe's fall, and sure enough, the poem delivers with a pair of linked semi-sexual encounters with the bestial Princess Volupine, who "entertains" both Burbank (precipitating his personal fall—into lust, out of grace) and "Sir Ferdinand/ Klein" (Eliot "Burbank with a Baedeker" 28-9). Like Bleistein, Volupine "embodies the corrupting disease, which, in her case, made it possible for the European aristocracy to be semitically adulterated" (Cheyette 254). Sir Ferdinand Klein, on the other hand, "represents that class of Edwardian Plutocrat who buttresses, racially, a Bleisteinian Jewish bourgeoisie" (Cheyette 255).

Eliot does include a handful of inadequate, stop-gap measures intended to dramatize the futility of holding back Europe's wrack. Here we are treated to Princess Volupine's call for "Lights, lights" (Eliot "Burbank with a Baedeker" 35), which Cheyette notes recalls Rudyard Kipling's "The House Surgeon" where a "'fortifying blaze of electric light' also represented a failed modern attempt to efface the sins of the past" (Cheyette 255). Similarly, we are treated here to "Burbank's Baedeker inspired meditation on 'time's ruin and the seven laws,' an operation—reading—that, like gazing at the Caneletto, is obscured by Bleistein's voluminous smoking" (Eliot "Burbank with a Baedeker" 40). Such "superficial acts," then, are unable to clear the vision or the mind, and unable, ultimately, "to expunge a culture in deep-seated spiritual crisis" (Cheyette 255).

Intriguingly, Bleistein makes another appearance in Eliot's poetry two years later, in the unpublished "Dirge." Though the piece was cut from *The Waste Land*, "Dirge" nevertheless resonates with the epic (Cheyette 256), establishing what Cheyette calls a "profound involvement" with the "Death by Water" sequence—which Cheyette,

borrowing from Moccoby, describes as “‘a muted and idealized’ redoubling of Bleistein’s ‘purgation’” in the former poem (Cheyette 259). That poem is sufficiently brief to be quoted in its entirety:

Full fathom five thy Bleistein lies
 Under the flatfish and the squids.
 Graves’ disease in a dead jew’s eyes!
 When the crabs have eat the lids.
 Though he suffer a sea-change
 Still expensive rich and strange

That is lace that was his nose
 See upon his back he lies
 (Bones peep through the ragged toes)
 With a stare of dull surprise
 Flood tide and ebb tide
 Roll him gently side to side
 See the lips unfold unfold
 From the teeth, gold in gold

Lobsters hourly keep close watch

Hark! Now I hear them scratch scratch scratch. (qtd. In Cheyette 256)

Cheyette refers to the sequence as a purgation, and the word is aptly chosen.

Certainly, immersion in water signals baptism, while the allusion to Ariel’s song in *The Tempest*, which concerns Prince Ferdinand’s drowned father, situates Bleistein as a kind

of Judaic father figure, plausibly—as Empson argues—a stand-in for Eliot’s own Unitarian father (Cheyette 257). Personal psychology aside, Cheyette is clear that the poem deals in the “baptismal redemption of the Judaic father,” a theme that would become increasingly important to Eliot in his later work (Cheyette 257). Here, we return, in a sense, to the scene in “Burbank” underneath the piles of Venice, but where in that poem Bleistein is ascendent, here he is defeated, ironically unmade, if arguably also cleansed, by the very forces—of decay, of parasitism—he himself has represented. The poem takes a great deal of ghoulish pleasure in that fact, while rehearsing for its readers a host of two-bit antisemitisms regarding Bleistein’s gold-capped, yellowed teeth and drolly dissolving nose. The action of the poem, however, fixates on the washing of Bleistein, a de-sliming (or de-squishing) to be sure, and in that sense a de-Judaization (note again that disintegrating schnoz). Yet, the poem’s rendering of Bleistein’s “sea-change,” baptismal as it may be, recalls the baptismal font rather less than it does the Prioress’ privy, a space of rank abjection. This ambiguity is likely intentional, as Helen Williams also notes the “‘rotting and corrosive’ aspects of water and the Wagnerian sense of ‘waste’ and ‘void’ inherent in the evocation of the sea in Eliot’s poetry” (qtd in Cheyette 261).

Even more so than the handsome Phlebas in “Death By Water,” then, our slimy Jewish Bleistein “is not simply undergoing a ‘purgation’ but represents [and continues to represent, in death as in life] those passions and worldly preoccupations which...’dissolve mind and sensibility” (Williams qtd in Cheyette 261). The Prioress’ privy produces the same kind of ambivalence. Inescapably bound up with both Jewish and Christian writings on the theological or ontological status of Mary’s womb, a site

crosscut in these texts by exultation and wretchedness, the privy becomes a site of both privation and of salvation. “Dirge,” then, partakes in the same pattern of uncertain evacuations or expulsions we have seen in Eliot’s other anti-Jewish poems.

An ideal objective correlative for this equivocality arrives in the form of those watchful lobsters scratching at Bleistein’s corpse. The lobsters embody, or enact, the mechanism of decay, contributing simultaneously to Bleistein’s purification and decomposition. But it’s the “scratch, scratch, scratch” of their pincers that really deserves our attention. Daniel McGee has argued that this onomatopoeic interposition represents an erosion of language that “consumes both Bleistein and the poem itself” (512). McGee argues further that the lobsters of “Dirge” mimic the rats that populate *The Waste Land*, themselves figures of linguistic decay. To demonstrate the point, McGee notes the phonetic diminution that leads Eliot to generate the word “rat” out of the word “rattle” in “The Fire Sermon,” a single line before referring to the rat’s “slimy belly” (Eliot *Waste Land* 186-8) which reference links the rat indelibly to Jewishness—always a slimy or squishy affair in Eliot—and to Bleistein specifically by means of the “protozoic slime” he emerges from in “Burbank.” McGee points out too that Eliot likely inherits this connection between linguistic decay and Jewish identity from the “proto-fascist aesthetics” of antisemitic European philosopher Charles Maurras, an essay of whose Eliot translated for *The Criterion* (510). In that essay, which echoes Wagner, Maurass imagines Judaism as an “anti-semantic force,” and the Hebrew language as “not a language at all, but a degeneration of language into noise” (McGee 510). Eliot seems to have taken that notion on board. Amongst the array of cultural threats he identifies and associates with the Jew, one must now append the evacuation of meaning from the word

(hardly a leap, given the Pauline argument regarding the Jew's problematic relationship to the divine Word).

What does it mean then, that Bleistein's demise, rather than releasing language from its devolutionary grip, only accelerates the process, as the poem ends with a series of signifiers that *do not represent anything*. The word "scratch," as an onomatopoeic utterance, cannot properly be said to represent its signified; rather, it amplifies the material elements of language—its phonemes, morphemes, et al—such that they abstract and displace the signified, impersonating it in a way.¹³ But this amplification of the material stuff of language inverts the proper operation of semiosis; from the perspective of the Greco-Christian aesthetic, it inverts the proper relations of metaphor: here, the signifier, the vehicle, refuses to be discarded, insisting on its own presence so powerfully that it supersedes the signified or tenor—a blasphemy indeed. The mechanism of Bleistein's purgation, then, is equally the mechanism of his augmentation, as the scratching lobsters literally, through repetition, multiply his semiotic sin threefold. As per usual, the Jew in Eliot grows only stronger when struck down.

That "Dirge" was eventually cut from *The Waste Land* does very little to mitigate the spread of Bleisteinian Jewish squish through the poem, as both lobster and Jew have a convenient understudy in the rat, a figure long associated with the Jew¹⁴ and involved

¹³ It seems here that Eliot avoids a sort of Poundian error, refusing to read onomatopoeia as somehow naturally or organically linked to the signified, as Pound does with the ideogram, recognizing, contra Pound, that the possibility of a pure writing system may be always already foreclosed.

¹⁴ The trope is perhaps most famously expressed in 1940s' *Der Ewige Jude* (*The Eternal Jew*), a Nazi propaganda film depicting Jews as exterminable vermin. However, the trope precedes the Nazis by a long ways. Comparing those determined other to rats was common in the twentieth century (Bland), while the specific rat/Jew analogy itself was typical of antisemitic rhetoric throughout the period (Ellman 59). The origins of the trope are unclear, though some have speculated that Sigmund Freud's famous Rat Man case may have helped solidify the connection within the antisemitic imaginary (Ellman 61).

throughout *The Waste Land* where “the rattle of rats” repeatedly frames the subjugation of sense to sound, signaling corruption (McGee 61). McGee argues as well that, on one level at least, the rats of *The Waste Land* undermine the project of the poem, operating as a deconstructive counterpoint to Eliot’s play with “foreign” and “native” languages. In this regard, McGee writes:

the function of Eliot’s use of both foreign and native language is not to foreground linguistic difference but to enact its erasure.... It’s as if each language in the poem speaks, representing its own translucence as a sign of language as such and thereby embodying the structure of representation that Eliot identified with the Dantean image... [which operates as divine vision rather than metaphor and so refers always back to the divine origin]. *The Waste-Land* modernizes this poetic structure by foregrounding whole languages as the poem’s fundamental images, endowing them with the redemptive universality of meaning. To put this in the terms Eliot himself used, each language in the poem is not so much a sign system as a single word, intended by the mind of Europe. Eliot’s project is to allow the reader, through his unexpected capacity to read the poem’s various languages, to remember that mind as his own. (McGee 506-7)

The rat, though, and his habitually disruptive rattle, signify hardly anything at all, not even the Jew, as what Eliot has done by removing any overt reference to Jews in *The Waste Land* is to realize the association, to bond the two so closely that the Jew disappears as a term of comparison and simply becomes the rat entire. In any case, as far as *The Waste Land* goes, ratjew is jewrat, and the jewrat is not *representative* of meaninglessness at all; it simply *is* meaninglessness, its appearance frustrating the

poem's desire to recover a universal *langue* that might restore the living bond between signifier and signified and in so doing revivify the culture (McGee 519).

Fascinatingly, Eliot alone among the figures discussed in this chapter makes intentional use, not of the Jew, but of a Jewish poetics, or rather of that breed of Jewish poetics that modernism, in its fevered, anti-Jewish imagination, dreamt up to play its own detested shadow. Where Wagner, James, and Pound are content to put the Jew off as much as possible, Eliot's poems stage a conflict between competing aesthetics, pitting Jewish indeterminacies against Greco-Christian verities, with the outcome less foregone than one might suppose—though Eliot's preference is always clear. Still, despite Pound's admonition to purge Hebraisms from his vocabulary, Eliot seems to have embraced them as a necessary tool of his art. In the reversals and redoubts of his poems, Eliot, although admittedly largely against his own inclination, paves the way for a Jewish modernism.

This movement is indicative of the sort of irony we are dealing with on a broad scale when it comes to discussing how the Jew, Judaism, and even Jewish poetics has been conceived within the modernist imaginary. It's a bizarrely literal manifestation of the old saw about how if the Jew did not exist, the antisemite would need to invent him. In this case, the antisemites did invent him, or rather it, plotting in their myriad rejections of a Judaized modernity the outline of a proto-deconstructivist poetics of supplementarity and linguistic excess, illegibility, semantic elisions, connotative accretion, halted or inoperable predication, sound over sense, the particular and the particulate, a poetics of the trace, the exile, the atomized and unassimilable. In erecting this fantasy edifice, the modernists imported a wide range of antisemitic biases and anti-Jewish constructions

from earlier sources as they tapped the rhetorical routine of thinking with Jews to navigate the crisis of modernity.

That crisis, meanwhile, they articulated along twinned lines (though this is admittedly an oversimplification): first, as a catastrophe for the subject, a détournement of the subject's ability to account for themselves, to situate themselves in the world; and second, as a collapse of meaning, an emptying out of signification such that language can no longer function, at least not according to the ideal guidelines laid out by Paul and Augustine and concretized by Chaucer's Prioress. This linguistic crisis was seen as analogous to a much broader collapse of meaning-making systems viz. myth and history—a crisis of representation, all of which in turn impugn the subject, who, drowning in squish, cannot triangulate a position from which to discern a relation to the real (or to anything else for that matter).

In any case, both crises—of subjectivity, of language/representation—were of course understood under the terms of the Greco-Christian aesthetic as rooted in an intellectual, cultural, and spiritual Judaization sapping the vitality of what Eliot called the European Mind, but which we might call Western society or the Western sociocultural dispensation. The modernist rejection of the Jew, the endlessly repetitive expulsions and purgations of the Jew from the field of aesthetics (via the anti-metaphoric sacrament of communion, for instance), or alternatively the obsessive reformations and conversions of the Jew (via posthumous baptism, for example), are thus in a sense discursively pre-conditioned: malingering recurrences of a very old infection.

Out of their negotiations with this pernicious phantom, modernist writers including Eliot and Pound developed a poetics that revived the subject—or at least

staged such a revivification—and stressed the purity of utterance, attempting a reanimation of the sign as sacrament in the Augustinian mold. At the same time, and indeed as a function of their negotiations, they produced a foil: a ‘Jewish’ or Jew-ish poetics that operated to delimit and contain all that they deemed improper about the modern condition, or anyway all the conditions they deemed improperly modern. That impropriety, however, is a funny thing, as by definition it defies restraint. As Eliot demonstrates, the Jew is an inadequate container for all he is meant to hold; overdetermined to the point of hyper-attenuation, the Jew overflows himself (recall the privy-horror of Eliot’s squatting Jew, Pound’s disgust at Stein’s all-too-Jewish verbal incontinence); the potentiality of his Jewishness seeps between the stalls, as it were, scenting ill-health. The Jewish threat recurs, then, in its hysterical or perhaps uncanny though certainly perverse nature.

Yet if disgust is the echo of desire, it may be that the modernists wanted more than anything to distance themselves from what they feared to be a delegitimizing but utterly incriminating interior Jewishness, a Jewishness of the soul—or rather of the text, of the modern text specifically, in its disjunctions and juxtapositions, its fragmentation and abstraction. In articulating their own poetics and in shaping their poetic practice against this shadow-self, these artists theorized and even flirted with adopting an utterly *other* poetic consciousness—one they rejected, but that others would come to embrace. In the end, anti-Jewish modernism gave birth to its own nemesis: a neurotic, nebishy Minerva, wringing her hands and blinking at the decor, gently breaking wind (*oy! excuse me!*) while kvetching about the narrow, cramped confines of her third-floor studio walk-up in Zeus’ skull.

5 Charting a Jewish American Modernist Poetics

“The Muses are not Jewish but Greek,” wrote Cynthia Ozick, drawing a hard line between Hebraism and Hellenism that, in terms of poetry’s mythical origins, cuts Jewish poetics off at the root (qtd. in Wirth-Nesher 127). This conceptual severing, this insistence on an absolute distinction between Jewish and Western culture, may go some way toward explaining why Harold Bloom, despite several decades of robust Jewish American poetry production, declared Jewish American poetry dead, or anyway ailing, in his 1972 essay “Sorrows of American-Jewish Poetry.” Archly, Bloom thumbs his nose at an impressive roster of Jewish American poets, some of whom—Lazarus, Reznikoff, Zukofsky, Schwarz, Nemerov, Ginsberg—he disparages by name, others of whom he merely waves away, arguing that none “with the high individuality of the major sequence of modern American poets... seems likely to emerge among them.” Like Ozick, Bloom lays the blame for this sorry situation on the hybridity of Jewish American writing, though neither employ that term. Rather, Bloom argues that Jewish poetry, at least when written in English, and especially in the Anglo-American modernist idiom, falls flat because it is out of its proper place; the poets have failed, Bloom claims, because they lack “a language appropriate to their desired stance,” which at least during the period around the 1920s, and plausibly right up through the advent of postmodernity, meant

either an adoption of or negotiation with “the metric and rhetoric of Eliot, Pound, Williams, and their followers.”

Bloom contrasts this failure with the successes, limited as they may be, of other Jewish American poets who, rather than acquiesce to the poetic dictums of Eliot, Pound, and their ilk, largely eschew the modes of the developing modern Western canon in favor of their own Hebraic, especially Biblical or Talmudic, tradition.¹⁵ For Bloom, the implication is clear: art arises, literature arises, when it arises, from a conscious, if at times agonistic, investiture in one’s own native soil, one’s own organic culture. To work in translation, as it were, as a Jewish artist or writer attempting to navigate Western poetic discourse, for example, is to doom oneself to a fundamentally deformative displacement. As Shreiber argues, Ozick makes much the same argument, claiming that the only proper vehicle for a Jewish poetry or poetics would be a new Yiddish—a new Jewish lingua franca—and that English is wildly unsuited to that task (“Jewish American Poetry” 149). Ozick writes, “English is a Christian language. When I write English, I live in Christendom” (qtd. in Wirth-Nesher 128). She has a point. To write as a Jew in English, or more broadly, to engage Western culture and especially Western poetics as a Jew, is to subject oneself to the terms of those discourses. These terms meanwhile, having been derived from the anti-Judaism embedded in Greco-Christian aesthetics, are

¹⁵ The Talmud, as defined earlier, is a compilation of rabbinical commentaries comprised of biblical exegesis and associated glosses. The text preserves a record of the rabbis’ hermeneutical and legal debates, arranged as a palimpsest. In terms of Jewish poetics, the Talmud is notable for two reasons. First, its palimpsestic schema collapses linear time, rendering past and present coincident: a move that as we shall see is constitutive of the Jewish approach to memory. Second, the biblical text that lies at its heart, the Torah, has been redacted so that, like an onion, the Talmud wraps layers of commentary around an absent center, providing a proof text for the concept of *tsimtsum*, or creative withdrawal, discussed later in the chapter as a key aspect of Jewish poetics.

wholly unworkable, positioning the Jew resolutely outside the scope of artmaking while imagining the products of Jewish artists as not only degenerate but debilitating. Within these discourses, what is Jewish about a piece of art or writing is that which endangers the unity of the whole, threatening its coherence, so that an encounter with the Jew, as a symbolic figure, is always already an encounter with the absolute other, with that which cannot finally be reconciled or assimilated.

Oddly, though, while apparently rejecting these overtly antisemitic assertions out of hand, Bloom and Ozick seem to have nevertheless internalized parts of the anti-Jewish critique: first, recapitulating the belief that to be authentic, art must be organic, i.e. that it must grow in native soil; second, recapitulating as well the antisemitic notion that the Jew has no business with the cultural dispensations of Europe; and third, arguing as if there really were—though in fact there are not—two stable and distinct singularities to contend with here, the European (arguably Christian, arguably Hellenic) mind and the Jewish or Hebraic one. Accepting that dynamic leads both Bloom and Ozick to reject Jewish American poetry and poetics as fatally bifurcated, incapable of formal independence, unable to render a synthesis that would transform those traditions into something vital and new.

So Jewish American poetry and poetics are dismissed by two titans of Jewish American writing as hamstrung by insufficient authenticity, i.e., insufficient Jewishness, as well as insufficient modernity, in a language borrowed from an ancient discourse that is resoundingly not Jewish and, what is more, powerfully hostile to Jews and Judaism. The irony is pointed. It is also instructive. A very similar dynamic is at work shaping the writing of Jewish poets of the modern period. Johnathan Freedman calls it “assimilation-

by-culture,” referring to the complex process by which Jews seeking entry to and acceptance within the middle and upper middle classes sought to acquire cultural capital, often via higher education, thereby appending themselves to the discourses of Western art and criticism, even becoming purveyors or agents of that tradition (*Temple of Culture* 12).

Freedman refers to this particular element of assimilation-by-culture as the “cathexis to high culture” (*Temple of Culture* 13), and he notes that it is an ambivalent relation, marked on the one hand by a conservatism conceding “the critique of multiculturalism, the defense of the canon, and the privileging of the most high-minded notion of European ‘culture’” and marked on the other by a radicalism engaged in “aggressions against traditional high culture as well as appropriations of it, negotiations of a new American identity as well as confrontations with old traditions or prejudice, marginality, and exclusion” (13). The reactionary strain of Freedman’s cathexis materializes quite clearly in Ozick and Bloom’s dismissal of American Jewish poetry, but its counterpart is equally visible in the innovative careers of both writers. Bloom especially has been noted by Handelman as having moved literary criticism in what she understands to be a more Jewish direction, that is, toward a quasi-Talmudic mode of hermeneutics in line with developments in poststructuralism and deconstruction. This selfsame contradiction, the twinned impulses to perform one’s assimilation while at the same time affecting a reconsolidation of Jewish identity and praxis, shapes Jewish poetics in the modern era and throughout the 20th century (and maybe into the 21st).

Jewish American poetics is best understood in this provisional, ambivalent light: a continually emergent phenomenon, a site of cultural identity formation wherein

competing discourses—Jewish and otherwise—collide, cross-pollinate, condition, and recondition each other, which may explain why it is often difficult to identify what is Jewish about it. Indeed, Benjamin Schreier argues that we look for the Jewish subject here in vain, since it is precisely Jewish subjectivity that is at stake in these works, which exist not as an articulation of some essential, timeless, unwavering ethnic identity, but rather as an “inducement to an as yet impossible identification,” i.e. an articulation—like that of all subjectivities—always in a state of flux or negotiation, straining with or against a host of discursive overdeterminations to “produce the terms by which identity can come to be realized” (277).

This is ultimately why Ozick and Bloom’s argument falls apart. It imagines two perfectly opposed identities in Hellenism and Hebraism, two sacrosanct subjectivities. But as with Pound’s division between phonetic and ideographic writing systems, the conceptual borders of the Hebraic and Hellenic are hardly clear (my own attempts to parse them notwithstanding). Jewgreek is Greekjew, to borrow again from Joyce, as the traditions—across millennia—merge and conflict, overlap and intertwine, braid and unbraid, now one way, now another. The essentializing critiques of Bloom and Ozick begin to fracture as the exact locus of either a Hebraic or Hellenic aesthetic cannot ultimately be determined.

Perhaps a relation can. Perhaps a functionality persists that might be limned as a means of situating Jewish poetics vis-a-vis the Western tradition. Certainly, within the confines of anti-Judaism, such a functionality is readily apparent. Judaism, or more accurately Jewishness, comprises a counter-tradition within Western aesthetics, wherein

it operates as a kind of *punctum*—the Latin word for puncture or wound. The term comes from the work of Doro Weiss, who uses it to theorize an ontology of photography:

A photograph is like a verb that conjugates its observer to a past point in time, yet his transfer is solely made possible through the transference of an observer who contributes his or her feelings to get close to—to embrace—the object displayed. Nevertheless, this closeness is only a felt one since... what one sees is always a person or object that was real in the past... at an irretrievable moment in time. In photography, the texture of history is therefore always shaped by a loss... while its effect is necessarily transposed into another medium that performs, with all its might, the mourning of the irrecoverability of the life that has been lost. (4)

The photograph, conjuring the past, the desired other, thus *wounds* the viewer by means of a disjuncture or displacement that fixes the viewer in a relation of mourning to that object, which is itself spectral, here and gone, its image signifying absence and presence simultaneously, articulating in one and the same breath intimate proximity and infinite distance—a structure of feeling encompassing memory and forgetting, recovery and loss. Both Jewish poetics proper and what we might call Jew-ish poetics, the fantasy literary modality produced as a constitutive other by Greco-Christian aesthetic discourse, walk a parallel path in this regard when it comes to semiotics, insisting on the spectrality of the signified, insisting as well on the condition of loss as the ultimate grounds for linguistic production. Just as the photograph propels us back in time, back into the particulars of history, into the granularity of a given moment, so do Jewish *and* Jew-ish poetics propel us ever back into the granular particulars of language. Further, just as the photograph, as a site of witness, suspends the viewer between competing imperatives, so

to do both Jewish *and* Jew-ish poetics suspend resolution, deferring, by means of various language games, the emergence of some final meaning in favor of continual reinterpretation, an acknowledgement of the inborn incompleteness of utterance, as well as a wrestling with its inexhaustible potentialities. In this sense, then, Jewish poetics and Jew-ish poetics are very close, and it seems reasonable to conclude that here too we are in the presence of one of those distortions of the antisemitic imaginary that, while lacking fidelity, nevertheless presents a version of Judaism that has at least some structural similarities with the real thing. That said, the question of origin is obscured by the fact the modern Jewish poetics that emerges on the back of the Jew-ish fantasy exists in a state of mutual conditioning with that fantasy.

To be clear, though, there is at least one major difference between them. In the case of the latter, the absence or displacement of the signified renders language a condition of the fall, and by that measure a species of abjection. In the former, the absence of the signified is understood as necessary, a prerequisite for new creation. In this, Jewish poetics echoes the position of Lurianic *Kabbalah*, which reimagines the creation myth of Genesis 1 such that God, prior to creating the universe, first retracts himself, contracting his ontological fullness to make space for the material world. The process is called *tsimtsum*, withdrawal, and it finds a complement in the retraction of the signified from the field of linguistic relations, since it is precisely that displacement which enables the free play of signifiers whose recombinations condition the emergence of meaning. While it may be true that Jew-ish poetics, as articulated within Western aesthetics, is never allowed to make this argument openly, it remains nevertheless

implicit, an embedded Jewish resistance to the Christological teleology of presence which most defines that discourse.

This resistance, though bracketed as heresy, is ensconced within Western aesthetics and has at times even proven to be a useful addendum. Eliot, for one, deploys it to detourn the syntax of his poems, scrambling the vectors of meaning in ways intended to duplicate the various bewilderments of the modern condition. Other respected modernists have taken a Jew-ish turn in their writing: whether by adopting a Jew-ishly deconstructive approach to the Western mythopoetic canon, as does H.D. to open the canon for revision; or by deploying the figure of the Jew as a kind of foil, as Wallace Stevens does to puncture the totalizing machinations of his Supreme Fiction; or by using the Jewishness of this or that character to legitimize a free-associative, stream of consciousness style, as Joyce does in *Ulysses*; or by means of some other adoption or adaption of the Jew-ish mode of linguistic production taken on so as to create a space wherein to stage yet another agon with the idealizing terms of Greco-Christian aesthetics. That indeed seems to be what Jew-ish poetics is for. Due to its legitimate link to an organic Jewish poetics, Jew-ish poetics acts as a counterweight, resisting and/or balancing the anti-linguistic tendencies of the Greco-Christian tradition.

Handelman has argued that over the course of the 20th century literary criticism experienced a return of the repressed in the form of a move toward what one might, very carefully, refer to as Judaized modes of interpretation, emblemized—as noted earlier—by the emergence of deconstruction and poststructuralism, both of which reject the univocality of utterance and investigate the multiplicity of meanings produced by the play of language in a given text. Handelman's claim, then, is that there are structural

similarities between these critical methodologies and the hermeneutical practices typical of Rabbinical Judaism, which does encompass both positions.¹⁶ Handelman's argument might also be applied to modernist literature, wherein a break occurs between the practitioners of the hard-edged, Imagist-inflected Pound/Eliot/Williams school and the semi-stream-of-consciousness-type, Symbolist practitioners of what Pound called squish: Joyce, Stein, Stevens (to an extent), H.D., et al. Given that "squish" in Pound is so often theorized as an expression of Jewish essence, it seems perfectly plausible to take Pound at his word and stipulate that, yes, some sort of Jewish turn is underway here.

Perhaps the turn is less Jewish than it is Jew-ish: a turn, not necessarily toward organically Jewish sources, but rather toward the imaginary Judaism ensconced in Western aesthetic discourse. This latter point seems more likely since the lines of influence operating on these authors generally do not (though H.D. is an important exception) lead back to the Jewish community. Yet as we have seen even in the twisted deformations of antisemitism, some trace of real Jewish praxis persists that cannot finally be obviated. Levi's argument that critics have tended to fetishize the proto-poststructural or quasi-deconstructive aspects of Jewish poetics as constitutive of modernism itself may well stem from this overlap, since Jewishness had already been fetishized within Western and modernist discourse as, on the one hand, a kind of aesthetic death drive, and on the other, as a viable pathway of ideological resistance and aesthetic innovation. In this

¹⁶ There is, however, a significant distinction to be made here. Edmund Jabes, in his essay "There is Such a Thing as Jewish Writing" notes that while Jewish poetics may hew close to deconstruction or poststructuralism, it is not identical in that it never completely abandons the transcendental signified. Certainly, the signified is deferred in accordance with the principle of *tsimtsum*, but its deferral conditions its reinscription, as for the Jew and the poet, "God is his Word, and this living word must be forever rewritten" (28).

regard, for those Jewish poets writing in English, this fetishized Jew-ish poetics may arguably form a bridge between modernism and the organically Jewish. That is, it created an entry point: overdetermined, to be sure, distorted beyond belief, but providing nevertheless a juncture, an intersection, a crossing, that enabled Jewish writers to smuggle their own Jewishness back into modern poetics, where it might affect—not a hegemonic takeover—but a renegotiation of the terms of its own being. So, this Jew-ish turn may prove Jewish after all, especially in so far as, within particular strains of literary experimentation, it engenders a reckoning with all that is oppositional, all that is *othered* within Greco-Christian aesthetics.

As Maera Y. Shreiber points out, Jewish poetics, even within the Jewish world, has frequently been associated with a certain unruliness. In fact, Shreiber claims that “the Jewish poem can work to profoundly unsettling ends: for rather than holding out a promise of spiritual and material restoration [as does the salvific poetics of the Greco-Christian tradition, with its privileging of sacrament as the *sin qua non* of utterance], the poem dwells upon and aggravates the very conditions of estrangement that engendered it” (*Singing* 2). Thus, the Jewish poem becomes “an agent of turbulent thought” (2). Of course, this status is hardly unique to Jewish poetics. Modernism itself operates this way as often as not. But then that is the point, and likely one of the parities that attracted Jewish writers to modernist form in the first place. That said, what difference does it really make?

Too often, in discussions of Jewish poetics, the impetus seems to be to discover something within the field that is distinctive, and what is distinctive is too often identified with that which is inimitable. This is an error. There is no reason to imagine that Jewish

poetics does not or cannot align itself with other schools of poetics, or that what is determinative in Jewish poetics cannot be similarly determinative in other areas. The positionality of Jewish poetics all but guarantees correspondence, since nearly two millennia of Jewish poetic discourse emerges largely under the influence of diaspora, which would tend to produce parity with the writing of other diasporic, immigrant, or even postcolonial communities. Moreover, insofar as modernism concerns itself with the turbulent thoughts appended to the crisis of modernity, and insofar as it employs disruptive formal methodologies which reaffirm an exilic ethos, it cannot—under the terms of its own self-imagining—avoid the charge of Judaization, though it is to the Jewish rather than to the Jewish that modernism turns.

In any case, and to return to the point, Shreiber affirms that, as a corollary to its unruliness, the condition of exile is central to Jewish poetics. But then, she notes, it is central as well to both modernist and specifically American poetics, which each share an interest in tropes of alienation, tribelessness, and homelessness such that they “accelerate” a loss of “ethnic specificity” culminating in the universalization of the exilic impulse: all poets, as the adage goes, are Jews (Shreiber *Singing* 4). Here, we play witness to an erasure of Jewishness accomplished via an amplification that dissipates Jewishness into the general collective. Insofar as the modernist poet must, by reference to his trope, be an outsider, an alien but also an alienist—capable of diagnosing the modern condition—and in so far as the Jew must, by reference to the discourse that surrounds him, be an outsider, an alien, an other, viewing the culture askew, the two offer analogous subjectivities. Yet at this point, the argument by extension takes over, and one arrives at the notion that insofar as the modern condition is itself a condition of alienation, all men

are alien, all men are poets, and all men are Jews. Jewish particularity then is wholly evacuated. One of the terrible ironies of Jewish literary criticism is that at times in seeking to promote the relevance of Jewish experience as a counter to its marginalization, Jewish critics—including Isaac Rosenfeld, as well as John Hollander, Jerome Rothenberg, and Eleanor Wilner—have fallen into a strategy of aggrandizement that tends to trope Jewish identity and experience in ways that render both fungible (Shreiber *Singing* 4). This seems a pitfall to be assiduously avoided. Yet it is necessary to mark the imbrication of Jewish and modernist or Jewish and American modernist poetics precisely because one cannot theorize Jewish American poetics without an understanding of where, how, and why the two are connected, or how, where, and why Jewish poets might have found themselves oddly at home in a discourse so set against them.

Taking up this question, we return once more to Shreiber, who, as noted, posits that since its very inception, Jewish poetry has been bound up with exile. Shreiber tracks the origins of Jewish poetics to the destruction of the first Temple in 587 BCE, arguably the period when, as Melvin Konner explains, a textual tradition began to surface that would eventually, after the fall of the second Temple in 70 AD, fully displace Temple Judaism and precipitate the emergence of Rabbinical Judaism (45). That tradition, however, grows up literally in exile, displaced into Babylon, where the psalmist wonders aloud: “How can we sing God’s song in a foreign land? (Shreiber *Singing* 6). Shreiber goes on to argue that, as immigrants, American Jewish poets faced a similar question, and that their writing, like that of the psalmist, emerges as a response to and a consequence of radical dislocation (6). However, pointing to a scene in Deuteronomy where God confronts a dying Moses with a vision of wayward Israel and offers a poem as ostensible

consolation, Shreiber notes that poetry, in the Jewish world, gives cold comfort. In forty-three verses, God's poem contains next to nothing of uplift or reassurance. Rather the poem is an accusation, "a witness against the People of Israel," operating not to salve the pain of exile, but to remind the people of their failings and to paint for them a harrowing picture of the chaos they are to face, not as a warning, but as a prophecy of the inevitable. Thus, Shreiber concludes, Jewish poetry "dwells upon and aggravates the very conditions of estrangement that engendered it," augmenting the wound of its origin (2).

In this vein, Jewish poetics charts a very different course from modernist poetics as we have come to know it. Though both modernist and Jewish poetics court trouble, modernism rarely rests in that trouble; rather, modernism is defiant. Habitually, modernism—at least in its reactionary mode—seeks to stave off the unsettling of the subject and the cultural institutions that attend it, and enacts a mythic literature designed to shore both against what it perceives as the wreck of history. As Eliot famously puts it in *The Waste Land*: "These fragments I have shored against my ruin" (431). Even those poems that court Judaization by engaging with Jew-ish strategies of displacement and polysemy (in Eliot's case, "Gerontion," "Burbank," "Sweeney," etc.) are peppered with gestures intended either to contain the threat such strategies represent or, by failing, to highlight its menace. Exile here is the enemy, "the contaminating mark of the loss of identity" (Shreiber *Singing* 25); not so in its Jewish iteration.

Jewish poetics proceeds from the divine proclamation: *lech lecha*, go forth. God commands Abraham (then Avram) to leave his father's house, to leave his community, to leave the land, and go into the wilderness, to a place God will show him: to go, then, into the unknown, to leave behind familiar landmarks—social, cultural, theological,

geographical—and become disoriented (Genesis 12:1). From that disorientation, from that estrangement and its accompanying derangement (à la Rimbaud), revelation comes. That revelation is the covenant, which, in its adumbration of chosen-ness, forges a new identity, a new subjectivity, and fittingly a new name, out of the condition of alienation. Thus, exile proves the very grounds of identity (Shreiber *Singing* 25).

This condition proffers a particular boon, one imagines, to displaced Jews struggling to come to terms with their own identities while acclimating to the disorienting modern American ‘wasteland.’ It is a particular boon as well to any Jew living in diaspora in nearly any place or during nearly any period of recorded history, since the Jews’ fate has been to live the better part of two thousand years in itinerant wandering. Still, during the early-to-mid 20th century, though of course prior to the establishment of the state of Israel, which complicates the issue terribly, “the condition of exile and alienation gets naturalized as the mark of the modern Jewish self” (Shreiber *Singing* 25). And this may be the point. Because it is *as exiles within the tradition* that Jews engage modernism. Recognizing the imbrication between the abjected Jew-ish mode of modernist experimentation and an authentic, exilic Jewish poetics, these writers appropriated—or reappropriated—the Jew-ish aesthetic, and in so doing made modernism over in their own image. A caveat, though: one might expect that following the trajectory of Jew-ish modernisms would lead Jewish writers to align—against Pound, Eliot, Williams—with the Symbolist school of American modernism. This is not the case. In fact, what we see is a much more complex picture as American Jewish poets, caught between the competing imperatives of the cathexis to high culture, struggled to articulate their relationality to both schools, refusing a too easy identification with the Jew-ish and

complicating the notion that the subject must be formally ensconced in some unitary organizing discourse or other to become legible. Rather, what distinguishes Jewish poetics from those reactionary modernisms promulgated by Eliot and Pound is perhaps the contention that exile and identity are coterminous.

Shreiber sees this sort of argument developing very early in Jewish poetic praxis, noting that poetry materializes in the Torah in the form of lyrical interludes that interrupt the main narration of the text as an individual human voice directs itself to God, such that “to speak of poetry, in Jewish discourse, is to speak of what is human... at a necessary distance from the divine” (*Singing*20). The pattern recurs in the evolution of the *piyyutim*, religious poems traditionally inserted into the standard liturgy to mark special occasions by members of the congregation. The earliest examples of *piyyutim*, however, reaffirm authoritative rabbinic positions, and though their form—which is very often acrostic—nods to the notion of a “securely boundaried, knowable world” (Shreiber *Singing* 21). Nevertheless, they operate as interruptions, breaking the familiar flow of the prayer service. Moreover, in time, Jewish poets began to experiment more teasingly with the acrostic form, using it in incongruous and even irreverent ways, for instance, to spell out the poet’s own name. Later, in the New Synagogue Poetry, this sort of playful experimentation culminated in a significant break with convention, both thematically and stylistically, as the typical collective, the “we” of the *piyyutim* fractured into many I’s articulating distinct religious personalities and visions (21). This explains why, in areas where Jewish cultural cohesion was less well established, *piyyutim* were vehemently opposed as outside, even “foreign” influences. Shreiber notes, too, the absence of poetry from the text of the Talmud, claiming that the omission cannot be an accident of history

but rather must represent the suppression of poetry as a cultural countertext opposed to the communal and communalizing imperatives of religion (22). Hebrew poetry's adaptation of Arabic meter and rhyme in the Middle Ages—an innovation of Sepharad, the Jewish civilization within Muslim-controlled Spain—was similarly decried as “a foreign import and a shameful mark of assimilation representing an inexcusable loss or corruption of origin” (23). Here too, then, Jewish poetry insists on following an individuating and hybridizing impulse articulated against totalizing imperatives.

Another related (if slightly contradictory) point suggests itself. Jewish poetry, as noted, seems to exist in an oppositional framework even within Judaism, wherein poetry and religion appear to play reciprocal roles, and wherein the positionality of poetry is such that it interrupts established truths. It may well be that, like the embrace of turbulent thought, the outsider status of Jewish poetry within the tribe also made it much easier for Jewish poets to append themselves to modernism, since modernism—despite some very significant conceptual differences—takes on an undeniable antinomianism in relation to established tradition. Consider that the first major foray into modernism by any group of Jewish poets occurs with the derogatorily named *Yunge* movement (a name given by disapproving critics meaning young upstarts), who rejected the communal sensibilities of their predecessors among the Sweatshop poets (a group known for taking on the role of community advocates in highly partisan writings) and embraced instead a project of aesthetic individuation alongside an ethos of art for art's sake and a fascination with the relationship between word and image (Chametzky et al 118). Thus, the *Yunge*, too, follow a program of hybridity that in transgressing the purity of origin enables, rather than retarding (as per Bloom and Ozick) artistic or poetic individuation. And the

practitioners of the movement to follow the *Yunge*, known as *Inzikhism* or Introspectivism, follow suit. In a move typical of the anxiety of influence, the Introspectivists intensified the *Yunge*'s attachment to modernism, which they argued had grown stale, "oppos[ing] mimesis as the purpose of art and argu[ing] that poetry reflects an internalized social world rather than serving as a vehicle to describe a political mood or humankind in general" (Chametzky et al 119). As the poet David Edelshtadt wrote (in a sort of early precursor to Introspectivism), "the bloody dramas of these times were staged within my breast" (15-16).

Introspectivism thus augments the interiority of the *Yunge* movement, but both movements follow a trajectory from tribal collectivism to atomized individualism—though the individual in Edelshtadt's case is not wholly disconnected; rather, the personal is seen as political, and subjectivity becomes the stage upon which to play out one's negotiations with the world at large. This lionization of the alienated subject is of course a modernist trope, and so it seems that for both the *Yunge* poets and the Introspectivists the other term in their hybrid poetics turns out to be modernism itself, which provided a countertext, a counter tradition, to the dominant modalities of Jewish poetry, enabling a productive crossover. As Chametzky et al. report, these poets, especially the Introspectivists, "developed a full-fledged Yiddish modernism that... later Jewish American poets would parallel in English (119). The situation here is very much the inverse of that between Jew-ish/Jewish poetry and Western aesthetics, a fact that again demonstrates how fecund those tensions may prove, as well as how these traditions are mutually constitutive rather than opposed.

Thus, insofar as Jewish American poetics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is marked by a migratory impulse—an impulse to transgress origin, to hybridize, to generate new aesthetic fields out of which to cultivate new subjectivities, new Jewishnesses, modernism—itsself invested in tropes of wandering, disconnection, and the new—proved a handy complement. In fact, the argument was explicit. “As Arnold Eisen has noted,” Shreiber points out, “imagining Jews has been a central activity of Jews in America” (*Singing* 23). And hybridization seemed, at least to some, as a viable path forward in that imagining. In 1907, the historian Israel Friedlaender delivered an address in which, after diagnosing the problem with Judaism in America as one of “cultural disintegration or decay” (a perennial refrain), he suggests a remedy by way of historical precedent, calling up “the great and glorious Jewish-Arabic period [referring to the flowering of Sephardic culture circa 965 BCE – 1492 CE]” which, in Friedlaender’s telling, “deals a deathblow to the dilemma besetting Judaism, and is itself overwhelming proof... of the compatibility of an active participation of the Jews in the life and culture of the nations around them , with a strong, vigorous, genuine development of Judaism” (qtd. in Shreiber *Singing* 23). Engaging the countertext of modernism, of Western avant garde poetics, then, was one method by which the Jewish American community, suffering through its own crisis of modernity, sought to incite and animate a cultural renewal.

The comity between modernist and Jewish poetics is not without its sticking points. We have already differentiated the Jewish and modernist approaches to exile. Another significant distinction arises from a difference of opinion surrounding time. As Shreiber writes, “Jewish time, and its relation to alternative ways of construing

temporality, is central to understanding the difference Jewishness might make to more generalized accounts of modernist poetics” (*Singing* 99). Coming into being at a historical juncture defined by “rapid change, violent rupture, and the destabilization of founding religious and political institutions,” modernism is overtly concerned with mapping a usable past with which to make sense of the jumble of the era. Specifically, modernism turns to myth as “a counterforce to the sprawl of history—a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (99). Myth, in this construction, operates as an “antidote to linear time,” an invocation of the cyclical, the seasonal, the archetypal and recurrent, which salves the apparently fraying progressive teleology of the Christian historical narrative and engenders once again the distillation of universal or general truth from an otherwise unreadable grab bag of events.

Jewish poetics, meanwhile, and Jewish modernist poetics in particular, are skeptical of myth. Louis Zukofsky, for one, writes:

The poet wonders why so many today have raised up the word ‘myth,’ finding the lack of so-called myths in our time a crisis the poet must overcome or die from... when instead the case may be made out for the poet giving some of his life to the use of the words *the* and *a*: both of which are weighted down with as much epos and historical destiny as one man can perhaps resolve. (qtd in Shreiber *Singing* 105-6)

Zukofsky’s emphasis on *the* and *a* is no joke. Words like ‘a’ and ‘the’ are *nonrepresentative*, which might signal a modernist concern with the sacramental, i.e., nonrepresentative, potential of language. But *a* and *the* are not nonrepresentative in the

way of the sacrament or, for that matter, the myth. The sacrament is nonrepresentative in that it cancels representation and calls the signified into immediate being, obviating signification; the myth is similar in that it too routs the process of signification by invoking the presence of the signified in the form of a mythic archetype which grounds and determines the direction of the interpretive act, thereby overwhelming the semiotic potential of the signifier. *The* and *a* on the other hand are nonrepresentative in that they simply do not signify. They lack any sort of material referent in the world outside language.

The implication is provocative. As articles, their function is not to direct the reader outward, away from language toward an objective reality that, in its distance from the play of signification, grounds language and grants it legitimacy. Rather, they modify nouns, directing us back into language, into syntax, to discover the relationships that structure meaning.¹⁷ It is here, in the granular particulars of language, and by extension in the granular particulars of history, that the modern Jewish poet must seek illumination. Zukofsky's poetry behaves in keeping with that assertion, deploying images that collapse linear time while eschewing the totalizing structure of myth, instead "organizing history synchronically rather than diachronically [or cyclically], in terms of structured relationships rather than sequential events," recurring historical 'rhymes,' or mythological archetypes (Stanley 34).

¹⁷ Those relationship are telling. Because 'a' and 'the' modify nouns, they offer up an intriguing instance of *language* conditioning *things*: thus, they mark an inversion of the Greco-Christian dispensation along typically Jewish lines.

For Zukofsky, history is not at all best understood as “a teleological chain of events” (Stanley 34); rather, it is personal. Indeed, in its engagements with history the subject defines a locus of being. In this sense, Zukofsky is more interested in memory than history; his poetry seeks to situate memory as a sort of intervention into history, an inscription that “give[s] significance to a point in time” (Stanley 34). Anchored in memory, one discovers history’s malleability, its amenability to restructuring, and its correlative relationship to identity. Thus—in a somewhat existential or absurdist gesture—the subject becomes history’s objective correlative, and the problem of how to structure history becomes a matter of psychology—which is to say, from a Freudian perspective, a problem of representation, of language. Once again, then, Jewish poetics operates as punctum, for while it shares modernism’s anxieties regarding the relation between past and present, it avoids modernism’s typical responses, eschewing a mythological escape into the autonomy of the universal in favor of a dodge into the contingent and subjective.

Or, in a word, into the lyric. In a sense what we are dealing with here is a formal disagreement: a clash between lyric and epic modes. The epic involves itself in the story of the collective. The lyric involves itself with the individual. The epic contracts the sweep of history into a comprehensive narrative. The lyric waves at history from its anchor point in the self. The epic constitutes history as a mythic endeavor, taking part in movements of cosmic import; the lyric scratches its bottom from the back of the lecture hall. This positioning of the lyric is Zukofsky’s own, articulated in response to his professor John Erskine’s insistence on the primacy of the epic as a measure of poetic greatness within the of Western canon. Zukofsky’s parodies Erskine’s argument in the

fourth movement of his own modernist epic *Poem beginning "The,"* subtitled "More 'Renaissance.'" Lifting his rhyme and meter from Poe's "To Helen"—who, viz Erskine never wrote an epic and could not therefore be counted a great poet) Zukofsky proceeds to explode Erskine:

Is it the sun you're looking for,
 Drop in at Askforaclassic, Inc.,
 Get yourself another century
 A little frost before sundown
 And if you're a Jewish boy, then be your
 Plato's Philo.

Engprof, thy lectures were to me
 Like those roast flitches of red boar
 That, smelling, one is like to see
 Through windows were the steam's galore
 Like our own "Cellar Door."

On weary bott'm long wont to sit,
 Thy graying hair, thy beaming eyes,
 Thy heavy jowl would make me fit
 For the pater that was Greece.
 The siesta that was Rome

Lo! from my present—say not—itch

How statue like I see thee stand

Phi Beta Key within thy hand!

Professor, from the backseats which

Are no man's land!

Poe, gentlemen, don't chew know,

But never wrote an epic. (168-85)

Here, Zukofsky mocks Erskine's mastery of Western high culture, noting that while such mastery may bear fruit in the form of accruing cultural capital and its attendant material rewards—that Phi Beta key, recall—still it proves a trap, forcing Jewish students like Zukofsky into the role of “Plato's Philo” (167), routing Jewish identity back through the Western cultural matrix (as Philo did with Hellenism) so as to render the two compatible *under the terms of the Western dispensation*.¹⁸ This is subjugation, a necessity of subject formation as, at least traditionally, subjectivity may only be authorized as a function of some discourse or other, but in this case...what a bind! To speak at all in this context requires internalizing the valuations embedded in the discourse surrounding western High Culture (the pater, or father, that was Greece; the nepo-baby that was Rome), valuations that appear arbitrary—as if, cue Bleistein, through

¹⁸ “Philo Judeaus was a first century Alexandrian Jewish philosopher renowned for his classical learning who attempted to reconcile Judaism with Hellenism, and for the effort, the Jewish tradition considers him a traitor” (Tomas 54).

a screen of smoke—and which are not only hostile to Jews and Judaism but also outright exclusionary, as the Jew in the West is he who cannot speak in any event.

Zukofsky rejects this catch-22 vehemently, associating Erskine’s lectures with “flitches of red boar,” a decidedly non-kosher source of sustenance, and associating himself, or the Jewish poet, with Poe, who Erskine rubbishes, but who Zukofsky revives, incorporating Poe’s lyric mode into his own epic as satire, such that the lyric rather than being expelled from the canon of modernist modalities becomes the countertext of the epic, its complement and companion. In this way, Zukofsky deftly sidesteps the conflict between lyric and epic, or between subjective and objective, personal and collective, accounts of history. The twain are not split at all, nor are they synthesized; they are instead mutually constitutive. This method of composition *by difference* seems especially integral to Jewish poetics, an expression perhaps of the rabbinical principle: *elu v’elu devarim Elohim chayim*: “these and these are the words of the living God,” a means of suspending contradictions, though without resolving them, in theological debate.

Much the same is happening here. In this instance, Zukofsky’s play with the tension between lyric and epic effectively suspends the debate between the Imagist and Symbolist schools of modernism. Like Edelshtadt before him, Zukofsky grounds history in identity, such that the inwardly focused lyric imagination (that Poundian squish) and the outwardly focused political imagination (with its myths and objective correlatives) work in tandem, extending, complicating, and compensating for one another. In this regard consider the allusion to Helen, a mythic figure ready made for the modernist treatment, which Zukofsky might give her but that her presence has been disallowed by Erskine on the grounds that Poe is an inadequate forebear. In short, her birth is suspect.

She enters the poem, then, uninvited, and in keeping with that entrance, as well as with her adulterous proclivities in the *Illiad*, she stands for wayward desire, in this case the desire for assimilation, the desire to transgress origin. In this sense she doubles as the *shekhinah*, an important figure for Jewish poetics, representing God's (feminine) presence in the world who accompanies Israel into exile.

This doubled status, Helen's allusive dalliances with both Jewish and Greek discourse, alongside her questionable placement in the text, confuses the trajectory of the reference and undoes the symbolism of the image. Helen is the object of desire, but the nature of that desire is unclear. She seems at once an aspirational figure representing the assimilative drive and, contradictorily, a rebellious figure representing a return to Jewishness. Then again, in so far as Helen may represent a return to Jewishness, it is a strange and meandering return, taking the long route through a history of Jewish assimilation (which markedly intensifies with Hellenization). This move may imply a reckoning with historical particulars at odds with the generalizing impulse of myth, which, in this poem, does exactly the opposite of what it's supposed to, magnifying rather than clarifying the complexities of history. So Zukofsky's entry into the mythical mode of modernism proves less assimilative than it might at first appear. As is typical of Zukofsky, and maybe, as I have conjectured, of Jewish American poetics, the appropriation of myth serves contradictory purposes, performing the cathexis to high culture while also revising that culture in ways designed to encourage a contradictory renewal of specifically Jewish energies.

Along the same lines, Zukofsky's detournment of the objective correlative is notable as well. As Eliot explains, the objective correlative is an image, though not a

metaphor, which in various ways is made to gather about it the emotional valences of the poem. It operates as a symbol, but without ever losing its objective grounding in the empirical world as described by the text. A cigar, for instance, in a modernist text, may well be a psychosexual symbol, but it will also be a cigar, with all the vivid detail that entails—the bright, lit tip, the blunt and lip-wet end, etc. But the objective correlative parallels Pound’s image, in that, as noted, it “brings language close to things” (qtd in Parker 116), thus mimicking the silent ontology of the Greco-Christian tradition. In keeping with this allegorical materialism, the objective correlative must be in the poem. That is, it must exist as an object in the text. Helen does not. But her poem, Poe’s ode, does: in the meter and rhyme of Zukofsky’s parody. Zukofsky, that consummate Jewish modernist, renders the correlative not as object but as countertext, literally a second text conditioning the meaning of the poem. In a sense, then, the allusion to Helen is a feint, as it is Poe’s ode which is the real locus of desire in the piece. Thus, the structure of desire in “More Renaissance” never extends outside textuality. Zukofsky deploys myth only to drive the reader straight back into the loving arms of language, scrambling the Greco-Christian silent ontology along Jewish lines. Here too, Greekjew is Jewgreek, as Zukofsky juxtaposes both traditions, placing them in a relation of difference such that the tension they create motivates the poem.

In many ways, Zukofsky is an ideal study for Jewish modernism. As the son of uneducated Jewish immigrants who taught himself English by translating the works of Shakespeare and who, having distinguished himself as something of a literary wunderkind, achieved one of a shrinking number of reserved spots for Jews at the prestigious Columbia University (at the tender age of sixteen, no less), Zukofsky’s

biography tracks the cathexis to high culture rather perfectly, placing him directly at the crossroads between the Western and Jewish cultural dispensations. Nor is Zukofsky unwitting of this fact. His engagements with modernism and with modernist aesthetics are deliberate. Indeed, Zukofsky saw himself self-consciously as a poet/critic in the mold of Pound and Eliot: “a participant in the making of a modern American poetics” (Stanley 2). What is more, Zukofsky understood his “marginal position in society”; rather than seek to obscure or deny this status, he integrated it into his poetry and in so doing remade modernist poetics, crystallizing along the way a range of Jewish poetic practices that now appear definitive. As such, Zukofsky is a perfect test case for a theory of Jewish modernist poetics.

However, there remain a handful of points regarding Jewish poetics and its relation to American modernism or to the Greco-Christian aesthetic tradition that need to be explicated prior to entering a close reading of Zukofsky’s work. The first involves gender. Shreiber argues convincingly that gender operates as a “third-term” in the construction of Jewish American literature. Essentially, since Judaism is a patriarchal religion, and poetry is often situated within Judaism as at least partly opposed to religion, there has been a tendency to associate poetry with the feminine in ways that, according to Karl Shapiro, not only suppress the tradition but actively distort it. Specifically, Shapiro argues that a masculinist Jewish literalism pervades the field of Jewish writing, a literalism which disables the feminine capacity for metaphor (Shreiber “Jewish American Poetry” 158-59). To be honest, Shapiro’s gendered binary here seems not only arbitrary but also indebted to the kinds of weaponized engendering typical of “The Prioress’s Tale” and other anti-Jewish texts. Be that as it may, given that Jewishness and femininity

are deeply entangled in “The Prioress’s Tale” in ways designed to further their abjection, and given that the same largely holds true in the discourse of Western aesthetics generally, it is reasonable to assume that Jewish poetics would require a reckoning with the feminine. Shapiro concurs, arguing that for Jewish poetry to flourish, a feminine capacity for metaphorical transformation needs to be recovered (Shreiber, “Jewish American Poetry” 159). Thus, writers from Zukofsky to Ginsberg have attempted symbolic reconciliation with a feminine figure: frequently, the problematic figure of the Jewish mother, but also quite frequently, the figure of the *Shekinah*, both of which now take a certain pride of place as central cultural symbols for Jewish poetry.

The next point of demarcation is sincerity. In the manifesto that serves as introduction to the 1920 anthology *In Zikh (In Oneself)*, which introduced Introspectivism as a poetic movement to the world, Jacob Glatshateyn, A. Layeles, and N.B. Minkov write:

“The poet must really listen to his inner voice, observe his internal panorama—kalaeidoscopic, contradictory, unclear, or confused as it may be. From these sources, he must create poetry which is the result of both the fusion of the poet’s soul with the phenomenon he expresses and the individual image, or cluster of images, that he sees *within himself* at that moment.” (qtd in Finkelstein 47)

As Norman Finkelstein notes, this program bears an extraordinary resemblance to Objectivism—the loosely defined and even more loosely attended “school” of modernist poetry invented by Zukofsky to justify his curation of a special issue of *Poetry* magazine, featuring himself and the other Objectivists: most notably George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, and Charles Reznikoff. Objectivism too seeks a fusion of the psychological with the

material, anchoring the former in the latter such that the poem, like a cubist collage, comes to represent the totality of the experience of a given moment in all its rich perspectives at once, albeit as filtered through the poet's sensibility (Finkelstein 49). Here we see again a desire to reconcile the Imagist and Symbolist schools of American modernism, or at least to blur the distinction between them. Here again, Jewish poetics demonstrates its hybrid impulse, its willingness, even eagerness, to transgress. And here again, its willingness to pose contradictory modalities side by side to harness their intrinsic tensions.

Perhaps what is yet undertheorized in the matter of sincerity is the sheer level of transparency it imposes, especially when opposed to modernist irony. Eliot, for one, felt the distancing effect of irony as a relief, writing in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," that "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; not an expression of personality, but an escape from personality." Eliot is quite clear that this means repressing the self and the self's peculiar proclivities: "Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality." Objectivism brooks none of this self-silencing. The odd proclivities of the self and its unique responses in the moment are just as much a part of the poetry as any other factor; and this is because the object of Objectivism *is* the self, or rather *the self in relation to history*. Adequate representation of the poetic subject requires an investigation of personality as that personality is shaped by and reacts to its encounters with the world. That self cannot be avoided as it is the grounds for the encounter and in that sense the engine of the poem. However, it is by no means a stable environment. It is turbulent, and

the Objectivist poem renders that turbulence without apology in keeping with the nature of the Jewish poem as a vessel for turbulent thought. So, one might conjecture that where modernist poets sought a refuge from the turbulence of the self in personas or in anchoring characters (such as Hugh Selwyn Mauberly, the title character of Pound's eponymous *ars poetica*, or Tiresias, who narrates part of Eliot's *Waste Land*), Jewish poets may plausibly have tended to adopt such strategies less frequently or with greater degrees of distancing, since—given the unique sociocultural positioning of Jews in the American scene at this time—the self is so often at stake in these works.

The most significant element here is finally the willingness to simply let identity be. That is, not to depict its various incongruities as terminal (as if the subject were fatally wounded by a terrible blow, desperate for restorative elixir viz. Sweeney or Agamemnon, or Mauberly for that matter) but rather to allow those incongruities to enter the poems openly in all their confusion, as natural aspects of a subject in the process of becoming. This understanding of poetry as oriented toward the future rather than merely mediating present and past is yet another area of distinction between Jewish modernisms and American modernism proper, with the argument being that Jewish poetry “interrupts a modernist aesthetic that tends to fetishize the past at the expense of the future” (Shreiber *Singing* 101)—a natural enough position for a marginalized community whose boundaries are “perpetually in flux” and which is, again rather always, struggling to define itself against a changing socio-cultural backdrop (Shreiber *Singing* 7). We should note, however, that this is not exactly a natural position for traditional Judaism, which demands “the identification of the individual with the people, the Law, and the God of Israel” (Stanley 53). In this context, the Jewish poem transgresses both modernist and

traditional Jewish convention. The messy, contradictory subjectivities it articulates may not be properly covenantal, but then, from the perspective of an unruly Jewish poetry, they need not be. Sincerity in this instance may mean, to borrow from George Oppen, the simple refusal to extract one's Jewishness from the text, with all the complexities that inclusion entails (Stanley 53). Sincerity insists on the incompleteness of the subject, on the difficulty of its articulations, and especially on the difficulty of those articulations for a Jew in the modern American scene. Perhaps sincerity, then, is specifically a form of survival, but "survival as a Jew" (Oppen qtd in Stanley 53). What that means looks different for every Jewish writer, but then the Jews are they who continually wrestle with God, who continually wrestle with history and identity, and so perhaps therefore it is the act, the wrestling itself, that must at all costs be preserved. A fine task for the Jewish poem, since in Jewish poetics process is king, while telos—like *meshiach*—is deferred. Jewish poetry, Jewish poetics, presents us not with "the Jew" as ontological category, but with Jews, awkwardly navigating their lives on the edges of belonging.

6 Louis Zukofsky and the Revisioning of Modernity

At this point, I turn from theory to praxis, applying my exploration of Jewish poetics in the abstract to an investigation of Louis Zukofsky's early masterwork *Poem beginning 'The'*. *'The'* is, like Zukofsky himself, a bit of a unicorn as far as criticism is concerned. A more perfect vessel for testing a theory of Jewish American modernism is hard to imagine, since the poem is—among many other things—an *ars poetica*, addressing itself to the developing tradition of modern verse and intervening in that tradition to carve out a place for a new poetics. As Sandra Kumamoto Stanley writes, “*Poem beginning The* serves as a fascinating example of, in Zukofsky's words, ‘the contingency of one poet reading another,’ for in this poem Zukofsky both appropriates and challenges the modernist tradition evidenced in Eliot's *The Waste Land*” (48). But more specifically, Zukofsky “appropriates Eliot's poem in order to reject Eliot's solutions” (Stanley 48). Rather than seek out the comforts of the “symbolic [or sacramental] word” or “the certainties of transcendent structures” as answers to the problem of modernity, Zukofsky, in keeping with the imperatives of a Jewish poetics, “would look for his answers by embracing the linguistic word and the possibilities of history” (48).

'The', however, is a labyrinthine affair. The poem comprises six movements, each highly allusive and intertextual, and each employing nonlinear logics. As such, *'The'* resists unitary interpretations. The poem is amenable to a wide range of approaches, and

this chapter will touch on many of them, though two will receive special attention. The first involves tracking Zukofsky's push/pull relationship to Western aesthetics and to modernism specifically, which can be done directly as the poem often addresses those issues quite frankly. The second involves tracking Zukofsky's relationship to Judaism, embodied in the poem primarily by the figure of Zukofsky's mother who recurs throughout the text in various asides but who frequently acts as its thematic and emotional center. Treading these twin trails through the piece should enable us to parse the poem's imbrication with both Western and Jewish culture in general and with Western and Jewish poetics specifically, and thus provide a valuable glimpse into how at least one early strain of Jewish modernism—perhaps the major strain since, as noted, Objectivism, the movement Zukofsky spearheaded, remains the most sustained early intervention into English language modernism by American Jewish poets.

My study of *'The'* begins just prior to the poem, with the notes appended to the opening. As John Tomas points out, providing annotations to a poem composed in 1926, only four years after the publication of *The Waste Land*, “would immediately cause readers to compare [that poem] to Eliot's,” and this does seem to be Zukofsky's intention (44). *The Waste Land* is without question the most significant precursor to *'The'*, as the latter poem was conceived as a response to it. Or as a rebuttal, since, as Zukofsky put it in a letter to Pound: “‘The’ was a direct reply to *The Waste Land*—meant to avoid T.S.E.'s technique, line etc... but intended to tell him why, spiritually speaking, a wimpus was still possible and might even bear the fruit of another generation” (qtd in Shreiber 106). That “wimpus” is a slangy allusion to the whimper that ends the world at the close of “The Hollow Men,” another woeful Eliotic gesture tracing history's ongoing diminution,

and another volley in Eliot's running commentary on the waning vitality of Western culture. Zukofsky, for his part, begs to differ, taking up the position, contra Eliot, that the culture might not be quite as wholly exhausted as he seems to believe, and that sufficient creative energies yet remain to enliven a further generation of artists. This point lies at the heart of Zukofsky's debate with Eliot and appears in his poem's first movement, but the debate does not begin there. It begins a notch earlier with a separate though related argument embedded in those curious notes.

Eliot's notes are painstaking, thorough, detailed: an orderly, line-by-line guide through the web of allusions that make up *The Waste Land*. Zukofsky's, meanwhile, are nonsensical. They serve the same nominal function, illuminating Zukofsky's vast allusive repertoire, but "Obvious—Where the Reference is Obvious" is hardly the most informative of clarifications. Nor do "the King's English" or "the French Language" elucidate much of anything. And when Zukofsky is not resisting the explanatory impulse, he amplifies it preposterously (though as we shall see not entirely without reason), as when he associates the image of the sun with the "Power of the past, present, future" or adumbrates his mother as "Symbol of our Relatively Most Permanent Self, Origin, and Destiny" (8). Moreover, the notes are peppered with mystifying asides—additions too brief or oblique to be worth much, e.g., "Horses" or "University Extension" (8). Plus, the notes are out of order. Or rather, they are out of chronological order, which tends to scramble the poem. To read the notes is to encounter the poem in an entirely different arrangement, as (nearly) an entirely other poem. Here, Zukofsky appears to court anarchy, magnifying the fracturing effects typical of the crisis of modernity in a way both borrowed from and in opposition to Eliot—borrowed in the sense that Eliot often has

recourse to atomizing strategies, oppositional in the sense that Eliot represents but does not embrace such confusions. But this conclusion may well be premature. The notes are not exactly in *no* order. They are in alphabetical order, and in that choice lies their true significance. Zukofsky's choice subordinates the poem to the imperatives of language and thus signals his allegiance to the concrete particulars of the text over and above any alternative governing framework for literary meaning-making such as—per Eliot—(epic) narrative or myth. However, language may not be the only ordering imperative at play here. Zukofsky buries a dedication in the beginning of the notes: “because I have had occasion to remember, quote, paraphrase, I dedicate this poem to Anyone and Anything I have unjustifiably forgotten” (8). Memory, too, then, serves a structuring role in the poem, which itself now, in keeping with the priorities of the Jewish poem, appears to be grounded at once in language and in subjectivity.

This interest in language *per se* and its relation to the subject continues through the opening of the poem, where Zukofsky takes on the persona of Christ, the sovereign subject: Western aesthetics' supreme symbol of the fusion of signifier with signified and the embodiment of sacramental utterance. The gesture is extraordinary in that it arrogates Christ's privileged position to Zukofsky as speaker, thereby, metaphysically, elevating his poem to the status of God's word—that is: a language actually commensurate with its object. As such, the poem is rendered as an answer both to the crisis of modernity—which among other things is, as noted, a crisis of representation—and to the desire burning at the heart of Greco-Christian poetics, i.e. the desire for a language to mediate the human and divine. No small feat for Zukofsky's nascent Objectivist movement. Except it turns out... not really. In fact, Zukofsky does *not* claim to embody Jesus

himself. Rather, he identifies with “the *voice* of Jesus [emphasis mine]” (1). That is, Zukofsky identifies, not with the origin or tenor, but with the vehicle. In so doing, he inverts the supersessionist narrative, dragging us back from the proximate realization of the signified to the emptiness of the signifier, the space of language, thus resisting the allusive mode of Greco-Christian hermeneutics and asserting in its stead a Jewishly inflected program of linguistic realism. Indeed, realism in its most literal sense. Not a realism comprised of convincing illusions—of idealized mimesis—but a material realism, not unlike the hermeneutical method of the rabbis, grounded in the real stuff of poetry, i.e. in words, words, words.

Language, though, is slippery ground, and privileging the materiality of language is a risky business, resulting—in this instance—in an immediate disintegration, a shattering of the sense of the poem and of subjectivity. The opening is comprised of two conjoined fragments spread across three lines: “The/ voice of Jesus I. Rush singing/ in the wilderness....” (1-3). The period, of course, creates a fair degree of confusion regarding the syntax of the sentence. Is this one continuous sentence, broken perversely? Or is the break perverse only in that it is pointed, interrupting the sentence such that the speaker’s ascension to the position of sovereign subject is made incomplete? Or, after all, does the break mark a tension between modernist modes, where prior to the period the mode is mythological, but after we find ourselves dealing with the image? Is this a rejection of myth? An alignment with Imagism? Is “I” a noun, an initial, or a roman numeral? What if “Jesus I. Rush” is intended as a jokey proper name, like the character Peter Out who appears later in the poem? Are we looking at a commentary on the speed of the modern era, or a self-mocking metacommentary on the speed of Zukofsky’s argument, as in: ‘oh

dear, have I done too much too soon, appropriating Jesus right away?’ The verb too, “rush,” cannot stabilize. It continually shifts states: a verb, a noun—contradictory either way since the lone wavering “rush” whistling its song to the wilderness contrasts markedly with the frantic forward momentum implied by the word’s verb form. Perhaps, however, it does not matter how we interpret the sentence. Perhaps its meaning is not relevant, or less relevant. What is relevant (more relevant) is the breaking of the sentence, the breaking of the subject, the breaking of the word. What is relevant is what *happens* to the language, and what effects that happening creates. The effect here is that language annihilates meaning. We have, in a sense, entered Greco-Christian hell, or anyway a true aesthetic wasteland of the Eliotic type: a misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms, all of which appear to signify, none of which do.

At this exact moment, Zukofsky’s mother enters the poem. Of course, it doesn’t have to be Zukofsky’s mother. The line reads: “A boy’s best friend is his mother,/ it’s your mother all the time” (4-5). There’s nothing here that would require readers to associate this mother with Zukofsky’s, but then the mother is a recurrent figure, and whenever else she appears, she is clearly Zukofsky’s since he addresses her as such. Still, there remains a productive ambiguity in the figure when she is first introduced. Shreiber, for one, identifies the mother with Mary: a natural enough assumption since Christ has been invoked (110). In this regard, perhaps she (Mary) holds out a lifeline. Access to the sovereign subject position occupied by Jesus has been interdicted by the exilic properties of language. We are in a postlapsarian state. Mary, then, may intercede on our behalf, operating—as is her symbolic wont—to close the gap between signifier and signified, to bridge the material and the divine. However, Mary is little help in the current situation.

Why les nieges? (14-21)

Here we find allusions to James Joyce, Ezra Pound, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Norman Thomas, and Eliot himself, modernists all, and all whose work trades in “themes of exile, alienation, and disintegration.... images of destruction, death, and decay” (Tomas 45). If the age demands “an image of its life and contacts,” and not, as Pound thought, a death mask, “an image of its own accelerated grimace” (“Hugh Selwyn Mauberly” 21-2), then this disaffected rabble seems ill-suited to the task. Their faith, from Zukofsky’s Jewishly oriented perspective, is in the wrong place, given over to Mary and to Jesus, to the Greco-Christian dispensation and its false promise of aesthetic redemption through idealism. Zukofsky’s depiction of the fruits of that labor—“wrathless skeletons exhumed/ new planted in the sacred wood” (27)—tells us all we need to know about its efficacy. How appropriate, then,—if devilishly ironic—that Zukofsky, via a brief allusion to Canto IX of Dante’s *Inferno* (10), locates these writers in hell, where they play the part of heretics, sealed in stony sepulchers and subjected to eternal flame for the sin of their misplaced convictions (Tomas 45).

Zukofsky’s own convictions are not so inapt. Though the mother as Mary has proven barren, yet there is hope—a necessity for Zukofsky, whose poetry is future facing, and a necessity for anyone, really, wishing The End a little less nigh than it appears in most modernist poems. For there is another way to read the mother: not as Mary, but as *Shekinah*, Israel’s sustenance. The *Shekinah* is a complex figure, akin to the Holy Spirit in that she represents God’s immanence. And yet the *Shekinah* is not a spirit, not a disembodied essence. Rather, embodiment is her very nature. The *Shekinah* is God’s presence in exile, God’s being in materiality. The *Shekinah* descends into and transforms

the material. To borrow again from Rimbaud, she becomes ‘encrapulated,’ redeeming herself and materiality in the process, achieving *tikkun*, or turning, such that the sparks of divine light trapped in creation in Luria’s catastrophic retelling of Genesis are returned to their rightful orientation, turned toward, or tuned to, the divine.¹⁹ In that sense, the *Shekinah* duplicates the rhetorical role of Christ as redeemer or fulfiller of signs, but with the crucial difference that this redemption is not idealized; it occurs within the field of the exilic where the *Shekinah* resides, which is to say, within materiality, within history, and within language (Kohler). The *Shekinah*, therefore, is a considerably more useful helpmeet than Mary for wanderers of the modern wasteland. Here, Zukofsky doubles down on the point he made in the notes. There is no external principle that can provide an escape from the wasteland, no myth, no rain, no salve, no healing. Even “the ravens that/ brought the prophet bread/ are dust,” Zukofsky writes, alluding bleakly to Elijah (24-5). In so far, then, as a redemption must be affected, it must perforce emerge from the dust itself, i.e., from the dirt, from the Jew, from that which, under the terms of the Greco-Christian dispensation, has been rendered out of place, impermissible.

The Jewish connection here is underscored by Zukofsky’s note, which identifies the mother as a symbol of origin, as well as by the halachic principle of matrilineal descent, which isolates the mother as *the* conduit for Jewish identity. Zukofsky’s invocation of the mother thus brings Judaism to bear upon the poem, and—since the reference is split with Mary—positions Jewishness as the countertext to modernity, or to

¹⁹ As Luria imagines the scene, when God created the universe, he poured his divine energy into vessels intended to channel it into creation. But the vessels broke, and shards of divine light were trapped and scattered, lost to materiality, from which they must be redeemed for the healing of the world.

Anglo-American literary modernism and its Greco-Christian inheritance. But bringing in the mother also activates femininity as a countertext for the poem. It is true that Zukofsky's engagement with the feminine is limited. He does not, in any meaningful sense, engage women, who, in their relatively rare appearances, tend to be instrumentalized or objectified in the poem. Instead, he utilizes a feminine principle, or rather, deploys a set of writing practices dubbed feminine within Western aesthetic discourse. Those practices, though, are largely the same set of practices dubbed Jewish. As we have seen, femininity and Jewishness are linked in the Western aesthetic imaginary. Both are associated with polyvocality, semiotic play, syntactic slippage, materialism, and literalism; and both are positioned as dangerous aberrations: fleshly, death-bound, abject, and improper modes of poetics. But then it is just that impropriety that makes them so appealing. "You are cra-a-zee on the subject of babies" Zukofsky writes, presumably in the voice of his mother (though it not wholly clear who is speaking), only to respond: "that is because somehow our authors have been given a woman's intuition" (31-2). Apparently, Zukofsky's biological clock is ticking. Like Pound, he has an eye for the new. He is eager for a future, any future, to emerge from all this modernist handwringing, and he sees that future unfolding via a deliberate entanglement with the traditional *others* of Western aesthetics. Thus, Zukofsky's embrace of Judaism also entails an embrace of what he understands as feminine impulses within his own writing. In fact, Zukofsky refers to the point directly, claiming his infatuation with babies, or rather with the new, is the result of his having been given (alongside other modern authors) a "woman's intuition" (32).

This explains perhaps why Zukofsky stages a wedding in the following lines: “The tram passes singing/ O do you take this life as your lawful wife,/ I do!/ O the time is 5/ I do!” Rejecting the maudlin, Zukofsky weds himself to the energy and the promise of modernity as well as to the unruly power of art. The reference to e.e. cummings’ *is 5*, published the same year Zukofsky composed *The*, underscores Zukofsky’s commitment to a materialist poetics while at the same time asserting its transformative potential. Indeed, cummings in the forward to that book discusses the delightful reality that while two times two may equal four, the poet knows it may also, under the right circumstances, equal five: a radical perceptual freedom Zukofsky here—as both avant garde artist and Jew—claims for himself.

Zukofsky, though, is not free from doubt. He worries whether his otherness is sufficient to effect the program of aesthetic and creative revivification he has outlined, whether he has, in his cathexis to the culture of Anglo-American High Art, lost something of the Jewishness he—inconsistently, but palpably—positions as so essential. And he wonders, too, having internalized perhaps some of the anti-Jewish critique, whether the Jew is rightly capable of art, or of poetry:

Let me be
 Not by art have we lived,
 Not by graven images forbidden to us
 Not by letters I fancy,
 Do we dare say
 With Spinoza grinding lenses, Rabbiasi,
 After living on Cathedral parkway? (54-60)

Here, Zukofsky wonders at his own hybridization, and the extent to which that positionality may deform his subjectivity or impede his ability to speak. Alienated from the Western aesthetic dispensation by the discourses of anti-Judaism and alienated from Judaism by his cathexis to the Western dispensation, Zukofsky occupies exactly the split-subjectivity warned against by Ozick and Bloom.²⁰ Naturally, a certain anxiety attends that position. Attend in this regard the allusion to Spinoza, the seventeenth-century Jewish heretic, excommunicated for his sweeping revisions to Jewish philosophy and, like Galileo, noted for his principled resistance in addressing the council of rabbis who interrogated him (Tomas 46).

Zukofsky too fears a severing from his tribe; yet—like Spinoza but unlike some of his contemporaries, viz Jacob Glatstein who, in “Good Night, World,” shuts the ghetto gates on the whole of Western culture—he refuses to obviate history or unwind assimilation in a bid to reanimate Jewish subjectivity. He has lived on Cathedral Parkway, and that fact cannot be forgotten. In a sense, though—and this is really what the allusion is about—the Jews have been living on Cathedral Parkway for thousands of years. Assimilation and hybridity are as much a part of Jewish history and culture as Sinai. In this instance Zukofsky presages the concerns expressed in Allegra Goodman’s short story “The Four Questions,” where too the temptation of a reified Jewishness is rejected in favor of a historicized one that accepts its own hybrid status. Zukofsky’s insistence on acceptance dovetails nicely with the Jewish poem’s typical resistance to

²⁰ And before them, Wagner.

formal purity and/or to the hegemony of origin and in so doing charts a path for Jewish modernist poetics. As Tomas explains:

Zukofsky's problem is one which almost all Jewish-American intellectuals had to confront eventually: how to exist as Jews in a society which denied their worth? Many... solved the problem by trying to deny that it existed, by seeking complete assimilation and effectively abandoning Jewish heritage. Zukofsky will have none of this approach. He means to forge an alternative to assimilation, to create a personal tradition, one which excludes nothing—American popular culture, the English literary tradition and his own Jewish/Yiddish culture. (47)

Hybridity, then, is essential to Zukofsky's project, and arguably to Jewish poetics at large. *The* and by extension the Jewish poem, or maybe the Jewish-American modernist poem, defies the directives of Platonic idealism, asserting in their place an aesthetic of tension, of mutually constitutive difference.

So we arrive at the second movement of Zukofsky's poem, subtitled "International Episode." If, in the first movement, Zukofsky "announced his revolt against the artistic establishment, here he plays variations upon that same theme: announcing a threefold revolt—religious, political, and sexual" (Tomas 48). "Revolt" may be a bridge too far, but Zukofsky certainly aims to complicate. The section proceeds in two parts: first, a framing dialogue that turns out to be a monologue between Zukofsky and a character called Peter Out, who in a move as comic as it is vulgar is revealed to be Zukofsky's own... well, 'peter;' second, an elegy for Richard Godfrey ("Ricky") Chambers, the younger brother of Whitaker Chambers, the latter of whom Zukofsky befriended at Columbia and later lived with on Long Island (Tomas 50). Once again,

productive tension seems the order of the day, as the elegiac and the comic bounce off each other to great effect. And here too, language moves us, as the shift in sections occurs precisely when Zukofsky, considering the rise of antisemitism in Europe, stumbles on the word “funereal,” which appears to trigger the elegy. This tendency to allow the free associative, connotative connections of language itself to guide the poem provides a solid example—amongst many—of the materialist impulse of *The* and of the Jewish poem generally.

That said, we must still parse the movement. The framing dialogue takes the form of a discussion about the theater, and what show Zukofsky and Peter might enjoy of an evening. The titles, which Peter reads aloud, presumably from a newspaper, are fictional and absurd, drawing on references to Lawrence, Marlowe, Spengler, and others (Tomas 48). This particular theater, then, as Tomas points out, is not Broadway, but rather “consists of all the aspects of Zukofsky’s world and interests” (48), continuing the strategy of hybridity and of radical inclusion that marks Zukofsky’s “personal tradition,” i.e., his poetic idiom (47). In keeping with that strategy, Zukofsky also allows another ‘unruly’ element to make its way into the poem in this section: libido. Indeed, the conversation between Zukofsky and Peter becomes increasingly bawdy as Peter suggests the pair attend a spate of shows, including: “Tear the Codpiece Off, A Musical Comedy” and “Panting for Pants” (144-5).

This ebullience contrasts sharply with the remainder of the framing dialogue, however, as much of the conversation appears to follow Peter’s flipping through the paper, resulting in a set of decidedly more dour observations. As noted, we are treated here to a brief comment on the rise of Italian fascism and to critiques of both German and

Italian antisemitism (Zukofsky 68-75). The cumulative effect is to underscore Zukofsky's alienation as a Jew, perhaps to underscore too the distinction between Zukofsky, whose otherness is thrust upon him, and Eliot and many of his fellow modernists, who are, in Zukofsky's words, self-exiled men: a phrase referring to the expat status of many modernist writers, Eliot in particular, as well as to the internalized but largely self-imposed alienation that, in a sense, legitimized their claim to modernity in the first place (Tomas 46).

Then again, it seems significant that these considerations are brought up alongside sex, since desire then entangles with issues of Jewish identity, belonging, and assimilation—and that entanglement plays thematically throughout the poem. In that sense, we might apply the label “self-exiled” to Zukofsky as well, given that his embrace of otherness in the form of Jewishness and the feminine may appear from a certain angle as a kind of self-imposed, or at least self-willed, exile. Yet what marks Zukofsky as distinct is that, unlike many modernists, he makes his home there. This may well be a ‘natural’ enough choice for Zukofsky since Daniel Boyarin has pointed out that so-called feminized modes of masculinity were already well ensconced as normative within Jewish culture, especially that mode he refers to as the rabbinic model of masculinity: bookish, intellectual, “gentle, studious, and sweet”—a far cry, say, from the rank animal animus of a Sweeney (1-2). To take the point a small step further, we have already seen some overlap between The Jewish and the feminine in the tradition of Greco-Christian aesthetic rhetoric. So, embracing Jewishness and femininity may, for Zukofsky, amount to one and the same thing. With this in mind, it seems notable that this discussion marks the first instance where Zukofsky's Jewishness enters the text overtly as an overt concern, a sign

that ‘marginal’ issues of Jewish identity, gender and sexuality are not to be excluded any more than any other topic, whether polite or impolite.

Speaking of the impolite, a certain Jewish licentiousness does seem to be at stake in this section (that is, the second movement) as the text appears to allude obliquely in its mention of the “Jew goat-song” (Zukofsky 68) to “the practice of attributing a special degree of (bestial) sexual potency to Jews which was a staple of contemporary (circa 1926) antisemitism” (Tomas 49). There are a handful of other examples in *The* where Zukofsky paints himself as a would-be Lothario, so it seems plausible that Zukofsky here uses the antisemitic stereotype against Eliot, whose own explorations of sexuality come off as milquetoast in certain poems, particularly “Prufrock.” To be fair to Eliot and Zukofsky, however, this is not a measuring contest (or not entirely). Sexuality in both writers’ work tends to be mixed up with other concerns, in this case the potency of the culture. For Eliot, the culture is creatively flaccid; for Zukofsky, it has potential vigor—it’s just hamstrung by a racist/sexist propriety that locks out its most dynamic elements. The reference to Jewish licentiousness, then, turns the stereotype on its... well, on its head. Rather than figure forth the threat of an alien sexuality, the threat of impurity, in this instance the stereotype positions the Jew as the possessor of a generative energy which society is in dire need of—an inversion of the usual (“limp” or “diseased”) stereotypes and as such a comment on the debilitating cultural impact of othering/marginalization and an argument in favor of Zukofsky’s emerging, others-oriented modernism.

Still, Zukofsky is no Pollyanna. He is neither naïve nor overly optimistic about the culture’s openness to *other* creative energies. This may explain why, at the close of

the movement, Zukofsky turns the dialogue to a discussion of a job Peter is hoping to take at the Post Office, a job Zukofsky warns he will not get because he is underweight, or... undersized (136-41). Here, then, the other shoe drops, and we come face-to-face with the second and quite contradictory part of the old antisemitic canard about Jewish sexuality, i.e., that, though it is mysteriously and perversely potent, it also somehow anemic or enfeebled. As an aside, one may note that both stereotypes are embedded in Peter's name. Further, the otherness of the Jew, established in the earlier section dealing with Germany and Italy, returns now to trouble the poem. Ultimately, for this reason—Jewish otherness—Zukofsky fears Peter will not land the gig, which is to say, he fears rejection, not by the Post Office, but by the world of letters, and what is more due precisely to antisemitism, to the belief—commonly enough expressed by the wardens of the culture—that the generative potential of Jewish poetry is either insufficient on the one hand or threatening on the other.

Neither is the case of course, which is largely the point of the material in the movement dealing with the death by suicide of Richard Godfrey (Ricky) Chambers. As Tomas explains, Zukofsky is less interested in Ricky as a historical figure than he is in Ricky's symbolic potential. Ultimately, Ricky "becomes a symbol of Judaism" in the poem (Tomas 51). In Zukofsky's assessment, echoed by Ricky's brother Whittaker Chambers in his book *Witness*, Ricky has been victimized by a Christian worldview that, in its "ill-digested Platonism," vilifies life in favor of an unchanging, ideal, but finally pallid heaven (Zukofsky 93-103; Tomas 50). Ricky thus finds himself positioned on the wrong side of precisely the same binary (earth/heaven; exile/salvation; flesh/spirit) that split the Jews from the developing West. Tomas notes that upon his first appearance he is

at once “an image of sexuality, a ‘Goldenrod’” and of ethereal otherworldliness: “his slimness was as evasive/ and his grimness was not yours” (Tomas 78; Zukofsky 91-2). Ricky’s death, however, catapults him into a Platonic afterlife that wholly severs his connection to material reality and, worse, saps its significance:

Do you walk slowly the halls of the heavens,
 Or saying that you do, lion-hearted not ours,
 Hours, days, months, past from us and gone,
 Lion-heart not looked upon, walk with the
 stars.

Or have these like old men acknowledged
 No kin but that grips of death,
 Of being dying only to live on with them
 Entirely theirs,
 And so quickly grown old that we on earth like
 stems raised dark
 Feel only the lull, heave, phosphor
 change, death, the

One follow, the other, the end? (Zukofsky 93-103)

Here, life shades into “indomitable death” (141) so wholly it seems hardly to have any purpose of its own; and death itself apparently comprises a “life” precisely without those vital contacts that make living meaningful and worthwhile in the first place—not really the most appropriate of heavens for our vivacious, lion-hearted goldenrod.

Indeed, Tomas argues that Ricky is transubstantiated by death into a sort of reluctant Christ symbol. And Zukofsky does tag him with language that recalls his description of Jesus in the first movement: “his slimness was not yours” (91); “Vide the legend of thin Christ” (9). Yet if Ricky is a Christ figure, he is “not the God-man central to the Christian tradition, but the young Jew whose life and death were appropriated for ends he never willed” (Tomas 51). As Zukofsky puts it: “our candles have been buried beneath these waters/ their lights are his... Damn it! they have made capital of his flesh and bone” (104-108). Tomas explains that the candles Zukofsky refers to here are “symbols of the Jewish culture which the Western world has suppressed for two millennia” (51). Thus, Ricky becomes a kind of stand in for the Jew: a deracinated figure whose vitality has been drained away by a culture that misreads and misappropriates it—hence the reference to alienating capital, which similarly abstracts and arrogates the value of labor.

So, with Ricky’s “life and contacts” thus displaced, the poem must attempt a miracle. It must resuscitate Ricky, but not under the terms of the Greco-Christian dispensation. That, Zukofsky seems to feel, would amount to the same breed of literary necromancy derided in the first movement, and given Christian idealism, would only compound the problem (“what, in revenge, can dead flesh and bone make capital?” (109)). Zukofsky must perforce turn elsewhere. He rejects the abstraction, the dematerialization built into the deification of Christ, insisting on Ricky’s embodiment even postmortem: “his heart is dry/ like the teeth of a dead camel/ But his eyes no longer blink/ Not even as a blind dog’s” (110-113). In place of Christ’s deification, then, Zukofsky offers, as he will do again, a countermyth, a countertext, with which to

compensate Ricky's loss. Tomas notes that Zukofsky, even while refusing a symbolic divination, nevertheless retains the structure of the resurrection in his treatment of Ricky by joining Ricky's narrative to "the Arab legend of Sa-idi, a young Bedouin... conquered by the desert sun" who returns to life at sunset (51).

The Arab myth, meanwhile, comes to Zukofsky in translation from a Jewish source, the poet Solomon Bloomgarten, better known by his *nom de plum*, Yehoash (Tomas 51). However, the importance of the myth lies primarily with its eroticism. The Arab myth retains, where the Christian does not, a hunger for vital contact: "Swifter than a wild tiger to his prey/... the Bedouin bears the Desert-Night,/ Big his heart and young with life,/ Younger yet his gay, wild wife/ The Desert-Night" (121-26). In this regard, it seems no accident that Zukofsky stages Sa-idi's resurrection as a return to the kingdom of the living rather than an exit into a dematerialized heaven: "With the blue light shadows on the sand/ May his kingdom return to him/ the Bedouin leap again on his *asilah*,/ The expanse of heaven hang upon his shoulder/ As an embroidered texture/ Behind him on his saddle sit the night/ Sing into his ear..." (114-120). Those distant stars, which earlier proclaimed their ownership of Ricky, marking his deracination, now spur a recoupling, precipitating an eroticized union of the ideal (or divine) and material. Here then, the return of the repressed—the reinfusion of certain disavowed modalities into Western literature—figures as the mechanism of the West's revitalization. This revitalization is accomplished, poetically speaking, via a hitherto suppressed Jewish methodology, composition by difference, the intercession of the countertext: i.e., a doubling (or further multiplication) of allusive referents such that they come to comprise competing but

mutually constitutive semiotic frameworks whose tensions inform upon the identity or meaning of the subject.²¹

Which brings us to the third movement of *The*, '“In Cat Minor,” wherein Zukofsky’s punning play with sex and sexuality comes close to obscenity. But it does, thematically, pick up right where Ricky/Christ/Sa-idi’s wild desert nights left off: in the highly charged space of an eroticized longing for connection. Zukofsky declares his own longing in this section, casting himself amongst a pack of “gentleman cats” on a nocturnal hunt for amorous assignation. Generally, and as noted elsewhere, sexuality in this poem tends to be caught up with other issues, particularly issues of belonging and assimilation. In that regard, there is a teasing play in this section between the fulfillment and non-fulfillment of desire. The narrative places us in the moment of going out, when desire is all potential; yet the section is heavily marked by puns, suggesting a rather more tumescent situation may pertain. The uncertainty seems to be deliberate, as what is being proposed in this passage—as established in the previous section—is not simply sexual union, but a union of sensibilities: a union of, in Eliot’s terms, the Jewish and European Mind.

Punning may itself be significant in this regard, as the pun is an exemplar of linguistic excess, of irrepressible connotation, and as such, at least where Pound might be concerned, a “Jewish” (or Jew-ish) sort of joke. And puns, as an abjected form, come in for a fair degree of bashing in the Western dispensation: Wittgenstein, for instance,

²¹ And do not resolve. Composition by difference is not the same thing as the dialectic in that it does not subsume tension in the birth of new synthesis. Rather, in keeping with the imperatives of *elu v’elu* and *kal v’chomer*, difference is maintained, the tension persists, and the frameworks maintain their integrity in interdependence.

ruefully observed that the depth of grammatical jokes was the same as the depth of philosophy. But punning in this section is also the mechanism by which desire is fulfilled (or comes closest to fulfillment). Note the ejaculatory resonance of “our milk flows lewd” (149) or that embedded in “we’ll cry the more/ and wet the floor” (151-2). However, just as the symbolic ejaculate is redirected here, so too desire’s trajectory has yet again been perversely detoured, redirected from the signified (in this case the desired lover) back into the web of language in a gesture that insists on the value of materially grounded and indeed othered means of semiosis. In this way, the movement recalls the *Shekinah*, employing an image of the desired, the beloved, which is intimately bound up with language and materiality. And in that sense it signals its overarching Jewish sensibility. Still, whether any sort of consummation is achieved in this section is unclear, even doubtful. The puns figure orgasm, but the narrative never reaches anything like a climax, and the consummating image itself figures disconnection, leaving Jewish and Western modes of literary production suspended in an uncertain relation.

This issue carries over into the fourth movement of the poem, “More Renaissance”, where—as discussed in much greater detail in the previous chapter—Zukofsky invokes Helen, or really Poe’s lyric ode “To Helen,” as a countertext for his engagement with the principles of canon-formation. Zukofsky here banks on the mutually constitutive tensions between the lyric and epic, as well as those between the Symbolist and Imagist schools, to fuel the formal energies of the section, which detour the desire for a realization of the signified back into the space of the signifier, i.e. back into the deferred presence of material textuality. Meanwhile, at the level of content, Zukofsky constructs a

critique that opens the canon, and by extension Western aesthetic discourse, for revision along Jewish/Jew-ish lines.

A note, however. At this point, we have identified both Helen and the mother character with the *Shekinah*. Thus the *Shekinah* appears to have two valences in this poem: one, the desired other, in which guise she represents both a potential erotic partner and the Western aesthetic dispensation; and two, the mother, the origin, the source of life and creativity, which, given Zukofsky's background, naturally represents the Jewish cultural dispensation and its feminized modes of artistic production. Zukofsky dances a bit of a Freudian tango in this regard, and unraveling the tangled skein of desires embedded in this knotty problematic is indeed one of the chief concerns of the poem, caught up with the broader issue of how to relate to the dominant culture and its literary output.

How to enter the canon? How to enter the discourse? Will it be permitted? And if so, what shape will the work take? What shapes are even possible? And what of the poet? How will he be received? These concerns, rising in the third and fourth movement, become dominant in the longest and most complex of *'The's'* six parts, the fifth: "Autobiography." In this section, Zukofsky dives headlong into the issue of Jewish identity and its attendant relations, and very much in the vein articulated over a century later by Schreier, for Zukofsky too sees Jewishness, or the relation between Jewish and Western aesthetics, as an open question. Yet Zukofsky, for his part at least, is certain of his argument. With this movement, Zukofsky, per Tomas, "sets out to reclaim his distinctly Jewish-Yiddish heritage for poetry by accepting the challenge Poe declined: making an epic out of the experience of his own family" (54).

According to Erskine's classically flavored Great Books method of criticism, the epic is the absolute height of literary achievement. Writing an epic, critically speaking at least, guarantees one's reception into the world of anglophone letters. Zukofsky's choice of the epic as a form for the section (and for the poem as a whole) can therefore be read as a flashing of credentials. Zukofsky is at pains to display his literary bona fides in other ways as well, alluding liberally to writers of the English canon, touching on Robert Herrick, William Shakespeare, John Donne, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and others. However, as Tomas points out, even as Zukofsky's allusions establish his critical and literary acumen, performing the cathexis to high culture, they also operate as appropriations, swiping the traditional English poetic vocabulary to apply it to "a new type of narrative," namely the Jewish-American immigrant narrative, a tale not of Gods or wars or great nations, but of the self, of the subject awkwardly embedded in history (54).

Appropriately enough, then, Zukofsky opens the movement with a reference to his own personal history, i.e., to the moment of his narrative's inception: the day his parents met. However, the moment is refracted through an allusion to Robert Herrick's "To The Virgins to Make Much of Time," a sign that Zukofsky's history is not really his own, or cannot be articulated as such. Rather, he comes to voice in the language of the Western cultural dispensation: framed by it, situated within it in ways that, as Tomas elucidates, are oddly inappropriate. For instance, the line introducing the father character—"is it your mate, my father, boating" (Zukofsky 189)—follows hard on the line alluding to Herrick's "gather ye rosebuds while ye may"—"How long is it since you gathered mushrooms,/ gathered mushrooms while you mayed" (Zukofsky 187-88). The

effect, Tomas claims, is to conjure something like a scene out of Jane Austen, whose characters recall “the English gentility rather than poor Russian Jews” (55).

This may well be why Zukofsky follows the lines with a description reasserting his Russian country setting (190-91); that is, to reaffirm the difference of his origins. That setting, however, rapidly gives way to another: the “gastanks, ruts, [and] cemetery-tenements” of the Lower East Side (196). So this autobiographical movement opens with the double displacement of its purported subject: one, a historical displacement, whereby Russian Jews like Zukofsky’s parents were forced to emigrate to America to escape intensifying antisemitism fueled by the assassination of Czar Alexander II; two, a cultural displacement, whereby Zukofsky, as a second-generation American, finds himself obliged to tell his story in a language, and through a web of cultural connotations, that are foreign to him, or at least foreign to the tradition that gave him birth. Zukofsky’s story in this movement, then, his epic, is about precisely that struggle, the struggle to navigate this dual displacement and to articulate a subjectivity that is at once commensurate with and legible within Western culture yet that also maintains its difference, asserting a Jewish sensibility and affirming Jewish roots.

A further sign of Jewish difference may emerge at this point in the form of Zukofsky’s Marxism, a philosophy making heavy inroads amongst Jewish American immigrants in the early 20th century due to its universalist promise. Marxism enters the poem early in Zukofsky’s allusion to the critique of capital in the second movement but here comes into sharper focus as Zukofsky considers the Bolshevik revolution and the terrible irony (terrible to Zukofsky anyway, who is yet unaware of the horrors the new regime will visit upon the Jews) that Zukofsky’s family fled an oppressive Russia just in

time to miss the people's grand revolt. Now, while "it is your Russia that is free, Mother," Zukofsky must live under the subtler oppressions of American capitalism, where rather than take up arms in a teleological war of historic import, he is forced into "insular pursuits" like poetry, confined thus to his own psyche (Tomas 56).

However, Tomas' interpretation may not serve as well as it seems at first glance. Note, for instance, that Zukofsky's identification with the Bolsheviks, like his identification with Christ, is incomplete: "So then an egoist can never embrace a party or take up with a party? Oh, yes, only he cannot let himself be taken up by the party" (199-202). In this passage, Zukofsky, quoting Max Stirner, makes it clear he has little interest in becoming subsumed by an overarching ideology, presumably because of the loss of agency and identity involved in fitting oneself into any such rigid, intellectual framework. The integrity of the speaking subject in the poem, the integrity of Zukofsky's own subjectivity, demands no less. Zukofsky may embrace Marxism as a critical approach, but he is not therefore a Communist per se. Arguably, a similar attitude pertains in the poem regarding Western literature and the diktats of modernism. Like Whitman, Zukofsky apparently prefers his schools in abeyance, and here too he signals his disinterest in joining any club that might have him as a member. Stanley explores this reading in some detail, arguing that in this passage Zukofsky rejects, specifically challenging Eliot, the cultural authority of the Western aesthetic tradition. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot depicts the work of the poet as an act of continual self-sacrifice, a surrender of personality to the guidance of tradition; Zukofsky, on the other hand, understands that the tradition, left to its own devices, allows him no room to maneuver, that its Jew-ish pigeonhole is not only too narrow for his needs but also might

well silence him entirely. “We now understand,” writes Stanley, “why Zukofsky refuses to be absorbed fully by... authoritative institutions, [for] complete assimilation into the culture, into the tradition of existing monuments, could very well mean a form of annihilation....” and so a revolution is in order—not perhaps on the bloody order of what the Bolsheviks pulled off, but a revolution none the less (Stanley 68).

Zukofsky’s revolution, of course, will be formal. As Stanley explains: “Zukofsky’s search for an epic form... will not lead him to Eliot’s surrender to cultural authority; but neither will it lead him to [that other great pole of American epic literature] Whitman’s self-expressive lyric-epic [as exemplified by “Song of Myself”]” (69). This assertion may strike readers as surprising, since I recently mentioned Whitman as an antecedent, and since, so far at least, Zukofsky’s poem might slide effortlessly right into the lyric-epic file folder. Certainly, other Jewish poets, most significantly Ginsberg, have found the Whitmanian hybrid amenable, so why not Zukofsky? The answer may have something to do with Objectivism, and with the unique imperatives of the Objectivist poem. For while the Objectivist poem may be partly grounded in the subject, its purpose is not to *express* that subjectivity, but to open it for analysis, which requires rendering it an object in the poem, a term or node of the total composition. What governs that composition is not the self, not identity—for identity is yet at stake—but *language*. Language, Stanley asserts, is the “mediating authority” of the poem (68), a choice which allows Zukofsky to avoid kowtowing to either the authority of tradition or that of the self, while enabling him to treat with both as a natural condition of working the raw material of the poem.

Moreover, the Whitmanian lyric-epic is problematic for another reason. The self it imagines is far too unified and stable. Whitman's elastic I surges through the landscape in "Song of Myself," appropriating identities and sublimating conflict wherever it goes. Not so Zukofsky's, which while similarly protean lacks the surety to declare itself a representative repository of all human experience—a problem that Rosenfeld too lamented regarding the unfortunately alienated positionality of the Jewish artist hindered by double-consciousness. In lieu of Whitman's voracious and ever-expanding subject, which position (like Christ's sanctified subjectivity) is denied him, Zukofsky offers up something considerably stranger: a collage of partial identifications. This fragmented portrait may well prove a more accurate and objective rendering of the Jewish American subject at this moment in history than any other since no coherent discourse of Jewish Americanness yet existed that might have offered that identity a legible shape. In fact, what marks Jewish American literature of this period most indelibly is exactly this tendency to pose identity as an ongoing negotiation, resulting in any number of incomplete, but nevertheless expedient selves—a tendency Zukofsky here exemplifies and even magnifies. As far as identification goes, then, one ought not assume, as Tomas seems to, that any of the various selves at work in the poem may be made to account for Zukofsky himself or for the Jew in any too characteristic a capacity. Rather, the selves on display here are phantoms, arising to meet the needs of a given moment before fading into the background, where they may continue to inform the poem's emerging sense of subjectivity, but not to define it. Once again, we see that the Jewish poem aggravates the conditions of its own creation, as *The* produces a spate of Jewish American identities in

answer to its core concern only to call those identities into immediate question, revealing—even reveling in—their fragmentary and provisional status.

A fascinating example of this pattern occurs in the latter third of the movement, when Zukofsky, for the first time in the poem, openly considers issues of race:

In Manhattan here the Chinamen are yellow

in the face, mother,

Up and down, up and down our streets they

go yellow in the face,

And why is it the representatives of your,

my, race are always hankering for

food, mother?

We, on the other hand, eat so little.

Dawn't you think Trawtsky rawthaw a darling,

I ask our immigrant cousin querulously.

Naw! I think he is awlmawst a Tchekoff.

But she has more color in her cheeks than

then the Angles—Angels—mother—

They have enough, though. We should

get some more color, mother.

If I am like them in the rest, I should

resemble them in that, mother.

Assimilation is not hard,

and once the Faith's askew

I might as well look Shagetz just as much
as Jew. (241-53)

The passage does some interesting work with colorism in the Jewish community, playing with the Jew's relation to whiteness on the one hand and racialization on the other. That relation is volatile, for the discourse of race science and the racialization of the Jewish community were relatively recent modern phenomena, dating to approximately the mid-1800s, and their incorporation into Jewish self-conception were at this point (and even today) pretty spotty and inconsistent.²² Nevertheless, the discourse has clearly had an impact, as we are witness to a torturous circumambulation during which the poem attempts to situate the American Jew's precise racial identity via a sort of skin-color-coded litmus test. In that regard, we witness Zukofsky expressing contradictory identifications: "we should get some more color, mother. If I am like them in the rest, I should resemble them in that, mother."

Who, though, are "they?" The syntax of the passage allows two possibilities. Either Zukofsky is referring to his "immigrant cousin" and his/her extended family—who are "colored" in the sense that they are deeply linguistically, ethnically, and culturally Jewish, and thus at odds with the predominantly white American cultural mainstream—or he is referring to the "Angles, Angels," who, while of course white nevertheless "have enough" color to be getting on with, perhaps because their relative privilege has allowed them a higher standing of living and thus a healthier, ruddier 'glow' than the traditionally,

²² Evidence of this point can be found in *A Bintl Briv*, Abraham Cahan's advice column in the *Forward*, the chief Yiddish-language newspaper of the day, where he refers to Jews in some cases as a distinct, racialized group, as when discussing antisemitism in 1907 (300), or alternatively refers to Jews as a community folded into whiteness, as when discussing the trafficking of Jewish women, which he refers to as "white slavery," in 1909 (302).

stereotypically, pale, anemic Jew. In one sense, then, the passage internalizes and deploys racialized hierarchies, and positions the Jew as an assimilative climber, appropriating whiteness for social advantage; on the other it turns its back on the assimilative drive and reaffirms Zukofsky's ethnic roots in Jewishness; and on yet another it mocks the entire system of racial hierarchy as a wholly artificial discursive construct based in exclusion and operating in the interests of privilege. This last point cuts both ways, as Zukofsky's use of the word "Shagetz," a nasty epithet for non-Jewish men, reveals the Jewish community's own chauvinism and capacity for hierarchical othering, while at the same time registering Zukofsky's disgust at the very assimilation he here embraces.

From one perspective, then, Zukofsky is the cultured Jew, Wagner's assimilated and assimilating stranger; from another, Zukofsky is the Jew in revolt, Glatstein's ghetto rebel who turns his back on the West; and in still another, Zukofsky is the Jew as modern alienist, the intellectual or artist who by dint of his alienation can see the culture (both his own and the dominant strain) from radically different and potentially illuminating perspectives. And absolutely *none* of these identifications is final. So, will the real Zukofsky please stand up? No. Each of these selves is equally Zukofsky and not Zukofsky. He is, in this instance, Schrodinger's Jew, occupying all positions and none. And that is the point. The Jew is not articulable in this instance or, in fact, under the terms of this ill-conceived and ill-fitting racialized ethnic discourse, but the Jew must nevertheless engage that discourse if he is to come to voice at all. The result is the emergence of a fragmented and contradictory subjectivity that is exactly right, since, riven by contradictory discourses, the Jewish American subject is objectively fragmented at this moment in history.

This is why, I suspect, we must take the closing section of the movement with a rather large grain of salt. Here, in response to the problems of identity he has been wrestling with, Zukofsky articulates (for the first time) a clear plan of action:

“I’ll read their Donne as mine,
 And leopard in their spots
 I’ll do what says their Coleridge,
 Twist red hot poker into knots.
 The villainy they teach me I will execute
 And it shall go hard with them,
 For I’ll better the instruction,
 Having learned, so to speak, in their
 colleges. (254-261)

Tomas, for one, takes the assertion quite seriously: “Zukofsky will adopt the gentile ways” (57). Estranged from his culture by assimilation and education, and from his religion by dint of a concomitant crisis of faith, Zukofsky will adopt the tradition of the anglophone poets, though reluctantly and with a bit of biting irony or critical distancing that might perchance signal a desire for discursive vengeance (Tomas 57). One may read the whole of *The* in this light, as a thematically Jewish and as such somewhat resentful reworking of the English poetic tradition that generally acquiesces to the imperatives of modernism. But it is not that. And Zukofsky’s statement of intent here is not quite what it seems either.

First off, Tomas seems to be ignoring Zukofsky’s little gag about the leopard. Leopards, famously—in fact, biblically (Jeremiah 13:23)—cannot change their spots, but

Zukofsky here pulls them on as easily as a trench coat, donning that second skin like the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing: a comment then on the skin-deep qualities of Zukofsky's assimilation (as well perhaps on the utility, or rather non-utility, of race or ethnicity as an ontological category). In any case, whatever 'becoming gentile' is going on here, it is less a whole soul sort of transformation than it is a costume change. And as is the case with our duplicitous wolf, that costume change is rendered for a nefarious purpose: i.e., predation. Zukofsky has no interest in meekly adopting the suits and trappings of the dominant gentile culture. He performs gentility (in both its racial and classist sense) as a means to an end: and that end, apparently, is the dismemberment, or perhaps the deconstruction, of the dominant culture: "it shall go hard with them, for I'll better the instruction."

Or so the poem seems to imply. Yet this reading is no more viable than the assimilative reading, since in adopting this persona—the Jew as cultural insurgent—Zukofsky is simply putting on a new hat (to go with the coat) and inhabiting an antisemitic stereotype: one we know well, because it appears in Wagner, in James, in Eliot, and in Pound, and throughout modern anti-Jewish discourse. The Jew here is an assassin: an agent of the death, or at least the decomposition, of the West itself. Zukofsky may well entertain some sympathy for this position (he articulates it with real relish, after all), but he is undoubtedly aware of its provenance, as, having once invoked it, he shifts instantly into a silly bit of occasional song lifted from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, which tragically, through its antisemitic depiction of Shylock, undoes (or at least complicates) the notion of the Jew as revenger and, what is more, renders the notion of

Jewishness itself profligate, such that Jewish identity flits from character to character along discursive lines without regard to anyone's Jewish or gentile blood.

Indeed, as David Nirenberg reads it, Shakespeare's entire play operates to scramble the distinction between Christian and Jew so that it can stage a broader critique regarding the nature of so-called Christian society ("Shakespeare's Jewish Questions" 82). Intriguingly, along these lines, the song quoted by Zukofsky appears in the play just prior to the moment an imprisoned Bassanio laments the duplicity of *his* society: "so may the outward shows be least themselves; the world is still deceived with ornament" (Shakespeare 3.2.75-6). Ultimately, then, Zukofsky's masking—his layering of possible Jews—signals that the Jewish subject is not in this instance legible, and therefore that what we are looking at in Zukofsky's various selves is basically ornament whether we examine Zukofsky's embrace of assimilation or his plot to overthrow the West from within. This is the bubbling froth of identity, not its deepest motivation, not its moon-tilt tide. Significant too that these impulses—the assimilative, the rebellious, the analytical—arise together out of the positionality of the Jewish American subject in one instance of interpolation. Thus they cannot be read as discrete responses, nor as holistic selves; in Bossanio's terms, they are the outward shows of a subjectivity under enormous pressure: which is to say they are best understood symptomatically, as expressions of the tensions inherent in the Jewish American problematic.

This has been Zukofsky's method throughout: to figure forth the competing and contradictory selves that emerge from the Jew's sociopolitical situation. There is no reason to imagine he would abandon it. The self, for him, is never fixed, but *in process*; indeed, one might go further and say that Zukofsky, acting as a sort of precursor to

Roland Barthes, treats the self as a product of text, or more accurately of discourse. Certainly, that is what happens in *'The'*, as the various voices of Zukofsky's selfhood refuse to cohere into any sort of univocal identity, but rather interrupt and complicate each other in an example of what we might call countertexting, which Bakhtin would call the carnivalesque. The carnivalesque, though, *is* subversive: calling into question the unity of the subject and throwing out univocality as the grounds for coherent expression. And this is the poem's real innovation regarding subjectivity. The text itself becomes the body of the self, and what moves there, what speaks in this or that utterance, is provisional, but also expansive. As Stanley writes, "the materials of tradition, history, and the self are all merged in the language of the poem... [which] resists being subsumed... within a monologic voice" (68). In this sense, yes, Zukofsky does after all operate as provocateur, though not exactly in the way Tomas depicts, pitting the Jew-ish or Jewish conception of a protean discursive subjectivity against that fully incorporated existential harmony more commonly sought out by Western philosophy and literature.

This discursive approach enables Zukofsky to achieve a hybridization of the text that will allow for its Judaization. The text, in this poem, and the self, are identical. In that regard the self must be read not as a singular, holistic text, but as a palimpsest of texts in tension (quotations, allusions, countertexts, etc.). Many of those texts perform the cathexis to high culture, but not all of them. In "Autobiography," Zukofsky smuggles in eighteen lines of Yiddish verse penned by Solomon Bloomgarten, aka Yehoash, which Zukofsky translates and then, for lack of a better word, plagiarizes²³. The lines mark a

²³ The word is technically inaccurate. Zukofsky cites Yehoash in the Note that precedes the poem. However, whether the reader remembers, or even noticed, that citation at this point in the poem is another matter.

dramatic shift in the movement away from the tenements of the Lower East Side and to a rural idyll where “an old horse strewn with yellow leaves/ By the edge of the meadow/ Draws weakly with humid nostrils/ The moisture of the clouds” (220-223). Horses are uniquely important to Zukofsky as symbols—though the word is not quite right, perhaps embodiments, actualizations—of the harmony and perfection of nature. Rosenfeld speculates, in “Situation of the Jewish Writer” that being only a generation or two removed from the rural life of the shtetls gave American Jews a more intimate connection to the agricultural rhythms of pre-modern life.²⁴ Meanwhile, modernists like Pound—in Poems like “In a Station of the Metro”—positioned nature as an antidote to the anxieties attending modernity. This gesture may be intended to underscore the same sort of intimacy with nature or with the pre-modern that Rosenfeld remarks and that Pound imagines as the purview of the imagistic imagination, which—in terms of its relation to nature—attempts ideogramatically to short-circuit the abstractions of language and reassert an organic connection between word and thing. Zukofsky may be, as he has with Christ and the Whitmanian lyric-epic, appropriating a stance that allows him to refurbish the Jew and position him as a rhetorical figure in ways that make him amenable to the modernist project without falling into the abjections of anti-Judaism—in ways designed to playfully disrupt the Greco-Christian dispensation.

Yet each of those prior figurations (or refigurations?) has been left incomplete, and the same is true with this one as well. Because Zukofsky extends Yehoash’s verse,

²⁴ The idea is grossly overgeneralized and stereotypical. Many of the immigrants who arrived during the Great Tide dwelt in cities and towns.

revising the scene such that it becomes—Tomas explains—a meditation on God’s apparent abandonment of the Jews:

Lord, why not give these bright brutes—
 your good land—
 Turf for their feet always, years for their mein.
 See how each peer lifts his head, others follow
 Mate paired with mate, flanks coming full
 They crowd,
 Reared in your sun, Lord, escaping each hollow
 Where life-struck we stand, utter their praise
 aloud.
 Very much Chance, Lord, as when you first
 made us,
 You might forget them, Lord, preferring what
 Being less lovely where sadly we fuss? (226-34)

According to Tomas, this passage operates in the agonistic tradition of the “Yiddish complaint against God,” contrasting the Lord’s love of those elevated horses—“the epitome of organic form in harmony with its surroundings” (Mandell qtd in Tomas 56)—with his incomprehensibly forgetful treatment of his one-time faves, the poor Chosen, these days “confined to the hollows and divorced from their (‘our’) sun” (56). Zukofsky wonders too at the fickleness of the Lord, imagining a future betrayal in which the horses as well end up overlooked as God’s love and attention shifts to some other creature. The passage, then, offers up a sardonic reworking of the myth of Christian

supersession and in that regard the threat of forgetting stands out most palpably since the Jew is precisely that which Christianity should have forgotten; his continued existence a terrible reminder of the incompleteness of Christian teleology: the deferment of redemption, the prolonging of the condition of exile. Add to this the extent to which modernists identified the bewilderments of modernity as Judaizations, and escaping the Jew, forgetting the Jew, becomes a ticket to contemporary salvation.

But not for Zukofsky. As discussed earlier, *'The'* takes memory as one of its key structural supports. The fact that one can read Zukofsky's allusive intertextual tapestry as a self-portrait depends in part on the understanding, established in the notes, that Zukofsky is quoting material he has memorized, which is to say, material he has internalized and incorporated into his psychic landscape. Quoting Yehoash, especially so extensively (no other figure receives anywhere near as large a slice of linear real estate in the poem), not only signals Yehoash's deep importance to Zukofsky's personal poetic idiom, but also reasserts Zukofsky's commitment to the tradition of Jewish poetry and signals his desire to bring that tradition to bear upon the aesthetic project of anglophone literary modernism.

Quoting Yehoash even enables Zukofsky to achieve one of his own frustrated literary desires. In 1920, six years before the composition and eight years before the publication of *'The'* (in 1928), a fifteen-year-old Zukofsky wrote to the editors of *Poetry* magazine, querying their interest in publishing some of his translations of Yehoash, who Zukofsky, in the letter, refers to as "one of the greatest Yiddish poets" (*Selected Letters* 22). They refused, sending perhaps the unintended message that Yiddish poetry, or more broadly Jewish poetry, was of insufficient interest or quality to merit inclusion. That

rejection—though this is speculation—well may, alongside other signs, have contributed to Zukofsky's sense that the Jewish poet might be an unwelcome figure in modern American letters. What a coup, then, to smuggle Yehoash into a modernist epic, and then to see that epic published, if not in *Poetry*, then in a comparably prestigious avant garde journal: Ezra Pound's *Exile*. What a coup, in fact, to have captured the attention of Pound, a first-tier poet-critic, and (at the time) a died-in-the-wool antisemite. As ironies go, this is rather a good one: that Zukofsky, in adopting the methodologies of Jew-ish modernism and performing his poem in a sort of semitic drag (that is, if it is possible to do drag as oneself), managed to capture the attention of someone like Pound and then direct it to an organically Jewish poetic voice that, without Zukofsky's intervention, Pound would—like the publishers of *Poetry*—probably have ignored. The implication seems to be that Zukofsky hopes to intervene in a larger sense as well, and to combat as best he may (via the ironic reappropriation of legibly Jew-ish methodologies) the invisibility and illegibility of Jewish poetry to the contemporary American reader. In this way, Zukofsky defines one of the central concerns of Jewish American poetics in this period, and, to return to the theme of memory, suggests that whatever the strength of his desire to enter the field of literature, there is a price the Jewish American poet will not or cannot pay: he will not, cannot, erase or forget his Jewishness.

For this reason, Zukofsky turns once more to his mother in this movement. Indeed, the mother character is invoked over and over again in a series of apostrophes: ten over the course of the movement. Tonally, this feels as if Zukofsky were often addressing his mother sarcastically—as when he chides her and her husband for moving the family to the US, when he notes the family's poverty (and food insecurity), or when he teases

her about abandoning the faith. Regarding this last, we can perhaps best read the tone here as adolescent rebelliousness rather than contempt, because ultimately these call outs to mom are filial in nature: “If horses could but sing Bach, mother,--/ remember how I wished it once—/Now I kiss you who could never sing Bach, never read Shakespeare” (238-40). Here Zukofsky stages a reconciliation with the mother, and by extension with those feminine energies (and literary methodologies) that so often in this poem and in Western discourse overlap the Jewish. Note too that precisely what most Jewish, or perhaps most *other*, about his mother, measured in this instance by her impossible distance from the Western dispensation, elicits Zukofsky’s affections, and in the very movement where Zukofsky declares his assimilative drive. The contradiction is remarkable, but also intentional, signaling Zukofsky’s split positionality as a Jewish American subject, and registering yet again that this poem aims not to resolve the tensions inherent in that identity but rather to put them on vivid display.

The movement closes with a passage that could be read as a rejection of Judaism, though as we shall see such a reading will not hold. Judaism is central to Zukofsky. He has not and will not relinquish it. But the section is, at least on the surface, quite bleak: “I, Senora, am the Son of the Respected Rabbi,/ Israel of Saragossa,/ Not that the Rabbis give a damn,/ Keine Kaddish wird man sagen” (266-69). The passage does appear to feature Zukofsky’s excommunication from Judaism brutally appended to a declaration of patrilineal fealty. Though not essential for Jewish identity, in Orthodox communities, patrilineal lines of descent can be important when they come to comprise rabbinical dynasties. Zukofsky here then appears to be ejected from the community for his dalliances with modernity or more broadly with the West, and his embittered response is

to tell the council of rabbis who have passed his sentence that “no *kaddish* need be spoken.” Orthodox tradition prescribes the recitation of the *kaddish* (the prayer for the dead) over an excommunicated Jew to mark their ostracization, the line may be understood as a Parthian shot, letting the rabbis know that Zukofsky has at this point strayed so far from the faith, or rejected it so utterly, that there is no need to mourn his loss. Alternatively, though no less bleakly, one might, as Tomas does, read the section as a negative assessment of a Jewish cultural vitality so sapped by assimilation that neither Jews nor their rabbis can be said to “give a damn” about the tradition any longer (57-8). Either way, the idea seems to be to position Zukofsky as just as antagonistic in his relation to Judaism as he is to the Western dispensation, and maybe there is some truth to that. As Zukofsky puts it later in the poem: “Angry against things iron I ring,/ recalcitrant prod and kick” (303-4). Whenever he is confronted with rigid, calcified systems, Zukofsky tends to revolt. And, as we have seen, the Jewish poem has no compunction about aggravating its own origins.

Despite this, or perhaps in combination with this, the allusion to Heinrich Heine in the first two lines of the passage, like the allusion to Yehoash earlier, underscores Zukofsky’s investment in Jewish sources and in the tradition of Jewish letters, providing a structural counterpoint, even a rebuttal, to Zukofsky’s apparent rejection of Judaism. The poem Zukofsky quotes, Heine’s “Donna Clara,” is itself a meditation on the potential for Jewish integration in the form of an interfaith romance. The titular Donna, worn down by the tiresome conventions of chivalry, falls for (and beds) a nameless young knight she hears playing the lute outside her window. The knight’s identity is only revealed at the end of the poem, when he turns out to be Jewish, the son of Reb Israel of Saragossa—a

locale itself notable historically, in times of both Muslim and Christian rule, for hosting a rather vibrantly integrated and relatively privileged Jewish community (“Saragossa”). Heine leaves things there. But he has spent much of the poem wryly tracking Donna Clara’s antisemitic asides like a set of unforced errors: “Gnats were stinging me, my dearest, and I hate these gnats in summer... as though they might be Nasty Jews with long, hooked noses” (29-32); “Yes, I love but you, my dearest, and I swear it by the Savior Whom the Jews, God’s curse upon them, Did betray and foully murder” (41-4); “Nothing’s false in me, my dearest;/Just as in my breast there courses/ Not a drop of blood that’s Moorish, Nor a taint of Jewish foulness” (56-9). So, it seems likely that this specific Jewish reveal will be received with a degree of shock and horror. One might even go so far as to imagine the scene as a revenge fantasy, bordering on a rape fantasy, in which the crypto-Jewish knight seduces the unwitting white, European princess. Such a reading is in line with the imagery of the Jew as cultural insurgent (as well as lecher) that Zukofsky explored in the preceding passage (and earlier in the poem), where he threatens the integrity of the West from a similarly camouflaged vantage. As we know, however: that pose is a pose is a pose.

Better, then, to approach the allusion to Heine as an affirmation of the potential—though perhaps also a recognition of the danger—of hybridity. After all, Heine himself was a successful poet in the modern European mode, taking a skeptical but involved role in the developments of the German Romantic movement (“Heine”). Though Heine was forced to convert to Protestantism as a condition of his acceptance into German society, he claimed his conversion was little more than a “ticket of admission to European culture” (qtd in Kavon). Late in life, in the lyrics considered some of his finest work,

Heine returned to his Judaism (though the word “returned” is poorly chosen, as Heine claimed he “never left it” in the first place), drawing for influence on the brilliantly crossbred Arabic/Hebrew verse of Yehuda ha Levi, thus doubling down on the viability of hybridity as an approach both to literature and to subjectivity (Kavon). Given Zukofsky’s own documented commitment to hybridity, this reading seems the most likely. And in this regard the closing line, “Kein Kaddish wird man sagen” need not be read as some disaffected exit, but rather as a rejection of the conditions under which such an exit would even be necessary. No kaddish need be spoken because Zukofsky the Jew is not dead; moreover, his Jewishness lives on in the allusive textual valences of his poetry.

With that, we arrive at the sixth and final movement of *The*, cheekily subtitled “Half Dozenth Movement: Finale, and After.” Like the fifth, the final movement is complex, playing as a coda, if not a resolution, to the text and as such touching upon all its major themes. In this regard, three passages require attention. The first extends and expands upon the reconciliation with the mother figure begun in the previous movement, and thus reinforces the poem’s entanglements with both Judaism and femininity as *other* compositional modes. Appropriately, the section begins with Zukofsky fretting once more over his status as Jew within the larger Western world: “Under the cradle the white goat stands, mother,/ What will the goat be saddled with, mother?/ Almonds, raisins/ What will my heart be bartering, mother,/Wisdom, learning.../ These are the words of the prophet, mother,/ Likely to save me from Tophet, mother—/ What will my heart be burning to, mother/ Wisdom. Learning” (270-29). Here, as in its first invocation, the goat stands as much for the Jew as Zukofsky does, and both are saddled with burdens, either to

take to market, or (echoes of the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac) for sacrifice. That sacrificial bell has also been rung before, when in the first movement the Jewish “goat-song” fell upon deaf German ears. So, while in this sequence Zukofsky is depicted as prepping to engage in some potentially beneficial transaction, how that transaction will finally play out remains unclear. As before, the passage registers the uncertainty Zukofsky feels as to whether he will be able to carve a place for himself in Western culture, and what that place might look like given the overdetermined discourses already active in the Western imaginary. “Lullaby, lullaby, lullaby, lullaby” (275) comes the calming answer, intoned by the mother, comforting Zukofsky, and us, that whatever treatment the West has in store for the Jew Zukofsky can at least rest assured that motherlove will hold fast: “By the cat and the well, I swear, my/ Shulamite!/ In my faith, hope, and in my love, I will cradle thee, I will watch thee,/ Sleep and dream thou, dear my boy” (280-83). The space of Jewish origin here is dramatically contrasted with the space of Western encounter, the latter being associated with Tophet—an epithet for hell, but more tellingly a place in the valley of Hinnom (aka Gehenna) where, in the Torah, pagan worshipers immolated children in sacrifice to Baal (Hirsch and Price). “What will my heart be burning with,” indeed.

Zukofsky here confronts again the fear of his rejection, or rather of his instrumentalization—which as we saw in his treatment of the Christ mythos, Zukofsky is legitimately concerned about. He is concerned, that is, that the wisdom and learning he carries, the wisdom and learning of the Jewish tradition, will be burned away by the light and heat of the wisdom and learning he has been assimilating, shunted into forgetfulness or yoked to some distorting narrative by the overwhelming power of the Western

dispensation. What saves Zukofsky from this fate is his mother's lullaby, which he identifies with "the words of the prophet," i.e., the letter of the law. And what is the law? Not Torah, in this instance, but instead a different kind of Torah, a different teaching: not the teachings of orthodox Jewish religious tradition, but those of literary Judaism, with its language-oriented, intertextual, materialist approach to form, its embrace of polyvocality, deferral, and mutual conditioning.

And how do we know? Because Zukofsky is punning again. Or no, not punning, exactly but... something else. The words of the prophet, which are also the mother's soothing lullaby, never translate into a piece of occasional song, as happened earlier when Zukofsky brought up *Merchant*. The text of the lullaby then is absent from the text of the poem. Unless, that is, the lullaby, its content, is identical with its form, and we are to read those limpid l's and languid, full-voiced vowels as in and of themselves offering a form of solace. Maybe they do. Again, this is no pun. There is no double meaning here. We are simply being asked to take the word seriously as a word, to recognize that its material form is not wholly arbitrary—as Plato and Aristotle have argued—but constitutive, at least in the sense that the sound of the word, its physical being, contributes to how it is received and understood, as well as how it may be integrated into, and how it may then play upon, the meaning of a surrounding utterance. In that sense we are being asked to recognize that, contra Greco-Christian aesthetics, language is not in fact entirely divorced from meaning, but intimately, materially connected, and moreover, that the sacrifice of the material word as metaphorical vehicle (especially from the perspective of poetry) is neither necessary nor desirable. In launching this defense of language, of course, Zukofsky also launches a defense of the Jew, who has similarly been

wronged in Western discourse, conjured into abjection and discarded like a husk. Thus, Zukofsky's reply to his mother: "I do not forget you" (286) stands over and against the ongoing act of forgetting that defines the Western tradition's relation to Judaism, reaffirming the role of memory as a counter to the teleological or ideological imperatives of history, and reaffirming as well a principle of relationality (a Buberesque I/Thou) that inures the subject against both Western culture's consolidating and atomizing impulses.

Insulated thus from the twinned threat of disintegration and (total) incorporation that appends assimilation, reaffirmed in his commitments to his family, his people, and his poetics, Zukofsky is once again free to go out for the night: "The Royal Stag is abroad,/I am gone out hunting" (288-89). Thanks to "In Cat Minor," we know right well what Zukofsky is hunting, and sure enough we will, in a handful of lines, return to that earlier scene of romantic ambiguity, yet we would be remiss not to note the Royal Stag. The stag is a feature of quite a few European legends, including the Arthurian myths where, like the grail, the stag represents spiritual renewal. Hunting the stag, then, speaks as much to the poem's interest in reviving modern culture's flagging imaginative capacities as it does to Zukofsky's libidinous desires.

As usual with Zukofsky, the key to cultural revivification is hybridity, signaled in this instance by Helen's return to the poem. This time around, however, she arrives with a surname: she is "Helen Gentile" (Zukofsky 297)—in case the allusion wasn't clearly Western enough. On the other hand, perhaps some special identification is needed here since the first time Helen came up she was a disembodied referent. Now, though, she is a flesh-and-blood, gentile woman: "And did one want me; no./ But wanted me to take one? yes./ And should I have kissed one? no./ That is, embraced one first/ And holding closely

one then kissed one? yes” (298-302). Obviously, Zukofsky is caught up in some handwringing of his own; what seems to be at stake (beyond the immediate sexual impulse) is, as before, the integration of the Jew into Western society—for which, unfortunately, grossly, the pulling of a ‘*shiksa* goddess’²⁵ has oft proved a potent if problematic symbol for the Jew’s having “made it” in America (the archetypical example, though one that post-dates Zukofsky’s poem, being the marriage of Arthur Miller to Marilyn Monroe). Even in the final movement of the poem, though, the extent, nature, and success of Jewish integration remains in question. Zukofsky will not answer that question. Rather, he leaves ‘*The*’ incomplete in this regard, deferring desire’s consummation in a gesture that, while having the virtue of reflecting some very real sociopolitical uncertainties, also reflects the Jewish poem’s interest in prolonging tension and delaying any sort of telos or permanent resolution.

The poem does end, as all things must. And it ends, shockingly for a modernist epic, not with despair or ambivalence, but with unabashed hope (Stanley 68). As Stanley writes: “Zukofsky is interested in displacing the modernist vision of alienation with a socially conscious vision... one that will incorporate aspects of ‘otherness’—allowing the silent and repressed of the culture to have a voice, moving them from the margins to the center of aesthetic and social discourse” (69). Thus, where Eliot’s *Waste Land* closes with a question, an ambiguous gesture at regeneration, Zukofsky’s closes with a passage that speaks directly to his imagined future:

Under our feet will crawl

²⁵ A desirable gentile woman, usually depicted or imagined in terms of largely white supremacist beauty standards.

The shadows of dead worlds.
 We shall open our arms wide,
 Call out of pure might—
 Sun, you great Sun, our Comrade,
 From eternity to eternity we remain true to you,
 A myriad years we have been,
 Myriad upon myriad shall be.

Zukofsky here takes up the mantle of prophecy himself, playing a role he has heretofore disallowed himself, largely due to the Jew's displacement from that privileged position within Western discourse. Now, though, that displacement appears at an end, or is projected to end, as the Sun, which so far in the poem has always stood in for the Western dispensation and its Greco-Christian inheritance, has been sufficiently reimagined, sufficiently Judaized, to affect a reconciliation. That revision occurs a few lines earlier, when in a passage plausibly spoken by the mother, though the source is unclear, Zukofsky alludes to the Biblical myth of Absalom, a son of King David killed in battle. "Oh my son Sun, my son, my son Sun! would God I had died for thee, O Sun, my son, my son!" Zukofsky writes (313-14), plying the sun/son pun for all it's worth. But the pun, minor as it may appear, is significant as it produces a semantic bleed between the Sun, which Zukofsky identifies as a symbol of "The Power of Past, Present, and Future" in his notes, and Zukofsky himself, the poor Jewish kid trying to make his way in the world.

This is about as close as Zukofsky gets to the sovereign subjectivity of Christ, the poem's other sacrificial son (well, there's Ricky, but the two are connected) and a descendent, so legend tells, of the Davidic line. This may be why Zukofsky tags the sun

with a bit of supplementary difference before exiting the poem, referring to that symbol of Western cultural dominance as “Comrade” in a cheeky gesture of simultaneous estrangement and familiarity that, in a single move, disassociates the sun from its authoritative and authoritarian position in the Greco-Christian connotative web and then realigns it with the Jewishly adopted, and broadly progressive democratizing and hybridizing impulses that drive the poem. One must distinguish here between Zukofsky’s Jew and Wagner’s, since this section of the poem does engage in a running debate with that figure—though mostly in the background. In any case, the argument is with Wagner’s association between the Jew and the corrosive abstractions of capital. Zukofsky turns the association around, invoking Marxism to reposition the Jew as an enemy of said abstractions, a figure rooted in material reality—though a reality quite different from the one Wagner, in his idealism, imagines. Thus the sun, symbol of the real, becomes in this instance Judaized, and as such a potential comrade.

For that reason, Zukofsky may speak as prophet in this moment. He has Judaized the culture. The Sun has come to him. Or rather he has called it down to himself: “Bei dein Zauber, by thy magic I embrace thee,/ Open Sesame, Ali Baba, I thy, firefly, little/ errant star, call here, By thy magic I embrace thee” (310-312).²⁶ The line opens by referencing Friedrich Schiller’s “Ode to Joy,” the poem that, with a few alterations, was incorporated into the final movement of Beethoven’s ninth symphony. The invocation of

²⁶ Michael Heller, Emmanuel Levinas, and Edmund Jabes has each made the case that the withdrawal (*tsuimsum*) of the transcendental signified in the Jewish poem is distinct from the evacuation of the signified that marks poststructural or deconstructive poetics in that it is *not* an evacuateion, but a deferral. The Jewish poems maintains a God-bearing project in this regard. A project visible in Zukofsky here in his work with the image of the sun, but also throughout the poem wherever the Mother/*Shekinah* is invoked.

Beethoven may be deliberate, as it is Beethoven who Wagner identifies as the pinnacle of Western musical achievement, after whom the art is exhausted. Wagner extends this point to Western culture generally, so it's possible that Zukofsky, in linking his own project, via Schiller, to Beethoven, is continuing his argument that a renewal of Western culture may depend on the infusion of other, either sublated or wholly non-Western energies, while simultaneously intervening into the culture to enact that renewal at the originating site of the Wagnerian, or modernist, breakdown in Western cultural continuity.

Schiller's poem, like Zukofsky's, offers hope in the face of an alienating world, so it seems that Zukofsky is gesturing at a parity between the two desiring sensibilities of the poem, both grounded in Zukofsky as subject, the son/sun of the verse. We are speaking of course of the Western sensibility, with its longings for salvation and transubstantiation, and the Jewish, with its longing for incorporation and belonging. Out of this parity emerges a "we," absent from much of the rest of the poem, which speaks to the bridging work Zukofsky has done and holds out the promise of a newly integrated American subjectivity and with it a newly regenerative genealogy. A genealogy in this case articulated not according to the assimilative project of the American melting pot, which dissolves difference into homogeneity, but one articulated instead in James' ethnically hybridized, Judaized accent of the future: a future Zukofsky, having rewritten it over in his image—in the image of the Jew, but more importantly in the image of the *other*—at last seems capable of believing in.

7 Stevens, H.D., and the Jewish Turn in Modernism

Thus far, we have been exploring a narrative wherein, wrestling with its own internal contradictions, Western discourse produced a theoretically salvific but ultimately antisemitic fantasy of Judaization that informed the development of modernism and that at the same time, and rather ironically, provided modern Jewish writers with an entry point for engaging and revising the tradition of Western aesthetics. In combination with the remarkable work of Jewish artists like Louis Zukofsky, that fantasy produced a very real counter discourse within modernism, some of whose practitioners, both Jewish and non, came to see in Jewishness, or in the Jewish approach to language and textuality, something subversive, yes, but also something vital, something which—despite or because of its having been derided as sacrilege—might yet prove energizing to a new generation of modern artists. This chapter picks up on that latter part of the story, exploring the ways in which both Jewish and Jew-ish poetics impacted the course of literary modernism at large, specifically its American iteration. By way of illustration, the chapter will interrogate the work of two canonical American modernists, Wallace Stevens and Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), who, despite not being Jewish, nevertheless appear to engage elements of a Jewish, or at least a Jew-ish, poetics in their writing.

A reading of this type is beset with pitfalls, chief among them the “phobic approach” Levi warns against in *Modernism and the Myth of Jewification*. The issue was explored in chapter one but is worth revisiting. As Levi explains, the phobic approach

involves the retroactive Jew-ing of modern, canonical, gentile writers, like Joyce or Becket (Stevens or H.D.), such that they become nominal members of the tribe: non-Jewish Jews (10). The phobic argument is usually undertaken as a means of relieving the canon, or modernism, or author X, of antisemitic baggage, and as such operates like Madame Eglentyne's purification rituals, though in reverse. Extending the trouble, the phobic approach often comes paired with what Scott Spector calls its "philosemitic triumphalist counterpart," an argument that, attempting to laud Jewish contributions to modernity, unintentionally reifies the antisemitic critique of modernism by claiming that the emancipation of the Jews and their subsequent assimilation and integration into mainstream Western society resulted in a culture-wide Judaization which itself is responsible for modernist innovation in the arts and letters. Spector goes on to claim that a common corollary to this position is the argument that, while there is indeed something ubiquitously Jewish about modernism or modernity, nevertheless that Jewishness is somehow hidden and needs to be revealed (616).

When revealed, meanwhile, at least in literature, Jewishness often appears in the form of a fetishized notion of poetics defined by dispersal of meaning, intertextuality, the collapse of linearity, and some tricky work with the injunction against graven images (Levi 10). This argument is not antisemitic, or not deliberately so. The intent is not to reveal some nefarious Jewish influence with which to tar the entire modern milieu, but rather to celebrate that influence, to uphold the Jewish artist at long last as someone who, as Rosenfeld ardently hoped in the closing of "Situation of the Jewish Writer," and as Zukofsky envisioned at the close of *Poem beginning 'The'*, might offer some dynamic contribution or critical revision that could open the West to new possibilities of self-

imagining. “In every society, in every group,” Rosenfeld writes, “there are what Saul Bellow has called ‘colonies of the spirit.’ Artists create their colonies. Someday these may become empires” (573). The phobic approach takes Rosenfeld’s projection as gospel and seeks to explore the reach of those imaginative empires. Yet in doing so, the phobic argument takes up a totalizing position that ends up being nearly identical with that of antisemitic antimodernism, which too imagines modernity as rife with a subtle but pervasive (and contaminating) Jewishness.

I have no desire to engage the phobic argument or to claim any outsized influence for Jewish poetics on the development of modernism writ large. Nor—in answer to the charge of fetishization—would I argue that the features of Jewish poetics I have delineated in earlier chapters are wholly determinative or exclusively delimiting. As I have endeavored to make clear, Jewish poetics, like any other cultural construct, is not one thing only. It is a site of tension, a contact zone, a space of competing and mutually conditioning desires. Its articulations are inconsistent and contradictory. And while the theoretical frame I have constructed around Jewish poetics does bear some resemblance to the one described by Spector, this description is not intended to end all discussion, for I am aware that within Jewish poetics there are issues and controversies I have not broached.

What I would say, though, is that there is a legitimate reason that critical analyses of Jewish American literature so often land on these sorts of descriptors. And it isn’t genealogical backformation. Nor does it have anything to do with Jewish essences. Nonetheless, as I believe I have demonstrated, the Jewish philosophy of language and the practice of rabbinical hermeneutics does contain much that is amenable to deconstructive,

post-structuralist, and materialist poetics and criticism and does seem to have had a significant impact on Jewish artists' and critics' engagement with those elements of the field. Ultimately, however, the primary reason modern Jewish poetry behaves the way it does—that is, the reason it is so frequently unruly, so willing to court and even to embrace the absurdities and contradictions (linguistic and otherwise) of the modern moment—has everything to do with the way the Jew has been constructed discursively as other in the Western imagination. The Jew has been specifically linked to representation, to abstraction—though also contradictorily to materialism—to linguistic excess, semiotic slippage, polyvocality, and the space of the signifier. Jewish artists and writers have never had the luxury of entering gentile culture un-shadowed by that battered rhetorical agglomeration since—especially from the mid-1800s to around the mid-twentieth century—it dominated public discussion and shaped the reception of Jewishly-made art and literature.

As Rosenfeld notes, Jewish artists and writers of the period internalized an awareness of how they were construed by the dominant culture—i.e., by the white gaze, and their work reflects that double-consciousness: at times revising, at times rejecting, at times willingly playing into the stereotypical topoi of that construction (571). These were the only terms under which a Jewish poetics might register within a gentile cultural milieu as legibly Jewish at all. Entry into the culture, the process of coming to voice, meant a certain wrestling with the Jew and the Jew-ish. But as we have seen, even antisemitic hallucinations may bear within them a trace of Jewish praxis, such that Jewish poetics, that fantasy projection of modern literature created largely to delimit the materialist, deconstructive, or post-structural tendencies of modernism may well, despite

itself, have served as a bridge for Jewish writers, like Zukofsky, looking to try a hand at modernist experiment along those lines.

But then we are not speaking of Jewish writers here. The attractions of a Jewish or even a Jew-ish poetics to a non-Jewish writer with little stake in the tradition or in the community may seem difficult to parse. In fact, at the risk of phobia, I'd say they can be—for criticism anyway—difficult to see. In the cases of both Stevens and H.D., for instance, the critical analysis has largely eschewed any discussion of Judaism. Why wouldn't it? There are hardly any Jews to be found in either writer's oeuvre. Then again there are not none. Further, and more importantly, both writers knowingly and deliberately flirt with a kind of Jewishness in their writings, or at least elements of a Jewishness, a Jewishness they seem at pains to deny, and one which criticism has been only too happy to allow them to obscure, even though the operations of that occluded Jewishness are essential to their respective writings.

Understand, I do not mean to imply that either Stevens or H.D. are secret Jews. Nor do I intend to argue that their work ought to be read Jewishly merely because it bears structural similarities to various elements of Jewish praxis—though it does and, to an extent, it should. What I wish to claim is that both Stevens and H.D. have made a quantifiable investment in certain aspects of or ideas about Jewishness which operate with shaping force upon their poems. I would note further that in both cases, the role of the Jewish in these writers' bodies of work falls mostly in line with the operative role Jewish/Jew-ish poetics has played in the development of modernism or in the development of Western aesthetics generally. That is to say, it operates as a punctum, détourning the idealisms of the Greco-Christian dispensation in favor of a linguistically

oriented materialism which, due to its openness to connotative play, to productive contradiction, to polyvocality, hybridization, and the deferral of telos, enables a revision of, or at least a renegotiation with, what Nirenberg terms the West's dominant aesthetic theology (*Anti-Judaism* 6). These revisions or renegotiations do not magically displace the cultural dominant or infuse it broadly with some reified Jewish sensibility. Nor do they signal some obscure quality of Jewishness in either Stevens or H.D. personally or modernism generally. They are limited engagements with a specific aesthetic sensibility. That does not mean they are not significant or cannot be said to contribute—alongside the works of Jewish artists—to an arguably Jewish turn within the culture.

I'll say it again. *Within* the culture. The engagements suggest a thread within the culture, imbricated with other contradictory and complementary threads, but recalcitrant, pulling against what Zukofsky calls "things iron" (303) in the hopes of unravelling and reorienting the whole in ways that may, *may*, open it to some meaningful degree of heretofore othered influence: a return of the repressed, even if constrained, even if partial or incomplete. For Jewish writers, such a move was concomitant with their cultural survival; for gentile writers, on the other hand, it was symptomatic. Symptomatic of what? It depends. Generally, symptomatic of some disruption to the subject, especially to the subject's ability to articulate itself. What that disruption looks like, in what direction that articulation trends, what specific renegotiations become available, these are unique to each individual. We have already seen with Richard Wagner, with Henry James, with Ezra Pound, and with T.S. Eliot, how some nagging eddy in the currents of their thought brought them into contact with the figure of the Jew in Western aesthetics, and that figure became important to them for the working through of some internal quandary, some

problematic or other, such that it entered into and influenced both the content and the structure/method of their work.

Much the same is happening with Stevens and H.D. For each, the Jew (or Judaism/Jewishness) provides a distinct but essential *techne*, fulfills a necessary operation in the workings of their poetry. But with these writers, in contrast to those we have examined to this point, the tendency to antisemitic projection has been somewhat disabled or displaced. As a result, the revulsion typical of the antisemitic response, which gives rise to various expulsion or containment strategies, never really materializes—or materializes in an atypical guise—so that instead of an outright rejection or demonization of the Jew, we are privy to an identification with the Jew. This is not entirely unusual. While on the one hand the Jew was degenerate in the discourse, on the other he was bound up with all the strangest and most provocative proclivities of modern art. As Jonathan Freedman argues in *Temple of Culture*, the popular culture of the period—due in fair part to the influence of George du Maurier’s blockbuster *Trilby*—linked “the Jew to the image of the high-cultural artist in such a way as to affiliate the ascriptions made about one to the other and back again in a chiastic crisscross of cultural ambivalence” (90). That ambivalence and its proximity to abjection are key. For Pound, James, and Wagner, it is intolerable, a further destabilizing element; for Eliot, there is utility in it, though he keeps the Jew at arm’s length. By contrast, for Stevens and H.D., and for others like them, a more complicated relationship to that difficult figure develops, a kind of incorporation, though not without its hiccoughs. To see this more complex relationship develop we must perforce turn to Stevens and H.D. themselves. With Stevens, I focus on his play with one recurring character, the rabbi. With H.D., I focus on her relationship to

Freud and on the rabbinical methods of exegesis sublimated within Freud's dream work which, it happens, prove crucial to the development of H.D.'s own poetics.

Very little criticism has been written on the figure of the rabbi as it appears in the poems of Wallace Stevens. A search through *JSTOR*, *Project Muse*, and the *MLA International Bibliography*, for instance, results in only three relevant hits. A search through Google reveals slightly more, but these are typically mentions in passing, brief interpretations included in the study of some larger issue. The scarcity of critical work is, however, understandable. The rabbi is a minor character, appearing in only six of Stevens' poems. Moreover, there is hardly any dispute about the rabbi's role in those poems, or in Stevens' oeuvre. A critical consensus has been reached in which the rabbi is identified as a rarely employed understudy for two considerably greater figures in Stevens' catalogue of *dramatis personae*: the scholar and the poet. All three, the argument goes, are agents of the Romantic sublime: men who, through language, refigure humanity's relation to the world of things, articulating a synthesis of subject and object, imagination and reality, signifier and signified. This articulation amounts therefore to a transcendent re-visioning of common experience, one with the potential to (momentarily) awaken humanity from the somnambulism of custom and thereby bring us into a more immediate and intimate contact with life.²⁷

There is absolutely nothing wrong with this reading. Or rather, there is almost nothing wrong. The critical consensus is built on careful observation and is well reasoned; what is more, it is essentially correct. It does, however, contain a gap, a rather

²⁷ For a thorough and engaging reading of Steven's rabbi understood from this angle, see Helen Vendler's "The Ocean, the Bird, and the Scholar" which lays out what appears to be the dominant position.

oddly shaped gap: a gap which, if one were to imagine it as a sort of paper cut-out, would look a lot like the silhouette of a man with hunched shoulders, dressed in a long coat, trousers, a wide-brimmed hat, and a fringed prayer shawl; a gap, in short, precisely the size and shape of the rabbi himself. To put it directly, the problem with the extant criticism of the rabbi in Stevens is that so much of it tends to occlude or elide his identity as a Jew.²⁸ Of course, it must be acknowledged that Stevens does provide some justification for this omission. He writes in his letters that “the rabbi is a rhetorical rabbi” (*Letters* 786) and that he has “never referred to rabbis as religious figures” (751). However, Stevens’ comments only beg the question: if the rabbi is not a religious figure, if he is merely rhetorical, and thus has nothing to do with Jews or with Judaism, nothing to do with Jewish culture or Jewish history, then why is he a rabbi at all?

I will attempt to answer that question, arguing that one cannot decontextualize the rabbi in the way that Stevens has endeavored to do and which his critics have allowed. I posit that the rhetorical role Stevens assigns to the rabbi *depends* upon the character’s Jewishness—that, in effect, it could not have been conceived without reference to a regime of representation present in the philosophical discourses proceeding from Romanticism and tied to the Greco-Christian dispensation in which Jews and Judaism had already been cast in a very particular light. Further, I claim the rabbi’s Jewishness serves a double function that critics have yet to account for, at once enabling and

²⁸ Charles Berger’s 2010 essay “Reading the Alien in American Scenes: Henry James and Wallace Stevens” is a refreshing exception, acknowledging as it does the necessity of the rabbi’s ethno-religious character in shaping his role in Stevens poems. Similarly, Joseph G. Kronick’s 2003 article “Of Parents, Children, and Rabbis: Wallace Stevens and the Question of the Book” also moves toward a cultural and religious recontextualization of the rabbi, linking his use in Stevens specifically with the position of the Jew in the writings of Hegel. This essay is indebted to both critics.

inhibiting the grand synthesis of subject and object that was Stevens' apparent poetic project. The rabbi, then, inscribes an important ambiguity in Stevens' poetics: an ambivalence to Romanticism and to the Romantic sublime that, in a way, enables Stevens to solve the problem of the Supreme Fiction—i.e., the problem of producing an ultimate aesthetic order that sublates subject and object—by arresting it, by holding it in permanent suspension.

Before beginning to read the Jewishness of the rabbi, however, it is necessary to situate Stevens' poetics appropriately in the framework of modern philosophy. Stevens, as has been well established, is one of the great philosopher-poets of the twentieth century, wrestling throughout his oeuvre with the intellectual and cultural fallout stemming from the crisis of modernity, and most especially from the "death of God" (Vendler, *Wallace Stevens* 30), i.e., from the displacement of the godhead from the privileged position of transcendental signified, a displacement which resulted in the concomitant collapse of the truth-claims of Judeo-Christian mythology and the rise of positivism and rational empiricism as the West's primary epistemologies. Of course, the death of God was protracted; it did not begin in the twentieth century, but much earlier, during the Enlightenment. Yet the discourse of the Enlightenment is not in fact where one must turn to situate Stevens. One must turn, rather, to the Counter-Enlightenment.

The Counter-Enlightenment can be characterized as a pushback against the ascendance, within the Enlightenment, of the "critical analytical intellect" as an epistemological tool (Berlin 108). It argues that, in seeking purely rational solutions to questions regarding the nature of being, Enlightenment philosophers "imprison the free human spirit in constricting intellectual machines," i.e., in social and scientific systems

deriving from a so-called ‘natural’ law which is not only absolute and immutable, but which is also entirely other and inhuman, having no bearing on the felt realities of human existence (Berlin 108). Thus, a tradition developed in the form of Romanticism that increasingly placed the human spirit at odds with natural law and with rationality and which sought to resuscitate mythopoeic modes of knowledge production—though not, as Judeo-Christian mythology had done, as profound insights into an eternal and supernatural order but much more radically, as *realizations in nature of the nature of one’s true self* (Berlin 108-9).

The general thrust of Stevens’ depictions of the role of the poet/rabbi/scholar squares well with this anti-positivist, irrationalist, and individualist tradition. For example, in the poem “Somnambulisma,” Stevens positions the scholar as a figure of “immense fertility” (Vendler, “The Ocean, the Bird, and the Scholar), a man who, though metaphysically separated from nature, is nevertheless open to nature, not only observing but “feeling everything” (18) and who then, having internalized the world of things, “pour[s] forth” their “personalia” (17), inscribing them with an identity (in part his own) they could not themselves have achieved. In this poem, Stevens, echoing Coleridge’s position on the secondary imagination, makes the scholar responsible for producing and maintain the “pervasive being” (15) of the phenomenal universe. In this sense, then, the scholar becomes the equivalent of the Augustinian sovereign subject, a consciousness capable of sublating the otherwise fatal difference/*différance* between representation and the real, bringing into being a new symbolic order in which signifier and signified are made commensurate. That said, there is a notable distinction to be made between Stevens’ take on the sovereign subject and Augustine’s. Augustine imagined a process

that brought man's faulty perception of the world into line with its true spiritual reality. Reality in Stevens is disappointing, deadening, quotidian. It is only the human imagination that gives it effervescence and meaning. Here, then, is a modern existentialist revisioning of the terms of the Greco-Christian dispensation, yet not a complete revision, since the basic trajectory of desire still tends towards a messianic realization of the transcendental signified. In this case, though, that position is held by the subject rather than God, since God, from the perspective of modernity, is indisposed on account of his being deceased.

Stevens employs a similar treatment of the poet as artist in poems such as "The Man with the Blue Guitar" wherein the eponymous guitarist constructs a new and lively *actuality* on top of, or rather out of, the merely factual existence of "things as they are" (i.6.5-6)), as well as in "The Idea of Order at Key West" wherein the poet, this time disguised as a singer, becomes "the single artificer of the world" (37). The rabbi, meanwhile, is also positioned in this way. In "The Sun This March," for instance, Stevens' calls upon the rabbi to "fend [his] soul" against the harsh impersonality of the sun—always a figure of the absolute real in Stevens—which has threatened with its "exceeding brightness" (1) the very substance of the self, intimating that the ground out of which subjectivity arises, the "eye" in which the subject has its "element," is simply a recurring hallucination (3-7). The manifold puns here, on brightness/enlightenment, on eye/I, in conjunction with the poets' play with rhetorical opposition—in contrast to the sun, the poet conceives "how dark I have become" (2) while the rabbi is the "true savant of this dark nature" (12)—enable the reader to locate the rabbi, and the poet, firmly on the side of the Romantic subject. That is, on the side of an interiority whose sublime

vision, however hallucinatory, is nevertheless necessary to defend against the emptiness of the real, or better to transubstantiate that emptiness, to translate the “nothing that is not there” into the “nothing that is” (Stevens, “The Snow Man” 15). We have seen this before: Zukofsky attempts, but then interrupts the elevation of the subject into the role of God as the ultimate artificer of creation and possessor of a language commensurate with being. This is Stevens’ solution to the death of God; it is also the theoretical ground of his Supreme Fiction.

One wonders, though, how exactly the rabbi got into the mix; that is, how he became coincident with the scholar and the poet, the latter of which had long been deployed by the Romantics as a hero of the Counter-Enlightenment, and the former of which seems to derive his rhetorical identity from a clever reversal of Enlightenment notions of learning and knowledge (which would have tended to deride the poet). Stevens is little help in answering this question. In his letters, he often reiterates his understanding of the rabbi as a “metropolitan,” and thus secular, wisdom figure (*Letters* 292-3), a person “devoted in the extreme to scholarship and at the same time to making some use of it for human purposes” (786). Yet the origins of this feeling are left frustratingly opaque. By way of explanation, Stevens offers only the following passage:

When I was boy I was bought up to think that rabbis were men who spent their time getting wisdom. And I rather think that that is true. One doesn’t feel the same way, for instance, about priests or about a Protestant pastor, who are almost exclusively religious figures. (828)

That opening “when I was a boy” is tantalizing, implying as it does a long relationship with the rabbi, or with ideas about rabbis, situated in Stevens’ childhood. In

this regard, Rosamond Rosenmeier makes an interesting case that Stevens is referring to an inherited sensibility gleaned through his mother's ancestral link to certain "pietistic German groups in Pennsylvania" (141). These groups maintained a culture "infused with the biblical and Apocryphal Wisdom tradition" and heavily influenced by the works of Jacob Boehme, the seventeenth-century thinker whose kabalistic cosmology "centered on the dialectical and sexual relationship between God and the *Sophia* [i.e., the divine bride or mother]" (143-4), positing that "the female ground of being is prior to and then coexistent with the creative, masculine deity" (149). Rosenmeier notes, also, that within this tradition the bride is "found in earth, not . . . heaven" (149). In her imbrication with materiality, *Sophia* echoes the *Shekinah*, and may be read as a similar sort of figure. The rabbi's task, therefore, is to read the signs of her immanence in "the wilderness of the world" (150), implying a hermeneutical displacement of empiricism.

For Rosenmeier, the connection between the pietists' and Stevens' rabbis appears very close. Both are co-creational figures, existing in a dialectical relationship with nature conceived as a fecund matrix of the real that comes to fruition via poesis: that is, via an enunciation which situates ineffable being within the symbolic order, sublating it into an expression of Symbolic Law—in Stevens, no longer the law of a masculine deity, but, despite the feminine resonances of *Sophia/Shekinah*, nevertheless a Lacanian Law of the Father. Offering further evidence of the connection, Rosenmeier is careful to track Stevens' engagement with this notion of rabbinical identity both through his biography and through his poems. In terms of the former, she notes Stevens' intense genealogical research during the 1940's, over the course of which he read several histories and biographies of Pennsylvania's early German settlers (150). In terms of the latter, she

points to multiple instances of Stevens' diction that bear a striking resemblance to the Wisdom-inflected language of the pietists (146; 150), as well as to a number of scriptural allusions in the poems that relate the roles of both the rabbi and the poet to the pietist's dialectic of creation. This dialectic Stevens reimagines in secular, romantic terms as his overarching poetic project: the quasi-theological but utterly heretical notion that the poet might produce a Supreme Fiction—an idea, invented but willingly believed, that will, as noted, replace an exhausted God as transcendental signified, authorizing (or reauthorizing) the symbolic order (145-8, 151-2).

Rosenmeier's argument is compelling for many reasons. For one, it helps critics to better account for the very personal affection and even self-identification Stevens avowedly felt for the rabbi. As he wrote in his letters, "I am beginning to feel like a rabbi myself" (*Letters* 751). This point may, in turn, help us to understand Stevens' lack of antisemitic revulsion. I find it likely that Stevens' apparent philosemitism—at least later in life—also reflects America's changing attitudes toward Jews during and in the wake of WWII, when antisemitism, as an obvious extension of Nazism, fell out of favor in the American mainstream (though gradually, and only to a limited extent). That said, this cannot account for Stevens' portrayal of the rabbi in earlier volumes of verse—a problem that will recur in another guise momentarily. Still, another benefit of Rosenmeier's essay is that it effectively illuminates the link between the rabbi and the tradition of wisdom literature as transmitted by Stevens' German ancestors: a link Stevens makes explicit in "Things of August" where he names his rabbi *Weisheit*, after the German word for wisdom (v. 1). Still, there are problems with Rosenmeier's argument. First, there is the problem of dates. Stevens' genealogical research postdates his first use of the rabbi—in

the poem “Le Monocle De Mon Oncle,” published in 1927 as part of *Harmonium*—by just over a decade, and Rosenmeier, despite her references to Stevens’ childhood, is unable to offer tangible evidence of his engagement with the pietist version of the wisdom tradition prior to that time. Second, Rosenmeier’s critique invokes the pietist rabbi without any discussion of how that incarnation of an intrinsically Jewish figure came to function so meaningfully within the frame of gnostic Christianity, nor of how Stevens’ appropriation of the rabbi might speak to his engagement with the history of, and the politics surrounding, the representation of ethno-religious difference.

The fact is that while Stevens’ bond with the philosophical and theological discourses of his mother’s forebears may inform his use of the rabbi, it does not and cannot fully account for that use. To begin that accounting, critics must look to a different discursive tradition: anti-Judaism. As noted, the term anti-Judaism is a recent one coined by historian David Nirenberg to refer to a species of Orientalism, though one dating well before Orientalism proper, traceable as far back as 700 BC (Nirenberg 5). As Nirenberg defines it, anti-Judaism comprises a historical amalgam of critical thought in which Jews and Judaism have been impressed into rhetorical service as an antipodal semiotic category, under the rubric of which all manner of oppositions may be arranged and managed (1-6). Within anti-Judaism, the Jew is an unstable figure, and he has played many contradictory roles across the millennia. The key point, however, is that the Jew, as constructed in anti-Judaic discourses, functions as a dark mirror for the developing West.

Hardly surprising, therefore, to find anti-Judaism ensconced in the discourse of the Romantic writers and thinkers to which Stevens owes so much. The most notable of these are Kant and Hegel, both of whom Stevens read (Brazael 3), and whose influence

may be felt in the poems of Stevens' first book, *Harmonium*, as well as throughout the body of his oeuvre. The ideas of Kant and Hegel provide the foundation for Stevens' long struggle with "the epistemological distance between knowers and things in themselves, or the equally taunting 'failure in relation between the imagination and reality'" (Brazael 3). They also provide the foundation for Stevens' rhetorical use of the rabbi.

Kant and Hegel do not themselves use the word "rabbi," but they do use the words "Jew" and "Judaism." Kant, for instance, building on the old link between the Jew and fleshly materialism, associated Judaism with empiricism, identifying it as the vessel of that tyrannical natural law—to which Kant was, of course, opposed—that restricted or negated "the human subject's potential for the active establishment of its relation to the world" (Nirenberg 394). In *Religion Within the Bounds of Reason Alone* (1792), Kant repeats this dualism in a Christological frame, identifying Jesus as "a rebel against Jewish materialism, a revolutionary 'who opened the doors of freedom to all who, like him, choose to die to everything that holds them fettered to earthly life to the detriment of morality'" (Nirenberg 394).

Ironically, when Hegel, an "ardent Kantian" during his youth, abandoned Kantian dualism in his early thirties, he did so by recasting Kant and his followers as Jews (Nirenberg 397-8). For him, the entire notion of dualism, of an unbridgeable chasm between reality and the real, subject and object, the imagination and the mind God, was itself a Jewish notion, one which would have to be overcome for the West to progress (Nirenberg 397-8). The mechanism of this victory was history itself, which Hegel conceived as a dialectical process sublating all oppositions in an emergent synthesis

“patterned on the overcoming of the difference between God and man, in the Incarnation of and Passion of Jesus Christ” (Nirenberg 402).

One can perhaps begin to see at this point both the prominence of Kant and Hegel to Stevens’ idea of the Supreme Fiction, which is necessitated by Kantian dualism and takes the form of Hegel’s dialectical synthesis while at the same time fitting itself out in the now twice-borrowed clothes of Christian mysticism. Moreover, one can also perhaps begin to guess at the rabbi’s unique role in the articulation of that Fiction. For a more concrete explication, however, one must give Stevens the floor. At the end of “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,” which, again, is the first poem wherein the rabbi appears, Stevens pens the rabbi figure into a miniature *ars poetica*:

. . . Like a dark rabbi, I
 Observed, when young, the nature of mankind,
 In lordly study. Every day, I found
 Man proved a gobbet in my mincing world.
 Like a rose rabbi, later, I pursued
 And still pursue, the origin and course
 Of love, but until now I never knew
 That fluttering things had so distinct a shade. (xii 4-11)

In the manner of the “ever-elaborating consistency which is Stevens’ hallmark” (Rosenmeier 141), everything one needs to read the rabbi in Stevens’ later writings is present in these lines. Here, the reader is treated to a curious dialectic of rabbis situated within a progressive, autobiographical teleology. The “dark rabbi,” displaced into the poet’s past, is associated with a poetic and philosophical error: an ascetic withdrawal

which is intended to, yet fails to, facilitate the poet's development of a theory of human nature based on observation. This withdrawal "prove[s]" violently dehumanizing, tied via Stevens' diction to the institution of a hierarchical caste system ("lordly study") as well as to de-individuation, a dismemberment ("mincing") of the soul which consumes subjectivity and reduces mankind to the status of a thing, a "gobbet" of half-chewed food.

Read this way, the dark rabbi appears to embody an extraordinarily precise recapitulation of Kant's Judaized critique of empiricism. He is, like the 'Jewish' empiricists, a "devourer of man" (Kronick 148) subjugating humanity to a form of law that is paradoxically other yet worldly, inhumanely abstract yet brutally materialist. However, one might also read in the dark rabbi a recapitulation of Hegel's Judaized critique of Kant, which locates Kant's Jewishness precisely in his inability to fully reject the subject/object divide that underscores the empirical method and which Hegel identifies, ultimately, as stemming from a so-called "Jewish principle" that opposes thought to reality, not least in its insistence on a non-incarnational version of the godhead (Nirenberg 399-402). Either way, the dark rabbi is a retrograde symbol, emblematic of an intellectual past that must be rejected in the interest of progress, and in this he fits disturbingly neatly into the supercessionist mode of anti-Judaism.

The rose rabbi, meanwhile, operates on the other side of the dialectical coin. He marks a watershed in the poet's development and defines the poet's current poetic project: to "pursue the origin and course of love" ("Le Monocle" xii. 9-10). Pursuing the course of love leads the poet back into contact with the transient and quotidian: the "fluttering things" of this world (xii. 11). But this move cannot be accomplished without a simultaneous return to the origin of love, presumably the self or the subject, the

psychological ground of emotional experience, which revitalizes the poet's ability both to *be* and to *know*: “until now I never knew (“Le Monocle” xii.10). It is only through this contrapuntal movement that the poet can recover the sublime “shade[s]” of existence (Le Monocle xii.11), transcending the subject/object divide in a vision that sublates both terms via a logocentric epistemology in which the mind of man fuses with the godhead, and the subject is rendered incarnational, i.e., inscribing its own origin within itself.

Here, then, Stevens’ rose rabbi reproduces Hegel’s Jesus, acting as a scripturally encoded metaphor for the poet’s (momentary) realization of a self-authorizing Supreme Fiction, a synthesis-in-poesis that supersedes religious cosmology and yet still serves as the guarantor of being. That the rose rabbi supplants the dark is to be expected, in so far as Stevens has simply extended to poetics Hegel’s (and Kant’s for that matter) conception of history as a progression away from the divisive philosophical errors of Judaism and/or Judaized thought and toward a final, utopian state marked by an ideal organic unity. However, Stevens is not quite so comfortable with this triumphalist historicizing as he might at first appear. For one thing, Stevens retains the word *rabbi*, both for the remainder of this poem and throughout his oeuvre, effectively maintaining a trace of Jewish (really, Jew-ish) recalcitrance wherever he deploys it.

This is not an accident. Throughout his life, Stevens remained skeptical of and resistant to totalizing systems, be they political or poetical. This skepticism applied to his own poetic project as well. As he wrote in his letters, “in projecting a Supreme Fiction, I cannot imagine anything more fatal than to state it definitively...: we are dealing with poetry, not with philosophy. The last thing in the world I should want to do is to formulate a system” (*Letters* 863-4). Indeed, Stevens understood, as “Le Monocle”

demonstrates, that a certain violence attends the production of systems. He also knew that even synthesis involves an embrace of obliteration—specifically, the obliteration of difference, of an alterity which is essential to poetry, as Brazael argues (6), as well as to the civic health of a pluralist democracy, as Berger points out (34). Both of these concerns are central to Stevens’ work with the rabbi in the poems “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” “Things of August,” and “Auroras of Autumn,” wherein the rabbi—ever and again figured as clothed in text or imbued with textuality—becomes a figure whose close identification with the word—i.e., with language as a system of differences, as well as with the infinitely multiple potentialities of linguistic substitution—allows him to *de-fend* Stevens against the “apocalyptic urges” of totalizing synthesis (Berger 34). And this is the dual role of the rabbi. Not only to, alongside the scholar and the poet, throw his weight behind the grind wheel of the Supreme Fiction, but in fact also to drag his feet, retarding its progress, deferring its completion, forcing Stevens, and his reader, away from unifying ideals and back into distinct particulars: exiling us from the light of perfect forms back into the fractured shade of Plato’s shadow world, which now appears as real as a cave wall. In this way Stevens inverts the terms of the Romantic sublime, accessing the otherness of the Jew in the discourse as a viable pathway to affecting a renegotiation with the terms of his own aesthetic project.

By way of example, one might look to the moment in “Things of August” when Stevens names the rabbi character “*Weisheit*” (v. 1): a word that suggests the character’s status as an outsider—and thus the possibility that he is a refugee, a German Jew exiled to America (Berger 35)—while also signaling Stevens’ genealogical affinity to him via their shared German ancestry. As Berger notes, the decision to mark the Jew as German

reflects Stevens' awareness of, and perhaps identification with, the precarious political and historical circumstances propelling Jewish immigration to America in the 1930s and 1940s, for the poem was written in 1949, just after the end of WWII (35). In this regard, Stevens' insistence that the rabbi is the "lucidity of his city / joy of his nation, the state of circumstance" (v. 2-3) takes a political turn, registering the rabbi's potential to infuse the American scene with a unique knowledge gleaned from the experience—now both textually and historically encoded—of otherness and exile (Berger 35).

This attitude accords nicely with Zukofsky, who also seemed to feel the Western dispensation could use a strong shot of otherness, but it flatly contradicts that of other modernists like Eliot, Pound, and James, for whom the Jew-as-recalcitrant-other was a threat to Anglocentric cultural unity, a recidivist in the American melting-pot. It also contradicts Stevens' own tendency to imagine, as the captain character does in "Life on a Battleship," a quasi-fascistic grand unifying social-episteme, symbolized by the ship itself, which could simplify or clarify human life, though only by means of a violent and reductive attrition (ii.1-4). Here too, the rabbi steps in, asking—from a terrible knowledge—a question only he can answer, but which even the captain sees "implies a flaw in the battleship, a defeat / as of a make-believe" (ii.27-8). So the rabbi punctures Ahab's homicidal/suicidal dream, revealing the destructive potential inherent in humanities' pursuit of a messianic "crystal hypothesis" (Stevens, "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction: *It Must Be Abstract*" viii.7) or telos which would otherwise ostensibly close the gap between sign and signified, perfect consciousness, heal society, bring history to its close and stop, once and for all, the otherwise eternal, and eternally rather

painful “revolving” of the world (Stevens, “Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction: *It Must Give Pleasure*,” x.21).

Neither Stevens nor his dark rabbi want the world stopped, and that the dark rabbi, and not the rose, continually recurs in Stevens’ writing seems telling in this regard. One can see the pattern emerge even at its inception in “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle.” The poem’s concern with totalizing vision is embedded in its title, which punningly refers to the ‘monocle of monocles’: that is, the greatest monocle, the decisive single lens through which to view the world. As discussed, the monocular perspective has its realization in the rose rabbi, who replaces the dark rabbi and subs for the Logos, Hegel’s Christological metaphor for totalizing synthesis. Yet, despite the apparent teleology of the poem, the rose rabbi as Christ-figure does not have the final say. The dark rabbi returns, twice.

First, he returns in the very name of the rose rabbi who, contrary to his rosiness—i.e., his association with those progressive teleologies that lead from Judaism to Christianity and from Christianity to the Enlightenment—nevertheless cannot shake his outmoded ethno-religious title. That linguistic marker plunges both the rabbi and the poet *backward* in history, reversing the course of these supersessionist narratives even as it is articulated, and thus enacts a return to origin with a vengeance (xii.9). The dark rabbi appears once more in the poem’s final lines, wherein the poet/speaker appears to separate himself from the rose rabbi’s romantic pursuits with a rather intriguing aside.

“Until now,” he says, “I never knew/ That fluttering things have so distinct a shade” (xii.10-11). The word “shade” is central. It operates in the poem as an extra-concentrated pun, incarnating in its single body a shifting complex of multiple meanings—color, shadow, ghost—that evoke a complex interplay between the rose and

dark rabbis, between absence and presence, present and past. This dialectic, moreover, is productive precisely because *it will not resolve*; it is linguistically structured and thus dependent on *différance*, a relation, not of synthesis, but of infinite regress, infinite deferral. Thus, the rabbi comes to behave as a punctum in Stevens' oeuvre, détourning the Supreme Fiction, and opening up Stevens' own ambivalence to that project and indeed to the existential drift of Romanticism and to the notion of the Romantic sublime. Here, then, is the rabbi's true milieu: a negative sublime, one that is markedly Jewish in its stiff-necked refusal of telos. Here too is the secret of the rabbi's rhetorical role. He maintains the function of the Jew in Western aesthetic discourse, behaving in line with the fantasy construction of Jew-ish poetics ensconced there. Yet here he is fashioned as essential rather than excessive or superfluous. He is the ghost in Stevens' machine: the figure of an alterity native to language and time, and thus to poetry and human experience, which continually disrupts the enunciation of the Supreme Fiction, and so ensures, by delaying the final realization of the Supreme Fiction, the recurrence of all our little fictions, all our games of seeming, forever postponing the foreclosure of our broken, beautiful, realities.

At this point, we have a viable reading of Stevens' rabbi and may turn forthwith to H.D., here to discover another critical lacuna, though this time not in regard to a particular figure in her work, but rather to the fundamental operation of the work itself. In the discussion surrounding H.D., a consensus has been reached that identifies the mode of her poetic experimentalism as distinctly feminist. The crux of the argument, as articulated by Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis, is that H.D.'s work "is fundamentally dialogic, reflecting her negotiations as a woman to place herself in and

through language in a position of authority—not in the position of masculine privilege, but rather in a positionality emergent from her ‘difference,’” which is to say, a positionality emergent from the particularities of womanhood itself (“Preface” xii). The general shape this modality takes in H.D.’s poems is, as Susan Gubar points out, a “palimpsestic or encoded revision[ing] of male myths” (197), but the method of these revisionings truly provocative for at its heart lies a radical embrace of the instability of language, a semiotic promiscuity that breeds words from words and images from images, transforming and revising many of the overdetermined, gendered structures baked into Western discourse. Indeed, for feminist critics, precisely this embrace of instability, this proto-poststructuralism, most distinguishes H.D.’s poetry as feminine in the first place, in so far as her writing operates under conditions markedly different from those of any dominant (patriarchal) Western philosophy of language.

I would like, however, to complicate that notion. I contend that by identifying H.D.’s experimentalism with a *sui generis* feminist poetics—a discursive field marked by a semiotics whose origin is womanhood or feminine difference—critics unintentionally mask the relationship between H.D.’s poetry and another semiotic methodology, one inscribed with its own brand of difference, and one that is in fact crucial to H.D.’s poetic project. That methodology is Jewish and is located within the tradition of rabbinical hermeneutics.

The intellectual genealogy of H.D.’s inheritance of the rabbinical hermeneutical tradition is complex. H.D. is not Jewish. Nor did she ever attempt any special study of Judaism or Jewish culture as such. On the other hand, her investment in certain aspects of *Kabbalah* (Jewish mysticism; long since fused with gnostic Christianity and

adopted/appropriated by various occult groups) is well established, having been elucidated by Susan Stanford Friedman in *Psyche Reborn*. In that work, Friedman tracks H.D.'s engagement with the writings of Robert Ambelain, whose glosses on *Kabbalah* she read in 1939 and integrated into her epic *Trilogy*, and whose 1951 text *La Kabbale Pratique* proved similarly integral to the development of her long poem *Helen in Egypt* (279). In contrast, I would argue the groundwork for H.D.'s interest in *Kabbalah* was laid years earlier by Sigmund Freud, with whom H.D. worked as analysand and protégé in 1933 and 1934 (DuPlessis "Brief Chronology" xx).

Friedman mentions the Freudian connection, though she does not explore it in depth. She says only that H.D. would have noticed parallels between psychoanalysis and Kabbalism since both hold that language, or in Freud's case the symbolic language of the dream, performs the paradoxical function of at once concealing and revealing an ineffable reality: for Freud the reality of the unconscious, for the Kabbalists the reality of divine unity, the fundamental identity between sign and signifier, word and thing, man and God (*Psyche Reborn* 284). These ideas, Friedman points out, inform H.D.'s aesthetic as well as her understanding of the poet as an essentially religious figure, a symbolic adept (284) whose "central task is the search to understand the dialectical relationships between the opposing forces which reside inside the One" (286). Like Stevens' dark rabbi, H.D. takes a hermeneutical approach to ontology, rather than an empirical one. Friedman treats these parallels in passing, but they are not curiosities; rather they are the trace of a repressed Jewishness latent within the methodological apparatus of psychoanalysis itself.

This last point belongs to the critic Susan Handelman, who claims that psychoanalysis, in a much deeper way than the old pejorative allows, really is a “Jewish science” (132). Handelman argues that, seeking to distance himself from Judaism to better assimilate into the German scientific community, Freud displaces his Jewish heritage into psychoanalysis, wherein, Handelman posits, it’s “psychic structure” resurfaces in instances of uncanny coincidence (132; 151-2). Specifically, Handelman draws attention to Freud’s dream analyses, which she believes involve methods of interpretation structurally identical to those the rabbis use for interpreting Holy Writ (148). In this regard, Handelman notes multiple recursions to ancient rabbinical interpretive methods in Freud’s writings, including the use of *notarikon* (word play), *gematria* (number play), *semuchin* (juxtaposition), *gezerah shava* and *hekkesh* (forms of analogical correlation), as well as *kal v’chomer* (amplification) as legitimate means of wresting meanings from dreams (149).²⁹

More important, however, is Handelman’s characterization of Freud’s notion of latent content and the dream work, which echo the rabbis’ attitudes to the text of the Torah and the process of exegesis. In terms of the former, the key connection is the idea that both Freud and the rabbis saw the object of interpretation—whether dream or Torah—as “the product of condensation, a coded shorthand” beneath whose often bewildering manifest content lay “a latent content, a locus of entirely rational, comprehensible... thoughts” (Handelman 147) accessible via a specific set of hermeneutical rules. As it happens, this idea is at odds with the silent ontology of the

²⁹ For a thorough breakdown of the methodologies of rabbinical hermeneutics and a discussion of how they differ from their more familiar Greco-Christian counterparts, see Handelman’s *Slayers of Moses*.

Aristotelian interpretive tradition because it shifts the ground of interpretative work away from pure logic and ensconces it instead in the twinned fields of “rhetoric and poetics” (146).

A similar discontinuity exists in the case of the dream work. Here, though, the antipodal discourse (or countertext) is Protestant literalism, which, as an exegetical method, attempts “to reduce the manifest to a single latent referent” (147) to ensure the text’s “univocality of meaning” (146). In the Jewish tradition, on the other hand, and as we know, meaning is never fixed; it is instead “multi-vocal,” “indeterminate,” and above all “dialectical” (146). Freud’s dream work duplicates this approach. As Handelman explains, “both the rabbi and the psychoanalyst assume a hidden meaning which in its manifestations is multiple—and [which] is not... found *in* the text, as a reified essence, but *in the process* of interpretation... with which it becomes one” (150). Thus psychoanalysis, mirroring rabbinical hermeneutics, steps outside the imperatives of the Greco-Christian tradition in two ways: first, in the case of latent content, by insisting on the truth-value of poesis; and second, in the case of the dream work, via the incorporation of free play and polysemy within an open-ended process of meaning production in which interpretation plays an active role.

One may perhaps begin to glimpse in Handelman’s description the powerful appeal of Freud’s Jewish science for H.D. It presented within itself a ready-made philosophy of language that vouchsafed all manner of textual experiments and eschewed symbolic fixity, presenting a semiotic field untethered from referentiality, where meaning emerges not out of the paternal relation of the referent to the signifier, but out of any number of nonbinding meaning-making encounters between co-equal signifiers

(Handelman 142). Precisely this “overthrow of paternal authority” (Handelman 142), moreover, enables H. D.’s feminist poetics, allowing her to deconstruct, recombine, and eventually to redeem that misogyny which, in her view, had fatally corrupted the vital symbol systems of Western culture. Just as, of course, the overthrow of paternal authority (It is not in heaven!³⁰) empowered the rabbis to fuse their exegesis of the Torah with the Torah itself in the form of the Talmud (or Oral Torah). In this way, Ariela Freedman asserts, H.D. finds her voice in Freud, borrowing the tools of psychoanalysis to articulate her own message (184). Further, as Diane Chisholm argues, H.D. takes Freud’s place as analyst/interpreter, substituting her own voice for his (Freedman 184-5) in a dialectical process of translation indistinguishable from the process outlined by the rabbinical method. Thus, in her embrace of psychoanalysis as a methodological proxy for a newly feminist poesy, H.D. becomes (albeit unwittingly) heir to Freud’s displaced Judaism and to the psychic structures of the rabbinical mind.

This inheritance is, however, terribly ironic, since H.D. felt Freud’s Jewishness was to blame for his greatest failing, i.e., his adherence to positivism and empiricism as intellectual frameworks for analyzing psychological phenomena. Specifically, H.D. dismisses Freud’s argument that psychological experience may be tracked to an originary trauma located in the gendered body as a vestige of a grossly reductive and materialistic Hebraism (Spiro 605-6). H.D.’s dismissal grows out of a disagreement she had with Freud—unspoken during their time together but articulated later in *Tribute to Freud*—

³⁰ The phrase is from the Talmud and appears in the section referred to as Achnai’s Oven (Bava Metsia 59b), in which the rabbis insist upon their ruling on a matter of kosher law despite God’s having intervened to assert a contrary position. “It is not in heaven” refers to the Torah, which, having been bestowed at Sinai, is now the possession of the Jews, and therefore their responsibility—and not God’s—to interpret.

regarding the interpretation of a dream in which H.D. witnesses a series of gnostic figures appearing upon a wall as if written by an unseen hand. For H.D., the dream is a divine vision sanctioning her self-identification as a poet/prophet. For Freud, it is a dangerous symptom of megalomania, a neurotic overcompensation for H.D.'s innate penis envy.

Such an interpretation is, for obvious reasons, threatening to H.D. No wonder she rejects it. However, as Spiro notes, the mode of her rejection, the shape of her antagonism, resonates with an anti-Jewish strain of Christian apologetics (608), particularly with Paul's claim that Judaism has forfeited the Mosaic covenant by fetishizing the written text of the Torah and thereby committing idolatry: mistaking the word for the Word, the book of the Law for the Law's incarnation in Christ. Here again, as we have reviewed *ad absurdum*, the charge is one of materialism, and this allows Paul to condemn Judaism as a "ministry of death" (2 Corinthians 3:7 *NRSV*) and to argue for its supersession by Christianity, which is a covenant "not of the letter but of the Spirit: for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6 *NRSV*). Like Paul, H.D. sees in Freud's demystification of her dream a kind of death, an evacuation of the immortal and eternal psyche back into the death-prone body.

The Pauline resonance of H.D.'s resistance to Freud's analysis is no accident. Paul's critique of Jewish materialism disables Judaism's claim to interpretive authority vis-a-vis the Word of God. In the same way, H.D.'s critique of Freud vouchsafes her appropriation of his interpretive authority, enabling her revisioning of the psychoanalytic method: a project that will invert Freud's "Jewish instinct for [locating] the particular in the general... the personal in the impersonal... [and] the *material* in the abstract" (H.D. *qtd.* in Spiro 612) so that it aligns with H.D.'s desire to stress "the general, the universal,

and the abstract (Spiro 612). H.D., in essence, converts psychoanalysis, purging it of what she sees as its Jewish particularity and its concomitant deathward drift, while conserving its ability to read the language of the unconscious not, as Freud did, as a sign of the mind's imbrication with the body, but rather as a sign of the soul's imbrication within the greater, undying, and transcendent reality of the Spirit.

This is perhaps the meaning of H.D.'s notion of "spiritual realism" (*Trilogy* 48), a notion that invests her poetry with salvific force (Barnstone xiii), positioning the writing act as a form of quasi-occult magic, a "spell" (*Trilogy* 15) which, in reweaving the elements of humanity's collective dream-work, renews the mythical sphere of human consciousness and redeems both psyche and soul from the threat of dissolution, guaranteeing their immortality. As H.D. puts it in *The Walls Do Not Fall*: "so what good are your scribblings / this—we take them with us // beyond death (*Trilogy* 17). The "death" H.D. refers to in this passage is at once literal and symbolic. It is the death of the body to be sure, but it is equally a spiritual death resulting from the crisis of modernity, which H.D. sees as having produced a "schism in consciousness" that "must be bridged over" by poetry (*Trilogy* 49). The schism is historical in so far as it speaks to modernity's progressive teleology, which figures history as a continual displacement of the past by the future; ontological, in so far as it speaks to the displacement of the knowledge regime of religion and myth by that of positivism and empiricism; and it is psychological, in so far as it speaks to the subordination of the disordered id to the structural imperatives of the superego. Crucially, the schism is also archetypally gendered, involving the violent displacement and abjection of the feminine anima by the masculine animus.

H.D.'s poetic project, then, is to emancipate the feminine principle from abjection, to integrate animus and anima, and thus to heal the multifaceted wounds of the modern era (wounds given a terrible and very literal presence by the casualties of the first and second World Wars). That this project emerges out of H.D.'s conflict with Freud is fitting in that it provides an ideal example of the de-particularizing, de-personalizing, de-materializing, de-Judaizing thrust of H.D.'s revisions to psychoanalysis. In a move typical of the antimodern Judaization fantasy, H.D. reads Freud's condescending patriarchal assault on her writerly identity as nothing less than a symptom of a psychosocial and theological disease afflicting the whole body of Western culture. That she associates this disease with Freud's Judaism is hardly surprising since, cue Nirenberg, Judaism has often played the role of other in Western discourse (Nirenberg 1-6). But then, for H.D., it is also a bit of turn-about: if Freud de-legitimizes her claim to interpretive authority by rendering her abjection as woman, she de-legitimizes his (and re-asserts her own) by rendering his abjection as Jew. Thus, as Spiro puts it: "H.D. borrows the patterns of thought which express the supersessive ambitions of the Christian Church as a model for an imagined supersession in the sphere of gender" (615). In this sense, and like so many moderns, H.D. is similar to Madame Eglantyne, producing an other of the other onto which to offshore her abjection, thus clearing the way for her to speak.

The former points notwithstanding, H.D.'s appraisal of the androcentric and misogynistic bent of Western culture and of Judean-Christian tradition cannot, and should not, be denied. However, her assessment of the shortcomings of psychoanalysis as rooted in a worldly or fleshly Jewish materialism is mistaken, because the materialism of the

Rabbinical tradition, which I have argued might be more appropriately called a *textual materialism*, allows her poetic project to succeed. As we are at this point well aware: this textual materialism is categorically different from the sort that underlies empiricism and positivism, and this is because it posits, contra the whole of Greco-Christian hermeneutics, that language, rather than being—word, rather than world—is a priori, such that in the rabbinical model interpretation passes not from the signifier to the signified, but the other way around: “from the thing to the word, which creates, characterizes, and sustains it” (Handelman 32). For the rabbis, the name of a thing is its primary character, and the play of linguistic differences the essential engine of creation (Handelman 32). This is why rabbinical exegesis is so heavily marked by word games: by puns, substitutions, and recombinatory codes (Handelman 39): exegesis is not interpretation; it is the continuation of the text.

With this in mind, the similarity between H.D.’s philosophy of language and that of the rabbis becomes quite evident. For her as for them, the Word is the beginning (*Trilogy* 17), and the empirical world an emanation of the Word’s mediating inscription within or upon an ineffable, divine reality (*Trilogy* 18). This is the secret stored “in man’s very speech, // in the trivial or/ the real dream,” whose “insignia” is emblazoned “in the heron’s crest./ the asp’s back” (*Trilogy* 15). One might turn, too, to H.D.’s assertion:

.... I know, I feel
 the meaning that words hide;

 they are anagrams, cryptograms,
 little boxes, conditioned

to hatch butterflies (*Trilogy* 53)

Here, echoing the rabbi's investment in word games, H.D. gestures at what will prove a central element of her poetics: an *alchemy du verbe* wherein she mines the palimpsest of language for linkages (etymological, phonological, morphological) that allow her to deconstruct those overdetermined, calcified conditions, those fixities of meaning that delimit and disable language's generative function.

That function, meanwhile, H.D. understands as implicitly feminine; the box of the word, the cocoon that births the butterfly, is also a womb: a point hinted at early in *Trilogy* when H.D. first envisions the cocoon as a shroud spun by a reviled yet unrepentant and industrious "worm." The pun is slight, a matter of a minor slant rhyme, but its implication is made unavoidable by the fact that the cocoon spun by this particular worm is about to manifest the Lord God (*Trilogy* 12). The parallel to Mary, and to the place of Mary's womb in Christian theology—at times abjected as a figure of sexual terror and disgust, at times sanitized, desexualized, and venerated as the pure conduit of the incarnation (Jang 175)—is obvious. And yet, the God to whom H.D.'s worm eventually gives birth is not Christ, but "Santa Sophia," "the new Eve" who is the resurrection not of John's masculine Logos, but of "Holy Wisdom" (*Trilogy* 101). In Proverbs, she is referred to as *Chochma*: the feminine personification of the creative principle and the Jewish twin of the Egyptian Goddess Isis (Shapiro "Proverbs" xxviii), herself a life-bringer, a healer, and a major figure in H.D.'s pantheon of Gods and Goddesses—as well as a kind of corollary to the *Shekinah*, already a major figure of Jewish poetics. The name *Chochma*, though, does not appear in *Trilogy*. H.D. chooses

instead “Psyche,” a name she invokes to counter what she sees as an attempt, by a presumably male but at the least androcentric “you,” to reify the Christian hermeneutical perspective and force her Isis figure back into the old gendered hierarchies of being, wherein the feminine identity is imagined as instrumental and incomplete: a means to an end, rather than a thing-in-itself (101-3). Thus she writes of this reader’s Christological interpretations, “O yes, you understand, I say,/ this is all most satisfactory,// but she wasn’t hieratic, she wasn’t frozen/.... // ...she is not shut up in a cave...// imprisoned in leaden bars in a coloured window; she is Psyche, the butterfly, out of the cocoon” (*Trilogy* 103).

H.D.’s insistence in this passage on an ancient Greco-Egyptian root for her figure of the feminine generative principle, along with her avoidance of any Judeo-Christian referents, aligns perfectly with her desire, expressed very early in *Trilogy*, to return to the “old highways” in search of “the true rune, the right spell” that will enable the recovery and renewal of those “old values” (i.e. the divine feminine) lost or occluded within the “palimpsest of past misadventure” which is the Western tradition (*Trilogy* 5-6). Yet, it is also disingenuous—if only unconsciously: for H.D.’s “right spell,” the “worm work” of her revisioning (*Trilogy* 15), turns out to be rabbinical in kind. Her punning, for instance, recalls the rabbis’ *notarikon*—the principle allowing predication based on phonological and morphological relationships. Her conflation of Eve/Mary with Isis/Psyche, meanwhile, recalls the principles of *gezerah shava* and *hekkesh*, which allows for substitution of terms based on analogy. Far from revising psychoanalysis away from Jewishness, then, H.D.’s poetics magnifies the relation, though admittedly in a way that

extends Freud's original displacement: this time burying the Jewish trace in deference to feminism (though H.D. would not have called it that).

In any case, such occluded rabbinical moves are present in abundance throughout *Trilogy* as they are elsewhere in H.D.'s oeuvre. Still, *Trilogy*, perhaps, provides the most effective example since unlike, say, *Helen in Egypt*, it is not openly engaged in a revision of Judaism. With *Trilogy*, critics have an opportunity to see the ways in which rabbinical hermeneutics and the Jewish philosophy of language informs H.D.'s writing as a repressed psychic structure, rather than as a deliberate scaffold. Indeed, my intent has been to suggest some of the ways in which both H.D. and Stevens, as well as their critics, have tended to ignore Jewish difference in their treatment of the so-called Judeo-Christian tradition, which is a tradition wherein Judaism—like womanhood—has been relegated to an abject, superseded, instrumental position.

Such a project deserves more pages and requires far more examples than I have yet offered. Due to limitations of space, however, I propose to examine only one more example, though it is one I believe to be paradigmatic: i.e., the extraordinary moment of poetic alchemy that occurs in *Tribute to the Angels* whereby H.D. invokes Hermes Trismegistus (*Trilogy* 63), a synthesis of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth, both associated with language, in order to begin a process of linguistic purification that will once again rescue the feminine generative principle from its terminal state of abjection. The process begins in section eight, where H.D. writes:

Now polish the crucible
and in the bowl distill

a word most bitter, *marah*,

a word bitterer still, *mar*,

sea, brine, breaker, seducer,

giver of life, giver of tears;

Now polish the crucible

and set the jet of flame

under, till *marah-mar*

are melted, fuse and join

and change and alter,

mer, mere, mère, mater, Maia, Mary,

Star of the Sea,

Mother. (*Trilogy 71*)

As Freidman explains, the impetus for this passage lies in both the New and Old Testaments. In the former, John the Divine³¹ decries the Mother Goddess as the Mother of Harlots, i.e. a seducer, “the essence of abomination and the source of defilement for

³¹ Not to be confused with John the apostle, John the Divine, aka John of Patmos, is the author of the *Book of Revelations*.

men.” In the latter, Moses names the Hebrews’ first encampment in Sinai “Mara” (bitterness) because the water there is too salty to drink; later, Naomi, whose name means beauty, follows suit, renaming herself Mara to commemorate the bitter tears she sheds at the death of her children. In all three cases, a figure (water, Mother) that is to be a giver of life is instead reimagined as a bringer of death (Freidman *Psyche Reborn* 246-7).

Yet H.D.’s lines reverse this movement. “In the crucible of poetry, heated by the fire of war,” Freidman says, “H.D. distilled the words associated with sea water and bitterness to restore the origins of life, the Mother, to her pre-Judeo-Christian essence” (247). The point is made even more apparent in sections eleven and twelve, where, in a further act of alchemical distillation—“O swiftly, relight the flame”—H.D. burns away the “impious” association between women’s sexuality, embodied in the Goddess Venus, and the venereal “impurity” of disease (*Trilogy* 74), at last enabling a return of the “holy name”: a tri-syncretic union of Aphrodite, Astarte, and Venus now understood not as a defiler of divinity but as its “venerator” (*Trilogy* 75). All this is covered admirably (and in greater detail) by Freidman, though without mentioning the possibility that the operations of H.D.’s poetics are not, as they appear, foreign to Judeo-Christian discourse. Instead, they are embedded in it: resurfacing as a repressed and ever recurring traumatic memory.

Here again H.D.’s doubly suppressed Jewish inheritance enables—by way of Freud’s hybridized mythopoeic science, wherein rabbinical hermeneutics is ensconced as forgotten origin—the essential alchemical transformations of her verse. Here again, we find *notarikon* in the morphological and phonological recoding that purifies *marah* (bitterness) into *mar* (to disfigure) and into the phoneme *mer*—empty in English—from

which is derived *mere*: in modern English *solely* or *only*, but in Middle English *pure*, in the Latin, *undiluted*, but also, in the Germanic Old English, a lake or pond. It is from this last etymological connection that we then make the leap, through the amplifying logic of *kal v'chomer*, to *mère*, the sea, and from that sea, by way of the analogical maneuverings of *gezerah shava* and *hekkesh*, to the earth goddess Maia, source of life, and then (*notarikon* again) to Mary. Worth noting in this regard too that *mere* and *mer* are both French words, for mother and sea respectively. So H.D.'s etymological play also crosses languages in its construction, banking on the same principle of radical textual materialism to construct a web of etymological allusions that strengthen the symbolism of the text. Nor is this the end of H.D.'s repositionings. Riffing on the association between Jesus as "the bright and morning star" in Revelations, H.D. imagines Mary as "Star of the Sea," the pole star guiding sailors through black night to the dawn of morning (Friedman 249). This star is the planet Venus, but also, *kal v'chomer*, the goddess Venus/Aphrodite and thus, *gezerah shava*, Astarte, the ancient Egyptian divine Mother. At the same time, of course, the star is also Sirius, the Dog Star, (Friedman 249), which, in section forty of *The Walls Do Not Fall*, H.D. had already reworked (through *notarikon*) into a syncretism of Isis, Osiris, and God the Father (the Sire of her "O-Sire-is).

Thus, via rabbinical hermeneutics, H.D. unravels (and re-ravels) the patriarchal web of Western theological discourse, recovering and redeeming as she does the abjected feminine creative principle, which, in its properly consecrated state, enters into the unity of divine synthesis (Mother with Father) and thereby renews or resurrects the whole. But while Friedman and others like her are alert to the feminist elements of this project, they are typically blind to the Jewish ones. This is not out of any kind of antisemitism, but

simply because, like H.D., they approach the Western tradition as a monolith, imagining that its internal contradictions have been sublimated and that one must move beyond or outside the discourse of the West to reimagine them. H.D. does this in her movement to the ancient Greek and Egyptian Gods that predate Judaism. Freidman, meanwhile, does the same when she imagines H.D.'s rhetorical games as having a kinship with Pound's orientalism, reaching as far afield as possible (and quite a bit further than H.D. does) in order to find a model with which to explain what H.D. is doing (*Psyche Reborn* 249). This insistence on reading H.D.'s feminist poetics, and really modernism generally, as somehow constituting a kind of ultimate break with, or even the end of, Western culture is endemic to the literary scholarship surrounding modernism. But, despite the necessary work it has done, it is an inadequate model. As argued, it obscures the ways the historical dialectic of Western discourse *already* encompasses the seeds of its own unmaking. And it obscures the continued influence of repressed and subordinated traditions, like Judaism, which have not in fact vanished or been subsumed, but which, as both H.D.'s and Stevens' work demonstrates, may yet return to trouble, revise, hybridize, and renew the weft and warp of our shared cultural discourse, the textual body of our collective psyche.

And what other implications do these respective readings of H.D. and Stevens offer? For one thing, they complicate the phobic approach to modernism. Certainly, one does not wish to impose a specious Jewishness on the work of any writer, Jewish or not, whose writing does not meaningfully engage that concept; and one must beware of any tendency to elide the hard facts of biography and history into some essentialized sensibility that then might be deceptively or misleadingly analogized with Judaism.

However, when, as is the case with these two writers, the concrete particulars of the work

reflect some investiture in Jewishness, and when the exigencies of history and biography too align to suggest an encounter with the Jew, whether that encounter be born, as it is with Stevens, out of the Jew-ish projections plaguing Western discourse, or as it is with H.D., out of an organic—though Jew-ishly mediated—encounter with actual Jews and Jewish literature—then criticism is remiss to ignore it. Doing so, perhaps in hopes of avoiding a phobic reading, only reiterates the antisemitism inherent in the phobic approach—though admittedly from another angle. Rather than render Judaism as a sort of metonym for modernity, it nonsensically and ahistorically renders Judaism matter out of place, expelling the topic from discussion in any case where the Jew cannot be directly invoked as author and thus duplicating the same obscurantist tactics deployed by H.D. and Stevens to distance themselves from Jewishness so to avoid any too overtly ethnic entanglements.

This explanation alone might justify the sort of recovery work I have attempted here, stressing the Jewish (and the Jew-ish) as it inheres in the writings of H.D. and Stevens so to establish a counter-reading within the critical conversation on these figures and thus to expand Nirenberg's tracing of the work done by the Jew in the workshops of the Western mind.³² Moreover, if, in this regard, a reading of this type may be valuable for Jewish Studies, it is also valuable for literary studies more generally, as it serves as a reminder that the Western cultural dispensation is itself—even at the level of individual cultural artifacts—crosscut by other traditions, less assimilated than they at first appear. These traditions, Judaism among them, ought not be overlooked by criticism. They

³² Nirenberg's remarkable history, *Anti-Judaism*, touches on modernity briefly, but does not offer the kind of detailed, in-depth exploration it does with prior historical periods.

maintain a crucial difference/*différance* within Western culture, incubating and nurturing potentially subversive perspectives that, though often obscured, may still, like the germ of some forgotten flower, blush with unexpected life.

Coda

“The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” wrote queer, Black, feminist scholar Audre Lorde (1). But what if they could? What if, in a sense, they already had? What if the incorporation or assimilation of difference did not, in fact, erase anything? What if the shop-worn, ‘melancholy history’ of Jewish assimilation resulting in a concomitant loss of Jewish identity (and a subsequent whitening) has it wrong? Or partly wrong? What if difference persists in assimilation? What if, sometimes, in this form or that, it hangs on even within the dominant tradition, a distinct trace or latent countertext? What if it maintains its potential for disruption? What if it up and demands a pound of flesh?

Lorde, for her part, is dubious. She sees tolerance as smothering, a fire blanket dousing difference, surrounding and enclosing its incendiary power: “Advocating the mere tolerance of difference... is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives” (1). Maybe, and maybe this is why contemporary Jewish writings so rarely register outside the Jewish community as meaningfully different, meaningfully distinct from the dominant culture. Once upon a time, William Dean Howells might have introduced Abraham Cahan’s *Yekl: a Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896), his first novel in English, as “so entirely of our time and place, and so foreign to our race and civilization” (qtd in Soost) but these days, Jewish difference is not so well established in the mainstream American imagination.

For much of the postwar period until very recently, Jewish difference was often obscured behind a screen of tolerance (produced in willing concert by Jews and gentiles alike) which, unless and until some stark distinction asserted itself, tended to render that difference largely inconsequential—or apparently so—from the normative (normalizing?) perspective of American culture. This situation is less pronounced today, when rising nationalist sentiment has revived a curious breed of amnesiac American nativism and poured new energy into old hatreds such that antisemitic hate crimes have reached their highest levels in years, and the dull peal of antisemitic rhetoric rings once more through the public square. But then the Jew, while certainly Christianitas' chief other, has never really been America's despite the best efforts of the John Birchers, the Great Replacement-ists, or the QAnon adherents; and Jewish history in this country, while marred by othering, is also incontrovertibly speckled with periods of relative acceptance and successful integration. The discourse of Jew-hatred, it seems, moves like the tide, swelling and ebbing with the moods, or more unsettlingly with the needs, of the nation.

And that is why we speak today of the Jews' contingent whiteness, a partial and largely conditional identification—and one, moreover, unavailable to non-white presenting Jews—which provides some members of or groups within the Jewish community access to the privileges associated with white identity in this country.³³ In the immediate aftermath of WWII, that meant the G.I. Bill and a shot at participating in the then newly emerging suburban American dream. In the world of letters, it meant that for a moment or so Jewish writers (e.g. Allen Ginsberg, Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Norman

³³ Note too that misogyny plays alongside racism here, and that women's status too remains subordinated even within the structure of contingent privilege.

Mailer) were celebrated as major American literary figures, their works widely read, discussed, reviewed.

Nonetheless, the benefits of contingent whiteness have not always sat easily on Jewish shoulders—in part because they complicate Jewish ethics, which is based on a fundamental identification with the other (for you were strangers in the land of Egypt³⁴); and in part because these contingent benefits are just what they sound like: contingent, subject to retraction on a whim. We may note regarding the latter Roth's *The Plot Against America*, which imagines the nation in the grip of a homegrown fascism that embraces antisemitism as a political tool (a book that, lately, hits a bit too close to home). Regarding the former, consider Roth's damning satirical takedown of the assimilated, whitened Jews of Woodenton, New Jersey in "Eli, the Fanatic," who—in a terrifying irony—essentially become Nazis, attempting to chase a group of displaced Holocaust survivors out of town because the Orthodox folkways normative in that community may, *may*, endanger the Jews of Woodenton's newly acquired access to privilege.

For writers like Roth, the erosion of Jewish difference is disturbing, something to be resisted, which is why Roth closes his story with a rather wonderful, though also rather upsetting, scene. In it, driven by a need to perform anti-assimilative penance, the tale's protagonist, Eli Peck, outfits himself bizarrely in Orthodox garb—the black suit, prayer shawl, black hat, black coat (literally, the suit of a Holocaust survivor)—and wanders into town, where he is accosted by members of his own assimilated community who believe he is in the midst of a nervous breakdown. He is detained, drugged, stripped

³⁴ The phrase recurs in variation countless times throughout Torah.

of his all-too-Jewish get-up, and forcibly committed to the psychiatric ward of the local hospital for observation. To insist on the maintenance of Jewish difference in the face of acceptance registers here as a form of madness, though in truth it is the desperate desire not to lose oneself. But if Eli can be stripped of the accoutrements of Jewish difference, its outward show, something remains in him that is not so easily redacted: “In a moment they tore off his jacket—it gave so easily, in one yank. Then a needle slid under his skin. The drug calmed his soul but did not touch it down where the blackness had reached” (Roth 945).

Jewish difference here is indelible, a psychological coloring that cannot be bleached away—an internalization of otherness, even in the face of widespread tolerance and assimilation. That Jewish difference might persist even beyond its apparent containment is one of the key claims of this study. And make no mistake: the articulation of Jew-ish poetics within Western aesthetics is a containment strategy: a way of tamping down the threat represented by supplementarity, by representative excess, by *différance*, by the materiality of the system of signs—opposed as all that is to the ideal fusion of signifier and signified which Greco-Christian discourse imagines marks the apogee of utterance, its sanctification and redemption. Expelling these impediments, as writers of the Greco-Christian dispensation have frequently done—requires constructing a rhetorical figure to hold them. The Jew serves that role, though neither well nor faithfully. Like any constitutive other forged in the crucible of identity as a repository for whatever is intolerable to or unassimilable by the subject, the Jew returns ever and anon to puncture that subjectivity, to wound it, to stir it up, to demand recognition for that

which it has occluded and to renew the conflict between them, thus effecting a renegotiation (a haggling) over the terms of the subject's (and its own) existence.

The emergence of Jewish modernisms, and in particular the proto-poststructuralist or quasi-deconstructivist strain represented by Zukofsky, represents just such a return, as Jewish American writers caught up in the cathexis to high culture encountered the figures of the Jew and the Jew-ish within Western aesthetic discourse, recognized themselves as though in a funhouse mirror, and proceeded to make faces at the glass. Discourse, however, unlike glass is permeable, and the radical play engaged in by Jewish artists including Zukofsky, the Objectivists, and Stein turns out to have had very high stakes. Zukofsky was correct in *'The'* when he gambled that a viable modernism could indeed be made from the disallowed poetics of the Jew-ish. Not only did that experiment succeed, it had legs, running all the way to H.D. and Stevens and perhaps others. Not that H.D. or Stevens were directly influenced by Zukofsky or his fellow Jewish poets; that does not appear to have been the case. Rather, such modernists were drawn to similar opportunities, participated in a parallel turn, sensed the same shift or the same possibility of a shift in the dominant discourse, and in the culture. They then contributed to that shift, that rift, that punctum, widening it, agitating it, reawakening the old Jew-ish wound.

Subject formation is a violence—though whether of necessity or not I do not know; still, both the subject and the other it creates are wounds. And wounds in the psyche never close. They orbit each other in mutual pain. But they don't have to. Audre Lorde, for instance, imagines another possibility:

Difference must be not merely tolerated but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the

necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters. Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. (1-2)

There is, I suspect, a “raw and powerful connection” between the interdependent difference explored by Lorde, Zukofsky’s countercontext, mutual conditioning, and the rabbinical notion of *elu v’elu*. And I suspect that this is more-or-less what is depicted in the scene that closes *The*, wherein Zukofsky conjures the sun—his prime symbol of Western culture—out of the heavens so that they may meet as co-equals. I am unsure however of Lorde’s invocation of the dialectic. As Hegel constructs it, the dialectic culminates in a synthesis that obliterates difference/*différence* in a new construction. This is merely the recurrent process of the return of the repressed, demanding renegotiation with the subject. A more radical vision, and the one I think Lorde is actually articulating—the language as always simply having complicating resonances—is a notion closer to that of Isaac locked in an endless wrestling match with the nameless angel, demanding: “I will not let thee go except thou bless me” (KJV, Genesis 32:26).

Though the violence of the image may be less than appropriate, the idea of a suspended tension, unresolved and existing within the culture as a source of potential vitality or change seems viable, seems indeed quite close to what Rilke describes in

Letters to a Young Poet when he depicts love as “two solitudes [which] protect and border and greet each another” (26). Here too the image resists: I do not believe in perfect solitudes, sacrosanct subjectivities. We exist in porous interdependency—though there is and must remain a distance between us. But to protect, border, and greet! A gesture of connection and mutual acknowledgement which recognizes without effacing distance, difference, *différance*. This seems, in Stevens’ terms, a feasible way to pursue “the origin and course of love,” which comes to us not from the synthesis-obsessed rose rabbi, but from the dark, whose love of “fluttering things” will not brook the expurgation of their distinctive shades (“Le Monocle” xii.4-11).

As I have argued, and as Zukofsky, Stevens, and H.D., read together, demonstrate, both Jew-ish and Jewish poetics are tied in a web of mutual conditioning, exist within Western discourse as countertexts, entwined with the dominant discourse in a further mutual conditioning. That relationship enables a semantic bleed between figures, such that none are fully insulated, and each remains reactive to its counterpart. The Jewish turn in criticism theorized and anatomized by Handelman in *Slayers of Moses* is one example of how this reactivity may manifest. The Jewish turn in modernism is another. Both have their limits. We are not, in the phobic manner, talking about culture-wide revolution, an absolute if elusive revisioning. We are talking instead about pebbles in an avalanche. Tiny, often almost imperceptible independent displacements of the cultural dominant that coming together in the right moment may indeed stir the landscape, whether dramatically or in subtler ways: sometimes an avalanche, but sometimes a mudslide, or maybe just a blurring of the trail. Regardless of the size or shape of such disruptions, they are worthy of attention. Puncturing the West’s dominant

aesthetic theology activates those productive tensions which properly nourished can lead to extraordinary reimagining regardless of scale.

So, the Jewish turn, such as it is, may be somewhat less grandiose than what Handelman traces in her book, though I think no less significant. Indeed, we might mean a great many things by the phrase “Jewish turn.” We may speak of attention, of a (fraught) turning of attention to the Jew as a symbol of the crisis of modernity. We may speak too of the turning affected by Jewish artists, who reappropriated the Jew and Jewish poetics and made them into a vibrant and challenging methodology that compliments but also contests the methodologies of mainstream modernism. And we may speak of a turn affected by gentile writers as well, who found in the Jew and the Jewish, or in some cases in the organically Jewish, a germ of radical inspiration that led them to break with or at least to complicate the Greco-Christian dispensation. In so doing, they came to chart their own course—though perhaps with the Jew (or the Jewish) along as a companion, a rabbi, a helpmeet, a Baedeker, but not Burbank’s; rather, Bleistein’s: a strange and, crucially, estranging guide through the wasteland of the modern.

Difference, one hopes, breeds difference. And the encounter with difference of one kind may well liberate difference of another. In this potential lies the universal promise of Jewish poetics—in so far as it needs one. I am skeptical of the universal, even when it is deployed in the interest of difference. We have seen, in fact, how the universal fetishizes essentials to erase difference, as it did with the absurd argument that all men, all people, are Jews in alienation. But I do believe in mutual difference, in the network of mutual differences described by Lorde. That is how I would like to articulate the relation

between Judaism and modernism, between Jewish poetics and the Greco-Christian dispensation.

Again, we approach Jewish poetics as an open question rather than as a body of maneuvers. It is an impulse, a motive, a goad, an inducement to certain kinds of linguistic experiment along polyvocal and materialist lines. Jewish poetics allows language to drive, allows word play and other games to dictate the direction and shape of the argument so to discover what new logics are made available, what new connections and relations become possible. Additionally, Jewish poetics embraces hybridity, paradox, contradiction, complication, illegibility, and the deferral of telos. The beating heart of Jewish poetics lies here, with the notion that in the deferral of the signified lies the engine of creation, and that difference (*différance*) provides itself the grounds of being. In these ways, Jewish poetics is wildly distinct from the Greco-Christian aesthetics. However, it is not, in fact, separate. All these impulses are preserved within the Greco-Christian dispensation in the form of Jew-ish poetics: disallowed, abjected, hereticized, but still present—and because they are present, latent in the tradition, they remain capable of disruption, return passage for an occluded otherness, or for a range of occluded othernesses: the encounter with which may yet prove, if destabilizing, also illuminating, a benediction. For we are enjoined to welcome the other, to welcome the stranger, as, we noted earlier, we too were strangers in the land of Egypt.³⁵

³⁵ Mythologically speaking. According to Melvin Konner, there is no extant archeological evidence whatever for the mass enslavement or exodus of Jews from Egypt (3). But that is beside the point. Mythology is not constrained by fact. It is narrative, and as narrative transforms consciousness precisely through the willing suspension of disbelief. This is why Jews (re)enact the exodus at Passover. Not because it happened then. But because it must happen now. Not the escape from Egypt, but from *Mitzrayim*, the Hebrew word for Egypt, which translates as “the narrow places”. The exodus we pursue is from all the narrow places that constrain us, be they political, social, economic, aesthetic, psychological, or spiritual.

So, we find ourselves in a sense engaged in an inversion of the Jamesian critique. His torture rooms of the living idiom made over into nurseries, the ethnic enshrouding of the accent of the future reimagined: not a shroud at all; but perhaps a child's *schmata*, perhaps a prayer shawl, or *tallis* to give it its right name, though in truth that accent is unlikely to bear alone a Jewish brand. If luck holds, it will be something entirely beyond such limitations: some fantastic hybrid chorus of heretofore forbidden voices, the Jew among them, his keening goat-song a wild blue thread in the tapestry of the whole.³⁶

What else is there to say?

Perhaps I may close simply by dwelling for a moment on the radical openness of Audre Lorde's conception of mutual difference. Each node in the network she describes maintains distinction, individual identity, but maintains also its connection to every other node; each is unique, but vibrates in concert with the whole, remains accessible to the other, welcomes the stranger. There is a compelling and vertiginous instability to being in such a network. Embracing that instability, recognizing its strength, its beauty, its generative potential is what Jewish poetics is finally about, and more-or-less I think what God, speaking as the burning bush, meant when he said to Moses, "take off your shoes, for you are standing on holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). Believe it or not, God was punning. There are punctums everywhere. Because in a sense that too, too solid ground is indeed full of holes. Sinkholes, maybe. Enough to swallow a house—even, as Moses found, the master's. Or maybe, just maybe, not sinkholes, but cartoon escape hatches patched into the earth, fitted impishly into the grounds of intransigent being, so that we might, when

³⁶ Blue because, according to ancient tradition, Jews were to weave a blue cord, called a *techelet*, into the fringes (*tzitzit*) at the corners of their prayer shawls (*tallit*) to symbolize the glory of God.

so moved, leap through them into other lives, other worlds, other subjectivities, and so receive the blessings of the disavowed, hear the small, quiet voices of the least of these. If only we know that in the place where we stand, the ground is hole-y.

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