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THE SACREDNESS OF "SECULAR" LITERATURE: A CASE STUDY IN
WALTER BENJAMIN

Introduction

In the early pages of his study of religion *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade asserts that "Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself... It could be said that the history of religions...is constituted by a great number of hierophanies, by manifestations of sacred realities."¹ Though appearing in many forms, the essential nature of this sacredness is its transubstantiation from the spiritual into the physical realm, its *actively taking on of* the materiality of an object while remaining intimately, even sensually, a part of the divine sphere. And though these hierophanies are of divine consequence, their manifestation is uniquely derived for human benefit and are often even of human origin or at human prompting; indeed, they are the physical *creation of space* for an interaction otherwise impossible between humanity and an invisible holiness.

This fundamental idea in Eliade provides the underlying motivation for this essay, wherein I am interested specifically in Jewish sacred texts (understood by the rabbis as examples of hierophanies) and their resonances in the contemporary world outside of religious settings.² It is my observation that a

¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, tran. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1959; New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1987), 11.

² By *sacred texts* I mean those objects that are understood by adherents to be the written record of divine histories or revelations, parchments and books and words and letters that represent divine presences on earth as representative of God's enduring relationship with His holy peoples. Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote about *scripture* more generally, although he ends in confluence with the greater point of my essay: "It is this: that "scripture" is a bilateral term. By that we mean that it inherently implies, in fact names, a *relationship*. It notes something in a particular relation to something else...Fundamental [to understanding scripture] is the recognition that no text is a scripture in itself and as such. People—a given community—make a text into scripture, or keep it scripture: *by treating it in a certain way*" [emphasis added]. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993; Minneapolis:

great deal of Jewish cultural memory and tradition speak to the relationship between people and divine words in material form. Yet it is also my observation that we live at a moment in time when, for a vast number of Jews, this metaphysical relationship between the Jewish people and its physical texts seem to have no (overtly sacred) material outlet in their daily or even yearly lives. Thus, I here set out *to begin to propose a way* of answering the following question: What becomes of the relationship associated with sacred texts (in religious settings) for Jews who no longer live (overtly religious) lives that bring them into contact with sacred texts?³

This essay is organized as a case study, in which I begin to answer the larger question posed above through an analysis of Walter Benjamin's writings on books and physical literary production, alongside historical Jewish textual theology and practice. I argue below that Benjamin's writings offer the contemporary scholar a highly refined and thoughtful example of the way this metaphysical relationship—expressed through cultural memory in response to sacred texts—becomes transformed into a “secularized” (i.e. passively non-religious) sacredness toward literature in the form of books and the written word. This essay focuses on the genres of literature Benjamin identifies as important, looking into the written way he goes about describing books and the role of words, and connecting that with Jewish sacred practices and theological notions about the importance and use of texts in humanity's relationship to the metaphysical world.⁴

Fortress Press, 2005), 17-18. That *certain way* is what I argue here transfers from overtly sacred texts into the realm of the *perceived* secular.

³ In the question-and-answer session after a lecture at UNC Chapel Hill on March 21, 2011, Dan Diner described the work of the contemporary scholar of Judaism as asking the question: How do Jews and Judaism (in the post-Enlightenment West) transfer the wholeness of Jewish Law (and life) into a world of (scientific and rational) division? Diner's question is another angle from which to view the overall thesis I seek in this essay: What if we view the application of (formerly distinctly) sacred practice toward texts as a fragment of a formerly more-unified Judaism, and one that attempts to continue Jewish influence in a (post-) religious world?

⁴ It is important to note that the interpretation of Benjamin I am using in this paper, while not discounting or proclaiming inferior his Marxist-materialist expressions, is an explicitly theological-Judaic approach to his writings and methods. Any one scholar, let alone any one paper, is limited by his or her own material essence in both time and space. So I am here reading Benjamin from the sidelines of Gershom Scholem, fully conscious that Theodor Adorno and Berthold Brecht stand somewhat opposite myself, but focused, still, rather down and inward. Employing Thomas Tweed's (2006) important insight, this is the “positioned sighting” for who and where I am as writer and thinker. Thusly, in this paper I am not claiming a broad reinterpretation; I am only positing one reading, which will hopefully prove to support some new and interesting religious contextual influences on Benjamin, as well as demonstrate one of the avenues the cultural memory of material sacrality traverses as it permeates out of the holy places and into contemporary Western society. Finally, this is a text-based interpretation. I do not enter into the realm of social history or political action, choosing rather to stay grounded in the material textual traditions of Judaism and the textually oriented writings of Benjamin.

A cover-to-cover reading of Benjamin's works, however, would not provide the insights I am searching for, nor would it seem to illustrate a coherent program of thought or development. That is why it is important to note that I am not arguing here that Benjamin *thought* about this question, or was concerned with the uses of Jewish cultural memory and the relationship between the Jews and the text, in non-religious settings. Rather, in reading Benjamin, I find an example of the way that religious practices express themselves in non-religious contexts; in other words, I argue that what the historical Jew once did strictly in relation to the Torah, the (non-religious) contemporary Jew (or at least a Jew such as Benjamin) is now doing in relation to "secular" texts.

Like Courtney Bender in *The New Metaphysicals* (2010), this essay moves toward a blurring of the line between sacred and secular, between religious and non-religious. Perhaps, as some scholars have come to believe, there is no *true* secular at all, no social, cultural, or intellectual space entirely free of religious influence or religious meaning, no contemporary life that is fully independent of its sacred past, of the endless centuries of sacred meaning clinging desperately to every word and deed like a heavy shadow on the darkest night. Though my thinking here rests on a foundation written and theorized by Eliade, I set my argument within the world that many contemporary scholars observe, wherein there is no distinct line between sacred and profane, where the overlap and undercurrent of religious practice and secular space are in continual and fascinating flux. This small essay (without a desire to promote the polemic in either direction) suggests to me the possible truth to a claim for the impossibility of a *total-secular*.⁵

The first, briefer, section of this essay describes Jewish sacred practice around holy texts, specifically the role of the scribe and the rabbinical laws and commentaries concerning Torah as both written scroll and oral teaching. The second section analyzes the writings of Benjamin for his commentary on physical books and words, arguing for an interpretation of his written practices and ideas as secular incarnations of Jewish religious practices.

Jewish Textual Practices: The Torah and its Commentaries

For Judaism, the consummate hieraphany is the scroll of the Torah itself, the textual basis of the people, the chronicle of its history, the revelation and reflection of its God. "Just as God Himself does not change, so the Torah which is his eternal testimony to Israel cannot be changed."⁶ The Torah is double in its importance, is inextricably both word and parchment. The Torah as concept and being cannot distinguish between the meaning of its words and the material form of its words. "Throughout the generations, great care was taken to preserve the Torah exactly as it was given by Moses. The scribe is thus given the advice,

⁵ That is, if by *secular* we mean a secular lacking in any historical shadow of the sacred.

⁶ Aryeh Kaplan, *The Handbook of Jewish Thought* (New York: Maznaim Publishing Corporation, 1979), 125. This book is a compilation text, comprised entirely of short paragraphs paraphrased or quoted directly from ancient and medieval biblical and rabbinic sources. It is not an expression of Rabbi Kaplan's viewpoint, but a synthesis of two thousand years of Jewish thinking and argument.

'Be careful with your task, for it is sacred work; if you add or subtract a single letter, you will destroy everything.'⁷ To the rabbis⁸, the Torah is the fundamental unity of the meaning of the ink-drawn letters and the actual existence of the letters themselves.

But there is a complication in this notion of Torah as *solely* material. The rabbis actually define two Torahs, one *written* by Moses at Sinai and one *taught* to Moses at Sinai: the written Torah and the Oral Torah. Because of this duality, rabbinical commentators on the nature and wisdom of the written Torah have engaged in a multi-millennia long theological discussion over the precise meaning of the words contained in the written text. This discussion can be characterized as *dialectical*, because "movement [in its arguments] is generated specifically by the raising of contrary questions and theses." Indeed, "[w]hat characterizes the dialectical argument in rabbinic literature is its meandering, its moving hither and yon...[The argument] is always one, but it is never the same, and it flows across the surface of the document at hand."⁹ Thus, the *text* inspires and incites *discussion*, which is then written down as text, which, with the first set of text, is then interpreted through discussion to create more written text. As the circle of texts and discussions widens, the existence of the written Torah and the centrality of its precise words remain the central axis point around which all of rabbinical Judaism revolves: "Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance to the congregation of Jacob" (Deuteronomy 33:4).

This presence of the double Torahs, of the oral teaching and the material parchment, demands of rabbinical Judaism an expansive view of the meaning of sacred texts. Because half of the divine revelation remained unwritten at Sinai, such revelation therefore retains the possibility of appearing in manuscripts not directly included in the scroll of the Torah.¹⁰ And indeed, during the medieval period (five hundred years into the primacy of rabbinical Judaism), scripture as a theological concept became widespread in European culture, no less in Christianity than in Judaism:

The texts were not always written down, but they were invariably understood as if they were. An invisible scripture seemed to lurk behind everything one said. Meaning gravitated to this written type of reference, rather than to the sense of the spoken alone; and what had been expressed in gestures, rituals, and physical symbols became embedded in a series of interpretive structures involving grammars, notations, and lexica.¹¹

⁷ Ibid., 134.

⁸ The rabbis: a certain type of religious teacher who rose to prominence, and ultimately to complete authority, in Judaism in the centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple (AD 70).

⁹ Jacob Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 74.

¹⁰ For example, a direct revelation from God, taught to Moses at Sinai and repeated through the generations, could appear written *for the first time* in this or that rabbinic commentary.

¹¹ Brian Stock, *Listening for the Text* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1990), 20.

Is this not the dream of the classical rabbis? That the ink-drawn letters act as an invisible scaffold upon which all else in life is founded? For it is written: “a person who seeks to explore the true depths of the Torah finds himself on a road that has no end.”¹² The interpretations continue, but the text, the scroll, retains its haunting centrality. For the rabbis, this is the essential transformation: a world where *that which is seen* (black ink on beige parchment) creates a world where *every gesture*—or grammatical phrase, or physical action—traces its genealogy to the power of those original divine letters. In Judaism, the sacred lies hidden beneath the surface of the material world, the lurking connection between one’s present experience and form and the original divine revelation.

Walter Benjamin and the Sacred “Secular”

In the course of the last half century, Walter Benjamin’s *Ausgewählte Schriften* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966) was published in Germany and a translation of essays, entitled *Illuminations* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), was published in the United States. Together, these volumes allowed readers and historians renewed access to the thoughts and ideas of this important German-Jewish essayist and critic, with the years since witnessing the flowering of that interest in an ever expanding and evolving application of Benjamin’s writings across diverse disciplines and academic subfields. From the narrow definition of his writings as heterodox Marxist critique, many contemporary writers (with much credit due to Hannah Arendt’s article in *The New Yorker* (1966) and Gershom Scholem’s memoir *Walter Benjamin – die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (1975)) have attempted alternative approaches to Benjamin’s thought, pointing especially toward his musings on Judaism and his use of overt theological and messianic symbols and tropes. Although Marxist political philosophy came to dominate his worldview nearest the end of his life, many (myself included) continue to read him through alternative lenses.

To begin to understand Benjamin and his relationship to texts, we should meet him at his most exposed. In “Unpacking My Library”, he stands before boxes of his books, piles of collected volumes not yet placed onto the shelves of a new apartment in Berlin, and directly addresses the reader. “[W]hat I am really concerned with,” he writes us, “is [in] giving you some insight into the relationship of a book collector to his possessions...” A collector, he continues, has

a relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value...but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate. The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill... [F]or a true collector the whole background

¹² Kaplan, 144.

of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object.¹³

Fundamental for Benjamin is that a book and its collector are in a mutual and profound relationship, that they share in a responsibility for one another that exists only between them, and exists only for as long as the two are together. He is clear: this is not *functional*, not *utilitarian*. There is no obvious commercial or monetary gain. He is even unclear if there is social gain.¹⁴ Instead, this relationship is a form of symbiosis; it is *magical*, wherein the book itself actively shares in the metaphysical union, becomes something different than it would have been without the collector, just as the collector himself is transformed through the ownership of his book.

If, perhaps, we reflect these words as if in a mirror, the *collector* and the *collected* become the *Jewish people* and its *Torah*. A sacred text is only important insofar as it both offers and bears meaning for each generation of its loving possessors. In Judaism, the Torah is not a book that, like a baptismal font, must only *contain* the elements of sacredness within it. The radical holiness of Torah is that it actually imbibes the sacredness, making it as if its very fiber of being were composed of the divine specter. The scroll of the Torah, the ink of its Hebrew letters, is the medium and the magic; the vessel itself actively participates in the relationship with the person.¹⁵ From the rabbinic perspective, such is the fundamental bond: the reader exists uniquely for the *material* text being read; each is nothing without the other.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library," *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968; New York: Schocken Books, 2007) 59-60, 60.

¹⁴ I am inclined to think that there is not, for the rabbis vocally prohibit the flagrant expression of superior scriptural knowledge.

¹⁵ Gershom Scholem describes this growing realization on Benjamin's part. During a conversation in 1927, Benjamin specified "his wish to approach the great texts of Jewish literature through the medium of the Hebrew language not as a philologist but as a metaphysician... He had realized that his ideas on the philosophy of language could not find their focus in the German and French literatures accessible to him. He said that his friendship with me had contributed to the increasing realization that his focal point would lie for him in an occupation with the Hebrew language and literature... He said that it was precisely these things [his translations and criticism of European literature] that had made him ever more clearly conscious of his Jewish identity... True, he knew little about the Jewish intellectual world, but what he did know of it had appealed to him profoundly: the Bible, fragments of rabbinic literature that he had become familiar with, and [contemporary Jewish] thinkers... He, too, had in his view the religious world of Judaism as a central subject of his own world." Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), 137-8.

Even if Benjamin never made far strides in learning Hebrew, his consciousness of the language and its meaning for Jewish culture is impossible to dispute.

Benjamin writes that the book is *the scene, the stage*.¹⁶ But what is a play? A play is the most intimate of dramatic performances, an exhortation on the part of the actors toward their audience that *relationship* itself is something real, that this condensed moment of time—given as mimetic reproduction of *real* life—is indeed a reality in itself that must be taken seriously. All of life is merely fodder for the playwright; all the world and all memory are but merely a pedestal for the majesty of the book. To Benjamin, such an object collected is separated, is individualized. It is a scene, an exquisite moment. The space between the collector and his collected is the stage, the platform upon which the relationship is built in metaphysical space. It is the table upon which the Torah scroll is read.

Benjamin writes: the collector *studies and loves* his books. That is, the collector searches endlessly for the metaphysical possibility that the two are really one, pursues the impossible so that he might solidify the sacred bond. “[W]hat profoundly fascinated Benjamin from the beginning was never an idea, it was always a phenomenon.”¹⁷ The phenomenon of the search? Remember *the magic circle*. Perhaps he means the circle of light from a single flickering candle on the longest of dark nights. The light is the stage. The collection is the actor. The light is the circle that separates the knowledge within from everything beyond, that keeps the reader and the text safe, together, that isolates them, allows them the space to grow intimate. This is the divine right of kings, and an echo of the sacred book. It is *the final thrill*, an end in itself, the isolated circle that exists around the lone person and the lone book, the purity of that moment where between the page and the eye something *true* exists.

Again, a distant echo of the ancient rabbis, who enjoined the Jews: “Be diligent in the study of Torah,”¹⁸ for on account of this will you inherit your place in the World to Come.¹⁹ Just as in scripture, Benjamin values *inheritance* as a superior way of acquiring a book collection. “For a collector’s attitude toward his possessions stems from an owner’s feeling of responsibility toward his property. Thus it is, in the highest sense, the attitude of an heir, and the most distinguished trait of a collection will always be its transmissibility.”²⁰ The imagined eternity of a collection, the longed-for path that secures the continuity from this moment to the next, is inextricably part of the metaphysical relationship between collector

¹⁶ Benjamin undoubtedly used these words purposefully, for he was intimately familiar with the genre of plays from writing his study *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928).

¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, “Introduction,” *Illuminations*, 12.

¹⁸ Rabbi Elazar in Mishna *Pirke Avot*.

¹⁹ “We know that the Jews were prohibited from inquiring into the future: the Torah and the prayers instructed them in remembrance... This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future became homogeneous, empty time. For every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter.” Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Harry Zohn (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003; Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 397.

²⁰ Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library,” *Illuminations*, 66.

and collected. Just as a book is a fragment of a time before now, so too it will remember *this now* as it travels beyond its current collector into a *future now* relationship. Though our lives are fleeting, they do make ripples. "The [good] historian... grasps the constellation into which his own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one. Thus, he establishes a conception of the present as now-time shot through with splinters of messianic time."²¹ The Torah scroll is only important if it has a future generation to inherit it. Its ink is refreshed and the words re-written by each generation, but they are not considered to be new. Instead, they remain ever as remnants of the ancients, *splinters* of eternity. Recall one of the oft-repeated paragraphs in Judaism, from the daily prayer the *Shema*: "Therefore impress these My words upon your very heart...and teach them to your children...to the end that you and your child may endure..." (Deuteronomy 11:18-19).²²

Children. Children are the key – in Judaism as in Benjamin's philosophy. Though he only had one child (Stefan), Benjamin loved children and children's books, seeing in both a reflection of a pre-fractured world, a seamless existence between form and meaning reminiscent of ancient times. "Walter Benjamin knew that the break in tradition and the loss of authority which occurred in his lifetime were irreparable, and he concluded that he had to discover new ways of dealing with the past."²³ Part of that discovery was by looking into the world of children, whose encounters with present existence (as if by enchantment) failed to notice the dark chasms between memory and experience, between material form and content. The child's imagination, Benjamin observed, has the power to form relationships with times long since over, with characters and stories that for adults seem impossibly remote. In Judaism it might be said: only the child can truly stand as Sinai.

Benjamin wrote:

In the pictures in children's books, the object and the great autonomy of the graphic medium (woodcut or engraving) ensures that...here the imagination may and even must be allowed to roam free... Children's books do not serve to introduce their readers directly into the world of objects, animals, and people, into so-called life. Rather, if anything remotely similar to the Platonic anamnesis

²¹ Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Selected Writings, Volume 4*, 397.

²² Gershom Scholem recalls: "In those years – between 1915 and at least 1927 – the religious sphere assumed a central importance for Benjamin that was utterly removed from fundamental doubt. At its center was the concept of *Lehre* [teaching], which for him included the philosophical realm but definitely transcended it. In his early writings he reverted repeatedly to this concept, which he interpreted in the sense of the original meaning of the Hebrew *torah* as 'instruction,' instruction not only about the true condition and way of man in the world but also about the transcausal connection of things and their rootedness in God." Scholem, 55-6.

²³ Arendt, 38.

actually exists, it would take place in the lives of children, for whom picture books are paradise.²⁴

Anamnesis: “the remembering of things from a supposedly previous existence.”²⁵ It is not, as Benjamin says, that books are about introduction to the world of objects, to the fractures of a broken reality, to the harsh and cutting separateness that one human feels in the *so-called life* that is the present world. No. Rather, the child intrinsically grasps after a synthesis of memory and being, a bond with the past born solely out of some inner knowledge and light of the connection between all things, a unity with history that *is* the Torah scroll, the child’s imagination. In the definition of anamnesis it is the *supposedly* that contains the pearl of truth. The child’s relationship with the memories presented in picture books is not one of direct material experience. Indeed, Benjamin’s insight is that remembrance is not about the places one has been but about what is contained unknown in the actual *fabric* of the human mind, the generational experience of one’s people imprinted into the very fibers of existence. This is the warp and weft of the society’s past, wherein all of history is itself accessible for those who know how to live it in the present; the child’s memories are only *supposedly* of a previous existence. And indeed, to the end of his life Benjamin was true to this belief: “The chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accord with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history.”²⁶ For Benjamin, children remind us that the present world does not exist isolated and alone in the ocean of time and history. Likewise for the rabbis in Judaism, whose perfect chronicler is the Torah, blind to the major and minor, whose words form the divine Aeolian harp: made through the breath of God, its music balances the world eternally.

It is on the isolated and the alone, the divided and the lost, that Benjamin writes at his most impassioned. Benjamin saw in his world an alienation between the material and the metaphysical, a darkness in the relationship between humanity and the physical creations that contain the meaning of humanity’s existence.²⁷ But he also looked to the book as a source of unity and purity in cohesion, as an object that, singled out, has the capacity to endure in unbroken connection with its past, whose relationship to space and time is unalienable. Recalling his first interactions with books, Benjamin writes:

The world that revealed itself in the book and the book itself were never, at any price, to be divided. So with each book its content, too,

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Notes for a Study of the Beauty of Colored Illustrations in Children’s Books”, *Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996; Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 264.

²⁵ *The New Oxford American Dictionary*, Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁶ Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” *Selected Writings, Volume 4*, 390.

²⁷ A hundred years later, Benjamin may have looked to String Theory for his metaphor: that Man has become removed from the impossibly small vibrations that bind every action and that remember all of history in their invisible reality.

its world, was palpably there, at hand. But, equally, this content and world transfigured every part of the book. They burned within it, blazed from it; located not merely in its binding or its pictures, they were enshrined in chapter headings and opening letters, paragraphs and columns. You did not read books through; you dwelt, abided between their lines...²⁸

The modern e-readers, the Kindle, the Nook—these are the anti-child, or the empty-sacred. They disregard form and relationship for content, they assume that a book is the sum of its sentences, that books can be differentiated by the stories they tell or the information they convey. Not only do all books feel the same on these machines, they also appear the same: the typeface is standardized, the grey-to-grey scaling of the pages remains constant *within* books and *across* books. Without paper or ink there is nothing to age, nothing to demonstrate use; there is no spine to crease, no edges to run across one's forefinger. And there are no bookplates, no names in the cover, no signs of previous ownership or use, no marginalia—no one has ever lived in these pages, has ever held this set of words in his hand before. With these books, one is utterly alone.

These *magisterial* e-readers, which attempt to enclose within their plastic shells all the words that have ever existed, have painfully and inorganically separated the material form from its content, have confused through medieval-like sorcery the difference between *endless* words and *eternal* words. These readers are the anti-Benjamin, and the anti-sacred. They are the opposite of Benjamin's children, who implicitly comprehend the unity between form and content. Children "do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together...materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship."²⁹ I am reminded of a passage in Italo Calvino:

I could only question the philosophers. I entered the great library, I became lost among shelves collapsing under the vellum bindings, I followed the alphabetical order of vanished alphabets, up and down halls, stairs, bridges. In the most remote papyrus cabinet, in a cloud of smoke, the dazed eyes of an adolescent appeared to me, as he lay on a mat, his lips glued to an opium pipe.

"Where is the sage?"

The smoker pointed out of the window. It was a garden with children's games: ninepins, a swing, a top. The philosopher was seated on the lawn. He said, "Signs form a language, but not the one you think you know."³⁰

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1977), 55.

²⁹ Benjamin, "'Old Forgotten Children's Books,'" *Selected Writings, Volume 1*, 408.

³⁰ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 47-8.

Though the philosopher appears here to be the focus of the narrator's searching, both the *dazed eyes of the adolescent* and the *children's games* convey the true message of the sage's final words—that the language of meaning (i.e. the content of what we search for) is *not the one you think you know*. Neither the smoking adolescent nor the games are made of words at all. They exist *among* the words, the vellum, but they are not *in* the words. So a device that gives only the words and not the form could be altogether failing to convey any meaning at all, or at least the meaning that bears value for the one who searches for it.

The paradox, of course, is that for us to recognize the adolescent and the games in Calvino's story he must tell them through words, in a language that we (nominally) understand. So, let us look again at Calvino's narrative: the vellum books, the papyrus cabinet. These are not about the words at all, but about their material essence, their existence in the world external to their content and literary meaning. Calvino's story is as much about the adult's remembrance of Benjamin-like childhood as anything else, that in the search for the philosopher, who is all words, the narrator finds the reality of existence, which is in physical being. Notice how the philosopher lacks almost all description. He sits on the lawn, but that is equally as much about the lawn as the philosopher; the philosopher is an indentation on the earth. The adolescent has form, glazed eyes, lips glued to a pipe. Which means that he also has content, has memories, has meaning. The adolescent lies on a mat, something between him and the earth—but what? Experience. History. Civilization itself resides in that mat. And the adolescent is as much part of it as anything, for in Calvino's words he is indistinguishable from it—without the mat the adolescent would be someone else. Such is his content and his form. Such is his meaning, eternally.

This is also the cultural tradition, the relationship, of the Jews with the Torah. For the rabbis, the Torah is the living testament of history; the Torah is the testament of a living Judaism. Such a paradigmatic confluence of content and form exists in the very nature of the scroll itself, the material in which the fibers of history rest in their weariness and metaphysical importance. Calvino's vellum and papyrus. In rabbinical thought, the *process* through which Jews interact with this sacred text, translated into the actions of a living existence, is the perpetual wrestle (the literal meaning of *Israel*) against the fragmentation and disillusion that follows from an alienation of form and content. Under rabbinical leadership, Judaism understood this, for it never converted the scroll of the Torah into the medieval codex. The maintenance of form was a signal of content, but not content's entirety.

In what I consider a moment of misinterpretation, Gershom Scholem reveals to us Benjamin's deep intuitive sense for the significance of form in books.

Benjamin was not only a great metaphysician but also a great bibliophile. The enthusiasm with which he was capable of discussing bindings, paper, and typefaces in those years [1918-1919] frequently got on my nerves... I saw an element of decadence in it. I made this note about it: '...I deny that metaphysically legitimate

insights can arise from this way of evaluating books on the basis of their binding and paper.³¹

Perhaps Scholem's mistake should be attributed to his study of Kabbalah, a deeply immaterial tradition, often despising of the physical and materially sensual in an attempt to gain the metaphysical sensation of nearness to the great invisible God. What Scholem interprets as decadence is actually the recognition of material sacredness, what Eliade called *hierophany*. Decadence implies shallowness, an interest simply in appearance and social prestige. Benjamin's bibliophilia seems instead to emerge from someplace far deeper, at a remove from the shattered reality of appearance, closer to the humble darkness of the sacred Jewish past envisioned by the rabbis. Books, for Benjamin, reconnect contemporary persons to an historically extant fabric that exists across time, but which is found only in physical manifestation. Benjamin's insights are perhaps the *most* metaphysical in relation to books, because they deny the isolation inherent in evaluating books solely on content, because they reconnect the lost strands of what Benjamin calls *antiquity*: "If one had to expound the teachings of antiquity with utmost brevity while standing on one leg, as did Hillel of the Jews, it could only be in this sentence: 'They alone shall possess the earth who live from the powers of the cosmos.' Nothing distinguishes the ancient from the modern man so much as the former's absorption in a cosmic experience scarcely known to later periods."³² A cosmic experience embedded in the material forms that survives with us today: the child's imagination; the scroll of the Torah.

Following Scholem's comment and my subsequent reinterpretation, let us examine another passage from Benjamin:

The Latin word *textum* means 'web.' No one's text is more tightly woven than Marcel Proust's; to him nothing was tight or durable enough. From his publisher Gallimard we know that Proust's proofreading habits were the despair of the typesetters. The galleys always went back covered with marginal notes, but not a single misprint had been corrected; all available space had been used for fresh text. Thus the laws of remembrance were operative even within the confines of the work. For an experience even is finite – at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it.³³

Let us note Benjamin's words: *laws of remembrance, experience, finite, remembered event, infinite*. Is it not too far a stretch to liken Benjamin's notice of Proust's habits as similar to that of the Talmud and the rabbis who constructed it? That every available space should be taken up with text, commenting and piling one word upon another, regarding the memory and past of the previous words only

³¹ Scholem, 71.

³² Benjamin, "One-Way Street," *Selected Writings, Volume 1*, 486.

³³ Benjamin, "Image of Proust," *Illuminations*, 202.

insofar as they were still alive in the present. We do not know all the scribal errors that appeared over the centuries in this or that edition of the Talmud; but we know that the rabbis writing after those errors did not regard the errors as blemishes or faults. Rather, they bound the text even closer into itself through their commentaries on the errors, making the text—using Benjamin’s word—*tighter*, remembering within remembering. This is how the rabbis made the Talmud an *infinite* document; how they wound the words so tightly that it embraced the whole world, even the future. For, as Benjamin writes, *an experienced event is finite*, so the task is not to let the moment overtake the remembrance, for the shadow of an evening’s end to be pushed backward by a perpetual morning.

We must also remember that in a time before the printing press, when all literature was hand-copied, this form of additional comment to texts would not have been seen as disrespectful. Today, to write in a book of Torah or Talmud is perhaps profane. In the classical and medieval periods, it was how conversation took place. One talks to the ancients as if they were one’s contemporaries, just as Proust speaks to himself through the endless looping of additions to proof sheets.

Another passage:

There is yet another sense in which memory issues strict weaving regulations. Only the *actus purus* [absolute perfection] of recollection itself, not the author or the plot, constitutes the unity of the text. One may even say that the intermittence of author and plot is only the reverse of the continuum of memory, the pattern on the back side of the tapestry. This is what Proust meant, and this is how he must be understood, when he said that he would prefer to see his entire work printed in one volume in two columns and without any paragraphs.³⁴

Is it not again too far a stretch to say that this single volume with the double columns is the Torah scroll, the book that contains—with few breaks and no headings or notations—the entire corpus of God’s direct word in the Jewish tradition? Is the echo for such a comparison too faint? I do not think that it is, because the scroll itself is not the same scroll, the letters themselves are not the same letters: the vellum is bright and the ink is dark, rewritten again and again, refreshed by scribes or copied out anew. To the rabbis, the Torah scroll is the backside of the tapestry, the side where author and plot find less meaning than the act of recollection itself, which is the act that keeps the text alive and the people who read it together. Look at the vellum of the scroll from the back and you see the faint trace of black letters, the ghost of stories long-since told, of events long-since over. Neither the author nor the plot, note Benjamin, contain the unity of recollection, the thread that brings meaning into the world. Like the baptismal font, they are lacking sacredness *in themselves*. Rather this backside is

³⁴ Ibid., 202-3.

the side of memory itself. Absolute perfection is achieved through recollection alone: the phrase *actus purus* is a scholastic term, employed by Saint Thomas Aquinas in reference to God—the perfection among imperfections; the origin of history. The Torah, likewise, has not an author but a revealer: God; in rabbinic Judaism, the time-driven narrative plot barely warrants a theology.³⁵

The Torah and the Talmud thus find echoes in Benjamin's discussion of Proust because they are the archetypal sacred books in Judaism, the bearers of metaphysical meaning and the central axis around which the Jewish world revolves. In Benjamin, Torah and Talmud are the ancestors of the modern book, which in the fractures of modernity functions as the bridge over the narrow pass, the elegantly divine frame, the Aeolian harp: indeed, the book is the delicate crystalline pedestal upon which the whole world is balanced.

Conclusion

I began this essay with a discussion of Eliade's *hierophanies*, manifestations of sacredness that find outlet in the material forms of human experience. I have attempted to outline above the application of an hermeneutical approach to contemporary secular society, using the textual analysis of one philosopher in a case-study form similar to foundational psychological methods of earlier generations. At its most anthropological, I am here continuing the scholarly process of uncovering the sacred undertones of—and historical religion's interaction with—contemporary material form.

It seems to me that in the modern world, rather than to say that “modern man” is without the sacred, lacking the element of *Homo religiosus* credited to his ancestors, we must instead speak of history's *sacred shadow* in the present tense. This sacred shadow of being, which in Judaism as in Benjamin is the metaphysical implication of all material form, therefore invalidates the notion of a *pure secularism*. It allows space for such secularism in the *present*, but only if one limits one's sights to the *absolute* present, placing blinders around one's eyes toward the metaphysical realm in which all shadows eventually merge. Benjamin does not need to realize that he is still carrying this Jewish sacred memory, the shadow of the Torah, for it to be apparent in his work. Rather, his relationship to books, to collecting as memory and reflection, to the importance of binding and type on textual meaning itself, strongly resembles *secular* manifestations of the archetypal Jewish *sacred* relationship. Remembrance within remembrance, according to Proust's galley proofs, is forever building something forward; moving the world ahead; creating the new enveloped in the old as if by the sea.

³⁵ The Rabbis note that the Torah has no place of beginning or of end. God consulted the Torah in the creation of the world: “The architect moreover does not build it out of his head, but employs plans and diagrams to know how to arrange the chambers and wicket doors. Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, *In the beginning God created* (I, 1), *Beginning* referring to the Torah, as in the verse, *The Lord made me as the beginning of His way* (Prov. VIII, 22).” (I. Epstein, ed., *Genesis Rabbah*, Chapter 1, “Bereshith,” (London: Soncino Press, 1961), 1.

In this process, I began by asking: what has become of the cultural memory, the relationship, Judaism formed over millennia with its texts for those who are no longer traditionally religious? I have here answered: the relationship has become the sacred shadow, present to the materially-perceptive, though extant only as far as the individual Jew wishes to see it, or hidden if that is likewise the desire. If we are to believe Benjamin—that the good chronicler realizes that history never vanishes—then that eternal trail of Jewish sacredness, which, like a comet, streaks away behind every human action, must be equally as real and as important as the action which it follows.

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