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Midrash, Testimony, and the Angel of Interpretation: Geoffrey Hartman in Jewish Studies

THE FIELD OF JEWISH STUDIES has witnessed many types of growth over the past three or four decades. The sheer number of scholars, the range of methodological approaches, the crowded map of institutions with well-developed programs—all attest to the movement of Jewish studies from the periphery to the center of academic life in North America. What was so desperately desired in Europe before the Holocaust—the integration of Jewish studies into the university—has been fully achieved here. Jewish studies is now an accepted fact of life and standard fare in the American academy.

Another important sign of the field's growth, in qualitative terms, is its attractiveness to practitioners of other disciplines: literary scholars, historians, philosophers, and sociologists among others. The sources of attraction vary from the interpretive dynamism of the Jewish textual tradition to the status of Jews as a model diaspora people possessed of great skills of cultural adaptation. The resulting interest has allowed for the kind of ongoing fertilization of the field that bears resemblance to Franz Rosenzweig's agenda for his Frankfurt *Lehrhaus*, an institution in which he sought to attract nonspecialists whose "new thinking" (*neues Denken*) could help introduce a renaissance of Jewish learning.

Among those who have brought knowledge and methods derived from outside of the field of Jewish studies, Geoffrey Hartman deserves pride of place. Not only did he play an important institutional role in the development of Jewish studies at Yale University. Along with his fellow Yale colleagues Harold Bloom and Robert Cover, he crossed the border from his primary academic specialization to enter the precincts of Jewish studies. A native of Germany who fled in 1939 as a child on the *Kindertransport*, Hartman came to the United States in 1945, where he took up the study of comparative literature. After receiving his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Yale in 1953, then serving in the US Army for two years,

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he joined the faculty at that institution in 1955 and developed over the course of his career into one of the most distinguished literary critics in the United States. Hartman gained renown both as a penetrating reader of poetry, especially the Romantics (and Wordsworth, in particular), and as a literary theorist who contributed to the Yale School of Deconstruction, of which Paul de Man was the most important figure.

Coming from the intersecting worlds of literature and literary theory, Hartman has played an important role in two distinct subfields of Jewish studies for at least thirty years: Holocaust studies and Jewish literary studies. In the former case, Hartman was centrally involved in the Fortunoff Video Archive of Video Testimony at Yale, assuming the position of project director in 1982. Hartman not only solicited testimony from survivors but studied and theorized testimony, analyzing its potential and limitations with the tools of an exceptionally sophisticated literary critic. In the latter case, Hartman evinced a deep interest in the genre and practice of midrash, reveling in what he called, in a 1986 volume, *Midrash and Literature*, “a variety of ‘open’ modes of interpretation, a life in literature or in scripture that is experienced in the shuttle space between the interpreter and the text.” Marked by a rare combination of qualities—vast erudition, a lyrically poetic sensibility, penetrating analytical acuity, and a sincere recognition of the limits of his own knowledge—Hartman has come from the periphery and enriched Jewish studies.

This issue’s forum acknowledges the importance of Geoffrey Hartman’s border crossing, both as an act of intellectual enrichment and as a model of Rosenzweigian *neues Denken*. The three essays here offer probing insights into different aspects of Hartman’s intellectual formation, sensibility, and judgment. At once reverential and critical, they constitute an invitation to further inquiry into the work of one of the great literary scholars of our time.

The first essay in the forum, Vivian Liska’s “Winged Words and Wounded Voices,” sheds light on the important relationship between Hartman’s work on Holocaust testimony and his explorations of midrash. While seemingly disconnected from one another, Liska suggests that Hartman’s interest in each is linked by an animating tension—between the unintelligibility of the Absolute and the human quest to seek intelligibility—that “reveals his idea of Judaism and its relation to literature and commentary.” In fact, Liska points to an array of related tensions in Hartman’s writing—testimony and trauma, dread and exultation, speech and discourse, heavenly and earthly, and intimacy and distance. Rather than succumb to the paralysis of unknowability in the face of the Absolute or in the shadow of the Shoah, Hartman seeks to understand midrash and

testimony, Liska argues, as mediating agents that allow for a communicability that resists “dehumanizing silence.” Liska is attentive to key differences between the two genres in Hartman’s work, though she pivots her analysis around the singular figure of the angel, interceding between heaven and earth through words at once “winged” and “wounded.”

Ortwin de Graef and Pieter Vermeulen, meanwhile, begin their essay by reflecting on the idea of “mediation” in Hartman’s work. They note that Hartman, in his own words, “find[s] it impossible to empty ‘mediation’ of a religious overtone,” but, at the same time, that very inability frustrates him greatly, especially given his own disconnect from the emotional charge of religious ritual. De Graef and Vermeulen read Hartman’s frustration against the backdrop of the thought of his great teacher at Yale, Erich Auerbach. Auerbach was fascinated by the concept of Incarnation, which served for him both as “the representation of reality” and the “collapsing (of) the God-thing.” For Auerbach, the Incarnation commenced a process of “standardization” (we may read secularization) according to which “the human is finally thought (or written) as thought only by the human,” without any pretense of divine presence or disruption. While this development did not disturb Auerbach the teacher, it unnerved and frustrated Hartman the student, who sought to hold on to something beyond the realm of human comprehension—“something intangible escaping the dissolution of individuated existence into common humanity.” Emblematic of the division between student and teacher was their divergent paths in reading Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, which de Graef and Vermeulen see as the climax of the “auto-incarnation of the human.” Auerbach demonstrated a “remarkable lack of frustration” at this development, whereas Hartman could not shake off his unease. It is this very unease, the authors assert, that animate “the rustling of religion in Hartman’s writings.”

The final essay in the forum, Michal Ben-Naftali’s “A Dis-Identity Card,” shifts our attention from Geoffrey Hartman’s specific theoretical interests in midrash and survivor testimony to his participation in an intellectual cause célèbre of international scope in which he played a role: the revelations of the pro-German writings in wartime Belgium of a young Paul de Man, his Yale colleague and friend. (An important link to Ben-Naftali’s essay is that it was Ortwin de Graef who in 1987 discovered the short pro-German pieces that de Man wrote for the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir*.) Many regarded the one hundred seventy articles excavated not only as evidence of an ineradicable moral taint on de Man. They also came to see Deconstruction itself, with which de Man was unmistakably associated, as infected by that taint—indeed, as the embodiment of

a dangerous and amoral nihilism. Hartman, for his part, sought to explain de Man's writings, insisting in a 1988 article that "to contextualize is not to condone."

In her rereading of the affair twenty-five years later, Ben-Naftali maintains that Hartman's article engages the question not only of de Man's guilt or innocence but of the later observer's ability or right to link de Man's actions to an intellectual project such as Deconstruction. This does not entail an abdication of responsibility. Ben-Naftali insists that Hartman, unlike Jacques Derrida, another Jewish colleague of de Man's who endeavored to explain his fellow Deconstructionist, engaged in a form of (Freudian) mourning for his late friend's deeds that allowed for the assignment of moral responsibility. At the end of her essay, Ben-Naftali pushes beyond Hartman's own ambivalence about the literary critic as judge in arguing that Deconstruction does not point up "the moral limits of fiction" but productively challenges the distinction between "moral inquiry and literary or textual discussion" to the point that a serious moral discussion can be possible.

As a whole, these essays reveal the fecundity of Geoffrey Hartman's thought, as well as the salutary effects of his border crossing from literary studies to Jewish studies. They also make clear the substantial stakes at play in Hartman's work. Whether engaging the human aim to give voice to the ineffable, the survivor's attempt to summon forth that which cannot be replicated, or the integrity of a theoretical system brought to life by a compromised actor, Hartman exemplifies the very porousness of the boundary between the intellectual and the ethical. It is therefore fitting that he offers an essay at the conclusion of the forum, "Theology and Imagination," that is an extended gloss on Levinas's moral philosophy, with which he evinces considerable sympathy, while holding on to the reserve that sharpens his critical lens and yet revives his gnawing, frustrating, and regenerative agnosticism.

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