

The Sea Resists: Midrash and the (Psycho)Dynamics of Intertextuality

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The text, however, as we possess it today, will tell us enough about its own vicissitudes. Two mutually opposed treatments have left their traces on it. On the one hand it has been subjected to revisions which have falsified it in the sense of their secret aims, have mutilated it and amplified it and have even changed it into its reverse; on the other hand a solicitous piety has presided over it and has sought to preserve everything as it was, no matter whether it was consistent or contradicted itself. Thus almost everywhere noticeable gaps, disturbing repetitions and obvious contradictions have come about—indications which reveal things to us which it was not intended to communicate. . . . the difficulty is not in perpetrating the deed, but in getting rid of its traces. We might lend the word *Entstellung* [distortion] the double meaning to which it has a claim but of which today it makes no use. It should mean not only “to change the appearance

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of something” but also “to put something in another place, to displace.” Accordingly, in many instances of textual distortion, we may nevertheless count upon finding what has been suppressed and disavowed hidden away somewhere else, though changed and torn from its context. Only it will not always be easy to recognize it. (Freud 1985: 283–84)

As pointed out in an important recent paper by Christopher Johnson (1988), Freud is here drawing a powerful analogy between textwork and dreamwork. In typical nineteenth-century fashion he projects an “original” pure text which has been distorted through the conscious efforts of repressive scribes. In the present climate of thought, I find it hard to imagine this originary purity of the text (except as an article of religious faith), but Freud’s remarks are, nevertheless, very suggestive. If we transpose (displace) them, as Johnson does (and, as he claims, Kristeva does), from the realm of textual transmission to that of textual production, we arrive at intertextuality, as the traces within the text, the bumps on its surface, which mark the suppressions, conflicts, and transformations of earlier signifying practices of which it is the site.

Intertextuality is, in a sense, the way that history, understood as cultural and ideological change and conflict, records itself within textuality. As the text is the transformation of a signifying system and a signifying practice, it embodies the more or less untransformed detritus of the previous system. These fragments of the previous system and the fissures they create on the surface of the text reveal conflictual dynamics which led to the present textual system. Now it is, I would claim, precisely these gaps in the text which the midrash reads (see Boyarin 1986), and the rabbis very early drew the connection between dream interpretation and the hermeneutics of the Torah (see the classic discussion of this matter, Lieberman 1950: 70–78). It is perhaps not altogether unexpected, then, to find the psychodynamic model a useful one for the understanding of some aspects of midrash and its relation to the biblical text. The Torah itself, even as it is generically identified as God’s work, nevertheless indicates its own belatedness with respect to earlier texts: “Therefore it says in the Book of the Wars of the Lord ‘and Waheb in Sufa and the Rivers of Arnon’” (Numbers 21:14). Other markers of the presence of earlier signifying systems within the biblical text are less explicit but nevertheless discernible in the “noticeable gaps, disturbing repetitions and obvious contradictions” to which Freud referred. Indeed, our present reading practice will refigure as intertextuality all those fissures in the Torah which diachronic scholarship figures as evidence for sources (see also Hartman

1986: 11 for a similar perspective and a very powerful reading of the story of Jacob and the angel). These intimations of intertextuality are part of what gives the Bible its continuing power to fascinate, and the rabbis could not fail to mark and interpret them in the midrashwork. In analyzing a text from the *Mekilta*, I will try to show that it constitutes an interpretation of these intertextual fragments of earlier repressed but not utterly expunged cultural practice. The claim that I wish to make about this midrash is that it enacts in very important ways the conflict in Jewish culture between its pagan past and its monotheistic present. Putting this in psychic terms, the midrash makes manifest the repressed mythic material in the Bible's "textual subconscious." More specifically, much of the Bible openly records the conflict in its culture between paganism as the old religion of the people and the new religion of the Torah and the prophets. The remnants of that conflict, and indeed the remnants of the suppressed culture, are to be found in the allusions which the Bible makes, willingly and willy-nilly, to the content and images of the earlier mythology. One of the important dynamics of midrash as reading is that it makes manifest the hidden dimensions of that mythic intertext by gathering together these fragments of allusion and figurative language and reinscribing them into narratives.

This idea is not entirely new. Samuel Loewenstamm (1987: 116) has already pointed to an example of this process in the very text we are studying here, the *Mekilta*:

As for the wind [which drove back the waters of the Red Sea], the midrash has already focused on it very precisely and remarked that it is not accidental that God here acted by means of an *East Wind*, but indeed this wind is counted as one of the traditional weapons of God. [The midrash] cited evidence for this in its interpretation of Exodus 14:21 from the verses: "With the East Wind I will scatter them before the enemy" [Jeremiah 18:17]; "With the East Wind You have broken the ships of Tarshish" [Psalms 48:8]; from the verse in Hoshea [13:15], which dubs the East Wind, the Wind of the Lord"; and from the verse in Isaiah [27:8] about the War of the Lord, "With His strong wind, on the day of the East Wind." . . . It is clear that the East Wind was singled out from all the winds in the mythological tradition of Israel.¹

1. U. Cassuto makes a somewhat similar argument. After arguing that there was an ancient Israelite epic of the battle between God and the sea, and that it was lost at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah owing to theological antagonism, he writes:

It was, in truth, lost, but not entirely. The basic story it related, which was widely known among the people, was not completely forgotten. The poetic version was no longer extant, but the knowledge of its content did not become extinct. This tradition continued to live in the people's memory, and was given renewed literary expression in rabbinic teaching. The fears that aroused the antagonism of the Torah to

As Loewenstamm has acutely realized, the *Mekilta* (Lauterbach 1961 [1935]: 229), by gathering all of these verses into a paradigm (under the rubric, “And you also find that God punished the generation of the flood and the people of Sodom, only by means of the East Wind. . . . And you will also find in the case of the People of the Tower . . .”), has revealed that which perhaps the biblical authors sought to hide, the actual mythic background of the description of the East Wind as a weapon of God. In the rest of this essay I would like to analyze a much more complex text from the same midrash which thematizes both this mythological intertext and the conflict with it:

And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea (Exodus 14:21).

The Sea began to *resist* him. Moses said, “In the Name of the Holiness,” but it did not yield. The Holiness, Blessed be He, revealed Himself; the Sea began to flee, as it says, “The Sea saw and fled” (Psalms 114:3).

Its *mashal*; to what is the matter similar? To a king of flesh and blood, who had two gardens, one inside the other. He sold the inner one, and the purchaser came to enter, but the guard did not allow him. He said to him, “In the name of the king,” but he did not yield. He showed him the signet, but he did not yield until the king came. Once the king came, the guard began to flee. He said, “All day long I have been speaking to you in the name of the king and you did not yield. Now, why are you fleeing?” He said, “Not from you am I fleeing, but from the king am I fleeing.”

Similarly, Moses came and stood at the sea. He said to him, “In the name of the Holiness,” and it did not yield. He showed him the rod, and it did not yield, until the Holiness, Blessed be He, revealed Himself in His glory. The sea began to flee, as it is said, “The Sea saw and fled” (Psalms 114:3). Moses said to him, “All day long I have been speaking to you in the name of the Holiness, Blessed be He, and you did not submit. Now, ‘what has happened to you, O Sea, that you flee?’” (Psalms 114:5). He answered him, “Not from before you am I fleeing, son of Amram, but ‘from before the

legends of this nature, no longer existed in the days of the Talmudic Rabbis, since the danger of idolatry had then already passed. Hence the Sages did not refrain from incorporating the accepted folk tradition in their treasury of legend. (Cassuto 1975: 102)

Cassuto deserves all the credit for having discovered the fragments of the Israelite epic in the biblical text, but his claim that the material was actually preserved in the folk tradition until rabbinical times seems both naive and unnecessary to me. Loewenstamm’s advance over Cassuto’s original formulation with regard to the midrash is in his perception that the rabbis could have indeed reconstructed and revived the mythic material from their close reading of the Bible itself. What I am trying to do here, which goes beyond both of them, is to inscribe this particular instance in a theory of cultural dynamics in which repression and the return of the repressed as manifested in the intertextuality of all literature is emblematic of culture in general, making possible a dialectical dynamic in cultural history.

Master, tremble Earth [progenitor of the Earth],² from before the God of Jacob'” (Psalms 114:7–8).

This midrash fits the formal structure of the midrashic *mashal* in general (see Boyarin 1989). The *mashal* is a sort of model or structural-generic pattern within which midrashic gap filling can take place. In our case it is the narrative schema of the king and his gardens which generates and contains the story. We begin with the Torah verse to be interpreted, “And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea—and God moved the Sea with a strong East Wind all of the night.” The verse provides a gap. Aside from any theological problem which this verse raises, it is problematic from the point of view of narrative logic. If Moses has been empowered to split the sea with his hand, as implied by God’s command to him in the verse “Stretch out your hand over the sea and split it” (Exodus 14:16), then why does God intervene directly and perform the splitting himself? Alternately, if Moses has not been thus empowered, then for what purpose does he stretch out his hand? The oddness of this verse can be shown by comparison with others, for example, “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand toward heaven that there may be darkness upon the land of Egypt.’ . . . So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was a thick darkness” (Exodus 10:21–22). Or in the continuation of our very story, “So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and as morning broke, the sea returned to its normal course” (Exodus 14:27). The effect of our verse is so jarring that the higher critics have placed a juncture between two sources in its caesura (see Childs 1972: 220–21 and Noth 1962: 114–16). In fact, many Bible critics regard the whole account of the splitting of the sea as the interweaving of two contradictory traditions or documents (see Loewenstamm 1987: 118). The rabbis who composed the midrash, unwilling, of course, to adopt such diachronic solutions, read the text synchronically, that is, as a system of gaps.³ They resolve the contradiction of the two halves of the verse by narrating a set of events which took place between them and which motivate the change in subject from Moses to God himself as director of the sea’s splitting. The plot of this narrative expansion is structured by a *mashal*. It is the text of Psalm 114, however, which provides the primary material for the narrative. The solution of the midrash is created by reading the text of Psalm 114 as a commentary on the Exodus passage. The text of the psalm which generates

2. For these two exegetical possibilities see literature cited in Weiss 1984: 369–70.

3. Midrashic reading is, in this sense, congruent with contemporary reading practices. The classic statement on this issue is now Meir Sternberg’s (1985) chapter entitled “Gaps, Ambiguities, and the Reading Process.” See also the excellent discussion of this issue in Polzin 1980: 17.

the story of the sea's opposition is thus introduced precisely into the middle of the original verse, precisely into the split where the higher critics see the joining of sources and for exactly the same reason.⁴ The dialogue of the psalm is inserted right into the middle of the verse between "And Moses stretched out his hand" and "And God moved the Sea."

Let us have a look now at the psalm itself, a text well known for its personification of natural entities:

When Israel went out from Egypt; the House of Jacob from a foreign nation.
 Judah became His holy one; Israel His dominion.
 The Sea saw and fled; the Jordan turned back.
 The mountains danced like rams; the hills like lambs.
 What has happened to you, O Sea, that you flee; O Jordan, that you turn back?
 O mountains, that you dance like rams; O hills, like lambs?
 From before the Master, tremble Earth, from before the God of Jacob.

The midrash, reading this psalm, projects a world in which the Red Sea is not a personification but a personality; not a metaphor but a character. It will be easier to sense the radicality of the midrashic reading of the psalm by considering first a road not taken. As read by Sir Philip Sidney, the personifications of nature in this psalm are a figure, an *enargeia* of the God who cannot be seen by eyes of flesh:

[David's] handling his prophecy . . . is merely poetical. For what else [are] . . . his notable *prosopopeias*, when he maketh you, as it were, see God coming in his majesty, his telling of the Beasts' joyfulness and hills' leaping, but a heavenly poesy: wherein almost he showeth himself a passionate lover of that unspeakable and everlasting beauty to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith? (Cited in Krieger 1979: 601)

Commenting on this passage in Sidney, Murray Krieger (*ibid.*: 601–2) remarks:

The *prosopopeia* is a form of personification which gives a voice to that which does not speak and thereby gives presence to that which is absent. Through this figure, Sidney argues, God enters David's poem (we are made to "see God coming in his majesty"). It is as if this figure is made to serve the larger objective of *enargeia*, the verbal art of forcing us to see vividly. Through "the eyes of the mind"—an appropriately Platonic notion—we are shown the coming of God and his "unspeakable and everlasting beauty." Here, then, are words invoking a visible presence, though of course to "the eyes of the mind" alone. Though God's may be only a figurative entrance

4. It is certainly significant that on Exodus 14:27, cited above, in which there is no narrative gap, the *Mekilta* explicitly comments, "The Sea will not resist you."

through His personified creatures, the poet makes us, “as it were,” see this entrance. He is there, in His living creation, and absent no longer.⁵

In Sidney’s and Krieger’s reading, then, the personification of the sea, rivers, and hills in the psalm is not truly a representation of nature at all but a poetic means of making the reader see the coming into the world of the unrepresentable God by evoking the reaction of imaginary witnesses to this event. Nature, that is, that which is properly apprehended as a *res*, is personified; the very terminology of trope reveals the reification of nature implied and assumed. As Jon Whitman (1987: 272) has remarked, “It is only when the ‘personality’ is a literary fiction separate from the actual condition that we have a personification.”

The midrash, in contrast, reads the psalm as literal, as the record of an actual colloquy which took place at a specific moment in history, that moment being the moment suspended between the two halves of our verse in Exodus. The psalm perfectly completes the gap of the Torah text. The speaker addressing the sea is Moses and not, as has been suggested, some anonymous Jewish poet marveling at the miracles of the Exodus and evoking the presence of God.⁶ The sight which the sea perceived and from which it fled is not left as the unspoken and unspeakable presence of God but is taken to be the actual self-revelation of God (cf. Weiss 1984: 362). The rhetorical question and answer of the psalm—“What has happened to you, O Sea, that you flee? Before the Lord, Creator of the Universe, tremble Earth”—is turned in the midrashic text into an actual colloquy between Moses and the sea.⁷ That is to say, the figurative usage of the poem, the per-

5. For the sources of Krieger’s definition of “*prosopopeia*” see Whitman 1987: 269.

6. Cf. Weiss 1984: 368: “The events that transpired hundreds of years before your psalmist’s time have become, through his description, as though they were vivid events occurring before his very eyes. There are no more boundaries either in time or in space. The psalmist stands face to face with the sea and Jordan, the mountains and hills, and he can turn to them and ask them: What ails you . . .” It is, in fact, precisely this sense of no boundaries of time or space in the lyric voice that enables the rabbis to project this voice onto Moses himself at the actual events.

7. This reading is, to be sure, not the only one that could be adopted here. There is always, at least in theory, the possibility that this story is meant not seriously in a referential way but as a sort of parable or allegory for a more abstract issue. That is certainly the way many scholars and traditional commentators on midrash would read it. The sea’s speech would then be only a figure of speech. I cannot disprove such an approach; I can only say that it seems to go against the tenor of the text as I perceive it. I can perhaps strengthen my claim somewhat as follows: The rabbis generally make a distinction between *meshal* (parable) and “reality,” true stories in the sense of narratives of events that have actually taken place. The following text shows this opposition clearly:

sonification of the sea, is contextualized historically and dramatized. This minidrama is then correlated with the verse in Exodus which is the subject of the midrash, and that verse is situated dramatically as well. Out of the two texts is created a third, a new text which has qualities, both semantic and aesthetic, which neither has alone. The verse in Exodus is now motivated. An answer has been given to the question of why Moses stretched out his hand, if God was to be the motivating force behind the movement of the sea. Furthermore, the text of the psalm has been sharpened. We now understand what the sea saw. It saw God! The half-hidden memory of this event is recorded also in Psalms 77:17: "The waters saw You, O God, the waters saw You and trembled." Instead of a vague "When Israel went out from Egypt," we have a specific moment. Instead of the somewhat enigmatic "What has happened to you, O Sea?" we have a more specific question: Why did you flee now and not before?

It is important to note that vis-à-vis the earlier ancient traditions of biblical interpretation, this rabbinical sea as an actual sentient subject represents a reversal of a conventional historical-cultural development. The earliest interpretive tradition, and very likely the Bible itself, had already arrived at a rationalized perception of the world as nonsentient and wholly different from man. While the Bible, as Cas-

E. Eliezer says: The dead whom Ezekiel raised stood on their feet, uttered a song and died. What song did they utter? God kills justly and resurrects mercifully. R. Yehoshua says: they uttered this song: God kills and resurrects, takes down to Sheol and will raise up (1 Samuel 2:6). R. Yehuda says: in reality it was a *mashal*. R. Nehemiah said to him: If a *mashal* then why "in reality," and if, "in reality," then why a *mashal*?! But, indeed, he meant that it was really a *mashal*. R. El'azar the son of R. Yosi Hagelili says: the dead whom Ezekiel raised went up to the Land of Israel, took wives and begat sons and daughters. R. Yehuda ben Beteira stood on his feet and said: I am one of their grandchildren, and these are the phylacteries which my grandfather left to me from them. (Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 92b)

This text sharply contrasts *mashal* with "reality," which must mean that which has physically taken place in the real world, both in R. Nehemiah's astonishment at R. Yehuda's "inconsistency" and in the way that R. Yehuda's statement is contested by strong counterclaims about the literal referentiality of Ezekiel's narrative. Clearly, then, for the rabbis there is a semantic, cultural opposition between the *mashal*, which is fiction, and historical reality. Now, our text includes a *mashal*, and the story of the sea and Moses is the *designatum* of that very *mashal*. If the *mashal* is interpretive fiction, then presumably (although not ineluctably) its object (the other of the *mashal*) is making claims to be "in reality." Finally, I would think that if our text were a philosophical or theological allegory, it would thematize its theological issues more explicitly. As we well know, virtually any text can be given an allegorical reading. To my taste, there is nothing in this text that calls for or authorizes such a practice, although other readers, I am sure, will continue to maintain precisely that. What I am certain of is that this is not meant merely as a playful or entertaining tale; its cultural weight is too great for that.

suto (1975: 80–102) has shown, contains allusions to the ancient myth of a primeval battle between God and the sea, these allusions are all reduced from their narrative fullness and have only figurative force (Uffenheimer [1986: 165] identifies the processes by which mythological reality is repressed in the Bible as “reduction, depersonalization, ironization, allegorization and antiquarization”). The prophets and poets of the Bible, we may imagine, were very wary of even suggesting that the sea had a personal nature because of the real danger that, with the polytheistic world around them, they would be misunderstood, and the misunderstanding would lead to polytheistic belief.

Sidney’s interpretation, then, is solidly in the older tradition of interpreting the psalm; it also seems close to what may have been originally meant by the psalm, as far as that can be guessed. The rabbinical reading therefore seems at first a step backward in history. Midrash reverses all of these processes of demythologization. *Vis-à-vis* our example, the relevant case is “depersonalization,” defined by Uffenheimer (*ibid.*) as “alter[ing] myth in such a way as to remove the personal nature of its protagonists. The sea and other depths became geographical concepts.” In our midrash, the “geographical concept” becomes once again a person. Inserting the psalm into the historical context of a dialogue with Moses reanimates its meaning and by doing so reanimates the sea. In short, metaphor again becomes myth.

The gap in the text of the Torah corresponds to a fault line between ideologies. One half of the verse represents God as the only controlling force over nature in the world, while the other half allows that there may be human intervention in nature. The ambivalence of the verse is thematized in the midrash in the ambivalence of the sale of the garden to the king’s friend. On the one hand, the Torah tells us that Moses has been given the power to subdue the sea and split it; the inner garden has been sold to him. I read this not as magic but as a reduction of the status of the universe to a will-less nonsubject, a mere object of human desire, as its reification. On the other hand, owing to the contradiction in the verse and the “evidence” of the psalm, we see that will was not taken away from the sea. He still had the power and perhaps the right to resist; the outer garden was not sold. The garden which is sold and not sold, then, can be read as representing a kind of liminal moment in cultural history (indeed, in materialist terms, in economic history). However, it also plays a concrete function in the interpretation of our biblical narrative. It represents a deep-seated inner contradiction in the very situation of Moses’ having been commanded to split the sea. One who sells an inner garden without selling the means of access to it is, after all, creating a self-contradictory moment. This self-contradiction parallels the contradiction between

God's placing of "an *eternal* border for the sea from which it will not pass" (Jeremiah 5:22) and his commanding Moses now to make the sea pass from that very border.⁸

In my reading of the *Mekilta's* story of the encounter between Moses and the sea, there are really two conflicts being enacted within this textual gap, one between two characters and one between two ideologies. The first is the conflict between Moses and the sea, and the second is the conflict between monotheistic myth and polytheistic myth. The two conflicts are perfectly isomorphic in the midrashic text. On the one hand, we have the sea realized as a fully conscious and free-willed creature, a person—not a personification but a person who can resist the person Moses. This, I submit, is a reflection of a mythlike view of the landscape, one in which nature has not yet been reified. However, the moment God appears the sea does begin to flee. There is no battle between the sea and God. The conflict between Moses and the sea, then, is paralleled in the midrash by the conflict between a monotheistic myth and a polytheistic one lurking, as it were, in the intertextual unconscious. The mythic dimension is evoked by the conflict between Moses and the personal sea, and the defeat of polytheism by the absolute dominance of the presence of God over the sea. Were the sea to have any power to withstand God, we would no longer have Judaism at all, but a polytheistic regression. Accordingly, our midrash, notwithstanding its personal sea and once more visible God, makes it absolutely unambiguous that the sea has power against a man, but only against a man. The unquestioned and immediate capitulation of the sea to the revelation of God, then, is at the same time an enactment of the defeat of the myth of the battle between a god of heaven and a god of the sea, the famous hydromachia. This point is underlined heavily by the *mashal*, in which the sea is figured as an employee of the king and no more, one who is bound upon hearing the king's word to immediately obey. When God appears, there is no contest; the sea immediately obeys, like a faithful servant and no more. The very fact that the sea could be insubordinate (and there is no reason to suppose that it could not happen again) verifies the mythic reading of the landscape, which is still alive for the rabbis, but at the same time the text renders it crystal clear that the sea is not a god or a rival to God. The *mashal*, then, serves as an aid in the interpretation of the "dangerous" material by containing it within safe limits, a function the rabbis themselves figured by comparing the Torah to "a pot full of boiling water, which had no handle to carry it, and someone came

8. This last point was suggested to me by Professor Uriel Simon. Even this reading does not exhaust the highly overdetermined figure of the two gardens.

and made it a handle [the mashal], and it began to be carried by its handle” (Dunansky 1980: 5).

A later midrash on our midrash⁹ brings to full explicitness both the mythic and dialectical¹⁰ conflicts which are latent in the earlier one:

Thus, when Moses came and stood against the Sea, he said in the Name of the Holiness, “God has spoken to you, make a path and the redeemed ones will pass.” The Sea answered and said to Moses, “Ben-Amram, behold, Adam was not created first, but at the end of the six days of Creation, and I was created before he was. I am greater than you; I will not be split for you.” Moses answered to God, “Thus and so said the Sea; Master of the Universe, he is right; the Sea will not be split before me; rather You speak to him with Your word, and he will be split.” The Holiness, blessed be He, said to Moses, “If I speak to the Sea and he is split, he will have no healing for ever and ever, but indeed, you speak to him and he will split, in order that he will have healing by your hand. Here is a fount of strength with you.”¹¹ Immediately, Moses came with Strength going on his right side, as it says, “He causes His glorious arm to go on the right of Moses, splitting the Sea before them, to make him an eternal name” (Isaiah 63:12). When the Sea saw the Strength, standing to the right of Moses, he said to the Earth, “Earth, make me channels and I will enter into your depths, before the Master of Creation, may He be blessed, for it says, “The Sea saw and fled.” And when Moses saw the Sea fleeing before him, Moses said to him, “All day I have been speaking to you in the name of the Holiness, and you did not yield; I showed you the staff and you did not yield; now ‘what has happened to you, O Sea, that you flee?’” The Sea answered and said to Moses, “Ben-Amram, Ben-Amram, do not give greatness to yourself; I flee not from before you, but from before the Lord of Creation, may His name be made sanctified in His world, as it says, ‘From before the Lord, Creator of the Earth/make channels,¹² O Earth, from before the God of Jacob.’” (*Exodus Rabba ad loc*)

9. It is often the case that later midrashic texts begin with earlier ones. That is, the midrashic expansion of the earlier text leaves its own gaps, which are then filled by the latter midrashic reader, using precisely the same methods as the earlier one. Our text here is an excellent example of this phenomenon.

10. Cf. Weiss (1984: 375), who senses this dialectic within the psalm itself: “The description of the natural phenomena as independent, self-willed activity in verses 3–6 is surprising, according to the interpretation that the idea intended to be conveyed by the description is the dominion of God in nature.” The midrashic reading is, in my view, precisely an evocation of this dialectic.

11. Louis Ginzberg (1954: 19) translates “a semblance.” The Hebrew word which appears here, spelled *m’yn*, may be rendered either way; however, it seems to me that “a fount of strength” is more idiomatic for Hebrew.

12. The narrative expansion of this midrash is exploiting yet another sense of the root *hll* of the verse, namely “hollowness” and thence “channels.” This is the source of the sea’s request to the earth to make channels for him.

This text makes explicit much that is implicit in the earlier version, and again we have the same double movement: revivification of the mythic universe simultaneously with the neutralization of its polytheistic content. On the one hand, the claim of the sea against Moses has a very human note; it is not an abstract philosophical or theological argument that would signal an allegorical reading of our text, but a claim of priority and seniority. We are still in the realm of what I have called the mythic. Moreover, the mythic potential of "He causes His glorious arm to go on the right of Moses" is vividly realized, again by literalizing Isaiah's metaphor and rendering it a necessary element in the logic of the narrative. But on the other hand, the very content of the sea's response ("I was created first"), emphasizing its and the man's mutual status as creatures of God, enacts once again the total defeat of polytheism. The process of a monotheistic mythic reading of the landscape is thus continued and deepened in the midrash on the midrash.

Reading the landscape in this way is of great cultural significance, as it implies a certain situation of the human subject as one among many in nature, and not as qualitatively and absolutely unique. The great scholar of midrash Isaak Heinemann (1974: 19) has already noted this fundamental ontological reorientation of the rabbis, their "primitivity" with regard both to what came before them and to what came after them:

The medieval philosophers, with Rabbi Saadya Gaon at their head, depended on figures, such as "the eye of the earth," the "mouth of the earth," to prove that the Torah, even where it spoke of the eye of God and His mouth, "spoke in human language," that is, in metaphor. They assumed, therefore, as self-understood that all that was said about the bodily parts of the earth, was not intended literally. And indeed in all of the Apocrypha and certainly in the ancient philosophical literature, there is no sign of anyone who understood these verses literally. The midrash is entirely different: "All that God created in man, He created similarly in the Earth. Man has a head and the earth has a head, as it says, 'the head of the dusts of the earth'; man has eyes and the earth has eyes, as it says, 'and it covered the eye of the earth.'" . . . To all of these anthropomorphic metaphors, we can apply the dictum, "A metaphor is none other than a reduced myth." And even if the rabbis did not go so far as the realm of real myth, which sees the earth as a woman and a goddess . . . for the rabbis there functioned the anthropocentric necessity to find "our brothers" even in non-human nature and to bring it close, therefore, to our senses and understanding.

Heinemann bases his description on his conception of the rabbis as among those romantic peoples who are closer to the earth than the the peoples of culture (see Boyarin in press: ch. 1), but the point is well taken nevertheless. There is something different in the way that rab-

binical literature regards the world of nature. It is hard for me to imagine precisely what it “felt like” to live in a world peopled by a personal earth, a personal sea, and a personal desert, but it is not hard to imagine, in general, how different an orientation to the world this provided. Certainly it is difficult to see people who have such a consciousness acting with respect to nature as if it were there only to be exploited and spoiled for human purposes, as if it had no ontological importance of its own. If we cannot fully recover the sense of an earlier and other culture, we can, it seems to me, gain some sensation of it by paying close attention to practices within our own culture which seem somehow closer to that other one. I have found certain passages in romantic poetry strikingly evocative in this regard. For one example, among many possible, I cite a famous passage from *The Prelude*:

I dipped my oars into the silent lake,
 And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat
 Went heaving through the water like a swan;
 When, from behind that craggy steep till then
 The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and huge,
As if with voluntary power instinct
Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,
 And growing still in stature the grim shape
 Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
And measured motion like a living thing,
 Strode after me.

(Wordsworth 1970: 207–8; emphasis added)

The poet, even the high romantic, locates the space of nature, which is not a thing, in the no-place, the utopia of childhood, and from the point of view of the adult, the “working” poet,¹³ it must all be displaced into the realm of “as if” and “seeming,” marginalized, however longed for. In a sense, we might say that in the absence of an active (however repressed) cultural unconscious, the only resources for the recovery of the unreified nature are in the individual psyche and its childhood memories.

If my reading has any historical validity, the true inheritors of midrash are the theurgical cabalists, for whom the world is populated with anthropomorphic entities, from animals to trees to books. Thus Scholem (1961: 19) refers to a “classical period” in the development

13. It is striking how often in the first book of *The Prelude* the issue of labor is raised. The poem can be read as a verse version of an apprenticeship novel, with all of the social and historical implications of that genre. But that is not my text. Cf. Ross 1987.

of religion, "in which the scene of religion is no longer Nature, but the moral and religious action of man and the community of men, whose interplay brings about history as, in a sense, the stage on which the drama of man's relation to God unfolds," and then jumps to a "romantic period" of mysticism, which "strives . . . to bring back the old unity which religion has destroyed, but on a new plane, where the world of mythology and that of revelation meet in the soul of man." In my reading of this midrash, however, we have a third term mediating between these two, in which nature itself is projected into history and into moral and religious action in a community of man and nature. In such a world, it is irrelevant to speak of personification altogether, just as it would be irrelevant to speak of the portrayal of George Washington in a history book as personification; the world is already personal. It is reification which is the trope.

I have interpreted the midrashic text as bringing to consciousness, as it were, repressed elements of cultural history which are scattered throughout the biblical text. Both the repression and its interpretation belong to a kind of psychic repression within the collective (that is, social-ideological) consciousness of the people. By putting it in these terms, I have already signaled a kind of homology that I see between psychic and political repression and return of the repressed. It is intriguing that this homology or ambivalence of the psychological and the cultural-political in the conflict with polytheism has already been recorded in the Talmud:

"And they cried out unto God in a loud voice" (Nehemiah 9:4). What did they say? Rav (and some say Rabbi Johanan) says, "Woe is us; this is the one who destroyed the temple, and burned the Holy Place, and killed all of the righteous ones, and exiled Israel from their land, and still he dances among us. What is the reason You gave him to us? Is it not to receive reward [for resisting him]? We don't want him or his reward!" A shard fell from heaven with the word "truth" written on it. . . . They sat in fast for three days and three nights, and he was given over to them. A figure like a lion of fire went out from the Holy of Holies. A prophet said unto Israel, "that was the inclination to worship strange gods, as it is said, 'That is the evil'" (Zachariah 5:7). (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma, 69b)

This rather obscure legend requires some exegesis. After the return from the Babylonian exile, the Book of Nehemiah tells us of a great revival of religious fervor. The Talmud asks what the burden of the prayer was which they prayed on that occasion and answers that they prayed to be delivered of the desire to worship idols, recognizing that it was this desire which had led the Israelites into exile and all of its terrors. We see here an amazing confluence of political and psychic imagery. The "evil inclination," that is, the temptation to worship idols, is understood to be both a collective and an individual force—

or better, a collective force realized within each individual. This dual nature is figured by its being referred to in psychological terms but dealt with in political ones. The activity against it is that of the “Men of the Great Assembly,” the semilegendary governing body of the Jewish people at the end of the second temple period. Their prayers being answered, the evil inclination is delivered into their hands. As Saul Lieberman (1950: 120–21) has argued, this is an etiological legend; it explains the fact that, while the ancient Jews were inclined to idol worship, the ones of rabbinical (Talmudic) times “were so far removed from clear-cut idolatry that there was not the slightest need to argue and to preach against it” (see also Urbach 1959). It thus provides evidence that the rabbis considered the temptation of polytheism a dead issue. It indicates memory, as well, of the historical struggle that killed that temptation.

We can now offer a model for the “regression” of the rabbis and account for this reversal of an apparent progression in the history of consciousness. As Jameson (1981: 213) has argued, “Strategies of containment are not only modes of exclusion; they can also take the form of repression in some stricter Hegelian sense of the persistence of the older repressed content beneath the later formalized surface.” In this model, the Bible’s allusions to the ancient myth of the rebellion of the sea are precisely the older repressed content beneath the formalized surface of the Bible. I would suggest, therefore, that given that the rabbis had no fear of the Jews’ succumbing to polytheism, they were able to allow the barely repressed mythic intertext of the Bible to re-surface, as it were, into textual consciousness (cf. n. 1). If, as I have suggested, Sidney’s figurative reading is a response to the textual surface of the psalm, the literalized midrashic reading goes below this surface and touches the repressed mythic intertext. In the midrash, the coming of God into the world and the psychological effect which it had on the sea no longer need be reduced from myth to the figure of prosopopeia, that which gives voice to what is voiceless by nature, but can be given full narrative and visual representation, that which represents nature as having its own voice.

This text and its reading can offer us insight, then, into the general dialectics of cultural history. History is not a one-way street. Older formations remain. They manifest themselves in the social body as dissident groups, in the individual as hidden and partly repressed desires, in the texts of the culture as intertextuality. Since the fragments of such older cultural forms are not entirely expunged from the “textual unconscious,” cultural history can, as it were, regress, transform, and recover older orientations to the world. While this textual unconscious is perhaps only a metaphor, it seems to be one of great heuristic value. Reversing the Lacanian topos, we can say that language is structured

like a psyche, and the reading of sign systems can have the same dynamic dimensions as the reading of the negotiations of the conscious and the unconscious in the individual.

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