

REVIEWS

For and Against Gershom Scholem

Robert Alter. *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991, 131 pp.

Susan A. Handelman. *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, 389 pp.

Gershom Scholem strongly influenced our sense of the German Diaspora, and that influence has been both good and bad. It has been good in that Scholem was a great and passionate historian; in that his passionate admiration for Walter Benjamin and Franz Kafka set both figures at the center of our vision; in that as Benjamin's intimate friend and rationalizing interpreter he gave us a clear lens through which to look at the most commanding intellectual presence of that Diaspora; and in that as a man who left Germany in time, and lived a long, triumphant, and astonishingly productive life in Israel, he gave us a safe vantage point from which to look at the catastrophe of the Shoah with which that Diaspora ended. It has been bad in that Scholem's passions limited his vision; in that his admiration for part of Benjamin's work led him to neglect or deny the remainder of it; and in that he regarded the German Diaspora as a fraud, and in consequence restricted his attention to figures like Benjamin and Kafka, who seemed to him at odds with it, and devalued figures like Karl Kraus and Franz Rosenzweig, who were at home in it.

Robert Alter's book is in accord with Scholem's influence. Susan Handelman's is at odds with it. So reviewing these two books together is an occasion for thinking not just about two admirable works of literary and intellectual history but also about Scholem and the German Diaspora.

Robert Alter's book is close-grained, elegant, and discipular. It is discipular not in that Alter takes a slavishly worshipful attitude toward Benjamin or Scholem or Kafka, but in that for Alter the big evaluative questions about these figures have already been answered, and answered in accord with Scholem's criteria, before the book begins. Before the book begins, that is, Benjamin and Scholem and Kafka are already "exemplary German-Jewish modernists" (100), occupying the field of attention alone; and challenges to their status, e.g., Georg Lukács's celebrated argument against seeing Kafka as an exemplary modernist at all, are not part of the intellectual landscape.¹

Alter is aware of all this, I think, and certainly it is implicit in his characterization of his own enterprise:

What I discovered . . . as I shuttled back and forth among the texts of the three writers was that the specific biographical data and the concrete historical setting of their sundry literary enterprises were more deeply interesting, more revelatory, than all [these] conceptual generalities. (xii)

And Alter's book is best when it is most discipular in this sense, most attentive to specific biographical data and most skeptical of conceptual generalities. It resembles in this respect Scholem's own book on Benjamin, or Max Brod's on Kafka, or Elias Canetti's essays on Karl Kraus; in it Alter gives himself up to the pleasure of tracing patterns that link these figures, trusting that the patterns will be worth tracing because the figures are important.

The book is composed of four chapters: "Corresponding about Kafka," "On Not Knowing Hebrew," "The Power of the Text," and "Revelation and Memory." The first two of these are the most exact and so the best. "Corresponding about Kafka" centers on Benjamin and Scholem's long and varied dialogue over Kafka. The best part of this admirably sensible account is Alter's suggestive, concentrated comparison between Kafka and Agnon, which Alter undertakes in order to explain Benjamin's linked fascination with the two writers. Alter's account of Agnon's brief story "The Great Synagogue," which Benjamin called "a tremendous masterpiece" (15), is excellent both as an *explication de texte* and as an explanation of Benjamin's puzzlingly extreme enthusiasm; and the summary judgment with which Alter concludes that comparison is characteristic of his power of lucid formulation:

In Agnon the theological enchantment of the world of piety is elaborately and lovingly evoked at the same time that it is ironically subverted from within. Kafka's case is the obverse: his gray fictional landscapes of pathetic animals and petty bureaucrats (the difference between the two is not substantive) have been ruthlessly shorn of all the outward trappings of tradition, but the classic Jewish triad of revelation, law, and commentary virtually defines his imaginative world, whose protagonists at once cannot do without these categories and cannot understand them, tolerate them, live by them. (17)

Here as elsewhere, Alter writes especially well on the relations between his three figures and the language and literature of Hebrew. But in the same chapter he also gives a very good account of how Flaubert influences both Kafka and Agnon, and throughout the book he rightly makes clear the importance of Benjamin's French connection.

"On Not Knowing Hebrew" is the best of the four lectures, and the one that issues most clearly from the discipular attitude. How, one may ask, can ignorance be interesting, except to disciples? Benjamin, after all, knew hardly any Hebrew, and Kafka learned just enough to manage a page a day of Y. H. Brenner's *Shekhol vekishalon* (40). Yet it is in their ignorance, and not in Scholem's mastery, that Alter finds his richest material. He makes of this small topic a superb lens of examination for both men; their patterns of ignorance and knowledge of Hebrew, their presumptions and fantasies about Hebrew, are fascinating. In the study of

modernism we are tempted to make windy pronouncements about language in general; Alter, though, draws great profit from making analyses about languages in particular.

The central exhibits Alter considers are a letter Kafka wrote to Max Brod, on the great Viennese satirist Karl Kraus, on *mauscheln*,² and on the plight of German Jews who write in German; a letter Benjamin wrote in French to Gretel Adorno, telling her of a dream he had in a labor camp at Clos Saint Joseph Nevers; and a sketch of Kafka's called "A Dream," telling of Joseph K.'s encounter with a tombstone engraver, later reshaped for use in *The Trial*. The Kafka letter I shall take up later. The accounts of the other two pieces are really illuminating, but their excellences are hard to summarize; the distinction of Alter's analyses lies in the nuances, not in the conclusions. I quote, therefore, an extended passage from the account of Benjamin's dream:

The dreamer is afraid that the lady performing handwriting analysis . . . will discover things about him that he would prefer to keep secret—the tension between the desire to expose and the need to conceal that most writers feel, and perhaps German-Jewish writers more than most. However, all that can be seen of his writing is the tops of the *d*'s (of course, handwritten *d*'s), which aspire upward toward spirituality according to the graphological analysis, as Benjamin's own literary work repeatedly did. The *d* . . . is also the initial character of the pseudonym Detlef, with which Benjamin signed his letters to Gretel Adorno, and so it is a personal signature. One wonders, since systems of inscription are at issue in this French dream that contains a German sentence, whether the overdetermined *d* also obliquely invokes *Deutsch*, the writer's point of departure and habitual medium. In any case, the writing here has been executed in the strange medium of cloth, and the metonymic links between cloth and the female body are strongly forged by the dream logic. Writing is transformed into a kind of embroidery, an activity associated with women, and the visible fragments of the letter *d* are outfitted with a little blue-bordered veil. At the crucial point of revelation, Benjamin recites the enigmatic sentence, "it is a question of changing a piece of poetry into a scarf [*fichu*]," and though he has already stressed that these words were pronounced in French . . . he translates them into German. . . . The *fichu*/*Halstuch* is a piece of cloth worn around a woman's neck, literally tied to the desired body. The enigma of the recited sentence embodies a utopian vision of language transformed into pure realized desire. . . . The word becomes body, or at least the stuff that touches the body. Beyond all the tensions and the rasping frictions of cultural difference, the act of inscription is neither German nor French nor Hebrew but pure materiality, showing in its form an aspiration of spirituality (down to up rather than left to right) but carrying the dreamer directly, as though language's walls of mediation had dissolved, to the beckoning bed of lovely carnality. (49–50)

The third and fourth lectures are more abstract and less successful. In "Revelation and Memory," for example, when Alter considers the great dispute between Benjamin and Scholem as to whether in Kafka revelation is unintelligible

or absent, he does not seem to me to shed much light on that dispute. "Scholem's essential point in his debate with Benjamin," he writes,

is that the world in which we find ourselves has an ultimate, though also ultimately inscrutable, semantic power: something is always "in the process of appearing" from the ground of being that imposes itself on us with the sheer force of its validity, even if it finally has no safely construable significance. (110)

Alter at his best makes concrete what first presents itself to us as dizzyingly abstract; here, though, he gives us only an abstract paraphrase of an abstract position, and one weakened by apparently ungrounded emphases: "essential" (as opposed to what *peripheral* point?) "sheer force" (as opposed to what *other* quality of force?) "safely construable" (as opposed to what *less* safely construable significance?). Similar ungrounded emphases mark a crucial passage in "The Power of the Text," in which Alter characterizes certain traits in Kafka's stories as "preeminently midrashic" (75) and "virtually talmudic" (77), letting "preeminently" and "virtually" stand in place of the complex analyses necessary to describe the relations between Kafka and the classic Jewish modes of interpretation and commentary.

But even these chapters offer fine insights. In "The Power of the Text," for example, I would note Alter's comment that for both Benjamin and Kafka, "China is a displacement toward the universal of Judaism, the scribal culture closer to hand that both sought intermittently to appropriate" (68), or the apt observation that "Benjamin . . . contemplated [exegesis] as an ideal of writing and cognition, without ever getting around to practicing it" (80), or the suggestive parenthetical comparison between Proust and Kafka in the light of Benjamin's admiration for them both:

Kafka represents the most comprehensive working-out in fiction of the attachment to text through commentary, and Proust, as supreme stylist and master of mimesis, brilliantly encompasses "nature"—moral behavior, humanity in the integument of social institutions, the subtle flow of consciousness, and also the natural world. (80)

In "Revelation and Memory" I would note the patient account of the differences between Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht as readers of Kafka with which the chapter begins, but still more the moving account of the theme of angels with which the chapter and the book end:

Kafka's silent angel [as presented in a diary entry of Kafka's for June 25, 1914] speaks neither Hebrew nor German, but it is made, through a willed act of human intervention, to hold a candle for the man to whom it has appeared. As in *The Castle* and in many of the parables, as in the great sweep of Scholem's historiography, as in Benjamin's gnomic reflections on Kafka himself and on other writers, something that may endure still glimmers forth from the realm of transcendence that tradition so urgently addressed. (120)

The virtues of Alter's book, then, are in accord with its discipular character. But so is its principal flaw: this account of three German Jews is simply not *German*

enough. Now part of the problem here is purely philological. A small example: Alter rightly disparages the English translation of the Scholem-Benjamin correspondence as "generally competent" (5), but then quotes without comment a passage from it that inverts the sense of the German.³ A larger example is the thin, textureless accounts Alter gives of Benjamin's and Scholem's German styles. These accounts occur just after Alter has shown how difficult the linguistic situation of the German-Jewish writer is. He cites Kafka's three "linguistic impossibilities" for such a writer: "the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing German, the impossibility of writing differently" (33). He then asserts that "all three of our figures" exhibit "a surprising capacity to surmount seeming impossibilities," and so succeed in becoming "entirely authentic, entirely uncharacteristic German writers" (33). So a lot rests on Alter's account of the styles he praises; but he does not make good on his claim. He characterizes Scholem as "the master of a powerful scholarly German, ranging from dry precision and painstaking clarity in the exposition of technical intricacies to nuanced evocativeness in conjuring up psychological states, visions of God and man and history" (33). He characterizes Benjamin's style as "gnomic . . . a curious compound of metaphysical abstraction and dense lyricism" (34). Both characterizations are apt; but neither is philologically rich. The terms Alter finds for Scholem are general enough to fit, say, Martin Buber, whom Scholem disdained. The terms he finds for Benjamin are general enough to fit great German writers as diverse as Georg Christian Lichtenberg and Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno. Neither set of terms, that is, is enough to establish its subject as a writer clawing his way out of Kafka's impossibilities.

But the remainder of the problem is cultural, resulting from too narrow a sense of the cultural landscape. And the cultural problem, unlike the philological problem, can be traced to Scholem. For Scholem, as Susan Handelman writes,

the "love affair" between Germans and Jews was a "lurid and tragic illusion" . . . the supposed golden age of German Jewry, the fruitful interweaving of two cultures which produced the brilliance of fin-de-siècle Vienna and the Weimar Republic, was, in his view, a fraud. (10–11)

In Freud, in Benjamin, and in Kafka, Scholem finds exceptions to this general condemnation; but they are, precisely, exceptions. Part of the price of taking Scholem as a guide to German Jewry is to lose sight of most of it.

Consider, for example, Alter's reading of Benjamin's great 1938 letter on Kafka.⁴ Alter gives a very good account of the second half of it. The first half, though, he ignores. This is, presumably, because the first half is Benjamin's polemic against Max Brod's Kafka biography, and because Max Brod is precisely the sort of figure a Scholemized view of German Jewry has to disregard. Now Brod is surely no match for Benjamin as a reader of Kafka. But some of what Benjamin has to say about Kafka can best be understood as a rejection of Brod's account—of its blurring of theological and aesthetic judgment, and of its odd combination of reverence and profaning intimacy. And sometimes, too, Brod's book offers a corrective to Benjamin's view. It is Brod, for example, who, like Alter, sees in Kafka the writer influenced by Flaubert and Kleist, and Benjamin who

takes a full eighth of his letter to read him, ingeniously but unconvincingly, as presenting the world of modern physics as articulated by Arthur Eddington.

The other chief example also involves Brod, whose recurring ghostly appearances mark the book's willed limitations. Here, though, Brod is simply the recipient of Kafka's letter on *mauscheln*, and the crucially neglected figure is the far greater writer Karl Kraus, the Viennese satirist, playwright, performance artist, and language theorist. In Alter's account of this matter, Kafka is "the most ruthless critic of the vapidness and the futility of the paternal project of assimilation" (32); Kafka's letter is a critique of "the ineluctable contradictions of assimilation" (32); and Kraus, especially Kraus in his use of *mauscheln*, is the object of that critique. More specifically, Kafka is presented as having "explicitly stigmatized . . . the sin of *mauscheln*" (34) that Kraus commits, and having as an alternative to that sin "hammered out a pellucid German, with the exacting style of Flaubert as his ideal, that perhaps drew on certain German countertraditional figures such as Kleist as prose models but in any case created the effect of a language weirdly severed from its historical roots" (34). The implicit oppositions are between Kraus and Kafka, between Kraus's sin of *mauscheln* and Kafka's heroic accomplishment of an authentic German, and between assimilation and Judaism.

But these oppositions are drastic oversimplifications of the important matter at issue here. To begin with, it is impossible to understand Kraus as a sinning practitioner of *mauscheln*. He was a great writer, and Kafka says so, discriminatingly, at the beginning of the letter:

[Kraus's *Literatur*] seemed to me extraordinarily striking—striking right to the heart. In this small world of German-Jewish literature he is the ruler, or rather the ruler is the principle he represents, to which he has so admirably subordinated himself that he has confused himself with it, and makes others share that confusion. I think I can distinguish pretty well what in the book is merely wit, though magnificent wit; what is miserable wretchedness; and finally what is truth, at least as much truth as my hand is that writes, and at least as clear and as troublingly corporeal.⁵

Kraus was in any case not just, and for that matter not principally, a practitioner of *mauscheln*; rather he was the greatest and most vitriolic castigator of it, in the name of a German as "authentic," as singular, and as deliberate as any ever written. Hence, Kafka's acidic tribute, which Brod records: "in the hell of German-Jewish writing, Karl Kraus is the great monitor and disciplinarian, and that is his merit. But he forgets, in the process, that he himself is in this hell, among those awaiting chastisement."⁶

If Kraus is a more complicated figure than he appears in Alter's account, it is not surprising that *mauscheln* is also. This is the full text from which Alter draws his quotes on this matter:

[Kraus's] wit [in *Literatur*] is for the most part *mauscheln*, and no one can *mauscheln* like Kraus, though after all in the German-Jewish world hardly anyone can do anything *but mauscheln*, *mauscheln* taken in its fullest sense, the sense in which it has to be taken, namely as *a bumptious, tacit, or self-pitying appropriation of someone else's property, something not earned, but

stolen by means of a relatively casual gesture.* . . . I am not saying anything against *mauscheln*, which *in se* is very beautiful, is an organic linking of bureaucratic German and gestural language . . . and the product of a sensitive *Sprachgefühl*, which has understood that in German today what lives is only the dialects and beside them only the most intensely personal *Hochdeutsch*, whereas all the rest, the middle of the language, is nothing but ashes, which cannot be brought even to a semblance of life unless surviving Jewish hands muck around with it.⁷

So clearly *mauscheln* is for Kafka not simply a sin that Kraus commits, but the productive consequence of an illuminating linguistic intuition. And that, after all, makes sense. Alter's rejection of *mauscheln* is apparently a rejection of it on the ground of its being a *Mischsprache*, a creole, an impure and polyglot language. And this can hardly be Kafka's ground, given his admiration for that other Jewish *Mischsprache* constituted by Yiddish. It may be Alter's commitment to an idea of "authentic German" that explains the otherwise puzzling absence of any mention of Yiddish in his account of his three figures' relations to Jewish languages. Certainly that idea of "authentic" German, and the idea of Hebrew as *Ursprache* that keeps it company in Alter's account, are hard to impose upon the stunningly complex linguistic situation of German Jews; and it is such truncations and oversimplifications that in my view are the price Alter pays for the clarity of Scholem's vision.

Susan Handelman's book is not discipular but polemical. It does not presume that questions of judgment have been settled; rather, it undertakes to settle them. Handelman's polemical goal, however, is not principally to establish a reading of the German Diaspora writers she is concerned with. Her goal is to mount an attack. In general, she is attacking certain important but, in her judgment, profoundly mistaken ideas in contemporary linguistic and literary theory:⁸ the idea of language as a fathomless abyss of arbitrary meaning, and the idea that language can be understood ontologically before it is understood ethically, i.e., that the nature of language can be understood without reference to the ethical relations between speaker and hearer. More specifically and more importantly, Handelman is attacking Paul De Man. She is attacking him because she agrees with those who have seen essential affinities between De Man's great and illuminating critical work and his posthumously revealed antisemitic journalism. And she is attacking him through Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas because she wants to find in literary theory as shaped by Jewish thought a critique of literary theory as shaped by what she regards as antisemitic thought.

Surprisingly, Handelman's polemical intention does not distort her account of the German Diaspora; rather, it frees it of Scholem's received version of that Diaspora, and lets Handelman see things that Alter's more discipular relation to his subjects obscures. The reading, or readings, she offers of figures in the German Diaspora are in my judgment almost accidental benefits of her polemic against De Man; but they are substantial.⁹

The first part of Handelman's book concerns Benjamin and Scholem, the second Emmanuel Levinas. The polemical argument of the first part begins to emerge in the discussion of Benjamin's "Task of the Translator." Anyone interested in Benjamin's thought about language has to be interested in that visionary

essay, and Handelman accordingly devotes three chapters to a careful, common-sensical, and eclectic reading of it. The goal of her reading, though, is not an interpretation of the essay but a critique of certain powerful misinterpretations of it. Of these, the best and most famous is, of course, De Man's. The question at the heart of the matter is, what exactly does Benjamin mean by the "pure language" he says is "hidden in an intense form" in translations?

If, however, there is a language of truth, in which the ultimate secrets for which all thinking strives are preserved, tranquil and silent, then this language of truth is—the true language. And precisely this language, in the intuition and description of which lies the only perfection the philosopher can hope for, is hidden in an intense form, in translations.¹⁰

For De Man, as Handelman reads him, Benjamin intends in his essay to articulate "a nihilistic view of language and history wherein purity means mortification, disarticulation, and destruction" (38). In particular, De Man is "intent on denying any possible theological meaning to Benjamin's 'pure language'" (39). And for Handelman, that makes De Man twice wrong, once about Benjamin and once about language; for Benjamin in Handelman's view does insist precisely on the theological sense of language, on language as revelation and redemption; and in so insisting, he is right. In seeing the currently fashionable "semiotic view of language as an arbitrary system of signs [to be] a result of the 'Fall' from an original pure nonsignifying language of names" (63–64), he offers by Handelman's account a deliverance from the constraints of poststructuralist linguistic theory.

Scholem is an easily available ally for this position of Benjamin's, and Handelman predictably establishes him as such, not only in his conception of the language and language theory of the kabbalah, but also in his reading of Kafka and in his affinity for Benjamin's "On Language As Such and on the Language of Man," which he tried to translate into Hebrew and found "very close to [his] heart" (63). So Scholem joins Benjamin; and by the end of the second section of her book, Handelman can present Benjamin and Scholem as a team:

Benjamin and Scholem "secularized" a kabbalistic or mystical theory of language . . . then established it as a philosophical critical category, then applied that category as the criterion by which to interpret *all* other manifestations of language. (92)

What is not so predictable is how sharply Handelman subordinates Scholem to Benjamin; and it is, as noted, her polemical goal that lets her formulate this heterodox judgment. One part of Handelman's campaign is to set Benjamin and Scholem against De Man. But she is too sensible a reader of contemporary theory, and for that matter, too appreciative a reader of De Man, not to see that De Man has to have something conceded to him. And what gets conceded is Scholem. In an insightful excursus called "Hidden Ideologies in Debates over Theories of Language," Handelman traces the theological sense of language that Benjamin and Scholem share to its sources in German Romantic philology. She then notes the sharp conflict between this tradition and the alternative tradition that begins with Locke, is superseded by German Romantic philology, is then revived by

Saussure, and finally underlies De Man. In that alternative tradition, language does not, in Handelman's apt citation of Hans Aarslef,

have independent existence as a product of nature, but is the expression of human activity. It is an institution. Its function is communication, its being is social, and the linguistic sign is arbitrary. (73)

Then Handelman suggests that Scholem, unlike Benjamin, remains uncritically and unconsciously inside the German tradition, unaware of the real challenge presented by the French tradition; and she concludes by presenting Benjamin as the one theorist of language who seeks to do justice to both. On the one hand, then, she links Benjamin and Scholem together against poststructuralist linguistic theory, in the hope of holding on to a theological sense of language; on the other, she links Benjamin with poststructuralist linguistic theory, in the hope of linking a theological sense of language "as a mode of redemption and revelation" (70) with a social sense of language as a mode of communication in society.

The rest of Handelman's account of Benjamin and Scholem goes back and forth between these two polemical constellations: Benjamin and Scholem against De Man, Benjamin and De Man against Scholem. I would note especially the series of remarks on symbol and allegory. In these remarks, Handelman associates Scholem with an unreflective celebration of the romantic symbol as "a form of expression which radically transcends the sphere of allegory" (108), then associates Benjamin with the critique of that celebration:

In the romantic symbol, the beautiful merges with the divine in an unbroken whole. Benjamin argues that this is a false totality. It means that the moral world is purely immanent in the world of beauty, and so the ethical subject is lost in the beautiful soul. (124)

She then quotes De Man's celebration of allegory "as that mode which recognizes the 'disjunction between the way in which the world appears in reality and the way it appears in language'" (132). But the figure who emerges out of De Man's critique of the symbol is not De Man but Benjamin:

It is not difficult to see, then, why allegory in De Man's analysis comes to represent the archetypal model of deconstructive reading. De Man displaces the interpersonal dialectic of a subject's relation to an object (or mind to nature) for the impersonal relations of "signs in a system." . . . Benjamin, however, did not exalt a semiotic conception of language as an arbitrary system of signs. He considered that conception to be a *fall* from a purer language of truth, and he never broke the connection between his language theory and the search for redemption. (132)

It comes as no surprise, then, that this section on Benjamin and Scholem concludes with a moving image of Benjamin standing alone. Handelman quotes Lisa Fittko's beautiful description, from the book she wrote about guiding Jewish refugees over the Pyrenees:

What a strange man, I thought. A crystal-clear mind, unbending inner strength, yet hopelessly clumsy. *Walter Benjamin once wrote about the nature of*

his strength that "my patience is unconquerable." Reading that phrase years later, I saw him before me once again, walking slowly and measuredly along the mountain path. And his inner contradictions suddenly seemed less absurd. (173; emphasis Fittko's)

The remainder of Handelman's book deals with the work of Emmanuel Levinas, both his philosophical treatises and his talmudic commentaries. It deserves to be judged as an account of Levinas by those who know his work well. I myself do not, and in this respect can only say that Handelman's account of it seems to me a cogent, generous, and passionate presentation of a powerful mind.

But here, too, what shapes that presentation is Handelman's polemic. Here, in fact, the polemic justifies not only the organization of the account but also its presence. For what, after all, is this account of Levinas doing in this book? Handelman makes clear that Levinas's thought is profoundly opposed both to Benjamin's and to Scholem's. Levinas stands for halakhah, Benjamin and Scholem for aggadah; Levinas speaks for the Talmud and for rabbinic Judaism, Scholem and Benjamin (through his reading of Scholem) for kabbalah; Levinas conceives language ethically and rhetorically, Benjamin and Scholem magico-theologically. A book of criticism, a book of argument, that focuses on perspectives so opposed to each other would, it seems, have to do one of two things: speak on behalf of one perspective against the other, or seek to articulate some third perspective embracing the other two. Handelman's book does neither of these things; Benjamin is presented and espoused, Levinas is presented and espoused. At moments the perspectives are brought together—sometimes, less convincingly, to be compared, and sometimes, more convincingly, to be contrasted—but the big confrontation these incompatible perspectives imply is never worked through. How can this be understood? The answer, I think, is that both perspectives are in fact being presented as critiques of De Man. Benjamin and Scholem's theological conception of language, their sense of language as a mode of revelation and redemption, stands against De Man's sense of language as *aporia*; but so does Levinas's sense of language as an act by which we surrender ourselves to another human being.

Accordingly, most of Handelman's careful and rich accounts of the various aspects of Levinas's thought lead precisely toward a thoughtful critique of De Man. Thus, in the first section, "The Rupture of the Good," Handelman writes of Levinas's general critique of ontology and of "all philosophical idealisms and Hegelian dialectics which claim to encompass the All in thought" (181), and of the alternative to such systems he offers in his "inversion of consciousness of and for itself into the ethics of for the other" (182). But the *telos* of that description is, in my judgment, a point Handelman makes later about the relation between Levinas's thought and De Man's:

The connection between the historical horrors of the Nazi period and the philosophical idea of a neutral, impersonal "Being" is direct. For as Levinas writes, ontology as the attempt to reduce the other to the same, or "beings" to "Being," is ultimately an egoism. "Philosophy is an egology" [writes Levinas in *Totalité et Infini*], and "Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relation with Being in general, remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to

imperialist domination, to tyranny." As I shall argue later, Levinas's critique of Heidegger and his connection of Heideggerian ontology to political violence may also be applied to Paul De Man's linguistic theory, the key to which is the impersonality and autonomy of language; and this critique would shed some light on De Man's own problematic relation to Nazism. (190)

Again, here is Handelman's account of the key Levinasian terms "trace" and "face":

How is the trace related to the face? In *Otherwise Than Being*, the trace is described as what "lights up the face of a neighbor, ambiguously him *before whom* (or *to whom*, without any paternalism) and him *for whom* I answer. For such is the enigma or ex-ception of a face, judge and accused." (212)

But here is the point toward which that account is directed:

The very mode in which Derrida and De Man absorbed the Levinasian notion of the trace "effaced the face" and the ethical relation . . . because it is not strictly reducible to a purely linguistic sign, the Levinasian trace, like the Derridean, "signifies" in the actual sign-systems of language only through equivocation. . . . But in contrast to Derrida and De Man, this "negativity" in terms of "comprehension" is an excess as positivity, and positive in its call to responsibility for the other prior to all comprehension; it is the incommensurability of the good. (212-13)

In the section called "Parodic Play, Prophetic Reason, and Ethical Rhetoric: Derrida, Levinas, and Perelman," Jacques Derrida supplements De Man, while Levinas is linked to the Belgian rhetorical theorist Chaim Perelman, of whom Handelman gives a really fascinating account. But the ultimate goal is the same:

Rhetorical tropes in De Man are negative epistemological challenges to grammar and logic and must be separated, he writes, from "performative speech acts" and the "pragmatic banality" of psychology. . . . Similarly, De Man's model for teaching is a chilling one; it is "not primarily an intersubjective relationship between people but a cognitive process in which self and other are only tangentially and contiguously involved."

Levinas's philosophy reveals the violence to the other that this position implies, and Perelman's analysis reveals its covert connections with "absolutist epistemology." (243)

In the first part of her book, Handelman's polemical aim puts her far enough outside Scholem's vision to judge him critically. But she accepts Scholem's sense of who matters: Benjamin and Scholem himself. In the second part of her book, Handelman is bent on presenting Levinas; and in doing that, she not only criticizes the figures Scholem singles out but also focuses on a figure Scholem deprecates.

Reading the German Diaspora through Levinas means seeing it centered on Franz Rosenzweig. So Rosenzweig is rightly almost as prominent a figure in this second part of Handelman's book as is Levinas himself; his critique of Hegel and

idealism, his *Sprachdenken*, his own evocation of "face," his vision of history, his aesthetics are all prominent. And this is a big shift in viewpoint, because Scholem and Rosenzweig saw the world in incompatibly different ways. Handelman sometimes acknowledges this, but sometimes blurs it. All the issues that separate Scholem from Levinas also separate him from Rosenzweig. So does Zionism; Scholem was a Zionist, Rosenzweig a critic of Zionism and a lover—that is not putting it too strongly—of the German Diaspora. So does the question of the nature of language; the ordinary communicative functions of language were peripheral for Scholem and for Benjamin, central for Rosenzweig. In Stéphane Moses' apt formulation, "the communicative function of language, which for Benjamin represents the main symptom of its degeneracy, is for Rosenzweig identical with its quality of revelation" (70).

So does the question of the nature of the intellectual life; Scholem found his vocation in academic scholarship, Rosenzweig his in the rejection of academic scholarship, in the call *ins Leben* with which *The Star of Redemption* concludes, in the public space of the Frankfurt *Lehrhaus*, and in the making of the public text of the translation of the Hebrew Bible. Scholem clearly disliked the great translation of the Hebrew Bible to which Rosenzweig gave the last years of his life.¹¹ Finally, both Scholem and Benjamin heartily disliked Martin Buber, who was Rosenzweig's collaborator in that translation and a great influence on Rosenzweig's thought. Rosenzweig himself put the matter most vividly, in a 1922 letter to Rudolf Hallo:

Dear Rudi—I think it's wicked Scholem who is the cause of this long and theoretical letter (to which you, O wretched man, need not give so long an answer). Why are you debating [with him]? No debating is possible over what one *does*. And least of all with a nihilist like Scholem. The nihilist always gains his point. If someone sweeps all the pieces off the chessboard with his sleeve, obviously he's made it difficult for me to win the game. In Scholem there is the ascetic's *Ressentiment*. We are not ascetics. But we also do not want to be scoundrels, who give out more than they have. What we have is not nothing, as Scholem, thanks to his Zionist dogma, would claim—but also is not all, as you, distressed at that nothing Scholem coldly hurled at you, would like to find in me. Rather we both have only something, really and truly only something. Let us hold by it, and play our games with those who have learned to play with their fingers and not with their sleeves. Maybe Scholem too will learn that someday.¹²

So when Harold Bloom writes (in a passage that Handelman quotes) that Scholem, along with Freud and Kafka, is "already a larger [figure] in the ongoing tradition of spirituality than are, say, Leo Baeck, Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber . . . because the former grouping far surpasses the latter in *cultural achievement*" (7), he is making not just a judgment of stature but a choice between opposed directions. When Handelman, as an advocate for Levinas and a critic of De Man, turns back to Rosenzweig, she is exploring a territory that Bloom and many contemporary intellectuals have turned away from.

There are problems with Handelman's book, of course. Her bibliography is worryingly poor in German-language sources. She still lets Scholem define what

work of Benjamin's matters; in an astonishing footnote, she writes that she will not deal at length with Benjamin's great, unfinished *Passagenwerk* because it "was never seen by Scholem" (347; emphasis added). She is free enough of Scholem's influence to see Rosenzweig, but not free enough to see him whole; the Rosenzweig who gave so much of himself to the theory and practice of translation is pretty much absent, even from Handelman's discussion of Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," in which she draws on none of the essays reprinted in the Buber-Rosenzweig collection *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung*.

More troubling than these smaller points is her restriction of history to intellectual history. This would not matter as much if her book did not make so eloquent a case for a literary and linguistic theory founded on ethical considerations, and so eloquent an attack on a literary and linguistic theory that in its abstinence from ethical considerations seems to her to lead to unethical actions. But because her book does do those things, because ethical considerations in human lives therefore matter so much to her, she needs to give a historically richer account of the human lives she is portraying. It is not, for example, enough to present Scholem as a Zionist, Benjamin as a Marxist and victim of Hitler, Levinas as a survivor of the Holocaust. Handelman needs to say something about Scholem's practical Zionism, his political behavior in Palestine and in Israel. She needs to say something about Benjamin's specific political behavior in Nazi Europe.¹³ She needs to say something about Levinas's particular experiences as a prisoner of war, and about the life he has constructed for himself since that time. She needs, that is, to say something about the "thousand small decisions," to use Martin Buber's phrase, in which ethical principles are manifested.¹⁴

These are significant problems, and the difficulty of tracing Handelman's argument sometimes makes the reading of her book a slow task. But for those who, like myself, see the German Diaspora as centered in Rosenzweig, or who, at any rate, cannot accept a view of the German Diaspora that like Scholem's puts Rosenzweig on its periphery, Handelman's argument is a revelation; it is, I believe, the first book that in formulating a position on matters important in contemporary literary theory, and in seeking illumination of those matters in the writing of German Jews, finds illumination not only in Benjamin and in Scholem but also in Rosenzweig. And Handelman's book is important even for those holding other views. We have gotten most of the good there is to be gotten from looking through Scholem's lens, and have begun to suffer from looking through it too long. So right now we can learn more from Handelman's book than from Alter's; it is her book, more than Alter's, that opens up new territory.

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NOTES

1. Lukács, "Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann?" in *Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle* (New York, 1964), tr. John and Necke Mander, pp. 47-92.
2. That is, a German marked by Yiddish diction and syntax.

3. Alter quotes Scholem as writing to Benjamin, "we must not give up on this generation, and since nothing could replace Palestine in its function for Judaism but empty phrases evocative of nothing, how should I conceive of the years to come?" (7–8). But what Scholem had written was, "für diese Generation müssen wir resignieren," "we must [*not* 'must *not*'] give up on this generation" (letter of June 30, 1939, in Scholem, ed., *Walter Benjamin / Gershom Scholem: Briefwechsel 1933–1940* [Frankfurt, 1980], p. 308).

4. *Briefwechsel*, pp. 266–73; the reflections on Brod's book end on p. 269.

5. Letter of June 1921, in Max Brod, ed., *Franz Kafka: Briefe, 1902–1924* (Frankfurt, 1975), p. 336; my translation, as are all those not quoted from the books under review.

6. Brod, *Über Franz Kafka* (Frankfurt, 1966), p. 275.

7. Kafka, *Briefe*, p. 336; the passage between asterisks is what Alter quotes from this part of the letter, and is quoted from his quotation.

8. Handelman's title refers to "literary theory," but she discusses chiefly linguistic theory, albeit that of literary critics rather than linguists.

9. It is only fair to note that Handelman herself does not say any of this about her book. She states that she is interested in her three figures because "each is a Jew engaged in mediating the Jewish and modern worlds, as I am. More specifically, each has had enormous influence on contemporary ideas about language, history, and interpretation in a variety of fields from literary criticism to religious studies, philosophy, and social theory" (xviii). In fact, however, the polemical intent of the book emerges more vividly with the reading of each successive section of it; and it is only this polemical intent that finally holds the book together, as I shall make clear later.

10. Benjamin, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," *Illuminationen* (Frankfurt, 1980), p. 57.

11. See on this my "On the Reception of Buber and Rosenzweig's Bible," *Prooftexts* 14 (1994): 141–65.

12. Letter of March 27, 1922, in Rosenzweig, *Briefe und Tagebücher* (The Hague, 1979), ed. Rachel Rosenzweig and Edith Rosenzweig-Scheinmann with Bernhard Casper, 2:768.

13. See, for example, Chryssoula Kambas, *Walter Benjamin im Exil: Zum Verhältnis von Literaturpolitik und Ästhetik* (Tübingen, 1983). I owe this reference to my friend Jonathan Knudsen of the Wellesley College history department.

14. As quoted in Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics* (New York, 1988), p. 69.