

Text and Spirit

GEOFFREY HARTMAN

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GEOFFREY H. HARTMAN is Sterling Professor Emeritus of English and Comparative Literature and senior research scholar at Yale University. He was educated at Queens College of the City of New York, and received his Ph.D. from Yale University. He is the recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Woodrow Wilson Center, has been a visiting scholar at numerous universities in the United States, Europe, and Israel, and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Academy of Literary Studies. Early in his career he produced an impressive body of literary criticism, including *The Unmediated Vision* (1954), *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787–1814* (1964), *The Fate of Reading* (1975), and *Criticism in the Wilderness* (1980), among others. More recently he has begun to explore the topics of witness and historical memory, and the cultural and political implications of the Holocaust. His books on those subjects include *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (1986), *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory* (1994), and *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (1996).

The face-to-face with the text has replaced the face-to-face with God.

—EDMOND JABÈS¹

Even a casual observer of the worldly scene, or of news that besieges ears and eyes, and becomes increasingly a confusing talk show with endlessly extemporized sense and nonsense, even you and I, who are that casual observer, cannot fail to notice how often the supernatural turns up as a topic. Let me excerpt a moment close to Christmas 1997. “In Books, It’s Boom Time for Spirits,” runs a headline of “The Arts” section of the *New York Times* (Tuesday, November 11, 1997, E 1). The very next week, this same section, devoted to Robert Gobert’s installation piece in the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, features a Madonna standing on a drainage grate with a cruciform pipe through her belly, which elicits the curious headline “Religion That’s in the Details” (not only entrails) and adds “A Madonna and Drain Pipe Radiate an Earthy Spirituality.” The number of best sellers on near-death or out-of-body experiences is well known; spirit raptors proliferate; and the recovered memory syndrome has not only insinuated devastating suspicions about family values but also made stars of obscure people who claim to have lived previous lives as saints, warrior-heroes, and amazonian queens.

Serious scholars too have turned from their literary preoccupations to write, as Harold Bloom has done, on *The American Religion* and, with the approach of the millennium, on omens, angels, avatars, and such. Bloom’s survey of Christian and heterodox movements since 1800 envisions the year 2000 as the triumph of an unacknowledged, specifically American religion, “in which . . . something deeper than the soul, the real Me or self or spark is

¹ *Le Parcours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 84.

made to be utterly alone with . . . a free God or God of Freedom” who loves every American with a personal love. Bloom would like to stand aloof, but finds he too is part of this scene—as American as Ralph Waldo Emerson or Walt Whitman. “Religious criticism,” he says, “even if it seeks to banish all nostalgia for belief, still falls into the experience of the spiritual, even as literary criticism cannot avoid the danger of falling into the text.”² Though there is nothing new in the antics of hucksters and televangelists, or meeting the Lord in the air (in a spaceship, no less, according to Louis Farrakhan), or weeping statues, or miracles on Broadway (Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*), or the amazing ease with which both preachers and skinheads claim to have heard the call of God, it is time to reflect on this bullishness in the spiritual market.

Does the mere approach of the year 2000 act as a magnet? My initial thought is that there is enough craziness in traditional religion itself, I mean imaginative, poetic craziness, so that this sort of human circus is unnecessary. At the same time I agree with William Blake that imagination is religion’s birth mother, always trying to free its unorthodox offspring, the poets, from the strictures of positive religion. But then, of course, one remembers a different aspect of the spiritual impulse, that it is never entirely disinterested: it often breaks through as the compulsive side of those whose disgust with the human condition—with themselves or others or politics—becomes intolerable, and who tend to advocate purgative schemes of reform.³

² My two quotations come from *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), pp. 15, 256–57. See also Bloom’s *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996).

³ I omit entirely, here, the issue of spirituality in politics, except to recall the damage done by the Christian anti-Jewish polemic focusing on the enmity of spirit to the letter of the (divine) law. Carl Schmitt is not wrong when he writes in *Der Begriff des Politischen* [The Concept of the Political] (1932): “All concepts in the spiritual sphere, including the concept of spirit, are intrinsically pluralistic and can only be understood by studying their concrete political circumstances [sind . . . nur aus der konkreten politischen Existenz heraus zu verstehen]. . . . If the center of spiritual life in the last four centuries has constantly displaced itself, then, as a consequence of that, all concepts and

To write adequately about spiritual experience—or what is named such—would need the tolerance and comprehensiveness of a William James. The task of distinguishing between spirituality and spiritism seems endless. The question of where spirituality is today is complicated by the increasing predominance of visual texts, of the movies. How “spiritual” is a film like *Seven*, written by Andrew Walker? It is one of many staging the city as an evil place that requires purification through a punisher or avenger. Based on the Christian typology of the Seven Deadly Sins, it tracks a murderer’s grisly serial killings in pursuit of a spiritual quest. The killer himself imposes the scheme of the Seven Deadly Sins on randomly chosen victims, and the surprise is that, though outwitting the police, he allows himself to be killed at the end as a sacrifice to his own scheme—because he embodies one of those sins. There is no spiritism here of the supernatural kind; but there is a borderline sense of the uncanny, as in so many detective stories, where a fiendish force seems to outmaneuver human reason. The rational wins only because the murderer (or author) wants it to, in order to save the concept of motivation. *Seven* cannot be dismissed as the gothic exploitation of religious mania: it is a ghastly hyperbole demonstrating how sinister that mania becomes when the spiritual life runs amok, when its claim to mark and fight evil is seized by a despairing intensity that leads to flamboyant acts of proclamation.⁴

In general, the detective story format of looking for clues that do not yield easily to looking, and mock in their cunning character the noisy, clumsy pursuit of the police, points to the need for a different kind of *attention*. In such films there is a glut—gluttony—of sight that cuts across all attempts to render these moral

words have constantly changed their meaning, and it is necessary to remember the plurisignification of each word and concept” (my translation).

⁴ The criminal as artist (and artist as criminal) is not a rare theme in modern literature. See Joel Black, *The Aesthetics of Murder: A Study in Romantic Literature and Contemporary Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

fables spiritual.⁵ Perhaps the spiritual can only be caught at the margin, glimpsed, not focused on: it evades being incorporated, or fixed as a purely visual event. In *Seven*, there is a short moment in a police station where, quite implausibly, strains of classical music are heard—an allusion, probably, to a more striking scene in another film, *The Shawshank Redemption*, where music of that kind transports the prisoners in the yard to a world they have not known and may never know.⁶ Brushed by the wings of that music, they stand still, in their inner space, attentive; then the miraculous notes evaporate into the grim round of their daily existence.

My aim is to cover only one aspect of spiritual experience, that which involves “listening” to texts. This aspect of spirituality is linked to my previous examples through the quality of attention that texts, canonical or noncanonical, foster.

Many have claimed that something read, even as fragmented as a single sentence come upon by chance, has made a radical difference and set them on a new course with spiritual implications. This happened most famously to Augustine; the *tolle lege* (take up and read) episode from his *Confessions* recalls the magical practice of the *sortes Virgilianae* or *sortes Biblicae*, in which you opened the sacred book and decided on a course of action by taking the verse that met your eye as an oracle. The practice survived into Methodism and was known to George Eliot, whose Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede* seeks divine guidance “by opening the Bible at hazard.”⁷ Saul Lieberman, a distinguished scholar of the Talmud, speculated that

⁵ Only Ingmar Bergman’s late TV film, *The Blessed*, has the courage to portray a religious *folie à deux* culminating in a self-mutilation, the eyes being literally put out. More than Baruch Spinoza, adduced by Bloom, this film presents a love of God that is the opposite of “The American Religion.”

⁶ Strains of music like that are also heard in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Weekend* and in Roberto Benigni’s *Life Is Beautiful*.

⁷ Eliot, *Adam Bede* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 82. (I am told that this kind of divination was still practiced—at least into the 1960s—in Methodist circles of the American South.) Efraim Sicher’s important essay “George Eliot’s Rescripting of Scripture: The ‘Ethics of Reading’ in *Silas Marner*,” *Simeia* 77 (1997): 243–70, links biblical interpretation of this kind to the larger issue of the relation of chance and design in both secular and sacred texts.

this sort of divination was also behind the curious notion of *bat kol*, echo, literally “daughter of the voice [of God],” heard in an era when He was no longer audible, or, as the Bible puts it, open vision had ceased—the era of post-prophetic teachers who between the third century B.C.E. and the fifth C.E. were the founding fathers of orthodox Judaism.

The perplexed soul would go out of the house of study and the first sounds heard were to be a deliverance, indicating the path to be followed. Some of these sounds must have penetrated the scholar’s house; but perhaps his devoted attention, his *kavanah*, kept them out. The celestial *bat kol* could also “appear” in dreams or daydreams.⁸ This audism has something desperate about it; it is clear, from such incidents, that “the spirit blows where it lists,” or that, to cite Bob Dylan, the answer is blowing in the wind.

In order to respect secular experience, to see in it a potential hiding-place of the spirit—not unlike the way that art after Marcel Duchamp values trashy occasions—we eavesdrop everywhere. Chance mingles inextricably—as so often in novelistic plots—with a potential ethics. The surrealists say that such encounters reveal an *hasard objectif*. Today we don’t necessarily consult the

⁸ See Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950). One of the voice’s most famous manifestations is recorded in *Berakhot* 3a of the Babylonian Talmud, where Rabbi Yose is said to hear it in the ruins of Jerusalem, cooing like a dove and lamenting: “Woe to me for I have destroyed my house and burned my temple and have exiled my children.” The scene here is clearly an elegiac one, and the *bat kol* generally is mild rather than a cause for panic or fear. According to the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, the *bat kol* was already on occasion heard in the biblical period: mid-rashic sources gave it a role, for example, in Solomon’s judgment of the two women claiming the same child. The episode, in book 8 of Augustine’s *Confessions*, is especially remarkable in that the voice is both external (“Take up and read”) and textual (“I seized, opened, and in silence read that section, on which my eyes first fell . . .”). Augustine mentions the case of Saint Antony, who, entering the room where the Gospel was being read, “received the admonition as if what was being read was spoken to him.” (I quote from the Pusey translation of *The Confessions*.) Antony was the first of the desert fathers, and Augustine must be referring to an aural episode recounted in *The Life and Affairs of Our Holy Father Antony* ascribed to Athanasius of Alexandria (mid fourth century). We are told that Antony, entering the church just as the Gospels were being read, “heard the Lord saying to the rich man, *If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.*” Athanasius continues: “It was as if by God’s design he held the saints in his recollection, and as if the passage were read on his account.”

“bouche d’ombre” of Virgil or the Bible and turn them into a lottery; but the world, the very world from which we seek refuge, still opens to divulge accidental epiphanies. Modern Age spiritism of this kind may have begun with Charles Baudelaire’s *Fusées* (Fireworks): it describes a type of trance that parallels a depth experience also yielded by hashish, but extends it like a magical varnish over anything and everything, including “la première phrase venue, si vos yeux tombent sur un livre” (the first-come phrase, if you happen to look into a book).⁹ Poetry itself, Baudelaire suggests, is the product of an intelligence lit up by an intoxication of this kind.

Indeed, for both orthodox scholars and psychedelic adventurers the act of emerging from a period of concentration, of isolated study or brooding, into the promiscuous clamor of the street or the sad variety of books one admires and cannot make one’s own seems to hide a sensuous need, the wish for a coup de foudre, a choice as absolute as Emily Dickinson’s

The soul selects her own society
 Then shuts the Door—
 To her divine Majority—
 Present no more—(303)¹⁰

Love too amazes, akin to Grace, because it occurs involuntarily among the impossible diversity of human beings with whom one wishes to be intimate. As we have seen with the Jonestown sui-

⁹ He also uses the word “spirituel” to describe it, which connotes in French both spiritual and witty (the latter word reinforcing the intellectual character of the experience) and evokes a sense of strange “correspondences” between different events or perceptual phenomena (sounds and colors, for instance). Swedenborgianism (Balzac, for instance, made it in the early 1830s the subject of *Serafita* and *Louis Lambert*), Thomas de Quincey (his *Opium Eater*, which Baudelaire translated), and Edgar Allan Poe contributed their influence throughout the nineteenth century: in fact, the attempt to view poetry as a highly conscious hallucinogenic gateway came close to being programmatic in French symbolism. In the United States too, spiritistic phenomena, including Turning Tables, assumed fashionable proportion from the 1850s on.

¹⁰ *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1960), p. 143.

cides, the need to love, or to cleave to a strong, ordering voice, whether that of the guru or the text he claims to embody, is essential to this kind of spirituality. We too easily neglect the fact, however, that the promise of life, of rebirth, can produce its own rigor mortis: in Dickinson's words, a closing of the valves of attention "Like Stone."

Myself, I have never graduated beyond fortune cookies; and even those lost their charm when I opened one and received the all too probable message: "What you have eaten isn't chicken." But I admit that, being a student of literature, and reading a lot, in the canon as well as miscellaneously, there are times when a passage has taken my breath away: when I have been tempted to call the impact of such a text spiritual and supposed that others would also call it such. The first case I will take up is perhaps too good, in that the subject-matter is already in the religious realm. I read Cardinal Newman's *Dream of Gerontius* again, a play structured as a *viaticum* or ultimate rite of passage: it describes the individual soul passing from the instant of death to the judgment seat. It was not so much Newman's daring conception that held me, as he shows the dying man moving like a somnambulist along that fatal path, accompanied by the voices of the funeral mass and the intercession of orders of angels. What held me was an early moment in this process, when Gerontius expresses his terror: terror of dying, *timor mortis*, but also of God's judgment closing in. Newman places heroism at life's end, as it is overwhelmed by pangs related to the physical agony of death, pangs that contain an intuition of damnation:

I can no more; for now it comes again
That sense of ruin, which is worse than pain,
That masterful negation and collapse
Of all that makes me man. . . .

In this prayerful monologue Gerontius does not address himself to God, Christ, Mary, or other intercessors—till he is seized once more by a spasm of fear. The comfort of address, of being called or

being able to call upon, is removed, as he begins a free fall, dying alone, without steady hand or voice:

as though I bent
Over the dizzy brink
Of some sheer infinite descent;
Or worse, as though
Down, down for ever I was falling through
The solid framework of created things. . . .

Like Gerontius, at that moment, we realize how ordinary life bears us up; so that if the term “spiritual” can enter appropriately here, it also refers to the gratitude we owe created or material things for their support. The earth generally does not give way; and we trust our body, for a time. There are intimations, however, that this confidence cannot last: either at the end of our life, or at the end of days, or indeed at any time in the course of individual existence, we are deserted, a trapdoor opens, the pit yawns. Then spirits enter or reenter, and the immediate frontier is death.

In considering the colorful aspects of free-floating spirituality, as well as that closely linked to an organized religion like Catholicism or Judaism, I will try to avoid cornering myself into a decisive definition of the phenomenon itself. Like Nathaniel Hawthorne in “The Celestial Railroad,” I am anxious not to become a Mr. Smooth-it-away. I suggest, then, that we often seize on one event, whether disturbing or exhilarating or both, that cuts across a relatively careless, wasteful, or ignorant life. We focus on what was revealed: on what turned us around, not necessarily from bad to good but toward a sense of purpose and identity. The quality of attention so aroused is not inevitably the outcome of a religious exercise: it can involve acts of attention described by Nicolas de Malebranche as “the natural prayer of the soul.”¹¹ Or there is John

¹¹ Cf. Simon Weil: “L’attention absolument sans mélange est prière,” in *La pesanteur et la grâce*, intro. by Gustave Thibon (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1948), p. 135.

Keats's wonderful analogy: "I go among the Fields and catch a glimpse of a stoat or a fieldmouse peeping out of the withered grass—the creature hath a purpose and its eyes are bright with it."¹²

These accidental and defining events can be textual. Readers, poetically inclined, yet also distracted by passages that seem to stand out, must find a way to go where these lead. Such readerly absorption is, I think, becoming rarer, not just because books have multiplied and the World Wide Web is there to be manipulated, but also because film has become a major art form; and film is panoramic, requiring a more diffused as well as demanding attention, or one that hypnotizes through a variable zooming and focusing. The tyranny of the eye, the simple pleasure of filmic omnipotence, combines distraction with a faux-semblant of concentration.

Of course, some intensity of the visual has always existed: the use of religious icons or the meditative "exercises" of Ignatius of Loyola tell us how important images, inner or outer, have been. Or, as in D. H. Lawrence's "Bavarian Gentians," written a few months before his death, the coming darkness renders the visible more visible, counterpart of a kindly light purely and intensely nature's own and that acts as a *psychopompos*:

black lamps from the halls of Dis, burning dark blue
giving off darkness, blue darkness, as Demeter's pale
lamps give off light,
lead me then, lead the way.¹³

Yet unless the discipline of reading has first come about, without being routinized by print culture, it is doubtful we could even approach an analysis of "spiritual value," at least in our civilization.

¹² To the George Keatses, March 19, 1819.

¹³ There are two versions of "Bavarian Gentians" (as well as related drafts with the title "Glory of Darkness"). I am quoting from *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p. 697.

In many conversion experiences, as William James has shown, terror and turmoil are aroused or allayed when a voice is heard uttering Scripture words.¹⁴ Poetry's dense or enigmatic phrases have a parallel effect; they often induce a contemplative mood, asking to be carried longer in the womb of the mind, and do not bring a premature and disenchanting clarity to birth.

Is spirituality, then, linked to the sense of the individual as such being found, or found out? That those affected feel directly called or addressed is probably more important than recognizing whose voice it is, or the exact content of the call. A sudden, mysterious utterance outflanks our resistance to being identified, or known too well. Is not the oldest—and youngest—game that of hide-and-seek? Shock, surprise, self-consciousness, unanticipated arousals of guilt or joy, even a negative correlative of these, "Blank misgivings of a Creature / Moving about in worlds not realized" (William Wordsworth, "Ode. Intimations of Immortality.")—such radical moments, not always verbal, though demanding a verbal response, or a temporal, sustained act of consciousness, may not constitute the spiritual as such or bind it to the ordinary life we lead. Yet they furnish a disruption from which we date a conscious birth.

The individual is always singled out, is always one of three stopped by an Ancient Mariner, transported by a musical phrase, "looked at" by a work of art, as when the archaic torso of Apollo admonishes Rainer Maria Rilke: "You must change your life." There is often a heightened sense of place or virtual embodiment. The spiritual in those moments approaches ecstasy, but does not leave the body except to enter, at the same time, a specific visionary expanse. So Jacob at Beth-el: "How full of awe this place!" (Genesis 28:17). Or the flashbacks of trauma: "I think I would have no trouble even now locating the spot on the median strip of Commonwealth Avenue [in Boston] where they [the repressed ex-

¹⁴ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), Lecture IX, "Conversion."

periences of many years ago] emerged out of that darkness. . . .”¹⁵ Krzysztof Kielsowski’s film *The Double Life of Veronique* intimates how strong and sensuous the pull is toward union with a second self, which is always in another place, and whose absent presence is felt as a loss, even a disembodiment. This ghostly, complementary other becomes the obscure object of desire: it is endlessly imagined, mourned, pursued. Aesthetics classifies such feelings as sublime; religion generally as full of awe. They exalt, terrify, and humble at the same time.

The torment of individuation seems to be essential even when the newly minted person flees from it into the arms of a brotherhood, sisterhood, or God. It is notoriously difficult, as we all know, to distinguish the sense of election from mania. Then how do we get from such instances of spiritual experience to a communal bond without betraying or falsifying them? To hear voices is a form of madness; random textual surprises are borderline cases that interpellate the reader and can be amplified as inner quotations, cryptomania, or internalized commands. Yet once we have redeemed that madness by turning to methodical exegesis, are we still in the precarious domain of being singled out, or do we simply confirm what we already know through doctrine or doxis? Has astonishment or awe turned into dogmatic faith?¹⁶

We should not underestimate the importance, negative or positive, of hermeneutics in religion: an activity that flexes the meaning of a canonical text, as we seek wisdom or, more dangerously, an altered identity. The methodical character of hermeneutics tries to minimize eccentric responses by establishing a true, authoritative, original meaning. Yet everyone who has ventured into the field of interpretation, even when it represents itself as a discipline or a

¹⁵ Brooke Hopkins, “A Question of Child Abuse,” *Raritan Review* (Winter 1993): 35.

¹⁶ Cf. A. J. Heschel in *God in Search of Man* (New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955), who goes so far as to assert: “Awe rather than faith is the cardinal attitude of the religious Jew” (p. 77). He identifies awe with *Yir’at shamayim*, or what philosophers of religion after Rudolf Otto call the *tremendum*.

science, knows the polyphony if not cacophony of exegesis, and how endlessly interesting it is to try to meet the challenge of texts. Though we take for granted that the voice of God is no longer heard in the way the boy Samuel heard it, or which would make the interpreter reply “Here I am,” a part of us returns to certain texts as to vestiges in which strength of spirit condenses itself and could achieve what Robert Frost memorably called “counter-love, original response.”

I have given my talk the title “Text and Spirit” because it has always puzzled me how dependent spirituality is, not only on books—necessary for cultural transmission, once there is dispersion, or as the oral tradition becomes too complex—but on textual issues. The rivalry of religion with religion could not continue without systems of interpretation that activate in specific ways the faith-community’s Scripture, which may be a book shared by several religions.

It must already be clear, in any case, that there is a link between text and spirit when textual incidents, in the form of fragments or citations, are like a voice falling into us, taking hold of us. Though elaborated and restored to their first or another context, such *audita* remain snatches from a ghostly conversation or a more absolute book. I have represented this receptivity to spiritualized sound, to “the secret that has become audible in language,”¹⁷ as a psychic and existential fact. Moreover, I have stressed its contingency, as religion itself often does, when it depicts a divine intervention: a prophet is unexpectedly called, a commanding voice is heard, a rebus or inscription appears.

¹⁷ “[D]as hörbar gewordene Geheimnis in der Sprache” is one of Gershom Scholem’s formulations. Scholem does not mean that the secret is revealed or directly expressed in language: it becomes perceptible *as* a secret, or, as Sigrid Weigel says, it points to the “Bedeutungspur eines Bedeutungslosen,” which transcends “Mitteilung and Ausdruck.” See Scholem, *Judaica III: Studien zur jüdischen Mystik* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 271; and Weigel, “Scholem’s Gedichte und seine Gedichtstheorie: Klage, Adressierung, Gabe und das Problem einer Sprache in unserer Zeit,” *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, Sonderheft (1999): 49. Walter Benjamin’s well-known fascination with the quotational form, his wish to write a book consisting only of citations, is also relevant here.

But I have also said that the orthodox hermeneutics we have inherited, while respecting life-changing responses to source-texts with canonical status, seeks to limit these.¹⁸ Though some passages are more astonishing than others, and though, through unknown mediations, even ordinary biblical pericopes can have a startling effect, both religious and literary theories of interpretation take much pride in the doctrine of context—a predetermined context, shielding the reader from subjectivity and speculative excess. Similarly, in evangelical or charismatic movements, where startling conversions—even convulsions—are expected, what takes place is, as it were, programmed in, and becomes a sacred or, at worst, sacrilegious mimicry.

The force of the acoustic fragment, then, surprises, because it comes from outside, even when that outside is within us. It does not matter how we analyze the psychic fact; what is important is that this metonymic textual condensation, this appearance of word as vision, *leads back* to a source-text, or is the germ, as in creative writing, of a *leading forward*, a transformative moment that creates its own narrative support.¹⁹

¹⁸ The opposite is true of the Kabbalah, which often “relativizes” the letters in Scripture, claiming the Torah was originally, as one mystic claimed, “a heap of unarranged letters” combining in different forms according to the state of the world. See Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, tr. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), pp. 74–83. It is Emmanuel Levinas’s distinction that he sees in non-Kabbalistic midrashic calls to “seek and decipher” an orthodox hermeneutics that does not sacrifice multiplicity of meaning: “That the Word of the living God may be heard in diverse ways does not mean only that Revelation measures up to those listening to it, but that this measuring up measures up the Revelation: the multiplicity of irreducible people is necessary to the dimensions of meaning; the multiple meanings are multiple people” (*Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, tr. Gary D. Mole [London: Athlone, 1994], p. 134). This is reminiscent of Isaac Luria’s development of the conception that the 600,000 souls that received the Torah at Sinai are disseminated by transmigration into “sparks” present in every generation of Israel, and that “[i]n the Messianic age, every single man in Israel will read the Torah in accordance with the meaning peculiar to his root” (Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 65).

¹⁹ Jacques Lacan, seeking to define the action of the unconscious, disputes the Christian commonplace that the letter kills while the spirit gives life. He would like to know “how the spirit could live without the letter.” “Even so,” he adds, “the pretensions of the spirit would remain unassailable if the letter had not shown us that it produces all the effects of truth in man without involving the spirit at all.” In short, Freud discovered that this “spiritual” effect of the letter points to the existence of an unconscious process.

In talking of spirit, we have an obligation to go first to where the word *ruach* appears in the Hebrew Bible.²⁰ After “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,” Genesis discloses that “the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep.” The *ruach elohim* that “hovered over the face of the waters” is close to that darkness on the face of the deep. But this might suggest that chaos, the *tobuwabobu* of unformed earth and water, may have preexisted; in which case the creation would not be *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, but only a form-giving event. The Bible’s opening phrasing defeats that thought; and the “spirit of God,” with the formless darkness mere backdrop, manifests itself as a commanding voice instantly originating light. Yet even here, in this place of power, “Light is called, not torn forth.”²¹

In the second chapter of Genesis, there is a subtle parallel to the spirit hovering over the face of the waters: “there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground” (2:6). This is a transitional sentence that could be joined either to the previous verse describing the barren, soon to be fertile, earth or to the next verse that retells the creation of humankind: “Then the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” The words for breath and soul are not *ruach* but respectively *neshamah* and *nefesh*. As a picture, then, of the creative act, there is some-

²⁰ There is a wonderful feeling on reading that ancient text, which Buber and Rosenzweig capture in their translation of it: a feeling of the sheer impress of each word, as if it were newly created. We never quite lose the sense that reading the original aloud and understanding it remain parallel yet separate activities, despite generations of effort to have sound and sense converge. At the same time, what is communicated by the Hebrew Bible is, to borrow Goethe’s phrase, an “open mystery.” Or, as Levinas remarks, transcendence is intelligible.

²¹ John Hollander, *The Work of Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 37. (No wonder the Gospel of John, with its more ecstatic quest for union with God, identifies logos and light.) Hollander suggests two things in his chapter on “Originality” from which I take this: that comparative religious (cosmogonic) texts could make us expect a cataclysmic account of creation, and that perhaps such an account, revised, may have been the original version. What matters, though, is that the text as it stands does not entirely efface this suppositious trace of a “more” original account of the origin.

thing gentler here and more intimate: a proximity of divine to human one does not feel in the first creation-of-man account (Genesis 1:26–29), despite the theme of *zelem elohim*, of being created in God's image. In fact, where we might expect the *ruach* to reappear, as in Genesis 3:8, we find instead a voice, "the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden." The earlier depiction showed the spirit of God as a hovering force in the formless darkness; in the later picture, however, the mist rising from the ground and watering the face of the earth is an image taken directly from nature, and the creation that follows is distinctly anthropomorphic, in that its subject is literally the shaping of a man, while the very art of description is friendly and naturalistic. Genesis 3:8, moreover, augments the idea of a relation between *ruach elohim* and voice, the voice that generates light. Without, to be sure, a definite body, that *ruach*-voice now addresses and interpellates the lapsed human being, an act that can be said to call it to consciousness or conscience.

If my analysis is correct, *ruach* is not anthropomorphic (it is, if anything, closer to theriomorphic), though as a speaking and intelligible voice it moves toward a pathos at once human and sublime. *Ruach* never forfeits its quality as a *tremendum*.²² This is borne out when we enter the later, more historical era of Judges, where the voice of God, while still manifest, often escapes those who search for it. The episodes that focus on the relation between Samuel, Saul, and God are particularly disturbing: indeed, here the verb *lidrosb*, the root of "midrash," meaning to seek out the voice, appears.²³

The episodes are disturbing because while God's relation to Samuel remains familiar, allowing responsive words of obedience,

²² On that notion in the history of religion, see Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), trans. John W. Harvey (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1959).

²³ See First Samuel 9:9, perhaps interpolated; but Saul's name in the Hebrew suggests asking, most clearly after Saul's death in Samuel 1:28:6: "When Saul inquired of the Lord [*vajishb'al Shaul be-adonai*], the Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets," which leads into the episode of the ghost-seer of Endor.

the pressure on Saul is terrifying. Saul is an *am ha'aretz*, going to the seer for a mundane, bumpkin-like purpose—"Can you give me guidance where my asses are?"—and being confronted by a fearful demand, a question that is not a question at all but an astonishing, exalting imposition: "And on whom is all the desire of Israel? Is it not on thee, and on all thy father's house?" (Samuel 1:9:20). Samuel then predicts Saul's journey home, which culminates in his joining a band of prophets: "And the spirit of the Lord will come mightily upon thee, and thou shalt prophesy and be turned into another man" (Samuel 1:10:1–7), where "come mightily upon" translates *zalachat*, "seize" thee or "fall upon" thee (cf. Samuel 1:11:6 and 1:16:13). A power of transformation is evoked, akin to that of the *ruach* in the first lines of Genesis.²⁴

Clearly, the open vision and voice are passing from Israel. The presence of God returns in the prophets, but with more violence, ambivalence, chanciness, and—in Abraham Heschel's sense—pathos: so the *devar-adonai* is like a burning fire consuming Jeremiah's heart and bones (Jeremiah 20:9). God's *ruach* reverts to something of its aboriginal appearance: we are made to feel its incumbent mystery and transforming violence more than its intimacy.

It is well known that the sealing of the canon of Hebrew Scripture is linked to a recession, if not disappearance, of prophetic voice and vision. With the destruction of the First Temple, then decisively with the destruction of the Second and Bar Kochba's defeat, inquiry of God must go through "midrash." The Sages may still be looking for asses, but these include the Messiah's donkey. Those rabbis are not shy; they assert on the basis of Deuteronomy 30:11–15 that the Law is not "in heaven" but among them in the earthly tribunal; indeed, they abjure the authority of the *bat kol* and seek to shut down the prophetic impulse, even as Saul banished the witches whom he was nevertheless forced to consult.

²⁴ In Saul's fits of anger against David, when he seeks to kill him, the *ruach* is cited as a cause, and the English translation has to parse it as "an evil spirit from the Lord."

This means, in effect, that spirit has become textualized; inquiry of the Lord, in the post-prophetic and post-priestly era, is mediated by the recitation, reading, and contemplative study of Talmud Torah.

This multilayered commentary continues to call itself an oral tradition, however, and claims descent from Sinai; the image of direct transmission, through the voice of God or daughter of that voice,²⁵ is never entirely given up. To read in the Talmud, or to extend its inquiry, becomes a religious experience itself. Priest and prophet are replaced by the figure of the rabbi of exemplary learning who walks with the Law (*halakhab*, the path), even as the righteous of old had walked and conversed with God.²⁶

The rabbinic revolution, as it has been called, seals the canon and draws the consequences of that closure.²⁷ In the Sages' own hyperbole God is made to say of an errant Israel, "Would that you forsake me, and keep my Torah!" (*Lamentations Rabbah*, Introduction, chap. 2). This expresses, of course, a fear that *God* has forsaken the community; in captivity and dispersion, only the Torah remains.²⁸ But whatever dryness of spirit ensues, whatever constriction and

²⁵ No one has explained why it should be "daughter" of the voice: in the masculine atmosphere of rabbinic religion the Shechinah is another instance of the feminine as a figurative religious influence. It is possible to speculate that the rabbinic founders recognized that, in a normal human context, voice had a distinctly feminine inflection, and in most cases tried to guard against that "profane" element. How strongly the metaphor of voice persists, even where there is no sacred text, and can be none, is shown when Emil Fackenheim adds to the revealed commandments or the 613 *mitzvot* the "Commanding Voice of Auschwitz" forbidding Jews to give Hitler a posthumous victory by abandoning Judaism, or escaping from the "intolerable contradictions" of historical existence after Auschwitz. See his *The Jewish Return into History: Reflections in the Age of Auschwitz and a New Jerusalem* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978).

²⁶ In the *Zohar* this peripatetic notion becomes a technical expression "to illuminate the path [*derech*]." For an interesting discussion of how prophecy becomes exegesis, see Emmanuel Levinas, *Transcendence et intelligibilité* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1996), pp. 63–67.

²⁷ The best account of what that closure meant is found in Moshe Halbertal, *The People of the Book: Canon, Meaning and Authority* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

²⁸ One other aspect of divinity, however is imaginatively discovered and developed: the Shechinah or "dwelling" of God, closely linked to Torah. The Shechinah becomes a complex and consolatory personification elaborated by the Kabbalah into the feminine aspect of the divine.

narrowness of purpose, the act of reading strengthens and takes on a quality of prayerful recitation: of a crying to God in words of the canonized text—in His own voice, as it were—as well as a listening for His response.

This sort of feeling may even be discerned in the exegetical method of Midrash. It is true that its tendency to atomize Scripture is the historical result of an editing process that conveys with great economy the interpretive wisdom of generations of rabbis. But does not this style of exposition have something unique? One might think that how Midrash usually atomizes Scripture would diminish the latter's eloquence. Its divisions of Scripture certainly sin against plot or story, the very features that entice us to look at the Bible as literature. What matters in Midrash is the verse, or part of the verse, even a single word or letter. Meaning is achieved by the montage of biblical patches. Gershom Scholem once called the "mosaic style" of the great halakhists "poetic prose in which linguistic scraps of sacred texts are whirled around kaleidoscope like."²⁹ Yet a sense remains that these are written voices accumulating, though fragmented, as one voice.³⁰

²⁹ Scholem goes on: "and are journalistically, polemically, descriptively, and even erotically profaned"—but this part of his sentence must refer to Karl Kraus's style, which he sees as being derived from "the Jews' relationship to language." See *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), p. 107.

³⁰ By now we accept the atomism of Midrash as the natural form of Jewish commentary; a good way of collecting and ordering the combined wisdom of generations of rabbis and learned readers to the present day. Yet its methodical segmentation, which tears a seamless robe or exposes the stitching, and even sows contradictions (though only to resolve them), equalizes all verses and sharpens concentration. It is as if *bat kol* were still at work, allowing disjunct fragments and phrases to circulate and catch us. There is, to be sure, sustained symbolism and story-telling in the Kabbalah and, later, in Hasidism; and the genre of the retold Bible never dies. But a sense remains that each verse, phrase, word, letter (and letter-ornamentation) counts; the segmentation is a synoptic wager. Moshe Idel has emphasized that in Abulafia's prophetic Kabbalah (*kabbalah nevu'it*), the Hebrew of the Bible is considered as hiding the names of God, and knowledge of Him is revealed not by studying its language as a conventional human sign-system (an accommodated *lashon b'nei adam*) but by engaging in a contemplation that leads to so radical a deconstruction, or creation of new signifiers, that it engenders a striking metaphor: "Read the entire Torah, both forwards and backwards, and spill the blood of the languages."

What I have tried to do is sketch a minimalist theory of spirituality, influenced mainly by the Jewish commentary tradition. Some of you will be disappointed by this modest approach. Spirituality is a word with great resonance, yet I have not extracted for you large, exalted structures of sensibility or discourse. Were I to do so, on another occasion, I would have to respect an entire oeuvre or midrashic sequence and show how words dim the eyes as well as refresh them, insofar as visuality and idolatry may be linked. I would have to deal with the issue of anthro/gyno/morphism—or divine pathos—as a fertile, if always disputed, wellspring of religious energy, and stay longer with the way *ruach* breaks into voice, or becomes voice-feeling, close to the heart of the throat, yet threatening to turn the human response into a stammer. The very word “spirituality,” moreover, still seems somewhat foreign to traditional Jewish thinking and observance: it got preempted by Pauline Christianity. Only to Emmanuel Levinas might it be applied: his theology evokes a vigilance, even an insomnia, that keeps human finitude, traumatized by the infinite, from enclosing itself in “the hegemonic and atheistic self” for which life reduces to equanimity.³¹

There is one further generalization I want to venture. It returns to something almost as equivocal as dreams, namely the gift of speech and what Dante and Franz Rosenzweig both call its “grammar”: voiced thinking that becomes writing and seeks a coincidence of spirit and letter. That coincidence is rare and demands a price—an engagement that takes time, perhaps a lifetime. For there is no guarantee that poetic words, ancient or modern, will

³¹ See, e.g., *Nouvelles lectures talmudiques* (Editions de Minuit, 1996), pp. 28–29. Also: “[P]eut-être cette théologie s’annonce-t-elle déjà dans l’éveil même à l’insomnie, à la veille et à l’inquiète vigilance du psychisme avant que la finitude de l’être, blessé par l’infini, ne soit porté à se recueillir dans un Moi, hégémonique et athée, du savoir” (*Transcendance et intelligibilité*, p. 29). But the most difficult task would be to engage with issues of purity and impurity; not only to take up arms against the charge of Jewish literalism as a blind or imperfect reception of spirit but also to examine the emphasis on biblical and rabbinic Judaism on the efficacy, practical or mystical, or laws of purity that seek to bring Jews into the Presence as a holy people.

make sense, or the same sense, to different readers throughout history. In fact, the more earnest our attention to language, the more the conventional links dissipate, and a nakedness appears in the words as words, one that both arouses and threatens the process of intellection.

We often feel, then, that biblical words say too much to be received: their anagogical force, while helping to break what Rosenzweig calls the shell of the mystery (“die Schale des Geheimnisses”),³² can make us feel as poor as Edward Taylor, the Puritan poet:

In my befogg’s dark Phancy, Clouded minde,
Thy Bits of Glory, packt in Shreds of Praise
My Messenger [i.e., his poetry] doth lose, losing his Wayes.³³

We cannot presume to win spiritual coherence lightly, when the spirit itself is so often figured as a preternatural, disruptive intervention. The not-foundering of communication under that pressure is unusual, for speech could turn into nothing more than a contiguous mass of alien sounds.³⁴ Perhaps, then, shards, *klipot*, Edward Taylor’s “Bits of Glory . . . Shreds of Praise,” must suffice.

Let me end by recounting what happened to Martin Buber. His path to the great Buber-Rosenzweig translation of the Bible was

³² Rosenzweig applies the expression to the creation that follows upon God’s word. “Gott sprach. Das ist das zweite. Es ist nicht der Anfang. . . . Gott schuf. Das ist das Neue. Hier zerbricht die Schale des Geheimnisses” (*Der Stern der Erlösung* [Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1954]), II.1.31.

³³ “Meditation Twenty-eight,” in *The Poetical Works of Edward Taylor*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 139.

³⁴ Another way of putting it is to say that its coherence, or sense, might disappear, and that the fallout from any false imposition of meaning could lead to a cosmic sort of skepticism: “If the sun or moon should doubt / They’d immediately go out” (Blake, *Aurigues of Innocence*). Philology, when it becomes inspired criticism, senses the lacuna in a text or the wrong word that has filled it.

very complex, but one episode stands out.³⁵ Well-acquainted in early youth with the Hebrew original and then with several translations including Martin Luther's, he noticed shortly after his Bar Mitzvah that he read the Bible with literary enjoyment—which upset him so much that for years he did not touch any translation but tried to return to the *Urtext*, the original Hebrew. By then, however, the words had lost their familiar aspect and seemed harsh, alien, confrontational: “sie sprangen mir ins Gesicht.”³⁶

Thirteen years later (one thinks, therefore, of a second Bar Mitzvah), Buber attended Theodor Herzl's funeral and came home feeling oppressed. As he reached for one book after another, everything seemed voiceless and meaningless (“stumm”). Then, as if by chance, and without expectation, Buber opened the Bible—and happened upon the story of how King Jehoiakim had Jeremiah's scroll read and consigned piece by piece to a brazier's fire (Jeremiah 36:21ff.); this went to Buber's heart, and he began to face the Hebrew once more, conquering each word anew, as if it had never been translated. “I read [the Hebrew] aloud, and by reading it this way I got free of the whole Scripture, which now was purely *Migrat'*.”³⁷ A few years later, while reading a biblical chapter aloud, the feeling came over him that it was being spoken for the first time and had not yet been written down, and did not have to be

³⁵ I am indebted for this example to Herbert Marks, “Schrift und Mikra,” in *Logos und Buchstabe: Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit in Judentum und Christentum der Antike*, ed. Gerhard Sellin and François Vouga (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1996), pp. 103–26. See also the same essay in English: “Writing as Calling,” *New Literary History* 29, no. 1 (1998): 15–37.

³⁶ I am using both the German version as printed in the appendix to Anna Elizabeth Bauer, *Rosenzweigs Sprachdenken im Stern der Erlösung und in seiner Korrespondenz mit Martin Buber zur Verdeutschung der Schrift* (Freiburg dissertation), published in the series *Europäische Hochschulschriften* (Frankfurt a/M: Peter Lang, 1992), pp. 447–63, and the English translation (which I sometimes modify) found as appendix a in *Scripture and Translation: Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig*, tr. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 205–19. Buber's “[The Hebrew words] sprang into my face” is ironic in the sense that what the religious seeker desires is precisely to “see” God, to diminish the *bester panim*.

³⁷ *Scripture and Translation*, p. 208.

written down. “The book lay before me, but the book melted into voice.”³⁸

Buber has not left us a reflection on why the “found” passage from Jeremiah affected him so powerfully, and he does not refer explicitly to the *bat kol*.³⁹ But his stated wish to “get free of” Scripture by first converting it into an aural experience is remarkably candid. The Hebrew root *gara’* in *migra’* may have helped as a first step toward a retranslation of the Bible that challenges Luther’s strongly vernacular version.⁴⁰ *Qara’*, as in *Q’ryat Sh’ma*, denotes the action of calling, of a crying out or reciting, as well as naming: the content of this prayer is, after all, a naming of God. *Qara’* as “reading” never loses its residual meaning of “calling out.” Moreover, in the episode from Jeremiah, the verb *qara* (when spelled with ayin rather than aleph) is a near-homonym of “tearing”—a sacrilegious act on the part of the king, but one that recalls two distantly related events. First, the destroyed scroll is rewritten by Jeremiah’s scribe Baruch, a doubling that could recall that of Sinai’s tablets, as well as raise the issue of the relation of written to oral Torah. Both Buber and Rosenzweig try to express the link between text and spirit in a radical way, one that goes

³⁸ Buber writes typically, in 1936: “das biblische Wort ist von der Situation seiner Gesprochenheit nicht abzulösen, sonst verliert es seine Konkretheit, seine Leiblichkeit. Ein Gebot ist keine Sentenz, sondern eine Andrede . . .” (“Ein Hinweis für Bibelkurse,” *Rundbrief*, quoted by Ernst Simon, in *Aufbau im Untergang: Jüdische Erwachsenenbildung im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland als geistiger Widerstand* [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1959], 67).

³⁹ One should remark the similarity of this to Luther’s experience on discovering through a “found” passage in the prophet Habbakuk the meaning of Romans 1:17: “Now I felt as if I had been born again: the gates had been opened and I had entered Paradise itself,” quoted by Heiko O. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 165. It is significant that this discovery may have come through a “fit” in Wittenberg tower (or its “cloaca”), as Luther came upon that passage in Habbakuk. Once again, and in the most humble or worldly circumstance, a found text leads to a startling inner event.

⁴⁰ In what follows I am indebted to Herbert Marks, “Schrift und Mikra,” pp. 125–26. On Buber’s “metanomianism,” especially in comparison to that of Scholem and Rosenzweig, see Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Law and Sacrament: Ritual Observance in Twentieth-Century Jewish Thought,” in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Sixteenth-Century Revival to the Present*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1987), pp. 317–45.

through the restitution of its oral or aural resonance, but otherwise does not seek to transform the Bible by any type of spiritualizing interpretation. “*Schrift ist Gift* [Script is poison],” Buber quotes Rosenzweig, from a letter shortly before their work of translation began, “holy *Schrift* included. Only when it is translated back into orality can I stomach it.”⁴¹

The episode from Jeremiah, moreover, leads intertextually to Second Kings 22, in which Shaphan the scribe reads the newly discovered book of the law (*sefer batorah*) to King Josiah; but there the king tears his clothes,⁴² not the scroll, and—after instructing Shaphan to “inquire of the Lord” (*dirshu et adonai*, i.e., consult the oracle of the prophetess Hulda)—has it read aloud to the assembled people. This episode occurs in chapter 22 of Second Kings, whose chapter 2 had recounted the story of Elijah and Elisha: how Elijah ascends in a whirlwind and perhaps leaves to his disciple a “double portion of . . . *ruach*.” But when Elisha dies, there is no ascension and no mention of a *ruach* legacy. The fiery chariot and horses carrying Elijah away become, when Elisha is lamented (Second Kings 13:14–15), no more than a figurative allusion, an exclamation (“My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof!”)⁴³ expressing the fear that the *ruach* will depart from Israel with Elisha’s passing. This sequencing of episodes

⁴¹ Rosenzweig’s audacious statement has a traditional root in the reluctance of the Sages to remove the written Torah from the context of an oral tradition, which, while it built fences around the Law, remained open to an awareness that the lava of the Sinaitic revelation had never entirely petrified—that words could be montaged, revoweled, redivided, recontextualized, even their letters (especially in the Kabbalah) permuted.

⁴² Elisha tears his clothes at the passing of Elijah (2:12), as does the king of Israel having read Naaman’s letter (5:7), which might portend a disaster. The *g’ria* is to this day a ritual tearing of clothing on the death of a close relative or a public calamity. Another homonym, the word for “it happened,” enters in 5:7. A question could be raised about the relation between the apparently neutral “it happened that” and the meaning bestowed by the other two homonyms.

⁴³ Since King Josiah, as chapter 23:11 tells us, in his purifying of religious worship, takes away “the horses that the kings of Judah had given to the sun . . . and burned the chariots of the sun with fire,” I would guess that this figure refers not only to Elijah’s strength, by way of a military metaphor, but also to a strength that comes from a God who transcends the idolatry of the “constellations and all the host of heaven” (23:5).

in Kings suggests the transition from prophecy as open vision to a scroll that must provide vision by inquiry, by a midrashic process linked to recitation and learned research. Despite the sporadic persistence of prophecy, the spirit will now have to reside mainly within the temple of a text.

I leave the last word to Levinas, who suggests that talmudic and midrashic literature shows that “prophecy may be the essence of the human, the traumatism that wakes it to its freedom.” Thought itself is said to be an elaboration of such a moment. “It probably begins through traumatisms to which one does not even know how to give a verbal form: a separation, a violent scene, a sudden consciousness of the monotony of time. It is from the reading of books—not necessarily philosophical—that these initial shocks become questions and problems, giving one to think.”⁴⁴ Prophecy and the ethical coincide, where self-identity, challenged by otherness, instructed and roused by particular texts, becomes “la spiritualité de l’esprit.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ From an interview of 1980, in *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 21. For Levinas’s ambivalent relation to literature, see Jill Robbins, *Altered Readings: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999).

⁴⁵ *Nouvelles lectures talmudiques*, pp. 36–37