

“Apikoros” means heretic. Sleuths seek. Is the hero of *Apikoros Sleuth*, to the extent that it is possible to talk about the book having a ‘hero’, an heretical seeker after God?

Does Talmudic discourse admit the reader, or transform her into a silent spectator? In what way can the reader participate in the book beyond being a simple witness to the spectacle of discourse^α?

^α
I do
hope
so.

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APIKOROS SLEUTH

I would prefer to define Apikoros as a lapsed Jew rather than a heretic. The Talmud describes it thus: An apikoros is one who says “Oh those Rabbis!”

The term is defined in more detail in a Baraita in the Sanhedrin Tractate (cited in *Apikoros Sleuth* 4a):

“Those of us who say the Torah is not from heaven. Those of us who interpret the word of the Torah in a way contrary to the halakhah. Those of us who profane the covenant inscribed in the flesh. Those of us who profane the holiness of the sacrifices. Those of us who disdain the half-holidays. Those of us who say the whole Torah comes from heaven, except this deduction, except this

What is Talmudic thinking and writing? What qualities does Talmudic writing possess that caused you to think, if you did think in such a way, “This is available to novel narratives”?

Without reproducing here the discussion of the creative tension between Hellenic and Rabbinical world-views and methods of inquiry at the foundation of Western thinking — the two are of course, as Derrida has argued, inextricably bound together from the beginning, but to underestimate the contrasts between them would be to deny history — we can trace the influence of Rabbinical thought in currents of thinking and writing (whether by Jews or non-Jews) from its origins in the period of the Second Temple throughout Western history and up to Freud, Benjamin, Derrida. It is a current that has always been repressed, acting from within and without, undermining,

The question posed by the Talmud is “How should we act?” Reading Talmud ^α is like confronting a series of individual ethical decisions, without fixed moral principles to fall back on. Talmudic discourse calls for unending exegesis. The reader lifts and continues the commentary off the pages of the book. She chooses where to begin — which page, which column, the plot (and there is one), poetry or philosophy — which stream to follow^ψ. Talmudic discourse also requires collective interpretation, debate within the community over meanings and possibilities. In the case of *Apikoros*, most of the words are not difficult (except for those that are in languages with which the reader is not familiar — Hebrew, Aramaic, French, Chinese — or neologisms, or especially obscure or awkward words

^ψ
Once
only.

:: Interview with Robert Majzels, author of *Apikoros Sleuth*::

exception, except this *a fortiori*, or this proof by analogy. Those of us who have the opportunity to study the Torah and do not do so. Those of us who study the Torah, but only from time to time. Those of us who cause the face of their fellow to pale with shame. All these have no share in the World to Come: even if they know the Torah and have performed charitable deeds, all these have no share in the World to Come.”

[Note, in passing, how demanding is the Law. Even assuming someone were capable of such rigorous observance, he or she would be liable to violate the last descriptive clause, the sin of pride, or judgment of one’s fellows who were less observant. In the face of such a demanding practice, we are all apikorsim^Φ.]

offered up as a gift, a bonus (this word is free)). Nor are the sentences, for the most part, tangled or very long. Their incantatory nature may provide a certain reassurance or comfort. Nevertheless, the reader must learn to move carefully and slowly within the page and from page to page, rereading and moving in ellipses, spirals, rather than straight along. She must pay attention to the repetition of phrases, the way they accumulate and shift meaning, the way the story stumbles. A professional reader is tempted, if not required, to consult the intertexts, the Sanhedrin Tractate of the Talmud, the Sefer Yetzirah, the works of Abraham Abulafia, Emmanuel Lévinas, Beckett, Kafka, Célan, Benjamin, Stein, etc. By contrast even with the reader of what has been classified as literary fiction, the reader of Talmudic discourse is neither drawn in, nor swept away. She is not asked to forget herself but rather to

^Φ This
word
is fine.

What did you see?

Ψ
One
man's
is the
other's
heretic
.

α. Is
this
word
fine?

Apikoros Sleuth is a reluctant Sleuth, and a poor Jew. Western Metaphysics is always sleuthing. The primary narrator (let's not call him a heroΨ) of *Apikoros Sleuth* is less than compelled to sleuth.

That is our conditionα within modernity. Nevertheless, I would say his stance in the face of that compulsion is one of resistance. Resistance to sleuthing, lack of faith in the possibility of an ultimate truth. Which raises the issue of the use of the term "God." Unfortunately, by now (and wasn't it inevitable?) that term has been so corrupted in our imaginary as to have lost all usefulness. I doubt there's any way to think it without falling into one form or another of childish idolatry. This problem is related to the Christian embodiment of God I mentioned earlier. In a sense, this is the reason why, in rabbinical thought, it is forbidden to pronounce the name of God. God, in the Talmud is that which is beyond language, and therefore unattainable. Divinity is NoOne. Nothing. ::

destabilizing, disturbing the unity and categories of Occidental thought. One of the essential differences between the Greek-Christian tradition and the Rabbinical or Talmudic method, is that the latter is based on primacy of the letter over the spirit, rather than seeking to transcend the words.

Divinity or truth, according to the Rabbinical attitude is inscribed in the text, in language; not in a person. Truth is not suddenly revealed (unveiled) as One, but a continuous and unending process of interpretation. The Talmudic form and method of inquiry is the rigorous and relentless pursuit of truth and justice in the full knowledge of the impossibility of ever entirely attaining the goal.β

Of course, the Talmud contains a great deal of arguments that, at least to me, seem anything but radical or progressive, but I'm talking here about an underlying method of thought. The implications for writing and reading that stem from this philosophical perspective, and that arise in the Rabbinical work of

rethink that self. I did not want to write a book that attempts to talk to the reader, to educate the reader, to communicate some **THING** to the reader. The reader capable of reading a book is not possible before that book is written. *Apikoros Sleuth* is the desire to become a different sort of readerΦ ::

Φ **Thinking, as he replies: I wanted to write a book that requires no reader. We have had enough of the tyranny of**

β "The letters are without any doubt the root of all wisdom and knowledge, and they are themselves the contents of prophecy, and they appear in the prophetic vision as though opaque bodies speaking to man face to face saying most of the intellective comprehensions thought in the heart of the one speaking them. And they appear as if pure living angels are moving them about and teaching them to man, who turns them about in the form of wheels in the air, flying with their wings, and they are spirit within spirit." Abraham Abulafia, *Or he-Sekhel* (late 13th century C.E.) ΨΨ. ::

readers. The sacred book only needs to be, in order to act on language. As though, if only I could find the right order of

ΨΨ

Having said this, at this point I realize, of course, it's possible that the term heretic also applies to Apikoros Sleuth. Certainly the rabbis will think so.

In a sense, it is the heretical seeker that is tasked with constituting meaning within the book. Is that how you see it off the page? I mean, is it the outsider who seeks and eventually creates meaning?

Was it your intention to have your readers become heretical seekers themselves, by enticing the more curious amongst them to discover, perhaps for the first time, certain heretical strands of thought?

β I do hope so.

words, the entire Order of things would come crumbling down, nothing would ever be the same again. To undo the

Yes, I think that's a fine way to put it. As long as we understand that the reader is also inside the text. While he or she is reading, at least. And probably, if the book is not entirely forgettable for one or two moments longer afterwards. In a larger sense, none of us is outside the text. Perhaps the reader is at once inside and outside, and that movement is what allows her or him to create meaning(s).

Yet when the heretic asks questions, doesn't she occupy a space properly belonging to

The Talmud, are profoundly contemporary. Talmudic writing (and reading) can be described as contingent, metonymical, indeterminate, multivocal, open-ended, juxtapositional, and concrete. It presents rather than represents. Time and space are indeterminate; there is no past and future in the Talmud. In Talmudic (and biblical for that matter) narrative (unlike in Homer) only what is minimally required to move the ball forward is expressed. The rest is left to and for speculation.

Biblical accounts and the Mishnaic sections of the Talmud seem fragmentary, "fraught with background" (Auerbach), and are open to hermeneutical methods such as gematria, notarikon, and tikrei (treating the letters and sentences as material objects rather than

I don't believe I have any intention, when writing, as regards a reader, or readers. My responsibility is to language and to the work. I would like to suggest possible ways to describe the act of writing. One such way is to think of writing as a meditative exercise, permuting letters of the alphabet (*tzeruf*) in order to be other than oneself. The book, in that case, is nothing more than the golem, the physical residue of the exercise, serving only as a kind of evidence of the work that has been

golem, soulless being run amok, we must permute the letters of the 231 gates in reverse order. ::

doctrinal perspectives? In other words, isn't the heretic a slave to the doctrine from which all his questions are derived? Isn't heresy a manipulation of doctrine?

Well, that's why I don't particularly like the term "heresy". Apikoros is not an advocate, he has no Ψ theory, no doctrine. On the other hand, no one is not a slave to the discursive formation of their era. We cannot escape the philosophical framework in which we dwell (phallogocentrism). Our resistance is always still within that framework. At the same time, we can glimpse the possibility of something else. Thinking otherwise, writing otherwise, reading otherwise. ::

done. A soulless being, of no use whatsoever, other than as testimony to the fact of the exercise having taken place. At most, the book can serve as a trace of a kind of *unio mystica*. At worst, it will be the source of distortion, death, devastation (interpretation). Once released, the golem has a tendency to run amok. In such a case, to forestall the danger, we would do better to follow the example of Rabbi Nahman of Braslav and burn the book. Another model for writing, the reverse: When we write, we are undertaking the exercise of permuting the letters, but in reverse order (disrupting the codes of fiction, grammar, language), in order to undo the already existing golem or *partzuf* within the world and within ourselves. The golem is the socially constructed self subjugated to the norms and prejudices of the age within each of us. The golem, at its worst, could be a soulless, false warmongering president.

⌘ An anecdote: In 1280 C.E., the anti-semitic Pope Nicholas III, at the urging of the Roman rabbis, declared Rabbi Abraham Abulafia to be a heretic and condemned him to death. Abulafia traveled to Rome, declaring his intention to speak to the Pope (I almost wrote "Pole"). He arrived at the gates on the eve of the High Holidays, and was informed that if he stepped inside the city he would be burned at the stake in the morning. Abulafia spent the night outside the city, praying and permuting. In the morning he presented himself at the gate, only to be told that the Pope had died during the night. During the subsequent period of in-fighting within the Church, Abulafia was allowed to go free, and he left the city.

!

Ψ
single,
closed

! The word Bush, or *ha-seneh* in Hebrew has a numerical value of 120 and “burn,” or *bar*, a value of 272 for a difference of 152. If one

were to combine each of the letters of Bush with the tetragrammaton (YHWH) 152 times, one might cause a particular burning bush to be consumed in its own flames. ::

T here is an interesting intersection of edifice and knocking-ball in “*Apikoros Sleuth*”: postmodern playing with the Talmud is a postmodern playing with beginnings, and *Apikoros Sleuth* is itself, a play of rock, the book could be cracked open at any point and the ‘meaning’ of it would be conveyed to some extent. To what extent does the meaning of the book lie in its form?

Yes, the tenement, a large highrise in disrepair, is an important figure in the book. A tower of Babel. The edifice of our civilization.

Eschatology most can live with. Scatology, traditionally, is more problematic. What is the meaning

And the temptation to take a knocking-ball to it is there. But you're right, I believe the book can be cracked open at any point and meaning emerges. There is no distinction between the form and content of *Apikoros Sleuth*. Looking at the problem from the point of view of production: the design of each page and the combining of words, phrases, sentences within that page were done simultaneously. I did not first write out the text and then lay it out. The layout therefore dictated as much how much and what could be written as vice-versa. The narrowness of columns, for example, greatly restricts the length of words and combinations of words possible ::

of the repeated digestive sequences? Is this gesture part of a desire to show that there is magnificence --and the potential for provoking wonder-- in all things, however (r)ejected

β I mean, die with.

I s the nostalgic pathos of “*Apikoros Sleuth*” α part of a quest for the unique in the infinite progress and regress of thought and presence?

t ransparent symbols pointing to thoughts. Links in the Talmud are often associative, the linear progress of an argument or narrative is undermined by continual digressions and rhetorical shifts.

We are fortunate to have recent translations of the Talmud (Shottenstein) that provide more literal and less normalized versions of the text. This allows those of us who lack the Aramaic skills to get a better feel for the original. Looking at both the form of the Talmudic page, the multiple voices and differences, and the language itself, I was struck by how absolutely contemporary they were.

The Mishnaic text, its dense elliptical style, the mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic, the hermeneutic devices, all results in a plasticity of language. The body of the text acts figurally to open up the signifying process. It reads very much at times like language poetry. The question is not so much how Talmudic

O ne aspect of contemporary thinking αα, living as we do in the age of the crisis of modernity, necessarily includes nostalgia for the grand narratives, particularly the great emancipatory theories (humanism, Marxism, feminism, etc.), and the notion of avant-garde. Much as we regret the energy and time expended in that nostalgia, it remains an inescapable component of our relation to the world. That nostalgia is present in the book, in the voice of the *Apikoros* narrator, in the content of the narration (e.g. Homeless in Tutonaguy, chapter 8), and yes, in the repetition

α Which lies in its transcendental repetitions.

αα [sic.]

of certain key phrases throughout the novel. I'm reluctant to describe those repetitions as transcendental, however, in that they do not presume to take us to a level beyond the surface of textual play, although they do seem to produce an effect, which, at least to me when I wrote them and now when I read them, is something like joyous and even liberating. I believe the effect comes from the way the repetitions differ and transform meanings as they reappear in different contexts. Those phrases become old friends, but continuously surprising us with new aspects to their personalities. In fact, almost every one of these repeated phrases ("Perhaps you cannot possibly think so," "And yet. Not yet. Two! Why do I need two!?" "This is this

What did you see?

Without seeking to confine the book within existing understandings of prior works, to what extent is "Apikoros Sleuth" a postmodern, and/or Jewish "Tristram Shandy"?

and this is this.' etc...) are recurrent formulas in the Talmudic hermeneutic. In the Talmudic commentary, these phrases are part of formulas of logic in the arguments over the meanings and interpretations of the Mishnah. I've simply extracted bits of these logical formulas, removed them from the contexts of their arguments

they may appear? Was it your intention to call into question what is 'proper

Perhaps "Tristram Shandy" is already postmodern. And Jewish. If by postmodern we are referring not to a period but rather to that moment always within modernism that opens it up to radical revision, that acts subversively within it. Jewish, "...car le judaïsme et l'écriture ne sont qu'une même attente, un même espoir, une même usure," Jabès). In any case, Sterne was writing for a reader that didn't exist, and barely exists today. Nevertheless, he created the possibility for that reader. ::

You write: "He trudged through heavy language". Who trudges: hero? Author? Rea-

Writing can be made available to a novel narrative, as it is how Talmudic writing disrupts that tradition. Since I began working the novel form, in the three 'novels' I've published, I've been trying to work through the problem of the exhaustion of traditional literary forms. The novel and literary fiction in particular, with its insistence on delivering revelation in the form of a fichtean curve, its prettified language, and proper nouns disguised as real people, has become not only reactionary but a failing prop of the bourgeois ego. Not only the great narratives of modernity are exhausted, as Lyotard argued, but the narrative forms themselves, progressive and cathartic, have become empty shells. Golems. Returning to an ancient, long repressed form of thinking and writing is perhaps one method for tackling the problem, of breaking open the form.

The murder mystery and the Talmud both operate on the terrain of ethics, issues of life and death, guilt, responsibility and community. Both engage in detailed argument in the quest

and used them as units of discourse. Hence the transcendental effect. There is always that nostalgic longing for the unique, but the quest is simply for more metonymical movement, to go with the flow of progress and regress of thought and presence...

There are other kinds of repetition in "Apikoros Sleuth": the repeated returning to the scenes of the crimes, the rooms and half rooms, going over the same ground, and the repeated formatting of pages, the repetition of the 231 gates in the central column of a number of chapters, etc..

Furthermore, some of the repeated phrases are not Tal-

matter' for thought and for literature?

der? My sense is that you skip through language in this book, but is there a point at which its narrative breaks, a point of no logical return? If so, what is achieved by the creation of these blind-spots?

Two questions here. Who is the "He"? The subject of the text? Who is the Apikoros who has no name? Who is the narrator? I think there's a continual slippage of subjectivity, a conflation of selves. Between the narrator, the author, the protagonist(s), the cat, and the reader.

What failed to make this story my story? I mean why can't we B-Boop instead of droning on with that big boy sound? (50a)

mudic formulae: "a can of tuna, une demi-baguette, a fistful of bananas," for example, could be another way of saying "give us this day our daily bread..." Prayer and ritual are repetition. Permutation of the 22 letters of the alphabet in combination with the vowels and the Name of God is also repetition. That repetition creates movement, profluence, difference. ::

Yes, certainly, the issue of what is proper matter for literature is important, the wonder in all things, even the lowest. But this has been raised before and too easily assimilated into literature. The relation

β *This word is fine.*

The second question you raise is the point of no logical return? Do you mean there is a point in the book at which the narrative breaks down for good? Can you indicate where? I don't think it ever breaks down completely or, Okay,

Where does the Wordβ end and God begin?
The numerical value of God's name (Elohim), the

of the body to writing, to the body of the text, is what's at stake. I think the Apikoros narrator is

when it does break down, it gathers itself up again and goes on. "I can't go on. I must go on." Certainly there are moments when the flow of the story is interrupted, disrupted. And even when language takes off. These blind spotsβ, or explosions of language take various forms. The breaking of the columns, for instance, from 11b to 15a, moments of gradual erasure of the text, shifts of genre, from prose to poetry, shifts in language, occasionally wild sentences. A variant of ways then of introducing the Other into language, the figural

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What did you see?

For truth about life and death. If the murder mystery, in the way it achieves profluence through plot, driving the reader forward the conclusion, can be said to be the quintessential model for the modern novel, the Talmud complicates the mystery by its open-ended structure and the rhizomatic progress of its argument, thus suggesting the possibility of an aesthetic response to the limits of representationP. ::

pure essence of the Divine, is eighty-six. It is the highest spiritual level attainable. The value of Beli-mah, translatable as nothingness or the ineffable, is eighty-seven, one more than Elohim, and one stage beyond. (cited in Apikoros Sleuth, Chapter 87). Perhaps God can be located in Derrida's trace, Or in Lévinas' idea of the saying as opposed to the said? Certainly, God is in the word(s), and unimaginable outside it. Any attempt to do so, leads

Before we were narrative, we were boots and vertigo. We leapt across a canyon of traffic. We flung ourselves into a net of language. A horse was an inch of music. Dogs danced, wings gathered rock. Now we are the small brown pigtail of a mystery trailing behind its solution. We pour murder out of a tenement and lay the limp and soggy rag of story in the street. The police have parked the realistic code (always straddling a sidewalk) beneath their lights flashing. They are an empty vehicle crackling speech in a canyon of traffic. (Chapter 24, Two!) ::

related to Kafka's Hunger Artist, who "prefers not to" eat. Although, unlike the latter, the Apikoros

disruption of discourse, reaching out toward the unattainable, the ineffableββ. ::

inevitably to a form of idolatry, to substituting some anthromorphic metaphor to what must remain unsayable, unpronouncable. Clearly, the Christian embodiment of God in Christ represents a major break with the Hebrew idea of divinity, which is absolutely against any form of personification. As soon as we attempt to fix the concept of God as an individual being, as a name, as A word or phrase, rather than in the interaction of words and phrases, we fall into the childish bedtime stories and superstition that passes for religion these days.::

partakes of the food of the world around him, to a limited degree. But he takes no pleasure in it, and cannot digest it smoothly. He takes refuge in the solitude of private plumbing. The place where we are alone with our body. The place of the body in literature is a matter for further discussion: how it has been romanticized or objectified through either sex or food. There is no culture in the way Apikoros eats, no food preparation. His excrement is waste, and not even well formed. He is ill at ease in the worldΦ. ::

ββ Cry out the shibboleth
into the alien homeland
February. No pasaran. *Paul Celan.*

Φ To trespass the boundaries between genres, and between literature and life is more difficult. It is not the same as introducing new material and new forms into literature. We have to find ways to un-ease literature, to make it less smoothly digestible. ::