

INTERTEXTUALITY
AND
THE READING
OF MIDRASH

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THE SEA RESISTS: MIDRASH AND THE (PSYCHO) DYNAMICS OF INTERTEXTUALITY

The text, however, as we possess it today, will tell us enough about its own vicissitudes. Two mutually opposed treatments have left their traces on it. On the one hand it has been subjected to revisions which have falsified it in the sense of their secret aims, have mutilated it and amplified it and have even changed it into its reverse; on the other hand a solicitous piety has presided over it and has sought to preserve everything as it was, no matter whether it was consistent or contradicted itself. Thus almost everywhere noticeable gaps, disturbing repetitions and obvious contradictions have come about—indications which reveal things to us which it was not intended to communicate. . . . the difficulty is not in perpetrating the deed, but in getting rid of its traces. We might lend the word *Entstellung* [distortion] the double meaning to which it has a claim but of which today it makes no use. It should mean not only “to change the appearance of something” but also “to put something in another place, to displace.” Accordingly, in many instances of textual distortion, we may nevertheless count upon finding what has been suppressed and disavowed hidden away somewhere else, though changed and torn from its context. Only it will not always be easy to recognize it. Sigmund Freud!

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

Intertextuality is, in a sense, the way that history, understood as cultural and ideological change and conflict, records itself within textuality. As the text is the transformation of a signifying system and of a signifying practice, it embodies the more or less untransformed detritus of the previous system. These fragments of the previous system and the fissures they create on the surface of the text reveal conflictual dynamics which led to the present textual system. Now, it is, I would claim, precisely these gaps in the text which the midrash reads,² and the rabbis very early drew the connection between dream interpretation and hermeneutics of the Torah.³ It is, then, perhaps, not altogether unexpected to find the psychodynamic model a useful one for the understanding of some aspects of midrash and its relation to the biblical text. The Torah itself, even as it is generically identified as God's work, nevertheless indicates its own belatedness with respect to earlier texts: "Therefore it says in the book of the Wars of the Lord 'and Waheb in Sufa and the rivers of Arnon'" [Numbers 21:14]. Other markers of the presence of earlier signifying systems within the biblical text are less explicit but nevertheless discernible in the "noticeable gaps, disturbing repetitions and obvious contradictions" to which Freud referred. Indeed, all those fissures in the Torah which diachronic scholarship figures as evidence for a plurality of sources, our present reading practice will re-figure as indications of intertextuality.⁴ These intimations of intertextuality are part of what gives the Bible its continuing power to fascinate, and the rabbis could not fail to mark and interpret them in the midrash-work. In analyzing a text from the Mekilta, I will try to show that it constitutes an interpretation of these intertextual fragments of earlier repressed but not utterly expunged cultural practice. The claim that I wish to make about this midrash is that it enacts in very important ways the conflict in Jewish culture between its pagan past and its monotheistic present. Putting this in psychic terms, the midrash makes manifest the repressed mythic material in the Bible's "textual subconscious." More specifically, much of the Bible records openly the conflict in its culture between paganism as the old religion of the people and the new religion of the Torah and the Prophets. The remnants of that conflict, and indeed the remnants of the suppressed culture, are to be found in the allusions which the Bible makes, willingly and willy-nilly, to the content and images of the earlier mythology. One of the important dynamics of midrash as reading is that it makes manifest the hidden dimensions of that mythic intertext by gathering together these fragments of allusion and figural language and reinscribing them into narratives.

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

As for the wind [which drove back the water of the Red Sea], the midrash has already focused on it very precisely and remarked that it is not accidental

that God here acted by means of an *east wind*, but indeed this wind is counted as one of the traditional weapons of God. [The midrash] cited evidence for this in its interpretation of Exodus 14:21 from the verses: "With the east wind I will scatter them before the enemy" [Jer. 18:17]; "With the east wind You have broken the ships of Tarshish" [Ps. 48:8]; from the verse in Hosea [13:15], which dubs the east wind, "the wind of the Lord"; and from the verse in Isaiah [27:8] about the War of the Lord, "With His strong wind, on the day of the east wind." . . . It is clear that the east wind was singled out from all the winds in the mythological tradition of Israel.⁵

As Loewenstamm has acutely realized, the Mekilta,⁶ by gathering all of these verses into a paradigm (under the rubric, "And you also find that God punished the generation of the flood and the people of Sodom, only by means of the east wind. . . . And you will also find in the case of the People of the Tower . . ."), has revealed that which perhaps the biblical authors sought to hide, the actual mythic background of the description of the east wind as a weapon of God. In the rest of this chapter, I would like to analyze a much more complex text from the same midrash, which thematizes both this mythological intertext and the conflict with it:

And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea [Exod. 14:21]. The sea began to resist him. Moses said, 'in the name of the Holiness,' but it did not yield. The Holiness, blessed be He, revealed Himself; the sea began to flee, as it says, "The sea saw and fled" [Ps. 114:3].

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

Similarly, Moses came and stood at the sea. He said to him, "in the name of the Holiness," and it did not yield. He showed him the rod, and it did not yield, until the Holiness, blessed be He, revealed Himself in His glory. The sea began to flee, as it is said, "The sea saw and fled" [Ps. 114:3]. Moses said to him, "All day long I have been speaking to you in the name of the Holiness, blessed be He, and you did not submit. Now, 'what has happened to you, O sea, that you flee?' [Ps. 114:5]" "He answered him, "Not from before you am I fleeing, son of Amram, but 'from before the Master, tremble earth [progenitor of the earth],' from before the God of Jacob [Ps. 114:7-8]" . . ."

This midrash fits the formal structure theorized in the previous chapter. We begin with the Torah verse to be interpreted, "And Moses stretched out his arm over the sea—and God moved the sea with a strong east wind all of the night . . ." The verse provides a gap. Aside from any theological problem

which this verse raises, it is problematic from the point of view of narrative logic. If Moses has been empowered to split the sea with his hand, as implied by God's command to him in the previous verse, "Stretch out your hand over the sea and split it," then why does God intervene directly and perform the splitting Himself? Alternatively, if Moses has not been thus empowered, then for what purpose does he stretch out his hand? The oddness of this verse can be shown by comparison with others, e.g., "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand toward heaven that there may be darkness upon the land of Egypt' So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was a thick darkness . . ." [Exod. 7:21-22]. Or in the continuation of our very story, "So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and as morning broke, the sea returned to its normal course" [14:27]. The effect of our verse is so jarring that the Higher Critics have placed a juncture between two sources in its caesura.⁸ In fact, many Bible critics regard the whole account of the splitting of the sea as the interweaving of two contradictory traditions or documents.⁹ The rabbis who composed the midrash, unwilling, of course, to adopt such diachronic solutions, read the text synchronically, that is, as a system of gaps.¹⁰ They resolve the contradiction of the two halves of the verse by narrating a set of events which took place between them and which motivates the change in subject from Moses to God Himself as director of the sea's split. The plot of this narrative expansion is structured by a *mashal*. It is the text of Psalm 114, however, which provides the primary material for the narrative. The solution of the midrash is produced by reading the text of Psalm 114 as a commentary on the Exodus passage. The text of the psalm, which generates the story of the sea's opposition, is thus introduced precisely into the middle of the original verse, precisely into the split where the Higher Critics see the junction of sources and for exactly the same reason.¹¹ The dialogue of the psalm is inserted right into the middle of the verse between "And Moses stretched out his arm" and "And God moved the sea."

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

- [1] When Israel went out from Egypt; the house of Jacob from a foreign nation.
- [2] Judah became His holy one; Israel His dominion.
- [3] The sea saw and fled; the Jordan turned back.
- [4] The mountains danced like rams; the hills like lambs.
- [5] What has happened to you, O sea, that you flee; O Jordan, that you turn back?
- [6] O mountains, that you dance like rams; O hills, like lambs?
- [7] From before the Master, tremble earth, from before the God of Jacob.

The midrash projects a world in which the Red Sea is not a personification, but a personality; not a metaphor, but a character. It will be easier to sense the

radicality of the midrashic reading of the psalm by considering first a road not taken. As read by Sir Philip Sidney, the personifications of nature in David's psalm are a figure, an *enargeia* of the God who cannot be seen by eyes of flesh: "[David's] handling his prophecy . . . is merely poetical. For what else [are] . . . his notable *prosopopeias*, when he maketh you, as it were, see God coming in his majesty, his telling of the Beasts' joyfulness and hills' leaping, but a heavenly poesy: wherein almost he showeth himself a passionate lover of that unspeakable and everlasting beauty to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith?"

Commenting on this passage in Sidney, Murray Krieger remarks:

The *prosopopeia* is a form of personification which gives a voice to that which does not speak and thereby gives presence to that which is absent. Through this figure, Sidney argues, God enters David's poem (we are made to "see God coming in his majesty"). It is as if this figure is made to serve the larger objective of *enargeia*, the verbal art of forcing us to see vividly. Through the "eyes of the mind"—an appropriately Platonic notion—we are shown the coming of God and his "unspeakable and everlasting beauty." Here, then, are words invoking a visible presence, though, of course, to "the eyes of the mind" alone. Though God's may be only a figurative entrance through His personified creatures, the poet makes us, "as it were," see this entrance. He is there, in His living creation, and absent no longer.¹²

In Sidney's/Krieger's reading, then, the personification of the sea, the rivers, and the hills in the psalm is not truly a representation of nature at all, but a poetic means of making the reader see the coming into the world of the unrepresentable God by evoking the reaction of imaginary witnesses to this event. Nature—that is, that which is properly apprehended as a *res*—is *personified*; the very terminology of trope reveals the reification of nature implied and assumed. As Jon Whitman has remarked, "it is only when the 'personality' is a literary fiction separate from the actual condition that we have a personification."¹³

The midrash, in contrast, reads the psalm as literal, i.e., as the record of an actual colloquy which took place at a specific moment in history, that moment being the moment suspended between the two halves of our verse in Exodus. The psalm completes perfectly the gap of the Torah text. The speaker addressing the sea is Moses and not (as has been suggested) some anonymous Jewish poet wondering at the miracles of the Exodus and evoking the presence of God.¹⁴ Nor is the sight which the sea perceived and from which it fled left as the unspoken/unspeakable presence of God, but the actual self-revelation of God.¹⁵ The rhetorical question and answer of the psalm—"What has happened to you O sea that you flee? Before the Lord, Creator of the Universe, tremble earth"—is turned in the midrashic text into an actual colloquy between Moses and the sea.¹⁶ That is to say, the figurative usage of the poem, the personifica-

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

It is important to note that vis-à-vis the earlier ancient traditions of biblical interpretation, this rabbinic sea as an actual sentient subject represents a reversal of a conventional historical-cultural development. The earliest interpretive tradition, and very likely the Bible itself, had already arrived at a rationalized perception of the world as nonsentient and wholly different from man. While the Bible, as Cassuto has shown, contains allusions to the ancient myth of a primeval battle between God and the sea, these allusions are all reduced from their narrative fullness and have only figurative force.¹⁷ The prophets and poets of the Bible, we may imagine, were very wary of even suggesting that the sea had a personal nature because of the real danger that, with the polytheistic world around them, they would be misunderstood, and the misunderstanding would lead to polytheistic belief.¹⁸

Sidney's interpretation, then, is solidly in the older mainstream of interpretation of the psalm, and also seems close to what may have been originally meant by the psalm, as far as that can be guessed. The rabbinic reading therefore seems at first a sort of step backward in history. Midrash reverses all of these processes of demythologization. In our example the relevant process is "depersonalization," which is, according to Benjamin Uffenheimer, "to alter myth in such a way as to remove the personal nature of its protagonists. The sea and other depths became geographical concepts . . ." In our midrash, the "geographical concept" becomes once again a person. Inserting the psalm into the historical context of a dialogue with Moses reanimates its meaning and by doing so reanimates the sea. In short, metaphor becomes myth.

The gap in the text of the Torah corresponds to a fault line between ideologies. One half of the verse represents God as the only controlling force over nature in the world, while the other half allows that there may be human intervention in nature. The ambivalence of the verse is thematized in the midrash in the ambivalence of the sale of the garden to the king's friend. On the one hand, the Torah tells us that Moses has been given power over the sea to

subdue it and split it; the inner garden has been sold to him. I read this not as magic, but as a reduction of the status of the universe to a will-less nonsubject, a mere object of human desire, the reification of nature. On the other hand, owing to the contradiction in the verse and the "evidence" of the psalm, we see that will was not taken away from the sea. He still had the power, and perhaps the right to resist; the outer garden was not sold. The garden which is sold and not sold then can be read as representing a kind of liminal moment in cultural history (indeed, in materialist terms, in economic history). However, it also plays a concrete function in the interpretation of our biblical narrative. It represents a deep-seated inner contradiction in the very situation of Moses's having been commanded to split the sea. One who sells an inner garden without selling the means of access to it is, after all, creating a self-contradictory moment. This self-contradiction parallels the contradiction between God's placing "an eternal border for the sea from which it will not pass" [Jer. 5:22], and His command to Moses to now make the sea pass from that very border.¹⁹

On my reading of the Mekilta's story of the encounter between Moses and the sea, there are really two conflicts being enacted within this textual gap, one between two characters and one between two ideologies. The first is the conflict between Moses and the sea and the second is the conflict between monotheistic myth and polytheistic myth, and the two conflicts are perfectly isomorphic in the midrashic text. On the one hand, we have the sea realized as a fully conscious and free-willed creature, a person—not a personification, a person who can resist the person Moses. This is, I submit, a reflection of a myth-like view of the landscape, one in which nature has not yet been reified. However, the moment *God* appears the sea does begin to flee. There is no battle between the sea and God. The conflict between Moses and the sea, then, is paralleled in the midrash by the conflict between a monotheistic myth and a polytheistic one lurking, as it were, in the intertextual unconscious. The mythic dimension is evoked by the conflict between Moses and the personal sea, and the defeat of polytheism by the absolute dominance of the presence of God over the sea. Were the sea to have any power to withstand God, we would no longer have Judaism at all, but a polytheistic regression. Accordingly, our midrash—notwithstanding its personal sea and once-more visible God—makes it, nevertheless, absolutely unambiguous that the sea has power against a man, but only against a man. The unquestioning and immediate capitulation of the sea to the revelation of God is at the same time, then, an enactment of the defeat of the *myth* of the battle between a god of heaven and a god of the sea, the famous hydromachia. This point is underlined heavily by the *mashal* in which the sea is figured as an employee of the king and no more, one who is bound upon hearing the king's word to immediately obey. When God appears, there is no contest; the sea immediately obeys, like a faithful servant and no more. The fact that the sea could be insubordinate (and there is no reason to

suppose that it could not happen again) verifies the mythic reading of the landscape which is still alive for the rabbis, but at the same time the text renders it crystal clear that the sea is not a god or a rival to God. The *mashal*, then, serves as an aid in the interpretation of the “dangerous” material by containing it within safe limits, a function the rabbis themselves figured by comparing the Torah to “a pot full of boiling water, which had no handle to carry it, and someone came and made it a handle [the *mashal*], and it began to be carried by its handle.”²⁰

A later midrash on our midrash²¹ brings to full explicitness both the mythic and dialectical²² conflicts which are latent in the earlier one:

Thus, when Moses came and stood against the sea, he said in the name of the Holiness, God has spoken to you, make a path and the redeemed ones will pass. The sea answered and said to Moses, Ben Amram, behold, Adam was not created first, but at the end of the six days of creation, and I was created before he was. I am greater than you; I will not be split for you. Moses answered to God, Thus and so said the sea; Master of the Universe, he is right; the sea will not be split before me; rather You speak to him with Your word, and he will be split. The Holiness, blessed be He, said to Moses, if I speak to the sea and he is split, he will have no healing for ever and ever,²³ but indeed, you speak to him and he will split, in order that he will have healing by your hand. Here is a fount²⁴ of strength with you. Immediately, Moses came with strength going on his right side, as it says, “He causes His glorious arm to go on the right of Moses, splitting the sea before them, to make him an eternal name” [Isa. 63:12]. When the sea saw the strength, standing to the right of Moses, he said to the earth, Earth, make me channels and I will enter into your depths, before the Master of Creation, may He be blessed, for it says, “The sea saw and fled.” And when Moses saw the sea fleeing before him, Moses said to him, All day I have been speaking to you in the name of the Holiness, and you did not yield; I showed you the staff and you did not yield; now “what has happened to you, O sea, that you flee?” The sea answered and said to Moses, Ben-Amram, Ben-Amram, do not give greatness to yourself; I flee not from before you, but from before the Lord of Creation, may His name be made sanctified in His world, as it says, “From before the Lord, Creator of the earth/Make channels,²⁵ O earth, from before the God of Jacob.” [*Exodus Rabba*, *ad loc.*]

This text makes explicit much that is implicit in the earlier version, and again we have the same double movement: revivification of the mythic universe simultaneously with the neutralization of its polytheistic content. On the one hand, the claim of the sea against Moses has a very human note; it is not an abstract philosophical or theological argument that would signal an allegorical reading of our text, but a claim of priority and seniority. We are still here in the realm of what I have called the mythic. Moreover, the mythic potential of “He causes His glorious arm to go on the right of Moses” is vividly realized, again by literalizing Isaiah’s metaphor and rendering it a necessary element in the logic

of the narrative. But on the other hand, the very content of the sea’s response (“I was created first”), emphasizing its and the man’s mutual status as creatures of God, enacts once again the total defeat of polytheism. The process of a monotheistic mythic reading of the landscape is thus continued and deepened in the midrash on the midrash.

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

The medieval philosophers, with Rabbi Saadya Gaon at their head, depended on figures, such as “the eye of the earth,” the “mouth of the earth,” to prove that the Torah, even where it spoke of the eye of God and His mouth, “spoke in human language,” that is, in metaphor. They assumed, therefore, as self-understood that all that was said about the bodily parts of the earth, was not intended literally. And indeed in all of the Apocrypha and certainly in the ancient philosophical literature, there is no sign of anyone who understood these verses literally. The midrash is entirely different: “All that God created in man, He created similarly in the earth. Man has a head and the earth has a head, as it says, ‘the head of the dusts of the earth’; man has eyes and the earth has eyes, as it says, ‘and it covered the eye of the earth.’” . . . To all of these anthropomorphic metaphors, we can apply the dictum, “A metaphor is none other than a reduced myth.” And even if the rabbis did not go so far as the realm of real myth, which sees the earth as a woman and a goddess, . . . for the rabbis there functioned the anthropocentric necessity to find “our brothers” even in non-human nature and to bring it close, therefore, to our senses and understanding.²⁶

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

I dipped my oars into the silent lake,
 And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat
 Went heaving through the water like a swan;
 When, from behind that craggy steep till then
 The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and huge,
As if with voluntary power instinct
Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,
 And growing still in stature the grim shape
 Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
And measured motion like a living thing,
*Strode after me.*²⁷

The poet, even the high romantic, locates the space of nature which is not a thing, in the no-place, the utopia of childhood, and from the point of view of the adult, the "working" poet,²⁸ it must all be displaced into the realm of "as if" and "seeming," marginalized, however longed for. In a sense, we might say that in the absence of an active (however repressed) cultural unconscious, the only resources for the recovery of the unreified nature are in the individual psyche and its childhood memories.

If my reading has any historical validity, the true inheritors of midrash are the kabbalists, for whom the world is populated with anthropomorphic entities, from animals to trees to books. Thus Gershom Scholem refers to a "classical period" in the development of religion, "in which the scene of religion is no longer Nature, but the moral and religious action of man and the community of men, whose interplay brings about history as, in a sense, the stage on which the drama of man's relation to God unfolds," and then jumps to a "romantic period" of mysticism, which "strives . . . to bring back the old unity which religion has destroyed, but on a new plane, where the world of mythology and that of revelation meet in the soul of man."²⁹ In my reading of this midrash, however, we have a third term, mediating between these two, in which nature itself is projected into history and into moral and religious action in a community of man and nature. In such a world, it is irrelevant to speak of "personification" altogether—as it would be irrelevant to speak of the portrayal of George Washington in a history book as personification; the world is already personal. It is reification which is the trope.

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

"And they cried out unto God in a loud voice" [Neh. 9:4]. What did they say? Rav (and some say Rabbi Johanan) says, "Woe is us; this is the one who destroyed the temple, and burned the holy place, and killed all of the righteous ones, and exiled Israel from their land, and still he dances among us. What is the reason You gave him to us? Is it not to receive reward [for resisting him]? We don't want him or his reward!" A sherd fell from heaven with the word "truth" written on it. . . . They sat in fast for three days and three nights, and he was given over to them. A figure like a lion of fire went out from the Holy of Holies. A prophet said unto Israel: "That was the inclination to worship strange gods, as it is said, 'That is the evil.' [Zech. 5:8]"³⁰

This rather obscure legend requires some exegesis. After the return from the Babylonian exile, the book of Nehemiah tells us of a great revival of religious fervor. The Talmud asks here what was the burden of the prayer which they prayed on that occasion and answers that they prayed to be delivered of the desire to worship idols, recognizing that it was this desire which had led the Israelites into exile and all of its terrors. We see here an amazing confluence of political and psychic imagery. The "evil inclination," that is, the temptation to worship idols, is understood to be both a collective and an individual force—or better, a collective force realized within each individual. This dual nature is depicted by being referred to in psychological terms but dealt with in political ones. The activity against it is that of the "Men of the Great Assembly," the semi-legendary governing body of the Jewish people at the end of the second temple period. Their prayers being answered, the evil inclination is delivered into their hands. As Saul Lieberman has argued, this is an etiological legend; it explains the fact that, while the ancient Jews were inclined to idol worship, the ones of rabbinic (talmudic) times were not.³¹ It thus provides evidence that the rabbis considered the temptation of polytheism a dead issue. It indicates memory, as well, of the historical struggle that killed that temptation.

We can offer now a model for the "regression" of the rabbis, and account for this reversal of an apparent progression in the history of consciousness. As Frederic Jameson has argued, "strategies of containment are not only modes of exclusion; they can also take the form of repression in some stricter Hegelian sense of the persistence of the older repressed content beneath the later formalized surface."³² In this model, the Bible's allusions to the ancient myth of the rebellion of the sea are precisely the older repressed content beneath the formalized surface of the Bible. I would suggest, therefore, that given that the rabbis had no fear of the Jews succumbing to polytheism, they were able to allow the barely repressed mythic intertext of the Bible to resurface, as it were, into textual consciousness. If, as I have suggested, Sidney's figurative reading is responding to the textual surface of Psalm 114, the literalized midrashic reading is going below this surface and touching the repressed mythic intertext. In the midrash, the coming of God into the world and the psychological effect

which it had on the sea need no longer be reduced from myth to the figure of prosopopeia, which gives voice to the voiceless-by-nature, but can be given full-fledged narrative and visual representation, representing nature as having its own voice.

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