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Hyperphilology and the Anachronism of Anachronism

Elliot R. Wolfson on Boyarin's *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Nation*

"*Gegen die Wissenschaft der Philologie wäre nichts zu sagen: aber die Philologen sind auch die Erzieher. Da liegt das Problem, wodurch auch diese Wissenschaft unter ein höheres Gericht kommt.— Und würde wohl die Philologie noch existiren, wenn die Philologen nicht ein Lehrerstand*" ~Nietzsche, "Notizen zu Wir Philologen"

J*udaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion* attests once again to Daniel Boyarin's restlessly inquisitive mind and to his persistent need to challenge commonly held assumptions in a manner meant to be provocative and contrarian. As the author tells us in preface, this monograph represents the culmination and, in all likelihood, the final statement of nearly twenty years of thinking about the "Judaism question." It is a suitable framing for Boyarin's book, which he describes as being principally about the word *Judaism*, arguably the key word that has informed Jewish studies. The methodology deployed by Boyarin should be identified as *hyperphilology*, that is, the lexical concentration on a specific term with the intent to deduce therefrom a major and more general historical conclusion. Simply stated, his supposition is that there is no word in premodern Jewish parlance that is compatible with what is conveyed by the term "Judaism." Moreover, the premise that there is a discernible religion designated by this name is an invention of Christian semantic necessity and production. Ostensibly, for their own polemical purposes, Boyarin argues, Christians have converted the people of Israel into an *Ekklesia* or a *Synagoga*, which is positioned as a religious artifact in antagonism to the Church. "The crux of the matter," writes Boyarin, "seems to me to be that in order for there to be a true *Ekklesia*, there had to be a false one too, another member of the paradigm in which *Ekklesia* functioned semantically." This hypothesis leads Boyarin to the daring assertion that the term *Judaism* is a modern construct. The Greek term *Ioudaismos*, when it appears in older non-Christian Jewish writings, does not denote a religion but "the entire complex of loyalties and practices, including dress, speech, *and also* sacrifice, that mark off the people of Judea (what we call now 'Jewishness')." The "major claim" of the book is that "Judaism" is not a *Jewish* term.

Utilizing the language of Wittgenstein, Boyarin avows that religion is not a form of life to which Jews in antiquity or the middle ages adhered. He concedes that there could be a way of expressing a concept that is not tied to a particular word, and, indeed, it appears that it is necessarily the case that concepts have to develop before there are words to name them. This concession notwithstanding, the thesis Boyarin advances in this book is that the nexus between word and concept is intractable: "Where there is no word for 'religion,' religion is not meaningful as a concept, ergo 'religion' does not exist in that linguistic-cultural system and similarly for 'Judaism.'" Consequently, to apply the term *Judaism* as a religion to delineate the experience of a people, who has no such concept, is a practice of self-replication and not translation. This postulate serves as the groundwork for the insistence that "research ought to be based on the categories recognized in the language(s) of the objects of our research and not on anachronistic terms applied a priori." The nomenclature of Jewishness – that is, the condition of being a Jew, or Jewry as the corporate body of Jews, a people defined by its historical practices – is acceptable in his view. But Boyarin counsels scholars "to avoid using such anachronistic terms as 'Judaism' in describing Jewish/Judean forms of life before the modern period when such usages became current in Jewry and Jewish parlance. We should be neither ascribing nor implying the personal soteriological aspects of Christianities to a putative 'Judaism,' even though many Jews have been involved in such doings as well, nor should we be implying the separation of spheres that a word meaning 'Jewish religion' would insinuate before Jews en masse—or for that matter, nearly anyone else—made such distinctions and separations between law, politics, religion."

In my judgment, the notion of anachronism invoked by Boyarin is itself anachronistic, based as it is on a linear notion of time that undergirds his hermeneutical stance, a notion that is reflective of a modernist sensibility that is not necessarily pertinent to the experience of Jews in the ancient or medieval worlds. A varied conception of temporality will yield a different hermeneutic that, inter alia, would unmask the anachronistic nature of the charge of anachronism. As I argued many years ago, the accusation of anachronism is dismissible on the grounds that the philological insistence that a text be studied in a historical context construed in an exclusively synchronic fashion, though surely valid up to a point, need not be accorded hegemony when it comes to the hermeneutical task of reconstructing meaning. I certainly do not advocate an interpretative paradigm of academic study that discards philological competence on the spurious grounds that all readings are equally valid; on the contrary, I embrace the discipline of philology as a legitimate means for reconstructing historical meaning and thereby situating a text in its proper literary context. Beyond this determination, however, the meaning one imparts or elicits from a text need not be constricted by the spatially inflected belief in chronological contiguity. One's hermeneutical praxis cannot be disentangled from theorizing about the phenomenological comportment of human experience and especially concerning the complex role memory plays in identity formation. If one were to endorse the theoretical possibility of time reversibility, then one could not be certain that the future does not flow into the past through the present. If the past is determined as much by the future as the future is by the past, then it is perfectly reasonable to challenge the directive that one should, or even could, base one's research on categories recognized in the language of the objects of our research and not on terms anachronistically labeled anachronistic. But even if one does not want to complicate the historical reconstruction

of the past, or if one wants to argue that time reversibility may be assigned to a different ontic frequency than the one appropriate to the historiological study of history, we could still insist that hermeneutically there is no way to retrieve the past but through the prism of the present. Historical analysis is inescapably circumscribed within the temporal paradox of the simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous.

Here it is apposite to recall Derrida's comment that writing proceeds in accord with the dynamic of *the same law commanding things that are always different*. The chronicling of history as a meaningful construct—in contrast to the metaphysical concept of history that is linked to linearity and an entire system of implications regarding teleology, eschatology, accumulation of meaning, traditionality, and continuity—implies a logic of repetition whereby the trace marks the recurrence of the similar that is entirely dissimilar. I concur with Boyarin that time is what defines history as a discipline. But what is crucial is the historian's understanding of time, and this cannot be extricated from one's hermeneutical assumptions. Is not the very science of philology to which Boyarin appeals itself a modern construct? And if so, then what is achieved by insisting on such a rigorous constriction of the heuristic value of utilizing analytic models of the present to uncover meaning in the past? Is there any exegesis that is not concurrently eisegesis?

That Boyarin's historicist hermeneutic rests on a linear notion of time is evident in how he understands the mechanics of cultural translation. He is heavily indebted to the conjecture of Talal Asad that the task of the translator is not to translate the language of the other into one's own language but rather to understand the meaning implied by the other language and then to find the words in one's own language to communicate that meaning. Needless to say, this requires the philological skill to be attuned to the sources that are being translated. The position of Asad is buttressed by a statement of Godfrey Lienhardt: that the effort to describe how members of a remote tribe think is an act of translation that entails bringing to light as much as is possible in our own language, and in accord with our own logical constructs, the coherence of primitive thought in the language in which it actually lived. Boyarin references as well the view of Walter Benjamin, as transmitted by Rudolf Pannwitz, that the goal of the translator is not to turn the source language into the target language but to transform the target language in light of the source language. Filling in the view of Benjamin, I would add that he argued that just as the afterlife (*Überleben*) is not a mimetic reiteration of the life that came before, but its continual unfolding (*Entfaltung*), so translation is not the duplication of the original but the propagation of the polysemy contained therein. Translation comes temporally later than the original. When the process of survival and renewal is scrutinized through the speculum of history rather than nature, however, the timeline is inverted and afterward assumes the character of beforehand. Benjamin's position is pitted by Boyarin against Jonathan Z. Smith, who maintained that the scholarly endeavor privileges our modern tools of explication. Using the example of magic, Smith noted that to remain content with how an ancient society understood magic "may yield a proper description but little explanatory power. How 'they' use a word cannot substitute for the *stipulative* procedures by which the academy contests and controls second-order, specialized usage." Boyarin rejects Smith's contention and relies on the argument of Asad, which builds on Lienhardt, that "the task of the cultural translator is to make our powerful modern European language submissive to the language of the past, of the other, to let English speak Hebrew or ancient Greek or Hindi."

I readily grant Boyarin's point that as long as we persist in reducing the unknown to the known, we will not be able to find the other. The expanse between two languages is traversed through the collocation of the incongruent and not through the sublation of the dissimilar. On this score, translating is an act of transposal that demands bridging the breach between the primary and secondary languages, a bridging that sustains the very breach that it bridges. To some degree, however, the reduction of the unknown to the known is inescapable; the hermeneutic circularity of our ontological situatedness dictates that we cannot know the unknown – we could not even know the unknowing – but through the known. Epistemically, there is no compelling reason to separate heterogeneity and homogeneity; the former is detectable only against the backdrop of the latter. Even from a neuroscientific standpoint, the cerebral coding of information precludes positioning the homogenous and the heterogeneous in binary opposition: we could not recognize deviation empirically without hypothesizing stability ideationally. Expressed somewhat more technically, syncretic processing is assigned to the right hemisphere of the brain and the diacritic processing to the left hemisphere; the activity of signifying—a cornerstone of our cogitative and verbal aptitude as thinking beings—involves interaction between the two based on what is referred to as a "bimodal reticulation of similarities and differences." Insofar as the brain discerns that things resemble one another only when it perceives that they are inconsonant, we can postulate more abstractly that discrimination facilitates the detection of correspondence. Experiential variation, therefore, cannot be appreciated without the presumption of conceptual uniformity. Similarly, the scholarly task to mark difference can be executed only if some degree of sameness is presumed; indeed, it is the different sameness that engenders the same difference. If it is true that the same is the same in virtue of the other, then it is correspondingly true that the other is other in virtue of the same.

Boyarin addresses the very point when he writes:

For me, at any rate now, history is that which we strive to write ourselves out of, looking for the differences, which doesn't necessarily mean ruptures. To be sure, the search for difference has to be predicated on sameness as well; there is no absolute otherness. … Manifestly, I do not mean to short circuit the hermeneutical circle or to take a positivist stand on historical truth or the interpretation of texts.

I have no reason to doubt the sincerity of these qualifications, but they do not attenuate the forceful and categorical nature of the opinion promulgated in this book and the strong insistence on the need to let the other speak in its otherness. It is not at all clear that this is humanly possible. To summon Benjamin, translation can be seen as a "provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages"; the foreignness of languages, however, is itself a consequence of the kinship of languages. Consciousness cannot visualize the other but through the mirror of self no matter how refined our philological dexterity to render a text in its own idiom.

Let us contemplate a remark of Nietzsche in the unfinished meditation "Wir Philologen," composed in 1875 but only published posthumously: "The philologist must understand three things, if he wants to prove his innocence, antiquity, the present, himself: his culpability lies in the fact that he either does not understand antiquity or does not understand the present or does not understand himself." Although the three criteria required of the philologist – to understand

antiquity, the present, and oneself – are depicted as distinct, in the hermeneutical moment, as it were, they are intertwined in such a way that one cannot be known without the other two. Hence, to know the past, one must know the present, but to know the present, one must know oneself; by the law of transposition, to know oneself in the present, one must know oneself in the past. Philology as the science of antiquity, Nietzsche wrote in another fragment from the notes to this work, does not endure, but what is inexhaustible is the "ever-new accommodation of every age to antiquity." For the present to be adapted to the past, the past must be adapted to the present. Herein consists what Nietzsche brands the *antinomy of philology*: just as antiquity can only be understood from the present, so the present can only be understood from antiquity. Alternatively expressed, the reciprocity entails that people explain antiquity out of their own experience, but the value of that experience is assessed from the measure of antiquity thus gained. Experience, therefore, is the absolute perquisite for the philologist and it is only through knowledge of the present that one can acquire the inclination for classical antiquity. In looking backwards to the culture-epochs of bygone centuries to explain the present conditions of our culture, those conditions become transparent through the discernment of the past.

It is well to recall the observation of Sheldon Pollack, cited by Boyarin, that the import of Nietzsche's definition of philology as a "slow reading" is a form of "reading in a state of heightened self-awareness about what exactly we are doing when we are reading. Such self-awareness arises in direct proportion to the time-space distance that separates us from the origins of the text. The closer the text is, the less conscious we are of the processes by which we make sense of it." Proximity makes us less conscious of the processes by which we impute meaning to the text; it does not dispel the distance definitely. There is always a gap. As both Heidegger and Gadamer taught us, every interpretation is an act of translation, and every translation, a rendering of the strange as familiar by making the familiar strange. The transformative capacity of translation and interpretation fosters the discernment that not only is the alien not disposable, but its alterity compels a deeper appreciation of the intimacy of the space of the between where the partition of opponents prevails in the straddling of their discord. The intimacy of confronting the other is neither a coalescence nor obliteration of distinctions, but rather a preservation of divergence in the belonging together of what is indigenous and what is foreign. The translatability of languages is dependent on the inherent untranslatability of each language and the resistance of the other to the tedium and potential brutality of sameness.

Boyarin's resolute disapproval of using the term "Judaism" to signify an autonomous and essentialist sense of religion has substantial exploratory merit and power. It is somewhat vexing, however, that the aversion to essentializing the historical experience of Jews in this way comes perilously close to an essentialism in its unequivocal and uncompromising mandate to encourage scholars to avoid certain locutions. More importantly, what is left unexamined in Boyarin's analysis is the temporal underpinning of the hermeneutical understanding of translation that he adopts. As I noted previously, Boyarin succumbs to a linear conception of time and to the further assumption that a scholar can retrieve meaning of the past divested of the veil of the analytical patterns and terminological typologies cultivated in the present—to repeat his words, *history is that which we strive to write ourselves out of, looking for the differences*. In all due respect, this is a highly contestable claim. On philosophical and scientific grounds, it is not clear that we can ever accomplish this erasure of self in seeking the face of the other. I would counter that historiography, indeed the gesture of reading and writing more generally, presupposes a temporal

flow that consists of the recurrence of the same in which the same is the recurrence of difference. Following this notion of time, thinking is best characterized by a circular movement by which one is restored to where one has previously not been. This construal of lived time stands in sharp contrast to the quotidian understanding of time as progressing through a sequence of discrete points. In the interpretive gesticulation of scholar and practitioner alike, identity and difference are not mutually exclusive; they well forth from the spot where the original is perpetually disparate and the disparate provisionally original. I thus concur with Heidegger's insight that "again" means "altogether otherwise." Undergirding this paradox is the epistemological assumption that the truth already spoken is always yet to be spoken, that the archaic can be envisioned as novel to the degree that the novel is envisioned as archaic. As Gadamer put it, what is said in language "constitutes the common world in which we live and to which belongs also the great chain of tradition reaching us from the literature of foreign languages, living as well as dead. The real being of language is that into which we are taken up when we hear it—what is said." The divide between the historian, who assesses the tradition critically, and the devout, who is beholden to the tradition reverentially, is significantly narrowed. For both, the sequence of time is configured by the swerve of endlessly distended moments, which should not be envisaged mathematically as discrete points strung together and unified by an internal time consciousness, but rather as the mythopoeic instantiations of an infinitely protracted torrent that implements the eternal reappearance of the same, which is to say, the indefatigable duplication of difference. From this perspective, it may not be so anachronistic to read the meaning of religion back into the past before it is attested linguistically.

Pace Boyarin, I would argue that utilizing terms like "religion" and "Judaism" may not, in the final analysis, prove to be a "practice of self-defeat." Perhaps what is self-defeating—or, at the very least, self-incriminating—is the anachronistic imputation of anachronism to anyone who would continue to speculate on Jewish history from the vantagepoint of a multifaceted religion that can be classified justifiably and reasonably as Judaism. Identity through difference is what allows us to take stock of difference through identity.

A Critique of Daniel Boyarin's Reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein

To make his argument for the anachronism of the term "Judaism" in *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion*, Daniel Boyarin cites the passage from the *Philosophical Investigations* wherein Ludwig Wittgenstein writes, "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life." Is it necessarily the case, however, that the inverse is true or is it possible to imagine a form of life without imagining a language? Unquestionably, Wittgenstein's language-game (*Sprachspiel*) is predicated on the assumption that the picture of the world we harbor is based on the correlation of thought and language. But does this preclude the possibility of presuming the existence of life forms independent of language?

We would do well to recall Wittgenstein's celebrated remark in the preface to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that the whole meaning of the book can be summed up in the proposition,

"What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent." The purpose of the *Tractatus*, accordingly, is to "draw a limit to thinking, or rather—not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for, in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought). The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense." To delineate what is on the other side of language as nonsense (*Unsinn*) is not to say that it is unreal or inconsequential. On the contrary, what is nonsensical may, in fact, be most consequential to understanding our sentient experience. As Wittgenstein writes towards the end of the *Tractatus*, the experience of the brute and obstinate facticity of the world is "the mystical" (*das Mystische*), that is, the inexpressible (*Unaussprechliches*) that "shows itself" (*zeigt sich*). The onus of the philosophical method stipulates that one say nothing except what can be said (*Nichts zu sagen, als was sich sagen lässt*), which is to say, to disclose the world as described in the propositional, factual language of the natural sciences but to offer no assurance that the being of the empirical world coincides with the pictures formed by these statements of fact. On this measure, Wittgenstein's own propositions about the nature of language and reality are senseless (*unsinnig*) and thus they say nothing at all; that is, they are not scientific descriptions of the world, and thus they should be treated as a ladder which the reader climbs and then discards at the apex of the ascent. Only when one surmounts these propositions does one see the world rightly (*Er muss diese Sätze überwinden, dann sieht er die Welt richtig*). And this leads Wittgenstein to the seemingly pedestrian but, at the same time, astounding conclusion, which echoes the above-mentioned comment from the preface, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (*Wovon man nicht Sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen*).

Boyarin's choice to restrict his analysis of Wittgenstein to the *Philosophical Investigations* is defensible. After all, many Wittgensteinian scholars speak of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* as the two works that respectively epitomize the earlier and the later periods of his thought. But there are other interpreters of Wittgenstein who resist this bifurcation and advocate instead for a more unifying approach. In relation to Boyarin's choice, I would say that even if we view the *Philosophical Investigations* as the more rigorous critique of traditional philosophy, and especially as it pertains to logical inferences and the structure of language, including the treatment of these subjects in the *Tractatus*, there is still evidence in the more mature composition that Wittgenstein remain committed to the view that language is about how we think of the world and how we describe it in language but not necessarily about how we experience it on a more rudimentary phenomenal plane. As he writes in one aphorism from the *Philosophical Investigations*, "I want to restrict the term '*name*' to what cannot occur in the combination 'X exists'. … If 'X' exists amounts to no more than 'X' has a meaning – then it is not a sentence which treats of X, but a sentence about our use of language, that is, about the use of the word 'X'." The example Wittgenstein offers to illustrate the point is the proposition "Red exists." Prima facie, if there is no redness, then this cannot be spoken at all, and it would seem

… as if we were saying something about the nature of red in saying that the words 'Red exists' do not make sense. Namely, that red exists 'in and of itself'. … But what we really *want* is simply to take 'Red exists' as the statement: the word 'red' has a meaning. Or, perhaps more correctly, 'Red does not exist' as 'Red has no meaning.' Only we do not want to say that that expression *says* this, but that *this* is what it would have to be saying *if* it made sense – that the

expression actually contradicts itself in the attempt to say that just because red exists 'in and of itself.' Whereas the only contradiction lies in something like this: the sentence looks as if it were about the colour, while it is supposed to be saying something about the use of the word 'red.' – In reality, however, we quite readily say that a particular colour exists, and that is as much as to say that something exists that has that colour.

Commenting on this passage, Boyarin writes, "Closet Platonists that we are, we are tempted to take 'red exists' as an ontological statement, one that would necessitate something like, or at least analogous to, an Idea or Form. What Wittgenstein is claiming, in a non-Platonic thinking, in contrast, the sentence 'red exists' ought really to be understood as a statement about a given language—namely, that within that language, the word 'red' has meaning." After recapitulating Wittgenstein's argument about the semantic as opposed to the metaphysical nature of redness, Boyarin draws the inference for the leitmotif of his book: "If, for example, the sentence 'religion exists' only means that the term 'religion' has meaning, the term 'religion' cannot have meaning in a language that doesn't have a word for it. … Where there is no word for 'religion,' religion is not meaningful as a concept, ergo 'religion' does not exist in that linguistic-cultural system and similarly for 'Judaism.'"

Boyarin professes that he fully subscribes to the Wittgensteinian position, but I would offer an alternative interpretation. I concur that Wittgenstein's analysis is meant to undercut that there is a metaphysical – the term he uses as opposed to Boyarin's casting it as ontological – sense of redness implied by the statement that "Red exists," that is, the idea of a property of redness that exists in and of itself. What is intended by this statement is that the ascription of red to an object is meaningful only within the contours of a given language. It goes without saying that Wittgenstein rejected a Platonic idealism or the positing of universal forms. This does not mean, however, that he affirmed a nominalism that would deny the existence of beings to which names correspond. It is true that the proposition "X exists" is not a sentence that treats of "X" but a sentence about the use of the word "X." From this we cannot infer that Wittgenstein repudiates the ontic being of "X." On the contrary, that beingness of "X" is precisely what cannot be demarcated of "X" by language—not how "X" is but that "X" is.

In this light, consider the following passage from the *Philosophical Investigations*: "Philosophy just puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. – Since everything lies open to view, there is nothing to explain [*Das alles often daliegt, ist auch nichts zu erklären*]. For whatever may be hidden is of no interest to us." I suggest that the reference to what is hidden corresponds to Wittgenstein's invocation in the *Tractatus* of the limit that is the other side of thought or what he calls the mystical. In both treatises, the correlation between grammar and reality must be assessed against the backdrop of semantic ineffability, which does not denote some transcendental or supernatural reality but rather the incommunicable suchness of being, the thatness that shows itself and thus needs no explanation precisely because it is exposed in plain sight. With this in mind we surmise that Wittgenstein's observation "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" does not preclude an experiential surplus that overflows or supercedes the linguistic and conceptual straightjackets by means of which we name things. Wittgenstein himself emphasizes that language consists of more than just the act of naming; following the latter is the act of description:

For naming [*Benennen*] and describing [*Beschreiben*] do not stand on the *same* level: naming is preparation for describing. Naming is not yet a move in a language-game – any more than putting a piece in its place on the board is a move in chess. One may say: with the mere naming of a thing, nothing has yet been done. Nor *has* it a name except in a game.

Beyond naming and describing, beyond the two phases of the language-game, is the play of being. We cannot imagine a language without imagining a form of life, but is it not possible to imagine a form of life without imagining a language? If we entertain this plausibility, then it may indeed be viable to proffer that the forms of life experienced by Jews for centuries can be referred to legitimately as the miscellaneous permutations that make up—coherently and incoherently, predictably and unpredictably—the religious history of Judaism, provided we understand that the taxonomy of religious encompasses multiple domains, including the political, socioeconomic, legalistic, and aesthetic.

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