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REVIEWS

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VIVIAN LISKA, *GERMAN-JEWISH THOUGHT AND ITS AFTERLIFE: A TENUOUS LEGACY*, BLOOMINGTON, UNIVERSITY OF INDIANA PRESS, 2017.

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Vivian Liska's monograph *German-Jewish Thought and Its Afterlife* is a book on parables and fables. Approaching German-Jewish critical modernity the author reveals to a reader one of the rare places in the recent history of thought, defined by the power of allegory. At the same time, Liska is committed to drawing of the maps of the paths and passages through which motives of German-Jewish thought have reached landscapes of subsequent thought. The intriguing contribution of Liska's study lies in the vigilant actualization of topics originating in the tradition labeled as past and obsolete. The author succeeds to pinpoint the critical potential not only of the modern Jewish critical thought but also of the elements of the Jewish tradition in general. Any reader of this monograph should bear in his mind that ambiguous meanings of parables and fables could easily end procrastinated as close to things heretical and rebellious – as magic and trickery of most dangerous and subversive kind.

Therefore, who are the magicians? Also, this was a concern of the Polish-Jewish author I. B. Singer. Yasha Mazur, the main protagonist of Singer's novel *Magician of Lublin*, never practiced any magic and still, he was a *magician*. Then, how is it possible to be a *magician* deprived of any *magical practice*? Concerning only words

and semantics, Yasha was not a magician in the meaning of Hebrew *Chartom*, as a diviner and a man of a great occult knowledge, neither he was a practitioner of almost forbidden *practical Kabbalah* (*Kabbalah Ma'asit*). Instead, he was a mere illusionist capable of producing fraudulent tricks and amusing masses. However, this was not Yasha's choice, much more it was a consequence of the fact that *Chartoms* were no longer possible.

Still, this lack of the possibility of believing in the existence of *magicians* has not emerged because of their obsolescence and backwardness. No, it appeared as a consequence of the one of most fundamental, and still most enigmatic features of modernity: That it is an epoch shaped by the interruption in the tradition. In the words of Hannah Arendt, modernity is defined "... as a time when tradition can no longer reach us 'because' the process of transmission has irrevocably been interrupted" (p. 17) With interruption in the main streams of tradition, its subversive elements were altogether interrupted – and this has led to the metamorphosis of subversive practices into trickery and show.

Nevertheless, Yasha Mazur was a magician, not only an illusionist – provided that some illusionists are only exiled magicians. In that light, there is something

recognizably exilic in the figure of Singer's *Magician*: He is longing for the land of his fathers, for their *Halakha* and prayers, but he could not get back there. Yasha was condemned to wander around his world as a figure of joy for the eyes of strangers and their *Witzwetzung* (To borrow Martin Buber's neologism.). In the end, he will enclose himself in a brick hut and devote himself to unreachable depths of the tradition – and he did it against the advice of a local Rabbi.

There is some unsettling similarity between the position of Singer's *Magician* and that of seminal figures of Jewish *critical modernity*. In the works of Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt and Paul Celan, the motive of interruption in *transmission* of the tradition is decisive. Even though, instead of turning themselves away from the uncertainties of modernity, as well as of the remnants of the tradition – those authors have tried to articulate answers to questions and challenges of modernity by turning themselves to this very *interrupted tradition*. How these answers were formed, how they have related between themselves, and how they have overstepped boundaries of their original context, is the subject of Liska's minutely detailed readings.

Specifically, the book begins with Kafka, the writer whose work is permeated with the motive of interruption. Liska begins with Kafka's short story titled *Imperial Message*. In the story, a dying emperor sends his emissary to deliver a message of unprecedented importance to one of his subjects in the distant imperial province. Nevertheless, the message, the content of which remains concealed to the reader, never reaches its destination. The path of the messenger is too crowded and impossible to traverse, he reaches only out of the gates of the imperial city, just to get lost in its streets. Liska interprets this story as a parable that "describes the fate of tradition in modernity. Thousands of years, an intractable distance, and insurmountable obstacles lie between the modern individual and the source of an authoritative, perhaps divine, message." (p. 1). *Perhaps*

divine, perhaps *only* rumors of the true things as Benjamin once remarked (p. 2). Nevertheless, precisely these fragments of decaying wisdom could hide unsuspected critical potential. As Liska remarks regarding "... theology passed on by whispers dealing with matters discredited and obsolete...." this "... game of relayed whispers, nevertheless, continues apace, both in Benjamin's time and in ours. Starting from the historical moment when Kafka wrote his parable and Benjamin coined his metaphor, it continues, with exponential unreliability. These uncertainties generated by this disrupted transmission of residues from the Jewish tradition not only arouse melancholic longing but also spur major German-Jewish authors...." (p. 2)

In that respect, it is not the fact of minor importance that Jewish mysticism, as one of the matters paradigmatically *obsolete and discredited*, was the central topic of Scholem's research. Moreover, as Arendt remarked: The kinship between Scholem's choice of *Kabbalah* and Benjamin's interest in *German Baroque* is more than telling – both topics were at a time „downright disreputable" (p. 18) However, as Liska underscored, this *disreputableness*, and the character of these topics as „untransmitted and untransmissible", for Arendt was not a failure or exoticism, but rather: "...these qualities were precisely the evidence of such topics' liberating potential, grounded in the awareness of the rupture of tradition in modernity." (p. 18).

Such is the example of *Aggadah and Halakha* – In two Talmuds and Midrash there is the law, namely *Halakha*, but apart from it, there are stories. Some of these stories are historical, some fictitious, and some practical. This smaller part of Jewish oral and later written tradition is called *Aggadah* (narrative, or story). Status of *Aggadah* is ambiguous – in the midst of the commandments, we could find stories and advice, not always obviously associated with these commandments. The text of the law appears as imbued with the stories about life. Perhaps, this was a strategy of that very life to protect itself from the penetrating influence of the ever-present

law. Therefore, the function of *Aggadah* was not only in the legitimization of the law, much more it was a one of a subversion, of a *raised mighty paw*, to borrow a phrase from Benjamin (p. 63–63) This might be the reason why the Jews were not afraid of the law. Contrary to the enlightened beliefs that Jewish obedience to the law stemmed from the mere positivity of Judaism, this obedience was possible only on the ground of the subversive elements incorporated into the tradition.

Nonetheless, there are fears and phobias. As Liska mentions, Benjamin was concerned about the legal violence, about the fact that at one point the law becomes “indistinguishable from life itself.” (p. 59.) In Kafka’s stories, we could find a depiction of this life imbued with the law and turned into the lawless state of exception. If this is an accurate description of the modernity, then hope lies only in consummation and banishment of every law. If lawlessness of the law could be interpreted only as a real event, then Neopauline visions are last remaining. Therefore, as for Giorgio Agamben, in Liska’s words “the messianic task of Kafka’s students no longer lies in practicing or observing the law, but in studying it in order to deactivate it and ultimately drive it into oblivion.” (p. 51.)

However, what if this picture of *lawful lawlessness* is a form of *Aggadah* pointing towards *Halakha*? Still, such an *Aggadah* could not willingly strive towards the law and its author must be afraid of such a possibility. Nevertheless, as long as it is *Aggadah*, it must inevitably land itself in front of *Halakha* – it will come *Before the law*. (p. 64–65.) In that regard, it may be that *Aggadah* is all that is left for Kafka’s students. The Aggadic commentator like Kafka, as Scholem has suggested, is a commentator who has *lost his Holy Scriptures*. Since scriptures are lost, there remains a question regarding the subject of his commentaries (*Benjamin and Scholem, Correspondence*, 237.) Remaining *Aggadah* then leads the path around the state of *lawful lawlessness*, it deprives it of any claims on unquestionable reality, and it completes this task by the simple act of telling a story

about it. Therefore, it protects the *place of the law* in the situation of its utter untransmissibility.

Of course, Kafka is not the lonely new *Aggadic commentator*. Jewish critical modernity shares his task – and Liska’s book tempts the reader to go through its texts as a form of a new *Aggadah*. However, there is a possibility that distinction between *Halakha and Aggadah* is irretrievably shattered and that at some point texts have lost their ability to distinguish themselves as legal texts, commentaries, parables or advice, as translations and originals. Let us then imagine a writer of *Aggadah* realizing that his *story* is not pointing towards the *law*, but that it has become the *law itself*. Terror invoked by this realization does not touch upon the Jewish tradition only, it also touches upon the inherent power of texts to lay down their own laws and claim the power for themselves. This power shows itself in all its might when tradition becomes interrupted. The extent of the consequences of the interruption *in a tradition* stays an open question in Liska’s book. There is a free space for a reader to conjure the incalculable consequences and possibilities of a disappearance of the distinctions that were once present in an uninterrupted tradition. After reading this book, we could permit ourselves to imagine the thoughts of the *recipient* from Kafka’s *Imperial Message*. These *dreamy* thoughts might not be only about the content of the *message* and the vain hope in its delivery. Rather *recipients imagination* might be anxiously preoccupied with the dreams about the unpredictable consequences of the impossibility of such a delivery.

In the end there are conjectures, specifically: *Conjectures about Angels* – “In the Midrash, two rabbis discuss the biblical passage featuring the angel who, after having wounded Jacob, asks the latter to release him: ‘Let me go, for the day breaketh’....Debating possible meaning of this request, one of the rabbis surmises that God creates new angels every day: They utter one song of praise and then depart forever.” (p. 164). At the end of her book, before the *Epilogue* titled *New Angels*, Liska

reads Geoffrey Hartmann's essay from the *Third Pillar*, which speculates about the function of the idea of perishable angels in the Midrashic discussion. This apparently *obsolete* question appears as the question of the utmost importance for modernity: What if some of the angels are perishable?

There is a painting by R. H. Quaytman on the front cover of Liska's book. Quaytman's painting is the replica of the famous Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* – only without *Angelus*: “The background of Klee's *Angelus* is still recognizable in Quaytman's painting, but the angel has vanished. The painting jolts our visual memory into projecting the angelic figure onto the voided surface and invites us to imagine the angel's flight.” (p. ix) However, there is an addition to the original monoprint: One more frame, which somehow intrudes into the original picture while blending in its original frame and pointing *out of it*. This additional frame Quaytman colored blue, perhaps even *Tekhelet*, which is the Divine color in Judaism. However, this *Tekhelet* gate is not positioned inside the depths of the picture, behind the back of *Angelus*. This gate does not stand on the road to paradise, but it provides to *Angelus* the passage out of the original frame – with divine assistance it enables its flight. Still, there remains a question where could have *Angelus* fled? Could it be that this blue gate was the gate through which the Messiah has come and that *growing pile of rubble* and misery is altogether gone? Likewise, it is not impossible to imagine that storm has not blown from paradise. Of course, there was a storm in *Angelus' wings*, but *paradise* as a place of its origin was just a conjecture, one of these well-known rumors about the true things. Therefore, it is not impossible that *Angelus* was one of these perishable angels discussed by

rabbis, but his song was mute. Was there any flight then? The wish of *Angelus* to flee might appear as one of those well-known rumors and conjectures.

In the end, it might be that conjuring about the possible fate of missing *Angelus* hides messianic potential if the heap of rubble is still growing. The questions about “angelus' genealogy” which inspired generations of theoreticians and artists (p. 167) may be supplemented with the question regarding *Angelus' departure*. All these conjectures, Jewish or Neopauline, secular or theological, have a starting point at the top of the heap of rubble which relentlessly pushes forward. Together with the Liska's comparison of the *Angelus* with the owl of Minerva (p. ix), concluding words of her book are more than indicative:

.... These piles of wreckage block the path between angel and Paradise, between the man at the window and the palace of the emperor. In modernity, wholeness has turned into scattered fragments and truth into mere rumor. But rumors of true things persist and the backward gaze in Kafka's and Benjamin's texts suggests that they still sought spurs and splinters from an obstructed inaccessible origin. For the German-Jewish thinkers discussed in this book, the fragments of the divine message – its language, its law, and its promise of messianic redemption – are part of the debris from the past that can no longer be transmitted as truth at this late stage of history. It is through the true rumors of literature – Benjamin's allegory, Kafka's parable – that this message can be envisioned as in a dream, when the evening comes. The evening of the Jewish dimension in modernist thought may well have arrived. In Judaism, however, the falling dusk begins a new day, and as Benjamin reminds us, the Jews are not permitted to investigate the future. (p. 169)