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Sarah Hammerschlag, *Broken Tablets: Levinas, Derrida, and the Literary Afterlife of Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. xxiv + 243 pp. Bibliography and index. \$90.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-2311-7058-1; \$30.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-2311-7059-8.

Review by Ethan Kleinberg, Wesleyan University.

Sarah Hammerschlag's *Broken Tablets* is essential reading for those who want to understand the complex intertextual relationship between Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. In this wonderful and erudite book, Hammerschlag explores this thirty-year conversation across texts to articulate what she calls the literary afterlife of religion. What I take Hammerschlag to mean by the "literary afterlife of religion" is the post-World War II movement away from canonical understandings of religion as the power of an active God to a strategy of reading that activates the possibility of ethics and/or politics based on the interrogation of texts. In Hammerschlag's book, the trajectory of this shift is particularly Jewish as she tracks the lives of Levinas and Derrida for whom the rise of National Socialism and the event of World War II played a decisive, if differing, role. For Levinas, Hammerschlag tells us, it was his experience as a POW in a German camp that led him to realize the ethical vacuity of philosophy and "from this point forward, Levinas rejected philosophy as the replacement of religion, as the site of spiritual guidance" (p. 47). This ultimately led Levinas to the study of the Talmud and sacred Jewish texts. Derrida, on Hammerschlag's account, had always resisted "seeing himself purely within the discipline of philosophy" (p. 5) preferring literature as a privileged site of investigation, but it was Derrida's encounters with Levinas that led him to consider religion in relation to philosophy and literature. Thus, the shift toward literature as the "dreamlike displacement" of the question "How can the interrogation of God survive?" (p. 96) after World War II is really Derrida's move though one that could not have been accomplished if not for his thirty-year conversation across texts with Levinas. The book is therefore an attempt to recuperate the ways that Derrida read Levinas and how this in turn facilitated a re-reading of religion as literature and the political implications of this move.

It is in her investigation into this long and complex textual dialogue that Hammerschlag's intellectual work really shines. She painstakingly works through texts by Derrida from the mid-1960s up through his final writings searching for moments of intersection with Levinas as exchange, inheritance, or betrayal. To this end she uses the leitmotif of the "secret" throughout the book to organize her analysis of this textual relationship. The "secret" was the theme of Derrida's seminars in 1991 and Hammerschlag's own use of the term follows Derrida describing the secret as a moment of trust and fidelity but also and ultimately one of betrayal. In particular, Hammerschlag is interested in "irony" and the ways this trope is deployed to produce the effect of both proximity and betrayal. Chapter one, "What Must a Jewish Thinker Be?," begins by recounting Derrida's 1998 lecture at the *Colloque des intellectuels juifs de langue française* where Levinas had famously presented many of his "Talmudic lectures." At this lecture, Derrida told the audience about attending the 1965 colloquium with Emmanuel Levinas and the aside or secret that Levinas shared with him then. On the one hand, Hammerschlag shows us that Derrida's gesture is clearly one of fidelity demonstrating both his reverence for and proximity to Levinas. It was to Derrida that Levinas told the secret. But on the other hand, for Hammerschlag, by telling this story to the audience, Derrida had "in fact betrayed Levinas by revealing something said

between the two to the very group from which it had been withheld" (p. 3). On Hammerschlag's reading, Derrida's textual relationship to Levinas must also be read in this way.

It is through the lens of proximity, fidelity, and betrayal that Hammerschlag is able to demonstrate the way that Derrida's own understanding of literature as the displacement of religion came about through his fidelity to, and betrayal of, the work of Levinas. In chapter two, "Levinas, Literature, and the Ruin of the World," Hammerschlag presents a masterful intellectual history of Levinas's scholarly trajectory and the role that World War II played in his shift of emphasis from philosophy to religion (p. 45). Central to this shift is Levinas's increased interest in, and attention to, sacred Jewish texts and sources. But Hammerschlag is also attuned to the role and place of literature for Levinas even if ultimately Levinas chose to privilege religion because while "literature could perhaps reveal a subject with a different relation to power and agency...only religion, for Levinas, could ground reason in justice" (p. 38). Importantly, Levinas's ability to extract meaning from sacred Jewish texts in a fashion that made it legible to contemporary issues of ethics was predicated on his innovative and at times violent strategy of reading these texts. It is this emphasis on reading and the notion that a text always says more than it says that Derrida takes up with and against Levinas.

In chapter three, "Between the Jew and Writing," Hammerschlag sets out to demonstrate the extent of the relationship between Levinas and Derrida by bringing a number of Levinas's texts from the 1960s to bear on Derrida's work at that time. The goal here is to demonstrate that three seemingly unrelated texts, "Force et signification," "Edmond Jabès et la question du livre," and "Violence et métaphysique," hold a secret affinity and commonality with each other if read in the light of Derrida's sustained engagement with the work of Levinas at the time (p. 81). In this light, Hammerschlag asserts that Derrida's essays "function almost like a *melitzah*, the medieval form of weaving together biblical and rabbinic citations in a different context and thus providing them with a new meaning and set of associations" (p. 93). This move is essential for Hammerschlag's larger argument because it establishes Derrida's textual relationship with Levinas, credentials Derrida as the inheritor of a particularly Jewish tradition, and also unhinges this reading/writing style from the purely religious sphere because of the way Derrida applies it to non-religious texts. Unlike Levinas who sought to recover the ethical values which originate in sacred Jewish texts, Derrida found in Jabès's poetry "that return is not about recovering a site of origin but of setting something in circulation, a turning again" (p. 111). Readers of Derrida might recognize the strategy of deconstruction in this "turning again." But the key move is a shift in emphasis toward the open-ended nature of interpretation and its natural affinity to the work of literature. Here, I would like to point out that while Hammerschlag's argument is both textually and philosophically sound, it does require one to accept the major premise that Derrida's central focus in all of these texts is in fact the encounter with Levinas. This is an assertion that I imagine some scholars of Derrida will find problematic.

Having established both the secret connection between Derrida and Levinas, as well as the moments of fidelity and betrayal such a secret holds, Hammerschlag uses chapter four, "To Lose One's Head: Literature and the Democracy to Come," to show "how Derrida established Literature as a necessary lever—or should I say guillotine?—in this operation, to show that, for the model of freedom Derrida works out most explicitly in *Rogues*, literature is a necessary component" (p. 116). Hammerschlag provides a convincing argument that Derrida conserves those concerns that led Levinas away from philosophy and to religion but does so by activating those concerns in relation to literature. It is here that the reader comes to understand the full force of what Hammerschlag means by the "literary afterlife of religion." Part of this is revealed in the ways that Derrida's treatment of literature exposes the limits and problems of any given mode of reading or thought. Hammerschlag tells us that one thing "all of Derrida's essays and commentaries on Levinas have in common is the charge that Levinas could not keep his word" (p. 124). This is to say, Levinas's work holds forth a promise of a just and ethical life to come that is at the same time undone within the actual arguments proffered by Levinas. Hammerschlag sees this as akin to what Derrida calls the "autoimmune" as "that dynamic by which an organism in trying to protect itself against itself destroys its own self-protection" (p. 125). What is fascinating to

Hammerschlag is that Derrida's reading of Levinas is not a simple refutation (of either Levinas or religion) but serves to "reveal an autoimmune function in Derrida's text. Levinas has not served Derrida, then, as a way out of a conundrum, but as a means of exposing that Derrida's own arguments too are subject to an autoimmune unworking, to a function that betrays their principles" (p. 128). This is not a deficiency in Derrida's argument, according to Hammerschlag, but a strength, as Derrida is able to gather the key questions and problems that motivate religious (and political) thought without replacing the "sovereignty of the autonomous subject with a new lord." Instead, literature serves to reveal the fiction of sovereignty (p. 153).

Building on this argument, chapter five, "Literature and the Political-Theological Remains," pivots to address and challenge the current return to religion and the political-theological in contemporary thought, a moment sometimes referred to as the post-secular. Marshaling Judith Butler's *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*, in which she detects a "submerged [secret?] plea for literature" (p. 161), Hammerschlag challenges the thought of such figures as Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Simon Critchley, and Ward Blanton. Hammerschlag counters that "Derrida's argument for the relationship of religion to literature suggests another means of relating to the fact of our religious legacies" (p. 163) because Derrida's larger argument for literature's relation to politics through its ties to religion (ties forged in the textual relationship with Levinas) is such that "the project of thinking literature as a religious legacy provides us with a means to accept our religious inheritance, but to use it in such a way that literature can be theorized as the necessary 'imaginary' supplement to the democratic context" (p. 157). On this reading, religion retains the power to engage with the most important issues of ethics and justice but in a way that, as "imaginary," sheds the domineering need for exemplarity or sovereignty. It is in this regard that Hammerschlag asserts that "one of the tasks of this work has been to theorize the difference between religion and literature, to consider how a source for political theory is different when its appeal to the future is not in the hands of one who claims to speak for the tradition but is rather available for anyone to pick up a text and read" (p. 161). There is nothing particular about this reading/political strategy and yet throughout the book Hammerschlag has made it clear that this strategy is in fact particularly Jewish and is somehow inextricably linked to the Jewish tradition.

In the epilogue, Hammerschlag lets the reader in on another secret, her secret, as the tone of writing shifts from scholarly to confessional. Hammerschlag reveals that like both the main character and narrator of "The Figure in the Carpet," the Henry James story mentioned in Derrida's notes to his 1991 seminar that she hoped to deploy to explain Derrida's construct of "the secret" and conclude her book, she "too began to play the role of tormented critic" (p. 183), a role Hammerschlag avows that the thought of Derrida solicits. "How many hours had I spent combing [Derrida's] texts, looking for reference to Levinas, tracing out shared metaphors, trying to discern a meaning running through obfuscating prose? If Novick [the main character] and the narrator were duped, so was I" (p. 183). As I read these lines, I began to suspect that Hammerschlag's argument might be subject to the very autoimmune operation she detected in Derrida and Derrida detected in Levinas. If Hammerschlag was "duped," as she suggests in this sentence, then her argument is undone. Critical readers of this work will certainly grapple with the question as to whether the connections Hammerschlag produces to tie Derrida to Levinas are the product of Derrida's relation to Levinas or of Hammerschlag's reconstruction. To my mind this is a productive and generative challenge to the sovereignty of the author and one I believe Hammerschlag would welcome given her reading of the autoimmune function. I also believe that by shifting the reader's gaze from the more traditional chronological mode of analysis to that of reading Levinas back through Derrida, Hammerschlag has opened up new possibilities for reading and understanding both Derrida and Levinas.

Still, there is something forced about the construction of the relationship between Derrida and Levinas, especially around the question of what it is to be a Jewish thinker. There are significant portions of analysis devoted to Derrida's reading of non-Jewish thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Jan Patočka, and Martin Heidegger that point to Derrida's inclusion in a Christian tradition. Indeed, Hammerschlag's own appeal "to consider how a source for political theory is different when its appeal to

the future is not in the hands of one who claims to speak for the tradition but is rather available for anyone to pick up a text and read” (p. 161) suggests that Derrida’s intervention should lead to a mode of thought unfettered from any one tradition or religion. But even so, Hammerschlag is right to assert that Derrida ultimately constructs himself as a Jewish thinker within a Jewish tradition. Thus, the question is why? Why hold onto this logic of identity given the extraordinary lengths to which Derrida goes to destabilize the ties that bind one to it? To my mind the answer lies in the second to last sentence of the book when Hammerschlag tells us that Derrida’s relation to Levinas (the fidelity, the friendship, the misreading, the betrayal) “was, in the end, also the drawing of a meridian and a means of survival” (p. 189). A means of survival—perhaps survival is the secret. For Levinas, the turn toward Judaism and sacred Jewish texts after the rise of National Socialism and as a POW in a German camp was a means of survival in the most immediate sense of the term. Millions of other Jews did not survive. The issue that is avoided in Hammerschlag’s book is the role and place of the Holocaust in this narrative. It occupies a central place for both Levinas and Derrida in regard to the issue of preserving Jewish identity in the face of eradication, and yet it is not allowed to be central. How might an understanding of the “literary afterlife of religion” help us to confront this truly existential question?

The texts and ideas Hammerschlag explores are difficult, to be sure, but her prose and exegesis are incredibly accessible, so the payoff is enormous. Hammerschlag shows an uncommon ability to make even the most difficult philosophical formulations clear without simplifying or sacrificing any of their complexities. In the end, Hammerschlag does a masterful job of showing how deeply influential the work of Levinas was for Derrida and provokes us to think deeper about some of the most important issues of our time.

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