

No More But So

Ten Parables

David Cole

2009

David Cole  
137 Cottage Street  
New Haven, CT 06511  
Phone: 203-624-3982

Untaught, Untold

. . . all the while from these twain keeping me: to have taught,  
to have told

*And now this!*

And now, this . . .

## You Ten

I.	From the Palace of the Word	1
II.	And One	3
III.	The Future of Reading	5
IV.	The Man Who Went in Fear of Conversion	8
V.	Another Book	12
VI.	The Unfailing Word	18
VII.	The Abjection of Biography	23
VIII.	Three Forays in a Dying Tongue	27
IX.	No More But So	34
X.	At the Root of Jewish Writing	38

## From the Palace of the Word

When the Prophet received his Word, his first thought was to speak it where he stood, on the spot, from the nearest outcrop or hillside. But his Disciples objected. A true Word, they held, cries out to be delivered from a structure as sounding as itself. “Let us,” they pleaded, “raise you up some Temple or Palace of the Word, from which you may deliver yours.”

The Prophet, feeling (not for the first time) the pathos of discipleship, stuffed into his pocket the scroll from which he had been about to read and went apart.

The Disciples now plunged into the study of sacred architecture. They passed in review stupa and chantry, menhir and mithraeum, tempietto and chapel of ease. But no clear favorite emerged.

And as the pile of cast-off conceptions—minster and dolmen, cromlech and charterhouse—began to mount, so, too, did the murmurings of the Disciples. How (asked one) shall we frame a Palace suitable to a Word not yet spoken? Assuming (ventured another) that what we seek is a Palace that suits his Word, rather than, say, one that sets it off, as the foil the gem. Are we even clear (put in a third) that it is an actual building we want and not something more in the way of a *framework* or *context* for our Master’s utterance—perhaps a volume in his Collected Works? All

which led one skeptical disciple to wonder aloud whether his fellows really very much cared to *hear* their Prophet's Word—whether the whole thing were not perhaps merely an excuse for an immense building-jag . . . .

At length a design was fixed on, complete down to the last voussoir and header-joint, and next morning construction began. The Disciples laid first the jasper forecourts. They next dressed the stone of the inner keep. Up went the star-vaults and string courses, the drop-tracery and openwork . . . .

And when at last the Palace was complete, the Disciples crowded into the ephebeum and strained forward to hear—at last!—their Prophet's Word.

The Prophet came out onto a parapet, drew from his pocket the scroll from which, that first day, he had been about to read, and—

*“Fly, fly the jasper forecourts!*

*Undress the stone of the inner keep*

*Be ye no more seen beneath the star-vaults*

*Unstring the string courses, the tracery retrace*

*Make at last of the openwork a close . . . .”*

Thus, word by word, from the Palace of the Word the Prophet delivered His Word.

### And One

At her death, the Caliph's Third-to-Last Bride left behind a bulging notebook of tales by her invented or compiled. Here might be found the sagas of Sindbad and Aladdin, the adventures of Ali Baba, the legend of Yonus the Scribe . . . all the stories in the world, as it were. "But alas!" the Third-to-Last Bride had scrawled on the notebook's last leaf, "what shall this profusion avail me when, subsequent to our first and last night together, I am sent the way of all the Caliph's other wives?"

The Caliph's Next-to-Last Bride bequeathed to posterity a single page reading, in its entirety, as follows: *Scheme to prolong life: Tell him story after story. Break off each mid-tale. So live to tell another day . . . or thousand days.* "But alas!" the Next-to-Last Bride had scribbled at the foot of her single sheet, "I neither know nor can invent 'story after story' and so am sure, after our first and last night together, to be sent the way of all the Caliph's other wives."

On her wedding night the Caliph's Last Bride spent the hour between supper and bed turning out the drawers of her nightstand. In the lowest drawer she came on the single page of the Wife Before, resting atop the bulging notebook of Two Wives Back, which the Wife Before had set her lone leaf upon without examining further. The Caliph's Last Bride, however, made herself mistress of both notebook and page and, clapping them together, saw how she must go on.

That night, when the Caliph entered to her, the Last Bride—“She Who Succeeds” or, in the language of the Caliphate, “Scheherazade”—asked permission to speak.

“See, Master, what a bondage I spare you! Here”—holding up the Wife Before’s single sheet—“is a plot for placing you in thrall to an endless run of tales, and here”—holding up the Third-to-Last Wife’s notebook—“is the endless run of tales. Simply by putting this to that”—and here she brought the page and volume together in air—“I might have enslaved you to untold telling. Instead, I tell you the tale of your freedom.”

“And what a story it is!” exclaimed the Caliph. “I could hear you tell it a thousand times.”

*Which I proceeded to do*—so concludes this account found in Scheherazade’s nightstand after her death, though whether representing the true course of her dealings with her husband of many nights or merely a sketch for a tale, who can tell?

## The Future of Reading

A Reader desired to know his future. So do many. But the Reader faced special difficulties. He was never without a book; all he *did* was read. He would therefore have to pursue his inquiries about the future through reading, *to read* being his sole pursuit.

Well-meaning friends suggested a loophole: Does not one also “read” tea-leaves, Tarot cards, entrails . . . ? But the Reader would none of it. To him, reading meant *in a book*; and books, unlike tea-leaves and entrails, don’t tell you your future in any simple sense. And it was in the simplest sense that the Reader longed to know his.

At length, reading itself showed him a solution. In one after another of his cherished authors—in Rabelais and Augustine, in Browning and Brontë, in the plays of Montherlant and the tales of Robert Louis Stevenson—he came on instances of the “Virgilian Lots” (*sortes Virgilianae*), a divinatory practice so named because it was, apparently, the *Aeneid* that someone first had the idea of cracking open at random and taking the first words lighted on as predictive.

Readers of all stripes—lovers and soldiers, sages and kings—had (he read) queried the Roman epic in this fashion. But (his reading further revealed) many another volume had, over the centuries, been thus employed. Panurge put question to the *Iliad*, Augustine to the Letters of St. Paul, and the poet Cowper to a stray volume of Beaumont and Fletcher.



The Reader was elated. Here was a manner of knowing the future that not only did not call one from one's reading but could only be pursued book in hand. Reaching for his copy of (why not?) the *Aeneid*, he deemed his problem as good as solved.

And yet, in practice, the technique left much to be desired. It was only marginally helpful, upon "asking Virgil" where he should re-read *The Idiot*, to be told "near the coast" (*Aeneid* VIII.559) and not helpful at all, seeking to know what nation's literature should next draw his gaze, to find his finger resting upon "whatever land" (*Aeneid* II.1039). Clearly the method had its shortcomings.

And so the Reader introduced a refinement. Henceforth, rather than take the first word that struck his eye as giving him his future, he resolved to take it as giving him the title of the next book in which to pursue his search. So, for example, consulting *The Dark Night of the Soul* (Virgil had long since been jettisoned) as to whether he should one day be a confident reader of Mallarmé, and opening to the word "confidence," he took this, not as an injunction to confidence, but rather as a directive to crack open *The Confidence Man*; and, having opened *The Confidence Man* to "narrow," he reaches down his copy of *Narrow Road to the Deep North* . . . .

The problem, of course, was knowing where to stop, and here for once the Reader bypassed his new procedure: he flat-out "asked the book" (which that day happened to be *Fear and Trembling*) "When shall I be at an end?" And, having brought a blind finger down on the word "interminable," he did not push on to (say) *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* but from that hour simply pushed on: opening *The Interior Castle* to "secret," he opens *The Secret Garden*; opening *The Secret Garden* to "praise," he takes up *The Praise of Folly* . . . . But surely, reader, we may leave it there.

Occasionally—you would be surprised how seldom—he hit on a word so rare as to suggest no further title: “cerecloth” or “portolan” or “corncrake.”\* This he took as a sign that he must, after long voyage, turn prow for port; whereupon he would fetch down his copy of the *Aeneid* (kept ever at hand for this eventuality), part its boards, and was soon at sea once more.

“But—stay! Where in all this is your Reader’s original query? Surely now he will never know his future!”

On the contrary, reader, he knows it to a certainty; every moment of my Reader’s future is henceforth accounted for.

---

\*The Parablist seems unaware that “Corncrakes” is in fact the title of Section 3 of Louis MacNeice’s poem “Nature Notes.”

## The Man Who Went in Fear of Conversion

*converte me  
et convertar*

Who does not know the story of St. Genesius? If not in Lope's *Acting Is Believing*, then in Rotrou's *Saint Genest*, one has read the tale of this actor in the late Roman theatre who, while playing a scene in which his character, Adrien, undergoes conversion, was himself converted to the faith he feigned. But this is not the whole story.

The very hour the cast list for *Adrien Put Right* was posted, Genesius marched into his Manager's office and asked to be excused from the role of the convert. His Manager was dumbfounded. Maxime, the company's *jeune premier*, was forever begging off roles with scant swordplay, and Eulalie, our soubrette, had more than once turned down a character with no costume change. But in all his years with the company, Genesius had never before today refused a part. The Manager demanded an explanation. Genesius replied as follows:

"All my life I have gone in fear of conversion. As the hydrophobe, moisture or the miser, theft, so I dread that one day there shall break on me a sudden, resistless persuasion of divine truth, after which nothing will ever again be the same.

"Of course," he went on, "one takes precautions. I avoid holy places and men, give a wide berth to sacred images, flee, as but too predictable in their effect,

scenes of natural beauty and moral trial.

“Above all, I have shunned the sites of famous prior conversions: kept clear of orchards (for was not St. Augustine ‘taken’ in an orchard?); stayed off roads (for was it not en route that Saul of Tarsus was ‘won to the light’?) The man who goes in fear of conversion goes, it turns out, pretty much nowhere—not that ‘going nowhere’ is any sort of guarantee. For is not conversion likeliest to come crashing in precisely out of nowhere—indeed, is not conversion in essence a crashing in out of nowhere?”

“Only here in the theatre,” Genesius concluded, “have I, even for a moment, felt safe; for is not theatre the place where every turn is turned back at evening’s end? And is it theatre now bids me play even that very moment of conversion from which it has till now shielded me?”

“To *play* it, merely,” observed the Manager.

“Ah,” said Genesius bitterly, “the hill-caves of Cappadocia are full of actors who played their conversion scenes and left the stage converts.”

“Do but play me yours,” said the Manager, “and I undertake to secure you against such an outcome.”

Reluctantly, Genesius yielded, went on, and—lo!, even as he had feared, at the very moment convert Adrien first feels the stirrings, The Man Who Went in Fear of Conversion was himself converted.

Bitterly he sought out the Manager: “Behold me ‘won to the Light’. Where now are your assurances?”

“Convert, what’s it like?” the Manager could not resist asking.

“At Baiiae, on the Bay of Naples,” answered Genesisius, “rises a steep, from which, face one way and you look on the harbor; face round and you see the sea.”

*(This sounds like a speech from an old play, thinks the Manager.)*

“My conversion may be described as follows: one was looking on the harbor, now sees the sea—but with no experience of having faced round . . . .”

*(Sounds like an instant scene-change, muses the Manager.)*

“ . . . indeed,” Genesisius pursued, “with nothing that could be called an ‘experience’ of any kind. One was simply henceforth of a mind that excludes the other view.

“Was it not even from such a joyless certainty that you pledged to preserve me?”

“And shall keep my pledge,” said the Manager. “But, player, you must do your part. We have one last performance to give here at Baiiae. Freshen your make-up, straighten your robe. You shall play your scene one more time and you shall be free.”

“But how—?” said Genesisius.

“Places!” said the Manager.

So Genesisius steeled himself for an encore, not in the least seeing how this should undo his undoing.

But undo it it did! For (as his Manager must have foreseen) there is no way a conversion can survive a replay: Either you experience your “unrepeatable” moment over again or you experience nothing.

Which of these two sorrows befell Genesisius we never learned: the unconverted actor walked off the stage and kept on walking. He fled our company and went to dwell

in a Cappadocian hill-cave, whence night and noon may be heard rising the strain:

*The Theatre turneth*

*The Theatre turneth away*

*Blessed be the name of the Theatre!*

Such is the canticle of St. Genesisius, patron of players.

### Another Book

“The only ambition worthy of a rational being is to add a book to the Bible”—probably not the Aspirant himself could have told you the origins of this aspiration of his; the truth is, he could scarcely recall a time when, even thus stiffly phrased, it had not beckoned him on.

By contrast, the occasion of his first confiding his aspiration to another—his friend, the Theologue—stood graven in his mind, as was the Theologue’s response: “By this you mean to say that for such writing as you may produce, you seek to secure the status of ‘Scripture’; your aim is to enter the ‘canon’ of Western Literature.”

“My aim,” said the Aspirant, “is to add a book to the Bible.”

How can he dream of such a thing? Does not the Bible itself—in *Deuteronomy*, in *Proverbs*, in *Revelations*—forbid addition to itself? Do not the Prophets themselves declare the era of prophecy at an end?

Well, yes, true; but consider: There are a fair number of books that only just made it into the Bible: *Daniel*, *Esther* and *The Song of Songs* were nearly sent packing. Conversely, not a few pious screeds—*First Clement*, the *Didaché*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*—only just fell short. From such borderline cases might not the Aspirant well conclude that the boundaries of Scripture are porous?

After all, books have been “added” to the Bible before now, at least in the sense of having been, at some point, carved out of other books already in. *The Lamentations of Jeremiah* was “added” to *Jeremiah* in this manner. *Kings* emerged from a corpus that originally contained *Joshua* and *Kings*, and *Kings II* was “added” to *Kings I* by a further such partition. Special cases, you will protest. But in fact *every* Biblical book came into being through addition: of pericope to pericope, of *logia* to *logia*, of Yahwist to Elohist to Priestly strand. . . . The Bible is most accurately viewed as a patchwork of additions to additions. Why, the Aspirant might wonder, should he not continue the line? In support of his project, he could point to all those “other books” *named* in the Bible—“The Book of Yasher” in *Joshua*, “The Book of the Wars of the Lord” in *Numbers*, etc.—and so, in a sense, *already* added to it, all but their actual texts, which why should not he as well as another supply?

I will be asked: “Is he mad, this Aspirant of yours? What manner of man—?” But I must stop you there. *I do not know the man; I know the aspiration.* If there is a “life story” here, I have not been told it. *Whose* life? *What* story? The Aspirant is born of his aspiration, is before us only from the moment he aspires. Sing the birth of that aspiration and your tale is told. So much I may.

The aspiration to enter Scripture does not, as might be supposed, come of reading it; the Aspirant had never been much of a Bible-reader. To him, the Bible spoke only of his own absence from it and, since it *seems* to speak only



of something called “God,” he assumed that “God” was the Bible’s word for his absence from it. Well, there are really only two things you can do with the Bible: read it or add to it. Unable to read, the Aspirant set about to add.

But add *what*? Here he made small headway. His first thought was he might append to Scripture’s many visionary accounts some vision of his own: that Green Angel glimpsed floating past a window of childhood seemed the kind of thing. . . . But, a little reflection showed, any such “vision” was all too likely to be of the visionary enterprise itself—that Green Angel hovering just out of reach, for example, all too plainly figured this very “addition” he contemplated—and, in producing such a thing, he should have added, not another book to the Bible but, merely, another poem to poetry.

Coming at it from the other end, the Aspirant probed for “breaks” in the Biblical sequence, which he might strive to bridge: the “lost” years of Jesus, the interval *between* the Testaments, etc. But, he soon found, the Bible *means* its breaks, *intends* (for example) to present Jesus’ “lost” years as lost. . . . To “fill these in” is not to add a book to the Bible but apocrypha to the Apocrypha.

In this wise, the Aspirant saw one after another of his portals into Scripture slam shut. He had, it is true, a fallback position: he might always write a book *about* his attempt to add to the Bible the Book he could not add to it. Thus he was certain, come what may, to “get a book out of it.”

Ah, but (as must at length occur to him) such another book would be without a doubt “literature”—and was it not precisely literature he was determined not to fall back on?

Brought to this pass, the Aspirant conceived a fateful bargain (although with whom he took himself to be bargaining is a question): *Give me to add my word to the Bible, and I give my word not to add it.*

However, before taking this last desperate step, he once more sought out his friend the Theologue and asked what aspirants have always asked theologues: “What must I do to be saved?” (‘Saved,’ that is, the humiliation of finding oneself still emptyhanded, forever without.) “Put me in the way to write a book which all agree must enter the Bible.”

The Theologue took a breath.

“First you must receive, at the dictation of the Holy Spirit, an inspired, inerrant Word in a recognized sacred tongue: Hebrew, Aramaic or *koiné* Greek. This Word you must set down, employing one or another of the scripts (late Hasmonean semi-cursive, perhaps, or maybe a Persian chancellery hand) in which alone Biblical manuscripts are written, upon one of the materials (papyrus, leather or clay) on which alone early Bibles are found.

“The volume thus produced must now be assigned a place somewhere along the branching chain of manuscript transmission: is it, for example, out of the Aleppo Codex *via* the Samaritan Pentateuch?

“And finally, your book must be admitted into the Biblical canon, raising at once the question: *which* Biblical canon, the Jewish or the Christian? If the Jewish, would this be the collection fixed on at Jamnia *circa* 90 AD or the slightly more inclusive Alexandrian canon of the second century? If the Christian, does this mean the Protestant canon (coterminous, so far as the Old Testament is concerned, with Jamnia) or the far

ampler canon of the Roman Church? And if it is the Catholic canon you aim to enter, are we talking about the titles endorsed at Trent in the sixteenth century or is it within one of the earlier, slimmer collections—the canon as prescribed by Marcion, by Melito of Sardis, or the Muratorian Fragment—that you seek a place?”

The Theologue paused for breath. The Aspirant broke in: “And suppose a book of mine, by some such process as you recount, written and received. What should then be said of it?”

And the Theologue: “That it supplies a lack which, till your book supplied it, none had marked or guessed.”

“What lack is that?” asked the Aspirant.

And the Theologue: “That you must teach me!”

“My task is plain,” said the Aspirant and took up his pen.

Well, plain it might be, but no easier of accomplishment for that. The Bible, after all, *contains everything*: stories and poems, chronicles and laws, speculations on the divine nature and the natural world—what may it be said to lack?

For long and long, no obvious solution suggested itself. And then, one day, one did.

For see! notwithstanding the immense variety of texts it includes, the Bible includes nothing that could be called a *dramatic* text. Nowhere in the sacred writings does one come upon any writing *for the theatre*. The “missing book” the Aspirant might dream to supply was—a play! And, since the Aspirant was himself a playwright—it was, indeed, at a rehearsal of one of his plays that Scripture’s want of script first came home to him—here was a lack he had a better-than-even chance to make good.

He hastened to the Theologue with his discovery.

“But, my poor friend,” replied the Theologue, “what is the *Bible itself*—prescribing as it does to the faithful performer how at every turn he must act—but one vast script? Does not Scripture itself urge this view of itself upon us at *Ephesians 5:1*, where we are directed: ‘Be ye imitators (*mimetai*, “mimes”) of God’? The Bible does not *contain* a script because it *is* a script. The Book to which you would add another is already the other book you would add!”

“My work is done, said the Aspirant and laid down his pen.

## The Unfailing Word

### Parable for 2

In his youth the Old Jew was handed a book of blessings (*berakhōt*) by his Master, with the assurance that when he had pronounced every blessing it contained at least once, “you shall at last See The Light.”

The thing, at first, seemed doable. Between the first blessing (“On glimpsing winter sun reflected off pewter”) and the last (“On coming upon a situation for which this book supplies no blessing”) lay only a few hundred pages of not-so-fine print, comprising a thousand or so *berakhōt*.

Some he dispatched straight off. #338 (“On a torn glove”) he put away the very afternoon he received the book. Others demanded patience. Nearly a decade went by before he chanced upon a snake curled round a doorknob and could pronounce the *berakhah* (#511) prescribed for that encounter.

For a long time he feared that #618—“On glimpsing the Messiah in the next street”—would keep him from ever getting through. But then one day he *did* glimpse the Messiah in the next street and spoke the enjoined words. True, it turned out to be only Herr Steibl walking his cat. But the Old Jew had pronounced the *berakhah* in good faith. And when he now went on to murmur #819—“On mistaking someone else for the Messiah”—he might legitimately feel he’d done a good morning’s work.

Thus, over time, page after page of the *berakhōt* book fell to his blessing hand. But even as the list of bestowed blessings lengthened—#434: “On waking from a dream of childhood,” #820: “On being left off at a remote train station in the middle of the night,” #760: “On a sudden change of heart,” etc.—it only grew plainer that the real obstacle to his ever getting to the end and Seeing The Light was going to be that final *berakhah*: “On coming upon a situation for which this book supplies no blessing.”

At first blush, this might seem the least of his problems. Surely, given the amplitude of the world and the slimness of his volume, it could not be long before he came on a situation unprovided for there. But in fact he never seemed to come on one.

For, in addition to its many blessings on set occasions—#889: “For the third evening when she fails of our appointment by the boathouse,” #1040: “On a torch still somehow aglow at the bottom of a well” and the like—the book also contained a number of what might be termed “metablessings,” which greatly broadened its scope. As for example, #49: “On having neglected to bring this book out with one,” #93: “On feeling the impulse to reword a *berakhah*,” #84: “When the mind adverts to the author of these prayers,” and so on.

It was the presence of these metablessings that led the Old Jew to doubt he should ever nail that final *berakhah* and at last See The Light. Time and again he supposed himself arrived at his Unblessable Thing,, only to be brought up short by one or another of these catch-alls. He thought he “had it” the morning he stumbled into a cave sealed since the dawn of time (how could there be a *berakhah* for *that?*). But he had reckoned without #532: “On a sight to no previous eye vouchsafed.” Or again: he deemed himself home free the time he witnessed a tavern brawl among travelling players

(the blessing-book said nothing of taverns or players). But then he recollected, and duly reeled off, #480: “On the day’s events having fallen out in just the order they did.”

At last the camel’s back was broken. One day, approaching the 13th consecutive smashed window in a mill-façade (his manual had furnished lavish *berakhōt* for each of the prior 12), he was just congratulating himself on having beaten the odds, when his eye fell upon #65 (“On the  $n + 1$ st occurrence of something already blessed  $n$  times”); whereupon, murmuring #270 (“On just now recognizing that one has long since had enough”),

### HE TOSSED THE BOOK INTO THE AIR

\* \* \*

Was ever author less ambitious? Let other writers strive to change the world, light men’s path, break new ground, etc. Our Scribe set his sights lower. His dream was merely to write the only book he himself would ever want to read.

That his early efforts along these lines fell short did not faze him: what artist ever attains his dream straight off? But when a lifetime’s labor found him no nearer his goal, he began to suspect that the problem might be his goal.

Like any scribe, ours was the author of less and more perfect works and, in his quest for a “one and only,” he tore through both piles—in vain. To read over his more flawed productions only vexed him or, at best, sent him into frenzies of retouching. His masterpieces he found still less readable—in fact, not readable at all. In what light regard one’s own best pages but as an archive of long since made choices, in which one

had permanently lost interest precisely by virtue of having, back then, made them so well?

Thus, belatedly, Our Scribe came to see that the apparently modest goal he had set himself—“to produce the only book I myself shall ever want to read”—lay beyond even the greatest writers. Not Homer might get by on a steady diet of Homer. Not Dante could face the desert isle with none but his own *Commedia* for fare. The more utterly achieved the work, the more utterly must one’s interest have been exhausted by the achieving of it. To this iron law a Shakespeare, a Tolstoy were no less subject than oneself.

Some pride Our Scribe might take in having invented (rarest of inventions!) a new ambition for writing; but, alas, the ambition was one that he could neither hope to attain nor bear to renounce.

Brought to this pass, Our Scribe one day sat pondering (as for many days now he had pondered) not so much his next move as what, at this juncture, might count as a next move, when

### THE BOOK LANDED AT HIS FEET

He dropped to his knees to retrieve this gift from on high and began to page through it. It bore the title *The Unfailing Word* and appeared to be a collection of blessings for various occasions (“On glimpsing a rainbow,” “On meeting a dwarf,” “On passing an oak riven by lightning for the second time that day”)—indeed, as soon became clear, for pretty much every occasion.



As Our Scribe examined this windfall, the scales fell from his eyes. “Why,” quoth he, “here is even such a book as I have all this while dreamt of writing, its every page aflutter with those and only those words one might just then care to read.

“To have in hand this long-sought solution frees me—to unclench my hand. For truly, *who might wish himself the author of such a thing?* The answer to one’s prayers a prayerbook? Why, sooner than so, though I am not (thank heaven!) a praying man. I should be minded to bring forth something in the vein of . . . ”

[And here the Old Jew, having watched from afar as Our Scribe caught up his cast-off volume and thumbed through it, pricked up his ears.]

“ . . . *Berakhah*: On being shown my way clear of any such book as this.”

\* \* \*

Now, though the blessing-book was out of his hands, the Old Jew knew past a doubt that this *berakhah* would not be found there ; for was ever book yet framed it as a blessing to be turned from unread?

Accordingly, the Old Jew pronounced the single as yet unbestowed *berakhah* in the volume—“On coming upon a situation for which this book supplies no blessing”—closed the book on his book, and at last saw the light.

## The Abjection of Biography

Even prior to the unearthing of the Hensley Trove, the Biographer was growing fretful. Did not this ceaseless attending to the minutiae of another life have about it something . . . well, abject, even when the figure to whom one thus boundlessly attended was of the utmost distinction?

Of the Master's distinction there could be no doubt. And yet there were times when, after whole days spent poring over symptoms and outlays, schedules and shopping-lists, not even the Biographer's cherished mantra—*what is any life but the rough draft of a biography?*—could dispel the gloom.

Still, all this might have remained at the level of an inner grumble, but for the coming to light of the Hensley Trove, a cache of the Master's letters and papers only recently fished up out of a midden at Hensley, the country house where he had passed many a fruitful fall.

This was a development for which the Biographer ought, he knew, to be feeling grateful. Here, after all, were materials that might well shed light on all manner of vexed questions: the rumored affair at boarding school, the early experiments with fixed forms, etc. But what in fact he did feel was outrage: "Shall there never be an end of what I do for him? And why is it always me doing for him? Isn't it about time he did something for me? Why should not *he* write *my* biography?"

This last query had no sooner crossed his lips than the Biographer could scarcely believe he had allowed himself to entertain it, though perhaps the biographer never lived who has not, at one moment or another, entertained it.

“Why should not *he* write *my* biography?” . . . at what point, by what process, this angry mutter began to assume the contours of an actual project, the Biographer himself scarcely knew.

It might never have done so, had he been able to set out at once for Hensley to examine the Trove, to which, as authorized biographer, he currently had sole access. But it was several weeks before he might do so, and those weeks he spent laboring upon a composition to which he gave the bold title “Him on Me.”

This amounted to a page or two, in the Master’s best late manner, wherein were sketched the life and character of his eventual biographer, *i. e.*, of the Biographer himself. This production, I must say, read quite plausibly as one of his subject’s own. For there was no trait of the Master’s (save his mastery) of which the Biographer had not made himself master: the paratactic clauses, the images out of nowhere . . . but readers of this sketch will scarcely require a catalogue of the Master’s devices.

His good humor restored by these efforts, the Biographer now felt equal to the blizzard of new material awaiting him at Hensley and next morning set forth. On the train down, he read over “Him on Me” with some satisfaction, deeming it (and I may say I share his assessment) something beyond mere pastiche. Indeed, it seemed to him that in some ways these few pages represented a truer imaginative *entering into* the Master’s life than, even, the great Biography-in-progress—yet one which, the Biographer felt no less sure, only the author of that Biography might have compassed.

Imagine, then, his dismay, on plunging into the Hensley trove, to discover, at the very top of the pile, something called “Chronicle of My Chronicler,” a hitherto unknown composition in which the Master set out to portray the life and character of his eventual biographer—the very project by which the Biographer had thought, for once, to get the start of him.

I am not, thank goodness, obliged to report that this “Chronicle of My Chronicler” and “Him on Me” were word-for-word the same; *that* horror, at least, the Biographer was spared. Still, on every essential point and in more than a few actual phrasings, the Biographer could not but acknowledge that the Master had been there before him.

Well, but (you many urge) surely the Biographer must have taken *some* delight in this development; for would it not appear that his subject had, after all, written *his* biography, the very turnabout by him so fervently desired?

Alas, I am afraid that in his pique, the Biographer’s first (and for a good while only) impulse was to exclude from his volume every last scrap of the Hensley Trove. Such rigor, however, could not be maintained: certain of the “scraps” were just too interesting. And in any case a subtler vengeance than mere exclusion had, in the meanwhile, suggested itself.

The Biographer resolved, in a special appendix to his work, to reveal the existence and, indeed, print the text of the Master’s lately unearthed portrait of his future biographer. Only, the text he printed would be not the Master’s actual “Chronicle of My Chronicler” but, rather, the Biographer’s own “Him on Me.”

How, you may ask, could the Biographer hope to bring off this imposture? True, he had, for the moment, sole access to the Hensley materials. But in time the Trove must

be thrown open to other scholars and the hoax uncovered. Did not the certainty of eventual exposure deter him?

I tell you, it did not; rather, it gave him hope that his audacity in perpetrating such a fraud might render him, in the eyes of future researchers, a figure of independent scholarly interest—perhaps, indeed, the subject of an eventual biography.

## Three Forays in a Dying Tongue

### i. Fishhooks!

Of the dying language of G'maa there remained but two speakers; and these, dwelling as they did on opposite shores of Lake Tergun, had never met. Thus, when word reached the Eldest Speaker that the Second-to-Last sought converse with him, he leapt at the chance; for he had much to impart and none but the Second-to-Last to whom he might impart it.

Their conversation, when at last it took place, ranged widely. Songs, tales and gossip were exchanged; kinship ties between (long vanished) clans were traced; impressions of storm and sunrise over Lake Tergun were compared. Everything, it seemed, from cosmogonic myths to best peccary-trap locations found a place in this, the last conversation ever to be held in G'maa.

Yet afterwards, when asked by officials at the League of Beleaguered Tongues (which had sponsored and transcribed the exchange) how he felt things had gone, the Eldest Speaker replied with disgust: "Ah, he kept bringing it round to fishhooks!"

This, they assumed, was a G'maa idiom, somewhat along the lines of “getting down to brass tacks” or “the nuts and bolts of the matter.”

But years later, when transcripts of the long-ago last conversation were combed through by a young researcher intent on a revival of G'maa, it emerged that the Second-to-Last Speaker had indeed missed no opportunity of steering the dialogue toward fishhooks. For example, pointing into the night sky, he had exclaimed: “See! The Great Fishhook!” (a constellation name unfamiliar to the Eldest Speaker). Describing G'maa marriage customs, he had invoked “the fishhook exogamy rule” (a rule of which the Eldest Speaker could not supply an instance). He told tale after tale of “Old Fishhook,” that well-known (but not to the Eldest Speaker) figure of G'maa folklore. And any time conversation flagged, he would interject: “All those fishhooks—but where’s the fish?”, a “traditional” G'maa adage that the Eldest Speaker did not recall ever hearing and of which he failed to see the point.

The only other feature of G'maa that appeared with anything like such frequency in the transcript of this last conversation ever to be held in it was the future-perfect tense: “it *will have been* the case . . . .” This did not seem to call for explanation—*of course* speakers of a language with no future would recur obsessively to a future all past—but for the recurrence of “fishhooks” many explanations were offered. As for example: that fishing terms must be expected to bulk large in the discourse of a coastal people like the G'maa; or that the G'maa creation myth featured the landing of a Cosmic Carp; or that “The Fishhook” might be a nickname for some celebrated G'maa chieftain or belle . . . . Any of these seemed plausible, none definitive.

At last someone at the League of Beleaguered Tongues had the thought: why not bring in the Second-to-Last Speaker and *ask* him—assuming he was still alive.

He proved to be so, though it was now many years since he had spoken G'maa (“in which, however, I still dream,” he reported). And so they sat him down and asked why, in that long-ago conversation, he had, in and out of season, kept bringing up fishhooks. Was it to do with coastal economics? Cosmic myth? Nicknames?

“Ah, no,” replied the Last Speaker of G'maa (for such, with the death of his erstwhile interlocutor, the former Second-to-Last had become), “nothing like that. It was just, you see, that I longed to speak and hear one last time the chiming velar fricatives of my native tongue, of which only the G'maa word for ‘fishhook’—oh, and certain future-perfect tense endings—supply an instance.”

“It may be worth noting,” adds the League linguist who conducted this interview, “that the G'maa word for ‘velar fricative’ itself contains no velar fricatives.”

## ii. The Last Singer of Ga'am

The last two speakers of the dying language of Ga'am made a pact. Each undertook to memorize any message the other might wish transmitted to posterity, so that, whichever of them died first, his words should not be lost.

Such a bargain might appear futile, since, after all, each party to it must himself eventually die—and with him, the confided words of the other. But not so! For, as both men well knew, the fate of their language was being monitored by a linguist at the League of Beleaguered Tongues who specialized in languages with but a Sole Surviving



Speaker. Once Ga'am was "down to one," this researcher could be counted on to swoop in and archive every last one of the survivor's words, including, perforce, the words of his deceased fellow-speaker.

A more serious problem with the bargain was its lopsidedness. The Younger Speaker, a fisherman, had only a few family facts, some personal messages, and the locations of his prime crawfishing sites around the Bay of Tergun that he longed to pass on to the future. Whereas his co-compacter was none other than the Last Singer of Ga'am, the author of thousands of lines of oral verse, which, with the help of the Younger Speaker (and, ultimately, the researcher at the League), he hoped to preserve. The Last Singer thus stood to benefit disproportionately from the pact (not surprisingly, it was he who had proposed it) and the Younger Speaker could not but be aware of this inequity. Still, he did care about handing on his few poor facts, and to assure this outcome was more than willing to commit to memory the Last Singer's many lines.

What the Younger Speaker could not know about the bargain he had struck was that the Last Singer had no intention of honoring it. His true plan was, the moment he felt confident that the Younger Speaker had mastered his oeuvre, to commit suicide, thus ensuring that the Linguist of Last Tongues would promptly descend upon the Younger Speaker and set down his—which is to say: the Last Singer's—every last word.

It had, of course, occurred to the Last Singer that he might compass his end by killing the Younger Speaker rather than himself—that this, no less surely than his own demise, would bring on the Linguist of Last Tongues, to whom he might then confide his complete works. But to kill the only other speaker of Ga'am would be *to destroy his*

*entire readership*—a fate that to the Last (as to any) Singer seemed more a death than death.

And so, the evening of the very day he ascertained that the Younger Speaker had his corpus down cold—and, for form's sake, having repeated the Younger Speaker's small store to *him*—the Last Singer flung himself into the Bay of Tergun.

Now Ga'am was “down to one” and, sure enough, next morning the Linguist of Last Tongues appeared, notebook in hand. The Last Singer's plan would appear to have gone off without a hitch.

But now, see! The only thing the tricked survivor can be brought to talk about is the perfidy of the Last Singer's dealings with him: all that vast labor of memorization—and for what? *So* consumed is the Younger (now the Last) Speaker by his wrongs that he neglects to bring forth his own few, poor facts: his fishing tips, family lore, etc., must now die with him.

Page after page of the scholar's notebook fills with the Younger Speaker's grievances. And only every now and then, in the course of illustrating the difficulty of getting his countryman's verse by heart, does he quote a few words of it. In this way perhaps a dozen or so lines of the Last Singer's thousands survive.

The Linguist of Last Tongues, meanwhile, is listening intently for instances of non-clause-bound temporal connectors, a grammatical feature in which Ga'am, almost alone among the world's languages, abounds.

### iii. The First Writer of Ma'ag

The Last Speaker of Ma'ag, conscious of all that must pass from the world with his passing, devised a writing system, largely of his own invention, though incorporating here and there features of the Cyrillic alphabet, in which he was already literate. In this new script he set down all he could think to preserve of Ma'ag culture: myths, rituals, tales, and best cassava-patch sites about the Sea of Tergun. Especially he strove to record such founding tenets of Ma'ag thought as “How If Not So?”, “No Way Out But Through,” and “But For These Few, These Last.” At length before him lay, on page after page of the new alphabet, as full an account as might be wished of Ma'ag life and lore.

All the elements for the transmission of Ma'ag culture thus seemed to be in place. And indeed, on the death of its author his massive tome, at once the first and last ever to be written in Ma'ag, found its way to the League of Beleaguered Tongues—where to this hour it sits on a high shelf gathering dust.

For alas! The First and Last Writer of Ma'ag had, so far as anyone could tell, neglected to supply a key to his invented writing system—the occasional scholar who pulled down and opened the volume found himself adrift on what looked like a sea of wildly garbled Cyrillic letters—thus ensuring that this First and Last Book of Ma'ag should remain forever unread.

So glaring did such an omission appear that at least one scholar at the League could not credit it and put forward an alternative explanation. What if (this savant

speculated) the author had left out the key to his script *intentionally*, as a sort of test or trial, perhaps on the view that no aspirant incapable of clearing this small hurdle to the Ma'ag world was worthy to enter it?

It would doubtless have gratified the deviser of this hypothesis to learn that he had unwittingly stumbled upon the central tenet of Ma'ag thought—"Each Lock Its Own Key"—which, had he been able to construe the volume for whose illegibility he thus accounted, he would have found set forth on folio page 243 *verso*.

No More But So

(From the Archive)

WITNESS *deposes*:

Masters of the Tribunal—I thought you'd never ask.

\* \* \*

We were in the way of death, our shrouds already drawn fast about us, the stakes to which we should be bound already in view, when the Master—with whom, to this hour, I had scarce exchanged word—drew up alongside me and began to whisper in my ear.

What he spoke I could not, over the gunning down of those ahead, at first make out, but at length took him to be asking: Did I, in this final hour, nurse some great regret?

“Never in all my days to have done or known a thing that only I might!” I shot back without hesitation; then, with some hesitation: “And you, Master? Nurse you some great regret?”

Next moment I could have wished my presuming question unasked. The Master, however, gave no sign of offense but answered simply: “Yes. Never now shall I set down the Great Word vouchsafed me in cell yestereve.”

I joined the Master in bewailing his lost . . . I knew not whether to name it *teaching, vision* or *tale*.

“Ah, but,” cries he, “it shall *not* be lost! I will tell it *you*.”

“But, Master,” I countered, “how may it avail to repose your Great Word in me, whom even the next bullet fells?”

“Even thus,” replied the Master. “The Tribunal is as ardent to hear the vision as to hear no more of the visionary—two words for a single ardor, it may be.” (I don’t know what he meant by that.) “Let them but have sight of me pouring that vision into the ear of another, and they will *stop it there* to query my confidant.”

“But, Master,” I objected, “your confidant once queried, *they will shoot us both*; and the Word you look to make sure by making mine, were as certain lost as if never spoke.”

“Think again!” quoth the Master. “Of yours, as of every silence breached before the Tribunal, transcript is taken. Your last words—which is to say: the last of me—shall thenceforth in the Archives of the Tribunal ever bide.”

“But, Master,” I protested, “the Archives of the Tribunal are *sealed!*”

And he: “What is sealed may be unsealed! What is made fast may be made free!”

“And how,” I ventured, “if the Archives be not made free, but remain forever under seal?”

“Why, then,” quoth he, “in them my Great Word *remains forever*—at, it is true, the small cost of remaining forever unread.”

“But—stay!” broke from me (the thought only now occurring). “I do not speak the language of the Tribunal. In their Archive your Word, by me brought forth, shall live only on another’s tongue, in another tongue.”

To which, he, smiling: “As when not? As how else?”

“And suppose, after all”—as, indeed, now seemed likely, for already we had been marched up to our stakes—“they fail to mark your working lips at my ear and drop us both where we stand?”

And he, smiling: “Well, then, at least my tale shall have found a single hearer. I do not perish unread.”

And I: “O drear election! Or in a deathless archive to muffle or else sound in a dying ear!”

And he, always smiling: “The accustomed alternatives, are they not? And then, some solace it must bring to have banished your great regret.”

“Sir, how is that?” I asked.

“Why,” says he, “as my word’s either lone hearer or sole voice, shall you not in the end have ‘done or known a thing that only you might’?”

“Ah, Master,”—and even now your pikemen are lashing each to his stake—“so little is mine to thee signal service that it comes to no more than one’s having been the next ear in line, the next tongue down.”

To which, he, radiant: “And for what do you take your Master, if not ‘the next ear in line, the next tongue down’?”

At which, my last scruple vanishing: “Master! Give me to hear thy Word!” Yet he but glitters the while.

Rifles go to shoulders. “Teacher! Speak me that I may speak”—he yet but glittering more bright.

Whereupon, over the roll of drums struggling to be heard: “Father! Never or now! I am all ears!”

And here at last his lips part, in a smile of, if not boundless, yet considerable amusement. And the last thought that goes through my head as they force the hood down over it, is: But how if perhaps *already* . . . ?

\* \* \*

No, Masters of the Tribunal, not another word. No more but so.



### At the Root of Jewish Writing

As is well known, a Jew is forbidden to speak the name of God.

For this prohibition various explanations have been advanced. Some cite the Third Commandment (“Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord . . . ”). Others (Maimonides among them) hold that to name is to delimit . . . the Illimitable. And still others profess to find here a vestige of the ancient magical belief that to *speak the name* is to *seize the power* of another. To this way of thinking, the name of the All-Powerful would confer on its mortal speaker all powers, up through and including . . . well, do not the Kabbalists teach that “God created the world by uttering his name”?

Whatever the origins of this stricture, the manner of observing it seems obvious: coming, in speech or text, to the name of God, one simply preserves silence.

Ah, but “Preserved Silence” is also a name of God; and he who preserves the silence, utters the name.

No, I am afraid that the only way not to speak the name of God is to be ever and always speaking something else.

To this “ever and always speaking something else” we give the name of Jewish writing.