

**READING SCARS:
CIRCUMCISION AS TEXTUAL TROPE**

by

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This dissertation presents readings across a series of disparate texts in which circumcision--as initiating Jewish rite or descendant metaphor--functions as an interpretive key. The mark of circumcision has served as the rhetorical ground upon which much negative stereotyping--especially anti-Judaic and/or anti-Semitic sentiment--has been fostered. The metaphor of circumcision, in seeming contrast, has designated an elect in both religious and secular modes of exegesis. Additionally, issues pertaining to sexuality and gender attend or subtend the representation of circumcision in any number of cultural or critical venues. Among the texts which serve to anchor discussion around these issues are portions of Genesis; anti-circumcision literature and documentary; George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*; Joan Micklin Silver's *Crossing Delancey*; Agnieszka Holland's *Europa, Europa*; Peter Greenaway's *Drowning By Numbers*; and the opening chapter of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*. The polysemous character of this diacritical rite become sign determines in part the theoretical and critical writings called upon to illuminate the manner in which circumcision is and has been read. The primary informing bases are critical writings by Jewish historians and Hebrew scholars and psychoanalytic theory.

The legacy of the rite of circumcision within the so-called Judeo-Christian history of Western art and literature speaks both to the tenacity of Judaism's particular embodied tradition and to the influence of Christianity's universal and disembodied rhetoric. This inmix of

rhetoric, rite, and religion clusters at the interpretive edge of circumcision and informs as well its variant tropes. Metaphorically speaking, this means the best reading position is one at or near the wound. Textually speaking, this means tending to those sites where literal ruptures, or reading wounds appear.

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I dedicate this writing with love and gratitude to my children, Gillian, Alexander, and Nicole Glass, in memory of their grandfather, Dr. George B. Jerzy Glass.

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INTRODUCTION

The physical act of circumcision *in the flesh*, which prepares the (male) Jew for sexual intercourse, is also that which prepares him for Divine intercourse.

Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, 127

And then the guest of honor, who has reached the age of five, in our village of Tudra, was brought into the synagogue, and they wrote on wooden boards the letters of the alphabet in honey, and they said to him, "Darling, lick." / And the learning (*ha-torah*) in his mouth was sweet as the taste of honey

Cited in Ivan Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood*, 23

In the epigraphs above, taken from commentary on a midrash and a history of medieval custom, Jewish ritual practice enfolds an occasion for textual interpretation. While keenly pressing upon the metaphorical, the acts described in these passages do not abandon but, rather, embrace the body as they envision engagement with the divine word. As initiatory rites, each seems to foreshadow an intermediary or bridging space wherein the participant will be made ready for performance as receptive reader. While textual images such as these provide impetus for the readings undertaken here, they inform but one half of the hermeneutical hinge to which I am heir. The other half is tempered by readings more closely associated with the exegetical tradition dependent upon more disembodied allegorizations identified with Pauline interpretation.

In this writing, circumcision, both as rite and as metaphor, serves as the pintle joining the hinge. The pin loosely fastens together two Western religious and textual traditions--Judaism and

Christianity--both of which lay claim to the relevance of Abrahamic Biblical circumcision. ¹ And, borrowing from an *American Heritage Dictionary* definition of “hinge,” this pin is to function precisely as “A point or circumstance on which subsequent events depend” (“Hinge,” def.3). In its role as hinge-pin, circumcision at once fixes the site of the readings and locates their point of departure. As act and as trope, the wound and scar of circumcision provide the frame through or from which one reads. There is a sense, then, in which circumcision may be seen to encompass its own hermeneutic. That is to say, at the very moment the incision releases the sign, the act of reading and the discovery of meaning begin.

Years ago, I was scarred by reading a scene in a popular novel. The incisive moment was that in which a young Jewish athlete, living in second century B.C.E. Judea, was bludgeoned to death by his father for having reversed the sign of his circumcision.² Incomprehensible was the idea that the presence or absence of a foreskin could be so fraught with meaning that it would provoke infanticide. Making sense of an act so foreign and antipathetic to all I knew, has turned into a rather long project of reading. The reading of this scar has involved risking other textual wounds and upsetting, or at least turning sideways, ideas about what it means to read in the first place.

¹ The practice of Islamic circumcision lies beyond the limits of this particular study. Similarly, issues pertaining to female genital cutting are not addressed here.

² The scene occurs in “In the Gymnasium,” a chapter of James Michener’s *The Source*: “The Jew’s eyes rested with astonishment upon the visible proof of the boy’s disgrace, and he was so appalled at what Menelaus had done that he pressed his hands over his face, and as the crowd called the boy’s name Jehubabel heard the words of YHWH himself saying as of old: ‘And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant...’ and it seemed to him a commandment and he leaped from his seat, grabbing the walking stick of a crippled Jew and with this knotted club he struck his son with such force that the boy fell to the ground. With four crushing blows he beat his son about the head, shattering his skull” (349).

Reading the scar has raised questions. What entitlements need to be in place, or perhaps dismantled, in order to read beyond one's ken? How does one textually cross into, over, through areas of expertise without the requisite certification or training? How does one read or write about circumcision without, in effect, being or becoming circumcised? The argument here is that once begun, the reading of scars means that entitlements are in flux, that expertise is respected but not restricting, and that, sooner or later, the metaphor of circumcision has an uncanny way of turning the reader into a circumciser if not a circumcisee.

During the long course of puzzling through the reasons for the ritual cut, the merit in heeding the textual site of the reader's wounding became evident. This particular form of heeding or listening proved necessary because, as Gregory Whitehead observes, "... no wound ever speaks for itself" (135). And, conversely, this particular form of listening proved necessary because so many others had already spoken. Some of the others who have heeded and written on behalf of the wound and or circumcision are represented in this writing by epigraphs that head each chapter. Situated as foretext, acknowledged as aide-mémoire, these textual fragments are records, not of "intercourse with the Divine," but of textual contact, of this reader's passing through. There is a reciprocity of wounding in play here, for texts are often snipped from the very site the reader received the wound. Thus, the epigraph from Amanda Cross heading Chapter 3 devoted to George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* evinces the exact moment when, while reading a mystery, circumcision as a vexing critical issue was irreversibly coupled with the canonical novel.

Although the act of circumcision is a wound that may be understood as a mnemonic device written upon the body, not all wounds whose scars urge recollection work in the same way. At the close of his history devoted to *The Holocaust in American Life*, Peter Novick issues

a caveat built upon a phrase he has borrowed from Leon Wieseltier. The relevant passage from Wieseltier as cited by Novick reads:

In the memory of oppression, oppression outlives itself. *The scar does the work of the wound.* . . . Injustice retains the power to destroy long after it has ceased to be real. It is a posthumous victory for the oppressors, when pain becomes a tradition. (no pag., emphasis added)

Novick reiterates: “Whether the memory is of slavery, the Holocaust, or any of the other terrible events of human history whose scars do the work of the wound, the root of that memory in group consciousness has to be carefully considered” (281). I find the work Novick has done with respect to the institutionalization of the Holocaust in American culture to be elucidating and helpful in scholarly and highly personal ways, yet I am unable to endorse fully his and Wieseltier’s perception of the scar or even the wound as immanent oppressor.

Nonetheless, there is in Novick’s appeal a gesture nearer the position I hold, and that is the conviction that memories and narratives attending a wound deserve careful consideration. I appreciate the potential for repeated returns to the site of a scar to encourage a form of self-replenishing victimhood.³ However, I contend that “carefully considered” scars and wounds--in this case the semantic richness of circumcision--may encourage revisioning rather than reductive forms of narrative or critique. One might imagine the site of the scar as a place where the work of the wound, as figured by Novick and Wieseltier, is to be respectfully retired and set aside, mercifully excised from memory. The readings presented here are not quite so ameliorative.

The practice of Jewish circumcision elicits a tangle of questions concerning issues of difference relative to ethnicity, religion, and gender, to name but a few. As such, Jewish ritual circumcision has proven to be a space where I, neither Jew nor male, have been able to engage

³ For example, the return to victim status, as it pertains to this study, is frequently discernible as the drive urging arguments against circumcision.

questions of difference. One of the recurring questions concerns the common use of the term Judeo-Christian. Often universally coded and unthinkingly accepted, this adjective emerges from the side of the hinge housing the more recent narrative, its interpreters having reread and built upon earlier texts. Judeo-Christian is a tricky term at best, one that, not unlike circumcision itself, speaks simultaneously to remembering and forgetting.

Because it is a diacritical rite, circumcision marks as well as makes difference.⁴ When transmuted into metaphor, the cut as word continues to perform diacritically. This function is seen in Biblical writings where circumcised ears or circumcised hearts designate those spiritually attuned to the word of God as opposed to those who are not.⁵ At times the sign of circumcision appears to bear a nearly impossible burden, for it cannot sustain indefinitely its meaning as but one side of an always fixed binary. Sometimes it means “inside,” sometimes it means “outside,” and sometimes it appears not to mean at all.

My wish would be to have the readings that follow readily in touch with one another, but the restrictions imposed by writing demand they be presented sequentially. A reading of the story concerning Abraham, his family, and the contract sealed by circumcision appears in the opening position. It serves as a remembering of the inception of covenantal circumcision and calls attention to those features of the narrative which have influenced my understanding of the rite. The second section of the opening chapter presents theoretical underpinnings for the way in which I visualize one metaphor of circumcision to embody a necessary juncture in the process of reading. The pertinent image derives from the work of Julia Kristeva and her concept concerning

⁴ I appropriate this term from James Boon: “a diacritical rite offensive to many ‘Westerners’...”(46).

⁵ “To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Behold their ears are closed, they cannot listen.” Jer.6:10 In this passage from Jeremiah, there is a notation mark beside the word *closed*, for in Hebrew the word is *uncircumcised*. (*New Oxford Annotated Bible* 918)

the function of the semiotic. In attendance, too, are brief instances from Roland Barthes and Erich Auerbach where, I believe, references to puncture or place help to elaborate what is to be gleaned by making these sites, the points of contact, an entrance into reading.

The second chapter focuses on texts characteristic of the contemporary anti-circumcision movement. Seeking large scale reform through the cessation of routine infant male circumcision, the rhetoric of groups against circumcision often remains a liability when it comes to cultural custom and religious practice. On occasion, traces of older anti-Judaic stereotyping appear as ruptures within otherwise more conscientiously presented arguments. The acknowledgment of Jewish custom offered by the anti-circumcision groups is not infrequently made by a Jew who him/herself declines the custom. In other words, there is a disquieting sense of presenting an “enlightened” Jew, one who has forfeited the forfeit. In no way is this observation meant to suggest that Jews ought not question traditional ritual practice: it is meant to underscore the resistance of anti-circumcision groups to accommodate issues of difference.

Accommodating Jewish difference, insofar as it was an issue in late nineteenth century England, lies at the heart of George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*. A novel already subject to multiple critical cuts with respect to the question of circumcision, the reading presented here is a bit of a hybrid, for it is one that reads from both sides of the hermeneutical hinge. It is a reading dependent on familiarity with both Jewish and Christian perceptions of the rite. And, because no mention of circumcision appears within Eliot’s novel, the (un)represented cut emerges at the will of the reader as an imposed, albeit justifiable, iconography in which jeweled objects are called as witness and made emblematic of ritual circumcision.

The analyses of the three films comprising the fourth chapter--*Crossing Delancey*; *Europa, Europa*; and *Drowning by Numbers*--would seem to have no need of emblematic

reading, for each contains a scene representing circumcision. Even so, these films are read by way of companion frames or enhancing tropes meant to highlight differing views of passing and particularity. The passing in *Crossing Delancey* and *Europa, Europa* may be said to address specific moments of negotiating particularity within the long history of Jews in diaspora. The question of passing in *Drowning By Numbers*, however, addresses the difficulties in negotiating the particularities of sex and gender.

The final chapter looks at circumcision in one of its oldest metaphorical incarnations, the idea of circumcised ears. That this metaphor, coined in the Bible as a way of designating receptivity to the word of God, has been reminted as a way to designate an elect among those who read and interpret texts raises questions as to the sometimes historical, sometimes ahistorical nature of the metaphorical cut. Ongoing placements of Erich Auerbach, as period figure and revered critic, help to elucidate the semantic uneasiness accompanying the mark of circumcision in its journey from embodied covenant to a literary trope reserved for an interpretive elite.

In some ways the writings that follow record what reading at the borders of a disciplinary zone entails. At times established habits of reading do not yield easily to the new demands presented by other textual territories, even where common subject matter might be expected to ease the crossing. These are the times to return to Jill Robbins' comment and query regarding the account of Christ's circumcision (Lk. 2:21): "It would seem to describe the last circumcision, the circumcision that 'circumcises' circumcision, but in so doing, is it not also one circumcision too many?" (35). It may well have been one circumcision too many, yet it remains the threshold scar beyond which I respectfully try to read.

Chapter 1. Reading Scars

1.1. First Cuts

All of Genesis 15-26 deserves continual rereading, through “Isaac [a prototype first infant circumcision] and his wife Rebecca laughing together”(Gen. 26:8).

James Boon, *Verging on Extra-Vagance*, 52⁶

The human child, the human womb, the human hand, the face, the stomach, the mouth, the genitals (themselves circumcised, marked)--it is in the body that God’s presence is recorded.

Elaine Scarry, *The Body In Pain*, 204

The purported originary account of the circumcision ritual central to this study is the story of Abraham in Genesis. Male circumcision was not a practice unique to Jews living at the time Genesis was written, and there are many theories put forth by historians, anthropologists, and Talmudic scholars, for instance, as to how and why various practices came about.⁷ The primary interest here, to repeat, lies with the Abrahamic story treated as the site of the

⁶ The Fox version of Genesis 26:8 reads: “But it was, when he had been there a long time, that Avimelekh, king of the Philistines, looked out through a window and saw: There was Yitzhak laughing-and-loving with Rivka his wife!” The note to this line contains the following: “laughing and loving: Heb. *metzahek*, which can mean laughter or sexual activity. Trad. English ‘sporting.’” (119)

⁷ There is a brief discussion of ancient versions of the origin of Jewish circumcision--usually thought to be adapted from Egyptian practice--and the way in which the cut was read in Louis H. Feldman’s *Jew & Gentile in the Ancient World*, pp 153-158. One of the more intriguing linguistic remarks contained herein: “That circumcision was indeed the most characteristic sign of the Jews, it has been suggested, may be deduced from the title *Appella* (or *Apella*), of one of the comedies of the third-century B.C.E. Roman Naevius, because the word *apella* would be the Graeco-Latin equivalent of the Latin *sine pelle*, ‘without a foreskin.’ A similar explanation may be the key to understanding the apparently proverbial *credat Iudaeus Apella*, ‘let the Jew Apella believe it’ in Horace (*Satires* 1.5.100). (155)

foundational circumcision narrative in Western culture. While one can speculate indefinitely as to why this version of the institution of circumcision is the one that has been recorded, the approach here asks rather what this story about wounds to male genitalia has made, makes, or might make possible.

Initial thoughts with regard to the story of Abraham were that reference alone to either the covenant of circumcision or the so-called “sacrifice of Isaac” would provide sufficient context for a number of the discussions that are to follow. This assumption meant readers would readily recall details, such as the ages of Ishmael and Isaac at their respective circumcisions or the actual terms of the covenant. In addition, some features of Abraham’s familial narrative necessarily took second place to the drama surrounding the demanded sacrifice, with the result that they were, often as not, put aside or forgotten. Yet, because they are pertinent to this reading, some details need foregrounding, in particular those that demonstrate the shared, genealogically and socially embodied histories linking Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac.

In the book of Genesis, the so-called “sacrifice of Isaac” stands as the best known story among those recounting Abraham’s encounters with God. Perhaps it is because the idea of infanticide at once attracts and repels that the story of Abraham and Isaac continues to receive so much attention. Seen as a type for the crucifixion of Christ, the Bible story of the binding of Isaac has been rehearsed regularly by interpreters of the New Testament, interpreters who have also reinscribed the better known, albeit technically incorrect, appellation as “the sacrifice of Isaac.” Jewish scholars more frequently refer to the *akedah* or binding of Isaac.⁸ And, as we shall later see, Erich Auerbach’s renowned analysis comparing the style of Homeric legend in the *Odyssey* with biblical narrative in Genesis has, for the past fifty years, contributed greatly to the

⁸ “The Hebrew stem of the word translated as ‘bound’ is found nowhere else in connection with sacrifice in the Bible” (120). *Etz Hayim Torah and Commentary*.

ongoing critical appeal of the story of Abraham and Isaac. Considered a “landmark of twentieth century criticism” (Alter 103), Auerbach’s analysis continues to serve as the revered benchmark for many literary and theological critics.

Although Auerbach’s reading focuses specifically on the telling of the sacrifice demanded in Genesis 22, the horrific weight of this demand arises in part from the reader’s knowledge of earlier portions of the patriarch’s story, especially those concerning his fathering of Isaac. Auerbach acknowledges what is for him the importance of the hero’s history:

. . . the human beings in the Biblical stories have greater depths of time, fate, and consciousness than do the human beings in Homer; although they are nearly always caught up in an event engaging all their faculties, they are not so entirely immersed in its present that they do not remain continually conscious of what has happened to them earlier and elsewhere; their thoughts and feelings have more layers, are more entangled. Abraham’s actions are explained not only by his character . . . , but by his previous history. (*Mimesis* 12)

With this observation in mind, then, the hope is to lay the groundwork for following discussions by reviewing Abraham’s story and reacquainting readers with its germane familial history.

In light of his wife Sarah’s exceedingly long barren state, Abraham’s covenant in Genesis 15 in which God promises land to Abraham’s descendants, would seem to be, at worst, taunting, or at best, in need of major revision. Sarah, remarking that “the Lord has prevented me from bearing children,” tells Abraham “go into my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her” (Gen. 16.2) Hagar, Sarah’s Egyptian maid, conceives a child by Abraham, and “look(s) with contempt on her mistress” (Gen. 16.4). In response, Sarah mistreats Hagar, who then flees to the wilderness. An angel tells Hagar to return to Sarah and to “submit,” assuring her that her descendants shall be a multitude, and that child she carries, to be named Ishmael (meaning “God hears”), “shall be a wild ass of a man.” Abraham is eighty-six years old when Ishmael is born,

eighty-six years old when presented with what will become for him vexing issues of surrogacy and hierarchy.

It is when Abraham is ninety-nine years old that he enters into the covenant of circumcision with God detailed in Chapter 17 of Genesis:

Behold my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God. (Gen. 17: 4-8)

Of note here is the granting of a variant name for Abraham, signaling an altered subjectivity, and the promise of generations and land; the promise, that is, of time and space. Therefore, it is at this point necessary to highlight as mnemonic image, the idea of dynasty or sequence along a vertical axis and adjacency along a horizontal axis. These are of course, terms closely associated with Edward Said, ideas later encompassed by his sense of filiation and affiliation.⁹ While these ideas in conjunction with Judaism as a *particular* national social element manifest historical tension when reading a work like *Daniel Deronda*, for example, they will also provide a way of thinking about the dynamic of passing in the films *Crossing Delancey* and *Europa, Europa*.

The promise of generations and land also encourages a way of knowing--in this instance a way of knowing God--for it is Abraham's descendants, generations of bodies, who are to exist in the contracted time and space, thereby effecting and recording God's presence. However, it is

⁹ See Said *Beginnings* (10) for an example of the former, and "Ethics, Profession, Canon" (152) for useage of the later.

not only by way of bodies moving through time and space that God's presence is to be acknowledged:

And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between you and me. He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house, or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he that is born in your house and he that is bought shall be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant. (Gen. 17: 9-14)

Apart from the all important command making circumcision "in the flesh" the sign of the covenant, to be remarked here are the temporal ambivalences suggested by the prescription of the cut at the male infant's eighth day. This term of the covenant presents an assignment that can be understood in one sense as a singular event, specific to a child relative to his birth date. In another sense the demand works communally among all males, for, with few exceptions once the covenant is established, each male within Abraham's group will be treated alike on his eighth day. Also apparent in this passage is the launching of the circumcision metaphor in the figurative cutting off from his people any male who is not literally cut off in his foreskin, neatly demonstrating Leo Steinberg's comment that "circumcision, once instituted, becomes instantly metaphorical" (158).

Intent on establishing a specific lineage, God declares that Sarah is to become the favored mother of Abraham's offspring:

And God said to Abraham, "As for Sar'ai your wife, you shall not call her name Sar'ai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her; I will bless her, and she

shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” Then Abraham fell on his face, and laughed, and said to himself, “Shall a son be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” And Abraham said to God, “O that Ishmael might live in thy sight!” God said:, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him and make him fruitful and multiply exceedingly; he shall be the father of princes, and I will him a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year. (Gen. 17: 15-21)

As Everett Fox observes, Sarah becomes the only woman in the bible to have her name changed (73). Because the lineage of the covenant is established in conjunction with the promised child, whose birth is to occur after the rite of circumcision will have been instituted, Sarah’s new name may be understood to serve as a mark of election. The promised child ensures the eventual displacement of Ishmael as the proper heir, though God does bless him also.

The elect child, to be named Isaac--”he laughs” in Hebrew--will further attest to God’s presence. We are told first Abraham and later Sarah laugh when told of the forthcoming child. That the name of the child appears to memorialize the initial response of the parents also indicates God’s reliance upon their respective knowledges of their aged bodies as a way of further enhancing their perception of his presence.¹⁰ God’s work, the promise fulfilled, will be all the more impressive in its challenge to what they already know, to what has caused their laughter: both know the effects of age upon fertility. Countering the life knowledge of these old, would-be parents by presenting them with an antithetical experience, God makes himself known

¹⁰ In the *Etz Hayim Torah and Commentary*, we find a note with respect to Genesis 18:12--“And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘Now that I am old, am I to have enjoyment with my husband so old?’” The note concerns the word enjoyment: “The Hebrew word translated as ‘enjoyment’ (ednah) has a sexual connotation here. It means ‘abundant moisture’ and is an exact antonym of ‘withered’” (101).

in their bodies by, in the words of John Updike, “teasing Sarah into geriatric childbearing” (“Great” 104).

When he had finished talking to with him, God went up from Abraham. Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all the slaves born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham’s house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised; and all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him. (Gen. 17: 22-27)

Of special note here is the circumcision of Ishmael at thirteen years of age. The age of thirteen becomes significant with respect to the institution of ritual *bar mitzvah* during the middle ages.¹¹ Also evident is the enactment of a cut that binds at the same time as it detaches, for the entirety of Abraham’s household is gathered into the covenant.

As God has promised, Sarah bears a child to Abraham when he is one hundred years old. “And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him” (Gen. 21:4). Circumcising an infant is a distinctive characteristic of Jewish practice, although justifications for this feature of the practice vary widely. E. Fox finds the move from adolescent circumcision to infancy to be

. . . a daring reinterpretation, at once diffusing the act of exclusively sexual content while at the same time suggesting that the covenant, a lifelong commitment, is nevertheless passed down biologically through the generations. The males of the tribe are not simply made holy for marriage. They bear the mark upon their bodies as a sacred reminder of their mission. (70)

¹¹ See Marcus, 119-26.

Making the cut in infancy means that the Jewish male's relationship to God is perpetually foregrounded. Or, as Howard Eilberg Schwartz writes, "Circumcision has the distinction of making sure that a man is never naked of God's commandments" (171).

One of the more provocative suggestions as to why circumcision is performed on the eighth day appears in the commentary accompanying a photographic essay entitled *Witness to the Covenant*. According to essayist and photographer Dale Lieberman:

Just as in biblical times animals to be sacrificed were to remain with their dam for seven days, a child to be circumcised may be considered to have dwelled with and been nurtured by his mother for seven days and must be given up and presented for the *bris* on the eighth day after his birth. (2)

This analogy is reminiscent of some analyses devoted to the binding of Isaac in which the story is viewed as "a symbolic renunciation, the dramatization of some unrecoverable moment in prehistory when the proto-Jews gave up the practice of human sacrifice that their neighbors continued to engage in" (Cahill 83). The significance of these comments is not whether animal sacrifice was substituted for human sacrifice or vice versa, but the interpretive linking of sacrifice *in toto* with circumcision as well as with the binding of Isaac. Frequently the difference between the mark of circumcision and the erasure entailed by sacrifice is elided, with the result that the embodied sign fails to be read as such. It is important to remember that it is not Isaac who is sacrificed; it is the ram in the thicket.

Continuing in this vein with respect to Abraham's great test, Harry Brod reads the story of the binding as a reinscription of circumcision:

The hostility of fathers toward sons is present in the founding myths of many cultures. In the Greek tradition, and the Freudian tradition that adopts it, prior to the Oedipus complex lies the Laius complex. The story starts because Laius fears his son is going to kill him so he launches a preemptive strike to get rid of him before he becomes a threat. In the Christian story, the Christian God the

Father allows his son Jesus to die on the Cross. The Jewish tradition has the Akedah, the story of Abraham and the binding of Isaac. Of those three founding stories, the Jewish case is the only one where the murderous intention is not carried through (Laius did not succeed, but he never changed his intention to kill his son). I would argue that one can link circumcision to the halting of that sacrifice. The symbolic act of cutting replaces Abraham's descending knife. (288)

While chary of even such a temporally close back-reading, because figural in its approach--the anterior circumcision rite seen as the replacement for Isaac's sacrifice--Brod's emphasis should be marked for later reference. The difference between circumcision (even if a threatened form of castration) and sacrifice (actual castration as a form of death) must be recognized. The reason for being mindful of the difference will not be to deny the consequences of reading one for the other, though some readings along this line prove ill founded.

Another feature of infant circumcision needing brief mention at this juncture concerns the realization that it is an infant--from the Latin *infans*, one not able to speak--who is cut or wounded. An infant male without speech, subjected to a rite in which he is wounded, raises questions about those who ritually speak for him, and calls attention to the fact that whatever narratives attach to his wound must be voiced, at least initially, by those who surround him. The absence of language that can be destroyed by pain, even if only temporarily, is of consequence for both theoretical and practical considerations of ritual Jewish circumcision. So, for example, the theoretical argument to be made by way of Kristeva's pre-linguistic *chora*, and the more practical development and employment of appropriate anesthetic measures to be used by *mohelim*. Suffice it for now that pain as an issue recurs in discussions of contemporary attitudes towards the practice, whether it is performed as religious rite or as elective surgery.

It is important to remember that the ritual of Jewish circumcision has evolved throughout its history, the ceremony changing over time as it incorporates prayers, rewrites the mother's role

as participant, or provides a chair for Elijah. Writing about Jewish rites of childhood in medieval Europe, Ivan C. Marcus records the growth of community involvement:

Personal moments of transition were increasingly shared with a community, and as Jewish rites of passage became more public, collective symbols were added to the personal ones. In circumcision, for example the Chair of Elijah, a symbol of messianic days to be enjoyed by the entire Jewish people, was added, thereby placing a onetime event in the life of a particular child into a cosmic framework. (106)

Thus one may see, for example, in the opening of the film *Europa, Europa* the use of the descendant chair as designated for Elijah included within the film's representative circumcision ceremony.

The summary of the contemporary rite provided here is taken from the *Guide to Ritual Circumcision and Redemption of the First-Born Son* (1984) by Rabbi Eugene Cohen. Present at the ceremony are guests, godparents, *sandek*, *mohel*, baby boy, and parents. The *sandek* is a position of honor requested of a family member or friend, and the *mohel* is the person who performs the ceremony. There should be two chairs, one for Elijah and one for the *sandek* to sit on while holding the baby during the circumcision. The godparents bring the child in on a pillow, and the father says that he is ready for the circumcision to take place. The *mohel*, who performs the circumcision, places the infant on the Elijah chair, and a prayer is said. The child is then placed on the *sandek's* lap, or placed upon a table and held by the *sandek*. The father should stand near the *mohel*, for theoretically the father is fulfilling the commandment. After the circumcision, the last words of the prayer state: "Even as he has entered into the covenant, so may he enter into the study of the Torah, the wedding canopy, and to a life of good deeds" (55). This prayer succinctly joins three key life rituals in its wish for a life of good deeds. It is also a

prayer, I suggest, that nestles beneath the narrative course of *Daniel Deronda*, *Crossing Delancey*, and *Europa, Europa*.

1.2. Reading Around the Scar

So that, as rational metaphysics teaches that man becomes all things by understanding them (*homo intelligendo fit omnia*), this imaginative metaphysics shows that man becomes all things by not understanding them (*homo non intelligendo fit omnia*); and perhaps the latter proposition is truer than the former, for when man understands he extends his mind and takes in the things, but when he does not understand he makes the things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them.

Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, 130

“To do theory” is a commerce with theoretical concepts and objects; it is attempting to analyze the objects with the help of the concepts as well as the other way around, not by “applying” concepts, but by bringing them into touch with objects.

Mieke Bal, “Scared to death”, 46

In many respects, Giambattista Vico’s observation regarding the process by which man makes out of himself what he does not understand could be said to subtend the whole of this project. The very idea--*of reading scars, that reading scars*--suggests an inquiry that ought to be imaginatively broached from within a territory bounded by, referring to, and reflecting (upon) human bodies. Although the body under consideration is the circumcised male body, primarily as inscribed by the ritual of Jewish circumcision, the intention here is to put in touch with one another pertinent moments from Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, and Erich Auerbach where a sense of body, even if somewhat tenuously, informs the thought. In order to do this, it becomes necessary to assume a reading position not unlike that of Vico’s imaginative poets, using in part what is known by the body so that it may be placed within their texts.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that “commerce with theoretical concepts” as presented by Mieke Bal, suggests an exchange that belongs more appropriately to Vico’s

rational proposition wherein man understands by taking things in. Yet Bal's image of bringing concepts into "touch" with objects hints at knowing from the body, and demonstrates Vico's remark "that in all languages the greater part of expressions relating to inanimate things are formed by metaphor from the human body and from the human senses" (129). Respecting Bal's familiar caution against "applying" theory admits of an understanding that the plans for detaching theory are to incur no less condemnation. Nevertheless, the plan is to read in a somewhat scathing manner, opening up and deliberately cutting from the tissue of the texts the language of scars and the images of wounds. The textual excisions which follow, from Kristeva, Barthes, Auerbach and others, represent a collocation of texts upon which I have have been caught, but through which I have come to value and do commerce with the scar.

1.3.(Re)Reading a Kristevan Scar

Keeping the trope of circumcision in mind, the theoretical yard to be tilled here, when labeled, usually falls with the bounds of Lacanian or psychoanalytically-based criticism. This seems fitting for, as Julia Lupton observes, "psychoanalysis is a 'Jewish science,' with its own debts and investments in religious discourse" (194). Two texts by Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Powers of Horror* recur in an ongoing conceptualization of circumcision as a metaphor emblematic of productive critical encounter. Wrestling to come to terms with the relationship of the semiotic, thethetic, and the symbolic as articulated by Kristeva in *Revolution In Poetic Language*, I developed a cartoon-like schematic, shaped not unlike a barbell. The bell to the left represented the pre-linguistic semiotic associated with the theoretical *chora*; the connecting tube the path of thesis or Lacanian mirror stage and Oedipal crisis; and the right bell

housed the world of the Symbolic, the operational and legislative site of language.¹² Of course, this schematic could just as easily be set from right to left or up to down.¹³ Included too were imaginary interior valves at either end of the thetic pipe, a reminder that

. . . the supposedly characteristic function of the pre-Oedipal stages appears only in the complete, post-genital handling of language, which presupposes, as we have seen, a decisive imposition of the phallic. In other words, the subject must be firmly posited by castration so that drive attacks against the thetic will not give way to fantasy or to psychosis but will instead lead to a “second-degree thetic,” i.e., a resumption of the functioning characteristic of the semiotic *chora* within the signifying device of language. This is precisely what artistic practices, and notably poetic language, demonstrate. (*Revolution* 50)

Kristeva’s positing of a *chora* that may somehow be accessed¹⁴ by a “second-degree thetic” has proven problematic for many readers, representative among them Judith Butler. What Butler questions in particular concerns the manner in which Kristeva figures the choric maternal body:

The maternal body in its originary signification is considered by Kristeva to be prior to signification itself; hence, it becomes impossible within her framework to consider the maternal itself as a signification, open to cultural variability. Her argument makes clear that maternal drives constitute those primary processes that language invariably represses or sublimates. But perhaps her

¹² Elizabeth Grosz provides this brief definition of terms: “The symbolic is the domain of propositions and positions, the site for the creation of unified texts, cultural representations and knowledges; the semiotic is the undirected and uncontrolled input of the repressed impulses, energies and spasms of the infant in the first case, and later, of the subject in moments of crisis and psychical upheaval’ (Wright, 95). It is important to stress that the the semiotic is necessary for the operation of the Symbolic.

¹³ Kaja Silverman provides the image of palimpsest, which works well too: “. . . the *chora* is offered in the context of a general discussion of place names, a discussion which conceptualizes subjectivity as a spatial series in which each term is superimposed upon the preceding one, much like a palimpsest”(104).

¹⁴ Accessed does not mean gaining entrance, but rather receptivity to the pulse or motility ascribed for the *chora* by Kristeva. Despite the prohibition against thinking of the *chora* as position or space, its assignment of maternal function as expelling energy toward the symbolic conjures a somewhere, a source, however ineffable it may be, that at times begs embodiment.

argument could be recast within an even more encompassing framework: What cultural configuration of language, indeed, of discourse, generates the trope of a pre-discursive libidinal multiplicity, and for what purposes? (*Gender*, 91)

As an opening move befitting cultural studies, a move informed by an investment in the formation of the subject, Butler's question is a truly fine one. However, it pushes against an important distinction that Kristeva seems to be asserting with respect to poetic language, in which case Butler's "hence" may be a turn too quickly taken. In endnotes to her chapter on "The Semiotic *Chora*," Kristeva, as if anticipating resistance similar to Butler's, writes,

Why then borrow an ontologized term in order to designate an articulation that antecedes positing? First the Platonic term makes explicit an insurmountable problem for discourse: once it has been named, the functioning, even if it is pre-symbolic, is brought back into a symbolic position. All discourse can do is differentiate, by means of a "bastard reasoning," the receptacle from the motility, which, by contrast, is not posited as being a *certain* something. (*Revolution* 240)

The reading done by Butler, which within in her logic precludes any provision for contemplating the maternal even as metaphor, but which then immediately encourages the contemplation of a cultural trope, remains curious. Yet, to be fair, Kelly Oliver points out that Kristeva's own position with respect to her appropriated term *chora*, taken from Plato's *Timaeus*, has undergone many, dare one say, incarnations (48). Bringing forward the *chora*'s value may be better demonstrated by calling for a crossreading wherein Kristeva's reworking of the poetically productive status granted the *chora* of *Revolution* is set beside the harsher abjecting role posited for the semiotic in *Powers*. It is necessary to note that these terms are frequently interchanged. However, the more encompassing term with respect to the *a priori* of language is semiotic.

Kristeva provides several examples of abjection characteristic of the biblical sanctions in *Powers of Horror*, though the following selection was chosen because it addresses circumcision

directly. The passage generating the commentary, from Leviticus, concerns the post-partum period of maternal uncleanness related to the difference between the sexes as configured in the symbolic order. Commenting upon the function of circumcision in relation to parturition, Kristeva observes:

Circumcision would thus separate one from maternal, feminine impurity and defilement; it stands instead of sacrifice, meaning not only that it replaces it but is its equivalent--a sign of the alliance with God. Circumcision can be said to find its place in the same series as food taboos; it indicates a separation and at the same time does away with the need for sacrifice, of which it nevertheless bears the trace. Such a comment on circumcision within a text on feminine and particularly maternal impurity, illuminates the rite in fundamental fashion. I agree that it concerns an alliance with the God of the chosen people; but what the male is separated from, the other that circumcision carves out on his very sex, is the other sex, impure, defiled. By repeating the natural scar of the umbilical cord at the location of sex, by duplicating and thus displacing through ritual the preeminent separation, which is that from the mother, Judaism seems to insist in symbolic fashion--the very opposite of what is "natural"--that the identity of the speaking being (with his God) is based on the separation of the son from the mother. Symbolic identity presupposes the violent difference of the sexes. (*Powers* 99-100)

This passage presents a reading of the symbolic character of circumcision closely associated with psychoanalytic interpretations of the separation that occurs during the mirror stage, so that, Judaic circumcision, performed on the infant's eighth day, may be thought to anticipate the later rupture into language. However, what must be underscored in this presupposition of a violent differentiation of the sexes concerns the act and instrument of cutting, which Kristeva alludes to when she uses the phrase "carves out." Briefly then, a short detour through Elaine Scarry's discussion on pain and the body, most specifically to her salient observations concerning weapons and wounds.

When Scarry presents the weapon as an object that injures the body and calls attention to the “mental habit of *recognizing* pain *in* the weapon,” she endorses the idea that pain “almost cannot be apprehended without it”(16). She mentions as illustration a Joseph Beuys sculpture of a knife bandaged in gauze entitled ““When you cut your finger, bandage the knife”” (16). Putting pain elsewhere would appear to have epistemological advantages, and it is the thought Scarry carries forward as she elaborates upon the critical distinction between the God of the “Old Testament” and that of the New Testament. In the older text, she claims, God makes his presence known in the body of his people, whereas in the Christian text God makes his presence known in the body of God (214-15).¹⁵ But again, at issue in this move is the relocation of a place or site of knowing, a move away from the non-God body, with its attendant, implicit pedagogical ramifications.¹⁶

The translation above of the section of the Kristevan passage reading--“what the the male is separated from, the other that circumcision carves out on his very sex, is the other sex”--is handled slightly differently, but significantly so, by Gil Anidjar in his translated version of the French text. He writes, “what the male separates himself from, this other whom circumcision carves upon the genitals, is the other sex” (361). In Anidjar’s translation agency is granted and the sense of inscription is evident; carving *upon* and carving *out* may be understood as distinct operations. Anidjar’s felicitous wording supports his suggestion “that these formulations

¹⁵ I do not mean to underestimate the importance of this shift in any way. The influence of Pauline commentary concerning circumcision as carnal rite versus circumcision as spiritual metaphor will be briefly addressed in Chapter 2.

¹⁶ When Eilberg-Schwartz comments on Scarry’s reading, he appears to confuse his Biblical perception with her New Testament perception: “Scarry’s reading is illuminating in many ways. But her theory needs to be nuanced since it does not deal with those texts that imagine God in human form, an idea that confounds the sharp dichotomies with which she is working” (*Problem* 41). On my reading, and as I understand doctrine, Scarry deals directly with God in human form. Perhaps the emphasis here must be placed on “those texts that imagine” in conjunction with the God of the Bible. This makes clear the difference in the two approaches.

articulate a certain forgetting. *Naming* circumcision as being *about* men or males ('ce dont le mâle se sépare') could thus be, however unintentionally, something of an *oubli*" (361). What may be forgotten, according to Anidjar, is women.

Whether or not by intention, Kristeva makes space for two narratives to emerge from the scar of circumcision when she judges the preputial cut as repeating, in another key, the natural scar of the navel. In thinking through these coupled images of cuts become scars, another doubled moment in a Kristevan writing proves helpful. The essay on motherhood, "Stabat Mater," presents Kristeva's experience of giving birth in tandem with a commentary on the Virgin Mary. According to Oliver, the separation in "Stabat Mater," the space between the the dual texts set with different type face, is intended "to give the impression of a scar or a wound" (53).¹⁷ Kristeva is cited as saying "the theoretician is 'posited precisely on the place of this scar,' because of the painful transference between the theorist and her object" (53). Oliver offers several possibilities for reading the scar, including: a memorial reunion of a mother with her mother, as marking the loss of the child, or as signing the place of the abjected mother (54-55). Important to the reading of this scar, however, is that it be apprehended as having a productive function.

When Kristeva claims the theoretician to be "posited precisely on the space of the scar," I believe she is positing/positioning the theoretician/reader so as to be able to access the motility afforded the *chora*. Put another way, she places herself near the thetic: "The thetic--that crucial place on the basis of which the human being constitutes himself as signifying and/or social--is the very place textual experience aims toward" (*Revolution* 67). Moreover, it should be urged

¹⁷ This is a jagged scar at best, for I have at hand four books containing the essay, and each sits differently upon the page. Three of the translations (in Moi, Davis, and Kristeva's *Tales of Love*) are by Leon Roudiez, the fourth, (in Suleiman) belongs to Arthur Goldhammer.

that the circumcision scar be read as Kristeva has embedded it, as a “repeating,” “duplicating,” and “displacing” of the “natural scar of the umbilical cord” (*Powers* 100). Read through a Derridian loop of *differance*, as “the being-imprinted of the imprint” (*Grammatology* 117), the scar of circumcision may be granted a Janus like quality: the scar gates the narrative of abjecting loss necessary to the symbolic and the scar gates the fragmented pulsion necessary to the semiotic. The mnemonic aspect of circumcision, to reiterate Anidjar, is thus in part the memory of the other carved upon the genitals, in part the trace of the semiotic.

By allowing the scar of circumcision to have (at) it both ways, admittedly by way of “bastard reasoning,” the hope is to stay the sign from being read always and only as some body’s castration; after all, circumcision may be (merely?) a cutting around, not necessarily a cutting off.

All these various processes and relations, anterior to sign and syntax, have just been identified from a genetic perspective as previous and necessary to the acquisition of language, but not identical to language. Theory can “situate” such processes and relations diachronically within the process of the constitution of the subject precisely because *they function synchronically within the signifying process of the subject himself*, i.e., the subject of cogitato. (*Revolution* 29)

The emphasis placed here upon the synchronic functioning of the anterior processes allows for yet one other schematic to be hinted at, and this schematic ties into the covenant of circumcision in Genesis. The contract of circumcision, reductively and quickly read, promises time as a vertical axis, and space as a horizontal axis. So, Kristeva’s genetic perspective, the diachronic, and its synchronic function will also be understood as an image which touches, if ever so glancingly, upon ideas of dynasty and adjacency, of filiation and affiliation.

1.4. The Reading Scar of Roland Barthes

Although aware of the relationship of Barthes and Kristeva, the turn toward Barthes comes more by way of disposition than through any conscious appreciation of an intellectual genealogy.¹⁸ Some feature of Barthes' *Camera Lucida* catches as it gracefully conjures the wound as a productive interpretive site. In his commentary upon *Camera Lucida* Martin Jay foregrounds the morbidity that typifies this work, and there is no doubt but that the book weaves its way around absences and memory of the maternal, surely leans toward the abject (450-56). Yet the language Barthes has chosen to describe his sense of photographs as medium also makes possible the apprehension of a kind of wound as the site of knowing, or, to repeat Kristeva, "the very place textual experience aims toward."

In the 48 lyrical notes comprising the text of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes distinguishes between the subject of a photograph, its *studium*, and the resonant feature he identifies as *punctum*. For Barthes, the *punctum* is defined variously as being a prick, a mark, punctuation, sensitive point, wound, sting, speck, cut little hole, cast of the dice (26-27).¹⁹ The *punctum* does not connote a mortal encounter, but instead becomes the occasion for engaging with the work,

¹⁸ John Lechte discusses the importance of Barthes' writing as "the undeniable backdrop to" Kristeva's "project." (*Julia Kristeva* 65-69) See also Moi, *Sexual* 150.

¹⁹ In one example of a photograph's *punctum*, Barthes provides this commentary: "Here is Queen Victoria photographed in 1863 by George W. Wilson; she is on horseback, her skirt suitably draping the entire animal (this is the historical interest, the *studium*); but beside her, attracting my eyes, a kilted groom holds the horse's bridle: this is the *punctum*; for even if I do not know just what the social status of this Scotsman may be (servant? equerry?), I can see his function clearly: to supervise the horse's behavior: what if the horse suddenly began to rear? What would happen to the queen's skirt, *i.e.*, to *her majesty*? The *punctum* fantastically 'brings out' the Victorian nature (what else can one call it?) of the photograph, it endows this photograph with a blind field" (57).

for clearly there are places where Barthes suggests the generative possibility of the *punctum*. When he declares that the “mere presence” of the *punctum* “changes my reading”(42), or remarks that “(h)owever lightening like it may be, the *punctum* has, more or less, potentially a power of expansion”(45), he gestures toward the place of work as thinking or as critique. There should be evident in this claim some semblance to the Kristevan *chora*, which Jay would almost appear to highlight in this explication:

. . . the ‘*punctum*’ was that unexpected, prick, sting, or cut that disturbed the intelligibility of the culturally connoted meaning. Often a detail whose power was impossible to generalize for all views, it defied reduction to a code, serving as the analogon of something prior to codification. (453)

“Something prior to codification” is, I believe, what Barthes accesses when culling into language the photographic element he claims “pricks me--also bruises me--is poignant to me” (26-27). Later he observes, “what I can name cannot really prick me”(51).

There is additionally in Barthes’ *punctum* an element of belatedness characteristic to its recognition that that I find noteworthy. Barthes comes at this point in moments of refraction: “In order to perceive the *punctum*, no analysis would be of any use to me (but perhaps memory sometimes would ...)”(45), with this elaboration added, “the *punctum* should be revealed only after the fact, when the photograph is no longer in front of me and I think back on it” (53). The ability to identify the significance of the scar or wound only later, to glean its significance and to permit a narrative to take shape “only after the fact” describes an interpretive route not uncommon to many readers.

1.5. Auerbach's *Ansatzpunkt*

As much as one might like to run *punkt* and *punctum* together, it cannot be done. However, in the course of reading around and about Auerbach, certain features of *Ansatzpunkt*, his well known description of a “point of departure,” are described in language that seems cousin to that used by Barthes to portray his *punctum*. For example, when Auerbach writes in “Philology and *Weltliteratur*”: “The point of departure must be the election of a firmly circumscribed, easily comprehensible set of phenomena whose interpretation is a radiation out from them and which orders and interprets a greater region than they themselves occupy”(14), it is reminiscent of Barthes’ sense of the photograph’s *punctum* as having “more or less potentially, a power of expansion,” and his sense that “paradoxically, while remaining a detail, it fills the whole picture” (45). The point, the scar, may be releasing its latent sense, but, Michael Holquist advises: “For Auerbach, finding just the right point is crucial, because its selection can make or break any reading subsequent to the initial moment of choice (79).” Similarly, when Auerbach states that “a point of departure should not be a generality imposed on a theme from the outside, but ought rather to be an organic inner part of the theme itself,” (16) there may be heard as partial overlay Barthes’ comment, “Certain details may ‘prick’ me. If they do not, it is doubtless because the photographer has put them there intentionally” (47). This openness to what the text itself bears, to what might be referred under certain conditions as its immanence, plays into the idea of intuition that Auerbach mentions.

Auerbach also suggests, “modest general knowledge buttressed by advice can suffice once intuition has found an auspicious point of departure” (14). W. Wolfgang Holdheim, writing about *Ansatz* (without benefit of *punkt*) perceives Auerbach as sharing ideas close to “the views

of post-Romantic hermeneutics” (629). Citing Auerbach’s comment “‘The things themselves should speak,’” Holdheim then explains: “understanding springs from the willingness to listen to the text itself” (629). And, Holdheim describes Auerbach’s intuition in this way: “His ‘intuition’ is hermeneutic receptivity; it is tact, *esprit de finesse*--that elusive quality in which modern hermeneutics has recognized an autonomous (not a derivative) mode of knowledge” (629). This is the way in which I envision the position near the *chora*, Kristeva’s second degree thetic, to be engaged. I want that idea of *tact* pushed toward its root meaning of being touched, and in turn, to nudge it further, toward the idea of the productive scar of circumcision, one of whose antonyms is *intact*. The idea here enjoined is that the scar of circumcision is to carry with it, in Michael Ondaatje’s succinct phrase: “The tact of words” (231). I imagine the tact of words to ground the reader in or at the text, so that ensuing interpretation bears the mark of both reader and text.

In the next chapter, however, I will tend to the more usual sense of the word tact, as in tactful, a word around which the rhetorical performances attending the anti-circumcision movement appear to dance. In many respects careful not to indict the ethnic, cultural, or religious practices of those who circumcise, the mission of groups hoping to reform routine medical practice within the United States never quite frees itself from judgmental language. Speaking of the circumcised through the circumlocution of the term “non-intact”--an inane way to shift a negative morpheme away from its more usual but seemingly suspect mooring in *uncircumcised*--reveals an awareness on the part of the movement as to how language can be drafted. As a result, the language deployed at the behest of the movement invites rigorous analysis.

Chapter 2. “Unsettled Tonalities”: (Un)circumcision Crusades

. . . a persistent characteristic recurs in varied circumscriptions of circumcision/uncircumcision, including the present one: an unsettled tonality marked by either reticence or overkill... In recent and venerable sources alike--whether pro-, con-, analytically “neutral” or interpretively emphatic--words about (un)circumcision tend to be hypertrophied: either oddly laconic and allusive or overwrought and effusive. This ritual topos keeps calling forth the textual marks and prose registers of obsession.

James A. Boon, *Verging On Extra-Vagance*, 67

For those familiar with writings about circumcision, James Boon’s statement concerning the “circumscription” of “circumcision/uncircumcision” as possessing an “unsettled tonality” will be met with welcoming recognition if not a touch of commiserating agreement. The fact that circumcision falls within the purview of multiple discourses enlivens the narrative potential of the scar which one hopes to read. Often a voice borne of disparate echoes emitted from exegeses of Biblical narrative and midrash or from essays propounding the neural economy of erogenous tissue, the residual scar proves to be challengingly polysemous. And yet, as Boon observes, “Foreskins are facts--cultural facts--whether removed or retained” (43). However, the cultural fact become cultural cause invites rhetoric pressing towards proselytism at times. Linguistic performances such as these deserve and should be granted a diligent reading.

One site where one may peruse the language attending the fact of the foreskin belongs to the anti-circumcision movement, sometimes known by its more ambiguous self-appellation as the genital integrity movement. Generally speaking, language from this arena has tended to be more strident than that used by the defenders of routine infant male circumcision, though both

sides of the debate have indulged in “overwrought” suasive vocabularies. By looking at a few instances where the anti-circumcision movement reveals an “unsettled tonality,” most particularly where customary Jewish practice is concerned, the goal in reading is not to reinvest the place of wounding or to replenish a sense of victimhood. Rather, in seeking these tonalities, by gleaning them from the text, the hope is to encourage the revisioning of arguments. The wish would be to solicit arguments based on what is deemed valuable in the retention of the foreskin, without obliquely damning or demeaning men who have been circumcised or those populations where male circumcision has been customarily practiced.

It is necessary, moreover, to acknowledge that the scar of circumcision frequently finds its voice by way of anecdote. In an exploration of “the narrative structure of medical knowledge,” Kathryn Montgomery Hunter addresses the function of anecdote in medical narratives, recognizing its traditional designation as a “poor relative” in any form of investigative or analytic work, whether in medicine or English studies. As usually portrayed, one might even suggest that anecdotes are relegated to a position near the abject. This status notwithstanding, in analyzing the anecdote and its function within medical discourse, Hunter observes: “Playing a part in medical education, in clinical research, and in the daily care of patients, this oral narrative is actually a neglected, interstitial medium of the transmission of medical knowledge” (70, emphasis added). Further, Hunter finds that the anecdote “enables physicians to bridge this epistemological gap between the general rules of a disease and the particular facts of an illness” (70, emphasis added). Keeping Hunter’s observation in the foreground is not to anoint medicine as the hallowed ground upon which to consider circumcision, but to use this model of listening so that other sites for reading open. It is in this way, then, that circumcision anecdotes are being asked to function, to act as “interstitial medium” informing the analyses that follow.

It was as interested scholar that I attended an event organized by the anti-circumcision organization NOCIRC.¹ Promoted as an ‘evening of education’ on publicity flyers, the occasion also celebrated the ‘Northwest premiere’ of the short documentary by Barry Ellsworth, *The Nurses of St. Vincent “Saying No to Circumcision.”*² After the introduction of speakers, prior to screening the documentary, there was a call for questions. One man stepped up to a microphone to ask the assembly how to best handle his then fourteen-year-old son’s urgent request for circumcision. Recognizing the questioner as a former high school classmate, I closely observed the encouraging support he received from the gathering as they counseled him to talk his son through it, and, if possible, to keep his son intact. A standard argument put forth by anti-circumcision advocates promotes the idea that the child, when able to speak on his own behalf, may choose to be circumcised. However, the idea was not showcased in an instance where one would have thought it most befitting. This passing example of an elision, a minor dissonance, is indicative of similar moments to be found in materials handed out at the conference, in videos still available for purchase on the NOCIRC website, and in recent NOCIRC web postings.

Included among the materials handed out at the NOCIRC conference is a booklet entitled “Deeper Into Circumcision: An Invitation to Awareness And Guide to Resources for Researchers, Parents, Restorers, Activists, and the Merely Curious.” Within this guide compiled by John A. Erickson is a page headed “Miscellaneous” (64), a page exemplary of what Boon terms the “overwrought and effusive.” The top half advertises a bibliography listing “over 2,000 medical journal and scholarly articles from the 1830’s to the present” that intersect with issues

¹ NOCIRC of Washington Sponsors an Evening of Education. Mountaineers Building, Seattle. 7 November 1994. The acronym NOCIRC stands for National Organization of Circumcision Information Resource Centers.

² NOCIRC of Washington. Advertisement. November 1994.

related to circumcision. More striking, however, is the lower half-page containing the following list:

“Botched Circumcision” postcard. Two women looking down at crying baby. “*Oh dear! ANOTHER botched circumcision. “Oh well, it’s too late now.”* [Includes instructions for ordering.]

Dean Edell, MD, answers questions about the foreskin, circumcision, and foreskin restoration frequently on his daily weekday radio show.

Drowning By Numbers. Film by Peter Greenaway. Young boy circumcises self.

Myra Breckinridge, (novel) by Gore Vidal (Little, Brown, 1969.) In chapter 29 (Bantam paperback edition 166-197) a sadistic post-operative transsexual reformatory nurse taunts an uncircumcised Polish teenage delinquent about his foreskin, with thinly veiled threats of forced circumcision.

The NOCIRC Newsletter contains updates on the foreskin/circumcision/AIDS/UTI/STD debate.

Steps, (novel) by Jerzy Kosinski (New York, Random House, 1968) Pages 30-31 of Bantam edition. (“Isn’t it possible that as a result of mutilating him, the man becomes less sensitive and responsive?”) National Book Award for Fiction, 1969. (Jerzy Kosinski, a Jew, committed suicide in 1991).

Upon the Circumcision. Poem by John Milton. *The Complete English Poetry of John Milton* (New York University Press, 1963)

[And, in a box at the bottom of the page.]

I was railroaded into a clip job years ago. Had regrets ever since. Was tight phimotic, want to be at least slightly phimotic again. Any suggestions? (From a classified ad in FQ [Foreskin Quarterly] #12) (64)

On one hand, there is the recognition of texts not unlike those presented for analysis within this writing; the compilation of image, film, medical studies, penile conditions, literary texts, confessional, and a Polish Jew. On the other hand, one sees how readily the topic of circumcision skips in a deconstructionist dance across discursive domains. The bow towards bibliographic convention beside the works in print highlights rather than plays down the indexical oddity of the list. With the pertinent pages listed in a manner which separates them from their longer form, the Vidal and Kosinski citations symbolically circumcise the text, thereby enacting upon the novels the very deed being called into question by the organizational pamphlet's larger project.

Moreover, the literary listings raise questions as to how disciplinary or proprietary texts are to be read when they are called upon, in somewhat anecdotal fashion, to operate in alien venues. To wit, how might a reader best juxtapose the fact that Kosinski took his life with the parenthetical quotation from *Steps*? Perhaps one is meant to grasp that mutilation, resulting in lessened sensitivity and response, is the prelude to suicide. On this reading, perchance the reference to *Drowning By Numbers*--vehicle for auto-circumcision and suicide--should be reconsidered and repositioned as filmic or figural critique. Then again, in light of the Vidal commentary alongside the Kosinski, there may be some subtle connection between circumcision and Poles as an ethnic group, though surely Kosinski's being a Jew voids this linkage. And what contribution as exegesis could Milton's canzone rehearsing the Christ child's "wounding smart" possibly play here? Might it signify as the foreshadowing cut of crucifixion (mis)read as a death, or as a canonical literary figure's potent address on behalf of infant pain? Given the list's density of death references or allusions, circumcision would appear to deserve a designation as seriously

life threatening medical procedure. The threatened collapse of the preputial cut into death characterizes the anti-circumcision hyperbole.

The last entry on the miscellany page of the NOCIRC “Deeper Into Circumcision” pamphlet contains a request for suggestions, made by the gentleman who signs himself “tight phimotic.”³ One intertextual suggestion would be to track down the Park Avenue plastic surgeon who refashioned Chris Moore, promising him “the prettiest cock on the East Coast” (83). The anecdotal account of Moore’s phimosis and subsequent circumcision in *Details* magazine includes a description of an incident that occurred before undergoing said surgery. The image contained herein remains singular in this study:

To their credit, most of my partners were sympathetic and eager to help. But penetration was always uncomfortable, and often impossible. The turning point came one vigorous evening by way of a sharp pain and the discovery of blood. Lots of it. But exactly whose blood--hers or mine--took several miserable, embarrassing minutes to determine. Then I discovered a small tear on my foreskin. That night I resolved to get rid of it. (82)

The idea that the blood must be assigned to its rightful owner is remarkable in light of the history of the blood hierarchy dividing men from women, or the blood of circumcision from the blood of the mother. Discussions concerning women as unclean during menstruation, or studies devoted to their ritualized separation during menses in many cultures are so commonplace that the very idea that a man might be responsible for blood shed during heterosexual intercourse seems almost startling. In their studies of Rabbinic traditions, for example, both Hoffman and Eilberg-Schwartz find the regulations of bodily fluids to be determined in concert with ideas of voluntary control:

³ Phimosis, the constriction of the foreskin, is a condition frequently associated with urinary tract infections, and alleviated by circumcision. (Poland 1313)

The fluids which are released from the genitals thus comprise a system which expresses various degrees of human control. Urine, at the one end, being the most controllable, can never contaminate the body. Sperm which is ejaculated, and thus subject to human control on certain occasions, makes the body impure only until evening. Menstrual blood, non-menstrual blood, and nonseminal discharge are completely uncontrollable, and consequently make the body impure for seven days. In other words, there is a direct relation between the controllability of a bodily fluid and its power to contaminate the body. (Eilberg-Schwartz, *Savage* 187)

Hoffman remarks that in Rabbinic culture: “As circumcision blood saved, menstrual blood polluted” (190). Aware that Moore describes himself as an Irish Catholic, yet trying nevertheless to read some meaning onto this scene of displacement, one wonders: under old rabbinic laws, might the blood that announces the need for a circumcision surgery be counted as being the least bit salvific, or, given the copulatory circumstances incurring the wound, might the length of impurity be recalculated. The mere possibility of a blooded pen/ile inscription upon a sheet may be thought to reverse, or at least disturb, the timeworn perception of the virgin’s stain. This is an image that resonates as well with the bloody blot announcing the self-cut in the film *Drowning By Numbers*. In Moore’s readily shared, perhaps cautionary tale, the circumcisee has clearly spoken on his own behalf. Often, however, it is women as caregivers who feel compelled to speak on behalf of the (un)circumcised infant.

An intriguing representation of such caregiving women as readers of circumcision may be seen in the anti-circumcision video directed by Barry Ellsworth, *The Nurses of St. Vincent’s: “Saying ‘No’ to Circumcision.”* Ellsworth’s voice over informs viewers that twenty-three nurses in a New Mexico hospital banded together in 1992, refusing to participate in routine infant male circumcisions. A shot of scrubby green lands and white clouded blue skies opens the film, perhaps meant to underscore the nature of the protest as being a grass-roots effort. The women, interviewed individually, are framed in a close shot as each elaborates upon her oppositional

stance. All are seated as they dulcetly yet assertively speak about the circumcision procedure and how they perceive its negative effect on babies. One woman rocks on a porch swing in a lulling manner. Their arguments are quite compelling.

A nurse, Ann Lown, reasonably suggests that parents be present when their children are circumcised. Although this suggestion may be intended to eventually dissuade parents from authorizing the surgery, it would align the surgery with features more common to traditional Jewish ritual where the child is held by family members or friends for most of the ceremony. Another nurse, Betty Katz-Sperlich, talks about her sense of practicing her Jewish faith by carrying on a tradition of being very thoughtful. This moment may be read as one wherein viewers are reassured that the voices raised against routine male infant circumcision include Jewish voices. It is then possible to view the comments of these women as working to acquit any charges of anti-Semitism. However, at another moment, Patricia Worth mentions the Bible, and suggests the “ancient covenant”--marking the quotation with her hands--should be as outdated as is the stoning of women. Once again, circumcision is curiously wedded to death.

Nurse Mary Conant is filmed on the job as she demonstrates the “circ board,” the molded plastic device used for strapping the infant down. Later, she pulls a gauze from her breast pocket containing a recently severed foreskin. This is an effective move, this retrieval of a veritable relic from the trash. While the documentary’s last scene shows a circumcision in progress, the intent behind this ending seems a bit unclear. One might read it as illustrative of ongoing surgeries, deaf to the gentle nurses’ protests. This is the act, we have been informed, that goes on in secret, behind closed doors. The language is forceful, but here again one perceives a ruffled undercurrent; this is the same language couching the blood libel, a libel unleashed in response to what was imagined to be going on behind closed doors in the secret ceremonies--among them

include circumcision--of the Jews. The blanketing maternal tone of this short video, with its hushed talk of “angelic” and “perfect” babies, effectively makes a case against routine infant circumcision, interpretive misgivings notwithstanding.

That the foreskin may be read as forfeit property registers differently within discursive bounds. Its economy as a God piece would seem to be figured differently from its economy as the site of *jouissance*. And yet, in imagery used in Dillon Lawrence’s 1995 documentary *Whose Body, Whose Rights?*, an overwrought visual representation of this forfeit and/or economy produces yet another example of Boon’s “unsettled tonality.” Estimates of the functioning adult foreskin absent in men circumcised in infancy vary from twelve to fifteen square inches, and this is the visual presented in the documentary.⁴ A piece of paper three by five inches is first shown, and then, metaphors being indeed powerful, fifteen quarters are placed upon that paper, neatly lined up in three rows of five, thereby providing a second, monied visual. A reductive reading, more bang for the buck, acknowledges the added three dollars and seventy-five cents worth. However, given a reader familiar with the association between circumcision, coin-clipping and anti-Semitism, the image sounds an irritatingly discordant tone.

In earlier centuries, Jews were often caricatured by way of their jobs as itinerant rag salesmen, and linked to the practice of coin clipping, though a swindle common to crooks of all sorts. Coin clipping was also associated with circumcision, and Frank Felsenstein provides an example of this association taken from an eighteenth century jest-book. A man found guilty of clipping has been sentenced to death, and wants to know what harm he has done. He receives the following response:

⁴ This visual also appears in the *Maury Povich Show* of 23 Aug 1993, where two anti-circumcision advocates produce paper foreskins indicative of their lost property.

“Ay, but hark you my friend!” cries the ordinary, “what is to clip a thing but pare it round? And what is paring round called in scripture, but circumcision? And who, under the evangelical dispensation, dares practise circumcision, but one that has actually renounced the Christian-Religion, and is a Jew, a most obstinate and perverse Jew in his heart?” (140)

As Felsenstein observes, the judge’s “response . . . links the paring of the coinage of the realm with the severing of the prepuce, both activities traditionally associated with the Jews” (140). It is possible to complicate this coin and circumcision reading further by turning to Marc Shell’s short, dense essay on “The Holy Foreskin.”

Recounting instances of foreskin veneration throughout Europe, Shell runs the highly valued remnant of the body of Christ through a series of associations linking it with the idea of purse, as either container or contents. Noting an Austrian pre-World War I cartoon, entitled *Die Beschneidung*,⁵ Shell echoes Felsenstein when he observes: “the view that coin clipping and penis snipping amount to the same thing (at least for Jews) is the basis for the anti-Semitic mockery in ‘The Circumcision’ (351, 354). Shell continues by quickly turning the tables:

This cartoon’s assertion, that Jews Practice circumcision because it is lucrative in much the same way that people snip ducats because it is profitable, suggests more about Christians than Semites. For ‘The Circumcision’ projects onto the Jewish practice the characteristic foreskin adoration that modern Christians repress, or fear to recognize, in Christianity itself. After all, they are Christians, not Jews, who have revered a foreskin as the money like relic of relics, seeing it as the quintessence of ideal realization and seeking at once both to preserve and to consume it. (354)

⁵ *Beschneidung* is the German word for circumcision. The cartoon represents a caricature of a Jew, identified by a stereotypically big nose, full lips, payess and ragged clothes. He holds a palm sized coin in his left hand, and scissors in his right. (353) This same cartoon appears in Ephron also.

In light of these readings, the fifteen quarters provide a mixed metaphor. The ostensible economy of *jouissance*--with its 240 feet of nerves and 1000 extra nerve endings reporting to the pleasure centers of the brain--sallies forth in a destabilizing trope.⁶

Other rhetorical ruptures are apparent on the current website for NOCIRC. A mission statement proclaims: "Making the world safer for children." Lest one underestimate the character of this crusade, a cartooned drawing in the upper left corner of the home page proves revelatory. Four tiny toddlers, all wearing white diapers and sporting four different skin colors, are raising a banner that proclaims "NOCIRC." However, this almost disarming scene mimics the famous (staged) photograph of American soldiers raising the flag at Mt. Suribachi on Iwo Jima during World War II. The reference to that battle calls into play another curious intertext, here provided by first generation anti-circumcision proponent Edward Wallerstein. Writing about circumcision practices in the US Military, Wallerstein had remarked:

Another claimed hygienic benefit is that thousands of United States servicemen, particularly in the South Pacific, required circumcision. Would it not be better to circumcise in infancy and thereby avoid the more troublesome operation in adulthood? However, Japanese soldiers were fighting in the identical environment, and the Japanese did not practice newborn circumcision. When Japanese health officials were visited by Wallerstein (1982), they stated that to the best of their knowledge, Japanese military surgeons did not find it necessary to circumcise their soldiers; nor have they instituted neonatal circumcision after World War II. More to the point, in the event of a thermonuclear war, the role of the foreskin will pale to insignificance. (128)⁷

⁶ In the film, this description of the foreskin is provided by Steve Scott, Director, NOCIRC of Utah.

⁷ In the circumcision wars, even geographies would appear to be contested. According to Schoen, a physician actively in favor of circumcision: "During World War II, particularly the North African desert campaign, the combination of sand and lack of hygienic conditions proved disastrous to uncircumcised men. The loss of these soldiers to active duty in combat areas resulted in prophylactic circumcision being performed on many recruits at training centers. A World War II medical report from the U.S. Army referred to the 'enormous man-hour loss from disease peculiar to the uncircumcised man,' and stated that 'hospital admission from

If indeed hoping to make a “safer world for children,” evoking the memory of a battle in which thousands died cannot be charmingly finessed by a chromatic continuum of soldiering tots. A reader stranded between the logo and Wallerstein’s erratic commentary struggles to produce the intended point: Is there is an underlying suggestion that circumcision promotes violence? If so, and in light of the infantilized battle image, ought it be deemed a good or bad outcome?

The answer to such a question might have proven a worthy topic for discussion by an entrant into the currently posted NOCIRC essay contest: “Discuss the ethical considerations of amputating a normal, healthy body part of a non-consenting minor.” As worded, however, the assignment leaves little room to *essai* in the sense of using writing as a forum in which to try something out.⁸ Instead, one might more profitably examine the “ethical considerations” justifying the rhetorical tactics employed by anti-circumcision groups such as NOCIRC. A case in point follows, and concerns the highly publicized, widely read incident of a bungled circumcision.

While actual deaths from complications arising from circumcision are rare, there is one history concerning a surgery gone terribly wrong that requires special acknowledgment. The story of Canadian David Reimer, who had his penis destroyed in 1967 during a therapeutic circumcision to correct phimosis, attests to the egregious harm visited upon a child, his twin brother, and his parents in the wake of a botched circumcision. The book about Reimer’s

paraphimosis, phimosis, balanitis and condyloma accuminata during 1942-1945 totaled 146, 793. Had these patients been circumcised before induction, this total would probably have been close to zero.” Edgar J. Schoen “Overall Statement: Proof of Circumcision Benefits,” *Medicirc.org: Circumcision Information Site* 18 Nov 2004 <<http://www.medicirc.org/summary.html>>

⁸ The definition of an essay provided on the NOCIRC website reads: “An essay is a literary composition devoted to the presentation of the writer’s own ideas on a topic and generally addressing a particular aspect of the subject. Usually brief in scope and informal in style, the essay therefore differs from such formal expository forms as the thesis, dissertation, or treatise.” <<http://www.nocirc.org/essays/essay2/index.html>.> 18 Oct. 2004

experience by John Colapinto, entitled *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl*, appeared in 2000 to much fanfare and serves in some small way to highlight an oversimplified perception that any alteration to the penis is literally feminizing. David's parents followed the post-trauma advice of physicians, even though the recommended treatment involved his reassignment as a girl, a treatment which proved wholly ineffective. A series of so-called therapies were overseen by Dr. John Money of Johns Hopkins (25). The treatments, both psychological and pharmaceutical, utterly failed to alter Reimer's sense of himself as male. Acting in this case as a much needed "vulnerologist," Colapinto gave a clear, strong voice to the spiraled history of mismanagement surrounding Reimer's circumcision.⁹ Sadly, despite the construction of this voice, David Reimer committed suicide in May of 2004.

Reimer's death merited a press release on the NOCIRC website opening with the heading "Victim of Circumcision Takes Own Life," and ending with the sentiment that Reimer "will long be remembered as an example of the risk of terrible mutilation caused by circumcision." David Reimer's story matters, but it matters in culturally important ways that reverberate beyond the rhetorical positionings of circumcision activists, whether prescribing or proscribing the cut. In a note of praise on the book jacket for *As Nature Made Him*, Deborah Tannen comments on Reimer's story as being "an object lesson in medical hubris and close-the-ranks collusion, and in the tragic results when ideology trumps common sense in thinking about sex and gender." Writing prior to Reimer's death, Tannen nevertheless manages to accurately assess the situation that greatly contributed to it. The circumcision debacle in and of itself, horrible as it was, need

⁹ The term vulnerologist comes from Gregory Whitehead: "No wound ever speaks for itself. The goal of the vulnerological interpretive activity, then, is to construct a voice for the wound." ("Display Wounds" 135)

not have fostered such an unfortunate outcome.¹⁰ According to Colapinto: “Genetics almost certainly contributed to David’s suicide. His mother has been a clinical depressive all her life; his brother suffered from the same disease.”¹¹ NOCIRC’s cashing in on Reimer’s death by turning this unusually complex tale into an occasion for tabloid headline and saber rattling polemic completely undercuts the care and dignity with which the biography had been presented by Reimer and Colapinto.

There are two books, written more than one hundred years apart, relevant to the institution and practice of routine infant male circumcision in twentieth century America. The first, published in 1891 by P.C. Remondino, is entitled *History of Circumcision from the Earliest Times to the Present: Moral and Physical Reasons for its Performance with a History of Eunuchism, Hermaphroditism, etc., and of the Different Operations Practiced Upon the Prepuce*. Despite its being a century-old proponent of circumcision, Remondino’s opus has been much maligned by anti-circumcision groups. Now largely irrelevant in terms of its medical advice, the book nevertheless remains a valuable historical resource for a cross section of cultural disciplines.¹² Remondino zealously endorses circumcision, and, reflecting the impact of Darwin,

¹⁰ In “Remembering David Reimer,” John Colapinto recalls mishandled incidents in Reimer’s medical history during a radio interview. John Colapinto, interview with Melissa Block, *All Things Considered*, NPR 12 May 2004. <www.npr.org/features/feature.php?wflid=1894187>

¹¹ Gender Gap: What were the real reasons behind David Reimer’s suicide? 6 Oct. 2004 <<http://slate.msn.com/id/2101678/>>

¹² The University of Hawaii Press republished this work in 2001: “In order to make original editions of historical works available to scholars at an economical price, this facsimile of the original edition of 1900 is reproduced from the best available copy and has been digitally enhanced to improve legibility, but the text remains unaltered to retain historical authenticity” (ii). This claim is not quite accurate, however. Missing from the title page is part of Remondino’s authorizing profile, for after “By P.C. Remondino, (Jefferson),” the following information has been deleted in favor of the U of Hawaii imprint: “Member of the Amer. Med. Assoc., of the Amer. Publ. H. Assoc., of the San Diego Country Medical Society, of the State Board of Health of California, of the Board of Health of the City of San Diego, Vice President of California State

even predicts the eventual evolutionary extinction of the foreskin because men no longer climb trees or charge naked through the brush.¹³ It is true the book seems to have had, and continues to have, an extraordinarily long life as an authoritative handbook on the subject, irrespective of the fact that frequently it has been read with little or no regard for its historical placement.¹⁴ Curiously, Remondino's period racist statements--he refers to natives as savages, for example--go completely unremarked by many critics, whereas his perceived assault on the prepuce produces severe ire from those currently countering the cut. Providing a more cogent assessment of "this captivating work," Boon reads Remondino as an "enlightened" 19th century medicine man, a man who reads universally and monocularly across the spectrum of circumcisions available to him (60). In other words, Remondino needs to be properly put in his place, and read as best one can from a vantage that keeps that place in view. An examination of the history of the ongoing reception of Remondino's tome would be expected to yield a somewhat different, though equally elucidating history.

A counterweight history of circumcision published in 2000, harboring an anti-circumcision bias, is David L. Gollaher's *Circumcision: A History of the World's Most Controversial Surgery*. Gollaher, identified as a medical historian, visits Jewish, Christian, and Muslim practices as well as medical histories and the medical profession's concerns. A reader versed in the literature available on both sides of the circumcision debate recognizes Gollaher's ideology soon enough, even when he attempts to rein himself in rhetorically. After all, as he

Medical Society and of Southern California Medical Society, etc." (Remondino, 1891). Another reprint, published in 2003 by Kessinger, helpfully retains this information.

¹³ See Introduction and Chapter XVIII.

¹⁴ Jim Bigelow, an advocate for foreskin restoration, writes of Remondino in 1992: "For all his training and service as a physician, his view of the foreskin seems to echo primitive superstition far more than a medical point of view" (71).

asserts: “This book is a history, not a polemic nor a tract for the times. Throughout, I’ve endeavored to write a balanced account that accurately reflects what people, at different times, thought and did” (xi).

Apart from the little asides--“The Old Testament is full of violence, and circumcision is frequently identified with brutality, occasionally with death” and transitions such as “(i)n another grisly incident” before he mentions Saul and the bride price of David--Gollaher reveals his stance with the use of a photograph common to the literature produced by anti-circumcision groups. There is no credit beneath the photograph which appears in a chapter devoted to “Circumcision and Disease: The Quest for Evidence,” rather than in the chapter entitled “Backlash” dealing with the anti-circumcision movement. Nevertheless, the photograph of a scrunched-faced, open-mouthed, screaming infant is the same as that reproduced in 1994 on two pamphlets, “Respect Your Son’s Body” put out by NORM (National Organization of Restoring Men) and “Circumcision-Why?” circulated by NOCIRC and featuring a line drawing adapted from the photograph. (Disconcerting, too, is the fact that the surgical towel covering the baby’s torso has a woven border whose stripe crosses the body at shoulder level, reminiscent of prayer shawls.) The photograph, in poster form, also appears in footage of anti-circumcision rallies contained in *Whose Body, Whose Rights?* If, for Gollaher, balance is indeed the goal, he ought to beware the use of such photographic intertexts. In this instance, reframing belies rhetorical intent for those readers attuned to unsettled tonalities.

On occasion, a chord of messianism sounds within the rhetoric of anti-circumcision, blurring a line of argumentation separating the reformation of medical practice from the redemption of souls. One notes with interest as pro-circumcision Dr. Edgar J. Schoen speaks of “lay anti-circumcision organizations” who “mainly use anecdotes and testimonials,” and whose

“forces are dominated by laymen.”¹⁵ Although layman works specifically as antonym for physician in Schoen’s lexicon, as he admits, there are also physicians, like Dr. Dean Edell, who oppose circumcision. Listed on the NOCIRC miscellany page discussed earlier, Dr. Edell also appears in the *Whose Body, Whose Rights?* documentary, where he characterizes the American obsession with hygiene as an “anti-bacterial jihad.” And there is a conversion on record, to be sure but a lay emulation of Saul on the road to Damascus. Significantly, this life altering event belongs to Marilyn Milos, the founder of NOCIRC.

In coverage of the anti-circumcision movement, Gollaher provides a description of Milos’s awakening upon witnessing her first circumcision. Milos was so transformed that

Quietly at first, then with increasing boldness, she moved to alert the public to the evils of circumcision She began to write and speak and distribute tracts. There was no mistaking her withering indictment of the medical profession, whose callous indifference to suffering and lofty pretension of scientific authority struck her as hypocritical so long as doctors ignored the brutality of cutting infants’ genitals. (162-63)

And, Gollaher further informs us, at “the heart of this effort was a belief in the sanctity of the body, coupled with moral indignation at those who, in Milos’s words, fail ‘to respect the natural integrity of the male newborn’s body’” (163). This is the kind of language Jewish scholars Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin find problematic, for buried within this belief is much that serves to elide or obliterate difference.

Language portraying the “natural” as “perfect” or “whole” reinscribes an idea the Boyarins find to be “historically contingent” but “not a human universal” (*Thinking* 43). Even in rabbinic Judaism, they point out, circumcision is “figured as a perfection of the human body,”

¹⁵ *Medicirc.org: Circumcision Information Site: “Anti-Circumcision Groups.”* 20 Nov 2004 <http://www.medicirc.org/meditopics/medicirc_topics.html #Anticircumcision>

whereas Maimonides later suggests that nature contains nothing imperfect(44). Illustrating their concerns, the Boyarins comment upon the defense presented in an article written by a Jewish couple who chose not to circumcise:

The insistence on the infant's 'perfection ' and the denial of meaning to circumcision (calling it 'an unnecessary medical intervention') may also well represent an impulse back toward a universalism, and a figuration of circumcision as mutilation, which has had radical manifestations for thousands of years. (43)

The issue of universalism allows me as reader to better pinpoint what I find unsettling in the anti-circumcision discourse. In his discussion of Paul, Daniel Boyarin underscores Paul's universalizing mission. He notes, "For Paul, the only possibility for human equality involved human sameness. Difference was the threat" (*Radical* 156). In this light, what one begins to sense beneath the rhetoric of much anti-circumcision speech is its inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to accommodate the particular. This resistance manifests itself, for example, in arguments where routine infant male circumcision is made equivalent to the most invasive female genital mutilation.¹⁶

In the crusade for uncircumcision, respect for difference is jettisoned in favor of a blanketing discourse as the means to a desired end, an end wherein the idea of sameness trumps the idea of equality. Respecting difference and acknowledging the particular are tasks more sensitively handled by George Eliot in her novel *Daniel Deronda*. On the other hand, respecting difference while acknowledging the particular proves a more difficult assignment for critic Tania

¹⁶ The distinction between the two procedures is well articulated by A.M. Viens: "I use the term female genital cutting instead of 'female circumcision' in order to make clear the marked difference between this procedure and male circumcision. The removal of the male foreskin is in no way similar or equivalent (morphologically or symbolically) to the removal of the clitoris and/or labia." *Journal of Medical Ethics* 30(2004): 241-47.

Modleski in her analysis of sexuality in *Crossing Delancey*. As Boon so aptly observes, at this cutting edge one always hears an “unsettled tonality.”

Chapter 3. Facets of Circumcision in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*

“And why didn't Daniel know he was Jewish? Why didn't he look down?”

Amanda Cross, *No Word From Winifred*, 178

Throughout the course of its century and a quarter existence George Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, has piqued critics because of the handling of its double narrative. The “English half” of the novel devoted to Gwendolen Harleth and her ill-fated marriage to Henleigh Grandcourt has seemed to many to be the much stronger and more rewarding portion, whereas the “Jewish half” of the novel devoted to Daniel Deronda and his journey of self discovery among Jews has often seemed to constitute the weaker and more problematic share.¹ Readers expecting to see Gwendolen and Daniel finally paired off are frustrated at novel's end with Gwendolen widowed and reunited with her mother and sisters, and Daniel newly married to Mirah Cohen and sailed from England. However, critical appraisals necessarily reflect and incorporate the concerns of their era and in this respect *Daniel Deronda* is no exception.

For the past twenty-five years or so, a number of critics reading George Eliot's last novel have concerned themselves with the state of Daniel Deronda's penis in what one critic has

¹In his introduction to *Daniel Deronda*, Terence Cave rehearses critical reception to the novel, noting that early reviewers, if English, admired the Gwendolen story, and if Jewish, favored the Daniel story. Cave calls attention to F.R. Leavis's dictum that the whole of the Daniel portion ought to be jettisoned (xiii-xviii). Claudia Johnson critically situates Leavis and his extreme reaction to *Daniel Deronda*--he went so far as to publish a separate novel entitled *Gwendolen Harleth*--as she intelligently sorts through the complexities of era and exogamy that marked Leavis's own life. “F.R. Leavis: The ‘Great Tradition of the English Novel and the Jewish Part.’” *Nineteenth Century Literature* 52.2 (2001) 99-227.

referred to as the “anatomical jubilee of current criticism.”² In a footnote to an essay on Eliot, Steven Marcus, the academic credited with launching the debate surrounding this particular critical conundrum, relayed a student’s observation that Daniel’s ignorance of his Jewishness meant “he never looked down.”³ Presumably for Marcus, had Daniel done so, his identity as a Jew would have been evident before the eponymous novel was begun, and possibly an unworkable plot would have been left untested: “In order for the plot of *Daniel Deronda* to work, Deronda’s circumcised penis must be invisible, or non-existent--which is one more demonstration in detail of why the plot does not in fact work” (212). An active participant in ensuing conversations, K.M. Newton observed:

The fact that there is nothing to show that Deronda is a Jew until more than half way through the novel and that it is only proved conclusively in Chapter 51, indicates that those who read the book for the first time, *unless warned in advance*, would think of circumcision too late, if it occurred to them at all, for it to have any serious influence on the response and interpretation. Thus it would be likely to be noticed only during re-reading (323, emphasis added).

In light of Newton’s response, my initial run through *Daniel Deronda* may be labeled corrupt insofar as the question of circumcision was concerned. I had been “warned in advance.”

The warning arrived in the form of this chapter's epigraph, a textual wound of sorts, inflicted when reading a Kate Fansler mystery by Amanda Cross, pen name of literary critic Carolyn Heilbrun. In hindsight, *No Word From Winifred* ought to have been flagged with one of

² Vigdeman. < [http://search.epnet.com/login.aspx? direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,url,uid&db=mzh&an=1999070551&loginpage=loginpage=reflogin.asp](http://search.epnet.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,url,uid&db=mzh&an=1999070551&loginpage=loginpage=reflogin.asp)>

³ Reviewing contemporary (1876) Jewish critical response to *Daniel Deronda*, Cave cites James Picciotto, and adds: “Picciotto is, incidentally, the first critic to allude to a problem which has much exercised recent commentators: ‘It is singular,’ he says, ‘that (Deronda) should never have suspected his origin, which ought to have left visible traces’ (xvi).”

Edmond Jabès' red marks anticipating the wound delivered by the text, for, once read, innocence with respect to *Daniel Deronda* and the question of circumcision was lost. Yet the reference to *Daniel Deronda* in the Amanda Cross mystery was tagged, not for future interest, but as an irritatingly clever academic display. (Revisiting the mystery reference post-*Deronda* has rendered a different, less dismissive reading.) Nevertheless, as reader, I was primed to look for signs of circumcision before ever opening Eliot's novel.⁴

The first reading of *Daniel Deronda* commenced as a fact finding tour, where the notation of round items, necklaces and rings for example, set the pace. The choice of image stemmed from hearing beneath the title a sense of "Daniel of the Round." A ploddingly pedestrian approach to a very long novel, iconically sieving for circular images turned out to be critically valuable.⁵ The value was revealed, late in the novel when Eliot, as if clueing a point of departure, cut across the journeyman reader's path. At that exact point, the interpretive worth of a stolen diamond ring began to radiate.

3.1. Reading For The Cut

Symbolic exegesis is the attempt to tease out implicit meanings that are embedded in the practice in question.

Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism*, 143

There is no circumcision per se depicted or mentioned by Eliot in her novel. There are, however, a number of critics who have made the case for reading *Daniel Deronda* with

⁴ Cave suggests that readers turn to his introductory comments only after having read the the novel, lest they ruin "the pleasure of a plot full of suspense and surprises" (ix).

⁵ Remondino provides a description of Australian circumcision: ". . . while others content themselves with simply making a circular incision, which removes the prepuce after the Jewish manner, the excised portion being place as a ring on the median finger of the left hand" (44-45).

circumcision as a trope central to interpretation. The reading done by Mary Wilson Carpenter is particularly compelling because she traces out the seemingly myriad ways in which the circumcision in the novel belongs to Gwendolen. Claiming that Gwendolen perceives herself as the Phallus with respect to her mother--that is, she sees herself as the object of her mother's desire--Carpenter details instances of language Gwendolen experiences as wounds, and sees in them the cut of circumcision (110-111). In addition, Carpenter frames her argument within the context of nineteenth century biblical commentary on circumcision, which, as she points out, favored consideration of circumcision's metaphorical and spiritual meaning rather than its embodied practice. Carpenter pays close attention to the special significance of the New Year's date upon which an extended exchange between Gwendolen and Deronda takes place (120).

As Carpenter correctly observes, the New Year's Eve dance occupies the center chapters of Eliot's novel. Finding the keystone to her interpretation in this date, Carpenter carefully reiterates the day's former importance: January 1 celebrated the Feast of the Circumcision, with assigned church readings taken from Luke--where Christ's circumcision is mentioned, and from Romans--where Paul's pronouncements concerning the spiritual merits of metaphorized circumcision occur (113). The rereading of both testaments commenced with the new year's entrance, so that "readings for January, the first month of the new year, thus continually produced the problem of circumcision" (113). The problem as identified by Carpenter concerns the Protestant desire to avoid addressing the penis as a vulnerable sexual organ while simultaneously endorsing its value as a Phallic signifier (112).

Diagramming the narrative route taken by the two central characters, Carpenter observes that: "Both Gwendolen's and Daniel's stories move toward this signifying date, meet and 'cross' in it, then continue to endings that write the 'meaning of circumcision for each of them'" (120).

Establishing the trope as central to *Daniel Deronda* in this way is convincing. It underscores as well the double edge of circumcision, the Janus gated character of the cut central to readings that open in two directions, toward the semiotic and toward the Symbolic. These terms help graph the movement of Daniel and Gwendolen in line with their individual journeys, and pinpoint their repositioning within altered social circles.

Also persuasive is Carpenter's argument claiming a spiritual circumcision for Gwendolen. Carpenter portrays Daniel as a psychological *sandek*, a caring friend who assists in bringing Gwendolen into a "'covenant' of mothers" at the narrative's end. Where I part ways with Carpenter, as well as with most critics of the novel, has to do with the treatment of Mirah's father. Eliot's inclusion of this father, who appears to many a stock character--a less than socially desirable, nomadic Eastern European Jew--deserves a more kaleidoscopic reading than he generally receives.

For the majority of critics any consideration of circumcision relates solely to Daniel. The energy spent defending one or another reading of Daniel's circumcision or lack thereof is impressive, and convincing arguments are to be found in both critical camps. Some critics argue that surely Daniel was circumcised in infancy, while others believe that to be highly unlikely. Cynthia Chase's criticism of the novel is founded upon an understanding of Daniel as circumcised. In others, like Carpenter's, Daniel's physical condition figures as being less important than the cutting metaphor's elaborative function. While I favor critiques claiming an intact penis based on the history Daniel's mother provides, there are cogent arguments asserting Daniel's circumcision based on this same history .

Occasionally critical commentary upon Daniel's member reveals an attitude that may not have been intended. A footnote, which first quotes Chase--"the fact of Daniel's circumcision

calls into question how seriously we can take his story"--contains the follow-up comment: "There's no way Daniel's mother could possibly have kept the *mohel* off his infant penis until he was two years old, when she gave him to his English foster father."⁶ This depiction of a hovering *mohel* suggests an argument possibly as motivated by the blood libel as it is by biblical law. This example demonstrates, too, how the discussion of Daniel's circumcision is frequently carried on in footnotes or end notes, perhaps honorifically following in Marcus' footsteps.

In an impressive deconstructionist reading, when Chase turns to the significance of the signification of the hero's phallus, her notes appeal to the two-year age at which Daniel was separated from his mother, and name Marcus as the source for the "never looked down" observation. Similarly, when Carpenter observes "that critical discourse has repeatedly produced the issue of circumcision, precisely because of its 'notable absence' from a plot that seems to depend on it" (103), she nests the commentary within a footnote. This is not to insist that positions for or against Daniel's having been cut be handled in the body of the critical text at every turn, only to highlight an uneasiness Eliot's text unleashes with respect to reading the sign. Chase assesses the "hero's circumcised phallus" and deems it:

more than an exemplary metonymy, though it is that. It is distinctively significant, not as a rhetorical structure, but as a referent--one that produces embarrassment, a sense of discomfort that is not intellectual and that is more than a sense of esthetic incongruity. (222)

⁶ Vigderman. < [http://search.epnet.com/login.aspx? direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,url,uid&db=mzh&an=1999070551&loginpage=loginpage=reflogin.asp](http://search.epnet.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,url,uid&db=mzh&an=1999070551&loginpage=loginpage=reflogin.asp)>

She reasons the mark of circumcision must be evaded or excluded, because, if present, it would signal the cutting off of the narrative. In other words, Daniel's cut affirmed up front would name his Jewishness, and the novel's *raison d'être* would vanish. Understood.⁷

Bryan Cheyette counters this perception in his introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Between 'Race' and Culture: Representations of 'the Jew' in English and American Literature*. Lauding Chase's reading for having "made out an influential case for reading this novel in deconstructive terms," Cheyette expresses his concern for her critical approach because of what he sees as its reliance upon "opposing narratives of 'race' and 'culture.'" When circumcision is read to indicate "racial fixity," it works to stabilize the sign which is in fact fluid (8).

I searched through Cheyette's "range of signifiers associated with circumcision in Daniel Deronda"(8), and kept in mind Newton's reference to the "theme of the ambiguity of signs" (322). Amidst signs culled from Eliot's work and from commentary of critics whose analyses assisted in making sense of the gathering, there emerged an emblematic circumcision on behalf of Daniel Deronda. Even so, recognizing the potential of an emblem is one thing, whereas reconstructing the history of an emblem as it is seamlessly stitched into the lining of Eliot's narrative is quite another. Nonetheless, the signs do exist within Eliot's text, and they grant the charting of a symbolic rite.

⁷The keenest response to all the fuss about Daniel's never having looked down comes from James Boon, who cleverly observes: "Daniel could have looked down--quite obsessively in fact--and never known he was different, unless he also looked over: across the difference, thus comparing *les choses*" (292, nt.15).

3.2.The Temporal Cut

Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning.
George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 7

The initial cut in the novel is performed by Eliot herself. Eliot's use of an *in medias res* beginning for *Daniel Deronda* Barbara Hardy accounts for in this way:

The function of the flashback is plain: we begin with the encounter between the two, so that the beginning of the novel makes conspicuous and pointed what would have lost or blurred in a story which was told in chronological order. George Eliot was experimenting in controlling the reader's response to people and ideas. (24)

Excising two chapters from an imagined calendar of sequential events, and placing them at the head of the novel underscores the import of their content. Additionally, and heeding Eliot's oft quoted comment, "I mean everything in the book to be related to everything else" (Cave xxxi), the cut makes it reasonable to assume the writer chose to foreground interpretive tools, to make them, as Hardy says above, "conspicuous and pointed," a way to begin making connections.

The make-believe beginning of *Daniel Deronda* occurs in Leubronn, a resort where Gwendolen Harleth gambles away her stake under the gaze of Daniel Deronda, a person whom she has not yet met. Upon receiving a request from her mother to immediately return home to England, and in order to acquire the funds needed for return passage, Gwendolen elects to pawn a turquoise necklace. This necklace is reclaimed by Deronda and returned to her, wrapped in a handkerchief, a "large corner of (which) seemed to have been recklessly torn off to get rid of a mark"(20). Also included is a pencilled note: "'A stranger who has found Miss Harleth's necklace returns it to her with the hope that she will not again risk the loss of it'"(20).

The transaction in the pawnshop provides the reader with valuable introductory iconographic information with regard to signs and themes that will resurface throughout Eliot's text. The two passages cited below are particularly generative: they serve to establish a link between an iconic item of jewelry (significantly containing three stones as a mark of the paternal) with its subsequent purchase and handling by a Jew, foreshadowing transactions and identities that will recur throughout the novel:

. . . Mr. Weiner (had) nothing to remark except her proud grace of manner and the superior size and quality of the three central turquoises in the necklace she offered him. They had belonged to a chain once her father's; but she had never known her father; and the necklace was in all respects the ornament she could most conveniently part with. (19)

and:

Gwendolen's dominant regret was that she had only nine louis to add to the four in her purse: these Jew dealers were so unscrupulous in taking advantage of Christians unfortunate at play. (19)

Thus, early on, we learn the chain once belonged to Gwendolen's father and remark the novel's first mention of Jews. As Deborah Heller sees it: "the Leubrun (sic) pawnbroker is also there to establish the knee-jerk anti-Semitism from which Gwendolen, and, presumably, the reader, are to move in the course of the novel" (86). Although this view may define some of the intended work of the above passages, the passages also work to create a link wherein jewels act as genealogical markers. From the novel's inception, this necklace--a circular, jeweled piece, the first among many--functions as an emblematic marker upon which to fix the initial "not quite encounter"⁸

⁸ Gillian Beer, cited in Carpenter 122.

between Gwendolen and Deronda. Moreover, it puts into play a motif surrounding the traffic in jewels which provides the counterpoint to Eliot's intertwined narratives.

3.3. Family Jewels: Memorial Necklace and Memorable Ring

The term *family jewels* acts as truism and as joke. Without genitals there is no family, no lineage, no body to inherent property, yet referring to frequently debased anatomy as something precious makes for a humorous inversion. On one hand, it seems a flippant gesture to suggest that Eliot's novel concerns itself with family jewels--on the other, such an assessment can be reasonably defended as accurate. The play of jeweled gifts from fathers or jewels associated with father figures configures allegiances within the novel: jewels appear to determine legitimacy, and to designate the proper heir. Gwendolen's necklace, Deronda's ring, Grandcourt's family diamonds and engagement ring for Gwendolen underscore the web of social interactions that shape the narrative--hence the hysteria unleashed by the reassignment of the Grandcourt diamond necklace, or the responsibility deployed by way of the Charisi diamond ring. The manner in which Eliot accents her narrative with jewels as material indicators of familial relationships is thus entwined with the trope of circumcision.

In a commentary on *Daniel Deronda* calling attention to jewels as metaphors for body parts, Peter Brooks expounds upon Grandcourt Mallinger's family diamond necklace and its accompanying jewel box. This necklace had been in the custody of Lydia Glasher, mother-without-benefit-of-marriage to Grandcourt's three children. As demanded by Grandcourt, Lydia forwards the necklace in its jewel-case to Gwendolen on the night of her wedding to Grandcourt, along with a note cursing Gwendolen for renegeing on her promise not to marry the father of Lydia's children. Brooks places this jewel-case in the context of the *Schmuckkästchen* Freud

found significant in his analysis of Dora, and proceeds to read Eliot's comment upon girls as "delicate vessels" in this way:

To the extent that the delicate vessel is the womb, it necessarily implicates the jewel-case, the woman's sex, her sexuality, and the social contracts transacted on her sex--transactions that have to do with ownership and transmission, which both figure as very important themes in the novel, the first in particular reference to the Grandcourt-Mallinger world, the second especially for Deronda and his relatives. (249)

Brooks assigns the sense of ownership to Grandcourt, seeing the jewel-case as a twofold-attack upon Gwendolen in the form of Grandcourt's physical control over her body as well as the psycho-sexual association with Lydia. The theme of transmission is evident for Brooks in the womb of Daniel's mother, the Princess Halm-Eberstein, as "the key to Deronda's story, since Jewish identity is traditionally transmitted through the mother" (249). There are, however, two other containers, whose translation dovetails not quite so literally with the German *Schmuckkästchen* as does "jewel case," but whose content also underscores the network of dynastic and social relationships important to Gwendolen's and Daniel's narratives.

The first belongs to Gwendolen, and is the *nécessaire*⁹ into which she had stuffed the reclaimed necklace, torn handkerchief, and note as she was about to depart Leubronn.¹⁰ The handkerchief's torn corner suggests that an identifying embroidered monogram has been removed, an early indication that Daniel is not to be the appropriate inheritor of Gwendolen's

⁹ *Nécessaire*: A small case, sometimes ornamental, for personal articles such as pencils, scissors, tweezers, cosmetics. etc. 1876 usage Gwendolen thrust . . . necklace, cambric . . . and all into her *nécessaire*. *OED* <<http://www.oed.com/>>

¹⁰ With Brooks' womb imagery in mind, I think one possibility for reading the significance of the handkerchief or cambric wrapped around the necklace is as veil or hymen. "The hymen, intact, is a sign that the woman is a virgin and can properly (in the sense of *propre*, clean and proper) become the property of another man. Traditionally the marriage ritual involved breaking the hymen to seal the alliance and displaying the resulting blood as proof of consummation" (Oliver, "The Maternal Operation," 64).

line, nor she of his, as the return of the father's jewels suggests. The necklace re-emerges as a talisman for Gwendolen, allowing her to recollect and re-read her exchanges with Deronda. Before accepting Grandcourt's proposal, when Gwendolen once again, but only momentarily, considers parting with the turquoise necklace, her mother urges "No, dear, no; it was made out of your dear father's chain." And then, in embarrassment, the mother alludes to the wastefulness of her second husband: "All my best ornaments were taken from me long ago" (274). Though it is subtly done, a positive paternal ethical value becomes associated with this birthright piece in addition to its being imbued with a Daniel aura.¹¹ Juxtaposed with the Glasher tainted diamonds Grandcourt insists upon Gwendolen's wearing, the more modest turquoise chain attests to the painful choices facing Gwendolen.

As a remnant of Gwendolen's life prior to her marriage to Grandcourt, Gwendolen emblematically exploits the turquoise, like the wearing of a knight's colors. Originally a source of stinging embarrassment in connection with Daniel (even Daniel had mused to himself, "That little affair of the necklace, and the idea that somebody thought her gambling wrong, had evidently bitten into her" [404]), the necklace comes to represent what she values in her friendship with Daniel. However, when she decides to wear the "memorial necklace" wrapped round her wrist as a bracelet, she riles Grandcourt:

. . .she had drawn off her glove, . . .and when she put up her hand to take the glass and lifted it to her mouth, the necklace-bracelet, which in its triple winding adapted itself clumsily to her wrist, was necessarily conspicuous. Grandcourt saw it, and saw that it was attracting Deronda's notice.

'What is that hideous thing you have got on your wrist?' said the husband.

¹¹ Both Zimmerman and Cirilli observe the relationship between the negative features of the Grandcourt diamonds and the finer spiritual value attached to the turquoise associated with Daniel. Neither seem interested in jewelry that belongs to Daniel.

‘That?’ said Gwendolen, composedly, pointing to the turquoises, while she still held the glass; ‘it is an old necklace that I like to wear. I lost it once, some one found it for me.’ (443)

Later, away from Deronda, Grandcourt, twice referring to “that thing on your wrist,” demands that Gwendolen “fill (her) place properly,” and “(b)ehave with dignity,” although the narrator is quick to point out it is contempt, not jealousy, that prompts the husband’s commands (447). I would argue that ironically it is precisely the symbolic value of the thing on her wrist that finally permits Gwendolen to fill her place properly and to behave with dignity. This modest necklace serves as a tacit reminder that she is the only issue from her father, her siblings being the result of the second, clearly less happy marriage of her mother. The mentoring role that Daniel assumes on behalf of Gwendolen, further endows the necklace with a form of caring paternal support necessary to her reawakening, for as she will declare to Daniel, “it should be better . . . with me for having known you” (805).

Brooks also perceives in the development of Gwendolen a move from being the object of the gaze towards being one who hears. Again reading her position as signed by jewelry, Brooks states: “The novel’s repeated insistence on various jewels that Gwendolen is to wear, from the original paternal turquoises to the Grandcourt family diamonds, becomes a leitmotif of woman as sociosexual display” (254). Registering what he sees as “a paradigm shift, comparable to that worked by Freud, from seeing to listening,” Brooks then adds: “Voice and listening characterize a religious tradition that prohibits graven images, rejecting icons in favor of truth revealed by way of voice, which must be heard, interpreted, and then acted upon” (254). In this, one hears a hint suggestive of the biblical metaphor of circumcised ears.

The second container that is not quite a *Schmuckkästchen* houses the papers that detail Daniel’s lineage. Daniel learns of the existence of this chest during the meeting with his mother

wherein he follows her request that he wear a diamond ring--“Bring with you the diamond ring that Sir Hugo gave you. I shall like to see it again” (617). More importantly, Daniel hears that the ring belonged to his father--“Let me look at your hand again: The hand with the ring on. It was your father’s ring” (698). This ring, along with the documents contained in the chest, testify to Daniel’s blood line and prepare the scene for the metaphorical circumcision to be bestowed upon Deronda.

This item of jewelry, to be identified by Daniel as a “memorable ring” (789) and closely paralleling Gwendolen’s “memorial” necklace” (440), is the ring we first encountered when Daniel pawned it as a ploy to learn about Mordecai and the Ezra Cohen family. Only later is the reader made aware of a diamond ring given to Daniel by Sir Hugo, the import of which is disclosed when Daniel meets with his mother. Someone of Daniel’s standing may well possess more than one diamond ring, but because Eliot provides no evidence of a series of rings, I think it safe to assume the ring left at the Cohen’s to be one and the same as the ring Daniel eventually presents to his mother. In a moment that recalls Gwendolen’s pawning of her necklace, Daniel offers the ring to pawnbroker Cohen almost casually, as if it too were an item he “could most conveniently part with” (19). Daniel fully intends to redeem his ring, but in the meantime it serves as the vehicle bringing him into the circle of the Cohen family and Mordecai.

Reading the ring as metaphorical foreskin derives primarily from the route plotted by Eliot as she moves the ring through the text. The New Year’s dance, for example, occurs between the ring’s pawning and its retrieval. Given the celebration of Christ’s circumcision, one may meditate for a moment on that very special foreskin which holy relic several churches have claimed to possess at one time or another. More relevant here perhaps, at least in terms of an earlier type of this image of foreskin/ring, is to recall the lore surrounding Catherine of Sienna,

who, as legend has it, wore the foreskin of Christ as a wedding ring. In addition, the negotiations with young Jacob Cohen, who desires to trade a pen/pocket knife with Daniel when he visits the shop, places an instrument of circumcision in the same setting as the ring, the setting in this case being a Jewish shop and household. Later, the ring will be subjected to what amounts to a certifying gaze on the part of Daniel's mother, as she authenticates the ring and, therefore, Daniel's right to know his heritage. In this moment, Leonora will attain the role of archaic mother, the mother from whom Daniel will be separated as he enters into to a world differently ordered from the one he has heretofore known.

3.4. The Disposable Father

As impressively as Carpenter has constructed her reading, and as admiring as I am of the work she has done culling from nineteenth century biblical commentary, the closing three paragraphs of her critique seem to me overreaching in what appears to be a moment of particularly feminist zeal.¹² In these last paragraphs, Carpenter addresses the role of Mirah's father, Lapidoth, and she does so in a way that tampers with the metaphor so carefully explicated

¹²Carpenter's essay appeared originally in *Genders* (1988) as "A Bit of Her Flesh": Circumcision and "The Signification of the Phallus," and was republished with the same title in her 2003 book *Imperial Bibles, Domestic Bodies*. Omitted from the book version are two paragraphs concerning Lacan that perhaps account for this moment. From the second deletion: ". . .neither the woman writer nor we as reading women can produce ourselves except as gaps, silences, discontinuities, or repressions in the text. We are programmed to ignore stories told by the text that do not confirm the program. When women speak in the text, we as Lacanian critics, are duty-bound to silence them to read their more complicated stories only as an effect of the single, universal 'truth' of the Oedipal story" (15). She claims to use the Protestant discourse on circumcision as an intertext that "Lacan does not theorize" (102) because, she says, he does not recognize the vulnerable penis. To read Lacan in this fashion is to read him as he may wished to have been read, but is not to read Lacan as he in fact presented himself on occasion. See, for example, Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 144, and Bernheimer, "Penile Reference in Phallic Theory," *Differences* 4 (1992): 116-132.

heretofore. For all her keen observation regarding circumcision and its meaningful place in Gwendolen's story, Carpenter doesn't quite allow the cut to do work on either side of what she had earlier termed the "crossing" of Daniel and Gwendolen's stories. To Carpenter's credit, Lapidoth, so often short shrifted by critics, here at least receives some critical attention.

By all accounts a less than admirable character, either as provider or fellow Jew, Lapidoth functions as the perfect exemplar of behaviors used to feed anti-Jewish stereotypes.

Eliot addresses this point in the essay "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!" in *Theophrastus Such*:

Apart from theological purposes, it seems to be held surprising that anybody would take an interest in the history of a people whose literature has furnished all our devotional language; and if any reference is made to their past or future destinies, some hearer is sure to state, as a relevant fact which may assist our judgment, that she, for her part is not fond of them, having known a Mr. Jacobson who was very unpleasant, or that he, for his part thinks meanly of them as a race, though, on inquiry, you find that he is so little acquainted with their characteristics that he is astonished to learn how many persons whom he has blindly admired and applauded are Jews to the backbone. (229)

Lapidoth's negative portrait receives particularly harsh treatment from Heller:

The evident purpose of these unattractive Jews is to balance, and therefore give credibility to, the more ideal Jews. What is distressing about them however, is that their unattractiveness is automatically present as having a peculiarly Jewish flavour, as conforming, in short, to pre-established negative stereotypes. Where Gwendolen's husband is one of the most original villains in English literature, Lapidoth is an identifiable Jewish villain, almost ready made. (86)

Less stinging in his assessment, Leon Gottfried views Lapidoth as "only a petty criminal and a weakling, not a potent threat to the order of virtue. He is 'bad,' not 'evil,' and he may do harm, but he cannot undermine (unlike Grandcourt for example)" (173). One gathers that if Lapidoth must be found unpleasant he ought to be superbly unpleasant. I believe Hardy comes closest the

mark when she remarks: “There are imperfect Jews in *Daniel Deronda*--Lapidoth, Mirah’s father, is one, and a splendid creation he is” (15). Reinforcing the standard literary critical take on Lapidoth, the recently televised version of *Daniel Deronda* presented by PBS omitted the figure of Mirah’s father as an embodied film presence. And Eliot does paint an unflattering portrait of Lapidoth, most especially as his actions are recounted in Mirah’s biographical narrative presented to Mrs. Meyrick.¹³ A veritable magnet for the negative morpheme--evidenced in Carpenter’s compilation of Eliot’s descriptors as “‘the unreverend father,’ the ‘undesirable father,’ the ‘unworthy father’” (124)--defending Lapidoth seems futile. Yet it is this unpleasant character, so readily cut from the film, whom I find central to the work Eliot does with regard to the trope of circumcision.

Where Carpenter sees the work of circumcision in the novel creating a maternal community of women, I submit that Eliot is more even handed in her treatment insofar as gendering the trope is concerned. Carpenter’s depiction of Lapidoth assigns to him an act of circumcision in which he cuts himself off from his daughter, the mirrored reversal of Daniel’s being cut off from his mother:

. . . the ring that Lapidoth steals--like Grandcourt’s ring--acquires its significance only in its circulation through mothers. Perhaps it is not incidental that most nineteenth-century bible dictionaries referred the meaning of circumcision to the Latin *circumcidere*, “to cut around.” The “rings transferred to female “members” in this narrative effect a similar cutting around, but not a cutting off. Painfully, but meaningfully, they circle around mothers and daughters, daughters and their “creators,” both in and out of the text. But the father Lapidoth, the “undesirable father,” cuts himself off by his theft of the ring Daniel received from his mother. His circumcision then is a fraudulent ring, for it does not speak his covenant with God, but speaks only his own version of the story. (125)

¹³ Gilman finds reason to label Lapidoth a self-hating Jew” on the basis of Mirah’s extended account. (*Self* 19)

Reading Lapidoth in this manner allows Carpenter to complete her critical “cutting around” Eliot’s text as a proto-feminist paeon to mothers and daughters, recognizing and recapitulating the pre-Oedipal bond. Understanding why she dismisses Lapidoth as a delinquent parent, this final snipping by Carpenter is not necessary to her argument. However, fully endorsing her reading of the theft of the ring as a circumcision, the argument to be set down here contends that Daniel is the figure who undergoes circumcision.

3.5.Lapidoth as Mohel

During the rite of circumcision, the son receives a name linking him to the history of his people; by the proper name’s expropriating cut, circumcision removes the infant from the realm of nature and situates him in a network of social and linguistic relations.

Julia Reinhardt Lupton, “*Ethnos and Circumcision*” 197

In spite of having begun the reading of Daniel Deronda forearmed with respect to circumcision as a potential puzzle for the reader, and in spite of having dutifully assembled textual artifacts as symbols of the cut along the way, there was absolutely no preparation made for the wound inflicted by Lapidoth’s stealing of the ring. The man had little or nothing to recommend a reader’s faith in him, yet I felt compassion for his vanity and, having lost all critical distance, anticipated an embracing familial denouement.

If I entertained hopes for Lapidoth, it had come about from those moments in the text where Lapidoth seemed somewhat salvageable and more than a little human. From Mirah we learn that Lapidoth had been a teacher before becoming an itinerant actor, he spoke several languages, he had seen to it that Mirah was well-trained, and he had expressed affection for her. And, yes, he was ready to sell her at the time she ran away from him. Later, when he has located

Mirah in London, and she has brought him home to Mordecai, Daniel sees him for the first time.

In this small passage, there seemed the smallest glint of promise:

Deronda was cold and distant, the first sign of this man, who had blighted the lives of his wife and children, creating in him a repulsion that was even a physical discomfort. But Lapidoth did not let himself be discouraged, asked leave to stay and hear the reading of papers from the old chest, and actually made himself useful in helping to decipher some difficult German manuscript. This led him to suggest that it might be desirable to make a transcription of the manuscript, and he offered his services for this purpose, and also to make copies of any papers in Roman characters. (780)

In a romanticized reading, one appealing to a stereotyped image of Jews as scholars, the three men working together to read papers held the prospect of a reformed Lapidoth, a man for whom “a change of habits seem(ed) possible”(778). The image is dashed of course, when Lapidoth’s scorpion nature allows him to seek more immediate gratification in the theft of the ring.¹⁴ Fortunately, the stealing of the ring, the symbolic foreskin, refashions Lapidoth into the symbolic *mohel*.

This means of bringing Daniel into the fold has, of course, been set up from the moment when Daniel retrieves Mirah from the Thames. Although generally uncomfortable with this scene, a feminist reader disparaging suicide as solution, when read in context of the narrative journey, it is possible to see the retrieval of Mirah as a birth moment, the river and the drenched

¹⁴ Sander Gilman, in *The Jew’s Body*, reproduces a postcard from the end of the 19th century, depicting flooding in Berlin, with the caption, as translated “In the great flood, little Kohn died.” Kohn is drowned, flat on his back, with some parts of his body above water. Gilman writes: “Note the three qualities of the Jew’s body: the prominent nose, the large feet, and the ‘diamond’ ring. Here the physical and moral failings of the Jew are equated in the image of the dead Jew” (192).

clothing as fluid and caul of birth.¹⁵ And this works as a birthing moment for Daniel too, for it is the contact with Mirah which urges his investigation of the Jewish ghetto and provides the space for his subsequent schooling, initiating him into what it means to be a Jew, at least insofar as the Cohens and the friends of Mordecai present themselves within a community of Jews. The meeting with his mother would have been even less felicitous had he not been vetted in this particular fashion.

Although Daniel does not literally have a name assigned to him at the moment the symbolic foreskin is removed, the means through which he obtained his surname links him to the history of his people. His mother, having verified the ring, explains to him: “(T)here had been a branch of the family my father had lost sight of who called themselves Deronda, and when I wanted a name for you, and Sir Hugo said, ‘let it be a foreign name,’ ‘I thought of Deronda’” (637-8). The Latinate sounding name, if borne by a Jew, suggests Sephardic lineage, as we learn is the case with Daniel’s background: “...I come of a strain that has ardently maintained the fellowship of our race--a line of Spanish Jews that has borne many students and men of practical power” (748). When Mirah’s father changes his name from Cohen to Lapidoth, he retains an Ashkenazic name, a name he chose “because, he said, it was a name of his forefathers in Poland” (215). And, although “he had been a teacher and knew many languages” (212), we also know from Mirah’s story that he spoke German “better than he spoke English” (215).¹⁶

¹⁵ This passage is glossed by many critics as if Mirah has been “saved from drowning.” One of the basic Jewish tenets is to choose life: Deuteronomy 30:19--“I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before thee life and death, the blessing and the curse, therefore choose life, that thou mayest live, thou and thy seed.” The critical picture of Mirah as the perfect “little Jewess,” dumbs down what ought to be a more scrupulous reading.

¹⁶ Carpenter calls attention to Lapidoth’s name in her feminist critique, suggesting the father’s aim is to falsely align himself with the prophet Deborah: “The father’s very name is shown to be insignificant, deriving its importance only from a ‘borrowed’ association with a female prophetic lineage. The unorthodox narrative outcome deserves our notice in its insistence on the

This distinction between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews would have been one Eliot appreciated, though not necessarily the whole of her readership. As the stealing of the ring becomes the occasion for Daniel to claim the daughter as well as the father, so it becomes an occasion for weaving both strands of Jews together: ““Mirah, let me think that he is my father as well as yours--that we can have no sorrow, no disgrace, no joy apart”” (792). Additionally, there is the distinct biblical echo of the foreskin as bride price.¹⁷

In Lupton’s terms, by novel’s end Daniel has been situated within a network of social and linguistic relations. He has in a sense been separated from the realm of the natural, that is, from his mother and the emblematic ring requisite to his designation as a Jew, and he has been thrust, albeit somewhat narrowly, into the cultural realm of Jews. When Amanda Anderson writes of the tension present in Daniel Deronda with respect to the project of modernism, she posits the Jewish Question as one which “typically asks whether and how the particularity of the Jew might be assimilated to, or alternately accommodated by, a project conceived as modern in its pretension of universality”(39) . Clearly she is addressing the larger issue of Jews as participants in nation states, but her sense of the dialogue between the particular and the universal occurs on an intimate scale in Daniel Deronda. Daniel’s racial line provides the particular, his filiation if you will, yet his continuing cultural upbringing, as an Englishman and as a Jew, may prove

inconsequence of the father. The father, like the foreskin, can be dispensed with.” (2 Genders). And, had a Lapidoth made it into the BBC’s production, I feel certain that he would have spoken with the accented language Gilman refers to as “*Mauscheln*.” See also Felsenstein for a discussion of the Jew’s language (78-83).

¹⁷I Samuel 18:25: Then Saul said, “Thus shall you say to David, ‘The king desires no marriage present except a hundred foreskins of the Philistines, that he may be avenged of the king’s enemies.’” The note to verse 25 reads: The *marriage present* is regarded by some as a gift to the bride’s family, by others as a “price” paid for the bride. Probably the custom combined both elements.

particularly fertile, proffering an affiliation that includes the traversing of borders of class and of ethnicity.

By the end of Eliot's writing in *Daniel Deronda*--I think of this novel as ongoing still when the words run out--Daniel has, in effect, gained a voice. To be sure, throughout the narrative, he has proven to be a most interested and understanding listener. Particularly receptive to the language of women, his ability to listen, in particular his receptivity to narratives set loose by wounds, positions him near the semiotic *chora*. His journey during the course of the novel has moved him gradually towards performances of language and action that more decidedly characterize the Symbolic. Daniel has progressed from an undifferentiated position with respect to the maternal--in part undifferentiated because Leonora only materializes as an object late in the story--through thethetic process as he comes to formulate "Daniel is Jew." We see the promise of the circumcision ritual too, though symbolically late for Daniel, being met through the line of his birth story, his study with Mordecai and his marriage to Mirah, echoing the blessing: "As he enters the bris, so may he enter the world of Torah, the wedding canopy and a life of good deeds" (J. Silverman, no pag.)

3.6.Coda: Eliot and Cross

George Eliot and Amanda Cross, as pseudonyms for two women writers, represent the passing off of oneself as somewhat other than one actually is.¹⁸ Carolyn Heilbrun did not have to

¹⁸ Frederick Karl, in writing about Marian Evans' assumption first of "Mrs. Lewes" and then of George Eliot notes: "The name changes, in a respect not to be neglected, also gave her the ability to effect a gender alteration and to take on the masculine power she had always coveted-- . . . The masculine power meant freedom of maneuverability, a matter, really of free expression and liberation. It did not mean she forsook her femininity--on this she was quite clear--but it suggested that she could add another, the masculine side." (211)

attempt a gender cross, as perhaps Eliot felt she needed to do, but she did desire some distance from the Heilbrun who performed as professor and critic. Heilbrun died in the fall of 2003. Her obituary in the New York Times reported: "Fearing that her mystery writing might be seen by colleagues as frivolous and might even jeopardize her chances for tenure, Ms. Heilbrun concealed the identity of Amanda Cross for six years" (McFadden). This comment resonates tellingly with the explanation given by Kathryn Hughes when discussing the reasons for Marian Evans' name change:

Although her journalism appeared anonymously, everyone who mattered--editors, publishers, friends--knew who had written it. If Marian were to produce novels under her own name which went on to fail, there was a danger that she might damage her reputation as a writer of serious non-fiction" (Hughes, 186).

With respect to Heilbrun, one senses that by 1986 the separation of identities was not such a great concern, for she gives nod to her own academic identity by mentioning her institutional colleague. This is how her character Kate Fansler responds to the question about Daniel's ignorance with respect to his Jewishness:

. . . As to why Daniel never looked down to discover he was circumcised, I don't suppose anyone has answered that. But Steven Marcus has tried, among others. Will that do? I thought you were in comparative Renaissance, by the way.

'My husband started in Victorian, and moved up into modern, I guess you're who you say you are. Have you read *Shirley*?'

'Do you like it?'

'Very much, One of the professors here who used to be a dean wrote a good chapter on it in her book.'

'Okay,' Bidy said, 'You pass. Tell me the story.' (178-179)

Kate, trying to gain access to an academic whose specialty is Renaissance literature, feigns that period as her specialty when in fact she is a “modernist.” Suspicious when asked by Kate about the eponymous Winifred, Bidy grills Kate about literature, an academic version of the *Shibboleth* test. In this way, the passage also serves as commentary on an academic world in which one’s territory is bounded, in this instance, by a period. Boundary crossings can be dangerous, lest one reveal oneself to be uninitiated, uncircumcised of lips as it were, in the special language of the discipline. Even in this modest mystery, circumcision is made to resonate as a diacritical mark. In the last chapter, the performance of academics also will be measured, not only through the metaphor of circumcised lips, but through the metaphor of circumcised ears.

Chapter 4. The Passing Cut:
Crossing Delancey; Europa, Europa; Drowning By Numbers

It is possible to argue on behalf of circumcision as an organizing trope in texts where it is not even mentioned, as was the case with George Eliot and *Daniel Deronda*. And it is possible to elicit circumcision as a metaphor when articulating a form of literary election such as the elevation of a writer to canonical status, as will be the case with Erich Auerbach and *Mimesis*. However, the trio of films to be examined here were chosen precisely because each contains a representation of what I consider to be a circumcision of consequence; in other words, I submit that each filmic representation constitutes a significant rather than gratuitous gesture on the part of the filmmaker, and may, therefore, serve as a critical anchor for reading the work. The films invite readings ordered around or derived from theoretical conversations concerning acts and tropes of circumcision as discussed, for example, by Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, Jacques Derrida, Mieke Bal and others. Discussions variously focused on assimilation, identity and gender will be entertained, with the understanding that all of the films may be said to deal in one way or another with the idea of passing.¹

Two disparate enactments of what it means to be Jewish within the framework of a larger culture are addressed in the works by Joan Micklin Silver and by Agnieszka Holland. Silver's *Crossing Delancey* (1988), classified as a romantic comedy, weaves its girl meets boy narrative against the backdrop of familial and generational assimilation. As a young Jewish New Yorker learns to read (un)circumcised men in late 20th century metropolitan America, the attendant

¹ Daniel Boyarin notes the problems adhering to the word assimilation, for it operates as if there were a previous point of unassimilation. As he points out, cultures are rarely pure or unchanging, and are more usually involved in an ongoing process of multiple assmiliations. (*Queer Theory*, 191, nt. 27)

entanglements of identity and gender call for a nuanced reading that places elements of Jewish culture in dialogue with, as opposed to being fully subsumed by, the dominant culture.² In contrast, Agnieszka Holland's *Europa, Europa* (1990), presents an ironic portrait of what amounts to state sponsored readings of (un)circumcised men as an adolescent Jew tries to survive in Poland and Russia during World War II. The film is based on Solomon Perel's 1990 survivor memoir, published as *Europa, Europa* in French and English, and as *Ich war Hitlerjunge Salomon* in German. In this film, the identity betrayed by the ritual cut of circumcision is subject to and threatened by potentially lethal hegemonic reading practices. The narrative itself is driven by the performative angst accompanying Perel's multiple acts of passing.

Placed alongside the specific New York City of *Crossing Delancey*'s era and the recognizable movie aura of war torn lands in *Europa, Europa*, Peter Greenaway's *Drowning By Numbers* (1988) consciously resists such exact temporal and geographical emplacement. Combining frequent and telling references to seventeenth century European art within its moist, illustrative dreamworld, the film narratively couples a series of Symbolic counting games with semiotic watery deaths. The literal stain of a self-wrought circumcision in concert with the film's rhythmic and recurring interrogation of *vanitas* calls to mind Lacan's explication of the anamorphic skull in Holbein's painting of *The Ambassadors*. Here passing means passing on.

² Peeking out from behind the term "Jewish New Yorker" one might hear the echo of Lenny Bruce: "To me if you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish. It doesn't matter even if you're Catholic; if you live in New York you're Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you're going to be goyish even if you're Jewish." (Biale, 216.)

4.1. *Crossing Delancey*: Limning New York

It is hard for a woman, with whom an uncircumcised had sexual intercourse, to separate from him.

Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, 378

Adapted from Susan Sandler's off Broadway play, the film version of *Crossing Delancey* elaborates some aspects of American Jewishness that inform the smaller five character play. The expansion of the play into film allows the characters to move through Manhattan and to occupy a series of spaces, and, in doing so, considerably enhances the possibilities for redefining the assimilation entertained by Isabelle Grossman, the young woman who routinely crosses Delancey. Where the play was necessarily constricted and emphasized what I would identify as the dynastic-filiative axis of the covenantal grid, the movie version elaborates more fully its social-affiliative axis.

Contemporary reviews of *Crossing Delancey* not infrequently referred to the film as "a Jewish Moonstruck," the previous year's popular romantic comedy about an Italian-American family.³ Yet, characterizing the work in this way implies that the ethnic features of the films are irrelevantly interchangeable, that generic story lines can be repackaged successfully merely by substituting ethnically seasoned backdrops. While it is true that pairing with the right man motors both of these romantic comedies, the worlds above and below Delancey through which Izzy passes richly inform this "small film about the Jewish mating ritual in New York."

³For example: "Some people have called 'Crossing Delancey' a Jewish version of 'Moonstruck'"--David Sterritt. "*Crossing Delancey* is an ethnic comedy akin to last year's *Moonstruck*"--C.M Fiorillo. "'Crossing Delancey' brims with the same warm vision of family and community that made 'Moonstruck' such a joy."--Sheila Benson. "Dubbed the 'Jewish *Moonstruck*,' *Crossing Delancey* is more of a workout . . ."--David Edelstein.

Sander's original five character play included Izzy, the thirty-something New Yorker who works sales in a small bookstore; Bubbie, her grandmother; Hannah, a matchmaker; a writer (Izzy's fantasy partner); and Sam, a pickle maker interested in Izzy. In the film version a much enlarged supporting cast includes several of Izzy's women friends as well as the owner, fellow workers, and patrons of the bookstore. Izzy's job has also been upgraded from sales clerk, for, as she reminds Bubbie, she "organizes one of the most prestigious reading series in the city."⁴ The novelist, now Dutch and named Anton Maes, proves to be a considerably more flamboyant foil than the writer in the play. The detailed plot summary that follows is intended to provide a sense of the quotidian richness that Silver uses to highlight the world Izzy inhabits, as well as to mark the variety of boundaries she traverses.

The film opens at a Saturday evening celebration at the up-scale independent bookstore where Izzy (Amy Irving) works, and where Izzy's attraction to Dutch writer Anton Maes (Jeroen Krabbe) is further fueled when he inscribes one of his books for her: "Izzy dear--it's women like you who make the world liquid and even, still, and beauty born." Arriving at her apartment later that evening, Izzy finds a married friend, Nick, awaiting her. Nick's wife is out of town and he wants to unwind, maybe spend the night. Izzy agrees. We next see Izzy in her grandmother's apartment, patiently tweezing her Bubbie's chin. Bubbie (Reizl Bozyk) has arranged for Hannah the matchmaker (Sylvia Miles) to meet Izzy, but Izzy resists her grandmother's attempts at an arranged marriage. At thirty-three, Izzy views herself as successfully self-sufficient: she reiterates for her grandmother the virtues of having a great job, a rent controlled apartment, and good friends.

⁴ All dialogue citations have been transcribed from the film.

Nevertheless, and against Izzy's wishes, a meeting with Sam the pickle man (Peter Riegert) takes place under the aegis of Bubbie and matchmaker Hannah.⁵ Izzy declines Sam's invitation for a future date, explaining that the arranged meeting is not her style, that she lives uptown, "a million miles from here." Sam responds by suggesting, "Sometimes you can change your style." Then he tells the story of his friend Harry Shipman, who used to wear a little brown cap: "One day he's crossing Delancey, this big wind comes--poof--it's gone. He runs after it, but a truck gets there before he does." When Harry tells Sam what happened, Sam gives him five dollars to get a new hat, but asks him to forget the old cap, to buy something new and special: ". . . he comes back an hour later. He's a new man, A gray felt Stetson! A beauty! The next day he makes an engagement." Because the hat obviously cost more than five dollars, Sam figures that Harry added some Nova on the side. Izzy comments: "A man trades some lox for a Stetson and gets a bride in the bargain. Very romantic." Sam explains: "Oh, he had his eye on her for a long time. But she couldn't see him. That little brown cap. She couldn't see his eyes." This scene, notably the scene from which the title of the play has been taken, importantly prepares the way for reading a hat or head covering in conjunction with what crossing Delancey entails and promises for Izzy as she slowly and hesitantly begins to reflect on her own "style."

Izzy's uptown life continues: she and a friend run the track at the gym and take a sauna; she lunches with and hosts a bookstore reading for Anton; she attends the ritual circumcision of a single friend's son; she unceremoniously celebrates her birthday at a hot dog stand. When Izzy next visits Bubbie, a package arrives, no card enclosed, containing a cake for Bubbie and a

⁵ The play is based on Sandler's own experience crossing Delancey to visit her grandmother: "Sandler began to focus on her relationship with her grandmother, on the matchmaker who tried to interest her in a young kosher butcher (he later became the play's Pickle Man) and the values that her Bubbie tried to pass on to a younger generation." (T.H. McCulloh, *L. A. Times*, 8 May 1992, Valley Edition, 25B)

Stetson hat for Izzy. Izzy explains to Bubbie that she is being wooed. Feeling she ought to thank Sam, Izzy wears the hat to his pickle stand. As she watches him at work, his hands in the pickle barrels and filling jars, her face clearly registers disdain. Politely telling Sam she appreciated the gesture, she awkwardly suggests that his efforts might be better spent on someone else.

Nevertheless, heading out one morning, Izzy removes the Stetson from its box and wears it to work. When a fellow employee sees Izzy coming, in an aside to another employee she whispers: "Oh my God. It's the return of Annie Hall." During a staff meeting the bookstore's owner, the patrician looking Lionel, asks incredulously "What *is* that on your head?" In these instances, the hat, now north of Delancey, is perceived as being either belatedly out of place or as indecipherable. Izzy is no Waspy Annie Hall, nor is she yet able to give voice to how the hat might be understood, or why, in fact, she feels compelled to wear it. At home that evening, Izzy decides to call her girlfriend Marilyn and set her up with Sam, an offer Marilyn happily accepts. Izzy invites Sam out to dinner, but without notifying him of her plan to introduce Marilyn. The prearranged encounter at the restaurant goes clumsily, but Marilyn gamely gives her card to Sam, should he care to call. Later, when Izzy learns from a mutual friend that Marilyn has indeed gone out with Sam, she appears wistful.

Acting independently, Bubbie arranges a window washing requiring Sam's assistance to coincide with an expected visit from Izzy. This proves to be another botched meeting, with Sam accusing Izzy of having "again" set it up. In an attempt to smooth things over, Izzy invites Sam to bring Marilyn to an evening reception at the bookstore. When Sam attends the reception alone, Izzy invites him back to her apartment for a drink. Nick, the sometime overnighter, again reappears demanding shelter, and Sam, protectively intervening, offers Nick a bed at his place. Sam and Izzy agree to see each other again, this time for an official date to begin at Bubbie's.

Dressed for her evening out with Sam, Izzy is waylaid at the close of business by Anton Maes. Flattered by his wish to have her to read a few pages of a work in progress, Izzy calls Bubbie from Anton's apartment to say she has been held up. In the midst of making out, Anton mumbles that when Izzy comes to work for him she can furnish his empty apartment as she sees fit. Realizing she has been "stupid," Izzy races to Bubbie's, hoping Sam will still be there. He is.

Simply viewed this film may be understood as one wherein a nice Jewish woman finds happiness with a nice Jewish man. But this a reductive gloss which encourages the kind of negative criticism Jerry Tallmer includes in his otherwise favorable review of the film:

The movie itself has to get a certain amount of cuteness out of its system: all that easy mockery of the high-falutin' high-browism at New Day Books; a small overdose of the Bubbie-Izzy syndrome ("Bubbie, you ever see Sam around, tell him I said hello"--"What am I, a messenger? Western Union?"); a totally irrelevant steambath scene, and a supererogatory circumcision scene" (377).

Granted, some scenes in the bookstore were precious and many critics found Bozyk's Bubbie overdrawn, though, to be fair, others found her performance dead on.⁶ However, Tallmer's suggested cutting of two scenes--absent from the play, added to the screenplay--as "irrelevant" and "supererogatory" strikes me as a particularly poor exercise in critical editing. Although the stage play includes scenes which might point toward a framework for viewing circumcision as an organizing trope in *Crossing Delancey*, the additional features Sandler incorporated into the film adaptation of her play make that thematic much more evident. In fact, the addition of the

⁶ According to Sterritt, "Unfortunately, the movie does have one big problem--the performance of Yiddish actress Reizl Bozyk as Bubbie. The part is overwritten to begin with, and Miss Bozyk overplays it badly." Presenting a quite different take, Benson observes: "This singular grandmother is played by Yiddish theater stalwart Reizl Bozyk in her first English-language role, and if Olympia Dukakis magic should strike again here, it would be entirely justified."

“irrelevant” steambath and “supererogatory” circumcision help delineate precisely the social negotiations Izzy faces when she journeys across Delancey.

In contrast to Tallmer’s flip critical dismissal, Tania Modleski offers a reading of the steambath scene that retrieves its relevance. The scene, decidedly problematic--as another critic bluntly observes, “it comes off racist” (Edelstein 30)--depends in Tania Modleski’s reading upon the presence of two black women who are used to characterize

sexuality and ‘embodiment’ in a film that never mentions sex at any other time (to be sure, the fact of sex is hinted at when Izzy spends an occasional night with a married male friend, but it is never shown or discussed (221).

In the sauna, Izzy and her friend overhear the conversation of two black women seated on benches below them, one of whom describes the discovery of a long blonde hair in the midst of performing fellatio on her lover.

Modleski rightly remarks that the scene “hints” at miscegenation—“for, just as this woman’s lover has strayed, so too is Izzy straying from her roots” (221). Moreover, Modleski reads the black women as representing directly all those desires she sees this postfeminist film disavowing

both a voracious sexuality and a voracious hunger in general, resulting from the deprivation suffered by single middle class white women in the modern world. Thus the fact that the one sexual act mentioned in the film (which is about a woman’s love for a pickle salesman, no less) is the act of fellatio is not surprising given the ubiquitous presence of food in the film . . .(222)

Modleski builds a valuable argument for the use of black women as evidence of much that white American culture disavows, yet she also rather oddly assumes Izzy’s full assimilation into that world. Countering this collapsed position, Laura Levitt remarks of Izzy: “She clearly is ‘not white’ and like the black man she is also desiring. But as Modleski’s text continues she becomes

‘almost the same,’ like one of the ‘single middle-class white’ women whose desires are repressed” (7). Given her own insistent focus on the “complex articulations of race and gender,” Modleski’s theoretical amnesia with respect to Jewishness (to wit, she opens the essay with discussion of *The Jazz Singer*) sounds a curiously discordant note.⁷

Acknowledging the decidedly Jewish frame for Silver’s film impels a reading which does not instantly retreat into one delineating dueling victimizations. If *Crossing Delancey* is to be read as a story about a particular version of assimilation, the complexities of race and gender extend beyond what Modleski keenly identifies as the abusive use of black women. I would submit, for example, that the question of miscegenation does in fact provide a subtext for the film by pinpointing one of the historical pressures attending variant Jewish assimilations in America. And, were I to guess at Sandler’s and/or Silver’s rationale behind the sauna scene, I would say that miscegenation as a concern is succinctly transmitted through the image of a long blonde hair contrasted against a black body.

Quickly, Modleski moves from the signifying blond hair towards the more compelling issue for her of the signifying black body. However, I prefer to tarry a bit by taking a brief look at hair as an ethnic issue. Although a blond hair functions as a racial signpost in Modleski’s analysis, its cultural relevance as a marked characteristic does not belong solely to black men and women. Much has been now been written by blacks about their hair experiences in America, yet hair has been an assimilationist issue for Jewish men and women as well. In a detail from a 1995 artwork entitled “What Kinda Name Is That?,” Beverly Naidus raises disquieting questions about

⁷Noting this elision among feminist scholars, Sara R. Horowitz observes that “while contemporary feminist thinking acknowledges the special oppression and exclusion experienced by women of color in a way that distinguishes them from ‘white women,’ the special oppressions and exclusion of Jewish women are not validated.” “Paradox of Jewish Studies in the New Academy.” (121-2).

the pressures of conforming to the dominant order's coiffure dictates. The work was included in the 1996 exhibition *Too Jewish?: Challenging Traditional Identities*. The text cited below has been superimposed by Naidus on the bottom third of a xeroxed magazine advertisement. In the advertisement's photograph, four young white women, affecting a slumber party, sport softly curled pony tails. In keeping with the text's reference to Joan Baez, the ad appears to be taken from the early sixties. The added text is as follows:

She comes home from summer camp, ashamed of her curly hair.

All the hip campers had long, straight hair á la Joan Baez.

She buys a hair straightening product and suffers through the stench and sting of it.

It only works for a while.

Her next effort is wrapping her hair in curlers the size of orange juice cans.

Bobbie pins become embedded in her scalp as she struggles to sleep.

Finally her cousin teaches her how to iron her hair.

The smell of it burning reminds her of something so horrible, it is unspeakable.(143)

Unspeakable here are the ovens of genocide, the final solution to an abhorred miscegenation. It should come as no surprise that the emulation of straight hair marked an era of Jewish women coming of age after World War II.⁸ As an assimilationist move, however, the changing of hair styles also marked a much earlier generation of Jewish women.

At the time *Crossing Delancey* was made, the American obsession with the reclamation of roots had been going on for more than a decade, and the modeling of hair clearly reflected that process. Even so, I do not think it completely coincidental that Amy Irving, who possesses one

⁸ In the same vein, Susan Bordo comments: "I ironed my hair in the sixties, have dieted all my life, continue to be deeply ashamed of those parts of my body--like my peasant legs and zaftig behind--that our culture has coded as ethnic excess." (*The Male Body*, 217)

of the more glorious and abundant heads of hair in the history of filmdom, was cast as Izzy. Izzy's bountiful tresses clearly serve to separate her from the practice of orthodox women who routinely wear wigs or head covering, a separation that Silver herself began to chart in *Hester Street*, her 1975 film about Jewish immigrant assimilation in New York around the turn of the (19th-20th) century. One step in the process of Americanization in *Hester Street* concerns the young mother Gitl's hesitant forfeiture of her wig or *sheitl*. Reading Silver's films dynastically, Edelstein declares that "Izzy could be Gitl's great-granddaughter." If so, Izzy may represent a century's worth not only of Jewish assimilation, but of women's liberation as well.

In her book *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation*, Riv-Ellen Prell comments:

The literal marriage of different cultures served as the ideal trope for the New World, built as it was on relations of consenting individuals who created a new society alienated from the bonds of tradition and kinship that they had left behind." (69)

Moreover, for Jewish women, the site of exogamous sexuality was not relegated to the bodies of black women specifically. One stereotype affixed to the Jewish male who marries out may be thought to reflect negatively on Jewish women, because the non-Jewish wife is said to be willing to perform in a manner that Jewish women do not:

Non-Jewish women who married Jewish men struck terror in the hearts of Jewish women, similar to that felt by black women over white females who marry men from their group. To Jewish women they were like the scabs brought in by capitalists to force union workers to back down on their demands for fear of losing their jobs. Jewish men let Jewish women know that vast numbers of non-Jewish females were available and willing to make fewer demands, to be less pushy, more appreciative of the "job," and to function as Shabbos goys (Yiddish for non-Jews who performed for Jews certain actions forbidden on the Shabbat, such as fire lighting) by engaging in sexual practices Jewish women purportedly disliked. (Cantor, 175)

It is reasonable to assume that one of the sexual practices “purportedly disliked” is fellatio. Thus, when Izzy decides to call Anton after listening to the conversation of the black women, she may be claiming a sexual performance for herself that has previously been relegated to white, non-Jewish women, Modleski’s eloquent racial critique on behalf of black women notwithstanding.⁹

By assuming for Izzy a Jewishness that has been fully naturalized, that passes for white, Modleski’s condemnation of *Crossing Delancey* enacts the disavowal against which she cautions white feminist readers:

It is urgent that white women come to understand the ways in which they themselves participate in racist structures not only of patriarchal cinema--such as in *Crossing Delancey*--but also of contemporary criticism and theory.(225)

As a reader, I am uncertain as to exactly what it is that Modleski demands. What she misses, I believe, is the opportunity to read a less polarizing but more richly textured presentation of race as a sexual construct than her polemic admits.

One of *Crossing Delancey*’s attributes, it seems to me, is its willingness to present a feminizing and racial stereotype of a Jewish man, a stereotype with which Izzy herself must come to terms.¹⁰ Because she is dismissive of bodies not culturally encoded as overtly sexual, and because she ignores historical markers linking Jews and blacks, Modleski effectively sidesteps the ways in which the film’s central characters do in fact address issues of race and

⁹ There is a further knot here, if one recalls the third portion of older ritual circumcisions called *metsitsah* wherein the *mohel* cleansed the fresh wound by mouth. (For one discussion concerning *metsitsah*, see Gilman, *Freud*, 66-69). Fellation by Jewish women may have been understood as transgressive insofar as it functions as an onanistic act, but also because the image incurs the long history of ritual misreadings compelling the blood libel.

¹⁰ However, it is “with a cautionary note” that Harry Brod views similar representations of Jewish men: “Since Jewish men are already seen as feminized by the culture, using them to embody the more sensitive traits stereotypically associated with women is therefore both less threatening and more plausible to the audience than if these characters were blond, blue-eyed WASPS”(290-1).

gender. Thus, Modleski's assessment of the role the black women play in *Crossing Delancey* is that they:

. . . enable the white Jewish subculture, through its heterosexual love story, to represent itself in a highly sentimentalized, romanticized, and sublimated light, while disavowing the desire and discontents underlying the civilization it is promoting. (222)

A gentler touch here might call forth a reading in which one, in this instance a Jewish woman, entertains an identity which repudiates an all too easy, automatic assignment into one or the other lot within a color binary. The nexus for a more generous reading of the film is to be found in the story Sam tells about his friend Harry, and in Sam's subsequent gift of a hat to Izzy. A perusal of the opening passage of an essay by Freud which contains an excerpt from a poem by Heinrich Heine will help to establish the motif of the hat as a Jewish emblem closely associated with circumcision, while the contemporary relevance of this pairing of hat and cut will be evaluated in an essay by the brothers Boyarin.

When Freud quotes but part of a stanza of Heine's "Nordsee" in the introduction to his essay on "Femininity," the stanzaic lines he omits prove to be of added critical interest. Freud first observes: "Through history people have knocked their heads against the riddle of the nature of femininity," and he follows this comment with a four line passage from Heine:

Heads in Hieroglyphic bonnets,
Heads in turbans and black birettas,
Heads in wigs and thousand other
Wretched, sweating heads of humans (Freud 1933, 140)

Film critic Mary Ann Doane designates Freud's use of this quotation "a rather strange prop" in her essay on "Film and Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator." She points out: "Freud practices a slight deception here, concealing what is elided by removing the lines from their

context, castrating, as it were, the stanza.” Indeed, the query in Heine’s poem asks not about the nature of women, as Freud would have it, but rather, “What signifies man?” (17). Doane provides readers with the omitted lines bracketing Freud’s selection:

O solve me the riddle of life,
The teasingly, time-old riddle,
Over which many heads have brooded,
. . . (the text as Freud quotes it)
Tell me, what signifies man?
Whence does he come? Whither does he go? Who lives up there
upon golden stars? (Doane 18)

As Doane further notes, “the question in Freud’s text is thus a disguise and a displacement of the other question, which in the pre-text is both humanistic and theological” (18). Although Doane focuses primarily on issues of spectatorship and masquerade in film, her reading is one which also points the way to a consideration of religion/race, and gender.

In Sander Gilman’s reading of Freud’s use of the Heine citation, the question masquerading as one about gender also becomes one about race. Gilman contends that racial as well as sexual differences would be remarked by some in their readings of the poem:

For the anti-Semitic “Aryan” reader Heine’s references would evoke quite a different set of associations than they had in the original text. . . . Readers attuned to Heine’s Jewishness would have associated the oriental turbans, the Egyptian hieroglyphs, the sweat of ghetto poverty, the wigs of the shaved heads of Orthodox Jewish brides as hidden signs of racial, not merely sexual, difference. (*Freud*, 45)

For Freud, the perception of the Jewish male was rarely *merely* one of racial difference, but nearly always one which also indicated a sexual difference, particularly as inferred from the mark of circumcision by a non-Jewish reader.

The essay by the brothers Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, entitled “Self-Exposure as Theory: The Double Mark of the Male Jew,” examines the usually hidden sign of circumcision in conjunction with the more public sign of wearing a yarmulke, and highlights the importance of

the “double sign” of Jewish male ethnic identity: one inscribed on our genitals before we were ever able to exercise will, the other placed upon our heads in a free-willed if ambivalent act of self-identification . . .
(J. Boyarin, *Thinking*,35)

Attuned to feminist concerns, the Boyarins observe that “the marks we ground our selfhood in are only imposed on and available to male Jews--and hence inescapably inscriptions of heirarchizing and reifying difference”(36). I would like to suggest that Sam’s gift of the hat is an attempt to address, and perhaps redress, such inscriptions.

By providing for Izzy a head covering that may function as a “free-willed” even if “ambivalent act of self-identification,” Sam materially reiterates the suggestion he made early in the film during the arranged introduction: “You should try a new hat sometime, Isabelle. It might look good on you.” The only hat worn by a principal character is the Stetson Sam has given to Izzy, and while it is impossible to claim for this hat an absolute equivalency to the skullcap worn by a male Jew (in fact, the Stetson may be read as iconically assimilationist), it surely relates to Sam’s story.

If the circumcisions in the film (whether performed diegetically--the baby’s--or assumed prediegetically--Sam’s) can be said to call forth, as the Boyarins phrase it, the “anamnestic generational tradition” that both Sam and Izzy are heir to, the hat may be said to appeal to a self-revisioning of that tradition (35). In her mind, as a less traditional, more uptown Jew, Izzy has in many ways moved beyond the life her grandmother represents, yet the hat symbolically affords her the possibility, as Sam suggested, to change her style.

Because *Crossing Delancey* deals to some degree with versions of assimilation, it also points toward problematic stereotypes for Jews. Stereotypes often function as a way to delimit the Other or to define the self or group as distanced from the Other, and they can painfully muddle the process of assimilation. Various expressions of culturally induced self-hatreds have marked successive generations of American immigrants. This form of self-loathing emerges when children refuse to speak the language of their parents, or when they shy away from participation in practices common to other, once native countries. What this means with respect to someone like Izzy is not that she actively shuns contact with an earlier generation, but that she has incorporated values the dominant culture endorses. At times her performance will reflect behaviors that have been modified or dropped in response to stereotypes.

Early in the film (the opening scene in the play), after barbering Bubbie's beard, Izzy relates a dream:

I'm in the ocean and the water has a funny color...maybe pink or something. Maybe like something's bled there recently--and I'm standing. I'm not floating, not swimming--I'm standing and the water level's up to here on me (hand at her mouth)--and then the next thing I know it drops----way down to here.

Bubbie assures her that water and red are lucky images. Apart from the birthing imagery associated with blood and water, the upright, possibly phallic, position of Izzy's body in the blooded ocean suggests circumcision, even if indirectly.

One link to be made here is by way of Leviticus 12:1-5:

The Lord said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, If a woman conceives, and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Then she shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying; she shall not touch any hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary until the days of her purifying are completed. But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in

her menstruation; and she shall continue in the blood of her purifying for sixty-six days.

The commentary accompanying the Soncino edition of the Torah and Haftorahs remarks: “There is no satisfactory explanation why the period is doubled when a female child is born. It cannot be because a female was regarded as more defiling than a male, since the mother’s purification was the same for either sex” (460). In his study of gender in rabbinic Judaism, Lawrence Hoffman suggests that:

because rabbinic Judaism was a religion of the body, men’s and women’s bodies became signifiers of what the Rabbis accepted as gender essence, especially with regard to the binary opposition of men’s blood drawn during circumcision and women’s blood that flows during menstruation. (23)

That the blood of circumcision is the more privileged fluid, Hoffman further attests to by citing from a ninth century prayer book:

Tzadok Gaon said the following. They bring water containing myrtle and various very sweet-smelling spices, and they circumcise the child so that the blood of the circumcision falls into the water. Then all the designated people ... wash their hands in it, as if to say “This is the blood of circumcision that mediates between God and Abraham our father. (Hoffman 104)

If Izzy’s dream evokes associations with postpartum or postmenstrual *mikveh* or ritual bath, the linkage may be read as representative of the position of women within traditional, more orthodox practices, practices that are antithetical to Izzy’s life style. One gathers from Sam’s references to his attendance at shul that he partakes in more traditional religious observances than does Izzy. What Izzy at first dismisses may include the gendered restrictions she imagines requisite to a relationship with someone like Sam.

The fact that Sam does not wear a head covering within the film lends added weight to the meaning of the Stetson given to Izzy. Circumcision connotes those incorporating practices demanded by community tradition; it is the mark made upon the body prior to the development of any sense of self-making. Complementarily, wearing a yarmulke connotes an act of self-will. The option to change style, the option to read differently, is the option Sam provides for Izzy by way of the hat. Although, as Bordo suggests, a reading like this may only be possible because “Contemporary theorists like Daniel Boyarin have admirably tried to construct positive, countercultural images of Jewish masculinity out of strains of Jewish tradition that have shown resistance to aggressive phallic manliness” (329).¹¹ In which case, revisioning proves helpful.

The issue befuddling Izzy throughout the film has been an inability to read dicks--men and/or their equipment--correctly; she says to Sam at one point, “I want to get it right.” What I think Izzy finally gets right, she grasps through language, a point which brings me to a particularly Kristevan moment. When the foreign born and likely foreskin bearing Anton speaks or writes it, is from the far regions of the Symbolic, the place of book store groupies and literary pretensions. True, he inscribes a book and recites Confucian poems about plums for Izzy, but in the end his performance is nothing more than a semantically vapid feint. In contrast, Sam asks himself questions in the little notebook he carries, where invitingly he leaves himself room for the answers: “How do I talk to Isabelle?”

The question about Isabelle occurs twice within the closing scene, highlighting for me the perception that Sam works somewhat nearer the *chora*. On occasion he may be able to access the

¹¹ Lawrence Hoffman takes Daniel Boyarin to task for his assertively feminist readings of rabbinic texts: “But official rabbinic culture is indeed as male-dominated as feminist critics say it is. My claim here is in direct opposition not only to traditionally minded apologists . . . but to sophisticated treatments of the rabbinic textual tradition, the most recent being Daniel Boyarin’s description of ‘Carnal Israel’”(23).

thetic and hear the pulsions, the source of the *is*, the copula. And, after much hedging on her part, Izzy's ears have been sufficiently circumcised for her to be able to hear the difference between Sam's and Anton's speech. Between the first and second utterance--"How should I talk to Isabelle?" Sam tells Izzy how excited he was anticipating the evening, adding: "I said a special *broche* for the occasion, a prayer for the planting of new trees. Don't ask me why." Of course, this means that one should ask: "Why?" Eilberg-Schwartz gives us an answer:

. . . the priestly writings suggest an analogy between an uncircumcised male organ and an immature fruit tree. They thus associate the circumcision of the male with pruning juvenile fruit trees; like the latter, circumcision symbolically readies the stem for producing fruit. ("Problem" 152).

Sam is, we assume, most hopeful that this relationship will be successful.

In a discussion generated by the television series *Northern Exposure* and its portrayal of the Alaskan assimilation of a New York Jewish physician, David Porush lumps *Crossing Delancey* into a category with other films like *Annie Hall*, *The Jazz Singer*, and *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, films he sees as "showing the Jew in the last stages of divesting himself of his Jewish religion"(117). While I do not see *Crossing Delancey* as inaugurating a mourning period for a lost culture, there is another sense of nostalgia woven into the structure of the film. Praising the pairing of two Jews against the usual Hollywood stereotype pairing Jew and non-Jew, David Biale observes that

... the pickle vendor is out of another era, the period of the immigrant, caught in a time warp in the late twentieth century. Thus for the American Jew to find sexual salvation, she must not only cross religious, class, and geographic boundaries, but she must take a leap backward in time to a vanished age. (*Eros*, 222)

The film may come to earmark a time when the crossing of Delancey is invested with a meaning no longer quite so resonant. But, perhaps it will continue to signify, for I read in the New York Times of a young man and his girlfriend who have purchased an apartment

in one of the complexes that makes up the Cooperative Village, the former socialist and union enclave built between the late 1930's and the 1960's on Grand Street on the Lower East Side (and featured famously in the Movie '*Crossing Delancey*', as the home of Amy Irving's impish bubbe.)¹²

Where male Jews in Sam and Izzy's Lower East Side may feel comfortable enough to wear a yarmulke as an outer sign of the hidden mark of circumcision, no such luxury exists for the adolescent in *Europa, Europa*. The indelible mark of the Jew must be put under some version of erasure. If he is to survive, passing is imperative.

¹² Green, Penelope. "Habitats/Grand Street, Lower East Side: Rock Musician's City Paradise." *New York Times* 17 Aug. 2003 <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html>>

4.2. *Europa, Europa: Beschneidung, Obrzezanie*

And the Gileadites took the fords of the Jordan against the Ephramites. And when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, "Let me go over," the men of Gilead said to him, "Are you an Ephramite?" When he said, "No," they said to him, "Then say Shibboleth," and he said "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it right; then they seized him and slew him at the fords of the Jordan. And there fell at that time forty-two thousand of the Ephramites.

Judges 12: 5-6

Every generation frames the Holocaust, represents the Holocaust, in ways that suit its mood.

Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Culture*, 120

Were the circumcision scenes in *Crossing Delancey* and *Europa, Europa* to be to set side by side, each would provide a recognizable glimpse of the traditional rite. More closely read, each presents traces of its general diasporic home, and each resonates within the larger scheme of the film. Both scenes are relatively short, and are set within the parents' dwellings. In *Crossing Delancey* the gathering includes men and women, the mother is single, and it is her aunt who attends and takes part in the ceremony.

The rabbi chats amiably with the assembled group, and attempts to put everyone at ease by remarking that it is not unusual for the men at a circumcision to bring their hands together over their genital area as the ceremony progresses. The naked infant is placed on a long table, his still attached umbilical cord and penis identical in size and shape, though different in color, almost as if intended to illustrate Kristeva's coupling of the natural scar and the Symbolic cut. And the baby urinates, calling attention to the double function and vulnerability of the penis. The exposure here--the focus on the unclothed baby as well as the open space between the table and

the onlookers--imparts both the fragility of the child and the ambivalence of those witnessing the procedure.

On the other hand, *Europa, Europa's* circumcision, set to predate the New York circumcision by some sixty years, reveals a more tightly knit familial Jewish unit in its version of the traditional rite. The first image of the scene is a close-up of a corner of woven curtain which the *bris* baby's young siblings are pulling back so as to see into the room where the circumcision is taking place. The infant, dressed in white, is nestled on a pillow of embroidered linens and placed on an Elijah chair before being set upon the *sandek's* lap. The small group in attendance is all male with the exception of the mother, and as the cut is about to be made, the men move close in around the *mohel, sandek* and baby. The subtitle to the prayer we hear reads "God of our forefathers, let this child live." It is a necessary prayer given the trials this child will face.

Where *Crossing Delancey* may be said to tangentially raise issues concerning passing and assimilation, Agnieszka Holland targets the problematic of passing directly in *Europa, Europa*. In many respects Holland's work seems the perfect candidate for an analysis concerning the filmic treatment of circumcision. Opening with a ritual *bris*, the film centers around the recurring threat the circumcised penis presents to a young Jew trying to avoid death at the hands of the Germans during World War II. The screenplay by Holland is adapted from a memoir by Solomon Perel recounting his wartime experiences. Because Perel's story is unusual even among survivor narratives (one critic terms it "anomalous"), it calls particular attention to the director's choice and subsequent handling of the material. Critical response to *Europa, Europa* has ranged from high praise to near slanderous name-calling.

The story told by Perel begins with his birth in 1925 in Peine, Germany, where his father has a shoe store. With the rise of political unrest in the mid-thirties, Solly's father decides to

return to Łódź, Poland with his family. When war breaks out, the father sends his two younger sons, Solly and Isaac, further east in hopes of saving them. During a river crossing the brothers are separated, and Solly, rescued from near drowning by a Russian, is sent to a Russian orphanage in Grodno, where he spends the next two years. When the Germans invade Russia in 1941, Solly is captured along with others who are fleeing. Claiming he is an ethnic German from Grodno named Josef Peters, he proves helpful to the Germans who put him to work as a translator. The Wehrmacht unit makes a mascot of their newly nicknamed “Jupp” and he spends the next year with them. Under the aegis of the unit Captain, who wishes to adopt him, Jupp finds himself attending the Hitler Youth School at Brunswick, where he remains until the end of the war.

In addition to somewhat routinized yet chaotic representations of Europe’s World War II, Holland elects to punctuate her film with the ever present sense of danger a marked, circumscribed body such as Jupp’s elicits. The richness of the image--the vulnerable penis perpetually haunted by the phallic order gone mad--serves well to underscore Holland’s ironic commentary on identity. She appreciates, as does Susan Bordo, that:

. . . actual men are not timeless symbolic constructs, they are biologically, historically, and experientially embodied beings; the singular, constant transcendent rule of the phallus is continually challenged by this embodiment. Crystallizing this tension into its most succinct form: The phallus is haunted by the penis. And the penis is most definitely *not* “one.” It has no unified social identity (but is fragmented by ideologies of race and ethnicity). (“Reading” 265-266)

Because Jupp must urinate, for example, Holland reminds the viewer that however much the penis may wish to borrow from its idealized phallic counterpart, it is always subject to its material limits. This disparity is evident witnessing Jupp’s machinations as he seeks to relieve himself on an unoccupied tree or scampers, hand over nuts, out of a tub in order to escape the

unexpected invitation of a gay soldier. Holland presents circumcision as a sign perpetually threatening to be revealed as the truth of an identity, yet she refuses glossing as simple binary what is often assumed for such marks of exclusion/inclusion.

Beginning the film with the recreation of Solomon's 1925 circumcision, Holland shows herself to be a perceptive reader and critic of the ritual practice. The scene, though brief, is particularly noteworthy for its employment of a glass pipette used to suction the wound. While this detail undoubtedly reflects then contemporary and local practice accurately, it footnotes as well the history of Jewish ritual circumcision in Europe. When oral suctioning of the wound by the *mohel* was linked to the spread of tuberculosis, syphilis and other diseases during the nineteenth century, the French, for example, passed an ordinance in 1854 outlawing the portion of the traditional circumcision procedure known as *mezizah* (Boon 65)¹³ The glass pipette was introduced as a means that permitted suctioning, while avoiding direct contact between the *mohel* and infant (Gilman, *Freud*, 68).¹⁴ The inclusion of the pipette serves as a whispered reminder of pressures historically put upon Jews to submit to monitoring and regulation by dominant

¹³ Although both Boon and Gilman refer to the French law, and both cite Remondino (157) as their source, Gilman dates the law 1844 (*Freud*, 68) in contrast to Boon's citation of the date of 1854 (65).

¹⁴ According to Gilman: "The arguments against the practice of *metsitsah* were labeled 'hygienic' rather than theological and were separated from the ritual meaning of the act of circumcision. . . . By the close of the nineteenth century, the practice of *metsitsah* had been either abandoned or, in those Orthodox communities that insisted on its retention, modified by the introduction of a glass tube over the penis through which the *mohel* could draw blood, which was filtered before it reached his mouth. The initial purpose of the procedure, the stanching of the blood, was abandoned but the form of the ritual remained. By 1911, Franz Kafka could record in his diary the view that *metsitsah* had become a relic of Eastern Jewry, where the half-drunken *mohel* with his red nose and stinking breath sucked on the bloody penis. Kafka contrasted this with the boring but not unhygienic practices of Western Jewry that he had just witnessed, seeing his nephew circumcised." (*Freud*, 68)

communities, to make accommodations, and, when necessary, to alter their rituals. In addition, it tacitly assays historically negative associations accruing to the sign.¹⁵

The scene of Solomon Perel's infant circumcision is accompanied by a voice over saying "You won't believe it, but I remember my circumcision." However, it is important to note that the voice here belongs to actor Marco Hofschneider: the scene has been inaccurately described by the Boyarins as "contained in an interview with the author that begins the film" (*Thinking*, 41). Because no such claim of remembrance appears in Perel's written memoir, perhaps the statement belongs to screenwriter Holland who is establishing a trope for the film. Solly might as accurately have said: "My circumcision remembers me." To wit, there is a Talmudic story that King David lamented the time he must spend in his bath, stripped of his tallit and tefillin: "'I am unfortunate because I stand naked, without the opportunity to fulfill any of the commandments.' But then he recalled the *Brith Milah*, which was permanently in his flesh, and he became serene" (Cohen 3). Serenity will not descend upon Solly, but the idea that he is, like David, interpellated by his circumcised penis runs throughout the film.

As already mentioned, among the witnesses at Solomon's circumcision are his parents, and his young brothers and sister. The domestic touch links family and circumcision, further anchoring the sign of circumcision to losses that Solomon will later experience. Writing about Perel's claim to remember his *bris*, Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin observe:

¹⁵ *Mizizah* is considered questionable practice in some Orthodox communities because oral suctioning has been suspected as the transmitter of disease. "At Yeshiva University, biologist and ethicist Rabbi Moshe Tendler has inveighed against *mezizah b'peh*. 'I know from 3,500 years experience that it is safe,' he said, 'however a *mohel* who does it now I believe is foolhardy . . . because sadly, the HIV virus has crept into the heterosexual community.'" (Gollaher, 29) Unfortunately, the last phrase betrays a not uncommon antipathy toward homosexuality found in a Judaism whose covenant demands procreation.

This exaggerated claim to remember serves both of the themes that make this film so remarkable: on the one hand the extraordinary personal talents of its protagonist, which enable him both to react promptly and to dissemble effectively; on the other hand his persistent connection to his own “rooted” Jewishness. In a subtle symmetry, the film’s closing returns to Perel, and his assertion that when his own sons were born, he had them circumcised without giving it a second thought. The particular horror of the way the Nazis had turned the concealed sign on the body into a betraying mark, which made murderously clear the simultaneous historicity and panchronicity of identity, failed to prevent Perel from playing his part in this cyclical role of father and son. (*Thinking*, 41-42)

There is no doubt that the circumcised penis functioned as death warrant for many during World War II, but Holland reminds us that when read by the Other, an uncircumcised penis was the guarantor of absolutely nothing.

If circumcision announces the Jewish male infant’s entry into the community, the *bar mitzvah* signals his entry into the adult community of Jews. Holland directly follows the scene of Solly’s circumcision with a scene set on the eve of his bar mitzvah. Germans attack the homes and businesses of Jews, during which Solly’s sister is killed. (The real Bertha was to die later in the war.) What Holland accentuates here concerns the rupture that occurs when a communal ritual must be played out against an antithetical ritual, if one grants ritual status to acts of war and oppression. Solly’s entrance into manhood and the Jewish community occurs at a moment when any security that allegiance would normally offer is effectively wiped out. The affiliation and identity, assurances that normally would have been bestowed upon the adolescent become problematic in the extreme.

Moreover, although the Boyarins point to Perel’s exceptional talents at dissembling, it must be acknowledged that the benevolent outcomes of many of Perel’s close calls depend on happenstance. And, as Holland draws him, the newly minted Jupp occasionally benefits from someone’s misreading. When asked about his parents by the Germans, his hesitancy is

interpreted as pain at their loss. On the other hand, the German soldier who discovers Jupp's secret and subsequently befriends him turns out to be gay. In this instance, the reading of the signed penis by someone who is also an "other" proves advantageous to Jupp. Similarly, it is the mother of Leni, in the film the widow of an Italian husband and therefore already slightly "othered," who correctly guesses Jupp's origins, yet keeps them secret.

To be sure, had Solomon Perel been forced to display his penis to his German captors, his life would have been forfeit. In anticipation of the inevitable consequences of such a reading, Holland includes a scene that heightens the already unbearable tension awaiting Jewish captives. In his memoir Perel recalls the sorting operation in this way: "(W)henever the suspicious soldiers had the slightest doubt about a man, they ordered him to drop his trousers. If he was circumcised, they cursed at him and made him join the group headed for the forest. There he was shot" (21-22). Holland revamps this procedural information into a chilling and critical scene.

As the Germans sort through the people they have rounded up in their invasion, a middle-aged man, claiming to be Armenian, begs the German soldiers to examine his penis so that he may prove he is not Jewish. By means of this wrenchingly poignant and pathetic gesture, Holland instantly makes apparent the inane invested character of this sign. When detected, circumcision guarantees death; its absence, however, rewards nothing. For having foolishly invested in the myth of uncircumcision, even if only momentarily and under extreme circumstances, the uncut Armenian pays with his life. As Janet Lungstrum insightfully observes: "Holland's film skillfully shows how Solly's difference as a male Jew is both life-threateningly real, as well as of no consequence whatever in the greater scheme of things" (957). In a chaotic world of mad readers signs break down, at best they mean only arbitrarily.

That identity is always negotiated Holland understands especially well. The daughter of a Catholic mother and a Jewish father, Holland herself speaks from a position she identifies as neither properly Jewish nor Polish. Referred to as a Polish half-Jew by one reviewer, Holland recognizes that Poles consider her to be Jewish, whereas Jews do not recognize her as a Jew because, enforcing the matrilineal vestige of the patriarchy, her Jewish half stems from her father. In exile from either group, the identity Holland writes for herself seems to be one others either often fail or refuse to read. For instance, during a particularly anti-Semitic period in the late sixties in Poland, she was rejected from entry into the film school at Łódź. In another instance, the director of *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann, names Holland an anti-Semite, and comments: “It’s no coincidence if Agnieszka Holland . . . chose this one Jew as the hero of her ‘Europa, Europa,’ a movie that would make anyone vomit” (Roger Cohen, 32). Having experienced these forms of ethnic and racial support from potential landsmen, it is understandable how a story such as Solomon Perel’s appealed to Holland as a film-worthy subject. Annette Insdorf observes of an earlier Holland film that “Holland’s own cultural dislocation might be one of the reasons that *Angry Harvest*’s tensions are explored with such sensitivity” (108).

Reviewers of *Europa, Europa* respond to the so-called accuracy of Holland’s portrayal of Perel’s wartime experience with either more or less forgiveness. Because certain events were contracted or dramatically heightened by Holland is rated a travesty by some, and raises the customary questions about accuracy and truth in Holocaust representation. However, the central absurdity--Perel’s life among the Nazis--appears to be documented by the inclusion in his memoir of several photographs from the years when he was assigned to German units. The best approach, I think, is to judge *Europa, Europa* as a movie rather than as quasi-documentary, and

to analyze the film on the basis of its reading and treatment of what is admittedly “an incredible story” (Rainer 10).

In his review of the film for *Sight and Sound*, Jonathan Romney thoughtfully observed:

The truth of the story is important not so much because of any misgivings we might feel about being told a shaggy-dog story on such a serious subject as the Holocaust; but rather because truth and deceit are the very material of the story. If this were merely about a series of misunderstandings leading to one man’s survival, it would be an inconsequential picaresque yarn; but the question of truthfulness (to history, to racial/cultural identity, to oneself) makes this a moral story, and leads us to ask to what degree Perel is morally compromised by the mere fact of his survival. (440-41)

One can imagine that the same story, presented as a fully original screenplay, may not have fared as well among critics sensitive to the many difficulties and directives surrounding Holocaust material. (Recall, for example, the divergent criticism surrounding Roberto Begnini’s *Life is Beautiful*.) However, I would be hesitant in the extreme to comment on whether or not Solomon Perel was “morally compromised.” As he writes in his memoirs, his mother’s injunction in keeping with the Jewish tenet of choosing life was to “Stay alive.” And, as I understand the covenant with Abraham, staying alive is requisite to the promise of lands and generations.¹⁶ More important, the survival of this Jew need not threaten the memory of those who did not survive. But it is this perceived threat, one suspects, underlying much of the negative criticism turned on Perel’s biography and Holland’s film.

In addition, there is an embarrassment that at times surrounds criticism of this film as evidenced in Kathryn Bernheimer’s assessment in her collection entitled *The 50 Greatest Jewish Movies: A Critic’s Ranking of the Very Best*. Upon reviewing *Crossing Delancey*, Bernheimer

¹⁶ In a note to her essay, Linville also comments: “In an April 15, 1992, talk at Spertus College of Judaica, Perel emphasized his mother’s crucial role--rather than his father’s--in telling him had to find a way to survive”(51).

unselfconsciously includes mention of the *bris*, which she sees as “awakening a longing” in Izzy. Yet, when writing about Holland’s film, circumcision is not mentioned once. Bernheimer spends time talking about the controversy surrounding the reception of the film in Europe--“one of the boldest and arguably most disconcerting Holocaust films ever made”--and about the film having been slighted for an Oscar submission by Germany. Nevertheless, because she classes the film among the 50 best on Jewish themes, one wonders why she avoids writing about the film’s content. A clue to her chariness may be found in the following statement: “A metaphor for the extraordinary lengths to which Jews were forced to go in order to survive the Holocaust, *Europa, Europa* is a suspenseful and often terrifying drama tinged with a satiric edge” (129). Metaphor? If Bernheimer speaks of film in general as metaphor, perhaps. But what she refuses to name, namely the circumcised penis, is in this exact instance not a metaphor. And to refuse this is to egregiously and insensitively empty the sign of circumcision. However much some viewers may have been offended by Solly’s multiple “incarnations” (Bernheimer’s term), and however much some viewers may have wanted to deny the embarrassingly ever present penis, the circumcised Solly is always an incarnate Jew. Difficult to dismiss as some aberrant performance of critical modesty, Bernheimer’s review eschews offending those who find only transcendent representations of the Holocaust bearable. Doing so, she sadly undercuts the valuable work Holland does.

In a more astute reading, “Foreskin fetishism: Jewish male difference in *Europa, Europa*,” Janet Lungstum builds a compelling case for an historically informed psychoanalytic reading of Holland’s film. Commenting on the continuing influence of nineteenth century pathologizing discourses concerning the Jewish body, she posits the Jewish male’s circumcised penis a fetishized object for Nazi Germany:

In this discourse of modern biological antisemitism and the Jew's own self-inculpation within it, it was not, however, the act or condition of being circumcized that damaged the Jew, but the antisemitic conditions of being among non-circumcized (Nazi) men. The male Nazi who redirected his castration anxiety from the personal to the collective level thereby 'Jewified' even the assimilated Jew. This is a crucial point in understanding the fetishistic viewing structure of Holland's film; it reveals that antisemitism is a sexually fetishistic, specular, substitutive structure in that it produces and confirms the non-Jewish subject's stable, pure-race identity as a positive reflection of the negative image constructed of the object-Jew as castrated (again this can be seen as a strategy to ward off castration for one's own racial self.) (59)

I quibble with the usage of "biological antisemitism" in the way that Lungstrom makes use of the term here. Although she appears to have taken the term from Gilman, she links endogamous marriage, mikvah, and circumcision under the rubric of a perceived Jewish biological difference. Where endogamous marriage eventually may produce quantifiable biological differences, ritual bathing and circumcision cannot. Hence I would favor a modifier that stresses rather the pathologizing discourse of anti-Semitism, for it places the burden on the diagnostician. That quibble aside, Lungstrom's perception of fetishistic investment in the sign of circumcision works very well as a strategy for evaluating *Europa, Europa*.

Lungstrom supports her filmic analysis of Solly's body as a fetishistic object by relying upon those screen theories wherein the feminine form functions as the object/fetish for the male gaze.¹⁷ Recognizing the complexity of this theory insofar as women spectators and spectated males have been concerned, Lungstrom writes:

¹⁷ Lungstrom refers to Laura Mulvey's 1993 essay "Some thoughts on theories of fetishism in the context of contemporary culture" (*October*, 65) remarking that "Mulvey herself calls for an end to the semiotic-aesthetic 'disavowal' of culture, and for a reconsideration of fetishism's roots in the production processes (or *causes*) behind the social imaginary (*effects*)" (58).

I would maintain that Holland, via fetishism, is indirectly structuring in her film a sense of Jewish spectatorship/feminist visual pleasure/homoerotic or homosocial gaze that may be considered liberating in a general sense. Given the predominant use of fetishism in recent film theory, one might not expect to extend this interpretive device into Holocaust studies. Yet for such marginalized viewing groups, any theories concerning a new spectatorship that this film may have to offer must derive from the film's highly contextualized, ethically engaged historical event. The fetishism of ethnic male sexuality in *Europa, Europa* is not a freely floating image, but rather a fully engaged dialogue between representation, race and society. (58)

This sense of a “fully engaged dialogue between representation, race, and society” answers not only to those vehement detractors of Holland's film, but suggests as well a critical approach to Holocaust representation that makes space for a somewhat less proprietary readership.

When, for example, Roger Cohen refers to Claude Lanzmann as “the director of ‘*Shoah*’ and, since then, the conscience of the Holocaust in France” (32), he points to questions concerning the idea of Holocaust ownership. Deniers of the Holocaust may wish to own it so as to obliterate it, but those who choose to represent it, who make films, who provide testimony as witnesses, who write autobiographies or memoirs make of the Holocaust a legacy for readers. When asked about the success of *Europa, Europa* in the United States, Lanzmann's response was, “It's a pity for all Americans” (Cohen 32). Setting Lanzmann's peculiar enactment of some version of Judeo/Franco/Euro-snobbism aside, one wonders what identity of reader Lanzmann might endorse, and what form of censorship would be needed to insure that identity.¹⁸ The

¹⁸ In interview on NPR at the time his film *The Grey Zone* was released, Tim Blake Nelson addressed these issues: “You know, the rhetoric which surrounds the very carefully and jealously guarded notion of what is and isn't appropriate in a Holocaust film never ceases to astonish me. It's very cogent rhetoric, and I think it's been most beautifully articulated by the documentary filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, who made *Shoah*, which is an extraordinary document and a beautiful film. And the thinking goes that, conceptually, simply by trying to recreate in a fictional narrative film the events of the Holocaust, you are suggesting that these horrors are within the ken or scope of an artistic enterprise, and by doing that, you are diminishing the true

impossibility of reading correctly as suggested here informs a non-productive version of identity politics, a version that says “speaking as an x-y-z, my position is unassailable, impossible for you, an/other who is not x-y-z, to comprehend.”

What Holland, perhaps threateningly, brings to the foreground in her telling of Perel’s story is the suggestion, as Diana Fuss observes, that: “(A)ny politics of identity needs to come to terms with the complicated and meaningful ways that identity is continually compromised, imperiled, one might even say *embarrassed* by identification” (10). Holland also seems to be asking as does Fuss:

How might it change our understanding of identity if we were to take seriously the poststructuralist notion that our most impassioned identifications may incorporate nonidentity within them and that our most fervent disidentifications may already harbor the very identity they seek to deny? (10)

The idea that identity is fluid or subject to a series of disidentifications destabilizes what have become for some accepted or appropriate forms of Holocaust representation. However, Annette Insdorf, in a chapter entitled “The Ambiguity of Identity” from her book on film and the Holocaust, also notes:

When one was stripped of possessions, status, and external self-definition by Nazi brutality, the question of “who am I?” became problematic. And if one lost family or friends, the isolated self was all the more vulnerable to remorse, guilt, internalized aggression, and the assumption of other identities. (180)

An illustration of this drive to “other identities” appears in the epilogue to Perel’s memoirs. Perel shares an encounter that occurred during a discussion of his war experiences in Berlin when a

power of the horror. And that is a beautiful rhetorical flourish, but I actually have to say, as extraordinary as some of the filmmakers are who have made this argument, it’s a silly argument.”

gentleman, close in age to Perel himself, hesitantly revealed how he had survived the war by being hidden in an apartment in Berlin:

With a trembling voice he told us how he had stood behind the window curtains of this room, full of fear and terror, watching the Hitler Youths marching by. The longer he had to stay concealed in this room, confined to a few square feet and without contact with the outside world, the greater became his misery. More and more often, the little Jewish boy would dream of being a Hitler Youth too. (216)

Undoubtedly, a Jew wearing a Hitler Youth or Nazi uniform may be seen as an affront to Jewish survivors. And it may be an affront to some Germans as well. But the desire to be the other, in this case, an other free to live, must be an especially urgent desire in a child.

If *Schindler's List* is acceptable to the German film industry, apparently because it allows the work of mourning to proceed, Lungstrum asks what precisely is it about *Europa, Europa* that so offends. As a response she offers:

(T)he bulk of the German argument against Holland's film resided within its means of representation. Clearly, to represent Jews as noble victims with a steadfast sense of their own identity is an easier and more obvious device than to ridicule Nazism from within, using the figure of a Jew who must endure serial identities in order to escape victimhood. In short, to turn practicing a *Seig Heil* salute in front of the mirror into a vaudeville dance routine is unimaginable in Spielberg's context, but makes perfect sense when Solly does so in Holland's." (55)

The suggestion here is that the reverence or piety which attaches to certain portrayals of the Holocaust works at times to suppress critical analyses.

In a clever turn of phrase, film critic David Denby opened his review of *Europa, Europa* in *New York Magazine* with the following: "If anatomy is destiny, circumcision, in the twentieth century, is predestination" (69). Aside from the idea that anatomy as destiny covers a wealth of practices and responses, the notion that circumcision functions as predestination in the twentieth

century more than in any other seems somewhat questionable. The perception that circumcision may constitute a foreordained plight has been present for centuries, but, during the twentieth century in at least part of the Western world, an instant read of “circumcised-therefore-Jew” no longer applies. One can more safely, if less cleverly, claim that being circumcised within range of Hitler’s goose stepping minions was a major liability. With *Europa, Europa* in mind, how one speaks may fix one’s destiny as easily as the sign of Abraham.

While the film emphasizes the circumcised penis as the text of death, Perel’s own story suggests that he was subject to an unnerving moment of *Shibboleth*, the mispronunciation announcing the outsider, the alien, the enemy who must be rooted out, possibly destroyed. The speech which belies a claimed identity demonstrates yet another way in which the body may work to reveal its subject. When his German unit was assigned to Estonia, Jupp translated work orders for Russian prisoners. Once during a break, a prisoner commented:

“I think it’s interesting that you’re the only one around here who doesn’t roll his *rs*. That’s typical among Jews. For instance, you’d say *Abghasha* instead of *Abrasha*.” Without blinking an eye, I said that I didn’t understand what he was leading up to and ordered him to get back to work with the other prisoners. After that, each of us went his own way, and the subject was never raised again. But obviously the man had guessed my origins. (50-51)

Although this exchange occurs with a Russian speaker, it typifies the categorizing work of *shibboleth*.

Writing about the Jewish voice in *The Jew’s Body*, Gilman remarks:

For language purists of the 1920s and 1930s the most corrupt version of German was *Mauscheln*, the language ascribed to the Eastern Jew who attempted to speak German. This visibility of the Jew’s language mirrors Adorno’s experience in the United States as well as in Germany. It is echoed in his interview with a telephone operator in the 1940s who claims that “You get so you can always know a Jewish voice.” One can never, it seems escape

the sense that once one's voice is heard, one is instantly revealed as a rootless, cultureless Jew. (21)

Those of us lacking fluency in the languages of *Europa, Europa*, and completely incapable of detecting any lisped nuance announcing *Shibboleth*, must rely upon circumcision as the embodied, telltale mark of the Jew. At the same time, to the extent we are dependent upon the subtitles, we ourselves are marked as outsiders. In this instance, the metaphor of privilege would appear to belong to those whose lips are circumcised.¹⁹ Yet when Susan Linville discusses the stir caused in 1991 when the German Film Commission failed to nominate any film for an Academy Foreign Film Award in order to avoid nominating Holland's film, we see that language again proves an issue. Reporting on objections that the film was too sex filled, Linville adds: "Apparently more troubling to the Commission was the film's polyglotism. However, though *Europa, Europa* contains Hebrew, Polish and Russian, German predominates" (50).

That the two signs, a circumcised penis or a recalcitrant tongue, may function nearly identically is perceived in this way by Derrida:

One may, thanks to the *Shibboleth*, recognize and be recognized by one's own, for better and for worse, for the sake of partaking (partage) and the ring of alliance *on the one hand*, but also, *on the other hand*, for the purpose of denying the other, of denying him passage or life. One may also, because of *Shibboleth* and exactly to the extent that one may make use of it, see it turned against oneself: then it is the circumcised who are proscribed or held at the border, excluded from the community, put to death, or reduced to ashes merely on the sight of, or in the name of, the *Wundgelesenes*. (Derrida, "Shibboleth" 346)

¹⁹ In a review entitled "The Case of the Missing Prepuce," John Simon declares that "Miss Holland commits every kind of error", pointing out a "half dozen types," among them, : ". . . Miss Holland needs a better aural sense. The dubbing of this international cast is atrocious. You don't need to know German and Russian, the film's main languages, to realize the delinquencies of synchronization here: there's many a painful slip between the dub and the lip." *National Review*, 9 Sept. 91:41.

Circumcision and pronunciation, embodied identifying marks of an outsider, are joined by other potentially damning physical characteristics in the discourse of anti-Semitic stereotypes. It is not only the Jew's disfigured maleness and peculiar speech which reveal him to be inadequate: he also falls short of the imaginary standard because of his curly hair, his hooked nose, his flat feet--the list goes on. The would-be scientific bases for reading these physical indicators is reproduced in the film when Solly's head is measured with calipers and his eye color is matched to an eye chart made up of glass models. But, instead of his Jewish identity being discovered in front of his Hitler Youth classmates, Solly is declared an example of peoples from the Eastern Baltic. The fear of being found out, of not being able to pass indefinitely makes all body parts metonymies of circumcision.

This fear is satirically addressed in a 1893 short story by Oskar Panizza entitled "The Operated Jew," in which the ineradicable features of the Jew's body become the substance of the tale. A wealthy Jew undergoes a series of operations, as well as speech and deportment classes, intended to de-Jewify him, whereupon he becomes engaged to the daughter of a civil servant. At the wedding he drinks too much and his original form reasserts itself. Underlying this form of stereotyping is the belief that the Jew will out. His differences cannot be assimilated, nor can his distinguishing marks be made to disappear. I was reminded of Panizza's story during the brief scene which shows Jupp, newly attired in a Hitler Youth uniform, practicing his salute before a full length mirror. After a couple passes at snappy salutes and heel clicks, Jupp's moves turn into a clowning shuffle and dance pose before the mirror; as Linville puts it, "he privately mocks the Nazis through Chaplinesque parody" (45). What Holland shows us here may not be a version of the Jew will out, though that reading may be possible, so much as an instance of the adolescent will out. I am reminded of a motto cited in Peg Birmingham's essay on Kristeva and Arendt:

“Act in such a way that the Fuhrer, if he knew your action, would approve it” (85). Solly is a Jew trying to stay alive, but just as important, he is an adolescent for whom the wearing of an identity, even in such extreme circumstances as his, is subject to instant refashioning. The bit is a distillation of the multiple performances Solly/Jupp enacts throughout the war, sculpting his identity in light of another’s as befits the occasion, doing whatever is needed to pass. Nevertheless, although Solly’s situation overtly determines the performative nature of his identity, it is the mark of circumcision that recurringly unmask that identity as performance.

Solly must react more often than he acts, for the chaos of war makes control of any kind nearly impossible. Facing chaos of another kind, the father and son in *Drowning By Numbers* attempt to order the world around them. And yet, there is a a odd mirroring of the adolescent Solly and the adolescent Smut concerning their respective penises. Solly wishes his circumcision away so that he might safely have sex with his Nazi girlfriend, whereas Smut wishes his foreskin away so that he might please his girlfriend. Neither succeeds. Nor, as we shall see, do the men in *Drowning By Numbers*.

4.3. *Drowning By Numbers*: Circumcision as Barb(e)rous Desire

The nail has the hole for its image. Cunning mirror.
The hole has the nail for its pawn.

Edmond Jabès, *Foreigner* 1

The oxymoronic title of Peter Greenaway's *Drowning By Numbers* (1988) delineates the film's psychic territory; at one end the sea of the semiotic and, at the other, the gaming grid of the symbolic. Therein lies the trap, for unlike the worlds represented by *Crossing Delancey* and *Europa, Europa*, where the promise of life attaches to ritual circumcision, the circumcision signed in Greenaway's film must be read as castration. There is no doubt, as one enters the mythic realm of the abject in this film, that Greenaway does his painterly and seductive best to keep his viewers there. If not enchanted by numerically hunting one's way through the film, one may be enthralled by the homage to art that invariably graces any march through a Greenaway work. One gets to a hundred or reaches his end in either case.

Were I to have professed the unrealistic expectation that circumcision be interpretively read as trim merely and never as castration, Greenaway's *Drowning By Numbers* would have been omitted from consideration. However, this film--though finally death riddled--also serves as a primer on desire. Desire, as perceived from within a field of Freudian drives or instincts, weaves throughout the numbered narrative as it reframes the Samson and Delilah story. Another kind of desire, the desire associated with the Lacanian gaze as elaborated by Todd McGowan, laces among art historical intertexts provided by Greenaway. As a result, there are two versions of circumcised reader being called to action here. The first performs as a reader of circumcision

as castration by focusing on ways in which the Biblical story amplifies the film story. The second performs as the subject of desire by recognizing the role of the Other as represented by Greenaway.

The central characters in *Drowning By Numbers* include three women, four men and a youth. The characters' names serve to introduce the abject: Madgett the coroner, his son Smut, and the three Cissies Colpitts.²⁰ Greenaway himself is happy to read Madgett for us as maggot/magic ("Fear"); Smut stands for smut, and the Cissies Colpitts may be understood as sissy coal pits, but of course, sissy is up for grabs semantically speaking; siblings, wimp, or urine most immediately spring to mind. Also commenting on Greenaway's names, Thomas Elsaesser notes:

A reading of the names hints at how women become the objects of male fear and aggression: the Madgett/magic that makes them into Colpitts/culprits is the law of numbers, the rules of the game--what the production notes, in a phrase one assumes is Greenaway's, call the 'clerical necrophila' of both father and son. (293)

The three women--a grandmother, daughter, and niece--bearing identical names allude as well to allegorical figures such as the three Fates or the mythical ages of woman as virgin, mother, and crone. Cissie 1 (Joan Plowright) is in her early sixties and wedded to Jake, a gardener who likes to plant in any feminine field available to him. Cissie 1 drowns Jake in a tub of bath water. Cissie 2 (Juliette Stevenson) is in her thirties and is married to Hardy, a plump businessman with a greater interest in food than in his wife. Cissie 2 prevents his successful rescue when he is drowning in the sea. Cissie 3 (Joely Richardson) is a nineteen year-old, would-be Olympic

²⁰ My thanks to Lucy Fischer for reminding me that characters' names can be significant interpretive supports. In his discussion of Cinderella, Bruno Bettelheim calls attention to the connection between the German name as Aschenputtel and Aschebrüdel (ash brother), a term, he points out, Luther used to describe Abel's and Esau's relationship to Cain and Jacob. (*Uses*, 237). Greenaway's Smut could profitably be read beside Bettelheim's Cinderella.

swimmer who weds non-swimmer Bellamy, drowned when Cissie 3 removes his floats during a swimming lesson.

In order that the drownings may be successfully presented as accidental or natural deaths, the three women turn for assistance to Madgett (Bernard Hill), the middle-aged local coroner, who is infatuated with all three incarnations of the Cissies Colpitts. Smut (Jason Edwards), Madgett's intellectually precocious, adolescent son, shares his father's fascination for games and counting. Smut tallies and celebrates the neighborhood deaths, and receives the motherly affections of the trio Colpitts. Smut loves Elsie, the Velázquez girl look-alike who skips rope and counts stars. At the close of the film, Smut hangs himself with the Skipping Girl's jump rope after learning of her accidental death, while the Colpitts women leave Madgett to await his watery death in a sinking row boat.

A viewer already familiar with Greenaway's affinity for seventeenth century Baroque art might anticipate his explicative remark that "The film's subtext is the Samson and Delilah myth, which reflects confused Biblical associations with castration and circumcision" (Perlmutter 60). Many, if not most, critical readings of the Judges story as well as its later representations--Milton's *Samson Agonistes* or Rembrandt's *Blinding of Samson*, for example--assert that it is Samson's Oedipal desire for women/mother that proves to be his undoing. In Greenaway's film, too, one may detect male desire for the female as being central to the male's undoing. How this particular reading of the film's desire is illuminated by the Samson narrative may best be understood by initially focusing on Greenaway's citation of Rubens' *Samson and Delilah*.

Insightful and detailed analyses of the Samson story are provided by Mieke Bal in three of her books: *Death and Dissymmetry*, a critical study of the book of Judges; *Lethal Love*; and *Reading Rembrandt*. Her reading of Ruben's painting proves most pertinent to the film text

(*Death* 225). In Ruben's work, Delilah cradles the head of a sleeping Samson while a Philistine snips his hair, an image Greenaway again forges when Cissie 2 coifs Hardy postmortem. Additionally, Bal's analysis of the biblical text calls attention to characteristic elements of the Samson story which reappear or are similarly reconfigured in Greenaway's film. For example, Samson is involved with two women prior to his meeting with Delilah; Samson has a fondness for riddles or verbal games; and, Samson measures his wagers by the numbers of garments promised or tallies his revenge by the body count of men slain (*Lethal*, 44-48 passim). Women, games, and body counts are also the *métier* of Madgett. Most specifically, however, it is the portrayal of Samson's relationship to Delilah as realized by Rubens that underscores Greenaway's motif of the symbolic womb as the end of sexual desire. The desire for one's own death read as a sought after return to an earlier state, as a drive towards a tomb provisionally understood as womb, Greenaway reinforces by shrouding his victims in a wash of placental waters.²¹

The Rubens citation in *Drowning By Numbers* appears after Smut has been conversing with the Skipping Girl. During that exchange Smut gives the Skipping Girl the names of three more stars she can add to her counting exercise and shows her his photographs of a game of Handicap Catch played after Jake's death. In the midst of this activity she questions him:

GIRL: Are you circumcised?

SMUT: What's that?

GIRL: A piece of your willie is cut off. It's in the Bible. My mother says it's better that way.

SMUT: Oh.

²¹ Laplanche and Pontalis point to the difficulties surrounding Freud's use of the term *Trieb* for both the death instinct, and the instinct assigned to "the complex functioning of human sexuality"(101). ". . . what Freud was explicitly seeking to express by the term 'death instinct' was the most fundamental aspect of instinctual life: the return to an earlier state and, in the last reckoning, the return to the absolute repose of the inorganic"(102).

This conversation propels Smut into gathering information about circumcision, as we see when Smut later visits his father's bedroom. Smut is wrapped in a sheet and carrying an art book opened to a reproduction of the Rubens painting:

MADGETT: Smut, what do you want?

SMUT: (Taking off the sheet) I'm hot and is it true that it's desirable to be circumcised in a hot climate?

MADGETT: So they say.

SMUT: (Placing the book open at a Samson and Delilah reproduction on the bed) Was Samson circumcised?

MADGETT: Yes. (. . . line deleted from film version)

SMUT: Does it hurt?

MADGETT: I don't remember.

SMUT: What does it look like?

MADGETT: It's nothing special. Look. (He shows him.) Now go to bed.

SMUT: Was Delilah circumcised? Do they circumcise women?

MADGETT: Sort of . . . in hot countries.

SMUT: It's hot here.

MADGETT: So it is.

SMUT: Did they do it to Cissie?

MADGETT: I doubt it very much.

SMUT: Was Jake circumcised?

MADGETT: You'd better ask Cissie.

SMUT: Is circumcision barbaric?

MADGETT: Some say so. Now get back to bed, and anything unanswered about the barbarity of men to women you can ask Cissie in the morning--she's an authority. Now let me write.

In this scene, references to Samson and Delilah occur through both verbal and visual means, though there are other symbolic links to their story.²² The necktie the bearded Madgett wears on

²² Peter Lehman misreads this scene between Smut and Madgett: "At one point he talks to his father about the representations of penises in an art book, and Greenaway cuts to the paintings

his otherwise naked body may be read as an emblem of circumcision, for in a Freudian or Lacanian scheme symbolic circumcision equals symbolic castration equals symbolic death. Yoked, not unlike Samson at the grist mill, the noose-like tie foreshadows Smut's final circumcision/hanging as well as Madgett's prescribed drowning.

Female characters in the film echo yet other important elements of the Samson and Delilah story, as may be seen in Cissie's handling of the razor. Twice Cissie 2 trims Hardy's hair after he has been swimming. The first time is on the occasion of Cissie 3's and Bellamy's wedding celebration. Hardy has been rescued by the party-goers from his fit of swimmer's cramps, and he tells Cissie 2 to fetch some scissors. "Cut my hair--I'll feel better" he says. The second hair cut Hardy receives occurs after his drowning.²³ When Cissie 2 cradles Hardy's head in her lap in a variation on Ruben's composition, rather than present a side view, Greenaway elects to call forth the highly foreshortened corpses depicted in Mantegna's *Dead Christ* and/or the extant fragment of Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Joan Deijman*.²⁴ This composition recalls as well the pose and poignancy of an earlier shot of Cissie 2's mother, Cissie 1, bestowing a kiss on the forehead of the equally foreshortened, freshly drowned body of Jake.

being discussed"(217). Indeed, there is a cut to a close up of the Rubens painting, but there are no penises in the painting, though Delilah's breasts are fully bared.

²³ In a collection of essays devoted to the male body, John Updike mentions the ritual of shaving and notes: "Byron, in *Don Juan*, thought the repeated nuisance of shaving balanced out the periodic agony, for females, of childbirth. Women are, his lines tell us,

Condemn'd to child-bed, as men for their sins

Have shaving too entail'd upon their chins,--

A daily plague, which in the aggregate

May average on the whole with parturition." (8)

²⁴ Gumery calls attention to this same pose as suggestive of Mantegna's painting in Greenaway's earlier film, *Death in the Seine*. (75)

According to Bal the head on lap, maternal posture emerges from the biblical account of Samson's barbering:

The visual image of the crucial scene is again revealing. Samson, we are told, goes to sleep on Delilah's knees. The expression in Hebrew allows also for the translation "between her knees," an expression used for giving birth. The image of Samson resting on/between Delilah's knees is that of a baby, confidently resting with his mother. Painters who depicted this scene eagerly in the seventeenth century enhanced the motherly aspect of this moment. (*Death* 225)

While it would be foolhardy to argue that murder is ever pleasant, the motherly manner in which the Colpitts women dispose of their mates reverses, in effect, the Leboyer birthing method. Clearly these murders seem less violent, surely are less bloody, than the means by which the once barbered Samson eventually dies. In Bal's reading of Samson's pulling down of the temple, the Nazarite is symbolically placed between the giant thighs of the mother, the mother upon whom he at last revenges the trauma of his birth (*Lethal* 62). Greenaway would seem to reify this reading in the recurrent background shot of the water tower in *Drowning By Numbers*, for the tower supports resemble long, tall legs in an open stance. Ominously awaiting or inviting re-entry, these legs remain iconically overwhelming.

Nonetheless, the maternal performance that provides the impetus for Smut's self-circumcision belongs to the Skipping Girl's mother. Elsie, object of Smut's adolescent sexual desire, is the daughter of a lady of the evening, here an unavoidable cliché because all the scenes featuring the Skipping Girl are night scenes where the mother is silhouetted in the upstairs window of a house on Amsterdam Road. Gentleman callers enter the house door by passing behind the Skipping Girl, invariably busy jumping rope, counting and naming stars, or conversing with Smut. And Smut himself suffers no lack of mother figures. Although it is the mother of his desire, a woman of experience, who has declared circumcision "better," it is

Cissie 2, one object of his father's desire, who pronounces Smut's circumcision. Cissie 2 and Madgett discover Smut--recently missing from a nocturnal outing of insect gathering--propped up under a blanket in his bed, again in a foreshortened shot recalling those of the dead Jake and Hardy. A large red stain on the blanket articulates the site above Smut's groin:

MADGETT: God . . . Smut? . . . He's circumcised himself . . . call a doctor . . . I can't look.

(Cissie 2 looks under the sheets, Smut all the while gritting his teeth.)

CISSIE 2: Smut . . . (She shakes him.) Smut--what did you do it with?

SMUT: It's all right, Cissie, I sterilized the scissors.

CISSIE 2: Scissors?

That Smut understands he has circumcised himself on the Skipping Girl's behalf becomes evident near the close of the film. In this moment, however, Madgett might read Smut's clipping as the son's attempt to be like the father; that is, it appears to be a rather painful, filial enactment of Girardian mimetic desire.²⁵ Cissie had just reminded Madgett: "Smut is very devoted to you." Later, Madgett supplies a reading of the cut that binds him to his son even more compellingly. Cissies 1 and 2 have searched Madgett out so that he can declare the death of Bellamy, the third drowning, an accident:

CISSIE 1: (Calling out) Madgett . . . Madgett. What the devil are you doing here?

MADGETT: (Calmly) Picking blackberries.

CISSIE 2: We've been looking everywhere for you.

MADGETT: We've been picking blackberries. Vitamin C is good for eunuchs.

²⁵ The perceived object of desire here may be sexual initiation rather than a specific vehicle through which to accomplish that deed. Smut's desire for congress parallels the desire of the father in this sense. Also suggested here is a gendered crossover of the blooded sheet verifying the virgin, as depicted, for example, in Isak Dinesin's short story "The Blank Page."

CISSIE 2: Eunuchs?

(Wryly) Well-- I don't use mine . . . and Smut can't use his . . . for the moment.

The picking of blackberries (perhaps intended to be understood as '*nadberries*') underscores the theme of male impotence. The evocation of eunuchs in the company of the Colpitts women seems apt, especially given the full body castration the lethal trio have at this point effected upon their respective husbands.

Greenaway's comment about Samson and Delilah as a subtext for *Drowning By Numbers*--how the story reflects confusion over circumcision and castration--was in answer to Rhea Perlmutter's query whether *Drowning By Numbers* is, "like the *Belly of the Architect*, an essay on male impotence?" (60). In an interview with Marlene Rodgers, Greenaway continues this thought: "I suppose the coroner in *Drowning By Numbers* is ... a man who just cannot get it together. *Drowning* is very much about male impotency, and for that read mankind's impotency in controlling the circumstances, what he likes and dislikes" (18). In terms of his profession, Madgett would appear to be in control; the dead, after all, cannot stir up much trouble.

However, one soon begins to appreciate that Madgett's main concern may be the staving off, rather than the naming, of death. His obsessive desire to know, and thereby control, through taxonomy--compiling a book of cricketing deaths or encouraging Smut to count the number of leaves on a tree--is curiously offset by the visual richness of his meals, all of whose table settings resemble the genre of Dutch still-life painting called *vanitas*, a reminder of mortality. Madgett presents himself as desirous of sexual communion with the Colpitts women, yet he never succeeds in seducing them. Instead, failing to procure the pleasures of the little death, Madgett is to be rewarded with the greater promise of drowning, with symbolically returning (not unlike Samson) to the place of birth.

While one might accuse Greenaway of reinscribing woman as being representative of the most deadly of desires, refreshingly he grants his women characters an on-screen activity that had heretofore been rare. In Greenaway's film women read men's bodies and look at men's genitals. The morning after Cissie 1 has submerged Jake, she goes to fetch Cissie 2. Within the frame are Cissie 1, Hardy, and Cissie 2. Cissie 2 dresses while Cissie 1 sits on the edge of the bed where Hardy sleeps uncovered. In the course of announcing Jake's drowning Cissie 1 looks at Hardy: "Do all fat men have little penises? ... He looks pregnant. I like these creases here." Annoyed, Cissie 2 covers her husband.

How this act of looking might be interpreted depends upon which school of scopic performance the viewer endorses. In *Love's Body*, Norman O. Brown, presents a fairly traditional, psychoanalytic reading of the act of looking:

The spectator is voyeur. The desire to see is the desire to see the genital; and the desire to see is the desire to be one; to become what you behold, to incorporate the penis of another; to devour it through the eye. (124)

Although Cissie 1 may not be considered a classic, keyhole variety voyeur, in this moment she does occupy what has traditionally been a male position. Hardy has become the object of her vision: like Rubens' Samson he sleeps, vulnerable to the visual examination and "cutting" remarks of Cissie 1.

A more standard presentation of voyeurism attends the relationship of master and slave in Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus*. Spartacus and a female slave, who has been sent to his cell as reward, are ogled from above by the trainer. Ina Rae Hark points out that

The power of the gaze supersedes the power of the penis that is not a phallus. The scene represents a defining moment as to the meaning the film attributes to spectacle for Romans. The permission to become a spectator demarcates the master from the slave. (155)

In the Kubrick film, the slaves ultimately remain the object of their master's gaze. Even when freed, however, the former slave Varinia, now Spartacus' wife, is presented as the object of her husband's gaze. Sensitive to this version of gender bias in cinematic representation, Greenaway notes that: "Women get a poor deal in cinema. In the last twenty years, the whole position of the female in culture is radically changing and cinema should reflect this" (Perlmutter 60). Part of the change that *Drowning By Numbers* acknowledges, then, is the idea that looking itself need not be proprietarily gendered, that women can and do read male bodies. According to Keith Gumery, Greenaway is able to deflect overriding sexual content by presenting bodies that are less than ideal and vulnerably human (69). What may remain unchanged, however, is the dominance accorded the phallic order, which Cissie 1 joins when, reiterating Hark, she in effect grants herself "permission to become a spectator" and "demarcates the master from the slave."

Given the amniotic associations accompanying the lapping noises of the sound track, it proves difficult to escape the sense that some version of a sonorous envelope hovers close. The opening moments of the film are particularly womblike, the vision of an almost black, sparsely starlit sky acoustically accompanied by the regular, though not yet identified, murmuring slap of a jump rope. And, while the assisted drownings support the imagery of death as the recapturing of some pre-symbolic uterine embrace, the deaths of the Skipping Girl (hit and run) and Smut (hanging) are significantly more violent. Both children have exhibited evidence of their precocious immersion in the symbolic in the form of their relentless repetition of counting games. And yet, both exhibit some resistance to the symbolic. If one reads Smut's circumcision as a gesture on behalf of or towards the feminine ("I've done what you asked me to do"), the Skipping Girl's disinterest upon being offered the opportunity to look at the site of the circumcision, "No thank you--not today" indicates her reluctance to "incorporate the penis of

another” (Brown 124). Unfortunately, this refusal also seems to signal both their deaths, for immediately after this last encounter with Smut, the Skipping Girl is run down. Grief-stricken, Smut kills himself as he plays a hanging game in which “to win is to lose.” These children bypass sexual initiation altogether and proceed directly to death.

This causal relationship between sex (or phallic/penile performance) and death (or castration) in *Drowning By Numbers* also precedes each of the marital drownings. Cissie 1 sinks Jake when she returns home to find him drunk, naked, and bathing side by side, in twin tubs, with Nancy also known as Nell. Cissie 2 drowns Hardy after he has thwarted her sexual advances and has substituted an ice lolly for the penis Cissie 2 repeatedly requests. Greenaway emblemizes this moment with a punctuating shot of the partially melted dildo lying discarded on the grass. Cissie 3 detaches Bellamy’s umbilical life line once she is impregnated. The wandering phallus, the non-performative phallus, and the used phallus are all discarded. Writing about Freud’s castration complex, Kaja Silverman comments that:

Even before the so-called castration crisis, the male subject has an intimate knowledge of loss-- . . . he undergoes numerous divisions or splittings prior to the moment at which he is made to fear the loss of his sexual organ. Thus, what seems to confront him from without, in the guise of the “mutilated” female body, actually threatens him from within, in the form of his own history. (17)

Although Silverman is not referring to the final castration of death in this passage, the behavior or “history” of the husbands in *Drowning* provides the logic motivating their assisted deaths as acts of revenge, as literally phallic inevitabilities. Greenaway underscores this logic when the three women are gathered around the body of Bellamy and the speech of each serves to fragment

or fetishize him. Cissie 1 likes his feet, Cissie 2 likes his shoulders, and Cissie 3 likes his “bollocks.”²⁶ It is also worth remembering, in this film, it is the women who are swimmers.

The story of Samson and Delilah is usually read as a violent though ultimately salvific tale. Yet here, it is death at the hand of a woman that captures Greenaway, though his trio of Delilah’s do arrange for deaths that appear to be ever so much more pleasant than Samson’s. Furthermore, by way of the Samson story Greenaway threatens his viewers with a symbolically untenable form of cinematic death, for the blinding of Samson may forecast their loss of sight as well. Absent from Greenaway’s film, but necessary to consider in this context, is Rembrandt’s 1636 *Blinding of Samson*. Although Rembrandt had also painted a scene similar to the Rubens discussed earlier--a painting, that is, in which the post-coital Samson sleeps with his head in Delilah’s lap--it is Rembrandt’s earlier rendering of the painful instant of blinding that comes to my mind whenever reference is made to Samson and Delilah. Terrifying in this painting is the spear blade positioned above the pinioned Samson’s groin as it is being thrust toward his eyes. It is as if Samson’s own phallus has become synonymous with the instrument of his blinding. Equally troubling, if less physically provocative, is the image of Delilah as she flees, clutching shears and Samson’s shorn locks in her hand as she looks back in horror.

Although Greenaway includes no direct reference to this account of Samson’s symbolic second circumcision, by its absence the painting announces its presence all the same. When Smut tells Cissie 2 (she who barbers) that he sterilized the offending (off-ending?) scissors, her

²⁶ The image here is of Cissie 3 cupping her hand over Bellamy’s sheet/shroud clad gonads, a tactile reading as it were, that calls to mind a feature of circumcision noted by Gilman in his citation of a work by Paolo Mantegazza: “A woman before accepting the embraces of a man, must first make sure, with her eyes and with her hands, as to whether he was of the circumcised or the uncircumcised; nor would she be able to find any excuse for mingling her own blood stream with that of the foreigner. It had, however, not occurred to the legislator that this same indelible characteristic would inspire in the woman a curiosity to see and to handle men of a different sort.” (Gilman, *The Jew’s Body*, 95).

shocked response is the reiteration of the word “scissors.” In traditional ritual circumcision ceremonies, the most common instrument of cutting is a single blade or knife, a tool which almost automatically assures the symbolic conflation of circumcision with castration. Revealed in Smut’s use of the double blade of scissors are two feminine images that may be associated with Delilah: one is what Bal refers to as the “fantasy of the *vagina dentata*” (*Lethal* 60), and the other is that of Atropos, the Fate whose attribute is the scissors used for cutting the thread of life. Delilah engulfs Samson and, doing so, she limits his life.²⁷ As much as I had wanted to resist these engulfing or deadly associations with the feminine, the Colpitts women do not allow it.

When the Colpitts collective empty the ashes of their respective spouses into the sea, each also offers into the watery grave a possession emblematic of the deceased. Cissie 1 offers Jake’s pitch fork, Cissie 2 offers Hardy’s typewriter, and Cissie 3 offers up Bellamy’s portable radio. In her readings of the book of Judges, Bal finds rape to be a characteristic act of violence, whether it is men who act against men, women who act against men, or men who act against women (*Death* 226). Rape, as defined by Bal, is the entry of a hard object into soft tissue; so, for example, Jael’s insertion of the tent spike into Sisera’s head may be understood as rape, as may Samson’s blinding. On this reading, one assesses the actions of the three capable women (“Capable women normally have girls,” Cissie 1 ambiguously declares) who have avenged the

²⁷ Ten years after Greenaway’s film was released, a strikingly clever magazine ad for a women’s shaving cream appeared. A finely airbrushed photograph of a woman’s legs (ideally long, shapely, hairless, tanned, and in high-heeled sandals) were depicted as if they were blades on a pair of scissors. Where the legs normally would join the trunk of the body, they instead met the metal grips of the scissors’ handle. Ostensibly these curiously scissored legs were meant to promote shaving cream, to serve as a schematic for hair removal. However, the associations which readily attach to this particular image of barbering make it the perfect icon for psychoanalytically informed readings of Samson and Delilah. The legs-as-blades attach at the fulcrum by a swivel pin so that, reading the ad as a metonymic snapshot of a woman, we perceive exactly how *X* marks the spot: the legs come together at the literal site of the screw. And, where the upper body should be, housing head and heart, we record instead the means of manipulation. (*In Style*, June 1998, 149)

shortcomings of their marriage partners through murder. The women have cut the men off, castrated them, and simulated rape by sending the bodies of the men as hard objects into the soft tissue of water. In this fashion the film's title is enacted as the men are serially drowned by the numbers 1, 2, and 3, thereby signaling an end to Samsonian desire.

While it is correct to say that Greenaway's *Drowning By Numbers* opens with a "girl in an antique dress" (Rayns 289), Amy Lawrence puts it more accurately: "In one of the most ravishing images in Greenaway, a little girl dressed like a Velazquez Infanta skips on a village street while counting the stars"(99). Equally captivated by this opening, J. Hoberman reports:

At the preview theater where I saw it, *Drowning By Numbers's* first shot--a blue nocturnal street with a girl in an old-fashioned hoopskirt jumping rope, her shadow cast dramatically large in a golden spot upon a wall--inspired an audible intake of breath. (51)

It is by way of this gesture, this open love letter to Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, that I too soften and finally succumb to Greenaway. Moreover, this révérence to Velázquez marks the moment in which the possibility of experiencing the Lacanian gaze arrives.

From the outset, I identify myself as Greenaway's audience; I continue to work through what I, as reader, assume to be a shared relationship with respect to seventeenth century Northern Baroque painting. Practicably, filmmaker Greenaway speaks of this period:

I think the most successful of all painting has been that of the Dutch golden age--I refer to it in much of my work--because it was done when each individual painter was most understood. It's very bourgeois, not the privilege of the church or state. It was the time when art became most democratic and so must understood by the most people on both its literal and allegorical levels. A woman who holds a mandolin with three broken strings probably means she's had two abortions. If she's not wearing shoes it means she's a loose women. All that language has been lost to us but it was commonly understood by the bourgeois Dutch, by the people who commissioned the films ... er, paintings... sorry, Freudian slip. It was their language. Painting today has again divorced itself from mainstream activities and become a rather rarefied object.

I would like my movies to work the way Dutch painting did, on literal and metaphorical levels. If you've got that as a premise it's no problem at all to find all the information that ought to go in the frame--all the cultural, allegorical material. (Pally)

Using a figure from *Las Meninas* is not an innocent move on Greenaway's part, nor are the multiple references to the other artworks that grace his set. Greenaway values a particular approach:

Cinema is an intellectual as well as emotional experience. It's of no use to make films unless the structure relates to the content. In American and British cinema, there is not enough attention to form. *Hamlet* is a play *about* plays. Rembrandt makes paintings *about* paintings. (Greenaway in Perlmutter 63)

In *Drowning By Numbers*, Greenaway has made a film about desire, using as partial structural underpinning references to 17th century genre and motif characterizing that era's paintings and etchings.

The contention here is that the viewer's desire released by these images is a desire necessarily frustrated by the limitations of the film medium. In other words, film is not a museum, and some of Greenaway's references are but inexact simulacra, slender evocations of a particular work. Even so, when the viewer recognizes a source well enough, she summons an overlay memory of the work. And, as the identification of art allusions continues, the film's narrative slips into other eras, other borrowings. While this form of disorienting entrapment may annoy, it also encourages an engagement that blossoms into a conversation with the film, for the film invites repeated viewings. Repetition allows, or risks, the possibility that one's reading of the film may change.

The altered reading arising from repeated viewings of *Drowning By Numbers* as suggested here requires an understanding of the Lacanian gaze as elucidated, for example, by

Todd McGowan. McGowan correctly emphasizes Lacan's gaze as being "not the look of the subject at the object, but the point at which the object looks back" (28-9).²⁸ McGowan rehearses the usage by Lacan of Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* and its anamorphic skull, representative of the function of the gaze:

The gaze exists in the way that the spectator's perspective distorts the field of the visible, thereby indicating the spectator's involvement in a scene from which she/he seems excluded. The skull says to the spectator, "You think that you are looking at the painting from a safe distance, but the painting sees you--takes into account your presence as a spectator." (29)

Because it is of critical and theoretical importance that one grasp the significance of the gaze as originating elsewhere, McGowan elaborates further:

Grasping the gaze as objective rather than subjective transforms our understanding of the filmic experience. Instead of being an experience of imaginary mastery (as it is for traditional film theorists), it becomes--at least potentially--the site of a traumatic encounter with the Real, with the utter failure of the spectator's seemingly safe distance and assumed mastery. The crucial point here is that not only is the failure of mastery possible in the cinema, but it is what spectators desire when they go to the movies. (29)

Slow to admit of any desire to encounter the Real, it may be what eventually happens when revisiting Greenaway's picture game. For example, when naked Nell trips through the garden and looks to be straight out of a Rembrandt etching of Eve, there is the pleasurable moment of recognition followed by a sense of loss, for one never gets (to) the Rembrandt. Yet hope remains

²⁸ The gaze for Lacan belongs to the other. The effect is described by Miran Bozovic in his analysis of Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. Bozovic demonstrates that it is the murderer Thorwald's glowing cigarette that forces Jeff as voyeur to apprehend his own desire in the gaze of the other, that it is the sight of the burning embers which indicates that Jeff is already in the gaze of the picture, already desiring what Thorwald desires: "Faced with the window, Jeff can see himself only as the subject of desire" (169).

one can reach the Velázquez, that somehow the etching will appear, that they are only temporarily being withheld, that Greenaway does in fact possess them. Countless viewings later (Madgett and Smut would have counted) a realization occurs. Like the hapless men in the film, the viewer's desire is not going to be met. But in terms of the Lacanian gaze, this does not necessarily mean an end to desire.

When Lacan writes of pictures and painters, he speaks of the viewer as laying down his gaze before the work (*Four* 101). McGowan presents this idea of Lacan's, seeing "the desiring subject as placing her/himself in the service of the object" (32). What this entails with respect to Greenaway's film, I believe, is a lesson in desire as it pertains to art. The mimetic gestures, the shadows of iconic works thrown upon the screen, mask for a time the critical outlines of desire at work. Eventually, however, the viewer grasps that the self-memory called forth in response to Greenaway's many allusions is just as they are--merely partial and always fleeting. According to McGowan:

The jouissance embodied in this object remains out of reach for the subject because the object exists only insofar as it is out of reach. Lacan describes this process at work in the visual drive: 'What is the subject trying to see? What he is trying to see, make no mistake, is the object as absence. . . .What he is looking for is not, as one says, the phallus--but precisely its absence.' (32)

By reading the subject of desire in this fashion, the Cissies and their collective drownings may be understood as hermeneutic helpmates, for they illustrate through the submerging of their respective mates, "not ... the phallus--but precisely its absence." As for the finally scuttled Madgett, Greenaway notes that with each successive drowning, he was "denied his pound of sexual gratification" (Greenaway "Fear"). Once again, the economy of *jouissance* would seem to be the rule.

Chapter 5. Circumcision as the Cut of the Ear

There is seeing and hearing, which are what naive listeners and readers do; and there is perceiving and understanding which are in principle reserved to an elect. The apocryphal Epistle to Barnabas distinguishes between those within and those without by saying that the former have circumcised ears and the latter not. And all who teach and practice interpretation, whichever god is their patron, are in the business of aural circumcision.

Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy*, 3

One time only: a circumcision takes place just once. So, at least, it would appear.

Jacques Derrida "Shibboleth," 307

A reckoning with the past in keeping with democratic values requires the ability--or at least the attempt--to read scars and to affirm only what deserves affirmation as one turns the lamp of critical reflection on oneself and one's own.

Dominick La Capra, *Representing the Holocaust*, 66

Just how aptly the biblical metaphor of having circumcised ears befits an interpretive elect writing, in effect, about circumcision as metaphor is the query prompting this essay. If arrested by Frank Kermode's suggestion that those readers who perceive and understand may be considered to have circumcised ears, one may try to imagine what circumcised ears might look like, to contemplate the figural pairing of ears and penises. However, setting body parts aside, there remains in this particular metaphor some suggestion of a boy's club, which is not to say that Kermode is being hailed as sexist. Rather, the coupling of "genesis" and "secrecy" are heard as if they are coded words, words that one might be privy to only after long struggle. The sense

of being already outside deepens when Kermode elaborates upon the profile of his elect reader by way of the terms “carnal” and “spiritual.” Carnal readers are those whose first take, whose apprehension of what is immediately manifest in a work, marks the limit of their interpretive involvement (10). By comparison, spiritual readers are those whose readings “divine the true, latent sense” of a work, whose readings partake “of the elect, of the institution” (3). Nevertheless, what if one reads for the carnal, and does so deliberately? Perhaps this habit so misshapes one that the “god who has a special tenderness for latent, or spiritual senses” does not visit (21).

This, however, is not the thrust of Kermode’s argument. Through the use of the terms carnal and spiritual he means to distinguish practices, even divinations, pertinent to hermeneutics, to what he deems the “necessary and virtually impossible” task of interpretation. Working in part from Kermode’s sense of the “*moment* of interpretation,” taken he says from an impression point as theorized by Dilthey (16), I have chosen to depart upon an act of interpretation in the company of two texts, where I believe the metaphor of circumcision to be at serious play. The two texts are the opening chapters of Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* (1953) and Vassilis Lambropoulos’ *The Rise of Eurocentrism: Anatomy of Interpretation* (1993).¹ Although both of these critics may be described in accordance with Kermode’s passage as having “circumcised ears” and as being “in the business of aural circumcision,” it is Auerbach who emerges as the iconic interpreter, and whose singular stature makes visible some effects of

¹ I would like to acknowledge three “aural circumcisers” who, over the course of a few years, recommended my looking at Auerbach, Kermode and Lambropoulos as belonging respectively to Deeanne Westbrook, Mariolina Salvatori, and Paul Bové.

literary election.² Through a discussion that begins by attending to incorporating as well as inscribing practices in the *Odyssey* and in the Bible, I hope to make evident how analyses of circumcision--the rite and the metaphor--often inmix with processes of election, literary or otherwise.

In “Odysseus’ Scar,” the first chapter of *Mimesis*, Auerbach reviews the Homeric narrative surrounding the identifying mark of the hero alongside the “equally ancient and equally epic” account in Genesis recording Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. Auerbach begins his book and the analysis of the Homeric text in this way: “Readers of the *Odyssey* will remember the well-prepared and touching scene in book 19, when Odysseus has at last come home, the scene in which the old housekeeper Euryclea, who had been his nurse, recognizes him by a scar on his thigh” (3). At issue for Auerbach are the differences in the presentations of the Greek legend and the religious history, or “why,” as Edward Said puts it, “Homer’s text wanders verbally in a way that Genesis does not” (69). Auerbach finds the telling of the Greek legend to be highly descriptive, engagingly entertaining in its presentness, and analyzable rather than interpretable. On the other hand, he deems the more rugged, sparsely detailed recounting of events in the Old Testament to “require subtle investigation and interpretation,” moreover, to “demand them” (15). The tenacity with which critics reproduce or pay homage to Auerbach’s analysis of the Greek and Homeric styles is noteworthy. This is clearly evident in three recent translations of Genesis readied for the millennium; the first contains an implicit nod towards Auerbach, whereas the second and third explicitly honor him in their commentaries on Genesis 22:

² Given Lambropoulos’s overall argument for an end to the ceaseless practice of interpretation he sees unloosed by the Hebraic model of exegesis, he would, I assume, be reluctant to accept a description as one with cut ears.

This biblical style is a creation of the highest literary intuition and tact. No other Western classic has anything like it. It is worlds away from the exquisitely precise, elaborated, gorgeous language of the Homeric poems, the other great texts at the source of Western culture. (Stephen Mitchell xiv)

This story is certainly one of the masterpieces of biblical literature. In a famous article by Erich Auerbach it is remarked how biblical style as exemplified here, in contradistinction to that of Homer and other epic bards, eschews physical and psychological details in favor of one central preoccupation: a man's decision in relation to God. The result of this style is a terrible intensity, a story which is so stark as to be almost unbearable. (Fox 92)

The abrupt beginning and stark, emotion-fraught development of this troubling story have led many critics to celebrate it as one of the peaks of ancient narrative. . . . and the luminous first chapter of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, which compares this passage with one from the *Odyssey*, remains a landmark of twentieth-century criticism. (Robert Alter 103)

Certainly one might expect translators to be especially receptive to the work of a philologist, but other critical readers are no less admiring.³ The singular and revered position that Auerbach occupies among the circumcised of ear will be discussed more fully later, in concert with a lesson in humility this reading encouraged.

In the first chapter of *The Rise of Eurocentrism: Anatomy of Interpretation* entitled "The Rites of Interpretation," Lambropoulos' presents as his opening critique a reading of Auerbach's inaugural chapter. In fact, Lambropoulos actually mimes Auerbach's text by beginning in this way: "Readers of *Mimesis* will remember the well-prepared and touching comparison in chapter 1, where the two basic types of literary representation in Western culture are dramatically

³ To cite but one example, Peter Brooks speaks of Auerbach's "magisterial *Mimesis*," observing: "A history of the place of the body in Western literature would in many ways run parallel to Auerbach's study, since representation of the body is part of representing "external" reality as a whole"(3).

contrasted” (3).⁴ Indeed, it may be that many readers do recall the Auerbach passage and even take pleasure in Lambropoulos’ parodic homage to Auerbach’s welcoming and invitational beginning. Yet, the mere suggestion of textual familiarity present in the opening sentences of both writers marks their readers. Opening statements declaring that “readers will remember the well prepared and touching scene/comparison” acknowledge, however briefly, a community of *circumcised* readers who stand apart from *uncircumcised* readers, even as the writers immediately begin to supply their uncircumcised and/or forgetful readers with the textual synopses and information necessary to the arguments they will set down and elaborate. This separation of readers is more striking in Lambropoulos’ text if one assumes, as I do, a reader of *Mimesis* to be already far distanced from Kermode’s category of “naive listener.” At the time Auerbach was writing *Mimesis* he may have been reasonably certain that his readers were familiar with the Homeric texts, whereas that assumption might not be made with such assurance today. In any case, the metaphor of aural circumcision deployed by Kermode seems appropriate here applied to Auerbach and Lambropoulos, particularly when the first move each makes signals his position within a long tradition of literary criticism.

As Auerbach continues to relate the events surrounding the scene of Odysseus’ recognition, he remarks on the manner in which these events in the Homeric text are “scrupulously externalized and narrated in leisurely fashion” (3). When Lambropoulos comments on Auerbach’s project, which he defines as the comparison of “Homeric and Biblical systems of thought . . . set forth as the starting point for the investigation of European literary representation” (3), he again becomes both mimic and critic of the earlier text, stating that

⁴ Timothy Bahti makes a mimetic gesture similar to Lambropoulos, though the tone is different, in his essay about Auerbach and *Mimesis*: “Readers of the Dante chapter will recall the exquisite stylistic analysis that is so patiently sustained in the initial treatment of the encounter between the Dante-pilgrim and Farinata and Cavalcante in canto 10 of *Inferno* . . .” (145).

Auerbach's analysis "is scrupulously explored and narrated in painstaking philological fashion" (3). Firmly placing Auerbach's performance within the tradition of Hebraic interpretation, Lambropoulos argues that, despite the inclusion of the Homeric text, Auerbach's treatment of the *Odyssey* is aligned with reading practices common to the history of biblical exegesis. If biblical interpretation remains central to Auerbach's method, Lambropoulos asks why go through the guise of beginning with Homer only to turn quickly to Genesis; why attempt to conceal that which becomes evident soon enough? The question raised by Lambropoulos is a provocative one, but I would like to suggest that the response need not be the immediate unveiling of an interpretive agenda favoring Hebraic forms of textual analysis. Before taking the inevitable tumble down the slippery slope of the Western Hebraic/Hellenic divide--inevitable at some point precisely because of the circumcision metaphor--it proves instructive to consider further the literary examples that Auerbach has selected.

By rereading and rethinking the source texts that serve as the basis for Auerbach's discussion and by noting characteristics beyond those of style, telling features do come forward. One could, for instance, view the Homeric and biblical passages as representative examples marking the West's traditionally held distinctions between a Greek privilege awarded the visual and a Jewish bias bestowed upon the aural, even though the two passages could also be seen as complicating this often oversimplified binary.⁵ However, it is the mention of the *Odyssey*'s Euryclea on the first page of both Auerbach's and Lambropoulos' chapters that provides another perspective from which to view Auerbach's selections.

Feminist readers juxtaposing the two focal passages from the *Odyssey* and Genesis quickly note the presence of women in the selection from the former work, their absence from

⁵ See Jay *Downcast Eyes* page 33, and the "See O Hellas, Hear O Israel" commentary.

the later. Some of these readers may also observe that, in the *Odyssey*, the servant woman Euryclea performs an act of reading, that what she reads is a body, and that her response to that reading is silenced. These events occur within the “touching and well prepared scene” Auerbach recalls for his readers. This is not to find Auerbach particularly dismissive of Euryclea; on the contrary, he discusses her position as servant within the household and finds her to be fully absorbed within the hero’s story. But in Auerbach’s perception, because Euryclea has “no life of her own,” she represents nothing beyond that story. Granting it may not be possible to claim Euryclea speaks for her class, certainly one can claim she represents a reading practice and interpretive performance that appear to be neither visible to, nor illuminated for, either Auerbach or his critic Lambropoulos.

To wit, Lambropoulos refers to Auerbach’s chapter title as being “neutrally descriptive” (3), but “deceptive” nonetheless because it “promises a study on the recognition of Odysseus’ scar” and instead “delivers a model of literary interpretation derived from Abraham’s sacrifice” (5). Apparently what Lambropoulos finds suspect arises from his understanding of “Odysseus’ scar” as being “neutrally descriptive,” as being nothing other than a vehicle for the recognition and proper identification of the heroic subject. If this is the case, then Auerbach’s concentration on Abraham’s sacrifice as a comparative text may be termed a deceptive tactic, a reading veiled in Homer while speaking the Bible. However, it is at this moment that the figure of Euryclea, as she is represented in the Homeric text, can be of assistance to readers negotiating their way along the Hellenic/Homeric divide envisioned, albeit differently, in Auerbach’s and Lambropoulos’ works.

In Book 19 of the *Odyssey*, when Penelope requests that the “stranger” be given the customary foot bath to welcome him as a guest, the disguised Odysseus at first declines:

... I have no longing for a footbath
either: none of these maids will touch my feet,
unless there is an old one, old and wise,
one who has lived through suffering as I have:
I would not mind letting my feet be touched
by that old servant. (403-408)⁶

Penelope, pleased to comply with the stranger's wishes, responds:

I have an old maidservant ripe with years,
one who in her time nursed my lord. She took him
into her arms the hour his mother bore him.
Let her, then, wash your feet though she is frail.
(413-16)

Speaking to the stranger as she prepares to follow Penelope's bidding, Euryclea laments the difficulties her "child" must have faced and observes that "no one ever came, I swear, who seemed/so like Odysseus--body, voice, and limbs--as you do" (444-446). Given that these exchanges immediately precede Euryclea's discovery of the scar, Lambropoulos' perception that "Odysseus' Scar" is "neutrally descriptive" would suggest a scar that functions as an identification mark, one as suitable for listing on a police blotter as for recognizing a hero in Homer. But scars are rarely "neutrally descriptive."

A significant feature of these Homeric passages is that they present to naive listeners and elect readers alike inscribed bodies waiting to be actively perceived. Although the body of Odysseus has upon it the marks of age, his hands and feet "enseamed" as Penelope notes, Auerbach claims that Odysseus is not changed upon his return to Ithaca. In addition, Auerbach terms Homer's telling the story of the wound an "interruption," stating:

⁶ All quotations from *The Odyssey* are taken from the Robert Fitzgerald translation.

The excurses upon the origin of Odysseus' scar is not basically different from the many passages in which a newly introduced character, or even a newly appearing object or implement, though it be in the thick of a battle, is described as to its nature and origin . . . (5)

The wound story may appear to be in keeping with the stylistic character and placement of many of Homer's descriptive passages, but it is a limited reading which views it as that only. Rather, the precise placement of the wound story suggests that, equal to the dramatic intensity that accrues to Odysseus' request for a servant as versed in suffering as he and to that servant's subsequent recognition of him, is a form of epistemological intensity that accrues for the reader.

When Odysseus, hoping to delay revealing his true identity, suddenly remembers the scar on his thigh, he attempts to hide it from Euryclea, "(b)ut when she bared her lord's leg, bending near, she knew the groove at once" (458-459). What Auerbach deems an "interruption," the story of the boar hunt and its entailments, follows. According to Auerbach, this interruption insures a "local and temporal present which is absolute"(7). In context, however, the story about the wounding of Odysseus argues against such an absolute present, because the relationship between Odysseus and Euryclea rests at least in part upon their shared, lived histories which are necessarily past and recollected in memory. And, by stating that the hunt exists within an eternal present, Auerbach seems to deny the very perception of engaged bodies which allows the recognition to be named a "touching and well-prepared scene." I submit that an awareness of embodiment is as requisite to reading the *Odyssey* as to reading Genesis.

Turning to Auerbach's understanding of *figura*, I hope to elaborate upon this idea of embodiment. Auerbach holds that writers of patristic and medieval centuries used *figura* to signify the relation between two equally real persons, events, or circumstances, the first of which is a prefiguration of the second: 'but neither the prefiguring nor the prefigured event lose(s) (its)

literal and historical reality by (its) figurative meaning' (Gellrich 108). This is the manner, for example, in which the so-called sacrifice of Isaac maybe read as figure for the crucifixion of Christ.

Without claiming for the *Odyssey* an authentic historical reality such as Auerbach perceives the Bible registering, it is possible to assay the representation of historical reality presented within the *Odyssey* and then to make that representation available as a critical textual prefiguration to the *akedah*, that is the *Binding of Isaac*. One of the distinctions that Auerbach makes with respect to Homer is that he "knows no background." Auerbach's illustrative and pertinent example follows:

When Euryclea sets the infant Odysseus on his grandfather Autolycus' lap after the banquet, the aged Euryclea, who a few lines earlier had touched the wanderer's foot, has entirely vanished from the stage and the reader's mind.(5)

For Auerbach, the fact that the lines immediately preceding the tale of the scar are devoted to Euryclea do not even remotely suggest the likelihood that it is her memory which is being presented. Yet look at how the excursus is bracketed: "She knew the grove at once" (459)--(excursus)--"This was the scar the old nurse recognized; she traced it under her spread hands." (542-43). It is reasonable to assume that Euryclea, wetnurse and lifelong servant to the household, knows the story of Odysseus' scar exceedingly well, and that her memory as well the hero's is activated in recollection.⁷ Additionally, historical events in Euryclea's life story serve to prefigure this event, this recognition. After all, it was she who placed the infant on the grandfather's knee for naming and she who witnessed the promised visit to Parnassus upon

⁷ This sense that Euryclea may be the source of the memory is also understood by Irene F.J. de Jong: "[T]his position of the digression, wedged in between two references to mental activity by Eurykleia suggests that we interpret it as *her* recollection triggered off by the recognition of the scar" (517).

Odysseus' coming of age. And, more than likely, she was present when the story of the wound was told to Odysseus' parent. Auerbach seems in this instance to elide the possibility that the servant does anything other than serve the master's text.

In an essay which begins, incidentally, with "Readers of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* will remember its opening chapter entitled 'Odysseus' Scar,'" Bruce Robbins proposes

that in leveling servant and master at the threshold of the master's restoration, the recognition scene produces an abridged, transient utopia--a place of displacement, a "nowhere" emerging within ideology and yet prefiguring very different social arrangements. This utopia is also a *topos*, a commonplace.(64)

Setting the rhetorical sense of commonplace aside for the moment, the literal place or *topos* of recognition, the knowing again as *anagnoresis*, belongs to the epistemologically emplaced bodies of Odysseus and Euryclea. In calling upon their shared and body-spent histories, what Robbins refers to as a "sudden, exceptional moment of equality" occurs, a moment that enables Odysseus to be restored.

In addition to Euryclea, there is another female servant evoked but fleetingly in the first chapter of *Mimesis*. This servant is Hagar, around whom questions of circumcision, whether of the penis or the ears, will revolve. Also mentioned by Robbins, her particular "moment of equality" in fact signals a tiny tear in Auerbach's text, a tear resonant of the *akedah*. And indeed, commentary upon Auerbach's specific use of the *akedah* has become a commonplace over the past few years. It appears to be reflective of a particular *Zeitgeist*, whose fallout now proves to be somewhat troubling. However, this interpretive irritant also prompts a reevaluation of what the

appellation “circumcised ears” complexly connotes. Therefore, a rehearsal of the relevance of the *akedah* follows, keeping in mind other voices who have read its purport in a similar way.⁸

The tale of Auerbach writing *Mimesis* in Istanbul, without the benefit of a library or access to journals is well known, and has itself become a *topos* for those who perceive or demand that the critic function as outsider or alien. Yet, reminding ourselves of Brod’s critical distinction between circumcision and sacrifice--circumcision as the saving rite replacing the older rite of infant sacrifice--it is possible to see, beyond the comparison of styles, another kind of work being undertaken by Auerbach in the opening chapter of *Mimesis*. Although Auerbach may be identified as an acculturated Jew, “raised in the assimilated and cosmopolitan environment of Berlin’s Jewish haute bourgeoisie” as Earl Jeffrey Richards eagerly describes him (2), it remains impossible to conjecture whether or not Auerbach himself was ritually circumcised. Nor indeed, I add hastily, is this information in any way necessary, except as it might help situate Auerbach in relation to his German-Jewishness. The manner in which he perceived himself begins to carry considerable weight in light of recent assessments which claim for *Mimesis* a mission that may well go beyond anything that Auerbach himself either imagined or appreciated.

We know that the wording for Auerbach’s letter of dismissal as a civil servant from the University of Marburg referred to those “with two racially full-Jewish grandparents” (Gumbrecht, 15). Yet, even as this statement perversely underscores a warped version of covenantal genealogy, it fails to provide us with concrete knowledge concerning Auerbach’s religious practices. It is speculative in the extreme to read into comments such as his written

⁸ Jesse M. Gellrich writes, for example: “However Auerbach may have been led to this characterization of historical experience as a philologist of Abraham’s sacrifice in Genesis 22, he is indicating that he has also been led to it as a Jew living in Nazi Germany during the persecution and sacrifice of his people” (114).

description of Leo Spitzer--“the son of a Viennese Jew and opera singer” (Gumbrecht 23)--Auerbach’s placement of himself as an assimilated German Jew. It is, however, equally difficult to claim strong Jewish affiliation for Auerbach on the basis of currently available biography.

Whether or not Auerbach himself was engaged in Jewish ritual or practice to the extent he had been circumcised or had had his son circumcised, one may argue on behalf of his awareness of the consequences for those so marked and remaining in Germany. Accordingly, it becomes evident that Auerbach’s choice of texts for his opening chapter may not have been so random or arbitrary as he generally claims for the textual analyses throughout *Mimesis*. The possibility exists that Odysseus’ scar, read symbolically as circumcision, and the binding of Isaac were selected to be read beside one another in ways that were historically relevant for Auerbach.⁹ Surely one might wish that as Isaac had been saved so might others. The recognition that marks the Odyssean passage built on mutual, bodily histories is not the way in which the mark of the male Jew will be read in the Diasporic homelands of Europe. In contrast, the binding of Isaac read through the ritual of circumcision as saving alternative may have been the wished for prefiguration, not of Christ, but of living Jews who might be saved rather than slaughtered. This noted, a return to Robbins’ essay and the literal wound in Auerbach’s texts.

In highlighting the attention Auerbach pays to servants, Robbins remarks upon a scene from Proust cited by Auerbach in the last chapter of *Mimesis*:

When Auerbach discusses the Bible, he finds room for the unnamed “servingsmen” who accompany Abraham and Isaac to the

⁹ The reading of a wound to the thigh as circumcision has been linked for example, to the story of the wounding of Jacob when he wrestles with the angel. “He leaves the scene with a limp, which is the stigmata of his encounter with the divine, and with a new name, Israel, which is the boon of this encounter. The boon is purchased with the wound.” (Frank, 180-81) The idea of the boon is similar to Moira Gatens’ observation: “From the original covenant between God and Abraham--which involved the forfeit of his very flesh, his foreskin--corporeal sacrifice has been a constant feature of the compact” (23)

sacrifice. Hagar, also mentioned in the first chapter of *Mimesis*, comes back in the last--in the explication of a “random” passage in Proust. (58)

The passage to which Robbins refers, and which Auerbach uses as an example of the artist who has come face to face with his own past, is, of course, from *Remembrance of Things Past*. Auerbach prepares for the citation by reminding readers that Proust’s narrator recalls a moment in his childhood when he has waited up for his mother, worried because he knows he is expected to be less dependent upon her; when the father sees the child waiting apprehensively, he responds by suggesting the mother spend the night in the child’s room. The passage below from Proust has been copied exactly as worded in *Mimesis*:

It was impossible for me to thank my father; what he called my sentimentality would have exasperated him. I stood there, not daring to move; he was still confronting us, an immense figure in his white night shirt, crowned with the pink and violet scarf of Indian cashmere in which, since he had begun to suffer from neuralgia, he used to tie up his head, standing like Abraham in the engraving after Benozzo Gozzoli which M. Swann had given me, telling Hagar that she must tear herself away from Isaac. . . . (*Mimesis* 543-44)

For Robbins the mention of servants, represented by Hagar in the Proust passage, “indicates only the true absence of the people” (58). On this reading, the description of a man whose head is wrapped (recall the hats of Heine), whose stance resembles Abraham, signals a return to the metaphor of circumcision, only this time with an unexpected twist.

Hagar’s reappearance at the end of *Mimesis* records an Auerbachian slip brought to light by David Damrosch, though countless other experienced readers who might have been expected to notice this little error apparently have failed to do so. When Damrosch interprets the passage from Proust, he sees it echoing the “Akhedah” from the first chapter, and detects, as have others,

Auerbach's hope "that like Isaac he and his beloved lost world may yet be snatched from destruction, freed from the bondage of death" (11). Then Damrosch carefully continues, noting that Auerbach has replaced Sarah with Hagar:

But Auerbach has misquoted the passage, I have given the lines in their correct form above, but this is how Auerbach himself has transcribed, or remembered, the metaphor: 'standing like Abraham in the engraving after Benozzo Gozzoli which M. Swann had given me, telling Hagar that she must tear herself away from Isaac'[544, French text on 543]. Auerbach gives us the wrong wife. In order to harmonize the passage and its translation, Willard Trask altered the Moncrieff translation of Proust that he used in his English version; the error stood uncorrected in subsequent German editions as well, and I do not know of any published discussion of it. This is, however a resonant slippage of transcription or of memory. Auerbach has not only a secret hope but also a secret fear, that he may resemble Abraham's other 'first-born' son, Ishmael, reprieved from death only to be sent with Hagar into a permanent exile in the wilderness [Genesis 21:20].¹⁰

Although an observation suggesting that Auerbach gives us the wrong mother might have been preferable, this passage is an example of a finely tuned criticism. Damrosch, reading generously as he speaks of "resonant slippage" and as he textually reunites Hagar with Ishmael, makes apparent one effect of having a set of circumcised ears.

In this example, the circumcised ears of Damrosch as critic allow the error of the master to pass, and the scar in the text to heal in a thoughtful reading. Instead of the critic son slaying the philological father in a zealous moment of Bloomian anxiety, one hears perhaps a Kermodean invocation to the figure of Hermes, god of interpretation, here called upon to act as if

¹⁰ The correct French version reads: "Je restai sans oser faire un mouvement; il était encore devant nous, grand, dans sa robe de nuit blanche sous le cachemire de l'Inde violet et rose qu'il nouait autour de sa tête depuis qu'il avait des névralgies, avec le geste d'Abraham dans la gravure d'après Benozzo Gozzoli que m'avait donnée M. Swann, disant à Sarah qu'elle a à se départir du côté d'Isaac." (Emphasis added.)<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext01/7swan11.txt>

the angel staying the hand of Abraham. Damrosch's touching retrieval of Auerbach's intent is an admirable reading, but not, I think, one innocent of interpretive entailments.

One wonders if this tender gesture is reserved only for a figure as revered as Auerbach, or if the recognition of circumcised ears in another reader always, to some extent, determine one's response. A moment spent trying to untangle the web of protective adjustments mentioned by Damrosch may prove helpful. In his essay on servants, Robbins had written: "Hagar, also mentioned in the first chapter of *Mimesis*, comes back in the last--in the explication of a 'random' passage in Proust" (58). Following Robbins lead and hoping to enhance my reading of "Odysseus Scar," I had sought out the Proust passage in my old imprint of *Mimesis*. Fully steeped in the Genesis narrative, as yet unaware of Damrosch, I had scribbled a question mark in the margin. Much later, returning to the same passage after reading Damrosch, there was the mark, but would I have questioned the authority, the circumcised ears, of Auerbach, Trask, or Robbins? Never. However, Robbins may be numbered among the many who never noticed the minor metathesis, and the mere exchange of an "S" for a "G" in an otherwise similar sequence of letters. Or, perhaps he, like Trask, thought to overlook it.

Finding what amounts to a wee blemish on the surface of Auerbach's text is not the issue here. Rather, the concern is one about literary election and what it means in terms of how one reads--through what path one enters and then traverses a text. Because Auerbach has been championed by writers like Edward Said, who repeatedly evoked the model of critic in exile or built upon Auerbach's *Ansatzpunkt* as the point of departure into critical writing, and because a well received collection devoted to Auerbach's legacy seems to have urged consideration of the writer be brought to the fore once again, the stature of the author of *Mimesis* would appear to be

unassailable.¹¹ In many respects, it is. What Auerbach is subject to, on the other hand, is being read by those whose ears may be considered to be circumcised, but whose aural circumcision has taken place in times and places very distanced from Auerbach's own literary cut.

In addition to tending the general trope of circumcision as it is worn by the elect, I am concerned with the manner in which Auerbach is, or has been, characterized as a German Jew. Briefly, Paul Bové comments upon this matter: "The specific and difficult issue of 'the Jewish question' forms part of the context in any consideration of Auerbach, especially the issue of cultural assimilation as Hannah Arendt and others give it weight and complexity" (*Intellectuals*, 114). Writing in 1991, Rene Welleck responds after a fashion by noting:

One commentator on Auerbach, Paul Bové, has made much of Auerbach's allusions to the historical situation that compelled him to write in Istanbul. These are matters I took for granted. I never doubted his distaste for the Nazis who after all expelled him. (122)

In a one sentence description, Luiz Costa-Lima refers to "a German-Jew romanist, Erich Auerbach" as he quickly details the romanist's itinerary from Germany to Istanbul to Pennsylvania to Connecticut (467). Said at one point describes Auerbach in this way: "He was a Jewish refugee from Nazi Europe, and he was a European scholar in the old tradition of German Romance scholarship" (*World*, 6). Reading the Lerer preface to the essays on Auerbach's legacy suggests

It would, no doubt, be a great oversimplification to aver that Auerbach's preoccupations with a literary Europe in decline--with the politics of literary language and the language of literary politics--reflect his own experiences as a Jew in 1930's Germany, as an academic exile in Turkey, and, later, an intellectual émigré in America. (5)

¹¹ See, for example, Said, *The World, The Text and The Critic* (5-8) and *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (68-69). The essays are contained in *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology*, edited by Seth Lerer.

More revealingly, Jan N. Bremmer, from the University of Groningen writing in 1999 about Auerbach, asserts that the “most detailed biographical lemmata can be found in dictionaries specifically concerned with Jewish authors and scholars” and then remarks further, “Except for these specific studies, virtually none of the shorter biographical notices I consulted bother to mention that Auerbach was of Jewish origin and that he never would have written *Mimesis* without this background.” It proves difficult, as mentioned earlier, to imagine how it is that Auerbach might be placed within what must have been a broad spectrum of intellectuals who were both German and Jewish, and, further, to imagine how that position ought to be configured in analyses of *Mimesis*.

In an essay entitled “Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* as a Meditation on the Shoah” written in 2001, Earl Jeffrey Richards suggests that “it might be helpful to examine” *Mimesis* “as a potentially overlooked example of a highly sublimated allegorical meditation on the contemporary murder of Europe’s Jews.” It is an approach, I suppose, that was to be expected. Nevertheless, to claim for Auerbach’s *Mimesis* that it “anticipates a similar gesture to portray everyday life in the memorial books of eastern European Jews, the yizker-bikher, whose composition began immediately after the liberation of the death camps in spring of 1945” gives one pause. Surely one can concur that the choice of the *akedah* as a point of departure for *Mimesis* was in all likelihood historically contingent. However, one should question an argument suggesting “What is striking is that Auerbach, of all possible Biblical narratives, chose the *akedah* in 1942 to begin his book.” There are Biblical narratives, and there are Biblical narratives.

The *akedah* narrative carries enormous weight not only with respect to its braid among three religions, but with respect to the history of the visual and literary arts of Western Europe.

One must allow for the possibility that Auerbach chose it because, as he writes, “everyone knows it”(9). When Richards attends to “The Sacrifice of Isaac and the Motif of the Akedah” in one section of his essay, he reinscribes the error substituting Hagar for Sarah. Writing a few years after Damrosch, Richards presents this moment:

The third and final explicit reference to the Abraham/Isaac motif--though, strictly speaking, not the binding of Isaac--is found in the last chapter (and is not indicated in the index) in a quotation from Proust, where the narrator describes his father as ‘standing like Abraham in the engraving after Benozzo Gozzoli, which M. Swan (sic) had give me, telling Hagar that she must tear herself away from Isaac’ [544]

Not to be deterred, Richards continues on to name a better “parallel” for the Abraham and Isaac story, “the murder of the son of Seigner and Madame Chastel.” His demurring that the Proust passage is not “strictly speaking” about the binding of Isaac, would in large part disappear were he to have made the necessary correction. Sarah’s being pulled away from Isaac could then be configured as an event anticipating the feared sacrifice. However, upon reading, “In the index to Auerbach’s original German text, the first item to be listed is *Abrahamsopfer*, a subtle reminder of the importance of the story for the entire book,” it becomes necessary to question exactly how Jewish Richards wishes *Mimesis* and or Auerbach to become. After all, indices usually are alphabetized, with the result that Abraham is also the first listing in the index to Lambropoulos’ *The Rise of Eurocentrism*, a work that is a far cry from a meditation on the *shoah*.

One last note with respect to Auerbach and Hagar before leaving Abraham and his women altogether. In Muslim tradition, apparently, the child who is led to sacrifice is frequently understood to be Ishmael.¹² With this piece of information, the “resonant slip” made by

¹² Azazah Y. Al-Hibri comments: “In the Qur’an, under most interpretations, it is Ishmael, not Isaac, who is offered as a sacrifice” (Moyers 200). And: “The Muslim tradition relates that

Auerbach may indicate his familiarity with two traditions, and may account for an unthinking juxtaposition of Hagar with Sarah, irrespective of its inaccuracy. Nonetheless, the bigger, fiftieth anniversary edition of *Mimesis* has no emendations, its only textual alteration consisting of an added essay by Said, and so the Hagar/Sarah exchange will be perpetuated.¹³

The idea that circumcision takes place but once, as more or less suggested by Derrida's opening sentence to "Shibboleth," is an idea to be considered in conjunction with the metaphor of circumcised ears. The time and place of one's aural circumcision surely impinges on how one figures the act of interpretation to be undertaken, or what the act ought to minimally require. We see from Auerbach's own comments, made over fifty years ago, a forecast of trends that would not only insure the singularity of *Mimesis*, but would make endeavors similar to his a near impossibility for future scholars. He himself acknowledges:

Formerly, what could be taken for granted in the university (and, in the English-speaking countries, at the post-graduate level) must now be acquired there; most often such acquirements are either made too late or they are inadequate. Moreover, the intellectual center of gravity within the university or graduate school has shifted; there is greater emphasis on the most modern literature and criticism, and, when earlier periods are favored with scholarly attention, they are usually periods like the baroque, which have been recently rediscovered, perhaps because they lie within the scope of modern literary prejudices and catchalls. ("Philology" 9)

Undoubtedly the expectations for what constitutes passable literary interpretation have been redefined many times over the ensuing decades. The rite of interpretation changes, and I read now and again a form of public lament, a wish for a return to what might be called civility, as

Abraham leads Ishmael and not Isaac to be sacrificed; however there are differences among Islamic authors on this subject'(Hamoudi, 1998:95)" (Boon 292).

¹³ It will be Hagar's revenge for the beating she endured at the hands of Sarah in the Benozzo Gozzoli cycle. However, prints of the Gozzoli clarify little with respect to Isaac. See Ahl, plates 215 and 216.

hinted at in an essay (part of which just happens to be devoted to “Upon the Circumcision”) by Milton scholar John T. Shawcross¹⁴:

Studies in progress that I am aware of suggest a Milton of ‘traditional’ studies but others suggest a Milton to be examined as a postmodernist, one who reflects our concern with gender issues, with political substructures (particularly those that are construed as liberal or even radical) and with what may be seen as ‘politically correct’ or as engaged in linguistic ‘différence.’ My hope is that the new millennium will see the content and the methodologies of the past and of the recent present wedded in a union that will not be dissolved because of rancor from one member or the other. (5)

I hear in Shawcross’s list of other studies the whisper of Auerbach’s “modern literary prejudices and catchalls.” Shawcross’s use of the phrase “wedded in a union that will not be dissolved,” seems irretrievably archaic, if not just a bit un-Miltonic. Nevertheless, it is a perfectly fine phrase. Perhaps it is the context in which it is used that makes it seem an ill fit. One begins to appreciate how it is that Lambropoulos, faced with what appear to him to be unending acts of interpretation, argues: “There is no longer need to play Hebrews and Hellenes to gain admission to civic society, a society presently languishing under fatigue and global challenges” (331).

And yet, there are legacies handed down, not unlike the rite of Jewish circumcision itself, that respond, even if slowly, to historical pressures. At the end of his book on the blood covenant, Hoffman talks about the rite’s early emphasis, and he then comments on current revisions:

Circumcision as an act of drawing blood that saves is a meaning that was lost a long time ago. Even Orthodox Jews would find such elements in the rabbinic system hard to fathom nowadays. . . . But the official meaning of circumcision remains the same. It is the rite of initiation into the covenant; hence its new name in Reform circles: ‘covenant service;’ hence also the presence of a parallel

¹⁴ Shawcross was working on his PhD in 1957, (coincidentally the year of Auerbach’s death) and teaching freshman composition, so it is safe to assume it is an elder statesman writing in the the 2002 ANQ article. See <<http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/bjackson/CONVOCATION.HTML>> for full text of Bruce Jackson’s speech recalling Shawcross as teacher.

liturgy for girls, who now are covenanted directly with God, just as their brothers are. (219-220)

It is difficult, however, to imagine what an interpretive equivalent or a “parallel liturgy” for the metaphor of circumcised ears might be. Perhaps Derrida, emphasizing one of Celan’s terms, can be of assistance here.

The word Derrida selects from Celan’s poem, “Dein Vom Wachen,” is *Wundgelesenes*, in Derrida’s verbal play, a “reading wound,” or, “if not as the French translation says, a readable, ciphered, or decipherable wound [blessure lisible], at least read to the quick [lu jusqu’au sang] (Wundgelesenes)” (340). Working through this same poem by Celan, Hans-Georg Gadamer writes of the “wound-read” in this way:

‘Wound-read’ or wound-driven, refers to a wound produced by a reading expedition that has lasted too long. Or is there a deeper ambiguity in ‘wound-read’? Perhaps it refers not only to the pain of reading, excessive or futile reading, but also to the pain and the wound of what is ‘gathered,’ that is, what is painfully experienced in general which can also mean ‘gleaned’: gathered together, as in a gleaning of suffering? (107)

A footnote explains that “Gadamer plays on the meaning of the German verb ‘lesen’--‘to read,’ and ‘to glean,’ or ‘to gather’” (10). One sense of Derrida’s “read to the quick” is evident here as well in Gadamer’s “the pain of reading.”

As much as the idea of a readable wound appeals, for one might then give it voice, there is the reminder, repeated here, of Derrida’s claim for the Shibboleth:

One may also, because of the *Shibboleth* and exactly to the extent that one may make use of it, see it turned against oneself: then it is the circumcised who are proscribed, or held at the border, excluded from the community, put to death, or reduced to ashes merely on the sight of, or in the name of, the *Wundgelesenes*. (“Shibboleth,”346)

Whether by ears or by tongue, it seems, one is caught. There is in Derrida's riff on *Shibboleth* language not all that distanced from Kermode's deployment of readers: " ... the circumcised word, the word turned *Shibboleth*, at once both secret and readable, mark of membership and of exclusion, the shared wound of division ..." (346). The shared wound of division names the Janus-gated sign of circumcision as the place of interpretation. The secret and ineffable resonate here among the ashes, the place of the abject, the semiotic charge awaiting the call to muster on behalf of a symbolic cut, perhaps too quickly read into law as an inside or an outside. The only answer may be to risk the proscription and interpret, circumcision as *Wundgelesenes* firmly in tow.

CONCLUSION: Last Cuts

Mark the first page of the book with a red marker. For, in the beginning, the wound is invisible.

--Reb Alcé

Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, no pag.

And there are wounds so sweet and sticky, we hover about them like flies, we can never quite leave.

David Mura, *Where the Body Meets Memory* 257

In many respects the work presented here has been a dialogue conducted within the space embraced by these two epigraphs. While these snippets from Jabès and Mura are not precisely identifiable as figures of circumcision, I choose to name them as such. The Jabès acts as a reminder that a reader does not know before engaging with a text exactly what to expect. Important, too, in this cryptic remark is the understanding that the type of book one enters is not designated. Although the trope of circumcision connotes the elect, Jabès' aphorism leaves room for the possibility that works of less than high literary merit may capably deliver worthy wounds. The worthy wound inflicted by reading is that which first pricks and then prompts inquiry.

Derrida's dance around circumcision rests for a moment upon the idea that circumcision takes place one time only, on a certain date and at a certain place. If one can be wounded or even circumcised by reading, as I assert is the case, perhaps the time and place of the encounter inflect the way the words are met. It may prove necessary that the residual scar of a discursive circumcision--the habits of reading once requisite to an academic discipline, for example--be

subjected to a second or possibly third circumcision. This inscription might even provide the opportunity to read as an outsider.

Reading as an outsider makes possible, I believe, a somewhat different understanding of the kind of working space that texts can provide. What has emerged during this exercise of positioning myself and others as readers, whether inside or outside a hermeneutical elect, is a growing appreciation for scholarly texts that possess the characteristic of affability. This is not to imply that texts so labeled are merely simple or pleasing; it is to acknowledge that the inability to pronounce *Shibboleth* need not prevent a reader from crossing the borders into someone else's textual territory. I cannot claim for certain that one must go outside in order to read as an insider, but I can claim that the reading of scars, most assuredly the reading of circumcision, necessitates some willingness to read away from one's "intellectual home."¹

There is a lament voiced by Maurice Minnifield in the television series *Northern Exposure*, that the circumcised penis is no longer the yardstick it once was (Porush 115). This plaint suggests more to me than the erasure of a once serviceable sign of distinction, for it highlights the difference between a religious ritual ensconced within a richly narrative tradition and a routine medical procedure that gains a narrative only when it proves the exception. The absence of storytelling surrounding routine infant male circumcision strikes me as significant precisely because it seems to ensure the production of but one narrative, that of victimization. Taking this lesson to the text, to acts of reading, means that word wounds ought to be accompanied by ritual response in the form of narrative or critique. This is to say: read the words to the quick, find the live flesh, and make them mean.

¹ I first heard the term "intellectual home" used by Cora Kaplan, during an on campus visit at the University of Pittsburgh.

David Mura's epigraph, read without the context of his work and read within the context of my work, may conjure a ghoulishly perverse image. But it is the most succinct critique and/or mnemonic I have found for what the work of reading wounds requires and rewards. There are sweet and sticky wounds we hover about, wounds we can never quite leave, and some of these wounds have been delivered in the form of letters written in honey.

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