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"When I turn toward perception, (I) find at work in my organs of perception a thought older than myself, of which those organs are merely a trace." - Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*.

"We will therefore have to recognize an ideality that is not alien to the flesh, that gives it its axes, its depth, its dimensions." - Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*.

INTRODUCTION

How is the wisdom of a spiritual tradition kept alive? How is the truth of a spiritual tradition passed on from the old to the new generation? In this paper, we are going to reflect upon the human body as the primary ritual bearer, and original text, of such transmission. Our reflections are meant to bear in significant ways on all the spiritual traditions with which we are familiar. Thus, for example, they will be specifically related, when appropriate, to Buddhism, Christianity, and even the Kogi Indians of Colombia. Nevertheless, in order to keep our thinking clearly focused, we will concentrate almost entirely, for the time being, on texts in the Judaic tradition. Our principal objective will be to deepen our appreciation of the wisdom in this tradition, which prescribed, through its texts, certain rituals of prayer and meditation, understanding that, since rituals inevitably appropriate the body through posture, gesture, rhythmic movement, and the expression of inspired breathing, the "natural attitude" of the human body thereby undergoes a subtle, yet profound metamorphosis.¹

In essence, this metamorphosis is an ongoing, evolving process of sanctification: first, rituals of purification, which is a kind of phenomenological reduction (*epoche*), cleansing and emptying the earthen vessel we call "my body"; then, the glorious moment of investiture, apotheosis of incarnation, which it would be entirely accurate to describe as a moment of "enthusiasm."

The ritually consecrated body, sheltered within the precincts of the temple and devoted to performing the sacred tasks spelled out by the tradition, thus becomes, itself, a beautiful sanctuary for the preservation and creative disclosing of the presence of God. The heart of the body, for example, is a chest whose opened doors disclose, or make visible, the scrolls of the innermost, most invisible Torah, entrusted at the time of each human birth to mortal flesh.

Religion is a tradition which binds and fastens the body; but it does so for the sake of its health, its releasement. Through ritual, through the ritual practices of its tradition, the living body is completely reshaped; it is touched and moved in every cell and fiber; its limbs are gently bowed, bent and folded, to help us *feel* the meaning and value of devotion and service; and our organs and sensoria are receptively opened, emptied, and gracefully filled with the healing presence of that which, since time immemorial, is called "the divine."

ARGUMENT

What is prayer? Perhaps you are ready to say that prayer is simply an attitude of mindfulness: an attitude of reverence, praise and worship, the giving of thanks for manifold blessings constantly received. But prayer is surely not reducible to a psychological state, a mere turn of "mind". Prayer is also always manifest in, and through, the body. Not so much because, as Wittgenstein states, the visible body is our best "picture" of the invisible soul, but rather because the wholeheartedness of spontaneous prayer concerns our being in its existential wholeness. In, and by way of, the obligatory practices of ritual, the painful split between mind and body, spirit and flesh, obligation and desire, is finally healed, so they can function spontaneously as a whole, as one, in the commemoration and celebration of a sacred presence. The rituals are intended to facilitate such integration, for, according to the most ancient wisdom, there can be no health, no rejoicing, without it. When rituals succeed in fusing spirit and flesh, blessing and healing may be felt.

It is, I think, customary to understand the wonder of the spirit's final salvation, its release from the sins of the body, as a *real separation* of spirit from flesh; its departure, at the instant of death, and its everlasting return to the heavenly temple where God abides and sits in final judgment. But there is, in fact, a different and more subtle understanding of this release. For, once we appreciate the fact that the human body is an on-going process of embodiment, we may understand the notion of the soul's release to be the dream of a complete *metamorphosis* of the flesh, which, as such, would release the spirit from its painful bondage to an ego-body wilfully attached to its own lower satisfactions and repeatedly unmindful of the higher needs of the so-called spirit. The notion of release as a real separation is vulgar; it is in need of a deconstruction which moves our thinking beyond the mind-body duality.

THE TEXT OF FLESH: OUR PRIMORDIAL TEXT

"Warum zeichnet, wie sonst, die Stirne des Mannes ein Gott nicht, Druckt den Stempel, wie sonst, nicht dem Getroffenen auf?" - F. Holderlin, *Brot und Wein*, VI.

In "Freud and the Scene of Writing," Jacques Derrida writes:

From Plato and Aristotle on, scriptural images have regularly been used to illustrate the relationship between reason and experience, perception and memory.²

This is so, except that, by writing this, he casts away in shadow - as we shall presently see - the ancient scriptural image of his own ancestors, the Jewish people. Forgiving him this forgetfulness, we read on:

Psychical content will be represented by a text whose essence is irreducibly graphic. The structure of the psychical apparatus will be represented by a writing machine (as in Freud's mystic writing pad, for example).³

And he asks:

What must the psyche be if it can be represented by a text?⁴ Modifying this question, we would ask: What is the process of embodying a liturgical tradition, if it can be represented by a text? As we shall see very soon, the

liturgical and scriptural texts themselves connect the human body to the image of a text. But they also hide in shadow the full significance of this connection. Our concern, here, is to shed some light on this connection, so that we may see more clearly how the textual image helps us to understand the transmission of a religious tradition.

If we accept Julia Kristeva's definition of "text", then the process of embodying a liturgical tradition is indeed a text-centered process; but the sense in which this is so turns out to be much deeper, much more complicated, than we might at first have thought. Here is Kristeva's definition, proposed in her essay on Mallarmé's *Un coup des des*:

Let us designate as a text any linguistic *practice* in which the operations of the genotext appears in laminar form in the phenotext, so that the phenotext serves as a projection of a genotext and invites the reader to reconstruct from it the entire signifying process.⁵

First, suppose that we construe "the reader" to belong to a devotional community, so that the invitation is understood as religiously binding. Second, suppose we take the "phenotexts" to be the *visible* texts of the liturgy. Next, suppose that the "genotext" is an *invisible* text inscribed by God's own hand. Then Kristeva's definition implies that the visible texts of the liturgy bind those mortals who have thoughtfully encountered them to reconstruct, or interpret, their significance through a never-ending process of embodiment. But how should we characterize this process? Is it simply a process of liturgical reading? Surely not, since it is written into the liturgy that we, in reading the phenotext, transform our embodiment, weaving, or, in effect, writing the liturgical sense into the very flesh of our body. Is it, then, a *simple* process of writing? Not quite, since it is written that what we write into our flesh *always* turns out to have been written *already*, written invisibly, in the divine genotext. So, if the embodiment is writing, it is the writing of a copy: by copying the phenotexts, which are themselves mere copies of the genotext, the embodiment ultimately copies the authoritative genotext. But the matter is further complicated by the fact that the originality of the genotext, and even its basic authority, are shrouded in impenetrable mystery. The genotext is invisible, as is its author. Is the liturgy just its projection, its trace, its copy? Or is the genotext a projection of the liturgy - a myth, a fiction? We must now interpolate these obscure questions into the context of the embodiment process.

In "The God's Script," a short story by Borges, the author invites us to imagine the idea that, on the first day of Creation, God thought to write "a magical sentence with the power to ward off . . . evils. He wrote it in such a way that it would reach the most distant generations and not be subject to chance." And he speculates, while searching for that formula, that sentence with the secret of health, that, "Throughout the earth there are ancient forms, forms incorruptible and eternal . . . A mountain could be the speech of God, or a river . . . Perhaps the magic would be written on my face; perhaps I myself was the end of my search."⁶

Perhaps Borges' fiction is a poetic lie; that is to say: a hermeneutic truth. In fact, Borges simply recasts in modern print the shadow of an ancient truth, that truth protected by the sacred texts of the Judaic tradition, for example, which concerns the nature and origin of writing, and of inscription generally, and which recognized, engraved upon the human flesh, the invisible hand-

writing of God, compassionately transmitting, for the benefit of all human beings, the secret of their embodiment. This secret, dispelling diseases, even madness, spells out the way to health, the way of ancient wisdom. As Gershom Scholem explains:

Everybody carries the secret trace of transmigrations of his soul in the lineaments of his forehead and his hands, and in the aura which radiates from his body.⁷

Now, we could construe this as nothing but metaphor. The point of this essay, however, is that such an interpretation misses the experiential truth.

In the *Book of Psalms* (139:16), it is stated that the secret trace, the secret spell that brings mortals their health, is in fact, a text: "in thy book, all my members were written". But the text is *identified* with the human body. Thus, for example, in the text (a *piyyut*) for the second day of the service which commemorates the new year (*Rosh Hashanah*), we find a most powerful prayer. It reads:

O deign to hear the voice of those who glorify thee with all their limbs, according to the number of the two hundred and forty-eight affirmative precepts. In this month, they blow thirty sounds according to the thirty members of the soles of their feet; the additional offerings of the day are ten, according to the ten in their ankles; they approach the alter twice, according to their two legs; five men are called to the law, according to the five joints in their knees: they observe the appointed time to sound the cornet, on the first day of the month, according to the one in their thigh; they sound the horn thrice, according to the three in their hips: lo, with the additional offering of the New Moon, they are eleven, according to their eleven ribs; they pour out the supplication with nine blessings, according to the muscles in their arms; they contain thirty verses, according to the thirty in the palms of their hand; they daily repeat the prayer of eighteen blessings, according to the eighteen vertebra in their spine; at the offering of the continual sacrifice, they sound nine times, according to the nine muscles in their head: in the two orisons they blew eight times, according to the eight vertebra in their neck; their statutes and law are contained in five books, according to the five perforations; he hath ordained the six orders of the *Mishnah*, according to the different imaginations of the heart and inward parts; also the kidneys, the loin, the imagination, thought, belly, bowels and their moods; the animal life (instinct), spirit, rational soul, perception, skin, flesh, veins and bones . . . Shall all lift up the eye, and pierce the ear, and open the mouth, that with the tongue and speech of the lips, and from the sole of their feet to the head (they) may show the particulars of their good acts.⁸

Gershom Scholem writes that,

Long before the Kabbalah the Talmudists played with the idea of a correspondence between the commandments of the Torah and the structure of man . . . Thus, each member of man's body was made to fulfil one of the commandments.⁹

If this correspondence should seem, nowadays, to be nothing but the word-play of magic or myth, is that not because we, we moderns of the scientific epoch, have been denied the full teachings of our tradition? Where is the living tradition, now? Where is that tradition which once transmitted, from old to young, the *experiential* significance of this correspondence? The tradi-

tion which taught and preserved the healing of our embodiment, the healing of the flesh and our release from its suffering, through which alone the beauty of our spiritual life can blossom, is now gone. The continuity of the tradition has been all but completely forgotten - or (if we may translate Freud) deeply repressed. Still, as long as these texts, these prayers, are extant, the healing wisdom of this most ancient tradition is not, and will not be, entirely lost. Can we, in fact, restore it? Perhaps we can, if, even to some extent, we succeed in fleshing out, in the moving language of human experience, just what these texts concern, so that we rescue them from the perverse fate of mysticism.

It becomes crucial, here, to understand and appreciate the role of narrative imagination in the process of healing. Even if the correspondence be, in a sense, nothing but a wonderful waking dream, that is not to exclude the possibility that, precisely by such wakeful dreaming, our experiencing of ourselves, and above all, of our embodiment, may be profoundly changed. Wakeful dreaming is, as such, a form of therapy - perhaps, in fact, our most powerful method of healing. Basically, it involves working with an ideal body-schema, an image of mortal incarnation which originates in what Kant would call our "productive imagination". (Is it helpful to think of prayer as a form of waking dream?)¹⁰ The texts describe, then, the dream of a cosmological correspondence. And they do this with a spellbinding poetry that moves us to respond in such a way that the de-scriptions become pre-scriptions; and, since these are techniques that actually cure, the texts succeed in *making* themselves true (true descriptions, that is). Nor is this truth a mere isomorphism between text and flesh; for the possibility of the truth, here, is not different from the possibility of a cure. And this means that the texts are true because they have not forgotten the original text, inscribed upon our flesh, and of which they are merely the true and faithful translations.

How is God's infinite "tenderness . . . moved toward all flesh"? How is God's "glorious holy name . . . blessed by all flesh"? How is it possible for the "instruction" of divine law to "heal all flesh"?¹¹ In the prayer of Grace which seals their meal, thoughtful Jews like to chant:

We will give thanks unto thee, O Eternal, our God, . . . for thy covenant, which thou hast sealed into our flesh.¹²

The most obvious, or natural, interpretation understands this prayer as referring solely to the rite of circumcision, which sealed our de-cision to observe the sacred covenant. This interpretation, while certainly not false, is yet a tragically restricted understanding. For, in the first place, we must note that the word in the text is not a one-sided word which just denotes circumcision, but is, rather, the two-faced *hermeneutic* word, "sealed", which discloses the truth that circumcision reminds us of the *original* incision, or inscription: the writing and attesting of the divine signature, the grammatology of the original divine de-cision.¹³ According to Irving Friedman, the covenant is related *both* to the word of the tongue *and* to the circumcision of the foreskin: the Hebrew term *milah* refers, it seems, to both word and circumcision.¹⁴ The two are really one and the same. By sealing our tongue, we bind ourselves to speaking words of truth, words of compassion and benevolence, words so filled with love and joy and worship that they move the air in a polyphonic song. Likewise by the sealing of the foreskin, we make a sacred offering of our body, an offering, in particular of our sexual organ.

Circumcision sanctifies the organ of sexual union and procreation: it reminds us to infuse into our experience of sexual embrace and union the joyful wisdom of godly love. In properly consecrated union, even our separation from God (in keeping with His fateful decision) can be erased and healed.

It must also be noted that, at *Deuteronomy* 10:16, we find the rite of circumcision bound to the heart:

Circumcise, therefore, the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiff-necked.

This context surely establishes, not only that circumcision is a process of opening, but further, that the very *essence* of circumcision - the heart of the matter, as it were - lies in the fact that it opens. Circumcision therefore corresponds to the breaking open of a path: the process which Freud called "Bahnung". It is, to be sure, a transgression which *wounds*; but in wounding, it also opens. It is also an act of theft; yet it gives, in exchange, a gift which is far more precious.

In his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), Freud wrote that "pain leaves behind it particularly rich breaches (*Bahnungen*)."¹⁵ Circumcision, as the infliction of pain, brings about much more than a traumatic neurophysiological memory-trace (in Freudian language, an *Erinnerungsspur*). Indeed, it initiates the spiritual process which Jews call "remembrance." And, as an act of commemoration, circumcision is quite properly located at the scene, or site, or the covenant.

Now, the meaning of the Hebrew word, which we have translated by "seal", is remarkably close, in fact, to the meaning of the Sanskrit (Buddhist) word *mudra*, which Professor Herbert Guenther explains in this way:

The term *mudra*, literally translated, means 'seal'. But what is a seal? Is it something that makes a very deep impression on what it comes in contact with. So it might be better to understand *mudra* . . . as a tremendous *encounter* in which two forces come together and make a very deep impression.¹⁶

Mudra further denotes a sacred gesture: gesture of offering, gesture which makes manifest the very depths of heartfelt feeling, and seals our vow to commit our existence to the path of righteousness and compassionate service.

Circumcision, then, is a "tremendous encounter" with the commandments of God. In sealing the covenant, God *pro-programmed* our bodies. (This insight persists, oddly enough, in our scientific thinking about the genetic "code".)¹⁷ But this pro-programme is originally, as the word itself informs us, just a *potential*, which, in linguistic theory, would be called, I think, our "competence": a very special one, however, since the text is woven, invisibly, into the very texture of our flesh, as the secret, hidden scripture (*sepher torah*), by the light of which our life (or, as linguistic science would say, our "performance") may be properly guided. The pro-programme is, therefore, a truly unshakable *standard*, or *norm*, inscribed for safe-keeping into the very flesh of our bodies. However, the circumcision only *breaks open* a passage-way: what happens thereafter is up to us. The pro-programme, after all, is not a real seal, it is only the ideal *pro-mise* of one. The real seal, of course, can only be placed at the very end. Thus, to say that the body of tradition is inscribed with the Law of God is to concede that this body exists *only in deferment*, or in delay. It is, in fact, precisely to remind us of this deferment,

and even of the possibility of "erasure", that the seal of the covenant is put in writing. But the inscription itself *actually and explicitly* exists only in, or by way of, this *difference*, which we have articulated here as the temporal delay - the temporal interlude, separation, and exile - between the mere potential of a capacity and the holy life in which that potential is wholly realized and fulfilled.

Hence, we are compelled to acknowledge that there is, in fact, no "original" text at all. The "original", which is traditionally understood to be invisible, only exists as an *absent* text. In truth, the inscription takes place only after the fact (or, as Freud would say: *nur nachtraglich*): only, that is, *after* the transformative encounter with the liturgical texts of the tradition. Considered in this light, circumcision is a *first* encounter, traumatic precisely because its significance cannot be known until many years later, when, thanks to the encounter with liturgical tradition, the human body begins to embody the visible scriptures. After the fact, in the living body of tradition, I realize, "in my organs of perception", as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "a thought older than myself, of which those organs are merely a trace." But this ancient thought, older than myself, and always already at work, is a weave of symbols, binding our perceptual body into the maternal textures of the world. It *never* was *present* as a text, since it is precisely in regard to the beginning of life and its end that (in words borrowed from Derrida),

We must speak of the indissoluble union of the signifier and the concept signified.¹⁸

There is indissoluble union at the beginning, union prior to birth, because the painful encounter with tradition has not yet taken place; and there is indissoluble union at the end, union in death, insofar as the living body has compellingly bound itself to the duties of liturgical tradition. So the text really belongs to the *middle*, the interlude of life, which is also, perforce, the time of exile and alienation, the time, as Derrida would say, of maximum *dissemination*, which only the gathering of liturgical re-petition can bring to an end. The "original text" is myth, is dream. And yet, because it serves mortals as pre-text to spiritual exertion and devotion, it meets their desperate need for encouragement.

However, unless we are taught how to read (perform) this text, this most hidden scroll of divine illumination, and unless we bend every effort to understand it by translating it into the meaningful context of our daily life, the human potential for well-being, granted us by virtue of this text, will remain unfulfilled, our lives the merest shadow of what, otherwise, they might have become. Without the wisdom in this primordial text of flesh, our mortal existence is bereft of its most profound meaning and value. And, in the fall of our mortality, we will not know the refreshing spring of joy in a life which is moved by the inwrought *Torah* of godliness. In the print of the texts, we read the shapes of thought's embodiments, cast in articulate shadows. Do these shadows foreshadow our translation of their wisdom into the sanity of our lives? Or will they, instead, foreshadow a continuation of our period of mourning, exiled from the healing light of God's presence? - We must not forget that the divine inscription may also be read as the engraving of our fate, the seal, and shadow, of our death. Without the breath of truth (*emeth*), human beings are cast into the shadows of death (*meth*). Without the breath which perpetually sings the "ethics of the Fathers" (*Pirke Avoth*), the

wisdom which God engraved (*haruth*) will not rise up into the upright gait and bearing of human freedom (*heruth*).¹⁹

THE FLESHING OUT OF THE TEXT

"Man can embody the truth, but he cannot know it."

-William Butler Yeats

In his discussion of how the Kogi train for the priesthood, Reichel-Dolmatoff observes that,

Many of the songs and recitations are phrased in the ancient ceremonial language which is comprehensible only to an experienced mama (priest), but which has to be learned by the novices by sheer memorization. During these early years, myths, songs and dances become closely linked into a rigid structure that alone - at least, at that time - guarantees the correct form of presentation.²⁰

And he points out, further, that,

One of the main institutionalized teaching concepts consists in iterative behaviour. This is emphasized especially during the first half of the curriculum, when the novices are made to repeat the myths, songs, or spells until they have memorized not only the text and the precise intonation, but also the body movements and minor gestures that accompany the performance. Rhythmic elements are important and the learning of songs and recitals is always combined with dancing or, at least, with swaying motions of the body. This is not a mere mechanistic approach to the learning process and does not represent a neurally based stimulus-response pattern, but the child is simultaneously provided with a large number of interpretive details that make him grasp the context and the meaning of the texts.²¹

According to this author,

The novices have ample opportunity to watch their master perform ritual actions, a process during which a considerable body of knowledge is transmitted to them Now that they themselves begin to perform minor rituals, the recurrent statements contained in the texts, together with the identical behavioural sequences, become linked into a body of highly patterned experiential units.²²

Through these rituals, the human body becomes the loom of life, weaving into being the sacred body of knowledge, as preserved and taught by the priestly tradition.

I would like, now, to pursue the thinking which these anthropological observations suggest, going outside the particulars of the Jewish religion in order to approach a *universally* true understanding of the function of rituals of prayer and worship in the life of a spiritual tradition.²³ Stated succinctly, the understanding I shall be approaching with you concerns the process whereby the rituals and ritual texts of a religious tradition are progressively *embodied in practice* and slowly transform the practitioner's experiencing of the body - a painful body which is earthly, worldly and profane - into the hale and holy body of that tradition. This process of embodiment, then, is a profound transformation which makes the human body wholesome and healthy: one's body *glows* with the warmth and kindness of an ancient wisdom, whose creative, healing work the teachers of the tradition have compassionately

preserved in, and as, their own exemplary embodiment of holy knowledge, so that they could pass on this "body of knowledge" to the youngest people of the next generation. Finally, we will realize, not only why the human body essentially needs, and essentially depends on, a tradition of religious education, but also why, correspondingly, every religious tradition needs, the fatefully depends upon, the teaching of rituals of prayer and service.

It is crucial, however, that we have, to begin with, an appropriate understanding of the human body. If we cannot shake ourselves loose from the conviction that the human body is just a complicated machine, or merely a material thing of some sort, and that the human flesh is just a membrane of skin which enwraps a frame of bones and some internal organs, we will not be sufficiently open to the more profound understanding of the human body which, however obscurely, underlies - and underlies, in fact, with logical, or conceptual necessity - the traditions of ritual and prayer we have been considering. Accordingly, we must take to heart what Merleau-Ponty says about the flesh in one of his late manuscripts. He writes:

The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term 'element', in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing* The flesh in this sense is an 'element' of Being.²⁴

Our flesh, then, is "the concrete emblem of a general manner of being."²⁵ Once upon a time, the Judaic religion understood this manner of being: it diagnosed with great accuracy its inveterate tendencies toward dis-ease ("evil") and prescribed the way toward a restoration of health. It understood that, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "my body is made of the same flesh as the world," and moreover, that "this flesh of my body is shared by the world."²⁶ But if the body is that by virtue of which we share a world, does it not follow that the body must also be the historical emblem, the principal bearer, of the tradition of that sharing? The human body is, in fact, our most precious *historical* text, whose secrets of life are passed on, even without our understanding, from generation to generation. And yet, without any tradition of instruction in rituals and prayer, how can the most wonderful, the most precious, of these secrets ever be read - and translated into the creativity and growth of human life? I *am* my body; but, thanks to this body, I can *become* a different body, a different embodiment, more in keeping with my potential, my capacities (for deeper feeling, for a more open and appreciative way of listening and viewing), my skillfulness; and more fulfilling, therefore, in regard for my essential nature as a manifest embodiment of spirit. I am a body capable of becoming a sacred body of holy knowledge, a truly living body of the spiritual tradition.²⁷

But, as Scholem observes, there must be a *tradition* of oral teachings to show us how to focus on, and develop, our innate resources, especially those having to do with feeling and perceptivity. The *oral* nature of these teachings already bespeaks the fact that *the tradition is a tradition of embodiment*, while the mere fact that there are teachings establishes that the tradition is normative in nature. "The Oral Law, which gives a detailed interpretation of the ways of the Written Law and its application of life, is embodied," he asserts, "in Keneset Yisrael (the congregation of Israel), both in heaven and on earth."²⁸

We must appreciate, however, that, if the body of knowledge vouchsafed a religious tradition is to avoid reification and death, and escape the fate of moldy books silently turning to dust on archive shelves, it must be kept alive as, and alive in, a tradition of embodiment which is also, perforce, a tradition of textual rituals (e.g., rituals of reading, or performing, prayers), textual translations, and ways of sharing the experiencing and understandings of the sacred texts. The tradition relies on our understandings of the texts to weave, with those threads, a new body of knowledge.

This new body is also an ancient one. Merleau-Ponty, pursuing certain hints in the late manuscripts of Edmund Husserl (traces of a pre-reflective *Cogito*, and of a *fungierende Intentionalität*), recognized, and even limned, this archaic body, as a body of sentience and perceptivity. Walter Benjamin, by contrast more interested in its historicity, likewise raises before our eyes the dignity of the human embodiment. In his essay, "Ueber den Begriff der Geschichte," Benjamin writes:

The Jews are known for having been forbidden to investigate the future. The Torah and prayer, on the other hand, instruct them in remembrance.²⁹

Remembrance (*Eingedenken*) is indeed, as he says, the very heart of the matter. But the question remains: What *is* remembrance through prayer? Why, or how, does prayer become, for us, the very foundation of such remembrance? We are compelled to ask ourselves whether remembrance consists merely in reading and reciting prayers in a routine (i.e., mindless) way, or even in a deep, but entirely intellectual, or cerebral, understanding of the texts of tradition: or whether it doesn't involve us, rather, in a complete *Gestaltung*, an understanding so vital, so pervasive, and so fundamental that it takes place, in large part, as a sort of "postural impregnation" (Henri Wallon's phrase), responding to the texts on a level "*beneath* the (dualistic) relation of a knowing subject and known object"³⁰ in a process of embodiment that, for Merleau-Ponty, is "prior to cognition properly so-called."³¹

Indeed, it could well be that the performance of ancient rituals and the chanting of ancient texts of prayer make possible, through their poetic energy, an attitude of remembrance by which the textual meaning *spontaneously* "couples" with a long-sedimented texture of sense, or with a sense very much ingrained in the sentient tensions and intentionalities of the body. In that case, might we not be able to feel, reverberating through our own body, like the myths of the Jungian "collective unconscious" or the *memoire involontaire* which Benjamin enjoyed pondering, the primordial, "transcendental" bonds of wisdom and kinship by which we are joined, through tradition, yet also without conscious effort at recollection, even to our earliest spiritual ancestors?³² According to Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, we are blessed by prayer "when all the chambers of the body vibrate with it."³³ But "all the chambers" refers to every cell, and even every *genetic* element. Remembrance, embodied in prayer, penetrates the *meaning* of the genetic code. Remembrance reaches down through all the sedimented tissues of *experiential* meaning, to touch the loom of our pre-personal and mythic past - an archaic past rooted in the darkness beyond time and transmitted through the body as the felt meaningfulness of an invisible text, an invisible law.

Something of this is suggested, I think, by Lama Govinda, when he writes of awakening a "spiritual instinct". As the Lama accurately notes, "We can be spontaneously and yet fully conscious of the forms and forces of tradition."³⁴ For,

spontaneity is built on practice; . . . it is a product of long-repeated actions in the past . . . which have become so ingrained in one's nature that they need no further decision or effort of will.³⁵

A tradition could become so ingrained, however, only if it cor-responded to a grain, or destiny, already engraved upon the very flesh of our nature. What I have called "the primordial text" is, basically, just our human potential as bodies of perceptivity and feeling. Considered in this light, ritual performances serve to guide us through the process of embodying the secondary, outer texts (of ritual and meditation instruction), so that we become progressively more skillful at reading, or appreciating with a deeply felt understanding, our abilities and endowments, the original, God-given text. (Is it really any wonder, considering how well we understand ourselves and how poorly we achieve the healthiness we dream of, that the "original text" should be thought somehow hidden, invisible, or to have vanished?)

Prayer is the seal of tradition; through the symbols of its tradition, prayer transmutes the body, sealing the prophetic image of that tradition within us. Prayer bestows on us the ideal of a new body-schema, a new body-image. With the passage of time, the body itself becomes the hermeneutic seal and protector, the living, commemorative emblem, of the tradition. The process, then, is a double one: as we embody the tradition, we perpetually reincarnate, and keep alive, our tradition; at the same time, however, this embodiment is also our own reincarnation, our own renewal, blessing our flesh with the radiant spirit of health. Since we always begin life having already forgotten this blessing, we need to be gathered, by reading, into its recollection. *A tradition of embodiment is at the same time the embodiment of that very tradition*, for it teaches us how to open ourselves up experientially (in feeling and perception, for example) to the meaningfulness proclaimed by the canonical texts.

Let us now, to conclude, tighten the weave of our argument. According to the texts we have been considering, we receive, as our destined being, a body of flesh already engraved with a secret, but unknown text, programming our potential for perceiving and feeling the concrete presence, or meaning, of divinity. Since this inscription, however, is a prescription for our well-being (our potential cries out for recognition and nurture), we need to receive instructions from the tradition, teaching us the texts for ritual performance. As we perform the prescribed rituals with greater and greater skill, we begin to be in-habited by the powerful living *sense* of the outer texts. With the passage of time continuously repeated in the reading, inner and outer texts may begin to coincide. Were there no longer any difference between them, understanding would be complete: thanks to the performance of the rituals prescribed by the outer texts, the *sense* of the inner would be fully translated. We would finally *become* the one true text. However, the ambiguity in the word "sense" reminds us that meaning, embodied in the sensuous element, is subject to *endless* translation, *endless* dissemination. So that our relation to the texts is *always in question* as a sentence of becoming. The infinite existential value and inexhaustible meaningfulness of the divine text thus

continues to unfold - not only in our own life, but also in the lives of all the living beings whom we chance to encounter.

This process of ritual embodiment is what I call the fleshing out of the text. But "fleshing out" connotes understanding. Thus, in the remainder of this essay, I would like to focus on the process of understanding. Principles of decisive importance for humanistic education are, I believe, involved. Athens certainly thought so, if we may trust Plato's account of education in *The Republic* and *Laws*.

In his essay, "On the Phenomenology of Language," Merleau-Ponty observes that the human body enables me to enjoy "a spontaneity which teaches me what I could not know in any other way except through it." This suggests that *there are*, within the texts of a religious tradition, *certain dimensions of meaning, or sense, which are of such a nature that it is only with my body, only through the process of embodying those dimensions of meaning in a disciplined and skillful way, that I may come to understand them*. The senses forever disseminate meaning; but they also *recollect* ancient meanings otherwise lost. There are in fact, I suggest, meanings, some deeply engraved in the text, which I need to *hear* to understand; and there are meanings whose truth I have to *feel*. The Cartesian *Cogito* needs a tongue to taste the sweetness of truthful speech, as it needs hands to show charity and eyes to behold the glory of God's Creation. The meaningfulness of the texts needs to be woven into the textures of our body. Thus inwrought, they function with great effect - and with a spontaneity appropriate to our situation.

In *Wahrheit und Methode*, Gadamer writes:

To understand it (a text) does not mean primarily referring back to past life, but rather present participation in what is said. It is not really a question of a relation between persons . . . but rather, of a participation in the communication which the text makes to us.³⁶

Now, in the case of religious texts, this participation, this conversation with the text, is always, I submit, a process of understanding through embodiment. This explains, in part, why it happens that, as he states in another work,

The real event of understanding goes continually beyond what can be brought to the understanding . . . by methodological effort and critical self-control. It is true to every conversation that through it something different has come to be.³⁷

This is true above all, I believe, when understanding is a process of embodiment. Understanding a text is not a discrete mental state, or a momentary episode, in the disembodied "life" of a transcendental Cartesian *Cogito*. (See Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, to see this picture decisively repudiated and cast out). Understanding is, rather, an on-going process in unlimited time, a process, in fact, which is historically and culturally situated, since the relationship between text and reader is existential: "What I have called the consciousness of effective history is inescapably more *being* than consciousness."³⁸ "Understanding itself," says Gadamer, "is not to be thought of so much as an action of subjectivity, but as the entering into an event of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated."³⁹ Furthermore, just as it is more "our prejudgments (our horizons of pre-reflective understanding, which are primarily horizons of feeling)

that constitute our being,"⁴⁰ so too it is more by, or with, our primordial corporeal sense and sensibility than by, or with, our "pure intellect," that we come to understand the body of knowledge entrusted to us by our tradition. The "mediation" of textual sense Gadamer speaks of is, first and foremost, the sensuous mediation of our embodiment.

Nietzsche's notes, in *The Will to Power*, contain some fascinating insights which bear on these points. In Note 314, for example, he observes that,

Our most sacred convictions, the unchanging elements in our supreme values, are judgments of our muscles.⁴¹

In our muscles, and indeed, in our body as a whole, there lies:

The stored-up integrity and shrewdness of generations which are never conscious of their principles⁴²

According to Nietzsche,

When morality . . . has been, as it were, stored up through the practice of a whole succession of generations, then the total force of this accumulated virtue radiates even into that sphere where integrity is most seldom found, into the spiritual sphere.⁴³

Thus, he concludes that,

One acts perfectly only when one acts instinctively.⁴⁴

Or, as he says in another note,

To the extent that it is willed, to the extent that it is conscious, there is no perfection in action of any kind.⁴⁵

And he explicitly spells out the significance of his observations for the process of moral and spiritual education:

The great rationality of all education in morality has always been that one tried to attain to the certainty of an instinct: so that neither good intentions nor good means had to enter consciousness as such In fact, this unconsciousness belongs to any kind of perfection.⁴⁶

Even Edmund Husserl, for all his phenomenological sensitivity, could not break free of the rationalism that nurtured him. No more than Descartes could he appreciate the fact that the bodily "expression" of a thought, or the bodily reading of a written text, will always, and of necessity, *supplement* the "original" cognitive meaning.⁴⁷ Thus, Husserl shares the Cartesian view of the painter in Lessing's play, *Emilia Galotti*, who lamented the body's mediation as a loss of meaning: "On the long path from the eye through the arm to the pencil, how much is lost!" It is not easy for philosophers and theologians to respect and appreciate, as practitioners always have, the wonderfully, and indeed essentially pro-creative role of the human body in the process of understanding. When the transmission of sacred knowledge is mediated by the human body, we need to ask ourselves how much is gained! So much may be gained, in fact, that the Jewish thinkers of the Kabbalah insisted on the invisibility, or unintelligibility, of the primordial text. Ultimately, we may realize that there is only a *continuous* process of embodiment; *no* original text, but only the gestures of devotion that perpetuate the writing of the Book of Life.

How well do we understand this gesture? Under-standing is, first and foremost, a surrender or submission of the body. It is the body as receptive, the body as willing to yield to the authority of the text. But in prayer, we do much more than that: we *offer* our body to the text; we submit to it as an act of devotion. And, as we listen to the words we sing, as we consecrate our

ears and our mouth to the enchanting spirit whose sounds we echo; as even the frame of our entire body yields itself up to the rhythmic measures and the rising and falling intonations, we gradually recreate within ourselves an intimate, unshakable, non-objectifiable *understanding* of the body of knowledge: the holy language is woven, is insinuated, into the very fibers and bones of the body. And then we *know* our tradition in a way that we could never have known it, if we had been *pure* minds or souls, separate from the temple of our body. Under-standing the texts, we place our body in a stance which supports them and grounds them firmly on the earth where we stand: in brief, we stand *under* the text; we uphold it, too, holding it up to the sky. That is understanding.

In his *Ethics*, Spinoza states that, "The human mind is adapted to the perception of many things, and its aptitude increases in proportion to the number of ways in which its body can be disposed." (Book II, prop. 14) It is his conviction, strong like a true vision, that,

In this life, . . . it is our chief endeavour to change the body of infancy, so far as its nature permits and is conducive thereto, into another body which is fitted for many things, and which is related to a mind conscious as much as possible of itself, of God, and of objects⁴⁸

According to Spinoza,

He who possesses a body fitted for doing many things is least of all agitated by those emotions which are evil, that is to say, by emotions which are contrary to our nature, and therefore he possesses the power of arranging and connecting the modifications of the body according to the order of the intellect, and consequently of causing all the modifications of the body to be related to the idea of God (Book V, prop. 39, Note)

In this essay, I have been attempting to show that, and also how, a process of embodiment guided by the ritual texts of a religious tradition can awaken and cultivate a "knowledge of God", or an "intellectual love of God", far deeper and far more meaningful than we might have thought possible, insofar as this process recognizes "the essence of this or that body under the form of eternity." (Book V, prop. 22) For, as he says, "Our mind, insofar as it knows itself and the body under the form of eternity, necessarily has a knowledge of God", powerfully ingrained in the living body. (Book V, prop. 30) This living body, created by - and yet also for - our understanding of the form of eternity, is the authentic body of knowledge. The body of knowledge that is contained by the religious *texts* is, by contrast, just the imprinted *shadow* of this living body, without which the tradition would surely, and abruptly, perish.

The human body either changes and grows, or else it dies. So it is, too, with a religious tradition. Religious movements characteristically begin in ecstasy - in dream and vision. In the beginning, they promise freedom and health. But, as they establish themselves in the world, they have a tendency to lose touch with their creative vision. A shift in focus takes place, and they become dogmatic, judgmental, punitive, repressive.⁴⁹ The heteronomy of tradition and law conceals our initial dream of a healthy spontaneity, from which would flow words and deeds of great beauty, truth and virtue. In this essay, we have selected certain texts which are remarkable (although there are others we have not been able to cite), not only for their poetic power, but also for their unequivocal appreciation of our needs and capabilities as beings

with a bodily nature we cannot dispose of, and which we can ignore only at great cost. These texts are also remarkable by virtue of the lucidity with which they articulate, for our benefit, the processes of feeling and perception, and powerfully motivate us, through a poetry strong both in feeling and in understanding, to get in touch with our experiencing and work on opening up. After all, what is so striking, and so utterly beyond question, is the fact that the texts we are concerned with here ask us to focus on the way we inhabit and experience our bodily nature, and do so, moreover, with but one goal: the nurturing of our capacity for feeling and perceiving in more open, more spontaneous, more creative and meaningful ways.

If we take the texts in question to heart, that is, if we take them seriously, their poetry is not mystical, nor is it the naive experiencing of myths and superstition. Rather, we will discover that the poetry speaks truthfully and movingly, addressing itself *directly* to the way we are *experiencing* our being; and we will gradually understand the poetry as an expression, besides, of a visionary *standard* by which we can measure, and test, our own experiential growth. The poetry of these great texts addresses itself precisely to that "ideality . . . not alien to the flesh" which "gives it its depth, its dimensions," and of which, in the passage from *The Visible and the Invisible* which opens this paper, Merleau-Ponty so eloquently speaks.

Where there exists a living body of tradition, then, as Santayana says, in *The Life of Reason*, "We are not left merely with the satisfaction of abstract success or the consciousness of ideal immortality."⁵⁰ Wherever mortals dwell in the context of a tradition that has not forgotten the process of religious incarnation, there yet remains, as he argues,

an enlightening example, together with faculties predisposed by discipline to recover their ancient virtue. The better a man evokes and realises the ideal, the more he leads the life that all others, in proportion to their worth, will seek to live after him, and the more he helps them to live in that nobler fashion. His presence in the society of immortals thus becomes, so to speak, more pervasive. He not only vanquishes time by his own rationality, living now in the eternal, but he continually lives again in all rational beings.⁵¹

Perhaps our reading, together, of some ancient religious texts will help us to open our chests of immortal love and realize, there, the concealed body of knowledge which those texts have long treasured, protecting the body's eternal life within the weavings of darkness wrought by their own print.

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NOTES

1. Jewish prayers call for appropriate postures: sitting, standing, reclining, and also a modified sitting position, called "petition" or "falling on the face". See Fred Rosner, *Meditation in the Bible and the Talmud*. Library of Jewish Law and Ethics, vol. V. KTAV Publishing House, Inc. Yeshiva University Press, 1977. For the sake of cross-cultural comparison, see Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, "Training for the Priesthood among the Kogi of Colombia," in Johannes Wilbert (ed.),

Enculturation in Latin America: An Anthology (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin America Center Publications, University of California, 1977), pp. 265-288.

2. Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference*. Alan Bass, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 199.
3. *Ibid.* See also *op. cit.*, p. 223. Freud's "Note on the Mystic Writing-Pad" is in vol. XIX of the *Standard Edition* of his *Complete Psychological Works*.
4. Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 199.
5. Julia Kristeva, "Quelques problemes de semiotique litteraire a propos d'un texte de Mallarme: 'Un coup de des'," in A. J. Greimas (ed.), *Essais de semiotique poetique* (Paris: Larousse, 1972), p. 216.
6. Jorge Luis Borges, "The God's Script," *Labyrinths* (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 170.
7. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1941), p. 283.
8. *Service for the New Year*. Translated by Simon Glazer. (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1935), pp. 323-324.
9. Gershom Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 128. The *Shema*, oldest prayer in the *Sidur ha-Shalem*, contains 245 words, with three words repeated. This number (248) is thought to be the same as the number of "parts" in the human frame. We can, however, remain skeptical about the numbers without discarding their indication of a significant problem.
10. In this regard, see Mary Watkins, *Waking Dreams* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977). Also see Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970).
11. See *Service for the Day of Atonement*, p. 194.
12. See the *Daily Prayer Book*, p. 761. See also the *Book of Genesis* (17: 10-14) concerning God's covenant with Abraham. Also see *Deuteronomy* 10:16) concerning the rite of circumcision: "Circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be no more unmindful." I am grateful to Rabbi Marc Gellman for his helpful discussion of this matter.
13. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Spivak, trans. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1976).
14. *The Book of Creation: Sepher Yetzirah*. Irving Friedman, editor and translator. (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1977), pp. 1-3.
15. Sigmund Freud, *Project for a Scientific Psychology, Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. (London: Hogarth Press), vol. I.
16. Herbert V. Guenther, *The Dawn of Tantra* (Berkeley: Shambhala, 1975), p. 58.
17. Roger Masters, "Genes, Language, and Evolution", *Semiotica* 2 (1970) 304-313.
18. Jacques Derrida, *La dissemination* (Paris: Larousse, 1973), p. 113.
19. See Rabbi Joshua ben Levi's comment on *Exodus* 32:16: "The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets." The Rabbi's comment appears as a warning in Chapter VI of *Pirke Avoth (Ethics of the Fathers)*, a portion of the

- Mishnah* recited on Sabbaths between Pesach and Rosh Hashanah. See the *Daily Prayer Book*, pp.525-526.
20. Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, "Training for the Priesthood among the Kogi," *op. cit.*, p.279. Also see Marcel Mauss, *Essai sur les techniques du corps*.
 21. Reichel-Dolmatoff, *op. cit.*, pp. 279-280.
 22. *Op. cit.*, p. 281.
 23. For an extremely interesting discussion of matters closely related to our problematic, see Richard Jacobson, "Absence, Authority, and the Text," in *Glyph: Johns Hopkins Textual Studies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), vol. III, pp.137-147.
 24. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, (Evanston: Northwestern 1968), p.1.
 25. *Op. cit.*, p.147.
 26. *Op. cit.*, p.248.
 27. See my study on "The Opening of Vision: Seeing Through the Veil of Tears," *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry*, vol. XVI, nos. 1-3 (1978-1979), pp.113-146. In that paper, I attempt to clarify, in great experiential detail, what I think is meant by the process of opening presented in the sacred texts. Also see Lawrence Kushner, *Honey From the Rock: Visions of Jewish Mystical Renewal*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977.
 28. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: New American Library, Meridian Books, 1978), p.112.
 29. Walter Benjamin, "Ueber den Begriff der Geschichte," in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), Bd. I, p.704.
 30. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations With Others," in *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern, 1964), p.98.
 31. *Op. cit.*, p.99. See also Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" and "On the Phenomenology of Language," in *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern, 1964).
 32. Concerning corporeal intentionality and the sedimentation of meaning, notions which originate with Husserl, see Merleau-Ponty, "On the Phenomenology of Language," *op. cit.*, p.89.
 33. The words of Rabbi Pinchas (1726-1801) are cited by Reb Zalman Schachter in *Fragments of A Future Scroll*, p.74.
 34. Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Creative Meditation and Multi-Dimensional Consciousness* (Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical Publishing House, 1976), p.269.
 35. *Op. cit.*, p.268.
Merleau-Ponty, "On the Phenomenology of Language," *op. cit.*, p.93.
 36. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzuge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1960), p.369. There is an English translation, by Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: The Seabury Press, Continuum Book, 1975). Also see "History, Myth and Reality," in Georgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill: An Essay Investigating the Origins of Human Knowledge and its Transmission through Myth* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1977).

37. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (University of California Press, 1977), p.58. See also David Couzens Hoy, *The Critical Circle: Literature and History in Contemporary Hermeneutics* (University of California, 1978), for excellent critical discussions of these, and related, problems.
38. Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p.38.
39. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp.274-275.
40. *Op. cit.*, p.261.
41. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Book II, Note 314, p.173.
42. Nietzsche, *op. cit.*, Note 439, p.242.
43. Nietzsche, *op. cit.*, Note 440, p.242.
44. Nietzsche, *ibid.*
45. Nietzsche, *op. cit.*, Note 434, p.238.
46. Nietzsche, *op. cit.*, Note 430, p.234.
47. See Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*. David Allison, trans. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973). Derrida, in fact, argues an even more radical thesis, viz.: that there is no determinate "original" meaning, since meaning is always temporally displaced, always involved in a continuous ec-static movement of dissemination.
48. In order to appreciate more fully my interpretation of Spinoza's discussion of the human body, it is necessary at least to consider, in addition to the passages cited, Book II, propositions 12, 13, and 18; Book III, prop. 48 (explanation under the title, "General Definition of the Emotions"; Book V, propositions, 1, 4, 10, and 23. Given Spinoza's conception of the mind-body relationship, Spinoza must be committed, I think, to a conception of the human body according to which it is possible for the human body to exist eternally. Needless to say, the human body "under the form of eternity" cannot be identified, *tout court*, with the ordinary, everyday body, which is certainly perishable.
49. "Orthodoxy is, in its regressive aspect, a kind of fixation on a specific body of mythic forms." Stephen Larsen, *The Shaman's Doorway: Opening the Mythic Imagination to Contemporary Consciousness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p.38.
50. George Santayana, *Reason in Religion*, vol. III of *The Life of Reason* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p.185.
51. *Op. cit.*, p.186. The reader is strongly urged to consider Santayana's chapter on "Magic, Sacrifice, and Prayer," *op. cit.*, pp.25-37.