

GATHERING SPARKS IN THE DARK

Norman Finkelstein. *The Ratio of Reason to Magic*. Dos Madres Press, 2016.

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Mysticism does not deny or overlook the abyss; on the contrary, it begins by realizing its existence,

MAJOR TRENDS IN JEWISH MYSTICISM,
Gershom Scholem

1. Overview with Clues

Norman Finkelstein's latest collection, *The Ratio of Reason to Magic: New & Selected Poems*, announces its intention in bold terms. The title alludes to a mystery that waits to be revealed, if not as a thriller, then certainly as a thrilling ontology. A mystery of any kind engages us in the vital questions of "what happened?" and "who did it?" The answers to which are deferred until the last accounting, while we are compelled to follow the clues. I have seldom encountered a collection of poetry that has had this effect on me, Homer, Virgil and Dante notwithstanding.

There are four clues.

Clue #1: the dictionary defines *ratio* as "the quantitative relation between two amounts showing the number of times one value contains or is contained within the other." In music, the ratio describes the frequencies of pitches in intervals between notes. We might ask in this case which of the two entities contains the other, or if it worked either way, would that change the frequency that determines the notes on the scale?

This is not to be conflated with the Golden Ratio, "a perfectly symmetrical relationship between two proportions," at a fixed numerical value of 1.618 which the peerless Greek sculptor, Phidias, used to create the Parthenon statues, informed the Swiss architect Le Corbusier's Modular System, inspired Claude Debussy's *La Mer*, and Salvador Dali's painting, *The Sacrament of the Last Supper*. Finkelstein moves kaleidoscopically through the pitched intervals of poems written over the course of forty years at often unpredictable frequencies.

Clue #2: the Biblical number 40, a period of trial or testing: the Flood, years the Jews were slaves in Egypt, and wandered in the desert. Finkelstein's book is a Biblical Journey through mathematically enumerated details the sum of which can't be pinned down. His poem, "The Ratio," describes what it feels like to wander such a landscape.

When he came out of the mirror, a wind
from elsewhere was blowing in his hair. I can't
read those books anymore. The past was never

like that, but then again, neither was the
future...

Alice-in-reverse, Finkelstein steps out of the looking glass with questions that become an interrogation of where he finds and loses himself, and of the resources he brings to the mystery and the mission. Rooted in the best *midrashic* tradition, what holds these poems together is the voice that observes from a threshold space.

I can't read those books because of
The roads, because of the rooks, because of

The way the car stalls, night falls. This rhyme
measures the ratio of reason to magic.

The instrument of measurement is the poet's craft that builds poems to hold the vision of the world as broken vessels that cry out for repair.

Clue #3: Kabbalah as the underlying structure; Isaac Luria's symbol rich system in which limitless light shatters the original vessels of creation unable to contain it (*Shiverat ha-Kelim*). Shards and sparks fall into darkness. In this metaphor we are broken vessels in a broken vessel concealing sparks of light, which we gather to repair both. (*Tikkun ha-Olam*).

Every break indicates that something has

slipped through. Eventually they all sound
alike, the ones who escape and the ones
who dazzle the audience because they have

come back from the dead.

It isn't necessary to know the particulars of Kabbalah, or any other Gnostic system, to feel one's way into the heart of what Finkelstein is showing us. I'm struck by the power of these poems to accomplish this through direct experience. The poet invites us to enter each poem as we would a theater piece without the fourth wall. It is a dimension physicist David Bohm called "the theater of the mind." This is where gnosis, embedded in experience, is transmitted as art.

2. *Parsing the message*

Objects in Your Life (1977), is the first of the seven books from which these poems have been selected; the collection concludes with *NEW POEMS*. The sum of these poems proves remarkably coherent. Unfolding events, people and images are musical weave, Satie and Ives, with a touch of Brubeck. The dance of associations is affective, never analytical or didactic. Clear lines, simple language convey complex relationships in which meaning is concealed and revealed, and the poet held accountable. As Finkelstein puts it in “La Quinta Del Sordo,” a poem in the first section:

Like Goya, alone in that vast house. The open wound
 gapes wide enough to hold the world.
 It means everything, to think
 The thoughts that must remain unsaid.
 In rising, you seem to face
 a new life, and yet something remains bereft
 of those necessary small comforts.
 For surely there is something lacking.
 each moment leads inevitably
 to the next, yet you must still
 account somehow for the time lost.

Francisco Goya, (1746-1828) struck deaf by an undiagnosed illness at the age of forty-seven, evolved from his colorful early paintings, like “The Parasol” (1777), to the dark imagery of his late “Black Paintings,” the most famous of which is “Saturn Devouring His Son” (1819). The etching from *LOS CAPRICHOS*, “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters,” shows a man slumped at his desk assailed by winged furies. The deaf Spanish painter, alone in a villa, *The House of the Deaf*, is one of Finkelstein’s hidden sparks. Unlike Goya, who feared insanity, Finkelstein welcomes what rises from sleeping reason, the ancestral ghosts trying to make their meanings clear.

The poem, אמת, Hebrew for Emet, “truth,” addressed to William Bronk, frames it in terms of broken clay, alluding to the original vessel of creation, or the man-made Golem:

The clay collapses on the creator,
 the letters lie in a heap:
 or freed from their flesh, do they rise upward
 seeking the limiting code?

Bound and unbound to the limits of the world:
 covenant prior to all known covenants:

from a displaced source come restless messengers
yearning for authority from absent kings.

What happens when the poem collapses? The letters that composed it can either lie in a heap or rise as sparks to be reunited. Meaning is “bound and unbound to the limits of the world.” Finkelstein is drawn again by the sparks, what comes when reason sleeps. The ancestral ghosts speak, restless messengers yearning for an absent authority. Or they may be what the poet George Oppen spoke of as “angels of knowledge and comprehension.” Finkelstein understands a poem can function as a Jacob’s ladder on which messengers ascend and descend, but not how to parse their messages.

At dawn

You were visited by three messengers. Each spoke of love.
One offered to show you the depths of the earth.
He was insistent. The second was phlegmatic,
Would have given you a silver crown. The third,
A woman, offered herself to you... (*The Objects in your Life*)

3. *Who are the messengers?*

“A Poem for the Little Shoemakers,” opens the second section, RESTLESS MESSENGERS, with myth as fairy tale. There is “a house that is the navel of the world,” where the shoemaker on his bench watches the passing parade “built into the living structure of memory...” as a moment in real time: “...the sun is warming the shoemaker’s shed / and his hammer, striking the worn sole, / seems to make the sparks fly up into the light.” The shoemaker raising sparks as he repairs the sole is a recurrent theme in Finkelstein’s work. He is the avatar who remains at his task even as “the wolves come down from out of the mountain, / and in spring the ghosts seek higher pastures...// The books are submerged in a great repository / or consumed by braided flames.”

...but the shoemaker sits at his bench forever
and the people walk back and forth upon the earth.
For this is merely the story of a passage
not from one land to another
not from one world to the next,
but into the living structure of memory,
as that alone must suffice.

The little shoemaker is an enduring principle embedded in the living structure of collective memory, the creative imagination as a spark in the

husk of the material world. As such, the little shoemaker is distinguished from a restless messenger who seeks authority in the ancestral traditions. He occupies a space at the center of the psyche.

Contrast the little shoemaker to the evocation of “Moldovanka,” the setting of Isaac Babel’s *Odessa Tales*. Finkelstein imagines himself a little boy in the classroom where other boys have glued the sleeping teacher’s beard to the desk:

But I would have paid attention,
waiting respectfully until he awoke
so the lesson might go on.
For I have chained myself to the Gemara,
though the texts have long since rotted away,
till all that’s left is the afterlife of the spirit,
the matter of the poem

The Gemara, a commentary Jewish oral tradition, is an ancestral inheritance. Its allure, the authority to hold the world together, often does so by reducing it. Instead of life, we are left with after-life. Nevertheless, the impulse to leave ancestral messages, and their messengers behind is often accompanied by a sense of loss. In “The Master of Turning,” Finkelstein addresses the Talmudic tradition of the thirty-six *Tzadikim Nistarim*, or “lamed vuvniks,” the righteous souls for whom God safeguards the creation. He writes: “I love those old tales; their leisured music/ is born out of poverty...but I do not think there are any such men.”

The ancestral inheritance viewed as impoverishment, was at one time ripening fruit on the tree of life. Even when the taste on the tongue has disappeared, its “afterlife” calls out “from the heart of the parable.”

4. The body as book, book as body

David sings in Psalm xxxiv: “Oh taste and see that the Lord is good.” However compelling the claims of the spirit, the poet wants to taste and see what he desires. What of that third messenger, the woman who offers herself to the poet? She may have come to deliver words “that bind meaning to themselves/ as if they were strands of a great braid,” or as the Shekinah who “uncoils her braids / and her hair falls over the page.” In the fourth of Finkelstein’s “Four Impromptus,” we read:

Reb Derasha opened,
saying that the verse
was nothing but its interpretation,

dissolving into its opposite
and passing away.

The book of the world is composed of opposites, the visible calling to the invisible. Reb Dersha's literal book opens into one that has no end. He reads until his hands turn silver, and his beard transparent, another scholar who flickers like a candle in the dark but comes to no conclusion. This is the fate of those bound by passion to the book, the veiled Shekinah who illuminates its pages. Hence, the poet's plea that love "be unto me a book which will remain uninterpretable, and let your body be bound so that I might read at will..."

"The Oblivion of Love" details the merger of body and book by mapping the psychological terrain in physical terms:

In fields of ice or in fields of flowers,
where what is impinges on what ought to be
I wander half in the world of the book
and half in the world that calls me to task.
Forth I go, a body among other bodies:
they are twining about me as they twine about each other...

The beloved in the book becomes "my sister, my twin, the guardian of my voice" who knows and does not "know what she means to me" but guides him "toward the source of the stream that runs through me and beyond." She is the exiled feminine compliment of God who conceals and reveals her mysteries as she waits to be restored in Holy Union. And here is the bittersweet condition of the poet in love with her:

And when I awoke,
the letters of the alphabet
were asleep beside me.
My love was gone,
and so I read in her absence
in the space she had given me.

5. *Finding the measures*

Passing Over, the third section, references the Jewish flight from Egyptian bondage to the Promised Land. It also calls to ancestors who have passed over that constitute the poet's true family. Finkelstein's tribute to this Assembly is intimate, suffused with grief and gratitude. Foremost among them is the lynchpin of Jewish esoteric tradition, Gershom Scholem (1897-1982) whose *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, published in 1941, legiti-

mized the scholarly study of Kabbalah and celebrated “the revival of mythical consciousness.” Few metaphors capture the human condition better than the container that shatters because it cannot hold the light of creation. The desire to repair ourselves and the world are one and the same. Finkelstein inherits this poetic legacy.

“A Tomb for Gershom Scholem,” pays tribute with an elegiac question: “will they recall that you are also a poet / who defends the angels standing in judgment / before you lay them to rest in your history of light?” Written on the tenth anniversary of Scholem’s passing, Finkelstein contrasts his mentor’s contribution to those who popularized, exploited or misread him by invoking the *merkabah*, the meditation on God’s Throne.

The ghosts from Paris, from Prague, from Vienna
circle warily around the merkabah.
You cannot fend them off: they are parts of you.
They are sparks returning, completing a movement
Which you thought would never come to rest.

It can never come to rest: there are folds within folds,
and each fold is a throne, and each throne is a world,
each world is a word.

We might use this language to describe a poem, the lines that compose it, words in the line and letters in the words—the world enthroned, becoming conscious of itself. But lest we become comfortable with this notion, are reminded that the repair work of consciousness involves forgetting what has been remembered, “a ritual of remembrance / performed around the spaces / which oblivion has seized.” It is necessary to forget in order to remember...

the numinous objects
that must remain unnamed
like faces in shadow

the faces in shadow
on the border of recognition
—they too must fade away.

(A Dinnertime Interlude)

It is a shadow-dance of faces that emerge and dissolve. We are wrapped in contradictions. The Zohar tells us that to repair the world we must integrate the furthest pole, absorb the wholly other: *There is no true worship lest it*

issue forth from darkness. In what may be the most moving response to this condition, the poet sings:

I wanted to tell you everything
 I wanted to change the music

 But it fell apart in my hands

6. *Reading the Book of the World*

According to Scholem, “The Torah...does not consist merely of chapters, phrases and words; rather is it to be regarded as the living incarnation of the divine wisdom which eternally sends out new rays of light.” The sacred book is alive. Numerical and alphabetical systems are interchangeable since both are rooted in, and express the underlying unity. The ten *Sefirot*, and the twenty-two Foundational Letters, the *Otiyot Yesod*, form the linguistic-conceptual structure of the world. When the two are added together, ($10 + 22 = 32$) they comprise the thirty-two paths of wisdom through which the world was created.

Track, Finkelstein’s fifth book, is a serial poem written over a ten year period from 1993 to 2003. It unfolds through the creation and disruptions of patterns in a stripped down style reminiscent of George Oppen. Describing the design and intention of this book, Finkelstein says:

The text of *Track* was generated through various numerological and recombinatory procedures and formulas. Some are quite simple: the first movement in *Forest*, for example, is determined by the number six: the movement contains six sections (marked by ##); each section has six units of lyrics (marked by #), each unit has six lines. Other movements are more complicated and some deliberately break or interrupt their original patterns...The disruptions are incorporated into a large, and at certain points the series turns on itself...

In a later poem he gives us a clue to the meaning of his title: “track as in channel/ undergrounds channel/ running behind and before...” Tracking sparks of hidden light (from the shoemakers hammer), Finkelstein calls to the shadow-faces: Oliver Sacks, Paul Celan, Eric Auerbach, Goethe, Emily Dickinson, William Bronk, Robert Duncan and Armand Schwerner, to name a few. Jack Spicer, George Oppen, and Paracelsus flicker in the husk. The poet arranges their voices like notes on the staff tuned to the same question. They ask, *What is real?*

Duncan’s response is to create a field for the poem as a process by which the real can be known. Bronk points to structural limitations that cloud our perception of the thing-in-itself, then questions the existence of the thing-

in-itself, a real world. In his book, *After Lorca*, Spicer puts it this way in a letter to Lorca about what in a poem survives when language fades: “What sticks to the real?” Then channels the response: “As things decay they bring their equivalents into being.” Oppen’s “Leviathan” states: “Truth also is the pursuit of it.”

In *Track*, Finkelstein writes a letter addressed to “Dear T.,” (Track?) echoing Spicer: “I have been here long enough to understand that the temporary can become permanent in all sorts of ways.” At another point, he responds to Oppen with Objectivist concision: “And truth? O, / Truth!// If you say so, / old man.” Later, Finkelstein inserts a message from Paracelsus, the 16th century alchemist/physician, about the power of symbols like the six point, and five point star:

With these two signs the Israelites and the necromantic Jews have done much and brought about much. They are still kept highly secret by a number of them. For these two have such a strong power that everything that can be done by characters and words is possible for these two.

Paracelsus identified the Magen David with the philosopher’s stone, and the custom of inscribing Hebrew letters in the alchemical vessel for protection. He was no stranger to Gematria, through which the interaction of letters and numbers reveals underlying meaning. Scholem called the practice, the “inexpressible mystery of the Godhead becomes visible.” While not the major focus of *Track*, Finkelstein’s attention to form and number is evident. In the five-line section, he applies it to the well-ordered cosmos, stirred by Eros as “sometimes associated/ with marriage/combining the masculine 3/ and the feminine 2 // For purely mathematical reasons.”

7. *Repairing the world*

Finkelstein’s two following books, *Scribe* and *Inside the Ghost Factory*, are also serial poems that gather sparks from systems that fall apart and regroup: “Like the laughter of children / Over a field of graves. The last section, *New Poems*, features a sequence, *From the Files of the Immanent Foundation*, “about the formations and deformations of institutional power, how these...affect the psyche, generate ideology, belief systems, myth, rumors, secrets, etc.” Those who enter this Foundation are cautioned, “The rhetoric becomes magic as soon as you arrive. / Please be careful. Make sure of the relative/ stability of all objects in your field of vision...” (The Welcome). Further along:

Banners, trumpets, tumblers, angels on stilts.
 An allegory of an allegory. In that time
 Or some other. In this world or some other.

.....
 What does this mean? And this?
 And when she wears the robe and he does not
 Look at her. And then he does...
 (Fragment)

Finkelstein’s procession of images, associative leaps, and shifting points of view create a tension between what is inside and what is outside the observer’s mind. We are caught in the spell of mind itself in the act of constructing a world of which it is also an artifact. His forty-year journey through a landscape, measureable and imagined, conjures what I felt as a child reciting the 23rd Psalm at bedtime. It would not be a stretch to call *The Ratio of Reason to Magic* a book of psalms in which Davidic longing guides the poet through the valley. He speaks to us, as observer and participant, through his doubt, the shadow that accompanies him.

Call it a saving remnant. Brought forth
 from the fire again and again. Tell me about
 the furnace, tell me about the forge.
 (“Remnant”)

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to say this work was trapped in the past, locked in historical amber. There are moments along the continuum when Finkelstein shakes us with a sudden recognition that the changes in consciousness, the forces that now shape our perception, like the image of the earth from outer space, have altered our understanding in irrevocable ways. Finkelstein’s evocation of the valley of the shadow, and his journey through it, is informed by what has become of us since David danced.

I’m reminded of Umberto Eco, who argues in *Opera aperta* (The Open Work) that vital literary works present us with fields of meanings in which many conclusions can be drawn. In *Interpretation and Over Interpretation*, Eco writes: “...the task of a creative text is to display the contradictory plurality of its conclusions, setting the reader free to choose—or to decide that there is no possible choice.” We emerge from Finkelstein’s exploration, its “contradictory plurality” of conclusions, to decide for ourselves what sticks to the real, or if there is a real at all.

What’s left when our projections are stripped away?

Here is the fourth and final Clue # 4 to solving this ontological thriller buried in “A Poem of the Little Shoemakers”: “the Throne of Justice is va-

cant/ as it was always meant to be.”

The poem is the vehicle of praise, a mirror reflecting the brilliance of the *merkabah* throne. Its emptiness invites us to fill it, compels us by means of the magic in reason, and the reason in magic, to gather the sparks hammered out by the shoemaker in our hearts, and repair the world. For Finkelstein, solution to the mystery posed by his ratio, is the poem enthroned.

Norman Finkelstein’s remarkable collection, *The Ratio of Reason to Magic*, is one man’s interrogation of the soul that reaches beyond easy answers to the only answer left when the inner voice calls: *Where are you?* Finkelstein invites us to answer with David, Moses, the 36 lamed vuvniks, and those at this moment who grapple with quantum uncertainty, to say or leave unsaid: *Hineni, Here I am.*

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