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First Memories, Second Thoughts

It was a winter afternoon in primary school, perhaps third or fourth grade. I attended a Catholic girls-only school in a predominantly Protestant village near Haarlem in the Netherlands. In the afternoon, when concentration is hard to muster, the classroom was hot, and many girls had trouble keeping their eyes open. Not me. Given my lifelong obsession with narrative, it comes as no surprise to me to recall, decades later, that I was such an eager listener to the stories the schoolmistress used to tell. I think she told at least one story every few hours, often after the break or at the end of the day. At such sleep-inducing times of the day she dished up an incredible number of stories, the sole common feature of which was their baggage of moral lessons. We never read the Bible, ever. Nevertheless, I think it was a form of religious education, as usual with religion and ideology not very clearly distinguished. With my rather vivid imagination, I tended to bring the stories to bear on my own life all the time.

With the story of Potiphar's wife's wicked attempt at Joseph's virtue this proved to be a bit difficult. Neither I nor, I expect, my classmates had any education on matters sexual at the age of eight or nine. I even remember wondering what it was exactly that the woman wanted Joseph to do. But whatever it was, he didn't want to do it. And I understood that she insisted and he fled. I never doubted that she was evil. The heart of the story, of course, was her lie. This was what the teacher was trying to convey. Potiphar's wife lied, and as a result, Joseph went to prison. The horror was obvious, translated into absolute silence while the teacher lowered her voice to a nearwhisper, and somehow I went home with the notion that women can be dangerous to men.

This was a point worth making. More often than not, stories about danger targeted men. These cautionary tales of terror concerned strangers offering candy only in order to abduct children; bad men hidden in dark corners, so

that I tended to walk close to the edge of the sidewalk; men grabbing children who were alone in the street against their parents' admonitions; men hiding under my bed. Now, I learned, women could be dangerous as well. But strangely, in ways I did not understand, they were dangerous especially or exclusively to men.

These are my first memories of the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. I don't recall the precise story, but I do know it was about a woman in whose house Joseph was working. He was in good standing; his master appreciated him a lot, and so did, in fact, his mistress. She wanted something from him that he didn't want to give her, and he was right in his refusal. I don't remember what I thought it was she wanted. She then trapped him and deceived her husband, and Joseph went to jail. Luckily, and as a reward for his steadfastness, he went up from there like a comet because he was so good at explaining dreams.

I tell this tale of getting to know the story not to make this essay unnecessarily personal but because I want to understand how books and lives hang together. I am a literary scholar by training, and I love texts. Later I also learned to love images, to which I relate as other kinds of texts: as objects or artifacts that solicit me to make sense out of them. With images, I was also sensitive to their materiality. Whenever I worked on art, I yearned to touch, to hold the actual object, and did not rest until I had seen the real thing, wherever on earth it might be. Later in this book this contact with the material object will prove to be as crucial as the textual "letter" of the written stories. In this chapter, I will propose the concept of cultural memory as the first in a small series of concepts I wish to put forward as relevant for the interpretation of such well-known-as well as ill-known-stories as the one of Joseph's mishaps at the hands of a woman. These stories circulate and shape minds and lives.

Perhaps because of my training, I am in sympathy with scholars who are as dissatisfied with the reliance on oral transmission as I am and who therefore seek to trace the "original" version of any given tale that goes around and around in as many versions as the world has cultures. I take this to be a standard scientific attitude. The disciplines of philology are all based on this intellectual posture. Hence, on a gut level, I tend to a qualified adherence to

the tale's firm anchoring in the Hebrew Bible, as suggested by James Kugel in his study on biblical exegesis for which he uses this tale (1990). Kugel is a well-known, highly respected biblical scholar, and for this reason alone his book will stand for that academic field and be a constant companion for me throughout my current exploration. But as I will argue throughout this essay, living with stories requires also a constant questioning not only of their oral retellings but of written versions as well. My vague childhood memory, his expert textual study-what kind of combination is this?

Introducing the discursive genre of biblical exegesis Kugel calls "narrative expansion," the subject of his book *In Potiphar's House*, he insists that "such narrative expansions are, by definition, exegetical because they are ultimately based on something that is in the text" (1990, 4, emphasis Kugel's). How can such an affirmative assertion of positive anchoring match memories of a humid classroom so long ago yet so recent? The question is crucial for what I do with my life. The utterly subjective, fleeting memory does not come out of a cultural blue. But how can I believe that a text thousands of years old can affect my life, my flesh? I intend to make the textual approach of Kugel and others cohere-theoretically and semantically-with my childhood memory. Cultural memory, then, is the subject of this chapter. It is the first concept I propose for an intertextual and intercultural study of this love story and others like it.

Kugel applies the term exegesis to all narrative expansions that answer implicit questions raised by "an unusual word, an apparently unnecessary repetition, an unusual grammatical form" that arouses the need to "bring ... out all possible nuances implied in the precise wording of each and every sentence" (1990, 3-4, emphasis added). He talks the talk of one who will not have the text abducted by ideological abuse. I wish to heed this injunction, if only as a remedy to the kinds of ideological appropriation and political misuse to which canonical religious literature is subjected more frequently than are any other texts. But these abductions happen all the time. They cannot be wished away, because they are the result of texts; they are how texts act. I cannot believe in those textual roots of truths that suit some purpose while damaging others. So even if a text is an artifact and if it contains words that have meaning, each of them and in their arrangement, I

take issue with the notion that they also contain the questions we ask of them.

The leap from words to questions is significant. In the course of this book I will argue that interest in the precise wording is a reading attitude I call literalism, of which I am a strong advocate. On the other hand, the idea that the texts contain the questions we ask of them is, I will argue, akin to fundamentalism. My argument in this book seeks to carefully delineate the distinction between these two understandings of textuality and reading. The one treasures the cultural inheritance and opens it up for the contemporary world. The other makes a devastating appeal to an immutably referential, prescriptive meaning, an appeal that is based on a radical denial or negligence of how signs work.

However, it is not enough to align ourselves with reception theory and to simply assume the reader is in charge. I contend it is in the questions, not in the texts as hard core, that we must understand the texts that traditions have managed to save for us. Yet our questions are, in turn, culturally framed, embedded in ways of thinking and common conceptions of social life. Reading is establishing a meaningful connection between these relatively stable texts and the varying, historically shifting meanings they generate.

The practice of interpretation is not quite in step with this conception of reading. Instead, I contend, the standard question of interpretation of which Kugel's study is a prime example is, simply, "why?" We ask questions of the order of "why?" to understand things whose meanings have shifted and slid from underneath the relatively stable blanket of the text. "Why did X do what he did" (Kugel 1990, 2). These questions of "why"-why does a figure do or say something, why doesn't the husband understand, why is the interlocutor refusing to comply, and the like-merge not from the text but from the cultural frameworks of the interpreter, who feels the text does not fully flesh out the concerns of those who read it. In other words, it is from within our own conceptions that we wonder and ask why characters do or say what they do. These frames and conceptions change all the time, whereas the texts as artifacts retain more-although by no means total-stability. This stability is due, in large part, to the process of canonization, which is by definition conservative. The readings change faster. What I

resist, therefore, is the reasoning that a "why" question is anchored in the text whenever there is something considered enigmatic "in" a text, something the reader has to contend with: a seeming contradiction, a missing detail, an unexpected form. "Seeming" begs more specific questions. Who is the person or group of persons for whom there is a seeming contradiction? For whom and from which expectation would the detail be lacking? From which horizon of expectation would the form appear unexpected? These are questions of readership, the group identities and mythologies that inform a text's readers. Given this, I take these questions very seriously but will deny them their selfevident universality. With these qualifications and specifications in mind, I will refer to such questions of readership and expectations with the shorthand phrase "why questions."

This asking of "why questions" of the text is never finished, because readers move on with the times and hence meanings keep sliding along. Moreover, they have personal baggage to bring to the text as well as the cultural framings of this baggage. This is where my personal childhood memory joins the cultural memory in which I was and am steeped. Indeed, if we take seriously the cultural situation from which the text came to us, we must assume that the "why?" comes from the reader-who is, in turn, framed by her culture-not from the text. There are two paces at work: the long-term continuity of the artifact's existence and availability on the one hand and the faster pace of changing communities of readers on the other. Between these two paces the inevitable discrepancies define what has been called "cultural memory." To put it simply, cultural memory is the gap-sometimes abyss-between the words on the page and the meanings such as the one I took home that winter day in the 1950s. The question "Why?" is the most tangible site of that cultural memory. As such, it is neither "in" the text nor outside of it, but "into" it, toward it; it is the reader's relationship to the text.

I take Kugel's authoritative study to stand for the discrepancy between belief in the text's "precise wording"-literalism-and the belief that the questions are located in the text-a potentially fundamentalist attitude. I will flesh out what I understand fundamentalism to be in the context of readings of tradition-transmitted texts such as the Joseph story. Kugel's formulation does not address the issue of whether "why questions" can be considered

based on something other than his own frame of reference, something stable that is (ontologically) in (locally) the text, although he does acknowledge from the start that the texts "exercised a central role in everyday life" (1990, i). I will return to this issue throughout this book. For now, however, I qualify this alleged anchoring by means of my memory of primary school. School, as Louis Althusser argued long ago, is one of those "Ideological State Apparatuses" where memories are shaped to fit the cultural frame (1971). It is the site where children learn to think, and to think in certain ways. This is both necessary and unavoidable, and I am not going to argue that this kind of education shouldn't happen. But how it takes place-and what interests it serves-is worth considering if we wish to understand the intertwining of individual and social identities, as well as that between past and present. In order to understand this intertwining I will draw on three areas of study: semiotics, or the theory of sign and sign use; aesthetics, or the theory of humans' relationship to the material world; and religion, or the relationships among people and with deities.

Like so many others, I was raised to despise, hate, and at the very least blame Potiphar's wife for Joseph's mishaps. His stint in prison, which cannot have been pleasant to say the least, was brought about by her lie. And lying, I was taught, is bad. The emotion we were compelled to feel for Joseph was pity. He did not deserve his unfortunate downfall. With this firm and emotionally sustained hatred of the guilty woman I entered adulthood-becoming a woman myself. The story was safely stored away in my memory for later use. When, much later, I was led to read the story for the first time, I had this affective tie to the characters already set in place. I could not read the story without it. And only because I had not been raised reading the biblical stories firsthand was I able to be surprised by it. Something did not match the sources; something remained stubbornly alien to me. This book is an account of that surprise. I seek to understand and unravel that mismatch between memory and text.

Between memory and text lies a gap, or a stumbling block, and stumbling over it is the cause of my surprise. That surprise emerged from a clash between a memory and a text. Several times during my encounters with biblical literature, with retellings of biblical stories in modern Western literature, and with what, for the sake of fairness, I consider "versions" of

such stories-among which the Qur'an text of 12:23-31-I have felt such a clash. These were often productive, indeed exciting moments of learning. It was always to the extent I did not recognize what I saw before me that I found the text or image interesting. This rather flat word, a word of politeness and often of polite dismissal, receives new meaning when we take it in the German sense awoken by such writers as Jurgen Habermas. His seminal book *Knowledge and Human Interest* (1972 [orig. 1968]) remains an inspiring source for reflection on how knowledge thrives on interestedness-the opposite of Kant's ideal of aesthetic contemplation, defined as disinterestedness.

I am interested in exploring the interestedness of interpretation on the level of self-evidence. The kind of self-evidence I was carrying along concerning Potiphar's wife I can now recognize as a moral, indeed moralistic lesson against love or sexual attraction. A lesson in innocence defined as abstinence. Against women, protecting men.

How, then, can I articulate the imbrications of personal memory with cultural memory-in other words, how can my memory from schooldays become relevant in a discussion of a scholarly nature? The connection lies in the self-evidence, the unspoken implications of that warm schoolroom with the story told in it. These self-evident ideas, a culture's stock of wisdom, include what we call stereotypes. This notion points to fixed ideas that articulate the self's opinion about "others," construed as a group. Mireille Rosello's book *Declining the Stereotype* (1998) discusses the mechanism of stereotyping within a culture in terms congenial to what I set out to do in this book. She constructs the notion of the "reluctant witness," which I find a very useful, productive counterpart to the stereotype as itself an artifact. This reluctant witness is someone recruited to listen to a stereotyping discourse, a listening that entails the appearance of at least partly acquiescing to that discourse. When the listener herself belongs to the group being stereotypically constructed, she may be infuriated and feel offended, but often it is easiest to just go along for the ride. And then, after a time, to forget to get off. I think this happens to girls, to women-in-the-making, in misogynistic cultures such as my own. In my memory of it, I was a witness, only slightly reluctant, to my own stereotyping through the story of the wicked woman.

Rosello introduces the concept of the reluctant witness with the following examples, which are easy to recognize:

An overtly gay person may be invited to agree with the supposedly legitimate disapproval of a straight interlocutor. A Jewish guest may be asked to swallow his or her host's anti-Semitic stereotypes with dinner, the French relative of Arab origin may be entrusted with more or less carefully worded revelations about anti-Arab feelings in his or her immediate surroundings, he or she, of course, constructed as the exception to the rule. (1998, 1)

The exceptional status of the witness is at the heart of my story. Readers are witnesses, and as we will see, their act of witnessing is embedded in the story in one of its versions. Women are dangerous, the story intimated to me as a child, but if you do your best to be good, you can belong to the good guys. The invitation offers hospitality within the group in recompense for acceptance of the insult. The insult is mitigated. The morality that suggests the possibility of avoidance of the condemned behavior is the lesson-to stay with school parlance-that helps overcome the unease that would otherwise lead to its rejection or, as Rosello's pun has it, "declining."

In the case of our tale, this lesson, clearly, was gender specific. Told to an audience of gullible girls, unknowing about sex and inexperienced in that event referred to as "falling in love," the tale of Joseph's downfall was meant to instill in its listeners, specifically, a repulsion against lying as well as against what only later was named "love." It worked. As far as I can remember, I have tended to associate falling in love with guilt and being in love with the need to lie. Lying to the loved person, who would, without any doubt, run away if told about my thrill; lying to parents, who, without giving me the necessary information to judge for myself, told me repeatedly how bad, dirty, and dangerous all this unnamed stuff was; lying to myself, thinking something was wrong with me and I had better rid myself of that emotion that kept me awake at night.

Not that I came ever close to the specific kind of lie the woman in the Genesis story had performed. The situation was never quite like that. But associations flow in the direction in which they can go, like a river; and like rivers, they carve out an ever-deeper channel that tames the water. Speaking

in very general terms, the tale was one of several stories—a corpus later supplemented by other stories, novels, paintings, and films—that prepared me to grow up into a "decent" female, ready to organize my life accordingly. Whether or not this worked is not important. It never works to perfection; it never fails to work altogether. For the cultural critic I ended up being, the point is that any reading I was later able to perform on any "version" of the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife was always already framed by the earliest memories of a story half-understood and rapidly abducted. Where and who was I in that process, and what is this "me" to begin with, if I can be so framed?

"Me" is an individual shaped by many frames, but inescapably strongly shaped by school. In my case it was a Catholic school, in which the church participated, directly and indirectly. I remember the priests who came to teach religion, because they were the only men in the school and for a time I thought they wore robes to dress like women. Even within the relatively small village of my childhood, other children grew up in other environments, just as specific but also just as collective. Cultural memory is the term that has been used to theorize this togetherness of memories through which individuals are shaped as part of communities. The storytelling of my teacher and my processing of the story told would be "acts of memory" in this cultural sense (Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer 1999).

In a recent study, Jan Assmann, one of the prominent specialists of cultural memory, offers useful terms to distinguish between kinds and aspects of memory. He refers to episodic memories as derived from experience and "semantic memories"—a somewhat infelicitous term—as derived from learning. In light of my starting point in my school memory, the two categories are tightly imbricated. He further distinguishes scenic memories, which he considers "incoherent and remote from meaning," from narrative memories that do have meaning and coherence. I find these terms highly stimulating but his definitions disappointing because of their oppositional character. This opposition favors temporal over spatial structure: narrative versus scenic, for example. But the notion of distinguishing different—neither opposed nor categorically exclusive—kinds of memory is helpful. It helps us understand what makes memory by definition cultural, and why this recognition is important (Assmann 2006a, 2). For me, scenic is a

crucial qualification that helps explain the ineradicable persistence of memories through time; later on I will make a case for the scenic quality of the key scene of the Joseph story as an explanation for its power. Meanwhile, narrative, far from being an opposite qualification, complements the scenic with a range of events and characters that make the scenic memory articulate in the first place.

Assmann rejects the term social memory, through which Maurice Halbwach inaugurated collective memory studies in the social sciences in the 1920s, "because individual memory is always social to a high degree, just like language and consciousness in general. A strictly individual memory would be something like a private language that is only understood by one person" (Assman 2006a, 3). Instead, Jan and Aleida Assmann have proposed the term communicative memory to indicate the social aspect of individual memory. Such memory "grows out of intercourse between people, and the emotions play a crucial role in its process. Love, interest, sympathy, feelings of guilt and shame—all of these help to define our memories and provide them with a horizon. Without such definition they would not imprint themselves on our minds; without a horizon they would lack relevance and meaning within a specific cultural context" (2006a, 3). Assmann concludes on the same page: "Only emotionally cathected forms of communication bring structure, perspective, relevance, definition, and horizon into memory."

Nietzsche, Assmann's source of inspiration here, has argued that one of the functions of memory is helping people form bonds. Indeed the cohesion of groups depends on it. Nietzsche explains this thesis in reference to implied promises contained in shared memories. To the extent that the bonds that have been established promote responsibility and reliability, the philosopher grounds his concept of morality in these promises. This is how the human being in culture is made predictable: he will remember what he promised. Nietzsche attributes this reliability to acts of will. I am more focused on acts of obedience, of collusion, of halfway accepting the invitations Rosello wrote about, accepting them with reluctance. What Assmann's view foregrounds in this context is the possibility that the cultural production of shared memories stabilizes group identities and "a point of view that span[s] several generations" (2006a, i1).

For Assmann, religion is just such a form of shared remembering. This view makes my case against the anxious claims that the "why questions"-the alleged oddities-are in the text. I contend that these questions are nowhere but emerge, as a promise, from the cultural memories that make us "remember" to raise them. Returning to Kugel, then, I would like to propose a reading that qualifies the text-as-anchor with my memories and my memories with the texts-plural. Instead of relying exclusively on scholarly skills and bodies of knowledge, I seek to establish a dialogue in which my memories are as seriously involved as the memories that, I presume, have filtered into the most scholarly of exegeses. How can I be so bold?

Well, look again at Kugel's formulations, now through the lens of Assmann's concept of cultural memory. Bringing out "all possible nuances" suggests an openness that, if it is to be comprehensive, must be hospitable enough to accommodate my personal nuances as well. The word implied begs the question of the source of the authority that proclaims a question to be relevant. This authority belongs, in the present, to professionals such as priests, rabbis, imams, and the schoolmistresses doing their bidding. It belongs also, in the past, to the texts that result from processes of canonization. This is how personal memories fit into cultural memory: the figures of authority in the present draw on the authority of the past processes of canonization. They derive their present authority from the resulting canon, while the past is given ongoing, hence present, relevance by their compliance with what they take to be immutable truths.

The authority of the canon is just as difficult to dismiss as that of the text. As I will argue in the final chapters of this book, I don't wish to dismiss it but to understand the way it works, not to undermine but to delimit its power over the present. Further, the phrase "in the precise wording of each and every sentence" suggests a philological desire that I share, but it is also invoked to circumvent the question of relevance and its anchoring in interests. I will begin to examine this issue in chapter 2. The tension between literalism and fundamentalism, the recurrent theoretical theme in this book, will be more fully explicated there.

To anticipate this work: The grounding of Kugel's confidence in the textual basis for exegesis is his formalism expressed in the words "an unusual

word, an apparently unnecessary repetition, an unusual grammatical form." Yet in his own formulation I find the reasons to take my small-girl memories seriously and consider them relevant for an understanding of the story. Sure, words, repetitions, and grammatical form are textual features. However, "unnecessary" and "unusual" are judgments derived from habits-cultural, collective, informing personal ones-in relation to which words, repetitions, and forms are unusual or unnecessary. These habits are important in Kugel's standards but then are glossed over in his methodological reflection. In contrast, I put them at the center of this study.

According to this wording, the issue of the questions attributed to the text belongs to the realm of aesthetics, at least according to my conception of that domain. For me, the term aesthetics suggests a connection to the senses, through which the object "binds" itself to the reader. In a story whose themes concern a strong sensual appeal, this old and broad definition of aesthetics is quite suitable. For it suggests that one way to read the story is to consider Joseph, the figure who is constantly extolled for his beauty, as an aesthetic object. Such a framing of the character is easier to understand through a consideration of visual art that retells the story in its own medium-through line, color, and composition. This, at least, is what I have been led to do. Although the memories attached to my interest in Rembrandt's works around this story are more specific than that, it is against the background of an aesthetic of the senses that the story gains much of its thrill. On the condition that this binding be complicated by the fantasy aspect of all aesthetic experience, as I will argue in chapter 3.

That fantasy aspect lies at the heart of another experience of rereading that left an indelible memory of surprise. At a much later moment I was led, by my reading of a modern novel about the Joseph material, to look up what the Qur'anic story had to tell. It was astoundingly different, so much so that in a resulting publication I claimed that, far from being a version of the same story, this was an altogether different one. In terms of historiography, the move to look at the Qur'an to see where Thomas Mann had gotten his material was profoundly preposterous, in a double sense. This term, which I have developed at some length elsewhere (1999), indicates a literal turning upside down of the order of time: pre- becomes post- and vice versa. Any exegesis, then, is pre-posterous by definition, and no appeal to the "original

text" can change that. Qua text, the Qur'an postdates the biblical text, and modernist literature cannot but anachronistically distort any reading of either text that one might venture to perform. Granted. More than granted: foregrounded. As I will argue, this preposterousness is necessary as an antidote against the infusion in the alleged textual basis of exegesis of other people's memories, just as personal, unexamined, and "doxic" as mine.'

My schoolteacher was convincing and had such lasting influence because she was gentle and seemed to speak from her heart. Obviously, she was also simply transmitting a version of the story she had been told and had remembered, because she was a Catholic too and hence didn't read the Bible. Even if she had, she would have read it with her interpretation framing her reading beforehand. Cultural memories such as this one predate any reading. For this reason, they are the heart of what I just called, apropos of Mann, a "preposterous" view of the past.

The collective cultural nature of such unimportant little memories as the one of that afternoon in primary school makes me want to declare cultural memory itself a text, with the same right and with the same status-dubious, polymorphic, interested-as the texts proper. Not my personal memory, mind you, but the collective memories that, diffuse and ungraspable, make themselves known in such personal experiences. The schoolmistress's as much as mine; her parents and mine, her advisers in school and church as much as mine. This is my starting point, always up for dispute of course, but relevant nevertheless. What "the text" is remains elusive in this approach, but the gain is that reading becomes more diverse, yet not subjective in the individualistic sense. The corpus I have composed, although not at all comprehensive, allows me to set "versions" in relation to one another as mutually illuminating rather than competitive.

Once this earliest of my consciously retrievable memories of a love story is given its rightful place, it is time to engage Kugel's position-a predominant and scholarly one-and acknowledge the textuality of my "sources." I have six major and some minor ones I wish to confront with one another. The biblical text of Genesis 39, the relevant passages of Thomas Mann's novel from 1932, and the Qur'anic story of 12:24-35 mark the successive stages of my incorporation of the story I read, and therefore I cite them in that order.

But this is only half the truth. Sometime before, during, and after these readings I saw depictions of the key scene of the story, of which a small etching by Rembrandt is the first I remember, while two of his paintings came a bit later. Numerous other paintings followed, but I prefer to limit myself to these three images. Conversations, whether casual and incidental or goal-oriented, with various people who also had their own memories of the story to contribute were just as crucial to shape the view of the intertextuality of Joseph-and-Potiphar's-wife I am laying out in this book. I will not trace too many details of this muddled "influence" but will do some tracing only when it is theoretically relevant.

This relevance does not lie in the truth of the interpretation but in the process of interpretation itself. This process is framed by, while also an instance of, canonization. The fact that we are dealing with at least four canonical traditions concerns me most of all. For the sheer number of traditions that are intertwined here calls into question the concept of canon along with that of interpretation. It also complicates the view of cultural memory as Assmann's book represents it. While I am interested in showing the adventures of reading in the encounter between different "versions," I am keener still to demonstrate how each reading, even confined to one person's lifetime and framed by her scholarly training and lack of it, of necessity revisits and transforms the earlier ones.

Thus the outcome, if any, of my itinerary is self-reflection. Again, the reflection I propose as an inevitable key to cultural analysis in the present is not a reflection of and on me as an individual but on my activity as a scholar and writer within a culture that is plural. Not only is my culture—say, Western Europe—composed of an enormous number of different traditions, including religious ones, but it is also constantly being reshuffled into categories whose importance shifts with issues and situations. Sometimes age is more important than gender; sometimes class overrules all other groupings. At the present moment, religion, always politically inflected, is gaining renewed prominence as a tool for group formation. But never, in no situation, is that culture homogeneous. Reflection hence occurs along with other activities, as one among many. It holds me responsible for my own errors, indebted me to others for my insights. And ultimately it leaves me both alone and surrounded, framed, by the murmurings of the discourses of

others. This makes "me" a porous subject, both temporally, in relation to the child who first experienced this story, and socially, in the sense that I was, and am, not alone with that experience. I will elaborate on this porousness in chapter 3, devoted to the great but frequently underestimated importance of fantasy.

Only after discussing the two extremes of literal words (chapter 2) and fantasy (chapter 3) will I feel comfortable analyzing what was for me the maddest, wildest instance of this tale's cultural life: Rembrandt's etching. On the one hand, I use this image to discuss form. That is, I will analyze how visual images can also be held to their "words," their detailed form. On the other hand, that form, without producing a particular fantasy, solicits the production of fantasy. In this case it does so by means of a fantastic ambiguity. Ambiguity, then, is the topic central to chapter 4.

The possibility of mobilizing words and forms for the production of fantasies is predicated upon an aspect that is also at the heart of the cultural nature of memory. This is the issue of identification. I will first discuss Thomas Mann's narrative expansion of a single verse of the Qur'an to establish the connections between words and forms, which at first sight appear too distinct. Then, in chapter 6, I will stop to consider what that single verse in the Qur'an does to me, how it changes the story compared to what my memory had told me it "meant." The difference goes beyond the textual and theoretical topics discussed so far. My discussion of the Qur'an verse ends in a specifically Qur'anic version of semiotic theory, the theory of signs. This result will help me to overcome a sense of competition between the versions.

This semiotics, while derived from the Qur'an, need not be confined to a Qur'anic specificity. That would turn it into an exotic conception of signs alien to the Western sensibility. Instead, I consider the understanding of this semiotic conception a moment of intercultural learning. Hence the point of reading across the four different canons is to interact without merging, to develop a sensibility to cultural difference that avoids reifying difference as much as imposing assimilation. The Qur'anic semiotics is the tool to break open the enigmatic nature of two paintings by Rembrandt in chapter 7. For a long time I have been looking at these paintings with some intensity and

always found one more appealing than the other. Invoking Qur'anic semiotics, I am now better able to read each of these paintings in their own right, on their own terms.

But this outcome may give the wrong impression: that a point of view that combines cultural memory with philology ends up in a wildly subjectivist mode of interpretation. This impression would be wrong; I argue instead that these processes of enlivening the artifacts at the expense of their cultural stability are framed and enabled by claims to the truth, equally culturally framed, in their rhetoric and their contents alike. The final three chapters each deal with an aspect of this truth claim, or as I call it, truth speak.

First, in chapter 8, I will unpack the rhetoric of Mann's metacritical commentary on his own fabulations, or, as I should say in the context of a reflection on shared memories, con-fabulations. Mann neither reiterates myths as he knows them nor invents the stories. Rather, he turns them into fictions that are fabulous. He does this with, as the prefix con- indicates, the fictions that the multiple cultures through which he read had already produced before him. This rhetoric encompasses vastly different claims to truth. One of these is, of course, the rhetoric of truth itself, which I consider an instance of realism.

The question of the texts' status as the truth in their respective traditions inevitably leads to a discussion of canonicity, the process of canonization, and the authorities involved. This is the subject of chapter 9. In the face of so many canonical artifacts, no claim to higher canonicity can be accepted for any of them. But, I argue, the issue of canon does not lie in such a competition. Nor can it be dismissed with an appeal to cultural relativism, that alltoo-easy refusal to think through what others think. Instead, the canon is, as its etymology suggests, a measuring stick along which every one of us must judge. Not too fast, and not lightly, because judgments have a real influence on the lives of those we judge. But judge we must nevertheless, for the sake of ourselves, if we are to extract from our readings even a tiny grain of wisdom. The texts of the various canons-religious, literary, artistic-that make up pluralized public culture can be taken seriously only, I argue, when taken together, in dialogue. Only then

can they exceed their canonical fixity and come to life again, even if that life plays itself out against the setting of a particular centripetal canon.

But unfixing canons is not so easy. For their authority defeats attempts to liquefy their borders. In chapter 20 the nature of authority itself is up for scrutiny. Only if we are willing to analyze and understand authority can we accept chosen forms of authority, in order to live by them. At the heart of authority lies a tenacious belief in what we call, perhaps too easily and too polemically, "patriarchy." While sharing the critique of this all-too-handy term especially in its tendency to blame Judaism and Islam for all that is wrong in the ways past and present cultures deal with gender, and its lumping together of widely divergent social structures—I keep the term here, in scare quotes, to foreground the still-rampant power of fathers and father-figures, metaphors of fatherhood, and authority itself as "fatherly." The automatic authority of fathers—and one look at the registers of names of the leaders of the world makes it difficult to deny that this authority is indeed automatic—is grounded in misconceptions concerning procreation and is extremely hurtful. Ultimately the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife is framed by attempts to affirm that authority. But, as I also demonstrate, this frame is nevertheless undermined, or at least challenged, by the slightly liquefied state of this authority.

To make these arguments I will revisit earlier publications, all somewhat locked into disciplinary scholarship. My earliest publication on the story is in a book of art historical reflection, *Reading "Rembrandt"* (2006 [1991]). I will rearticulate those arguments in a more accessible manner. The later self-critique of this piece, recently published (Bal 2006a), will help me shift the focus from the issue of canon to a larger issue of culture. Together, these sources sustain, but do not confine, the essay offered here. This book is an essay in the literal sense: an attempt. I aim to explore concepts that I find particularly helpful in the understanding of classical, overly known, and thus doxically misread or unread cultural artifacts. It is an essay in methodology, but one that, in line with some of my earlier work (esp. 2002) seeks to establish in concepts the standards no longer self-evidently anchored in specific disciplinary knowledge.

As with other issues, it sometimes happen that I feel I need to be more explicit about my own position. This is the case here concerning my relationship to religion. Having been brought up a Catholic, I have declined further participation in that or any religious culture. I didn't care for the institutionalized power, the authority on which the invitation to be a reluctant guest-to reiterate Rosello's terms-was based. Since then, I have become more aware of the cultural importance of religion for many people with whom I interact. This awareness has increased the urgency to think through what religion can mean. It can be seen as a form of binding, a social effect that connects people to one another and their private lives to the cultural environment. This brings me back to Nietzsche and his conception of cultural memory. It also brings me back to a certain conception of aesthetics, also conceived as binding. Religion is not aesthetics, but it does have an aesthetic dimension. The primary difference is that in religion, the bond is based on the assumption of a prescriptive deity or deities; in aesthetics, on an object. Moreover, in religion, the senses are often put under suspicion; in aesthetics, they are central. These are major differences. But then, when I think of the Qur'anic semiotics that keeps the sign unsplit, I can see how the fields in which this essay is anchored have more in common than I had realized.

As I just mentioned, all three concern a form of binding. Aesthetic binds the subject to the aesthetic object through the senses. This appears to be an individual experience, although it is impossible outside of a social frame offering the objects and the terms of the experience. Semiotics presupposes a social framework within which communication by means of signs is possible. This is a crucial form of binding-one without which human life cannot be sustained. With religion, the binding occurs among members of the group that share the religion but also between the individual and the deity he or she feels connected with. Thus, if I may be forgiven the simplification, while aesthetics and semiotics concern primarily horizontal relationships, in religion the bond is both horizontal and vertical. Here the trick is to realize the need for the horizontal bond, not only to form a group of "selves" as distinct from "others" but also to counterbalance too strong a vertical bond. The trick, to put it bluntly, is to unbind, so to speak, the notion of binding from the akedah, the binding of Isaac about to be killed by his father.

This father had to submit so totally to the vertical relationship that he was willing to sacrifice what defined him as a father. It is rarely noted that horizontally he had already done that when, on the instigation of his wife Sarah, he had cast out his firstborn son, Ishmael, and the lad's mother, Hagar. Ishmael made it, and is said to have become the father of the Arabs. Then, vertically, God asked Abraham to prove his faith by sacrificing his "only" son-"the one you love." This figure Abraham is supposed to be the model of religious life. This model has a lot to account for. I consider this ideology of sacrifice the utmost illusion of a subject desirous, above all else, to be alone-a subject in fear of binding. What these three fields help us reflect on, instead, is the kind of subjectivity we wish to live by: either an autonomous one, fearful of dependence on others and invested in authority as a way of safeguarding an autonomy one knows to be untenable, or a porous one that accommodates others as part of the self, or others as models, spectacles, masks of the self. The three theoretical domains most prominent in this essay-semiotics, aesthetics, and the study of religion-attempt to grasp the modalities of that porousness.

The three conceptions of semiotics, aesthetics, and religion that emerge from these reflections join in a cultural field that, paradoxically perhaps, I can only indicate as a form of "abstraction." By this word I do not mean the opposite of figuration, for stories like the one central here are nothing if not figurative. Abstraction, instead, is a field of possibility, delimited by a threshold below which no form has yet emerged, hence no meaning is yet being produced. This leaves the field wide open for all manner of meaning production. Abstraction, then, is the potential of new forms, hence of new meanings, not the existence of them.

The French psychoanalyst Jean-Martin Charcot, Freud's master, is rumored to have said that for years he just walked through the wards of the hospital La Salpetriere, seeing only what he had been taught to see (Balmary 1999, i9). It was giving up this disciplined eye that allowed him to make the discoveries he did. In turn, these discoveries opened the way to psychoanalysis. But both Charcot and Freud also learned to open their eyes because the cultural moment they lived in was getting ready for such opening. It wasn't quite yet, which is why these doctors were able to invent such innovative ideas. But without the cultural moment allowing it, they

both would have succumbed to the pressure of the kinds of ideological belief that constituted their livelihood. In this respect, psychoanalysis as a paradigm has come to stand for the openness that was halfway in the air. If today this is no longer true of the practice of that discipline, this can be attributed to the institutionalization and unquestioned authority that are the price to pay for canonization.

That non- or anti-discipline may have become a discipline in the strict sense, with its own rather closed training program and societies, but at first it was a lesson in seeing, including in the biblical sense: seeing what we have not been taught, as an entrance to insight. A seeing that allows surprises. This lesson of psychoanalysis is stronger, more productive, than any disciplinary closure can allow. As French psychoanalyst Marie Balmary keeps reiterating, Freud taught us to turn against him-the Freud of surprised seeing showed us how to see, to read, his own writings as, inevitably, also caught by his time. This is why it seems imperative to me to balance surprise with what has become "cultural memory"-the acknowledgment and study of the way memories can be shared, including across generations. Including, also, across cultures and their respective canons. From these two directives I will retain the strengths of each and try to avoid the pitfalls: opening myself up to surprises while remaining aware of the memories that inform them as well. Or, conversely, I take memory seriously as a treasure of knowledge without letting it predetermine what to see and how to think. I wish, then, to be a reluctant witness to memories, my own and those of others.