Lots of Writing

Mieke Bal
Theory of Literature, Amsterdam

Abstract Lot(s) of writing happen(s) in the Book of Esther, and writing is where words and images converge, where the visual and the verbal, fate and agency, Providence and plotting come together. In this article I grapple with visual and verbal representations of self-reflexion in the story of Esther, as depicted in the Scroll of Esther and in two paintings by Rembrandt. The paintings are used as a gloss on the Book of Esther and interpretations thereof, and Esther's feast is presented as a feast of writing, with its relation to Purim revealed in the tension between writing and randomness, agency and luck, or lot.

Introduction

Esther's dramatic second banquet, one out of many mentioned in the story, has understandably attracted painters; drama is a visually representable form of narrative.[1] Rembrandt's 1660 painting *Esther's Banquet*, in the Pushkin Museum, Moscow, is my favorite painting on this subject, but precisely because it does not enhance the scene's narrativity or its dramatic tension (Figure 1). The three figures who, in the biblical story, are engaged in the most dramatic interactions with one another are each rendered here as if cocooned within an invisible veil,

1. See Sandra Beth Berg (1979: 31–58) for an analysis of banquets and fasts, and their relationship to Purim.
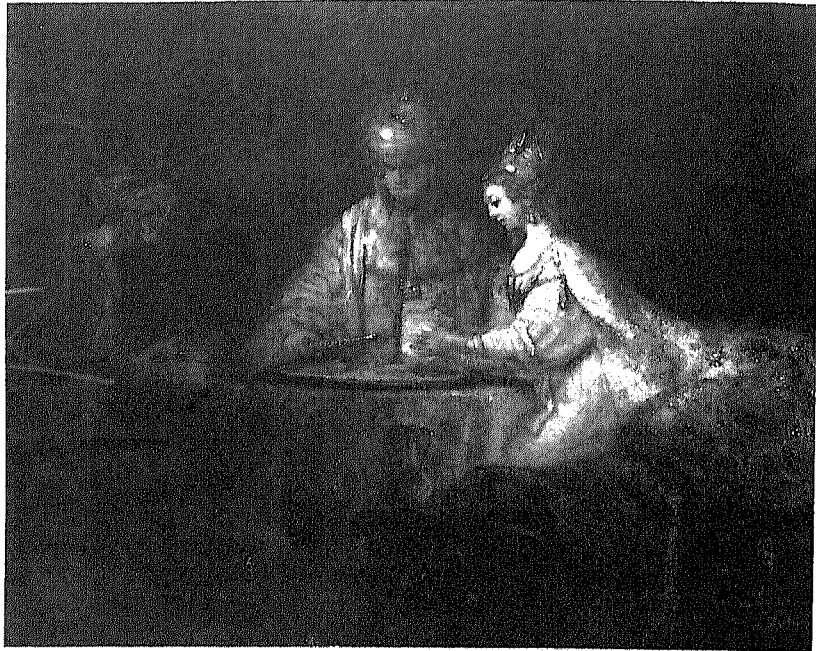
Figure 1. *Esther's Banquet* by Rembrandt van Rijn (1660). Courtesy of the Pushkin Museum, Moscow.

self-absorbed, silent, and isolated from the others.[2] Moreover, Haman, who is facing Esther, seems to be blind.

Another painting by Rembrandt, *Haman's Downfall*, dated 1665 and currently in the Hermitage, St. Petersburg, represents the next episode in the Esther story, the downfall of the plotter (Figure 2). Haman is strangely represented as almost literally falling forward, about to topple toward the viewer as he quits the scene; and here there is no doubt about his being blind.[3] In this work, the scene is even more strikingly drained of its narrativity; with Esther absent and Mordecai present, it is not the narrative event itself, but rather its proleptic meaning—Haman's displacement by Mordecai—that is represented.

Rembrandt is generally considered a narrative painter, exceptionally so even for a Dutch artist (see Alpers 1985). But here, in repre-

2. For an analysis of such self-absorption in paintings, as opposed to "theatricality," or interaction between characters and viewer, see Michael Fried (1980).
3. The question of whether Rembrandt intended to represent these episodes or whether the works received their titles later is as irrelevant to my perspective here as the question of whether "Esther" really instituted Purim or was a fictional representation of/justification for the festival.

Figure 2. *Haman's Downfall* by Rembrandt van Rijn (1665). Courtesy of the Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

senting a lively, highly dramatic scene, he" has eliminated movement from the image. In this still medium, the figures are emphatically arrested, as if to represent the stillness of visual art itself. And once self-reflexion becomes a mode of reading these paintings, another, more complex type of reflexivity is activated, one which courts paradox. On the one hand, due to its representation in a wordless medium, the scene's emphasis falls on speechlessness, the lack of communication between the figures mirroring the nonlinguistic quality of a painting. In the text, on the other hand, direct discourse—speech—is used to dramatize climactic confrontations. Both works are, in this respect and in contrast to each other, self-reflexive, articulating the truth of their

medium at the moment of diegetic truth. Neither work appears to make any use of food, the pretext for the banquet. But there is more.

The episode of Haman's downfall, following Esther's masterly plotted denunciation, offers a different, negative relationship to the respective media, a systematic inversion or counter-mirroring. In the visual text (i.e., Figure 2), blindness acquires a particular status that challenges the very visuality on which it is based, a status paralleled by the description of this scene in the New English Bible: "At that Haman was dumbfounded" (Esther 7:6).[4] Where sight fails in the visual work, words fail in the verbal one.

The failure of both sight and speech is reflected in the following, remarkable statement: "The word left his [the king's] mouth, and they covered Haman's face" (7:8).[5] The king verbalizes what he sees, and his word causes Haman's face to be covered. Words are things that do things here, to paraphrase J. L. Austin (1975); words are the principal agents of this narrative. In causing Haman's face to be covered, words blind him; the inability to see thus enters the verbal scene, just as in *Esther's Banquet* (Figure 1), the visualized figures are unable to speak. Hence, Rembrandt foregrounds only what is already in the text, and the neat distinction between speech and vision falls flat. Rembrandt's paintings enable us to better read the text by demonstrating how it has already been read.[6]

I shall use these paintings as a gloss on the Book of Esther, approaching the text from the perspective of Rembrandt's interpretations of it. Assuming that the realm of visual representation has its own devices for supporting interpretive claims, I shall endorse its heuristic power and accept that it has something to add that verbal argumentation might well, so to speak, fail to see. What, then, is Esther's feast? As

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4. *The New English Bible with the Apocrypha*, Oxford Studies ed. (1976). The less striking Hebrew phrase translates simply as "And Haman was scared." I have chosen to draw upon a modern, popularized version of the biblical text because I am not really focusing on an accurate reading of the "original" (whatever that may be), but rather on the cultural vitality of the text as it has increasingly resonated over time.

5. Here, the Hebrew remains ambiguous. Hebrew scholars have suggested "and Haman's face [was] clouded," or "Haman's face fell, became bland." I have allowed myself to play with these possibilities, but obviously my argument does not depend on these particular words. What matters is the power of words to defeat, even kill, and, conversely, the visual impotence expressed in the ambiguity of seeing as an epistemological and a perceptual act.

6. I shall not go into the vast number of existing interpretations, even by way of translation. Although any reconstruction of the "original" meaning is, in my view, doomed to failure, attempting a closer reading would, of course, require an analysis of the canonical Hebrew text—which, again, is not pertinent to my argument.

we shall see, it is a feast of writing, and its relation to Purim lies in its expression of the tension between writing and randomness, between agency and luck, or lot.

Writing is precisely the mediator between sight and speech. Using the representational system of language as its code, writing requires sight in order to be processed, that is, for what Roman Jakobson called its phatic function. The Esther scroll is a celebration of writing and, as the climax of the story, so is Esther's banquet. Lot(s) of writing happen(s) in Esther, and writing is where words and images, the visual and the verbal, converge; where, specifically in Esther, fate and agency, randomness and history, Providence and plotting dovetail. Writing is also, of course, the medium that produced the Book of Esther.

In Esther writing both partakes of and struggles against the lots that allegedly gave Purim its name. For, as is often the case in biblical literature, the celebration is a working through of the ambivalence associated with what is being celebrated. And there are plenty of reasons to feel ambivalent about writing. While it is commonplace in cultural anthropology to consider the invention of writing the inaugurator and index of civilization, what has also been acknowledged is that the careful political management of literacy has contributed to oppression and to the centralization of state power (see Lemaire 1984: 104).[7] Writing has been a tool of the elite, a means of enforcing inequity and exploitation, of promulgating ideology through religion, and of generalizing laws; it has definitively impressed upon its practitioners a particular view of history which rendered collective memory futile and undermined the participation of the masses in oral history—all of which can be thematized in a political reading of Esther.[8]

In political terms, the pronounced centrality of writing and the efficiency of the Persian postal system corresponded to the king's rule

7. For the connection between religion and the economy of the state as supported by writing, see R. Mc. C. Adams (1966). Diamond (1974) argues against evolutionism in this domain. Jack Goody (1968, 1977) offered the now-classic critique of the repression of orality by writing, and Lévi-Strauss's (1955) classic text, Rousseauistic in its nostalgia, is "The Writing Lesson." Precisely because of the Romantic residue in the orality/literacy debate, I should point out that I use the term "writing" here in the limited sense of script, not in the extended sense ascribed to it by Derrida (1976); I do not, however, view innocence and nonviolence or, indeed, a state of culture-without-writing as the opposite of literacy. On the contrary, the tensions that I perceive in writing as it participates in the plot of Esther demonstrate the fragility of just such an opposition. I do not consider the Derridean view of writing intrinsically incompatible with the political critique of writing's complicity in domination.

8. While it is widely assumed that literacy was relatively widespread in Israel from the eighth century on, oral history, at one time the only form of history, has never totally disappeared from cultural life in Israel or anywhere else.

over many peoples, that is, to both the appropriation of power and the abuse of power for the (attempted) destruction of a particular people and their culture. Writing was the instrument of a real, historical threat (Haman's first decree). In epistemological terms, Plato described (in the *Phaedrus*) the destructive effect of writing on memory, which was usually associated with the breakdown of archaic, small-scale "democracies." As it happens, in Esther the displacement of memory by writing also occurs, in the chronicle of Mordecai's deed, but it is enacted by Ahasuerus, the very ruler whose centralized and autocratic power extended "from India to Ethiopia." His failing memory should not be too hastily ridiculed—a ridicule so often based on a contemptuous presumption of little psychological depth or realistic plausibility in ancient texts that it cannot avoid the charge of anachronism, if not arrogant evolutionism.[9] Instead, the king's poor memory should be seen as a reflection of the inevitable but ambivalent shift toward the predominance of writing staged by the text. But if Esther is about writing, it is also about itself.

Given the centrality of writing in the Book of Esther, self-reflexion seems a relevant concept with which to approach the text, and the two Rembrandt paintings indicate that this text's reflexivity may be highly complicated. Therefore, in reflecting upon the possible uses of self-reflexion here, I shall propose that it yields a perspective on Esther that extends beyond the question of the historical connection between "lots" and Purim.

Self-Reflexion

Self-reflexion is too fashionable a concept to be endorsed unreflectively. If the Esther scroll centers on writing, then it may be considered

9. See, e.g., Jack Sasson (1987: 337, 341): "Yet the events of barely a fortnight earlier are so hazy in his memory"; and "dim-witted monarchs." Sasson's approach to Esther seems to reflect the hidden evolutionistic ideology of many works that are characterized as "literary" approaches to the Bible. The view that the chronicle episode is implausible is widely held (see, e.g., Berg 1979: 63). Sasson applies such anachronistic criteria as psychological plausibility in order to present the text as a typical, comically cute piece of ancient literature, by which Sasson means all premodern literature, from Hellenistic romance through medieval fabliau, up to Voltaire's *contes philosophiques*. My own view is that Ahasuerus should not be judged on his intelligence, but rather considered as a necessary agent of the plot, which is, by another reflexive turn, about plotting. Measuring the biblical story by standards derived from the modern psychological-realist novel is almost universal in commentaries; see, for example, Carey Moore (1971: liii, liv), who finds the characters lacking in depth and compares Haman with Oedipus, to whom he fails to match up. One wonders about the unstated gender ideology in Moore's approach, where a realist bias also seems evident (see, e.g., the description of Mordecai as "the greater hero . . . who supplied the brains while Esther simply followed his directions" [lii]). To my mind, it is the critic who lacks depth here.

a self-reflexive text; and if, as I will argue, Esther reflects the uncertain status of writing and the ways in which writing produces reality—the reality of the threat to and the salvation of the Jews—it may represent a case of postmodernism *avant la lettre*.[10] Is this pushing anachronism too far? This question can only be answered in connection with the very problematic of self-reflexion, for I will argue that the concept's appeal for contemporary criticism is precisely its ambiguity, which frees representation from its ties to the psychological realism of nineteenth-century Western fiction.

Notions of self-reflexion are not only popular in literary criticism, due to the impact of postmodern literature and deconstructionist writing; they have also begun to circulate in art criticism, particularly with respect to the visual arts. Foucault's remarks at the end of his chapter on Velázquez's *Las Meninas* in *The Order of Things* beautifully expresses this mode of reading:

> Representation undertakes to represent itself here in all its elements, with its images, the eyes to which it is offered, the faces it makes visible, the gestures it calls into being. . . . Representation, freed finally from the relation that was impending it, can offer itself as representation in its purest form. (Foucault 1973: 16)

The specific relevance of visual art to a discussion of self-reflexion stems from the representational imposition of the *subject*: while literature can be about *itself*, enabling critics to ignore the reader, self-reflexive visual art imprisons the *viewer*. This distinction invites a more complex interrogation of the concept and enables us to historicize it, too. For transposed to the literary text, within the framework of a reading-oriented theory of texts, self-reflexive reading entails a complication: Whose/Which self is being reflected? The identity between the work and its subject—between work as labor and work as product—is not unified; it is fragmented by the intrusion of the reader, whose position is inherently paradoxical: Is s/he part of the self that is being reflected or reflected on? If so, then the self-reflexive mode of reading, in which the reader is subsumed by the work, would not encourage reader reflexivity. The self would remain whole, while only the reflection became fractured; if the reader were not part of the self being reflected (on), then the self would be disrupted from the start, and again, reader reflexivity would not be encouraged. What I contend is that this obliteration of the reader dehistoricizes the critical endeavor even if, or precisely when, its overt aim is historical reconstruction.

This mode of reading is made double-edged by its relationship to

10. Both self-reflexivity and ontological uncertainty are considered characteristic of postmodernism (see Hutcheon 1988; McHale 1987; Van Alphen 1992).

narcissism. As an effectively antirealistic strategy, it is a means of read-
ing for the work itself or, to use Linda Hutcheon's term, for the "nar-
cissism" in the work (see Hutcheon 1982, 1988). Resonating with its
mythical, visual, and psychoanalytic connotations, "narcissism" also in-
vokes the particular pictorial quality and the erotic near-gratification
of self-reference. In the Book of Esther, the reader is constantly re-
minded of the connection between visual beauty and power during the
main character's adventures; once the instability of writing becomes
the central theme for the self-reflexive reader, the power of beauty
and the power of writing are enmeshed, and, as I shall argue, even
the conventional gender division is destabilized.

The paradoxical entanglements entailed by the concept of self-
reflexion were particularly visible in the heated debate of 1980–81
that arose over Velázquez's *Las Meninas* between philosophers and art
historians, which I have analyzed elsewhere (Bal 1991). As mentioned
already, Foucault, a philosopher and hence a professional discursive
self-reflector, opened his study of the classical age with a thirteen-
page reflection on this painting (Foucault 1973).[11] He saw the work
as inscribed with the invisibility of the viewer, whose place is taken
by the royals—a view which to me suggests an unexpected symme-
try between the seventeenth-century Spanish painting and the ancient
Hebrew text, where the royal position is taken over by the outsider,
Esther the Jewess. John Searle (1980), a philosopher, significantly, of
language and hence of discourse, saw the work as typically paradoxi-

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11. Critics who took up the challenge of Foucault's self-confident *placing* of the
work within his own argument made little of the specific intertextual relationship
between the painting and the philosophical argument, a relationship which was
inverted in the subsequent critical debate. Foucault's intention was not to say any-
thing special about *Las Meninas*, but to make *Las Meninas* say precisely what he had
to say about the classical age. It seems to me that this alleged use of a "masterpiece"
as a mere example was partly responsible for the emotional responses that Fou-
cault's piece provoked. But in Foucault's writing, there is no such thing as a mere
example. *Las Meninas* provided the philosopher with the discourse that he needed:
a visual one. This appropriation was quite strategic: it enabled him to evade the
charge of simplification (which, ironically, is precisely what he was charged with).
The Foucauldian view relativizes visuality by its strong emphasis on the irreducible
difference between words and images: "But the relation of language to painting is
an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, confronted by the
visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's
terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we
say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors,
or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendor is not
that deployed by our eyes, but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax"
(Foucault 1973: 9). This attitude toward the relationship between discourse and
visual image also holds for my heuristic use of the two Rembrandt paintings here.

cal precisely because the viewer could *not* be (yet *must* be) in the same place as the royal couple. The term "paradox" upset two critics [12] and amused others, thus provoking a series of responses, both to Searle's interpretation and to the painting itself.

These responses focus on the position of the viewer in relation to the mirrored image of the king and queen at the center of the work. The debate itself forms an appropriate intertext for self-reflexion because, at least in the articles by Searle and by Snyder and Cohen, there is a striking discrepancy between the positions that these critics espouse in their discursive reflections and those that they reflect— mirror—in their discourse. This discrepancy points to the argumentational "other," the connotative rhetoric of the texts. In other words, the critical texts lend themselves to the kind of specular and speculative reflexive reading that makes self-reflective reading genuinely relevant to critique. However, such a reading strategy might also lead to a complacent sense of triumph, a self-congratulatory pleasure in discovery. In other words, once self-reflexion becomes common practice, reading for "narcissism" is at risk of becoming narcissistic itself. What gets lost is a perspective on the historical position of self-reflexion, and that is, indeed, a powerful argument against this mode of reading, to which we will have to return.[13]

As I have suggested, self-reflexivity is a mode of reading that seems paradoxical because it leads the interpreter to submit to a position ostensibly determined by the work. As in a Hegelian master-slave dialectic, the reader is so overwhelmed by an apparently triumphant "discovery" of self-reflexivity that s/he tends to abandon his or her own position for the self-reflexive one that the work seems to propose, thereby forfeiting the self-reflexion of the viewing or reading subject. But if reflection of/on the work entails reflection of/on the viewer's position, then any submissive response is paradoxically non-submissive: it refuses to obey the command of reflection. In other words, an order of non-submission can be neither obeyed nor dis-

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12. See Joel Snyder and Ted Cohen (1981), whose dismay seems to stem from the well-known discomfort engendered by interdisciplinary discourse. In one of their many defensive reactions to the language Searle uses, they refer to another critic as being "in the Foucault-Searle line," and to his use of the term "ambiguity" as "a less exotic logical crux" than "paradox" would entail. Indeed, Snyder and Cohen seem to be reacting primarily to the use of philosophical terminology. Their irony is just a little too heavy-handed for the context, and their scare quotes, intended to undermine the terms they frame, seem merely sarcastic. The focus of the irony, however, is not only the alien discourse, but also, precisely, the threat resulting from seeing the painting in terms of "the Foucault-Searle line."
13. See the introduction to Hutcheon (1982) for a discussion of this criticism.

obeyed. This paradox mirrors Esther's position at the moment in the narrative when she is ordered to disobey (Esther 4:8–17).[14] The question of obedience as a paradox, not as a neat opposition between the "good" obedient queen and her "bad" disobedient predecessor, is thematized throughout the narrative. Bound to obey both her relative and her husband, Esther is forced to disobey both men in order to obey, thereby emancipating herself from the power of the two men and of their writing. Reading the Book of Esther self-reflexively elicits a comparable compromise, that is, one must read the text anachronistically (say, postmodernistically) in order to gain a perspective on history—on Esther as neither realistic nor postmodern, but as the historical "other."

The paradoxes and possible confusions proffered by the concept of self-reflexion are produced by the ambiguity of *both* parts of the term: self and reflexion. The former requires the reader to consider which self is reflected, that of the work or (and?) that of the reader. Assuming that self-reflexion risks the reader's entanglement within the work, it must endorse the reflection of/on *both* selves. This is suggested by the ambiguity of the word "reflection," meaning both (visual) mirroring and (discursive) thinking.[15] Self-reflection as mirroring suggests the Lacanian mirror-stage as an early, visually based construction of the self *in* self-alienation, while discursive self-reflection/reflexion invokes self-critique.

The two ambiguities of the word "reflection," coupled with the corresponding pair of selves to be reflected, yield four possible positions, which together comprise a useful typology of self-reflection/reflexion. The mirroring and the analytical, discursive forms of reflexivity differentiate between an unreflective, possibly unconscious, doubling of the work and a conscious position toward the work that problematizes representation. In the first case, there are again two possibilities, depending on the meaning of "self" involved.

14. Ernst van Alphen (1988: 59) addresses this paradox by differentiating between the reading attitudes proposed by the text and those adopted by the reader. He distinguishes four possible attitudes in relation to the corpus he discusses: (1) the realistic text read realistically; (2) the postmodern text read postmodernistically; (3) the postmodern text read realistically; and (4) the realistic text read postmodernistically. A realistic text, then, is a work which is not entirely realistic, but which both fits the conventions of realism and has elements that enable, or even encourage, a "postmodern," self-reflexive reading attitude. In the Book of Esther, which is neither realistic nor, of course, postmodern, the problem of obedience is thematized on the level of the narrative.

15. The different spellings—"self-reflexion" for mirroring, "self-reflection" for thinking—are not consistently applied and do not hold in French, where the same word carries the same ambiguity. If we have two different words, at least they are homonyms, close enough semantically to be confused in practice.

1. The fantasmatic position. Here, the critic responds to the self of the work only, viewing it as radically other and leaving him- or herself safely out of reach—or dangerously unconscious. This is Haman's mistake when (in Esther 3:6) he fantasmatically projects his rage at Mordecai, over a purely personal insult, onto the Jews at large, generalizing Mordecai's insult as Jewish insubordination. Seeing Mordecai as the mirror of his people, Haman fails to see the mirroring relationship between himself and Mordecai, that is, the reversibility of their relative positions. This failure to see (himself) is Haman's *lot*, his *pur*, which will foil his plot because it undermines his autonomy as an agent.

2. The narcissistic position. If, by contrast, the two selves are conflated in the mirroring, while the reflection remains non-reflexive (i.e., nonanalytical, nondiscursive), the result will be symptoms of primary narcissism, as described by Lacan (1979). This mode of self-reflexion can be read in the self-absorbed isolation of the three figures in each of the Rembrandt paintings. It is obviously also operating in Haman's childish dream of grandeur, in which he can imagine only himself as the object of the king's honoring (Esther 6:6–8). This is why Rembrandt's Haman is blind: already curbed in the first painting (Figure 1), he loses his balance and falls down in/out of the second (Figure 2). The discursive mode of self-reflexion, which entails that one take an explicit position on the reflexive qualities of the work and the self, can likewise assume two distinct forms.

3. The theoretical position. If reflexivity is limited to the self of the work, the work will be viewed as a theoretical statement about representation. The text or painting thus becomes a theory, as *Las Meninas* becomes a theory of classical representation. The letters in Esther become statements about writing and its prevailing relationship to reality (e.g., Esther 1:19). The critic who observes that "conveniently, Esther seems to know nothing of the irrevocability of Persian law" (Murphy 1981: 167) endorses this self-reflexion unreflectively; for him, apparently, writing reflects reality, and everything else is subsumed by this certainty.

4. The metacritical position. The second form of discursive reflexivity (and the fourth mode of self-reflexive reading) is one in which discursive, reflexive reading involves both the self of the work—the way in which it problematizes itself as representation—and the self of the critic, whose position as, say, an art historian or a philosopher is also subject to reflexivity. This type of self-reflection/reflexion requires that the splitting of the agency of writing staged in the narrative be viewed as a representation of the critic's position. In this mode of self-reflection/ reflexion, our model is not the blind Haman but the (in)sight(ful)

self \ reflection	self excluded	self included
visual mirroring	1 fantasma (3:6)	2 primary narcissism (6:6–8)
discursive reflection	3 text = theory (1:19)	4 metacriticism (8:5)

Figure 3. Reading reflexivity in the Book of Esther.

Esther, whom Rembrandt represents as fully aware of her isolated position, yet who accepts her split subjectivity, adopting Mordecai's position and risking death to save the lives of her people. Reading Haman's decree "properly" as not only a reflection of reality, but also an opportunity for intervention, given writing's inscription of delay (see below), while also recognizing the embeddedness of subject positions, Esther sees that she must rewrite the fate of the Jews (Esther 8:5). Hers is the position that the critic would do best to mirror (see Figure 3).

This mode of reading has two major problems, one of which, its generality, may be countered by specifying self-reflexion according to this systematic analysis. The second problem, its lack of historical awareness, is more difficult to remedy. I would contend, however, that this approach to the Book of Esther is historical in two ways. First, by committing this blatant anachronism, the historical position of the critic is at least foregrounded, which is precisely what does not occur in less overtly anachronistic readings (see note 9). Thus the unity between text and critic that is the basis of most criticism is disrupted, leaving room for historical awareness, including awareness of the impossibility of historical reconstruction. Second, it is impossible to identify writing as a major theme of the narrative without acknowledging writing's relation to power, and thus acknowledging the anthropological view of writing as the beginning of history. In other words, any analy-

sis of writing will be necessarily reflexive, or self-historicizing, hence the product of the fourth mode of self-reflexive reading: the mirroring of history in criticism. This mode requires discursive reflexivity, which posits the historical positions of text and reader in relation to each other.

The historical position of the reader relative to the text that I would advocate is less committed to (illusory) reconstructions of the past than to an awareness of difference in similarity. Along these lines, I have argued elsewhere (see Bal 1987) that the unstable beginning of patriarchy (as represented in Genesis 2–3) is visible from the vantage point of the equally unstable end of patriarchy that we are currently witnessing. Similarly, the emphasis on writing in Esther betrays its unmarked status there, a status that is shifting today as writing becomes marked, or visible, again. Today, writing is no longer considered self-evident, no longer "taken as read." The exercise of power through writing, as (em)plotted in Esther, becomes visible and can be more readily problematized in an age of letter bombs, when the reach of the sender, hence of the power holder, is manifested in and extended by an information-technology revolution. Our faith in the irrevocable nature of writing has been destabilized by computer technologies that enable us to alter or even delete what is written, to falsify records, to do what Esther does: to overrule in practice what was irrevocable in theory, using similarity for difference (cf. Esther 3:12–15 and 8:9–11). Self-reflexion thus dictates, for the ancient author as for the modern critic, that writing (the Book of) Esther is to (con)textualize Esther writing.

Esther Writing Esther's Writing

Lots, laws, banquets, and letters: these are the devices deployed in the plot of Esther. All are inversions (or perversions) of their standard functions, which enable them to become agents, controlling the characters who (mis)handle them. Lots are perverted by plots, laws target the individual instead of regulating the general, banquets function as fasts instead of feasts, and letters are disenfranchised from their senders. All four devices relate to writing: Haman's own lot is cast when his casting of lots leads to the writing of the decree, thus organizing lot randomness into plot system; laws are certainly written, but the power inherent to their status as written is seriously weakened by their lack of enforcement; banquets are occasions for the writing of decrees; and letters, of course, constitute the very embodiment of writing. But letters are also manifestations of writing's problematic status as a speech act: in fixing the ephemeral flow of speech, writing delays (hence undermines) its efficacy. I contend that Esther can be read as a reflection on/of precisely these aspects of writing.

With respect to the two central letters, then, it is obvious that the second one reverses the first, which was explicitly declared irrevocable (Esther 1:19). Ahasuerus's/Haman's letter decreeing the extermination of the Jews is annulled or erased by Ahasuerus's/Mordecai's letter decreeing the extermination of the king's enemies. At first reading, these two letters seem almost identical, mirroring each other with an elegant symmetry. But this mirroring is only an effect of their being paraphrased; neither letter is actually quoted in the canonical text. When they are written out, as in the Apocryphal supplement, they are totally different, and, as it turns out, their symmetry is sacrificed to their inscription (see the Rest of Esther 3:13, 16:12). This is a first indication that mirroring may be an illusion, that reflection needs to be reflected upon. These letters are instances of mirroring as narrative plot elements, not mirroring as texts. And if we read the letters as distinct supplements to the canonical text, encrypted by the excursus to the Apocrypha, it turns out that the second letter is not just a reversal of the first. A people is thereby supplemented ("and also for the Jews in their own script and language" [8:9]) as well as an action ("unite and defend themselves" [8:11]). Thus the diffusion of the subject of writing is enhanced.

Plot and counterplot prove asymmetrical on yet another score: one is initiated by lot, the other by reading (the first letter). The lot is a random "text" read by Haman and blindly obeyed, while the decree is a plotted text that is disobeyed. The response to Haman's decree can be read as a reflection on reading, offering an alternative to blind submission. Reading is a response, a reader-response. The letter/counter-letter confrontation constitutes a reader-response theory, proposing that reading is neither fixed by nor independent of the text. Obedience to the text (of Haman's decree) would have entailed killing; disobedience to the text, in the sense of ignoring or bracketing it, would also have entailed killing. The danger of this binary opposition—between overestimating and underestimating the power of writing—is represented in the narrative by the split between Haman's fall/Esther and Mordecai's elevation, on the one hand, and the necessity of writing the second decree, on the other: that is, the second decree is not rendered superfluous by Esther and Mordecai's victory. What is needed, both to save the Jews and to preserve reading as a historically meaningful act, is an adequate reading by a competent and committed subject who disposes of autonomous agency.[16] There cannot be an exact mirroring, for there is no more symmetry between oppressor and oppressed, between attack and defense, between letter

16. See Jane Tompkins (1980) for a relevant view of the historical significance of reading.

and reply than there is between subject and mirror image. With the engagement of speech in narrative, in the plot, writing can alter only what is already there.

What, then, does the written narrative of the Book of Esther teach us about writing? How can it make us more self-conscious about the writing we do about the writing it presents about writing—of letters as communicative action, of decrees as prescriptive behavior, of chronicles as delayed participation in history, of writing as mirroring the text of Esther?

Writing serves social functions, as described by anthropological critique; it is also related to narrativity and has semiotic functions. As it happens, in Esther the social functions of writing are exemplified by its narrative and semiotic functions. The act of writing is emplotted in such a way as to undermine the standard social functions of writing, as conceptualized in the orality-literacy debate, thereby inviting reflection on the politics of writing and reading.

The primary writer is (or should be in a true autocracy) the king, who uses it to exercise his authority. But even in his first letter condemning Vashti, the only one that he could conceivably have written himself, the king's exercise of power goes awry on three levels of increasing seriousness. First, on his own initiative, Ahasuerus's authority is diminished by the agency of his "wise men," who effectively undermine the authenticity of the king's writing by dictating its contents (Esther 1:19–20). Secondly, and as a consequence, his superior status is reduced by the elaboration of his personal humiliation at the hands of the disobedient Vashti as an insult to all men ("Queen Vashti has done wrong, and not to the king alone" [1:16]) that must be countered by a law to reinforce the authority of "all husbands, high and low alike" (1:20).[17] And thirdly, Ahasuerus's authority as a male, thus revealed to be the real issue, is further undermined when Esther ends up organizing the writing (in the plot) and even doing some writing herself.[18] Hence, as if to emphasize the ambivalence of writing's complicity in the use and abuse of power, state, class, and gender are respectively undermined by writing. This is the statement on the *social* function of writing that can be read in the self-reflexivity of writing in Esther.

17. Roland Murphy (1981: 59) mentions this elaboration of event into law as a wisdom motif in Esther, recalling Proverbs 31:10ff. and Sirach 9:2. For a claim that Esther belongs to wisdom literature, see also Talmon (1963).
18. Contra many commentators who emphasize Esther's obedience, it must be stressed that she is more like Vashti than they care to admit. Each is guilty of disobedience in terms of *approaching the king*, hence of taking control over her relationship with her husband. John Otwell (1977: 69), for example, sees Esther as merely "the primary Old Testament example of an obedient daughter" (*sic*).

The *narrative* function of writing in the scroll further undermines the presumed but illusory certainties of writing. The three decrees that structure the plot stage the ambivalence of writing insightfully and in detail. The first decree, deposing Vashti, was meant to forever ensure the obedience of wives, hence ensuring male power over women in private and in public. However, its excessiveness and fearful defensiveness, possibly parodic (see Murphy 1981: 159), ensure nothing but the decree's own failure, which is played out in the rest of the story. The submission of women cannot be guaranteed in or by writing, the story teaches us. Esther's initiatives embody her agency, her exercise of power against the royal rule that has stipulated the absoluteness of her powerlessness: namely, the interdiction against her being, or even *approaching*, the king. Vashti's punishment, the law of the first decree, is thus negated by Esther's symmetrical transgression.

The second decree, Haman's (p)lot, which is even less Ahasuerus's doing than the first, is equally irrevocable, but nevertheless proves to be equally futile. Haman's decree is less ambitious, more limited in scope, stipulating the submission—albeit absolute via extermination— of only a marginal segment of the population: one people instead of all wives. It is more circumspectly grounded not in "wisdom," that is, human opinion, but in Haman's version of Providence: the lot cast in his presence (Esther 3:7) to set the date for fulfilling the terms of the decree. Writing alone, this casting of lots seems to say, is too shaky a ground on which to build. But the rule of lot is countered by the Providence that Mordecai suggests to Esther (4:14). Writing, intended to fix, does not fix well enough.

Again, the narrative mode itself, constructed on the basis of temporal sequentiality, is mirrored by, and mirrors, the incidental "rests" of writing. For in the narrative, writing is used to produce danger, but not defeat; what separates the two is the temporal space of delay or deferral which, inherent to writing, undermines precisely the fixation it aims for. This delay is a crucial feature of writing, its negative feedback loop, here exploited to represent the revocability of the irrevocable. It is what makes identification among the relevant parties—writer, reader, and object—impossible, as recently argued so well in the critique of anthropology (see Fabian 1983).[19] Writing's fixation entails a "not yet" that calls for a sequel and that mirrors narrative's pursuit of an ending (Brooks 1984). The narrative play of letter-writing foregrounds the unwarranted pretence of writing-as-power, of what-is-written as "never to be revoked."

19. *Time and the Other* closely examines the impossibility of what Johannes Fabian calls "coevalness," or the simultaneity of the anthropologist's observation/participation and writing. This impossibility by definition renders the anthropological endeavor itself illusory.

So crucial is this feature of delay in writing that its staging in Esther becomes almost comical in one of the episodes considered "implausible" by realist standards and as signifying the king's limited intelligence by psychological standards.[20] In addition to the letter, a communicative mode of writing, and the decree, an authoritarian mode, a third type of writing, the *chronicle*, is used in the narrative. In a "historical" narrative, this is the self-reflexive genre par excellence, as it is incorporated in another chronicle. The events narrated in Esther 2:21–23—how Mordecai saves the king—encapsulate those narrated by the Esther story as a whole—how Esther and Mordecai save the Jews, thus also saving the king's integrity. Both "third-person narratives" and historical reports, the chronicle and the scroll of which it is a part, represent something outside themselves. The chronicle is in this sense a *mise en abyme* (see Brooks 1984).[21] Thus it is significant that this chronicle, necessarily written after the event, is not read, not integrated as history, not acted upon until much later. In that sense, too, the chronicle is a *mise en abyme* of this story about the delayed effects of writing.

Obviously, this chronicle-story also demonstrates the negative effects of writing on memory (Plato's warning) since Ahasuerus thinks of rewarding Mordecai only when he *reads* about the event, not when it actually occurs. But rather than interpreting this connection between writing and memory anachronistically as proof of the king's dimwittedness, what I see here is another instance of self-reflexion. For the delay in writing exemplified by the king's forgetfulness is utterly indispensable to the narrative plot, which is in turn indispensable to saving the Jews from the dangers of writing, which is in turn indispensable to instituting Purim. Such is the lot of writing: what's discursive is recursive.

Ahasuerus's real power lies in his identity as the reader of the chronicle, and in the adequacy of his reading; his memory fails in order to motivate his real function. The written text, which was impotent before the king read it, acquires in the reading the power to

20. See David Clines (1984: 259), among many others, for an example of the realist bias; see Sasson (1987) for an example of the psychological bias. As I argued above, these anachronistic standards are generally harmful, as they obscure other issues and the narrative motivations that might illuminate them. Thus their limited perspective on the text does not do justice to its historical-literary specificity and thereby leads to a tacit complicity in ethnocentrism or rather, as I like to call it, "parontocentrism."

21. A *mise en abyme* is a sign that represents the work as a whole and that is itself incorporated in the work. This term, by now quite well known, was introduced by André Gide and extensively studied by Lucien Dällenbach in his 1977 work, *Le Récit spéculaire*. I have commented on and elaborated Dällenbach's use of the term (Bal 1986: 166–80).

force the king to act: justice must be done to/served by the writing. This self-reflexion also applies to us: as delayed readers, we are likewise called upon to see that good deeds (such as Mordecai's, which, in fact, consisted of conserving knowledge and using it to avert danger) do not go unrewarded, that people do not get destroyed.

Finally, the *semiotic* function of writing is also foregrounded in the Book of Esther. If we take the Peircean typology of signs as a model not of truth, but, like the Rembrandt paintings, as a reading approach or strategy, we can view the writing in Esther as at once symbolic, indexical, and iconic, with the very fact that it fits all three categories signifying its crucial role in the text. Writing's tripartite role is also, as I hope to show, precisely what binds all the elements of the plot together.

First, writing is *symbolic*, as the first, most ambitious decree demonstrates. It is deployed in law-making even while it embodies the law itself. This occurs in three stages, each more expansive than the last, which turn an event into a sign, making it meaningful via repetition: (1) generalization, (2) publication, and (3) multiplication.

1. The generalization of Vashti's disobedience as a crime punishable by law makes a violation the grounds for a rule and turns a random occurrence into a precedent. Vashti's crime was thus to have *signified*, to have made possible this semiotization of her act. The ambivalence of writing immediately becomes visible again; it is part of the package, so to speak: for although the act is criminalized out of fear that it will become widespread, its being written into law actually promulgates it by publicizing the crime's meaning. Thus, fear of contagion inflates a domestic disagreement into the sign of a generalized battle of the sexes. What is reflected (upon) here, in my view, is the danger of generalization, which conjures up enemies and turns a disagreement into a war.

2. Its being written into law publicizes the event, literally—for such publication would have had much the same effect as a newspaper would today. The publication of the event is meant to make an impact on each and every household. Like the newspaper delivered to the door, the letter about Vashti would have reached all men and changed their relationships with women (Esther 1:22). Publication is the semiotic consequence of generalization and is what makes it irrevocable.

3. With publication, the writing is multiplied, sent "to every province in its own script and to every people in their own language" (Esther 1:22, 3:12, 8:9). This third stage, expansion by multiple translation, further emphasizes the semiotic nature of the ideological act of generalization. But it is also here that writing acts against itself. Thanks to the multiplication of Haman's decree, Mordecai learns of the projected pogrom and is able to counteract it, by writing back.

Secondly, writing is also represented in Esther as *indexical*. It is emphatically materialist, with its materiality signified by the king's signet ring. This ring, meant to produce "pure" indices—wax impressions of the seal—becomes the means by which indexicality is perverted. On the one hand, the king's letters can be copied, but only from an original issued personally by—from the person of—the king. But, on the other hand, the copies are processed via the signet, shifted from the king's finger to Haman's (Esther 3:12). The king's mistake is precisely his removing the ring from his body, thus severing the contiguity on which indexicality is based. This is a mistake that the king later corrects: although he entrusts the recovered signet to Mordecai, he seems to monitor what is written in his name (8:8), and, in any event, no conflicts arise between what the king desires and what is written in this later episode.

By thus emphasizing the materiality of writing, the text also establishes the continuity between writing and (other forms of) body language. Dress becomes a form of communication whenever it attains semiotic status by indexical signification, such as the royal regalia worn by Mordecai during his honorary tour through the city. Haman, the writer of the plot-letter, devises this indexical code himself, when he adds to "royal robes" the emphatic index "which the king himself wears" (Esther 6:8). The signet ring, which gave him royal power, is not enough for Haman, who wants to *be* the king, and the index is the most appropriate sign of this impossible conflation that would render signs superfluous. Thus he stipulates that iconic signification—robes that *look* royal—is not enough.

Another instance of indexical "body-writing" is the (conventional, hence symbolic) sign of royal favor expressed by touch. This index is doubly coded: the king holds the scepter, thus extending his body as the (symbolic) sign of his power, and the scepter touches Esther. It may be sheer coincidence that this tool by which the king enacts his connection to his subject bears an iconic relation to the phallus, likewise coded as power, but, in any case, the scepter also resembles the writing tool, the use of which will later be granted to Esther.

Thirdly, writing is *iconically* meaningful in this text. With its publication, the decree is displayed, a display foreshadowed by the demonstration of wealth as power at the first banquet. As a means of controlling the future, by decree, and of preserving the past, in the chronicle, writing also iconically signifies fate: Providence as opposed to chance. In the case of both writing and fate, certainty is dependent on some agency. What is written can be annulled by a timely intervention (thanks to the delay inherent to writing in general and to narrative in particular), just as the lots cast can be counteracted by plotting, and Providence aided by courage and wit. These iconic meanings of

writing, then, strengthen the connections among the different plot elements already produced by symbolic and indexical signification. The semiotic functions of writing help us to read Esther as a meaningful, relevant statement about writing's interactive nature: just as writing requires reading, so does the Book of Esther require readers.

But if the self-reflexive text thus encourages (discursive) reflection on the act of reading, the resulting self-reflexion entails reflecting on the agent, or subject, of that act. It seems meaningful that the writer of the story's last letter is the one whose very existence as a subject needed to be written first: Esther, touched by the royal scepter, ends this narrative of writing with an act of writing-as-power: "And Queen Esther and Mordecai the Jew wrote, giving full authority and confirming this second letter about Purim" (Esther 9:29). The narrative has accomplished its remarkable movement from the king whose authority has already been undermined to the powerful woman who began this narrative in a state of utter powerlessness, as orphan, woman, commoner, foreigner. This narrative also moves from the randomness of lots to the organization of Purim by writing, lot's counteraction. But it took the entire narrative to reveal Esther as a fully realized agent, or subject. For subjectivity is by no means self-evident.

The Subject of Writing

Foucault's remarks on *Las Meninas* provoked the question: Whose self is reflected in self-reflexion? As it turns out, the Book of Esther adds a new dimension to this question, for, to begin with, it stages the question's unanswerability. The male subject is represented as dispensable, shifting, and unstable, with writing as the locus of this representation. The female subject, on the other hand, blatantly dispensable at first, is also the one to reemerge, strengthened, and ultimately to take over, albeit as a result of the instability of subjectivity.

In order to comprehend the view of subjectivity entailed by this self-reflexive text, it is necessary to reject the realist and psychological readings to which Esther has been traditionally subjected. I propose to avoid the temptation to see the characters in terms of psychological plausibility by foregrounding their functional status. What then becomes obvious is that, as narrative agents, the characters are both unstable and interchangeable. For example, Vashti is integral to the production of Esther. The plot requires the elimination of Vashti in order to open up a space for Esther to fill. But there is more to the narrative function of the first queen. As an agent of ideological reflexion she must be eliminated for the sake of the ideology of male dominance. But Vashti is eliminated only to be restored as Esther, who takes her place and avenges her by reformulating disobedience as achieving power. Vashti's refusal to be an object of display is in a

sense a refusal to be objectivized, hence to be robbed of her subjec-
tivity. Esther's insistence on appearing before the king and using the
tools of display to do so ("On the third day, Esther put on her royal
robes" [5:1]) is the positive version of Vashti's negative act; Esther
appears not for show but for action, not as mere possession but as
self-possessed subject; finally, to drive this continuity between Esther
and Vashti home, it is Esther who then makes the king appear at her
banquet.[22]

Similarly, Haman, in all his wickedness, is necessary to the produc-
tion/motivation of Mordecai and his counterplot. Although he seems
to come out of nowhere in Esther 3:1, without Haman and his (p)lot
we would have no narrative, hence no Purim. It is highly appropri-
ate, then, that the name of the festival is derived from his initial
act. Haman's introduction as a newcomer rather than as one of the
established characters can be seen as a narrative stratagem to avoid
too much monitoring of Esther's behavior by the enraged wise men
(Esther 1:16–22).

Esther and Mordecai serve to produce and motivate each other:
without Esther, Mordecai would have no access to the court; with-
out her cousin, Esther would have no access to news from the city.
Both sources of information are necessary to make up for the defects
of writing. The narrative production of characters makes a psycho-
logical reading both futile and mystifying. Such a reading obscures
the very issue that is foregrounded by this narrative: the instability of
subjectivity.

With this in mind, it is easy to see that writing is the semiotic act
par excellence where the subject is destabilized, and, again, Esther
exploits that destabilization for its plot. Indeed, the awareness of his-
torical discrepancy helps us to reflect on the historicity of the very

22. The occasionally made assertion (totally groundless) that Vashti was asked
to appear naked before the king does point to this incident's impression of ob-
jectifying display and to its gendered quality. Although Ahasuerus is criticized
by some for his "male chauvinistic behavior" (Clines 1984: 257), Vashti's refusal,
which would be justified in light of that view, is often criticized nonetheless, with
the inconsistency typical of unreflective gender ideology. Identifying with ancient
patriarchy, some critics tend to endorse, to fully underwrite, the sexism in the
event while remaining blind to the shakiness of male power that the episode also
underscores. Rabbi Zlotowitz (1976: 46–51) exemplifies this tendency. After quot-
ing from ancient commentaries which deny Vashti any honorable motivation and
conclude that she deserved death, Zlotowitz states not only that she was indeed
killed, but also that Ahasuerus had Vashti killed. Interestingly, at the very moment
when this critic provides an imaginary murderer/subject to carry out this imagi-
nary murder, he neglects to specify the subject of his own text, thus endorsing the
ancient commentators' view and allowing himself to be unreflectively reflected in
ancient ideology.

notion of subjectivity. As Derrida reminds us, the notion of writing as expression of the self is a modern one, emerging with the pre-Romantic individualism of Rousseau, and may itself be symptomatic of the loss of the self in writing. It seems to be a nicety of history that this same Rousseau used himself as a weapon against the law which decreed a *prise de corps* (!) against him. And, as Peggy Kamuf recalls, it is in and through the signature, considered indexically contiguous to the body of the writer, that the illusory stability of the subject/writer is signified. The need for the signature is the need for indexicality.

But the Esther narrative severs the tie between signature and subject. The shifting of the signet ring from body to body is the narrative representation of the subjective instability which writing promotes. Kamuf rightly emphasizes the *evenemential* status of the signature, its narrativity, when she observes that "signature occurs in a difference from itself and an address to the other" (Kamuf 1988: 18). The writings in Esther dramatize this mobility of the subject/writer. The chronicle (2:23), for example, has no subject. Lacking a represented self—a chronicle is a "third-person" narrative in which the thematic subject, the agent of the events, is what's written about in a so-called objective presentation—the chronicle also lacks a signature: it is written in the presence of, not by, the king. The subject of the chronicle is, however, otherwise inscribed, notably, in the structure of address, here dramatized by the delayed reading.

For writing to fulfill its destiny, it is not enough that it be written in the presence of its intended reader; it must actually be read in order to fully achieve its deployment *as* writing. Without being realized by reading, writing remains a dead letter. In other words, the reader is the ultimate subject of writing, responsible for its consequences, for the actualization of the reality it proposes. By rewarding Mordecai, Ahasuerus shows himself to be a competent subject in this specific sense, with his apparently defective memory used as a narrative ploy to drive the point of reading home.

The description of the apparatus of royal administration and of the postal system (Esther 3:12), to give another example, while plausibly read as a demonstration of power or as circumstantial evidence of the text's historicity, can also be seen in light of the shifting subject of writing. The act of writing is broken down into its various aspects, each performed by an unidentified agent, or subject: the secretaries are summoned (by whom?); the writ is issued (by whom?);[23] it is drawn up in the king's name, which means precisely not *by* him but *for* him by someone else; and it is sealed with the king's signet, which is no longer on his finger. The stamp intended to validate the identity of the writer becomes instead the index of anonymous writing.

23. By Haman, obviously, but this is not *stated*.

Again, writing emblematizes a feature that is displayed by the narrative in other ways as well. Subjectivity is placed in question generally, and the plot is built on that questioning. The irony of Esther 6:4–6 provides one example among many. Haman must decide the honor that is destined to be Mordecai's, but he mistakes the subject who is to be honored. The king mistakes Haman for a reliable adviser; hence the name of the subject to be honored is irrelevant. Because Haman wishes to use his power to merge his subjectivity with the king's, he does not identify the people who are to be destroyed, which would have saved his enterprise. Thus the plot turns on subjectivity by default.

As if to foreground the intimate complicity of language in this plot of mistaken identities, Haman's use of language is doubly defective when (Esther 6:7–9) he mistakes the identity of the man to be honored; when Haman misreads the king's speech, he utters an anacoluthon, producing "bad" language, and he misfires, producing a "bad" speech act. Hence, the same speech act demonstrates the failure of both "writer" and "reader" due to unwarranted assumptions about subjectivity.

If we read the text from the perspective suggested by the Rembrandt paintings, as reflections of and on the vexed relationship between text and subject, the problematic of the subject of writing encapsulates the entire narrative: its language, its plot, and its characters. And the reader is not excluded from this perspective, but merely delayed by writing, with his or her response on hold. Haman's blindness in the Rembrandt painting (Figure 2) threatens to infect the viewer/reader, toward whom his body is emphatically directed; the icon of blind eyes is dangerously indexical as body language.

Conclusion

At this juncture, a critical question must be addressed: What have we gained by applying this willfully anachronistic contemporary concept to this ancient text? While it will be for others to say what, if anything, has been gained, I can suggest a few possibilities. I wish to make no claim about the historical meaning of the text, let alone about authorial intention or the origins of Purim, but I do think that I have made a case against the nineteenth-century model of reading predominant in many interpretations that do claim historical validity. While the enigma of Purim's origins and the meaning of its name are not, cannot be, resolved, I have opened up a space for an interpretation of the meaning of *purim* that is relevant to the contemporary reader, while also illuminating aspects of the text whose pertinence can hardly be denied.

Guided by an oddity in the two Rembrandt paintings, I have tried to draw a few lines that break up the text even as they pull its various

elements together, not to yield a deceptive coherence but to problema-
tize unity. By looking into the various meanings of self-reflexion and
the ways in which these meanings appear to be dramatized in Esther,
I have developed a view on the ancient text which affects the subject
of criticism. For if reading is the only way to breathe life into the dead
letter of the text, and if, moreover, reading is a matter of historical im-
portance, then Esther herself becomes a mirror for the contemporary
critic. If engaged, like her, in exposing the abuse of power, the dan-
ger of writing, and the instability of subjectivity, the critic will escape
neither responsibility for her activity nor the encapsulation of that
activity in historically diverse, subjectless writing.

Thus, writing criticism in accordance with Esther entails not ob-
scuring either its predecessors or its opponents, not denying either its
complicity or its agency. The Book of Esther demonstrates that writ-
ing is not necessarily either a deadly weapon or an innocent toy; closer
to the time bomb than to anything else, however, it can be countered
by virtue of its delayed effect. Hence, when involved in the act of read-
ing—the deferred completion of writing—critics should be aware of
both their (overt or covert) allegiances (reading is an act in which sub-
jectivity is dispersed) and their own inevitable contributions to this act
(it is an act).

In terms of allegiances, one cannot but reflect on the question of
where the "rest" of one's subjectivity lies: that is, with Ahasuerus's
"wise men" and their battle or with Esther and Mordecai and their col-
laboration. Should one endorse/reject the generalization of Vashti as
"all women"/the individualization of Esther as different from Vashti?
This question of implicit allegiances to ideological positions is less obvi-
ous than it seems precisely because obvious positions are offered as
a lure. It is only too easy to disavow Haman's genocidal impulse, but
the mirror also reflects more insidious generalizations from a single
individual to an entire people, more subtle expressions of hatred for
the Other, whoever he or she might be. Those positions and their
similarity to the obvious ones should be brought to awareness by a
reflexivity that extends to the critic him/herself. By insisting on the
complex functioning of writing and the instability of its subjects, the
Book of Esther shows that critics are no more autonomous or stable
than any other readers/writers; hence, their network of unconscious
allegiances is both inevitable and dangerous.

In order to draw all readers in, *purim* must be a form of plurality.
Haman's Downfall warns the viewer not to be blind to the mirroring
power of the text, which extends beyond any immediate or simple his-
torical veracity into the realm of historical agency. Had Mordecai and
Esther been as blind as Haman, they would not have been able to read
the writing on the wall. Seeking the historical origins of Purim in a

forlorn past, safely out of reach, the critic may forfeit her or his own *purim*. For when the lots have been cast, and another people imperiled, the critic reading Esther cannot passively submit to the dictate of lots: obedience has been revealed as the wrong attitude. It would be an ironic misreading of the mirror of Esther to see the scroll as reflecting only the history of the Jews and one of their festivals. By reading it as a text about reading/writing, however, one is invited to reflect upon all the issues implicated in it: upon gender, power, and the state; genocide and otherness; submission and agency—in short, upon history.

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