The Past as Past is its Disappearance: Erkenwald and the Jews

First, a plot summary of this alliterative poem: the action of the fourteenth-century Middle English Saint Erkenwald takes place during seventh-century London's rededication of its pagan temples to Christianity. In the foundation of the greatest temple, which would become the site of St. Paul's, workmen uncover a gothic tomb, carved with mysterious letters. Prying it open, they discover an immaculate body, royally dressed. London's bewildered citizens summon their bishop, Erkenwald, who speaks to the corpse, which confesses itself an ancient judge, buried as a king for his righteousness, but barred as a pagan from heaven. As Erkenwald weeps, he accidentally baptizes the corpse, which promptly rots and turns to dust while its spirit ascends to paradise. Then Erkenwald and the citizens exit in procession, with “mourning and mirth mingled together,” while the bells of the city ring out about them.

Erkenwald is notable for its frequent and confused references to time, beginning with its first lines, “At London in England not very long / after the time that Christ suffered on the cross and Christianity was established” (1-2), an odd dating given that the historical Erkenwald lived in the seventh century, and that the renovations the poem commemorates occurred in the thirteenth. Also, Erkenwald speaks of London as having been called “New Troy,” gesturing towards the city's foundation, which occurred long before any of the events narrated in the poem; it claims that London, or New Troy, had always had a bishop (26), though the action of the poem would be meaningless without New Troy's pagan past; and, finally, when the judge is asked how long he had been dead, he answers with an arithmetical riddle, highlighting at once time's calculability and complexity.

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Whatever the variety of chronologies *Erkenwald* presents, it finally resolves them into two homogeneous eras, namely, a non-Christian past and a Christian present. To repurpose Jonathan Gil Harris's *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare*, *Erkenwald* divides its muddled times into two “self-identical unit[s]” according to a “national sovereignty model of temporality” in which “each moment [has] a determining authority reminiscent of a nation-state's: that is, firmly policed borders and a shaping constitution.” Erkenwald's chronological resolution has three key effects; first, it rescues the past from itself, delivering what had been damned over to salvation here in the present; second, it gives London and by extension Christianity confidence by presenting the past as needing to be rescued and as being able to be rescued only by the Christian present; and finally, it helps preserve and present the London present as present by saving it from eruptions from what it construes as an unknown past.

I borrow some of the above from Philip Schwyzer's reading, which understands *Erkenwald* as a poem that, to “make homeland,” repairs and erases memories of crimes against the Britons, whether by the Saxons or by the fourteenth-century English, by first exhuming and then wiping away the “remains of subjugated people.” But *Erkenwald*’s grand narrative, in which London's past establishes the ground both for London and its ecclesiastical architecture, in which this past gives way to a Christian present, and in which this very giving way guarantees the inviolable presentness of Christianity's “Newe Werke” (38), should also recall a central temporal narrative of the Christian Middle Ages. This of course is the Christian narrative that relegates the Jews to being living letters of the law,” relics left alive in the present to attest both to Christianity's triumph and to the time of Christianity as the new dispensation.

Notably, twenty-one lines in, *Erkenwald* speaks of “the Synagogue of the Sun,” turned

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into a church of “our Lady.” Those Erkenwald scholars who take any note of word “synagogue” tend to gloss it as “pagan temple,” and not without justification: the alliterative Charlemagne romance Ser Firumbras includes a “synagogue” stocked with idols to Termagaunt, Mohamed, Jupiter, and Appolo. Fair enough. But I'd like to take the word literally rather than just as a convenient metrical filler. Like the London of any era, medieval London was an “urban palimpsest.” Per Saint Erkenwald, the churches of seventh-century London had once been pagan temples and perhaps still earlier, Christian churches, in the time of the Britons before Hengist came; as for fourteenth-century London, it included several large stone buildings that had once been Jewish homes or synagogues. I hear Erkenwald's reference to a synagogue turned into a church of “oure Lady” as signaling a particular building, a synagogue taken by King Henry in 1243, given to the Brethren of Saint Anthony and rededicated as a chapel of Mary, an event recalled in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and perhaps also in the intervening centuries. I find myself reading the poem, with this synagogue, as medieval kindred to John Stow's early modern account of a discovery made during repairs to Ludgate in 1586: here, mixed in with the supposed remnant of London's legendary foundation by King Lud, workers discover a stone “grauen in Hebrewe caracters,” the very image of what Christianity understood to be its foundational, superseded past.

We might be reminded of Latour's famous hammer, seemingly belonging to the present but also, as antique technology, hundreds of thousands of years old. Yet these buildings are not just forms “out of the past,” if we can speak this way; they are the very buildings themselves, still inhabited by the uncanny presence of what can only partially be called dead. Like the figures of typology, such structures simultaneously inhabit the past and present, complicating this facile
temporal divide to the point of meaninglessness. Faced with such structures, *Erkenwald* christens some in a typological gesture modeled in the alliterative form, which retroactively converts the J of the temples of Jupiter and Juno into anticipation of these structures' supersession into the churches of Jesus and James. But *Erkenwald* altogether tears down the greatest temple, “demolished and beat down and built new again”

wiping it from its history, until it encounters the tomb in the foundation, which too, after some resistance, yields to the Christian now. This encounter, the chief one of the poem, is therefore not supersession so much as the dream of eliminating the past, a hope for a present purer than that granted by the typological imaginary.

Of course, *Erkenwald*’s primary action does not occur in its synagogue; it takes place in London's largest minster, what would become St Paul's Cathedral, the only one of the Christened temples whose deity *Erkenwald* does not name. I take *Erkenwald*’s off-kilter placement of its synagogue exegetically, as a sign that the poem at once excludes its Jewish content from the heart of its Christianity and lodges it in its absolute foundation as—to gesture at Steven Kruger's book—a spectral presence. This presence haunts the person as well as the church of St. Paul, the great theologian of grace and supersession, and it haunts it without the poem being able to name or recognize its dependence on what Paul's God has superseded.

To take *Erkenwald*’s “synagogue” literally and as a double presence, simultaneously outside and unnamably inside St Paul's, helps account for another of its peculiar features, namely, its substitution of a pagan judge for a pagan emperor. As is well-known in *Erkenwald* criticism, its story's closest analog appears either in *Piers Plowman* or, far more exactly, in several early commentaries on *Purgatorio* 10, which recount construction work that turned up an ancient skull containing a tongue “fresh and fleshy, just as a living head has.”

The skull,
delivered to Pope Gregory, confesses itself to be the remains of the Emperor Trajan, whose soul was in Hell. Appraising himself of Trajan's justness, Gregory successfully prayed—per the Commedia commentary by Iacobo della Lanna—that Trajan be resurrected so that he might be baptized.

By using a judge instead of an emperor, Erkenwald simply intensifies the judicial elements already in operation in the Trajan legend, as Trajan earned Gregory's admiration by having his own son executed for the murder of a widow's only son. Rather than standing irreducibly outside and in the heart of the law,\textsuperscript{17} Trajan includes himself wholly within it, utterly committed to following it even if doing so means destroying his own progeny. He is therefore at once a figure and victim of merciless justice, law that offers only destruction, no expiation.

Erkenwald's judge is likewise a figure of justice without grace, exit, or future, a point clear enough simply in his profession, but also clear in his description of his own unwavering devotion to law, as he explains that regardless of a man's wealth or honor, regardless of any personal relation, he would not swerve from the straight path (233-44).\textsuperscript{18} Like Trajan, he incarnates the law itself, both in its secular and spiritual forms, especially the failure of the latter in the new dispensation promoted by, among others, Romans 4:14 and Galatians 5:4-5.

However, since Erkenwald hews to its own law absolutely, it offers no simple opposition between law and grace.\textsuperscript{19} The judge cannot be saved without the formula of baptism. Even Erkenwald himself needs to be taught this point, since, supported by citations from Psalms 14:1-2, and Psalms 23:3-4\textsuperscript{20} he wonders that the judge has not yet been plucked from hell. Against this soteriological generosity, the poem and its judge ally themselves with sentiments expressed, among other places, in the second book of Walter Hilton's Scale of Perfection, which asserts the

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erroneousness of the belief that “Jews and Saracens and pagans, by keeping of their own law, might be saved, even if they do not believe in Jesus Christ and Holy Church as Christian men do.” To this, both Hilton and Erkenwald say no. Yet the poem wants to have it both ways. Yes, the bishop baptizes and saves the judge, but he does so accidentally, speaking in the conditional, intoning the formula hypothetically by saying, in essence, “would that you would stay alive only long enough for me to fetch some water, so that I might be able to say, 'I baptize you in the name of the Father,' etc” (315-20). He thus carries out his law without carrying it out legalistically. In this arrangement, the judge is the subject supposed to be believe, or, better, the subject supposed to be rigid. Identifying himself as a “faithless man who failed your laws” (287), he is the one, out there, who really, directly, unwaveringly believes, who does what he should and only what he should, whether for the carnal law he served in life or for the spiritual law which, in his eternal death, he knows bars him from paradise. The judge serves the law in all its forms, and so does the bishop: but he, the bishop, imagines what he does to be the action of grace. Crying as he confronts, reaffirms, and re-enacts the law's limits, the bishop voices a hope for a more generous logic of salvation, joining the poem in imputing the rigor of the law to the judge, even while he remains London's greatest servant of the law that bound the judge in hell.

The conflict in Erkenwald could hardly be rendered more schematically. The judge of Erkenwald is a pagan, certainly. But through the judge and his crypt, through the christened temples and christened synagogue, the poem first creates and then overcomes two pasts simultaneously, indeed the two great pasts of medieval historiography: the pagan and the Jewish. And as a Jew, this judge is quite literally the “old man” of Romans 6:6, overcome by Christianity; he figures the perfection of worldly flesh, the Augustinian “Israel secundum
carnem,“ for his incorruptible, literal adherence to the law renders his flesh incorruptible, which is at once a sign of God's favor and of the judge's failure to pass through worldly flesh into death and renewal; he figures “living death,” frozen in his moment, as fresh as though he had been buried only yesterday, 26 yet immeasurably distant, on the other side of death's abyss; he figures the pasts as uncrossable, regardless of how proximate, that is, he figures it as the past; he is undead in the present, locked into those characteristics Christian doctrine so often imputed to Jews.

Erkenwald may thus be comprehended as cryptically working against Christianity's “hermeneutical Jews,” against what Sylvia Tomasch called late medieval England's “Virtual Jews,” or, especially, Kruger's “spectral Jews,” 27 summoned, as he says, via Derrida, by “Christian historical thinking...[which]...attempts to settle [Judaism] as past, 'conjure' it away, provide it once and for all with its 'death certificate.'” 28 This is a poem in which workers turn up in the depths of their greatest minster the bedrock of their faith, not in the form of their own faith's emptied tomb but rather as a tomb containing a living corpse held in stasis, present simultaneously in the tomb and abandoned in either limbo or hell. 29 This figure the poem preserves long enough only to be made to speak of its helplessness and then to be sublated into spirit by what the poem would like to present as the action of grace.

To close what is admittedly a “paranoid reading,” I ask, what else can we do with it? I have proposed elsewhere that we read it irresponsibly, or, better, that we read it responsibly, in a Derridean sense, by not imagining that we've done our duty by situating it in this or that historical struggle; I've proposed that we intervene in its past, insert new possibilities into it, 31 by giving ourselves a freedom not to finish it, to stop reading where it works for us, to stop in the

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middle, never imagining that we will ever be out of it. Faced with such a poem, I've proposed stopping around the tomb, with the London crowd, unsure about what's going to happen next: but these points, of course, belong to another talk.

Thank you.
1 *MED* s.v. “rūnish,” (a) “mysterious, strange.” Turville-Petre 2005 at 373 ingeniously suggests that the tomb might correspond either to the St Paul's Rune Stone, discovered in the 19th century, or some earlier find of the same sort (for image, see [http://www.museumoflondonprints.com/image.php?id=61240&printDetails=true](http://www.museumoflondonprints.com/image.php?id=61240&printDetails=true)); at 371, he also observes that the *MED* correctly suggests “that the meanings of renish and runish have here become confused, for in these quotations the sense is that derived from the common Middle English noun roun (from Old English *run*), which has a semantic range that includes 'voice, utterance, secret' as well as 'written character.’ For Q&A, have handy: Chaganti 2008, 56, where the runes “both embellish and obscure the meaning of an enshrined object. And in this capacity, their illegibility symbolizes the mystified nature of the late-medieval shrine in English churches and cathedrals. The runes speak through their very impenetrability, their resistance to being read as language, about the nature of ceremonial encounters with shrines as decorated objects, a mystery at once challenging and suggestive.” Yet another 'trope of vestiality'

2 “Hit is to meche to any mon to make of a nombre. / After þat Brutus þis burgh had buggid on fyrste, / No t bot fife hundred ere þer aghtene wontyd / Before þat kynned our Criste by Cristen acounte: / ȝ ȝ ȝ A þousand ȝere and þritty mo and 3 thren aght” (205-210). Scattergood 2000, 196, provides a model from 1269 shrine of Edward the Confessor in Westminster abbey, made by Peter of Rome, ’ANNO MILENO DOMINI CVM SEPTVAGENO ET BIS CENTENO CVM COMPLETO QV ASI DENO HOC OPVS EST FACTUM QUOD PETRVS.”

3 *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* 2 and 5. Harris writes against the notion of a moment “as a self-identical unit divided from other moments that come before and after it” (5) to disrupt the old binary of synchronic versus diachronic study (10). At 174, Harris 2009 quotes Michel Serres' *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time* (with Bruno Latour), “Classical time in related to geometry, having nothing to do with space, as Bergson pointed out all too briefly, but with metrics. On the contrary, take your inspiration from topology, and perhaps you will discover the rigidity of those proximities and distances you find arbitrary. And the simplicity, in the literal sense of the word *pli*: it's simply the difference between topology (the handkerchief is folded, crumpled, shredded) and geometry (the same fabric is ironed out flat).”

4 Biddick *The Typological Imaginary*

5 “Exhumation and ethnic conflict: from *St. Erkenwald* to Spenser in Ireland." *Representations* 95 (2006) 1-26 [see his book for most recent version], NOTE that Nissé does something similar, and Otter sort of as well. he writes “Wreaking havoc with the temporal equivalent of depth perception, the queasy fascination of the preserved body consists not only in making what is far away seem near, but also in robbing the near of its wonted security and familiarity. Thus, the Londoners in the poem experience not simply the simultaneous failure of living and historical memory but also a collapse of the distinction between these two modes of memory” (7) and also "While each affords he old Britons a measure of respect and even reverence--as hagiographers, as magnificent rulers, as virtuous pagans--each concludes by expunging the last traces of prior indigenous habitation from English soil. This is how one makes homeland" (15).

6 From Bernard of Clairvaux, “vivi...apices,” a phrase most famous from its use by Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law*.

7 If I need it: Harley 2250, where we can find the sole copy of *Erkenwald*, contains little or no reference to England's pagan past, barring its Alban legend (apparently same as Laud 108 *SEL* version), which is better understood as a particularly Roman martyrdom that just so happens to be
set in England. It does, however, contain three works concerned with Jews: one on the conversion of
the Jews of Beirut, another on a Jew robbed between Bristol and Wilton, saved by the virgin, who
converts, and another, notably, on the Jews’ vain attempts to rebuild their temple.

8 Burrow and Turville-Petre; also Penguin trans; Israel Gollancz, St Erkenwald, xvi-xvii, proposes that
the “Synagogue of the Sun” was a temple at Bath to dedicated to a Celtic sun god (called “Sul
Minerva” by the Romans), upon whose ruins was built the Church of St. Mary Stall. Rather than
look outside London, Peterson's edition suggests that Erkenwald combines “the progenitive power
of both the sun and the mother of God” (qtd from Finch 400 n21). Casey Finch's translation in The
Pearl-Poet notably leaves the word out altogether, rendering the line as “what was set to the Sun
now seized for our Lady.”

9 “To þe Synagoge wan she came þe dore heo haueþ oundo, / þan wei by-fore þan sche name & þay
come after þo. / Florippe drow a ridel þan þat stod be-fore þe frout, / þan sawe þay þer Sir
Ternagan & eke hur god Mahount: / lubiter also & iouyn stode þar hymen by-syde, / & eke hure god
appolyn araid wiþ grete pryde” (Sir Freumbras, ed. Signey J Heritage, EETS Trübner & Co.:
London, 1879 2535-40)

10 For this phrase and its uses, see Harris, Untimely Matter, 97 and 214 n4.

hospitalis Sancti Antonii Vienensis. “Rex dedit magistro et fratribus hospitalis Sancti Antonii
Vienensis capellam beate Marie in Lond', que quondam fuit sinagoga Judeorum. Et mandatum est
vicecomitibus Lond' quod fratri Thome, procuratori et nuncio ipsorum magistri et fratum, since
dilatione ejusdem capelle plenam seisinam habere faciant. Teste rege ibidem, xiiij. die Decembris.”
England,” Speculum 67 (1992): 263-283, for directing me to this reference. For more [cautiously]
London Jewry revisited.” Though this point is outside the scope of my paper at present, I can't help
but wonder whether Henry intended a deliberate insult by expropriating a synagogue for the benefit
of an order so closely associated with pigs. I am inspired to this suspicion by D'Blossiers Tovey's
1738 Anglia Judaica, which observes, concerning this chapel and house of Antonines, “The Arms
of which old House were Sable, a Pig Clarinee, Argent: possibly, to signify that it had left its [sic]
Jewish Masters: unless you had rather have it to be a Remembrance, of St. Anthony's Porcine [in
Gothic font] Companion.” For Stow's reference (this from 1603, but I imagine also in 1598 edition),
280.

12 John Stow, A Survey of London, Reprinted from the text of 1603. Volume 1 [introduction and notes,
Charles Lethbridge Kingsford, MA], 83. For discussion, see Harris, Untimely Matter, 95-118

13 Other commentators have also noticed the effect of alliteration, but have read it as either an anxious
inability to suppress the past (Chism for example) or as metaphoric substitution. Chaganti 2008, 67,
[Godden diss. too, which is good especially for close reading of formal elements: rare dominance of
b verse] is a rare exception: “Particularly in this visual and material sense, alliteration reinforces a
pattern of vestigiality: letters are repeated in pagan and Christian names, so that the past not only
prefigures the present, but it also leaves behind pieces—letters, like statues and buildings—which
are adapted in the present and incorporated into newly cleansed Christian structures and words.
The poem uses the narrative capacities of material objects and the material capacities of letters and
language to demonstrate the trope of vestigiality, the reliquiae, that which is left behind. The
inscriptional aspect of alliteration thus provides a defining temporality for the poem; the recursive return to what has been left behind,” so suggesting “ceremonial temporality.”

14 “Þen was hit [i.e., “þe temple Triapolitan”] abatyd and beten doun and buggyd efte new” (37)

15 Piers Plowman B, XII.270-95 (Schmidt ed), and C.XIV.194-217 (Pearsall ed.), where Ymaginatif argues that God will save the just at the day of judgment, Saracens, Jews, or Pagans (although his examples, Trajan, is a pagan) though they did not believe in Christ; note that this position directly contradicts the Hilton quoted below. For extended discussions, see Whatley and especially Vitto. For the theology, see Gordon Whatley, “Piers Plowman B.12.277-94: Notes on Language, Text, and Theology,” Modern Philology 82.1 (1984): 1-12. NOTE Whatley observes that baptism would not be required for those who lived before baptism instituted; Trajan requires it be he lived in time of grace; this judge? NO. The law thus carried out irrationally. This is bad doctrine, which is sort of the point. [question of whether Ymaginatif’s ref to Saracens, who all live in time of grace, complicates Whatley's neat reading of PPl's doctrine as Thomist]


17 Agamben, State of Exception


19 Note that the poem describes Erkenwald: “Now of þis Augustynes art is Erkenwolde bischop / At love London toun and the lagh teches” (34-35)

20 Lord, who shall dwell in thy tabernacle? or who shall rest in thy holy hill? He that walketh without blemish, and worketh justice // Who shall ascend into the mountain of the Lord: or who shall stand in his holy place? The innocent in hands, and clean of heart, who hath not taken his soul in vain, nor sworn deceitfully to his neighbour. He shall receive a blessing from the Lord, and mercy from God his Saviour.

21 "Syn this is sooth, thanne thynketh me that thise men gretli and grevousli erren that seyn that Jewis and Sarcenys and paynemes, bi kepynge of hire owen lawe, mown be maad saaf, though thei trowen not in Jhesu Crist as Holi Chirche troweth and as Cristen men doon, in as mykil as thei wene that her owen trouth is good and siker and sufficient to here savacion, and in that trouthe thei doon, as hit semeth, many good deedes of rightwisenesse, and peraventure yif thei knewen that Cristen feith were betere than here is, thei wolde take it and leve here owen, that thei therfore schulde be saaf.
Nai, it is not nnowgh so. For Crist, God and man, is bothe wei and eende, and He is mediatour atwix God and man, and withouten Him mai no soule be reconciled ne come to blisse of hevene."

22 Zizek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, among other places.

23 “Bot ay a freke faitheles þat faylid þi laghes"

24 NOTE big question here, via Godden, is fact that we have baptism w.out a name, although Mirk does allow God to 'hear' the name if the child already has one.

25 1 Corinthians 10:18; Augustine makes much on this in his Tractatus Contra Iudaeos and DCD.

26 “And als bry3t of hor blee in blysnande hewes / as þai hade 3epely in þat 3orde bene 3isturday shapen” (87-88) From Kruger, *Spectral Jews*, As he argues, this spectrality is not opposed to body: "indeed medieval Jew's spectrality often brings them into a particularly close relation to pure or dead body, mere materiality. More generally, while the spectral is a figure of a certain immateriality, it also remains significantly wrapped up in embodiment; without body, or something like body, how could the specter appear?" (xxi) For Derrida, the specter is a "certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit" (xxi)


28 *Spectral Jews*, 10, qting in part from Derrida *Spectres of Marx*.

29 Though Erkenwald specifically demands this information, it's unclear where the judge's soul actually is: “Quen þou herghdes helle-hole and hentes hom þeroute, / þi loffynge oute of limbo, þou laftes me þer” (291-2): the antecedent of “þer” (hell-hole or limbo) is uncertain.

30 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–51. Key bits for me: “What is the basis for assuming that it will surprise or disturb--never mind motivate--anyone to learn that a given social manifestation is artificial, self-contradictory, imitative, phantasmatic, or even violent?” (19) “The monopolistic program of paranoid knowing systematically disallows any explicit recourse to reparative motives, no sooner to be articulated than subject to methodical uprooting" (144) "A disturbingly large amount of theory seems explicitly to undertake the proliferation of only one affect or maybe two, of whatever kind--whether ecstasy, sublimity, self-shattering,joissance, suspicion, abjection, knowingness, horror, grim satisfaction, or righteous indignation" "No less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmatic, the reparative reading position undertakes a different rage of affects, ambitions, and risks" (150)

31 Zizek, Parallax View