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MUSIC OF THE LEFT HAND: PERSONAL NOTES ON THE PLACE OF LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION IN THE TEACHINGS OF R. AHARON LICHTENSTEIN

For the quest for virtue must involve the whole man, the intellect included.¹

In our concern for practical effects, we may forget the religious principles upon which, from More's point of view as from mine, true morality must be based —“la morale,” as Loisy said, “étant comme impliquée dans la religion, qui en inspirait et sanctionnait les préceptes.”²

It has been said—in fact, R. Lichtenstein said it—that the occupational hazard of every scholar is the temptation to exaggerate the importance of his subject.³ The Circe of the student writing about an authoritative and formative master is the temptation to exaggerate the overlap between the teacher and the student. This is not merely the inclination to egregious revisionism, when facts are suppressed and positions are misinterpreted with insouciance, as is not uncommon in current discourse. Especially in dealing with a thinker like R. Lichtenstein, who exemplifies intellectual nuance and personal balance, the student may meet a reasonable expectation of accuracy, avoiding error or misinterpretation, without attaining precision – you may get a good account of what the student learned but not a full or balanced assessment of what he was taught. One of the great Talmudists of the modern era wrote, in a similar context: “In judging, where the falsehood is only in the estimate of the

¹ Aharon Lichtenstein, *Henry More: The Rational Theology of a Cambridge Platonist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 203-04.

² *Henry More*, 204. Translation of French: “Morality being thus implicated in religion, that inspires it and sanctions its precepts.”

³ *Henry More*, ix.

mind, and not regarding what is perceived, deception is easier.”⁴ It is thus a matter of full disclosure to say something about my point of entry to this discussion.

From R. Lichtenstein and from my other mentors at Yeshiva University I gained the conviction that human life is about action rather than contemplation and that therefore the intellectual activity mandated by Judaism centers on thought allied to potential action, thus confirming the traditional concentration on the study of halakhic texts, so that a life apart from such learning is religiously impoverished. I gained an indelible appreciation of the traditional approach to learning, one that prevented me from succumbing to the notion that *lomdut* is somehow less “sophisticated” than the methods promulgated in the academic community, and that one “transitions” from the former to the latter. Of course, such training made it impossible for me to be attracted to the suggestion that one may, in good conscience, compartmentalize one’s intellectual life: *frum* in the *beit midrash*, academically antiseptic in the library. Having said this, my nominal professional position is in a department of academic Jewish studies and the bulk of my contribution to Torah studies is in Jewish thought and *Tanakh*; I teach regularly in the Humanities division and publish frequently on topics that are not explicitly religious in journals that are read mostly by non-Jews. A student of R. Lichtenstein who had described a different career would probably focus on different points.

Moreover, at the time I was fortunate to enter R. Lichtenstein’s *shiur* at Yeshiva University, I was already strongly convinced that one ought to seek out the truth wherever it is. One of the urgent questions in my mind was whether traditional Judaism was capacious enough to accommodate that which could be learned from a plenitude of sources. Once I reached something approximating my present theological position, the question was how to sustain this breadth and scope, first for myself and then in teaching others. This angle of approach is significantly different from that of an individual wholly enfolded in the ethos of the yeshiva world who inquires whether and why room should be made for other studies, even if, a lifetime later, we seem to have arrived at the same destination.

A sense of complexity is the hallmark of R. Lichtenstein’s worldview. It is naturally very much in evidence when he addresses the question of how to think about complexity, which is at the root of our topic. R. Lichtenstein’s many painstaking essays on the subject, written over the course of half a century, and in the context of his major productivity as a

⁴ Or *Sameah*, *Hilkhot Sanhedrin* 23:6.

teacher and author in Talmud and Halakha, defy executive summary. An “abridged and improved version” of R. Lichtenstein on general studies (as the old Yiddish thespians bragged of their performances of Shakespeare) would mislead the uninitiated and scandalize those who know better. There is no substitute for picking up his texts yourself and sitting at the master’s feet.

In the hope of encouraging and facilitating that encounter, I will bring those texts to your attention, in more or less chronological order. I will then turn to several areas of interest to me, where further discussion may facilitate your reading.

II

Let me begin with an unpublished source that played a role in my own growth. In the late 1960’s R. Lichtenstein gave a number of Sunday talks to his *shiur* on the place of general studies within a religious context. These were loosely organized around H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*. Niebuhr’s method, which reflected and influenced other theological work, was to define multiple models of interaction and then analyze and evaluate each one in isolation in order to construct, in effect, a broader framework able to draw constructively on the truth of each model.

The two extreme positions are accommodation, in which religion adopts culture uncritically, and rejection. The three intermediate categories are hierarchic, where human culture has value that is of a lower level than that provided by revelation – Niebuhr identifies this position with Aquinas. Dualism (identified with Luther) is keenly sensitive to the evil of human culture, but regards engagement in culture as unavoidable, given the fallen nature of man. Conversionism (tied to Calvin) is the most idealistic model; it looks to the elevation and sanctification of culture. These categories are not always mutually exclusive: different activities may fit one better than the others, and the same activity may be justified and appreciated under more than one rubric. Judaism, with its commandment of Torah study, mandates a further perspective on these rubrics, insofar as it is important both to determine the value of an activity in itself and to justify devoting time on it. While R. Lichtenstein does not explicitly employ Niebuhr’s classification elsewhere, the terminology it supplies may prove helpful later on.

By the time he gave these lectures, R. Lichtenstein had already written, for the *Yeshiva Commentator*, the first of three general essays on “secular

studies.” It was entitled by the editors “Synthesis: a Torah Perspective”⁵ in deference to the prevalent Yeshiva University catchword of the time, despite the fact that “synthesis” was not one of the 5,000 words in the article, due to the author’s dissatisfaction with the term, which implied, in his opinion, a kind of Hegelian progression, through which Torah was somehow converted into a putatively higher entity through its combination with *Madda*.⁶ It was followed twenty years later by the Hebrew “*Tova Hokhma Im Nahalah*.”⁷ Lastly comes “Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict,” a 75-page treatise that is the constructive part of a volume whose other chapters deal with the interaction of the two (Torah and general culture) in various periods.⁸ I will take this culminating effort, the latest and most comprehensive of R. Lichtenstein’s treatments, as representing his settled views.

Two other books must be mentioned. Recently R. Chaim Sabato has published a volume of conversations with R. Lichtenstein.⁹ This book is declaredly intended to be more accessible to the uninitiated public. To that extent, one might minimize its value on subjects treated at length elsewhere. Nonetheless, as *Hazal* taught, if the table talk of a *talmid hakham* requires study, the simplified formulations of a master educator, addressing an audience not predisposed to appreciate the full dimensions of his message, bear their own kind of significance, especially in the case of a teacher as relentlessly responsible and self-conscious as R. Lichtenstein. We will draw on it accordingly.

Going back to the beginning, of course, is R. Lichtenstein’s dissertation on the 17th century savant Henry More, his only extended essay in English studies. Because this work shows him engaged in, and contributing actively, to Western culture, and because of the book’s relative inaccessibility, it is worth reviewing its argument and implications for Jewish thought in general as well as its model of religious liberal arts study in particular.

⁵ *The Commentator*, April 27, 1961, 5-6, reprinted as “A Consideration of General Studies from a Torah Point of View,” in *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 1, 89-103.

⁶ See J. J. Schacter, “Torah U-Madda Revisited: The Editor’s Introduction,” *Torah u-Madda Journal* 1 (1989), 22, n. 49.

⁷ “*Tova Hokhma Im Nahalah*: On Torah and Wisdom,” in *Mamlekhet Kohanim Ve-Goy Kadosh* (Jerusalem, 1989), 25-43. Note also Rabbi Lichtenstein’s essay from the same period, “The End of Learning,” *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 1, 105-17.

⁸ *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration*, ed. Jacob J. Schacter (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1997).

⁹ Chaim Sabato and Aharon Lichtenstein, *Mevakshei Panekha* (Jerusalem: Yediot Aharonot, 2011).

Henry More: The Rational Theology of a Cambridge Platonist began as a doctorate under the sponsorship of Douglas Bush at Harvard, of whom R. Lichtenstein has always spoken with admiration.¹⁰ More was a significant intellectual figure in his time – he merits attention in the history of 17th century science and philosophy and religious speculation. R. Lichtenstein is attracted to More’s personality: “he is thoroughly dominated by that quality which he probably prized above all others—the quality of sincerity;”¹¹ this quality also guarantees that his religious struggles are real. Yet More made little or no contribution to what is ordinarily regarded as literature. If R. Lichtenstein finds “life in these dry bones, and a vital message in these dead leaves,” it is not thanks to the aesthetic excellence of More’s writing. If you didn’t know the doctorate was in English literature you would certainly take it for an essay in intellectual history, about a “minor writer” who dealt with “major problems.” Accordingly, R. Lichtenstein has hardly anything here about the value of literature for religious insight and growth; rather, he is concerned with a better knowledge of and interpretation of the cultural past.¹²

The book opens with a survey of More’s life and work. The next chapters concentrate on the “major problem” that interests R. Lichtenstein. It is about the place of intellect in religious life, a timeless question, but one especially pertinent to a Jew preoccupied with the study of Torah. Even timeless questions, of course, exhibit unique configurations, and reflect particular historical circumstances. More, according to R. Lichtenstein, was a transitional figure. He was educated early in the 17th century, but his thinking gradually came to anticipate the religious outlook normally associated with the 18th century. Understanding how these pressures affected More, and how attitudes towards the role of intellect in religion correlate with other changes in religious atmosphere and commitment, may help us understand how similar pressures influence 20th century responses to the centrality of Torah study and these correlate with other

¹⁰ William Pritchard, who studied at Harvard during the same period and went on to become a scholar of American literature, wrote a memoir in which he refers to Bush as an openly Christian humanist in a secular department, and singles him out as showing personal concern for students and as virtually the only one to display a critical spirit in the classroom (*English Papers: A Teaching Life* [St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1995], 55-57).

¹¹ P. 18. In my subsequent discussion of *Henry More* in this section, page references will be incorporated in the text.

¹² The exception is p. 146 n. 117, contrasting, with respect to the question of Providence and evil, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* with Leibniz’s *Theodicy*, to the advantage of the former (see “Torah and General Culture,” 249).

religious challenges of our times. This is R. Lichtenstein's implicit agenda in this book; from time to time he avows it openly.¹³

The development in More's thinking, which R. Lichtenstein at one point calls a "literal disintegration" of his outlook, is described in two chapters entitled "The Simplicity of Comprehension" and "The Simplicity of Exclusion." The first chapter revolves around the idea of "deiformity": the ability of the human being to become like God, to attain "a pure goodness directed by pure reason." This overall conception, R. Lichtenstein avers, "acknowledges the validity of both human reason and human will, and furthermore, it recognizes the necessity of employing both in the exercise of the religious life" (88). "Not in vain," he comments, "has More's name found its way into the histories of rational theology. The attempt to approach religious problems philosophically, often scientifically, is evident throughout his works" (55). It is an optimistic outlook: deiformity, asserted one-sidedly, lacks a sense of radical evil in human nature, and is liable to dissolve the gap between God and man and the inherent difference between revelation and the truth discovered by unaided human reason.

More's later writing, in R. Lichtenstein's judgment, shows a retreat from the earlier affirmation of the integration of intellect and will, to the point of being anti-intellectual. He argues that these statements go beyond the awareness that are normal among "all religious humanists" (*inter alia* he devotes some attention to Milton, who was More's contemporary), that "man's absorption in his intellectual pursuits may become all-engrossing, thus in effect obscuring his higher destiny" (98). R. Lichtenstein traces this tendency in More to two principles: the first is More's emphasis upon morality as the dominant element of spiritual life; the second, his "democratic" conviction that what knowledge is necessary for religion is fairly simple and easily attainable.

In the last long chapter, "From Religion to Moralism," More's texts continue to be central, yet the effort to understand More within the general context of the English thought that came before and after becomes

¹³ The notion of decline in the middle and late 17th century is still known to students of English literary history in connection with T. S. Eliot's idea of a "dissociation of sensibility" occurring somewhere between the Metaphysical poets, of whom Donne is perhaps the best example, and Milton, and entailed lowering Milton's prestige. Douglas Bush was not a proponent of this notion, which explained literary change entirely through aesthetic categories, and which was not grounded in detailed historical investigation. Despite the fact that R. Lichtenstein frequently quotes Eliot's writings approvingly, particularly regarding the proper relationship of religion and culture, his name is not mentioned in *Henry More*, nor is the dissociation of sensibility discussed.

central, and the tendency to engage the broad sweep of European religious thought down to the 20th century becomes more prominent. As he traces the ways in which the tension between the deiform elevation of man, including the intellect, and the de-emphasis of strenuous intellectual activity in the name of morality and religious egalitarianism, the number of passages articulating R. Lichtenstein's judgment increases. Consider the following:

Where idolatry itself is denounced as immoral rather than as sinful, it would appear evident that religion proper is conceived as an essentially moral relationship. To this extent, the unique character of religion as a distinct, purely *sui generis* entity is denied. (164)

While deiformity no doubt represents the noblest of ethical and religious ideals, its quest may be beset by numerous pitfalls. Chief among these is the danger of overreaching oneself, of seeking—and asserting—not deiformity but deification; or to use the Miltonic expression, of “affecting Godhead.” (165)

It may be rejoined that the Platonists' once-born mold—their weakened sense of sin, their failure to appreciate the “numinous”—is simply the obverse side of their undoubtedly laudable emphasis upon deiformity. And this is unquestionably true. But we must recognize that it is the result of a one-sided emphasis. (Ibid.)

It was indeed to the development of manners that the [18th century] religious community turned, and with results that were not altogether happy. With the ensuing concentration upon external conduct, the inner religious core came increasingly to be neglected or forgotten; and, with its dehydration, the vitality of English religious life was seriously sapped. (200)

In emphasizing social conduct we move, in short, from the proper ends of religion towards the logical goals of a secular morality—from the worship of God to the service of man, and from the realm of inner vision to the world of outer action... Conduct is vital, both as an expression of character and as means to its formation. Inextricably interwoven with the essence of religious faith, it is at once cause and effect, an indispensable element in that constant interplay of the inner and the outer man, of faith and works, through which the religious personality rises to ever greater heights. But the concern with conduct may lead to abuse, and it is precisely this that confronts the student of Augustan religious life. Foremost is the possibility that conduct may be taken as an end—nay, with Tillotson, as *the* end—of religion rather than as a means... that only the hollow shell will remain while vital inner power shall have been dissipated... Secondly...

there is a danger that the role of conduct will be distorted by the omission or diminution of some other element of the religious life... Cut off from the roots of knowledge and the search for it, conduct gradually loses its vitality and its content. A growth of righteousness must be accompanied—nay, must be intermeshed with—a growth in knowledge. For the quest for virtue must involve the whole man, the intellect included. Disregard this, and the result is disproportion; and disproportion, as the Greeks knew, brings first chaos and then desiccation. Thirdly... the isolation of morality as a self-contained unit may occur not only in our experience but in our thinking; it may affect not only our conduct, but our conception of morality proper. (201-204)

R. Lichtenstein is rightly viewed as a vigorous advocate and a living exemplar of the importance of moral considerations in human relations. His encouragement of the study of the humanities is largely based on the belief that, when properly utilized, this exposure increases moral sensitivity. His paper in defense of Hesder for Israeli yeshiva students has become a classic not simply because it justifies military service under present conditions but because he explains Hesder in the context of a larger philosophy of social and national responsibility.¹⁴ An enormous attentiveness to civility comes to expression in numerous public positions and pronouncements, many of which earned him unpopularity within the Religious Zionist community to which he belongs. It may seem puzzling for those who know him *only* for these acts of advocacy to discover that his years at Harvard bore fruit in a critique of “moralism” and that his narrative of the transition to the world of Augustan Enlightenment is a story of decline.

The incongruity, of course, is wholly in the eye of the beholder. As usual with R. Lichtenstein, the question of one-sidedness versus balance is key. This is evident even in the excerpts reproduced above. But there is a deeper point here. The Modern Orthodoxy with which he is willing to be identified (and unlike the Rav he has, at times, accepted the label), is not about adapting Orthodoxy to modernity, or about finding a formula that enables one to “live in two worlds.” To the contrary, “the quest for virtue must involve the whole man”—the intellect included, social responsibility included. One particular vice of Enlightenment religion is to treat religion as a handmaiden of social conduct, “morality with frosting.” One particular vice of the yeshiva world is the tendency to regard

¹⁴ “*Zot Torat Ha-Hesder*,” *Alon Shevut* 100, 9-33; English: “The Ideology of Hesder,” *Leaves of Faith* vol. 1, 135-158.

our responsibilities to outside society as insignificant. Both must be combated. As R. Lichtenstein writes in his *Commentator* article: In every Garden of Eden lurks a serpent, and to contend with the serpent it is useful to study a treatise on serpentine psychology.¹⁵

Earlier in the book, R. Lichtenstein surveys several solutions to the “democratic problem.” “Stated briefly, [the problem] is simply this: Religion must be accessible to all; some definitive intellectual content must enter into religion; and yet the great majority of men cannot or will not reason profoundly about religious or metaphysical questions” (107). The solution he finds most satisfactory is described as “Judaism,” which has required not only service of the heart and hand, but also of the intellect. Torah study is a universal obligation; none may forego the attempt. “Decision, Jewish tradition has of course reserved for competent authority; if there is no royal road to knowledge, neither is there a demotic. But the *peregrinatio* is the duty and destiny of all” (109).

The ideal of *talmud Torah* was not available to the 17th century Platonists. The pressure to make religious fulfillment possible for everyone was urgent for many reasons. The result, according to R. Lichtenstein, is that the Platonists, though they did not participate in the decline of religion, nevertheless contributed to it. The fact that their legacy was so different from their positions is, in his opinion, indubitable. More, for example, was far from deism, yet his downplaying of definitive dogma opened the door for it. “Dogma, ritual, intellection—whatever one may think of them—at least set an objective floor for religion; it can sink so low and no lower. These, however, the Platonists tended to minimize. They placed almost all their eggs in one basket, and it proved to have a sizable hole” (30).

Any reader of the book would assume that the phrase “rational theology” in the subtitle conforms to common usage among historians and philosophers. In the closing pages R. Lichtenstein rejects this terminology. The prevalent attitude views reason not as a participant in religious life but as an umpire: “it does not play the game, but rather sets up the rules and then referees” (209).¹⁶ The goal is social conduct, marked by “especially lavish praise for toleration,” largely on pragmatic grounds, disdain for dogma as unnecessary and socially divisive. Against this, R. Lichtenstein’s view of the rational theology worth pursuing is “something else entirely.”

¹⁵ “A Consideration of General Studies,” 93.

¹⁶ R. Lichtenstein therefore does *not* endorse the common idea that it is desirable to subject religious doctrine to doubt as a way of testing or fortifying one’s faith. Nor, of course, do Rambam (see *Avoda Zara* 2:2) and my “The Nature of Inquiry: a Common Sense Perspective” (*Torah u-Madda Journal* 3, 37-51).

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It applies to a theology for which “thinking is a genuine religious experience,” and incorporates the search for knowledge, “whether as an end or as a means—as a facet of the religious realm proper” (210).

III

We have caught a glimpse of how the study of the humanities is practiced. “Torah and General Culture”¹⁷ surveys a broad range of disciplines and addresses the theoretical questions facing *benei Torah* or *benot Torah*¹⁸ preparatory to engaging in such study. The earlier sections of the essay discuss the positive value to be gained from such study. The later sections focus on the impediments and dangers - the apportionment of time, the corruption of morals, the corrosion of faith, the chilling of fervor. My opening caveat, about the dangers of trying to paraphrase and simplify R. Lichtenstein’s thought, is even more in place here, where so much is covered, and even more important, where the theoretical analysis is meant not only to inform but to influence individual decisions. For those who are making these decisions or revising and fine-tuning them, R. Lichtenstein’s careful exposition rewards equally careful examination. I will limit myself to discussing several areas of special interest to me. I hope that my discussion will encourage vigilant reading on your part.

The George Steiner problem:

For as long as I remember, R. Lichtenstein has been troubled by the question raised by George Steiner: If culture is humanizing, how can a man read Goethe or Rilke, play Bach and Schubert, and do his work at Auschwitz?¹⁹ On which R. Lichtenstein comments: “This is, no doubt, a terrifying question for believers in the self-sufficiency of secular humanism—and a formidable one even for advocates of religious humanism” (249).

It is not obvious why this is a problem for advocates of liberal arts study within a religious framework in general, and where the primacy of Torah is recognized in particular. In defending his position against champions of

¹⁷ Unless indicated otherwise, page references in the text of this section are to this essay.

¹⁸ Note the gender difference respecting the obligation of Torah study.

¹⁹ Steiner also discusses works of artistic excellence produced by immoral people. On the connection between intellectual greatness and moral character, see below. Steiner’s question appears in the preface to his *Language and Silence* (London, 1967), as well as in later writings. Rabbi Lichtenstein discusses it, *inter alia*, in *By His Light*, 227ff.

“Torah only,” R. Lichtenstein has frequently resorted to the parable of the bread and the butter. A hungry man is offered a slice of bread, then another slice; at last he asks for butter, only to be told that bread is, after all, the staff of life, and that he should therefore ask for another slice of bread: “Spuriously rigorous logic dictates that more of the best is always best. But sound common sense knows that additional bread does not take the place of butter” (265).

Nonetheless, by the logic of the analogy, certain foods may make a positive contribution to one’s nutrition only as part of a balanced diet: butter unbuffered by bread may be worthless or harmful. It should not be surprising that art and science unlinked to a moral center do not humanize. For religious humanism, and particularly for Judaism with its main dishes of “bread and meat,”²⁰ the Steiner problem should not arise.

In fact, R. Lichtenstein himself employs a version of this argument to counter one line of religious anti-intellectualism he finds in More: “as More himself so often eloquently declares, knowledge *within* a moral context is very different from knowledge without it, and that within such a context, the quest for wisdom and its possession may be essential aspects of right human character.”²¹

Here are three suggestions why the Steiner problem should trouble even religious humanists:

1. From a logical perspective, to be sure, it is not always true that a complex whole expresses the qualities of its constituent parts: water has no qualities in common with either hydrogen or oxygen. Yet it is counter-intuitive, at a human level, that the experience of great art alone should have no wholesome quality whatsoever. If high culture really is morally indifferent in the presence of horrific evil, then one wonders whether it is ever worthwhile.
2. Religious humanism, for R. Lichtenstein, is not only a matter of religious Jews gaining benefit from the products of general culture. It is also about human dignity and the value of human endeavor.²² The bankruptcy of modern culture, its failure to deter or even its complicity with moral horror, casts a shadow on the dignity of the human being, and this should trouble not only naive believers in the power of culture alone, but all of us who value the image of God and his achievements.

²⁰ See Rambam, *Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:13.

²¹ Henry More, 105.

²² “Humanism is a world-view which values man highly... [I]n this formulation, “values” must be understood in two senses, both as “appraises” and as “cherishes”... Achilles respected Hector but had no concern for his welfare, while Sonya worried over Raskolnikov but could have had but scant esteem for him” (“*Mab Enosh*,” 3).

3. The Steiner problem demonstrates that intellectual excellence and its appreciation can be wholly divorced from moral decency. The intellectual pursuit mandated by Judaism in the service of God is meaningless absent the effort to integrate of will and mind. Yet *Hazal* speak of a generation when those who embraced the Torah did not know God, who did not recite the “blessing on the Torah” prior to their study.²³ How far such corruption of the cultural personality proceeded in 1940s Europe is thus a sobering admonition to us all.

Information vs. Edification

The occasional utility of natural scientific information for Halakha is rarely disputed. R. Lichtenstein observes that sociological and psychological tools are valuable both to enhance one’s ability to evaluate human beings and their situations and to understand mentalities and ways of life different from our own (234ff.). Such understanding is especially urgent in confronting a secular culture. While some opponents of liberal arts may balk even at reliance on the social sciences, preferring to rely on their untutored or, as they would have it, their Torah-true intuitions, rather than on humanly fallible and often deceiving academic results, others may accept the social sciences as they would the natural sciences. They would nevertheless dismiss the humanities as subjective and as a waste of time, airy nothings significant only to their local habitations, to say nothing of their dangerous seductive powers.

At the risk of oversimplification, I would point to three elements in R. Lichtenstein’s response.²⁴ First, if knowledge of God’s world is valuable as a way to know God, and if the human being, the image of God, is a prominent part of that world, it makes little sense to embrace the natural sciences while turning away from the creative achievement and insight that is distinctively human: “the notion that Shakespeare is less meaningful than Boyle, Racine irrelevant but Lavoisier invaluable, remains very strange doctrine indeed” (243).

Secondly, one may argue that imaginative artists often do a better job of illuminating human nature, and especially the morally and spiritually distinctive dimensions of the human condition, than do scientists or even philosophers. This may be due to the advantages of literary language over technical jargon, the attention of art to concrete reality rather than abstraction, or to other factors. In any event: “not only... have [they]

²³ *Bava Metsia*, 85b.

²⁴ In the essay, R. Lichtenstein distinguishes the first theme I list but lumps the other two together.

described more powerfully but also because they have probed more deeply. For sheer insight, can Locke or James²⁵ compare with Dickens or Dostoyevsky?" (248).

Finally, R. Lichtenstein asks: "How much more telling, however, is the element of power at the prescriptive persuasive level?" (249). By this he does not mean argumentation or rhetoric aimed directly at persuasion. One might wish to speak of the inspirational or elevating effect of art, as long as this is not taken merely as emotional exhortation or sentimentalism. It is, of course, these claims on behalf of literature that engender the Steiner problem.

Now there are differences between the vision of humanistic study derivable from the second factor alone and the attitudes consonant with the first and the third. The second strand in the exposition states, in effect, that the best literature of creative imagination does the same work that the social sciences do, only more profoundly, more concretely, more probingly – at least sometimes.²⁶ This does not entail that the subject matter of such literature is particularly edifying, or that reading it is uplifting. From this viewpoint, the differences, in depicting egotism, between Ayn Rand and Dreiser and Nietzsche and Milton's depiction of Satan depend only on differences in psychological perspicuity and artistic execution. Nor, likewise, should the wholesomeness of the author be pertinent so long as he or she probe deeply and knows whereof he or she probes. In H. R. Niebuhr's terminology, this element in the justification of cultural engagement is dualistic; it takes culture as fallible and requires a relentlessly critical attitude towards it. If, by contrast, we read to know God or to be inspired and elevated, not all subject matter, however instructive, serves this purpose; one may be instructed without being ennobled; and we may not be oblivious to the peculiar relationship between the person who lives and suffers and also creates.

In *Henry More* R. Lichtenstein is exploring a noble idea—the place of intellect in the life of religious devotion. He finds More a sympathetic, inspiring figure, despite his limitations and deficiencies. Yet, although he treats More and Cambridge Platonism with the vigorous and probing solemnity befitting a noble human attempt to get at religiously momentous truth, the goal of his inquiry is not to be persuaded by what is noble in it. To the contrary, it is to enlighten us with the story of a noble failure

²⁵ William James, I presume.

²⁶ I stipulate that classical works of social science often share the virtues of the humanities. That is precisely why Tocqueville or Adam Smith or Keynes are not superannuated by state-of-the-art empirical studies.

and to analyze, as accurately as possible, its causes and consequences, with an eye to their ongoing lessons.

If one compares *Henry More* and the early essay on general studies with “Torah and General Culture” and the interviews in *Mevakshei Panekha*, it seems to me that in the earlier writing the study of culture is more oriented to the critique of culture and the analysis of ideas, with less emphasis on the sheer glory of the Arnoldian “best that has been thought and said,” whereas more recent statements have appreciated and cherished the best in culture, even while continuing to devote attention to the possible negative consequences of engagement in culture. Take the following:

There are human beings, including Gentiles, whose historical mission is a mission of creativity—literary creativity, moral creativity. There are people in whom you see greatness, greatness of soul, moral greatness.

How can one not be impressed by Samuel Johnson? A man who emerged from the London mud, and reached a level of charity, that I wish I could attain. Must I ignore this because he was a non-Jew?²⁷

Perhaps this perception is exaggerated, a projection of my own development, or reflects accidental factors. If there is indeed a subtle significant shift, it could be explained in a number of ways. Perhaps the more critical approach to general culture is too demanding, in terms of investment or acumen, or too daunting for a large part of the likely audience. It is thus better to concentrate on texts that can be appreciated without reservation.

R. Lichtenstein is fond of the example of T. S. Eliot who, during his years as a philosophy graduate student, was immersed in Sanskrit, but abandoned the study, despite persisting interest, because it was drawing him in directions he did not care to pursue (287). It may well be the case that “dualism,” for many of us, is an important motive for study in one’s youth, when it is important to determine what one ought to believe and why, to discover what others believe and why, and to trace the implications of all this. As we move ahead with our lives, even if we do not wholly outgrow

²⁷ *Mevakshei Panekha*, 85. He goes on to mention Frost’s “Stopping by Woods” and Milton’s sonnet “On His Blindness.” In recent years he has also discussed particular poems before *talmidim*. See “‘The Woods Are Lovely, Dark and Deep’: Reading a Poem by Robert Frost,” *Alei Etzion* 16 (2009), 129-134, on Frost’s poem. One may argue that correspondence between the person and the work is more important in choosing to read Johnson (or More), who are primarily prose writers, rather than poets or historians, whose sincerity is a condition of their credibility. The value of Dostoyevsky’s insight, for example, does not depend on his biography in the same way.

these concerns, the pressing question is not what to read, but rather what to reread, and the criteria change accordingly in favor of the texts that inspire and elevate us and help us live the lives we ought to lead.

Lastly, as noted above, the advocacy of general education is only part of R. Lichtenstein's message. Religious humanism is about the appreciation and cherishing of the human being. Our current educational challenge is not solely the blight of intellectual narrowness, and the ensuing deficiency in our understanding of ourselves and others. We are also called upon to counter the tendency to derogate the human being, and within Orthodox society, the tendency to deprecate outsiders, non-Jews or *bilonim*, to make light of their contributions and dignity, and to disparage those aspects of human nature and destiny that we share, *volens nolens*, with the outside world. It is for this reason that R. Lichtenstein is so vocal in insisting on the *hakkarat ha-tov*, the sense of gratitude, that all Jews owe for the constructive work of secular Zionists, and it is for this reason that he is distressed by the glee with which religious Jews sometimes greet reports of moral communal breakdown outside our walls, as if our flourishing requires their desolation.

The Distinctiveness of Torah

If liberal arts disciplines can confer the benefits, in moral and religious sensitivity and for the knowledge of God, of which R. Lichtenstein speaks, it is tempting to play down the radical difference between the kind of knowledge and insight gained through such studies and the experience of Torah study.

One characteristic of rationalism, in the sense that More exemplified and that R. Lichtenstein rejects, is to value universal truths and concomitantly to avoid the absolute distinction between the wisdom accessible through nature and the knowledge given through revelation: "Certainly, with respect to morality and religion, any blurring of position must be categorically rejected, on both metaphysical and psychological grounds. A sense of the unique "otherness" of God—and consequently of the *sui generis* character of man's relation to Him—must be seen as a fundamental element of any truly profound religious consciousness" (172).

In our own age, the failure to observe that distinction is less often posed by the universality of natural science than by comparative and other relativistic methods of the humanities or social sciences that treat the content or experience of divine revelation as commensurate with other human cultural artifacts or experiences. Where we lose sight of it, the experience of the presence of God, the sense of divine Providence, is etiolated, as the uniqueness of

God is dissolved in the universal categories of deism. It also has a deadening and alienating effect on the encounter with God through the study of Torah. It is not surprising that the discussion of God in *Mevakshei Panekha*,²⁸ over half a century after *Henry More*, stresses this recognition.

IV

A word about the title of this chapter: it refers to Milton's famous statement that he wrote poetry with his right hand and prose with his left. By implication, R. Lichtenstein's right hand is stretched forth in the pursuit of Talmud Torah, while his engagement in liberal arts is the work of his active but subordinate left hand. From my reading of *Henry More* forty years ago, I recalled that R. Lichtenstein had used the same image in describing the writing of the book.

In fact, R. Lichtenstein did not borrow the image from Milton. "With a second hand" is a phrase of Spenser's (Sonnet 75) where he wrote his love's name on the sand, and, when it was washed away by the tide, wrote it again "with a second hand" but with the same result; R. Lichtenstein's aim is to offer More the tribute of recognition and bring to life a chapter of intellectual history partially effaced.²⁹

Can Milton's image be transferred to R. Lichtenstein's life's work in the manner I remembered? Milton's formula presupposed two projects—the poetry being the goal to which he wished to devote his life, the prose being the product of occasion and the task imposed by necessity—both directed by the same executive intelligence, but neither interacting with the other.³⁰ It seems to me that R. Lichtenstein's general culture, subordinate as it is to the pursuit of Torah and the life of mitsvot, nevertheless exhibits a greater degree of interaction than Milton's image implies. In *Mevakshei Panekha* he considers the ways in which the broad horizons of Western culture, subjected to rigorous critique and self-examination, may have helped him think through certain halakhic decisions or enriched his experience of Tanakh or certain aspects of religious and ethical life, to say nothing of the linguistic resources such education made available to

²⁸ Pp. 18-27 and especially pp. 23-24.

²⁹ A gentle reminder that even the unbiased memory of a well-meaning student is not infallible!

³⁰ In *Henry More* R. Lichtenstein writes: "Faith and reason are not [for More], as in Donne, a right and left hand; they are intermeshing roots..." (74). In other words, two hands do not represent genuine integration.

him.³¹ And yet, because these advantages are so evidently subordinate to the absolute imperatives of Torah and Talmud Torah, because he is so strongly averse to the notion that Torah needs to be “improved” by some additional ingredient, it is impossible to think of Western culture as anything like an independent force in R. Lichtenstein’s worldview.

Hesitantly, I chose to refer to the “music of the left hand.” From one perspective, the left hand in a piano composition is unimportant: the melody, after all, is carried by the right hand; it suffices to communicate the tune. If the left hand played alone, if the bass were amplified and the treble clef relegated to the background, the result would be unrecognizable. At the same time, the left hand, in its subordinate role, adds so much to the beauty and coherence of the music.

As R. Lichtenstein has repeatedly reminded us, a broad education is not a *sine qua non* of a profound religious life: “It would be not only impudent but foolish to impugn a course which has produced most *gedolei Yisrael* and has in turn been championed by them” (291). Yet, for those who, like R. Lichtenstein, have experienced the value of such an education, I hope this image of interaction captures something of the truth. In any case, for a combination of reasons, some of which have been alluded to in this essay, R. Lichtenstein’s “sense of the need for *Torah u-Madda* has sharpened, particularly in light of public events throughout the Jewish world.” “So, however,” he continues, “has my awareness of the difficulties of realizing it; of the very considerable spiritual and educational cost—regrettably far in excess of what is inexorably necessary—which the proponents of *Torah u-Madda* often pay for their choice. Jointly, these conclusions—and I am not alone in subscribing to both—pose a challenge which needs to be conscientiously and creatively confronted” (291).

³¹ See *Mevakshei Panekha*, 125-130. R. Lichtenstein’s preface to his *Dina De-Garmi* and to his *shiurim* on *Gittin* contain reflections on the advantages and disadvantages of adopting a colloquial style in writing about Talmud and organizing the material topically rather than following the order of discussion in the Talmud itself. How many *rashei yeshiva*, whatever their final conclusion, would so carefully consider the consequences of diction for the experience of Torah study, and need one ask how many would bring to such a discussion their knowledge of analogous shifts in prose style from Burton and Milton at the beginning of the 17th century, to Dryden at its end? For that matter, how many would include in a volume on *Gittin* a *shiur* on the permissibility of divorce in Halakha, alongside *shiurim* on classic topics relating to agency (*shelihut*) and the authority of legal documents (*shetarot*) and with the same rigor? Or conclude a series of *shiurim* on the tort law of indirect causation an appendix recognizing that Ramban’s elegant analysis which had served as the basis of the book may not provide satisfactory solutions for practical contemporary problems, which might be better served by other halakhic sources?