

SEEING THINGS:
THE INTERNET, THE TALMUD AND ANAIS NIN

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“We do not see things as they are, we see them
as we are.”

Anais Nin (1961)

This epigram (or something like it), is widely quoted on the Internet, sometimes credited to the Cuban-French novelist Anais Nin and sometimes to the Talmud.¹ While many of these Internet sources are compilations of quotes or personal blogs, several are scholarly in nature. The purpose of this note is to sort out this epigram’s origin, and to understand the context in which it appears. The next section examines the claimed Talmudic origin of these words, followed by a discussion of its use in Nin’s writing. The conclusion discusses the role of the Internet in this attribution.

The Talmud

Among the many Talmudic attributes of this epigram, one stands out both because of its apparently authoritative author and because of its citation to a specific part of the Talmud.² In a recent *Newsweek*

¹ As of April 3, 2008, 663 web pages have this quote and the name Nin; and 1,180 have this quote and the word Talmud. Of the 23 pages that have both Nin and Talmud, only one acknowledges that Nin references the Talmud; the rest have quotes from both (and many other) sources. A variant of the epigram, “We do not see things as they are, we see things as we are” produces 69 references with Nin and 2,050 with Talmud, and only one of the 47 that has both Talmud and Nin acknowledges that the quote is attributed to both. (Using Google.com).

² None of the “Talmud”-only pages (see previous note) provides an exact citation. Wikipedia, just to give an example, has this second quote on its page for Anais Nin but without a precise citation.

article, Rabbi Marc Gellman refers these words to the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakoth 55b.³ However, what the Talmud actually says there is—*ein marin lo l'adam ela m'harhurei libo*—"A man is shown only what is suggested by his own thoughts." The context of this phrase is a Talmudic discussion about dreams; the epigram, however, is about perception, not dreams. Neither the Babylonian nor the Jerusalem Talmud supports the citation.⁴ Nor do the various printed and on-line English translations of the Talmud support it.

How then, might the idea have suggested itself that the Talmud had something to do with these words? For an answer to this question, we look to the passage in Nin's writing where the words in question do appear. She writes: "Lillian was reminded of the Talmudic words: 'We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are.'"⁵ Hence people must have gotten from Nin herself the idea that these words come from the Talmud.

Anais Nin

Nin's words come from her novel *Seduction of the Minotaur*. As a novelist, she is not responsible, in a scholarly sense, for the literal truth of her words. Indeed, "scholarly" is not an attribute normally associated with Nin. As a writer she concerns herself deeply with psychological truth, but the literal facts do not interest her. As a novelist, she has artistic license to use the word "Talmudic" as a synonym for "ancient wisdom," without worrying about whether those words are or are not found in the Talmud. Nin's use of this quotation comes in the context of Lillian's relationship to the painter Jay:

³ Gellman, "How we see Sharon and Israel," in *Newsweek*, Jan. 9, 2006, attributes this saying to R. Samuel b. Nachmani. The Talmud there, however, has Samuel b. Nachmani speaking in the name of Jonathan, to whom the phrase thus is attributed. Samuel b. Nachmani, a third century Palestinian *amora*, frequently quoted his teacher and mentor, Jonathan b. Eleazar. This suggests that the Talmudic reference is a truncated form of the full name, R. Jonathan b. Eleazar—a third century Palestinian *tanna*.

⁴ A similar phrase is found at B. Hul. 92a, which also speaks about being shown what will come in the future *in dreams*. This, too, has Samuel b. Nachmani speaking in the name of Jonathan. A reference to the *Berakhot* text is found at *Afarsakta D'anya, Yoreh De'ah* 147, by R. David ben R. Baruch Kalonymus Sperber (1875–1962), who lived in Romania and Israel.

⁵ See n. 1 about the websites' acknowledgment of this quote. This quote comes from Nin, *Seduction of the Minotaur* (Chicago, 1961), p. 124.

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He had discovered a woman hobo who slept every night in exactly the same place, in the middle of the sidewalk, in front of the Pantheon. She had found a subway ventilator from which a little heat arose and sometimes a pale grey smoke, so that she seemed to be burning. She lay in a tidy way, her head resting on her market bag packed with her shawl neatly tied under her chin. She slept calm and dignified as if she were in her own bed. Jay had painted her soiled and scratched feet, the corn on her toes, the black nails. But he overlooked the story Lillian loved and remembered of her, that when they tried to remove her to an old woman's home she had refused saying: 'I prefer to stay here where all the great men of France are buried. They keep me company. They watch over me.' Lillian was reminded of the Talmudic words: "We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are."⁶

Thus the hobo lady experiences, while she sleeps, the company and protection of the dead great men of France buried in the Pantheon. Perhaps this is not too far from the Talmud's discussion of dreams.

The Internet

It is easy to imagine how, once begun, the misattribution of the words in question becomes rooted in popular culture.⁷ This is the kind of thing the Talmud perhaps "ought" to include, even though it does not. The Internet is an ideal medium for spreading a misattribution like this.⁸ The challenge for Internet users—and anyone reading and interpreting data—is to decipher between factual and fictional attributions.

This is particularly important in the Judaic textual world where the practice of attribution (*b'shem omro*, which means, more or less, that what I am about to say was said previously by this other person) is pervasive and old, arching back through Rabbinic literature

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ A chronological analysis of printed materials shows this quote coming about only after 1961, with the publication of Nin's novel. Published English translations of the Talmud, by contrast, predate the novel, and none of the translations support this phrase.

⁸ Another popular phrase—"Be the change you want [or, wish] to see in the world"—is mis-attributed to Mohandas Gandhi. With over 200,000 pages using this quote, one might think that Gandhi indeed said it. But while the sentiment of this phrase is something Gandhi might endorse, it is nowhere to be found in his English works. Only archival research of the web will be able to unearth the original source of this quote attributed to Gandhi.

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and, in a way, to the Bible itself.⁹ That attribution is an ancient practice reflects a strong and enduring belief in the justness of intellectual property rights. Saying things that we think we see can be misleading and, in some cases, unethical and even illegal.

⁹ It is possible to understand “Thus says the Lord” and similar phrases, especially when they are uttered by humans, as attributive.