Two years before he became the first Jewish Professor of Hebrew Language and Literature at University College, London, in 1828, Hyman Hurwitz published the first collection of Hebrew literature in English, an anthology entitled Hebrew Tales. The volume is composed of tales and aphorisms from rabbinic literature, including the Talmud and midrash. As Hurwitz’s preface and essay make clear, he intended the volume to counter negative and uninformed assumptions about this literature in much Christian writing, and to educate British Jews in their own rich traditions. More fundamentally, he wanted to show the compatibility of traditional Jewish wisdom and contemporary British culture. Inspired by his friend Coleridge, Hurwitz set out to redeem the Talmud and to cultivate a new tradition that would make Jews more at home in Britain and Britain more hospitable to Jews and Jewish culture. The historian David Ruderman, who sees the project of translation as a major part of the Haskalah or Enlightenment in England, believes that Hurwitz’s project, like that of Jewish biblical translators of the period, “constructed a radically new image of what they thought Judaism meant to their age. This image was so formidable and pervasive that, to the readers of their prodigious translations, the reality on which their new image was based was virtually displaced.” According to Ruderman, in attempting to make the rabbis and Judaism palatable to English men and women, Hurwitz deprived the tradition of its “unique idiom and cultural perspective.”

I will argue, however, that Hurwitz did maintain certain elements of rabbinic wisdom even as he crossed the linguistic and cultural border into English and into the world of Romantic literature and theory. Hurwitz rejected the belief that the Talmud was inspired, the word of God, a position that distances him from the tradition. But in choosing
to focus on narratives, *aggadot*, from the Talmud and other rabbinic sources, Hurwitz deflected attention from both the Law itself and the commentary. Therefore, he focused on that part of rabbinic teaching linked to ancient Jewish popular culture and avoided direct debate about the Law and its status. In doing so, he transmitted the narrative traditions and wit of rabbinic literature without attempting to make sense of the entire Talmud, although he did outline his theory for the project in an appended essay. In this sense Hurwitz’s project bears resemblance to Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*, particularly to the way that Wordsworth theorized the project in the Preface and transmitted a literary version of traditional folk narratives in the poems. Because of Hurwitz’s desire to redeem Judaism from scorn and to reconcile it with contemporary English culture, his goal was even trickier than Wordsworth’s. The comparison of the two authors is revealing, however, because Hurwitz thought of his project as a contribution to English readers, whose preferences and tastes were susceptible to influence.

**Literary Theory**

If a man attaches much interest to the faculty of taste as it exists in himself and employs much time in those studies of which this faculty…is reckoned the arbiter, certain it is his moral notions and dispositions must either be purified and strengthened or corrupted and impaired. How can it be otherwise, when his ability to enter into the spirit of works in literature must depend upon his feelings, his imagination and his understanding, that is upon his recipient, upon his creative or active and upon his judging powers, and upon the accuracy and compass of his knowledge, in fine upon all that makes up the moral and intellectual man. What is true of individuals is equally true of nations.

—Wordsworth, “Essay on Epitaphs II”

Hurwitz takes great care with the selection and arrangement of his volume, but he does not simply let the tales speak for themselves. Instead, he prefixes a theoretical essay to *Hebrew Tales*, placing his work in various contexts and assuring that his readers do not miss his polemical points. In the essay, Hurwitz is careful to acknowledge that he is presenting the collection with a particular function in mind. He calls this function “moral improvement” (5), but his agenda is both broader and more specific than that: He acknowledges that he intends to refute influential misreadings of Talmudic literature and to provide a framework in which English readers can appreciate the tradition anew. He does this by explaining the rabbinic method of storytelling, which includes a metaphorical imagination of the world, by drawing comparisons between