

# 1 Jewish Philosophy of Modernity

Because “Jewish philosophy of modernity” serves in this book as the central interpretive notion, I will start my argument from forging it. I will attempt to construct it against a handful of examples of 20th-century thinking, in which Judaism and modernity are conjoined, highlighting at the same time that the interrelation of the two as intimated in these examples is a moot point, indeed. As opposed to the previous incarnations of *Wahlverwandschaften* between Jewish tradition and modern thought, I wish to assume their connectedness explicitly and unambiguously. It is only from such a position that questions about where this connectedness originates and what sense it makes can effectively be asked.

## On the Affinities between Modernity and Judaism

Many 20th-century authors revisited the idea of a certain kinship between Jewish tradition and modernity. Both terms are, obviously, very general, but their inconclusiveness corresponds to confusions that envelop this complex issue. In earlier frameworks, “Jewish tradition” meant, for example, modes of interpretation developed within rabbinical Judaism, a distinct Jewish experience (e.g. exile, persecution, the Holocaust, survival of “the remnants of Israel,” and so forth), Judaism’s ethical ideals, the Jewish take on monotheism, an approach to language and a multitude of other things. Clearly, the theses about an affinity between “Jewish tradition” and “modernity” are predicated on prior, usually latent, preconceptions about what it actually is that lies at the core of the Jewish. “Modernity” is a by no means less vague or less polyvalent moniker which has been used to designate several different directions that philosophy has taken over recent centuries (particularly in the 20th century), contemporary paradigms of literary studies and, also, the conceptual horizons and the spiritual aura of the epoch, including the human condition in the 20th century. Presuppositions about the character of this “modernity” predate ideas about its overlaps with Judaism although particulars, including such apparently basic ones as its time-frame, remain underdefined.

To inventory all such assumptions would take a separate and extensive study of its own. As this is expressly not my goal, in this subchapter I will focus on selected representative examples to demonstrate fundamental insights concerning the affinity of modernity and Judaism. The first of our models is encountered in Gershom Scholem, the most distinguished historian of Jewish mysticism

in the 20th century. Admittedly, he ushered into academic research the theme of the Kabbalah, which had earlier been marginalised by the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement, yet a vigorous, deeply personal interest in the spiritual legacy of Jewish mystical tradition shines through his objective historical scholarship. Intriguingly, Scholem engaged in the scholarly study of the Kabbalah for distinctly “unscholarly” reasons. He wanted to respond adequately to the formative processes of his age, such as the crisis of Revelation or, even, the withdrawal of God, assimilation, the loss of Judaism’s religious heritage and the predicament of the modern man, for whom the world proved an entirely cryptic code. As attested by his famous letter to Salman Schocken,<sup>1</sup> Scholem viewed his endeavours to understand the Kabbalah – over the chasm of time that has passed since its dawn – as part of the toils his contemporary philosophy braved to decipher the enigmatic space in which it found itself.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the expanses of historical oblivion stretching between the Kabbalah and the present moment were the same problem to him as the shrivelling of the world’s comprehensibility. That is one reason why Scholem believed that scholarly investigations must strive to give our age a spiritual foothold. If veiled in Scholem’s historical studies, such as his classic *Trends in Jewish Mysticism* and articles compiled in the voluminous *Kabbalah*, this aim looms large in his numerous shorter post-war texts and conference papers. Besides philosophising on the condition of modern Judaism, Scholem repeatedly addressed also the preoccupation his contemporary philosophy showed with ideas akin to Judaism. What ideas were they exactly? In one of his conference papers titled “Reflections on Jewish Theology in Our Time,” Scholem rehearses quite a repertory of them. Let us look into the following passage:

- 
- 1 See Gershom Scholem, *Le Nom et les symboles de Dieu dans la mystique juive*, trans. Maurice R. Hayoun and Georges Vajda (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1983), p. 7 ff.
  - 2 As observed by Stéphane Mosès, Scholem found a peculiar aporia in the position the Kabbalah found itself in in his day. On the one hand, the Kabbalah could be viewed as a dead text-corpus good only for a detached historical analysis. On the other hand, as Scholem believed, the Kabbalah was relevant to the present, yet it could be accessed only through a historical study. The aporia lay thus in that the potency of this mysticism could be revealed only when the historical account suspended the text’s direct meaning, making the Kabbalah essentially impotent. See Stéphane Mosès, *The Angel of History: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2009), pp. 130–1, 163–4. It implies that the Kabbalah’s historical situation in the 20th century is in and by itself part of the problem which the Kabbalistic knowledge salvaged from oblivion is expected to solve.

The notion of continuous Creation is connected with an important concept through which the kabbalists have tried to grasp it intellectually by a bold manoeuvre. Since Creation was at the same time a miracle, they sought to render this miracle intelligible through the concept of *tzimtzum* (contraction) – though at a price, that of giving up the concept of the absolute immutability of God. [...] The universe of space and time, this living process we call Creation, appeared to the kabbalists to be intelligible only if it constituted an act of God's renunciation, in which He sets Himself a limit. Creation out of nothing, from the void, could be nothing other than creation of the void, that is, of the possibility of thinking anything that was not God. Without such self-limitation, after all, there would be only God – and obviously nothing else. A being that is not God could only become possible and originate by virtue such a contraction, such a paradoxical retreat of God into Himself. By positing a negative factor in Himself, God liberates Creation. This act, however, is not a one-time event; it must constantly repeat itself; again and again a stream streams into the void, a "something" from God. This, to be sure, is the point at which the horrifying experience of God's absence in our world collides irreconcilably and catastrophically with the doctrine of a Creation which renews itself. The radiation of which the mystics speak and which is to attest to the Revelation of God in Creation – that radiation is no longer perceivable by despair. The emptying of the world to a meaningless void not illuminated by any ray of meaning or direction is the experience of him who I would call a pious atheist. The void is the abyss, the chasm or the crack that opens up in all that exists. This is the experience of modern man, surpassingly well depicted in all its desolation by Kafka, for whom nothing has remained of God but the void – in Kafka's sense, to be sure, the void of God.<sup>3</sup>

In this passage, Scholem-the-scholar transfigures into an engaged philosopher. Precise historical references vanish from his considerations; *tzimtzum* is no longer an idea of the Lurianic Kabbalah but a concept of rather indefinite "kabbalists"; and God's contraction becomes indistinguishable from God's modern, post-Nietzschean "death." The nebulous argumentation seems to disguise quite a bold thesis that Scholem seems to posit. Explicitly worded, the thesis would be that modernity, in which the world becomes incomprehensible, devoid of meaning and suffused with nothingness, could be surprisingly aptly captured in the notion of *tzimtzum*, i.e. God's withdrawal. Similarly, the immanent pluralism, if not utter perspectivism, of modern thought is consonant with the Lurianic idea of the world splintered into shards.<sup>4</sup> There is thus a kind of kinship

---

3 Gershom Scholem, "Reflections on Jewish Theology," trans. Gabriela Shalit in Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays*, ed. Werner J. Dannhauser (Philadelphia, PA: Paul Dry Books, 2012), pp. 261–297, on pp. 282–3.

4 As Moshe Idel emphasises, drawing on Harold Bloom, Scholem was veritably obsessed with "the imagery of catastrophe." See Moshe Idel, *Old Worlds, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought* (Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), p. 127. The idea of catastrophe recurs both in Scholem's historical research

between the modern “nothingness of Revelation” and the methods of Kabbalistic enquiry, which Kafka’s work comes in handy to corroborate,<sup>5</sup> with all its paradoxical parabolic opulence redolent of Jewish mysticism of old and yet making the void its point of reference. Kafka seems thus to seal that recondite coupling of the Kabbalah and modernity.

Another idea espoused by modernity that Scholem evokes is Messianism. “It was better able to stand a reinterpretation into the secular realm than the other ideas,” he insists.<sup>6</sup> He is intrigued by the fact that Jewish Messianism, particularly in its apocalyptic version, kindled such interest in the 20th century, engrossing, for example, Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin. Scholem seems to assume that the attractiveness of the revolutionary messianic idea echoes the modern world’s abysmal collapse, which could be rectified only through an act of profound transfiguration,<sup>7</sup> if not by a radical historical split. This element of Judaic theology serves Bloch and Benjamin as an all-purpose key to modern philosophy (or, to evoke the metaphorical imagery of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” as a little hunchback of theology driving the machinery of contemporary thought<sup>8</sup>). Both to Bloch and Benjamin themselves and to Scholem as their interpreter, Jewish Messianism is an idea that, in its peculiar way, harmonises with the modern condition.

But how? Another curious text by Scholem, sporting the Benjamin-resonant title “Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah,” illuminates this compatibility a bit. It proposes that “[t]he view of the Kabbalists as mystical materialists with a dialectical approach would indeed be completely non-historical, but would not be entirely lacking in meaning.”<sup>9</sup> Thesis four argues that an essentially dialectical-materialist mechanism is at work in the thinking of the kabbalists, Luria’s successors in particular.<sup>10</sup> If modernity is an age in which dialectics in the strict

---

(as a patent fascination with the Lurianic Kabbalah and antinomic movements) and in his Gnostic view of the present times.

5 Cf. also Karl Erich Grözinger, *Kafka a Kabała* [Kafka und die Kabbala/Kafka and the Kabbalah], trans. J. Güntner (Kraków: Austeria, 2006).

6 Scholem, “Reflections,” p. 284.

7 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 285.

8 See Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 253.

9 Gershom Scholem, *Another Thing: Chapters in History and Revival II*, ed. Avraham Shapira (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1990), p. 34.

10 Also in *Jewish Mysticism*, Scholem clearly preferred the dialectically inflected trends of Kabbalism. For example, he was fascinated with the idea of *Ein-Sof*, a primordial,

sense came into being and spread while the kabbalists indeed reasoned in this way, the affinity of mystical Judaism and modernity would be well grounded. A similar linkage can be glimpsed in Scholem's fascination with Kafka's writings, notably with his parable "Before the Law," which Scholem believed to encapsulate perfectly Jewish theology, "which in its unique dialectic is not destructive, but, on the contrary, radiates powerful inner melancholy."<sup>11</sup> In this optics, Kafka is credited with the founding of the modern Kabbalah since his works deploy Kabbalistic codes and figures to render the modern condition.<sup>12</sup> In Scholem's view, Kafka's point of contact with the Kabbalah proper lies in dialectics, which is both materialist and hopeful for the healing of the broken world.

Scholem's last text that I would like to evoke here is his lecture "Reflections on the Possibility of Jewish Messianism in Our Time,"<sup>13</sup> which serves as a kind of reckoning of many years' worth of research into Messianism. If Scholem's early texts suggested that the present age might be somehow remedied by the historical study of the Kabbalah, this late contribution of 1963 defines such an enterprise

---

boundless form of God that mutates into nothing after creation. This notion makes it possible to reconcile dialectically the radical separateness of God and the world with the dependence of Creation on God. "The creation of the world, that is to say, the creation of something out of nothing, is itself but the external aspect of something that takes place in God Himself. This is also a crisis of the hidden En-Sof who turns from repose to creation, and it is this crisis, creation and Self-Revelation in one which constitutes the great mystery of theosophy and the crucial point for the understanding of the purpose of theosophical speculation. The crisis can be pictured as the break-through of the primordial will, but theosophic Kabbalism frequently employs the bolder metaphor of Nothing. The primary start or wrench in which the introspective God is externalized and the light that shines inwardly made visible, this revolution of perspective transforms En-Sof, the inexpressible fullness, into nothingness." Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1949), p. 213.

11 Greshom Scholem, "On Kafka's *The Trial*," in *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time & Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Chipman, ed. Avraham Shapira (Philadelphia, PA & Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1997–5758), p. 193. Scholem perceived his era as drenched in melancholy as a result of a crisis of transcendence. Similarly, he displayed an interest in "Jewish melancholy." Melancholy as a link between the modern condition and the Jewish experience is pondered also by other authors, such as Sergio Quinzio. See Sergio Quinzio, *Hebrajskie korzenie nowożytności* [Radici ebraiche del moderno/Hebraic roots of modernity], trans. M. Bielawski (Kraków: homini, 2005), p. 73.

12 See Mosès, *Angel*, pp. 145–68.

13 Gershom Scholem, "Reflections on the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time," in *On the Possibility*, pp. 4–18.

as inexorably aporetic. Scholem argues, namely, that Messianism last flared over two hundred years ago, and in our times its sparks have already dimmed down. Moreover, rather than a contingent phenomenon, it is tightly associated with the contemporary condition of religiosity, in which mystical experiences, if at all existent, remain purely private and do not found mass movements. Additionally, the transmission of tradition has been interrupted. Forms of religiosity have turned anarchic, Scholem insists, while a lack of faith in the God-conferred authority of the Torah – whose ambiguities once spawned ever new interpretations – bars any possibility of a new Kabbalah. Clearly, the modern condition as such is cited as a condition of impossibility of renewing the Kabbalah whereas earlier this very condition was expected to be mended by Jewish mysticism.

To sum up, Scholem's lifetime work bears insights about the affinity of modernity and Judaism (even about the utility of Jewish tradition in interpreting the contemporary universe<sup>14</sup>), but concurrently it addresses time and again the aporetic position of the Kabbalah in the 20th century. Nowhere is the connection between modernity and Jewish mysticism explicitly delineated, and even less philosophically elucidated. It is only through the workings of an abstruse spiritual attraction force that contemporary thinkers are tempted onto the paths trodden by the kabbalist of yore. At the same time, the situation of our epoch remains aporetic to Scholem: the spiritual condition of the present times urges to reach beyond philosophy and into the long-lost past tradition, but the scale and the nature of the loss foreclose the re-creation of the Kabbalah and even more the re-immersion into its flow. What remains is only inconclusive searching, indelibly marked with an imprint of historicity.

Let us move now to our second example. In her influential study *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory*, Susan A. Handelman proposes a comprehensive account of contiguities between the development of modern philosophy and literary critique on the one hand and Jewish tradition on the other. Her work stands as a paradigmatic example of the appropriation of Judaism by the (post)deconstructive humanities. It is informed by the idea that, as philosophy's metaphysical load, identified with the legacy of "Athens," dissipated in the 20th century, an opportunity appeared for it to absorb

---

14 Scholem elaborates on the universality of the Jewish experience also in his *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, where he states that "[i]n the Kabbalah the law of the Torah became a symbol of cosmic law, and the history of the Jewish people a symbol of the cosmic process." See Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), p. 2. In his view, Judaism and modernity are "almost inextricably bound" (*Ibid.*).

the abundant heritage of “Jerusalem.” On this model, various threads of Jewish tradition turn out to parallel the ideas developed by philosophy in the 20th century. This mechanism explains why philosophy started to borrow directly from Judaic thought. Handelman analyses “modern Jewish thinkers,” such as Freud, Lacan [sic!], Derrida and Bloom, without however defining this parallelism of modernity and Judaism which compels the philosophers who do not endorse Jewish tradition (e.g. Lacan) to gravitate towards it while inclining those who feel affinity with it (e.g. Bloom) to build directly on its formulas.

Let us first scrutinise the line that Handelman draws between Greek and Jewish traditions and then focus on the latter’s connections with modernity. According to Handelman, the difference between Athens and Jerusalem is particularly conspicuous in their approaches to textual interpretation. Nowhere else is the division between the “Greek” and the “Jewish” modes of thinking more pronounced than in their divergent premises about the relationship between “words and things,” the position of the author, the role of writing and the freedom of interpretation. Clearly indebted to Lévinas and Derrida, Handelman insists that Greek philosophy of the spirit is based on the originary division between words and things.<sup>15</sup> Language is, in her view, a conventional tool for describing things – a transparent medium which helps grasp them. True knowledge, in turn, does not exist in language but resides in ideas, with particular utterances only relating the unchangeable truth.<sup>16</sup> That is why interpretation is an utterly marginal issue and concerns applications of language as a tool but does not infringe on the status of truth. According to Handelman, this presupposition has enduringly impinged on Western philosophy by bringing in the myth of an ideal, abstract language for ideas.<sup>17</sup> It has also effected – through Aristotle’s influential pronouncements in *De interpretatione* – a degradation of rhetoric and poetics as “corrupted” with language and, consequently vastly inferior to abstract logic and “true science.”<sup>18</sup> It moulded also essentially the Christian take on interpretation, in which textual polysemy is always harnessed by the eternal and immutable “transcendent signifier”: “the Incarnate Word” is the ultimate interpretive authority and stabilises the potentially subversive ambiguity of the Scripture. Handelman recognises the primacy of the “Spirit” over the “letter,” instituted by Paul of Tarsus, as, basically,

---

15 Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), p. 3 ff.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

abolishing the question of interpretation because the allegorical method, which is the major mode of interpretation touted by the Church, helps read the always already presupposed meaning out of every ambiguity.<sup>19</sup> In this way, the abstract meaning is treated as literal, and its metaphorical character is concealed.

In turn, in Jewish tradition, language is inseparable from things. It does not describe objects external to itself but is part of the process in which they come into being. This relationship is symbolised in the already worn-out reference to דבר, *davar*, a Hebrew term that can designate both a word and a thing. This means that “[f]or the Rabbis [...] the primary reality was linguistic; true being was a God who speaks and creates texts [...]”.<sup>20</sup> If Greek tradition prioritises the image, which is sensorily available and, as such, constitutes a stable referent, Jewish tradition accords the central position to the spoken or written word, which must still be interpreted.<sup>21</sup> Allegory does not hold sway, nor is there any central agency to fix the text’s polysemy. As a result, its interpretations layer up, each in its own right, while commentaries proliferate endlessly. The rabbinical way of reading presupposes intertextuality, shuns universal formulas and emphasises specific links and continuities between particular cases.<sup>22</sup> Interpretation becomes, at the same time, a general method of understanding reality.<sup>23</sup> The linguistic element is enmeshed not only in reading but also in all creation: God Himself creates by uttering words, which proves that they are closely interconnected with things.<sup>24</sup> This thought seeps down so deep that the Talmudic treatise Shabbat describes the Torah as preceding creation.<sup>25</sup>

Quoting Erich Auerbach, Handelman lists dissimilarities of Homeric and biblical narratives to explain the difference between Athens and Jerusalem.<sup>26</sup> Homer renders phenomena in their external, visible and tangible forms as they are established in spatio-temporal relations; nothing remains hidden and unexpressed while events happen in the absolute “now.” In the Bible, everything is undetermined and contingent, time and space often remain unspecified, and the protagonists’ motives elude expression. There is only the narrative, often residual

---

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 82–90.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 47–50.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

as such; the rest is submerged in darkness. Speech conceals as much as it reveals while the tale is immersed in the layers of history, rather than in the present.

Finally, following Hans Jonas, Handelman discusses what she views as ontological differences between the two traditions.<sup>27</sup> In Greek thought, the world is eternal and governed by immutable, universal laws while the Jewish *creatio ex nihilo* braids contingency and will into the very emergence of the world and makes it dependent on an external power, that is, God. As all things are created, they are, in this sense, ontologically equal. Creation out of nothing emphasises also the particularity of all things created. Unlike in the case of “Athens,” singularity is not just a simple derivative of universality, being instead autonomous and irreducible. As Handelman adds later, the difference between God and the world is central to Judaism and precedes the differentiation into the sign and the thing.<sup>28</sup> Hence its anti-mythical and anti-metaphorical tenor; in Judaism, simply, a sign that embodies God cannot exist.<sup>29</sup>

Demarcated in this way, the dividing line between Athens and Jerusalem, as Handelman believes, overlaps largely with the history of relationships between Western philosophy and Judaic thought,<sup>30</sup> at least up until the Reformation. What is it, we might ask, that happens at that point? The answer is: embryonic modern hermeneutics begins to germinate in which there is, admittedly, no “return” to the Jewish take on interpretation, but the text is pushed to the foreground again, and its a-priori given meaning is stripped of primacy.<sup>31</sup> Although Luther relies on the reading of the Scripture for finding a direct divine presence

---

27 *Ibid.*, p. 28 ff.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

29 Starting from the same assumptions, Henri Atlan claimed that the prominent role Judaism awarded to writing was linked to the anti-idolatrous mindset. For writing, as opposed to speech, is always supposed to highlight the distance between the reader and the writer, as a result of which the Torah, a divine text, leaves a chasm between the sign referring to God and God Himself. According to Atlan, writing retains an irreducible component of otherness, a residue of sorts that defies interpretation, which makes God, who reveals Himself through writing, ungraspable in notions that strive to grasp Him. Cf. Henri Atlan, “Niveaux de signification et athéisme de l’écriture,” in *La Bible au présent* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), p. 86.

30 This connection is, of course, far more complicated than the simple Athens-vs.-Jerusalem opposition would seem to imply. The Kabbalah was after all immensely influenced by Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism while the rationalist Jewish philosophy of the Middle Ages found itself under a considerable impact of Aristotelianism. At this moment, however, let us leave such doubts aside and return to them in the following.

31 Handelman, *Slayers*, pp. 123–4.

and a concrete message in it, it is no longer possible to conceal how problematic an issue interpretation is. According to Handelman, Protestant hermeneutics provides a backdrop for the key developmental trajectory of modern philosophy from Schleiermacher to German idealism and Nietzsche, to, finally, Heidegger and Gadamer.<sup>32</sup> As approaches to interpretation radicalise, also due to a historical critique and the concomitant crisis of the Scriptural authority, the “Greek” take on the sign is exposed as limited. At the same time, the progressing assimilation of Jews channels elements of rabbinical thinking into Western philosophy, the trend promoted by the internal dismantling of the legacy of Athens. In this way, as Handelman concludes, the 20th century saw thinkers drawing on both traditions to concoct peculiar philosophical amalgams, with Freud as one of the most notable examples.<sup>33</sup> In the last stage of this history, Lévinas, Derrida and the Yale school make post-Second World War philosophy openly contest the crumbling tradition of Greek thinking and espouse interpretation as developed by Judaism.<sup>34</sup>

Reflecting on Handelman’s argument, we could ask what Judaism’s peculiar connections to modernity are exactly. She does not give any direct answer, but her book assumes implicitly that it was the decay of the West’s metaphysical tradition that steered philosophy and literary studies towards conclusions quite alike those with which Jewish thought had come up centuries earlier. If in the 20th century various ideas cherished by Judaism were revived in a philosophical form, it was because they found fertile ground in this philosophy. But, paradoxically, Handelman’s argumentation relies on “Greek” thinking far more extensively than she might wish it to be the case. Handelman builds on the discourses that unveil the West’s “metaphysical” history and its termination – the discourses developed, first of all, by Nietzsche, Heidegger and, to a degree, early Derrida. It would not be an excessive simplification to say that Handelman’s reasoning proceeds from the assumption of centuries-long “Greek error,” which slowly reaches its terminus in modernity and makes room for revived Jewish thought. This insight is commonly found in the academic doxa, which uses the contemporary philosophical reworkings of Judaism. However, the transparency of this historical outline, which seems just to rehearse, one by one, the facts of the history of Western thinking – the initial conquest of the philosophical imagination by the

---

32 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

34 Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 164–82.

Greek blueprint of perception, the disintegration of Greek-ridden metaphysics, the ingress of Judaism into the mainstream humanities – is blurred by the premise that depends on “post-Greeks” (such as Heidegger). For it is the very venture of mounting such historical constructs not an offshoot of the thinking that is to be left behind in philosophy’s quest toward Judaism? Does it not entail strewing the trappings of Jewish tradition on the mechanisms that derive, strictly, from modern thinking?

Before I try and answer these questions, let me discuss the third example in Harold Bloom’s *Kabbalah and Criticism*. The book was driven by an attempt to assemble various Kabbalistic inspirations that Bloom had used earlier to construct his theory of influence and belatedness. He presupposes that the Kabbalah – and in particular the Safed Kabbalah (as developed by Moses Cordovero and Isaac Luria) – offers an elaborate and precise model of relationships among various entities, one easily adaptable to the purposes of literary criticism.<sup>35</sup> According to Bloom, the Safed Kabbalah’s unique structure originates in the historical conjuncture where its founders lived in and wrestled with the vast tradition, compelled to develop subtle revisionist techniques of interpreting and opening up the canonical texts.<sup>36</sup> In this way, the Safed Kabbalah can be read as a superb study in the “psychology of belatedness.”

More relevant, however, is the structure of relationships among the aspects of Creation (e.g. Cordovero’s *behinot*), which Bloom transposes onto relationships within the literary field, showing how the gradual exuding of one aspect by another corresponds to the forming of a new poet in relation to his powerful forerunner.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, in a rather flimsy turn of thought, Bloom suggests that the map of relations of *behinot* or *Sefrot* corresponds to relationships not so much between writers as such as between poems themselves:

A poem is a deep misprision of a previous poem when we recognize the previous poem as being absent rather than present on the surface of the earlier poem, and yet still being in the earlier poem, implicit or hidden in it, not yet manifest, and yet there.<sup>38</sup>

---

35 Cf. Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 33.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 34, 72.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 33. Bloom goes on to state that in 19th- and 20th-century discourses, “poem” can be often substituted by “person” or “idea” while the structure describing relations between poems remains applicable to these other entities with equal effectiveness. See *Ibid.*, p. 59.

Refining his theory on the basis of the Lurianic notion of *tzimtzum*,<sup>39</sup> Bloom contends that the interrelations of this structure's particular elements can be comprehended as continued emergence of new entities through the *primal limitation* of their antecedents.<sup>40</sup> The links and traces that come into being as a result of this reduction are identified with literary tropes by Bloom, who suggests that mental defences theorised by psychoanalysis can also be described through this power structure.<sup>41</sup>

Here, we arrive at those of Bloom's insights that are central to our argument in this Chapter. According to Bloom, the structure of relationships among aspects (i.e. poets, poems, tropes, defences, and so forth) borrowed from the Safed kabbalists best suits the post-Miltonic model of Western poetry, and Romantic poetry in particular.<sup>42</sup> Bloom's theoretical sources, i.e. Nietzsche's and Freud's writings, also argue that the *tzimtzum*-based model of thinking and creative work is best applicable to modern developments. Bloom himself observes that the Kabbalah can be regarded as modernism *ante litteram*.<sup>43</sup> In other words, Bloom's theoretical construct seems to be a borrowing based not on one or another superficial similarity but *on a certain latent shared structure* that underpins both the Kabbalah and modernity. The text itself leaves these questions largely underspecified.<sup>44</sup> Symptomatically, Bloom does not draw a clear line between the Kabbalah "as such" and the Safed thought though he takes the latter as his fundamental framework of reference.

That is why *Kabbalah and Criticism* describes a kind of alignment between the (Safed) Kabbalah and modernity which consists in that at least some modern

---

39 *Tzimtzum* (both Isaac Luria's original notion and a version of it developed by Edmond Jabès) will be discussed in Chapter Three. At this point, it is enough just to explain that the notion envisions the primal withdrawal of God, who leaves a void in which the world can only be created. In *tzimtzum*, it is thus assumed that creation of the world takes place in the realm marked by God's contraction.

40 See also Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford UP, 1975), pp. 3–4.

41 See Bloom, *Kabbalah*, p. 74 ff.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 88 ff.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

44 In *A Map of Misreading*, Bloom draws on Ernst Robert Curtius to observe that literature after Goethe is not yet properly assessable. The late Enlightenment, Romanticism, Modernism and Post-Modernism are parts of the same phenomenon, whose continuity or discontinuity in regard to the prior tradition, as Bloom contends, cannot be established yet (*Map*, p. 33). Consequently, the indefiniteness of connections between modernity and the Kabbalah results, partly at least, from the fact that we still fall under the historical influence of the phenomenon we set out to analyse.

acts of creation (poems, thoughts, and so forth) are propped by the same structure as creation in Luria's notion, that is, by the mechanisms of originary reduction (*tzimtzum*). Like in Safed's revisionist thought, interpretation in modernity turns out to be an inevitable, veritably ontological misreading of the past. Bloom's argumentation is entangled in an essential double bind; namely, in his view, Cordovero and Luria implicitly found the "theory of belatedness" because *they are themselves belated* vis-à-vis Kabbalism's legacy. In other words, their own revisionism impresses itself on the structure of the concepts they develop. This means that Luria can think *tzimtzum* as a cosmic event because he performs *tzimtzum* on the existing Kabbalah himself. On another level, he learns about what he does. At any rate, in Bloom's rhetoric, the fact that he recognised this affinity is, in turn, an outcome of his own misreading. So the kinship of the Kabbalah and modernity is explained through the identity of the structure that results from the historical positioning relative to the existing tradition, which structure, as such, does not seem to have anything either *par excellence* Jewish or modern about it.

My fourth and last example comes from Maurice Blanchot's "Being Jewish," reprinted in *The Infinite Conversation*.<sup>45</sup> "Being Jewish" is not the only essay in which Blanchot muses on Judaism as an inspiration of modern thought, yet a handful of suggestions expressed in it are representative of Blanchot's other writings. First of all, he views Judaism as a tradition that is distinctively nomadic and, therefore, perceives the world as changeable, uncertain and defying one truth:

If Judaism is destined to take on meaning for us, it is indeed by showing that, at whatever time, one must be ready to set out, because to go out (to step outside) is the exigency from which one cannot escape if one wants to maintain a possibility of a just relation. The exigency of uprooting; the affirmation of nomadic truth. In this Judaism stands in contrast to paganism (all paganism). To be pagan is to be fixed, to plant oneself in the earth, as it were, to establish oneself through a pact with the permanence that authorizes sojourn and is certified by certainty in the land. Nomadism answers to a relation that possession cannot satisfy. Each time Jewish man makes a sign to us across history it is by the summons of a movement. Happily established in Sumerian civilization, Abraham at a certain point breaks with that civilization and renounces dwelling there. Later, the Jewish people become a people through the exodus. And where does this night of exodus, renewed from year to year, each time lead them? To a place that is not a place and where it is not possible to reside. The desert makes of the slaves of Egypt a people, but a people without a land and bound by a word. Later, the exodus becomes

---

45 Maurice Blanchot, "Being Jewish," in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 123–30.

the exile that is accompanied by all the trials of a hunted existence, establishing in each heart anxiety, insecurity, affliction, and hope. But this exile, heavy as it is, is not only recognized as being an incomprehensible malediction. There is a truth of exile and there is a vocation of exile; and if being Jewish is being destined to dispersion – just as it is a call to a sojourn without place, just as it ruins every fixed relation of force with *one* individual, *one* group, or *one* state – it is because dispersion, faced with the exigency of the whole, also clears the way for a different exigency and finally forbids the temptation of Unity-Identity.<sup>46</sup>

Given the fact that Blanchot goes to great lengths to dispel the illusion of unity, identity, certainty and unambiguousness, he seems to consider Judaism as his natural ally. More than that – an ally also of all modern thought that demystifies the idols of permanent truths, eternal places and unchangeable ideas. In other words, he assumes a kind of affinity between the strong Jewish anti-mythical tradition and modernity.<sup>47</sup> This interconnection reverberates in his apology of nomadism as a voluntary acceptance of life without enduring guidelines.<sup>48</sup>

Blanchot continues this line of reasoning to assert that – as distinct from Greco-Christian thought – Judaism does not disown “this world”<sup>49</sup> and affirms

---

46 *Ibid.*, pp. 125–6.

47 To be sure, this kind of relationship is not Blanchot’s exclusive invention. Rosenzweig, Benjamin and, finally, Lévinas were all inspired by Judaism’s anti-idolatrous investment. The Talmud’s Megillah states that “whoever repudiates idolatry is accounted a Jew” (see Abraham Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud: The Major Teachings of Rabbinic Sages* [New York: Schocken Books, 1995], p. 6). However, it was only in the 20th century that the Jewish movement against idolatry found philosophical applications. For example, Lévinas insists that “Judaism has decharmed the world, contesting the notion that religions apparently evolved out of enthusiasm and the Sacred. [...] Jewish monotheism does not exalt a sacred power. [...] Here, Judaism feels very close to the West, by which I mean philosophy. [...] Human existence [...] is the true place in which the divine word encounters the intellect and loses the rest of its supposedly mystical virtues.” Emmanuel Lévinas, “A Religion for Adults,” in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), pp. 11–23, on pp. 14–15.

48 This is another point where Blanchot is close to Lévinas. See also, Quinzio, *Hebrajskie*, pp. 66–9.

49 Blanchot, “Being Jewish,” p. 128. Also this idea has had a long interpretive history. The Gemara explains: “What purpose did your God have in speaking with Moses from the midst of a bush? [...] ‘To teach that there is no place void of the Divine Presence, not even so lowly a thing as a bush’” (see Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, p. 9). It is in this sense that Lévinas concludes that “Judaism has always been free with regard to place” (Emmanuel Lévinas, “Heidegger, Gagarin and Us,” in *Difficult Freedom*, pp. 231–4, on p. 233), i.e. it has treated the world as a unity with no permanent, demarcated sacred sites.

life instead of denigrating it. This clearly ties in with the Nietzschean re-appraisal of philosophy. However, another trait of Judaism that Blanchot discovers as akin and valuable to modernity calls for more scrutiny. This trait is Jewish monotheism, whose most seminal legacy, rather than in the revelation of personal God, lies in “the revelation of speech as the place where men hold themselves in relation with what excludes all relation: the infinitely Distant, the absolutely Foreign.”<sup>50</sup> Blanchot makes two assumptions here: first, he believes that Judaism recognises a dimension that is radically external to our world, and, second, that this outside imprints itself on speech in one way or another. What Blanchot offers is, thus, a thorough re-interpretation of monotheism. Judaism’s monotheistic legacy of old, as Blanchot claims, makes it possible to think contact with the absolutely exterior and, thereby, lays ground for relating to the Other in ways that eschew subjugation. This is another point where creation out of nothing by personal God seems to tie in with Judaism’s special approach to the particular.

So, for Blanchot, Judaism is a tradition of thinking whose mode of world-perception seems precious for modernity first of all because it discards an idolatrous version of transcendence. The radicalism of the outside and the endorsement of “this-worldliness” as the human life-world rather than as an illusion from which to flee bring Jewish thinking closer to the epoch in which the “Greek” tenets fall apart. Nonetheless, Blanchot does not delve into the reasons for this confluence. On the contrary, a certain vagueness of his musings suggests that he would also be inclined to accept the Nietzschean-Heideggerian model of the “Greek error;”

---

Scholem, in turn, insists that God’s omnipotence, omnipresence and oneness all suggest that reality is a pulsating unity that, subsumed in one spirit, mutates beyond and above the laws of nature; cf. Scholem, *Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, pp. 94–5. In these interpretations, reality as perceived by Judaism is not split into the defective world of earthly life and the ideal afterlife; nor are there any delimited places of the sacred. Rather, reality is a unity of equal elements that stand before God. That is why Jewish Messianism, unlike Christian one, does not presuppose spiritual “inner transformations,” tending rather to regard Messiah’s work as a real event in the external world. Cf. Gerhom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), pp. 1–2, 17. Jacob Taubes took issue with this division in his “The Price of Messianism,” in *From Cult to Culture. Fragments Toward a Critique of Historical Reason*, eds. Charlotte E. Fonrobert and Amir Engel (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2010), p. 3 ff. Izaak Cylkow seems to have shared the same ideas in his commentary on the first verse of *Bereshit*. Cylkow insisted that it implied “the unity of the world and an absolute solidarity of all its components.” *Tora* [Torah], trans. I. Cylkow (Kraków: Austeria, 2010), p. 3.

50 Blanchot, “Being Jewish,” p. 127.

which eventually recedes in the 20th century, while Jewish thought, so far immune to it, is coming in handy to reevaluate philosophy.

The four examples surveyed above can be usefully concluded with the voice of Sergio Quinzio, who, in spite of the naive character of his simplifying discourse, captures the reasons for the rise of modern philosophical interest in Jewish tradition:

Relics of the Greek and pagan worlds promote understanding of meaning as an all-encompassing fullness, as a wondrously all-explaining Logos. As a result, we could not but comprehend historical time as uniform continuity, as stairs solidly erected on stable ground and, hence, reliably leading up and up; and we could never think of time, experiencing each moment in it, as – in Benjamin's description – a small doorway through which the Messiah could enter. In reality, however, the humans of today, who on the one hand are not certain whether the age-old necessity indeed exists and, on the other, have been acutely disappointed with modern, secularised Messianism, experience empty time which, devoid of hope, tumbles into nothing. "Meaning" that could arise from such an experience cannot be a resumption of some perfect wholeness, of the triumphant Logos. The modern age, entirely unconsciously seizing Biblical categories, has drawn a circle, as a result of which the entire world experiences an ultimate risk of time, of reality which is not rational, a hope that comes through the abyss of Egypt and Babylon, through the night of Gethsemane, through the cross and through Auschwitz, through all darkness and decomposition that go with apocalyptic times. Meaning is only a modest possibility, paradoxical and feeble, and yet full of delicacy and mercy as it emerges from the awareness of death and nothingness [...].<sup>51</sup>

My argument above was, by necessity, a bare outline only. I believe, however, that it encapsulated the fundamental ways of conceptualising affinities between Judaism and modernity. Below, I will seek to interrogate these conceptualisations.

## **The Problematic Connectedness between Judaism and Modern Thought**

Despite all their differences, the four examples discussed above display some common patterns in their conceptualisations of the relationship between Judaism and modernity. Let us first scrutinise these patterns and, then, define problems that haunt them. First of all, all our examples presuppose that Judaism and modernity share, among others, fundamental "ontological" outlooks on the world, notions of the human condition and attitudes to text, truth and interpretation. All of them also propound similarities between the two which, though

---

51 Quinzio, *Hebrajskie*, pp. 186–7.

rather undefined, concern entirely fundamental philosophical propositions. Second, in each case the assumption of similarity lingers in a kind of penumbra. Seldom proclaimed explicitly, it does not tend to be analytically inspected. And third, the concealment of this assumption is enveloped in two different ratiocinative strategies. In one of them, the alignment of Jewish and modern thinking is framed as a contingent similarity (which is what Bloom basically does in viewing the connection between the Safed Kabbalah and modern poetry as originating in their analogous relations to their respective superfluous traditions). In this case, the problematic tenet of connectedness can be passed over since the comparison involves two phenomena which display certain similar properties only as a result of contingent historical factors.

In the other strategy, the premise of alignment is built into a certain historical pattern which in itself tends to be essentially affected by the very legacy of modern philosophy. This seems to have been the path that Scholem chose to go. Despite the elliptical character of his pronouncements, he can easily be inferred to have treated (at least in his early years) the secrets of the Kabbalah as singularly linked to the modern condition. Interestingly, such a solution can also be detected in Susan Handelman's reasoning, which is worlds apart from Scholem's modernist ideas. Ostensibly, her argument does not posit any non-contingent patterns in the history of thinking. It could after all be assumed that 20th-century philosophy was affected by Judaism through great thinkers (e.g. Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Lévinas, Derrida) who just happened to build on such inspirations. But, curiously, Handelman's reasoning – just like that of the “contingent” researchers of philosophical Judaism – heads towards quasi-historiosophical premises. Unlike in Bloom, modern thought is not envisaged as contingently similar to Jewish thinking. On the contrary, the likeness is an outcome of awakening from the “Greek dream,” of discarding the Hellenistic paradigm of thinking, which results in philosophy's confluence with Judaism. It is not coincidental that the Tertullian formula of “Athens or Jerusalem” is reborn in the 20th century and outside Christianity, for it suggests that philosophy has only two options to choose from. If “Greek thought” has naturally reached its limit, there is solely “Jewish thought” to turn to. Of course, not all the authors referred to above endorse as extreme a version of this idea as, for example, Lev Shestov does.<sup>52</sup> However, all of them – not excepting Derrida, who problematises the

---

52 Shestov was perhaps the first thinker to insist adamantly that the Greek truth had colonised the Jewish one thoroughly and that the process was bound to have disastrous consequences. Cf. Lev Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, trans. Bernard Martin (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1966), particularly pp. 343 ff.

issue most – consider *the modernity-triggered historical crisis of Western philosophy to have catalysed its confrontation with so-far marginalised Jewish thought.*

Let us now look closer at this connection by scrutinising “Violence and Metaphysics,” an essay that young Derrida wrote about Lévinas. The text opens with a quotation from Matthew Arnold which ushers in the optics of the Athens-vs.-Jerusalem opposition.<sup>53</sup> The first issue that Derrida addresses is the modern crisis of philosophy, which essentially has already suffered an inner death:

That philosophy died yesterday, since Hegel or Marx, Nietzsche, or Heidegger – and philosophy should wander toward the meaning of its death – or that it has always lived knowing itself to be dying (as is silently confessed in the shadow of the very discourse which *declared philosophia perennis*); that philosophy died *one day, within* history, or that it has always fed on its own agony, on the violent way it opens history by opposing itself to nonphilosophy, which is its past and its concern, its death and wellspring; that beyond the death, or dying nature, of philosophy, perhaps even because of it, thought still has a future, or even, as is said today, is still entirely to come because of what philosophy has held in store; or, more strangely still, that the future itself has a future – all these are unanswerable questions. By right of birth, and for one time at least, these are problems put to philosophy as problems philosophy cannot resolve.<sup>54</sup>

The resurgence of the Athens-vs.-Jerusalem opposition would thus be involved, without doubt, in philosophy’s movement towards self-transcendence observable in “Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger,” philosophers and anti-philosophers at once. Why? Derrida toys with the following answer: perhaps it is only philosophy’s inner depletion, its spectral, posthumous lingering that *unveils the nonphilosophical ground from which it arose and which it has kept hidden.* This fundamental crisis would thus expose questions that philosophy itself is unable to tackle as they pertain to its own construction.

In the face of the crisis, “two great voices” of 20th-century philosophy – Husserl and Heidegger – Derrida continues,<sup>55</sup> plunge into tradition, looking to Greece, to find the roots of their thinking there. For Husserl and Heidegger, the decay of Western philosophy is bound up with its Greek origins, which delimit “the

---

53 “Hebraism and Hellenism – between these two points of influence moves our world. At one time it feels more powerfully the attraction of one of them, at another time of the other; and it ought to be, though it never is, evenly and happily balanced between them.” In Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Lévinas,” trans. Alan Bass, in *Writing and Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 97–192, on p. 97.

54 *Ibid.*, pp. 97–8.

55 *Ibid.*, pp. 100–101.

possibility of our language” and “the nexus of our world.”<sup>56</sup> What surfaces here is not so much a new philosophical problem as the problem of the grounding of philosophy as such. This is where Jewish thought enters the stage:

It is at this level that the thought of Emmanuel Lévinas can make us tremble.

At the heart of the desert, in the growing wasteland, this thought, which fundamentally no longer seeks to be a thought of Being and phenomenality, makes us dream of an inconceivable process of dismantling and dispossession [...]. In Greek, in our language, in a language rich with all the alluvia of its history – [...] in a language that admits to its powers of seduction while playing on them unceasingly, this thought summons us to a dislocation of the Greek logos, to a dislocation of our identity, and perhaps of identity in general; it summons us to depart from the Greek site and perhaps from every site in general, and to move toward what is no longer a source or a site, [...] but toward an *exhalation*, toward a prophetic speech already emitted not only nearer to the source than Plato or pre-Socratics, but inside the Greek origin, close to the other of the Greek [...].

In question, therefore, is a powerful will to explication of the history of Greek speech.<sup>57</sup>

What do Derrida’s suggestions imply? Their implication is that *Judaism’s advance into modern thought is another stage of philosophy’s own movement to reach even deeper after the failure of its reflection on “the Greek origin.”* This insight is informed by several assumptions. First, philosophy in the 20th century is driven by a sense of deep dependence on particular conditions which it cannot penetrate by itself. This dependence is associated with a sense of crisis, and its persistence produces an impression that philosophy, while *essentially dead*, is sustained by the sheer force of inertia. This results in “posthumous” mobilisations of philosophy to explore the determinants that weigh on it, even at the potential price of abolishing philosophy as we know it. Second, the mobilisations are governed by the following logic: “dismantling and dispossession” surpass *actual* deadness and appearances. In this way, the movement of “philosophy’s self-accusation” is propelled, which compels it to confront a dimension it has not known so far. This dimension – the mysterious “exhalation,” as Derrida puts it – seems to be philosophy’s precondition even beyond the “Greek origin.” It does not instil any new philosophical *content* (new identities, sites, and so forth) but forms the *fundamental structure of the movement of philosophy* (hence “exhalation”). And third, Jewish thought is better equipped than Greek concepts to apprehend this precondition. Therefore, philosophy must reach out to Jewish thought to think through both the crisis in which it has found itself and its own structure as such.

---

56 *Ibid.*, p. 101.

57 *Ibid.*, pp. 101–102.

Thus, Jewish thought appears at the horizon of modern philosophy as a source of inspiration potentially enabling this philosophy to fathom its baseline, contentless, structural precondition, which Derrida calls “exhalation.” If we recall that Luria’s *tzimtzum* connotes “holding-in-of-the-breath,” Derrida’s metaphorical language will not seem coincidental. Why the authors cited above are captivated with the idea of *tzimtzum* will also become clear: namely, *tzimtzum can be interpreted as constituting a boundary between philosophy and the outside that determines it and that it endeavours to explore*. Derrida sees in Lévinas a searcher of “exhalation” *from before* philosophy, and, likewise, Scholem views the Lurianic Kabbalah as a model of modernity that has grown dependent on the dimension it cannot decipher.

Looking into Derrida, we could thus ask why inquiry into the affinity of Judaism and modernity so readily marshals quasi-historiosophical arguments. As we have seen, Jewish tradition is easily aligned with “nonphilosophy,” supposedly overshadowed by philosophy over the ages of “Athenian” ascendancy. Thus, the nestling of Judaic elements in 20th-century philosophy could be interpreted as a harbinger of philosophy’s stepping beyond itself and toward its “nonphilosophical” grounds. Such assumption entails that the idea of convergence of Judaism and modern philosophy – an idea restricted only to *similarities in the content* of two different conceptual traditions – is expanded to include an additional dimension, i.e. *a relationship between this content and the historical site and tradition in which it was formed*. In other words, the dovetailing of Judaic thought and modern thought acquires one more, irreducible component – namely the confluence of Judaism and modernity as such. What is at stake is no longer merely a contingent similitude of ideas, but rather a far more complicated bond between the epochs. We should notice that even when one seeks – like Bloom does – to treat this alignment as contingent and to ignore historical explanations, *history still hovers as an irremovable trace*. Willy-nilly, Bloom had to define a cut-off one way or another – to identify the point where the Safed Kabbalah began to correspond to poetry or philosophy. Once he chose poetry after Milton as this point, on another occasion poetry after Wordsworth; he also located orientation points for philosophy in Nietzsche or in Freud. In Bloom’s theory the assumption of the historical shift, the onset of a new epoch in which *tzimtzum* becomes a valid model of creation, lingers unarticulated.

If at the beginning of this subchapter we distinguished two ways of interpreting the confluence of Judaism and modern thought (i.e. either in terms of contingency or in terms of a historical schema), now we can conclude that, in a deeper sense, *both these ways refer to history* and differ only in the explicitness of this reference.

How can these interconnections be accounted for? Where does the irremovable trace of historicity in reflection on the relationships between Judaism and modern philosophy come from?

Before I attempt to answer this, I will ask three more detailed questions invited by the above problematisation of ideas about connectedness between Judaism and modernity.

First, as already mentioned, 20th-century philosophy's movement toward Judaism is associated with philosophy's inner crisis. Derrida observes that – because of “Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger” – philosophy has suffered an inner death, which produces “a desert,” a place where it encounters Jewish thought. One thing to ask about is thus *when the hiatus took place that caused the crisis of philosophy and what this hiatus involved*.

Second, there is a problem of the latent determining structure that philosophy has long striven to explore through recourse to Judaism. The question concerns the Derridean “exhalation” and is: *What structure is it and how does it work?*

Third, if Judaism appears within the horizon of modern thought as a result of this thought's own movement, does Western philosophy really open to its as-yet marginalised “Other,” or does it rather employ ideas of Judaism in its own field? In other words, is Judaism not just a construct like Nietzsche's or Heidegger's “Greeks” or Hegel's “Christianity”? Is it not, by any chance, a model fabricated by modern thought? If so, is this model actually “modern” rather than “Jewish”?

## The Universe of Modernity I: The Historical Hiatus

Let us start from the first of these problems, i.e. the historical hiatus that triggered a crisis of philosophy.

Already quoted, Derrida linked the ripeness of this crisis to post-war thought (and the aftermath of the let-down of Husserl's and Heidegger's inquiries) but saw it mellowing incrementally in the philosophy of “Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Heidegger.” Therefore, if we were to locate the historical rift, it would have to fall before Hegel. Can a genuine breakthrough be identified in the recent few ages of philosophy to explain why philosophy should suddenly “die” and go on existing only in an incessant return to that event?

In this book, my answer to this question would be: a tectonic change in the workings of knowledge that involved also a breakthrough in philosophy took place in the 18th century. Naturally, this answer is grounded in insights of Michel Foucault, who throughout his oeuvre consistently revisited the turning point positioned towards the end of the 18th century. Because where this point exactly fell and what it entailed precisely tended to fluctuate in Foucault's prolific

writings, a certain caveat is in order: I will build on his conclusions in *The Order of Things*.<sup>58</sup> Very briefly, the conclusions are as follows: (1) the transformation we are discussing occurred in the paradigm of knowledge as such, with philosophy and, for that matter, also economy and medicine, only displaying its effects; (2) as such, the transformation cannot be accounted for by positing one or another novel philosophical insight since the very possibility of such an insight results from the shift itself; (3) this transformation concerns the way in which knowledge constitutes reality. In Foucault's view, how does the shift manifest itself? It produces sequent effects. First, the classical order of representation collapses,<sup>59</sup> with signs no longer comprehensively and transparently referring to what is represented. Concomitantly, it becomes imperative to think of a certain deeper level of reality that transcends the directly visible phenomena, which heralds preoccupation with the concept of "the source."<sup>60</sup> There are two modes of reasoning which become particularly relevant: exegesis (of what is hidden) and hermeneutics (necessitated as language has ceased to be a transparent tool and gained depth).<sup>61</sup> Besides, historicity acquires a double relevance as the gap between the compass of cognition and what slips outside it<sup>62</sup> breeds not only the perception of knowledge as historical but also the idea of this unknowable dimension as a "source" that determines knowing.

If Foucault does not err in his conclusions, the crisis of philosophy we are exploring can be directly associated with the peculiar upheaval of the 18th century. For the sake of terminological consistency, I will refer to the age that follows it as "modernity." To scrutinise its imprint on philosophy, we need to specify its properties.

Modernity as conceived here is not simply an "age," that is, one of several periods within continuous history. *The very possibility and necessity to set it apart seems to result from the dimension of historicity that it has opened up.* Modernity would thus designate both: (1) a historically located epoch; and (2) a basic condition that necessitates looking for its historical locatedness in the first place. Consequently, modernity is an overdetermined phenomenon as it is in and by

---

58 Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences*, trans. (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

59 *Ibid.*, pp. 72–3, 123–4

60 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 249

61 Cf. Michel Foucault, "Les Mots et les Choses", in *Dits et écrits I. 1954–1975* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p. 528.

62 Cf. Foucault, *Order*, pp. 400–401.

itself an answer to the question that it poses. What this pattern specifically means will be seen in particular examples below.

Let us now depict briefly how modernity as defined here informs philosophy or, strictly speaking, the thought of Kant and Hegel, who best serve as a representative case in point. Analysing the structure of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, one notices easily that its model of epistemology *responds to the diagnosis of the crisis*. In his Preface to the *Critique's* first edition, Kant dwells on the need to deal conclusively with reason's specious claims known as "metaphysics."<sup>63</sup> Rather than ahistorical and general, this becomes urgent only when metaphysics has revealed its own inadequacy, as Kant insists. This is a strictly history-specific event that comes to pass when dogmatism is no longer capable of defending metaphysics against scepticism:

Now after all paths (as we persuade ourselves) have been tried in vain, what rules is tedium and complete indifferentism, the mother of chaos and night in the sciences, but at the same time also the origin, or at least the prelude, of their incipient transformation and enlightenment, when through ill-applied effort they have become obscure, confused, and useless.<sup>64</sup>

Kant goes on to aver that his times "will no longer be put off with illusory knowledge"<sup>65</sup> but will demand that "eternal and unchangeable laws" be pronounced by "the court of justice" – the tribunal of the critique of pure reason.<sup>66</sup> And in the Preface to the second edition, Kant suggests that philosophy's calling is to divest speculative reason of "its hitherto imagined possessions."<sup>67</sup>

The upheaval of modernity features in Kant's thinking in a double role. First, it is, to Kant, a crisis of knowledge that *has already come to pass*: metaphysics has ultimately disclosed its lack of legitimacy and cannot be sustained any longer. Philosophy is now challenged to respond fittingly to the crisis. Such a response can be found in critique. The structure at work here seems to be the same one that I outlined in the previous subchapter, following Derrida: philosophy discerns its own, previously unknown precondition that makes its existing form dead and compels it to move beyond its former paradigm. In other words, to salvage itself, philosophy must venture into the territories it has not trodden yet.

---

63 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), pp. 99–100.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 100.

65 *Ibid.*, pp. 100–101.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 101.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

Second, modernity in Kant designates also a new age that commences as critique is undertaken. In this age, all previous endeavours of philosophy are revealed as a series of dogmatic attempts from which thinking was decisively disjoined. Philosophy can *inspect* these attempts, but it can no longer *consider them true*. Hence, modernity's relationship to the past is quite specific. *The same crisis that severed off modernity's direct contact with the past makes it possible to produce a detached account of this past*. That is why modernity boasts both a sense of historical ungroundedness and a capacity to scrutinise history that precedes it.

In Hegel's philosophy, the shift of modernity seems to be even more pronounced. *The Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel's first mature work, offers a structure of reasoning analogous to the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Namely, it opens with a diagnosis of a crisis to which philosophy must respond in an appropriate manner. The crisis, again, lies in that a certain model of thinking has run its course and is dead now. In the Preface, Hegel briefly outlines the genealogy of the crisis:

Time was when man had a heaven, decked and fitted out with endless wealth of thoughts and pictures. The significance of all that is lay in the thread of light by which it was attached to heaven; instead of dwelling in the present as it is here and now, the eye glanced away over the present to the Divine, away, so to say, to a present that lies beyond. The mind's gaze had to be directed under compulsion to what is earthly and kept fixed there; and it has needed a long time to introduce that clearness, which only celestial realities had, into the crassness and confusion shrouding the essence of things earthly, and to make the attention to the immediate presence as such, which was called Experience, of interest and value. Now we have apparently the need for the opposite of all this: man's mind and interest are so deeply rooted in the earthly that we require a like power to have them raised above that level. His spirit shows such poverty of nature that it seems to long for the mere pitiful feeling of the divine in the abstract, and to get refreshment from that, like a wanderer in the desert craving for the merest mouthful of water. By the little which can thus satisfy the needs of the human spirit *we can measure the extent of its loss* [emphasis added].<sup>68</sup>

Hegel views his times as an age of utter deprivation, in which – in the aftermath of an undefined *event of loss* – thought has forfeited its one-time abundance. Like in Kant, dogmatic (in Hegel “rationalising”) philosophy still grinds on and denies this fact, pretending that nothing of that kind has happened. And, like Kant, Hegel believes that true philosophy must first of all acknowledge the relevance of the shift and re-think its hitherto development incisively. “Our epoch is a

---

68 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), p. 5.

birth-time, and a period of transition,” Hegel contends.<sup>69</sup> The historical threshold is so remote that it de-legitimises even such apparently well-entrenched disciplines as logic and enjoins constructing them anew.<sup>70</sup>

How does Hegel envisage philosophy’s response to the crisis? It is pithily sketched in the Inaugural address delivered at the University of Berlin in 1818. Hegel insists that after the upheaval of modernity philosophy must: (1) renounce its former opulence, that is, not only acknowledge loss but also consciously bring it to completion; (2) find itself in the solitude of pure thinking; and (3) only with its help *reconstruct* the lost content. As Hegel put it:

*The decision to philosophise means plunging into pure thinking (– thinking is alone with itself), as into a boundless ocean; all vivid colours, all mainstays have vanished, all friendly lights have faded. Only one star shines still, the inner star of spirit. It is a lodestar. It is natural that Spirit, alone with itself, is beset by terror. One does not know yet where to head and whence one comes; there is many a thing amongst what has vanished that one would be loath to forfeit, not even for the world, but they have not been reinstated yet in this aloneness and one is doubtful that they will ever be retrieved or recovered. [...] thinking that finds its origin in itself knows the same answers only in their unfolding necessity, and it would be an unbecoming impatience that answers its own questions forthwith to expect to arrive home presently at the very beginning. The Spirit must not be afeared to lose that in which it holds a true interest; that on which what emerges for it in philosophy rests is its... This is why philosophy will restore to it everything that is true in the representations which the instinct of reason first brought forth; but...<sup>71</sup>*

This implies that, in the wake of the modern crisis, philosophy must find “its origin in itself” and, only by *reasserting itself in it*, reclaim what was true in the

---

69 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

70 In the Preface to his *Science of Logic*, Hegel insists: “The complete transformation which philosophical thought in Germany has undergone in the last twenty-five years and the higher standpoint reached by spirit in its awareness of itself, have had but little influence as yet on the structure of logic [...] That which, prior to this period, was called metaphysics has been, so to speak, extirpated root and branch and has vanished from the ranks of the sciences. [...] The fact is that there no longer exists any interest either in the form or the content of metaphysics or in both together. [...]

Healthy common sense has so much lost its respect for the school which claims possession of such laws of truth and still busies itself with them that it ridicules its laws and regards anyone as insufferable who can utter truths in accordance with such laws: the plant is – a plant, science is – science.” Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel’s Science of Logic*, trans. Arnold V. Miller (New York: Humanity Books, 1998), pp. 25, 38.

71 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Enzyklopadie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*, [http://www.hegel.de/werke\\_frei/hw108174.htm](http://www.hegel.de/werke_frei/hw108174.htm).

lost legacy. Hegel's philosophical programme involves thus choosing a contentless, formal foothold, made possible only by the crisis, from which to start reconstructing the content. This movement involves the following stages: (1) identification of the traces of an incomprehensible loss; (2) acceptance of the loss; (3) deliberate pruning of all content of philosophy away to leave only a vestige of pure thinking, a formal point (called "an inner star of spirit" by Hegel); (4) revisiting the past to reproduce its content based on this point. Apparently, ever since the modern shift, philosophy has split into two – into *content* and *pure movement of thinking*. Hegel advocates analysing the movement alone (which in his case produces a dialectical structure) and using it to re-establish the residual "dead" content ("positive content," as he put it elsewhere).

Analysis of the historical shift suggests the following conclusions. The movement of philosophy toward recreating its "outside" through the encounter with Jewish thought seems to ensue not so much from the 20th-century crisis as from a far earlier one that marked the threshold of modernity. As implied by Foucault's findings and Kant's and Hegel's insights, its consequences were analogous to those visible in 20th-century recourse to Judaism. They include: (1) the sense that the hitherto mode of thinking has been emptied out and is "essentially" dead; (2) the imperative that philosophy work through the event that inexplicably determined it; (3) philosophy's need to step beyond its earlier categories in order to find a buried structure that conditions it; (4) re-thinking the content of the past based on a new foothold possibly attained through the fathoming of this structure. Should these analogies be correct, a significant portion of 20th-century thinking on the alignment of Judaism and contemporary philosophy *would be conditioned by the same modern mechanism of crisis whose puzzle German idealism sought to sort out*.

Now we can proceed to the second of the problems formulated above and ask what particular structure of thinking it is that philosophy in modernity hinges on and strives to capture in transcending itself.

## **The Universe of Modernity II: The Structure that Conditions Thinking**

If 20th-century thought and German idealism were indeed driven by the shared mechanism of modern crisis, the structure we are trying to identify would be graspable already in Kant's philosophy. With this assumption in mind, I shall first try to establish what it was that changed in the very "mechanics" of philosophy after the modern breakthrough. This will help us construct a model of this structure.

The basic change in philosophy whose paradigm was instituted by the Kantian critique concerns the relationship between knowing and the object of knowledge, and, consequently, the adopted model of being. The transformation can easily be grasped by comparing Aristotle's classic ontology with Kant's ontological framework.

Aristotle's central notion is *ousia*, that is, following the Latin translation, "substance." The term is commonly known to have more than one meaning in the Stagirite, with *The Metaphysics* alone describing it, among others, as "the essence," "the universal," "the genus" or "the substratum."<sup>72</sup> Nonetheless, all approaches to *ousia* are informed by two crucial considerations: (1) *ousia* is ontologically and notionally primary as well as autonomous; as Aristotle puts it, "that which is primarily, i.e. not in a qualified sense but without qualification, must be substance";<sup>73</sup> (2) *ousia* is inherent in bodies (for example, animals, plants and other physical entities) in which it is present "most obviously."<sup>74</sup> Inferably, *ousia* as a notion renders a physical body "at hand" which is, at the same time, a fundamental source of knowledge. Consequently, although to capture *ousia* may be challenging (hence ways of concluding about it are multiple), *there is no epistemological barrier as such between ousia and knowledge*. They belong to one and the same realm. In Aristotle's ontology, the model of being presupposes that *the differentiation of substances and their qualities are primally given and independent of knowledge*. Moreover, knowledge does not change anything in "being as such." This model of relationship between being and knowing seems to permeate all pre-modern thought.

The Kantian critique produces an upheaval in which a new model is forged. The Aristotelian *ousia* no longer constitutes a unity and the olden substance is dispersed into two aspects: the object, that is, "a thing for us" formed a priori by the mechanisms of cognition, and "a thing in itself," that is, an irreducible vestige which *we must assume to remain beyond the whole system of knowledge*. In Kant, then, knowledge is no longer neutral vis-à-vis its object. On the contrary, the object that is available to us is always already predetermined by knowledge. Intertwined with this is the necessity to presuppose "a thing in itself" that constitutes the outside of knowledge. If in Aristotle there was one universe of substances that existed in an originary way, in Kant the universe must be split

---

72 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book VII, trans. William D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press Reprints, 1924).

73 *Ibid.*, 1028 a.

74 *Ibid.*, 1028 b.

into two realms: knowledge, all of whose elements hinge on the same system of conditions, and an exterior remnant.

Why does this remainder come into being? Because whatever is subsumed into the system of knowledge, *becomes primally limited*. Without looking into details of Kant's reasoning, as this lies beyond the scope of these considerations, let us ascertain that in order to connect (that is, to know) phenomena in the first place, their originary differentiation must be reduced so that they could be imagined side by side with each other, forming one series. Kant identifies this series with time.<sup>75</sup> Two conclusions follow thence: the knowable world is determined by an elementary plane of continuity (time), and we must presuppose "a thing in itself" as that which has not yet become limited – *something that does not fall under a continuous, temporal series* and, thus, is not imaginable as an ordinarily "abiding" object. Hence, Kantian philosophy structurally harbours the problem of a boundary between the continuous series and what lies beyond it. For Kant himself, the problem is the source of the famous antinomies of pure reason.<sup>76</sup> But in later philosophers (Hegel and Nietzsche, to name but two), it will morph into the question of the relationship between the radically singular and the system within which it would be knowable.

We can therefore say that the Kantian critique thoroughly transforms the structure of fundamental propositions which form the very framework of philosophical thinking. Naturally, not all post-Kantian philosophy is fully enclosed in this framework, and many schools of thought repudiate the critical legacy. This, however, does not mean that it remains merely a source of inspiration. On the contrary, I would argue that *the Kantian critique is implicated in the very manner in which the modern shift re-cast the operations of knowledge*. In other words, structural resolutions of the same problems that Kant raised do not necessarily result from drawing on him directly. They may as well ensue from the fact that these questions are inscribed in the very construction of modern thinking. This insight explains why thinkers who do not refer to Kant at all – Jabès being one of the throng – walk the same paths that he trod. I propose, in this work, to group all the concepts that, whether deliberately or not, replicate the blueprint of Kantian problems under the umbrella term of *modern philosophy*.<sup>77</sup>

---

75 See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp. 162–164/178–182.

76 Cf. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 459–60.

77 Consequently, "modern philosophy," as used in this book, rather than designating all philosophy practised over the last few centuries (depending on where exactly the threshold of modernity is located) will denote only those of its forms which: (1) embody the structure of the modern breakthrough, and through that (2) dwell on problems that surfaced first in Kant's critique

As this thesis calls for a more specific substantiation, we should find out which issues outlined in the Kantian critique have since resurfaced regularly in philosophy labelled modern in this book. For one, there is a tension between the finite, limited field of knowledge and the unrenderable residue that persists beyond its bounds. The term “tension” implies that it is not all about a simple and definitive separation of two areas of the universe. The very act of such separation is in itself entangled in this division as it lies within the compass of knowledge. Already in Kant, it proved a challenge to distinguish phenomena from noumena, which were, on the one hand, a fiction of pure reason and, on the other, its indispensable premise. The structure of the tension between knowledge and its remnant was spelled out only by Hegel, who viewed “a thing in itself” as an irremovable vestige of the originary limitation performed by understanding, the first form of knowing.<sup>78</sup>

One would be hard pressed to find another Kantian problem of equal impact on later philosophical developments. In Nietzsche, it was re-cast into perspectivism, that is, the idea that there are multiple limited forms of knowledge, each of them conditioned in ways it cannot fathom itself.<sup>79</sup> This re-casting has

---

78 In the celebrated passage in *The Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel addresses “the thing in itself” in the following way: “It is manifest that behind the so-called curtain, which is to hide the inner world, there is nothing to be seen unless we ourselves go behind there, as much in order that we may thereby see, as that there may be something behind there that can be seen. But it is clear at the same time that we cannot without more ado go straightway behind there. For this knowledge of what is the truth of the idea of the realm of appearance and of its inner being, is itself only a result arrived at after a long and devious process, in the course of which the modes of consciousness, ‘meaning,’ ‘perception’ and ‘understanding’ disappear.” Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 96. For the primary limitation introduced by understanding, see *Ibid.* pp. 40–1; and Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (New York and London: Verso, 2008), pp. 28–35.

79 The structure of relationships between the known and its inaccessible condition is repeatedly addressed by Nietzsche in a variety of forms and throughout his philosophical career. The related insights concern, for example: (1) the relation between language and the “mysterious” X to which it refers – “the thing in itself” (see Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, trans. Daniel Brazeale [Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2005], pp. 12–16); (2) the relation between the meaning of a text and its inner rhythm (see Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, eds. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003], p. 5); (3) the relation between interpretation and the interpreted (see Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Antichrist,” trans. H. L. Mencken, § 52, in Anthony Uyl (ed.), *Writings of Nietzsche. Volume I* [Woodstock, ON: Devoted Publishing, 2016], p. 144; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans.

moulded a considerable part of postmodern philosophy,<sup>80</sup> having earlier affected Heidegger's reflection on the finitude of *Dasein*.<sup>81</sup> The Kantian articulation of these problems may have been thoroughly reworked since the time of his critique, but the basic structure set by him has endured. Its axis is the relationship between finite *systems* of knowledge (in more recent formulations: symbolic systems or perspectives) and a certain remnant that eludes them, yet determines them all the same. When we look at recent philosophical currents, we can find this relationship both in Lacan (involving the symbolic and the real) and in Derrida (involving metaphysical oppositions and what he describes as their underlying infrastructures<sup>82</sup>).

A second characteristic trait of Kant-derived philosophy is that it rejects the notion of transcendent God. The point thereof is by no means any simple atheism. Rather, as a result of the re-drawing of relations between knowledge and being, which I sketched juxtaposing Aristotle and Kant, pre-modern concepts of God have become barely tenable. God as the supremely perfect being, a source and a foundation of all other beings, is no longer viable since the very notion of being has been split into "an object" and "a thing in itself" (to use Kant's terminology). If God were an object, as defined by Kant, he would have to be part of the causal sequence, but as such he could not be *the beginning* of this series, for objects are its elements and not its origin. The principle of continuity consistently espoused by Kant stipulates that, as all the empirically available reality is subjected to one system of causes, *its origin cannot belong to this system*. Can God then be comprehended beyond this system? Kant answers:

---

Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale [New York: Vintage Books, 1968], § 481, p. 267); (4) the relation between a value-judgment and the life that makes it possible (see Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. W. Kaufmann. New York: Viking Penguin Press, 1977, pp. 485–86); (5) the relation between attitudes to and interpretations of the world and the physiological powers of the interpreter (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Judith Norman, eds. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman [Cambridge et al.: Cambridge UP, 2003], § 20, p. 20).

80 See Michał Paweł Markowski, *Nietzsche. Filozofia interpretacji* [Nietzsche: Philosophy of Interpretation] (Kraków: Universitas, 2001).

81 See Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics. Fifth Edition, Enlarged*, trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington and Indianapolis Indiana UP, 1997), pp.18–25.

82 See Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986).

For as far as concerns the void that one might think of outside of the field of possible experience (the world), this does not belong to the jurisdiction of the mere understanding, which only decides about questions concerning the use of given appearances for empirical cognition, and it is a problem for ideal reason, which goes beyond the sphere of a possible experience and would judge about what surrounds and bounds this [...].<sup>83</sup>

Whereas Thomas Aquinas, for one, could conceive of God as a cause in a single chain of causes leading up to the world as we know it, Kant could only see the notion of God as concerning solely the *field fully exterior to the causal sequence* and, therefore, perhaps as an experientially unauthorised idea of pure reason. The God-concept is thus postulative, and his existence cannot possibly be proved as logical thinking has no access to him.

Consequently, after the Kantian critique, the knowable reality becomes ontologically atheistic in being a single, continuous plane devoid of transcendence. If the concept of God is allowable after the critique, it can only be cast in a new role that structurally corresponds to “the thing in itself.” In terms of former philosophy, it is a metaphorical usage with “God” referring to a particular structural principle of atheistic reality. This transmutation is patent in several post-Kantian philosophers. Hegel’s radically atheistic thought frames God as a representational rendition of a particular moment in the movement of the Absolute. Lacan, in turn, identifies the concept of God with the great Other, which is “really” no transcendent being but an entity produced by the operations of language.<sup>84</sup> Finally, Slavoj Žižek associates divinity with the pure force of negativity which ruptures the unity of the atheistic world and drives its inner movement.<sup>85</sup> The Kantian critique could be said to *unsettle the previous notion of God and clear the way to identifying him not with the stable, transcendent being but with an empty vestige that persists in the reality stripped of transcendence.*

The third and last issue I wish to discuss is the subverting of the status of philosophy precipitated by the Kantian breakthrough. It results from the changes in the relationship between cognition and being, addressed above. Philosophy, namely, ceases to be neutral vis-à-vis its object and no longer provides general, theoretical knowledge of being, independent of the knowing subject. On the

---

83 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 330.

84 Cf. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality. The Limits of Love and Knowledge. 1972–1972 (Encore)*, trans. Bruce Fink, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), pp. 45–6.

85 See Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), p. 264.

contrary, *philosophy as such is predicated upon the structure that it ponders*. In Kant, this informs the idea that reason analyses its own boundaries rather than any being beyond it. This critical tenet makes Kant-inspired philosophy self-reflexive in erecting its edifice on the very movement of thinking.

Inviting two different appraisals, this feature of modern philosophy indeed propelled two different tendencies. One of them, epitomised by Hegel, edifies philosophy into a universal and fundamental science, with its self-reflexivity acclaimed as a virtue. It is admitted that philosophy as such is dependent on the structure it explores, but self-reflexivity makes it possible to *first detect this structure within philosophy itself* and, then, to apply the mechanism identified in this way in interpreting the “positive content.” This reasoning appeared also in the previous subchapter, where I quoted Hegel’s claim that philosophy re-establishes what perished in the modern shift and, moreover, in doing so it finds a foothold in itself. This tendency assumes, thus, that because all reality is grounded in the same structure, philosophy’s role is to find this structure in its “pure” version (in Hegel, dialectics is knowledge about it) and, subsequently, to use it to re-interpret phenomena.

The other tendency takes the opposite direction. It assumes that since philosophy is unable to offer knowledge neutral of its object and it shares the same underlying structure with its object, *it must be transcended and this transcendence is attainable only in and through a practical act*. An embryo of this approach was already inscribed in Kant’s concept of practical reason, radicalised by Fichte,<sup>86</sup> while it was hatched into a full-fledged form by none other than Marx.

Still, crucial to our analysis is that in the philosophy of the 19th and the 20th centuries the two lines of thought usually co-exist in a dialectical tension. As a rule, this coupling is underpinned by the following argumentation:

- (1) philosophy has so far been fraught with the error of failing to recognise its own precondition;
- (2) that philosophy has persisted in its hitherto form is, as such, an outcome of this error;
- (3) still, philosophy has a potential to recognise and explain it;
- (4) this recognition is bound up with a practical act that makes real change (in life, society, and so forth);

---

86 Cf. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge: With the First and the Second Introductions*, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge UP, 2013), pp. 6–10.

- (5) as a result, philosophy itself will be deeply transformed or, in many cases, replaced by an entirely new practice.

Thus, philosophy's position and the need to transcend it turn out to represent two facets of the same problem. Attempts at purification, supposed to yield a pure structure of thought, are analogous to strivings to oust theory for the sake of a pure act of practice. In both cases, that which is must be obliterated to unveil philosophy's philosophical determinants.

However abstract it may be, this pattern is palpable in several key modern philosophers associated with various traditions. For example, Nietzsche considers philosophy as practised so far to have been error-haunted since Socrates in that its false attitude to life produces, in Nietzsche's own age, nihilism. At the same time, it is philosophy that must see through this error. The "great noontide" of new, incipient philosophy heralds first and foremost an active and affirmative attitude to life and unfolding of things. What is accomplished in this practical act is, actually, breaking with the former philosophy, although the very category of philosophy is still retained by Nietzsche. Heidegger, similarly, views Western philosophy as moulded by the forgetfulness of Being. This fallacy can be recognised only in a new, liminal form of philosophy which, abandoning its former paradigm, will be replaced by deeper-penetrating, non-theoretical and non-aggregating "thinking" (*Denken*). This kind of thinking, listening to Being and the effort of "emplacing" (Heidegger's *Erörterung*) are closer to a practical act than to philosophy as exercised so far. This model is also discernible within Jewish philosophy itself. Franz Rosenzweig, for one, proposes to replace philosophy – based on the illusory knowledge of "the All" and deliberate obliviousness to death<sup>87</sup>– with the "new thinking" that abandons the edifice of theory, as a result of which "it opens into life."<sup>88</sup> Inspired by Rosenzweig, Lévinas strives to overcome Western philosophy's prioritisation of ontology by foregrounding ethics, a predominantly practical domain, as the new "first philosophy."

Clearly, disclosed by Kant, philosophy's ensnarement in its own object breeds, primarily, endeavours to surmount philosophy and, then, make it catalyse the transformation to be accomplished by fathoming the very structure that

---

87 Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison: Wisconsin UP, 2005), pp. 9–11.

88 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 447.

conditions philosophy as such. The surmounting of philosophy is, thereby, associated with a practical act.

Now we can try and answer the central question of this subchapter: What does the structure involve that determines philosophy which seeks it in self-transcendence? The answer is that *the structure involves an irreducible, particular remnant opposed to a perspectival, finite whole*. I believe that this structure underlies all three problems of modern philosophy analysed in this subchapter. First, it is to be found in reiterated transformations of “the thing in itself” and in modern perspectivism. Besides, the residue-structure serves as a cornerstone of a new notion of God’s position. The identification of God with emptiness, interval, central lack, force of negativity, and so forth, in so many modern “theologies” implies that this remnant plays a crucial role in modern philosophy. Finally, the remnant-structure answers also to the last of our issues, that is the surmounting of philosophy. How so? Namely, the remnant-structure is not only *an object* of philosophy but also its construction principle. Modern philosophy searches for a determinant that lies beyond it and opposes its limited knowledge. Hence philosophy’s self-overcoming movement, its cancellation in a practical act, is an attempt to remove the boundary between itself and the remnant that conditions it. That is why modern philosophy (as defined above) perceives reality as determined by the residual structure and, at the same time, is subject to this very structure, due to which it futilely strives to transcend itself in search of its own abolishment.

If this reasoning is apt, we should perhaps re-calibrate our perspective on all the discourses which frame Judaism as a tradition which, though forgotten, is “more truthful” than the Greek one and discovered only after the latter has disintegrated. Therefore, I would posit that *vis-à-vis modern philosophy Judaism functions as the vestige constituted by philosophy itself in an attempt to continue its movement through self-transcendence*.

### **The Universe of Modernity III: The Problem of Philosophical Account of Judaism**

With this thesis, we can proceed to our last question, that is whether the position of Judaism in 20th-century philosophy is something unique. Is this newly discovered Judaism not just a construct produced by modern philosophy as part of its own movement? If it were the case, we should find also other conceptual traditions that this philosophy utilises in a similar way. And, indeed, it turns out that mechanisms of re-interpreting traditions, particularly religious ones – exterior to philosophy – are detectable at the threshold of modernity, that is, in Kant. Still identifying himself with Lutheranism, Kant professed that “historical

faith 'is dead being alone.'<sup>89</sup> In the modern optics, it is founded on a doubtful and contingent historical narrative.<sup>90</sup> The impact of the modern shift addressed above is evident here: the continuity of tradition perishes. Despite that, Kant does not advocate discarding religion. Rather, he insists that it should be *reconstructed* based on "the principle of the pure religion of reason, as a revelation (though not empirical one) permanently taking place within all human beings."<sup>91</sup> In other words, the critique of pure reason enables philosophy to establish a new basis for religion and to invest the old beliefs with new meanings. Kant's reasoning proceeds in the following stages: (1) the crisis of faith is undeniable; (2) philosophy overcomes the crisis through critique; (3) that is why the principles of reason it finds *now* can found faith in a new shape; (4) when religion is grounded in the philosophical *structure*, its *content* will be imbued with new meaning. As a consequence, *religion is turned into an external source permanently disjoined from current thinking by the crisis of modernity. This source is subject to reconstruction effected by self-grounded thinking.*<sup>92</sup>

The same mechanism reappears in Hegel. He revives Christian religion smothered by Enlightenment's rationalism,<sup>93</sup> but does so only through reinterpretation based on philosophical solutions. Unlike the detractors of religion, he believes that religion's "positive content" can – and should – be re-created whereby philosophy's advantage lies in its capacity for such a reconstruction.<sup>94</sup> What would that involve? It would involve a *proper understanding* of the content of faith obscured by representations before. Although the formation of a given content predates this understanding by many centuries, Hegel avers that this understanding completes Christianity and is its key moment. Clearly, the

---

89 Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, trans. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), p. 119.

90 Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 117–22.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

92 Here, Kant reproduces Luther's reasoning in which religion is rebuilt based on the irreducible and fundamental act of faith, with the function of this act re-assigned henceforth to the philosophical critique of reason. Kant can thus profess that "we have reason to say [...] that 'the Kingdom of God has come into us'" (*Ibid.*, p. 128). Philosophy's triumph over religion is manifest in that the "Kingdom of God" is an era of reason that by itself reconstructs religion.

93 Cf. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion. Together with a Work on the Proofs of the Existence of God*. Vol. I, trans. E. B. Speirs, B.D., and J. Burdon Sanderson (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. 1895), pp. 36–7.

94 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

new legitimisation of religion by philosophy<sup>95</sup> involves, essentially, philosophy's employment of an external, prior matter *through which philosophy seems to arrive at its own primal condition*. What it in fact does, however, is insert its own mechanism in the past content and proclaim to have just found it there.

These examples of Kant and Hegel show that the movement of reconstructing religion is intimately implicated in the workings of modern philosophy which seeks its own exterior remnant. "Dead" for philosophy, faith's content functions here as an objectively existing, past matter that philosophy ostensibly relies on while actually reconstructing it.

Western philosophy of the 19th and the 20th centuries repeatedly revisits traditions that lie outside it and deploys them in this exact way. Therein, it crucially insists on describing them as "nonphilosophies," to use Derrida's coinage, which *earlier* fathomed the condition that philosophy has failed to recognise. This is how Schopenhauer viewed the Hinduism of the Upanishads, how Nietzsche saw his abstract "Greeks," how Heidegger framed pre-Socratics and German poets (e.g. Hölderlin and Trakl), how Bataille positioned Gnosticism,<sup>96</sup> and how Kojève, Lacan and Žižek, following Hegel, viewed Christianity. Evidently, not just religion but rather multiple discourses from beyond philosophy are used as such points of reference. *Their content is selected and configured consistently with the logic of modern philosophy which utilises them*. In being re-invented, some of their own tenets that contravene the spirit of modern philosophy are discarded (e.g. this is what happens to transcendent God's real existence in Hegel's version of Christianity) while other ones, though by no means given any eminence within these traditions themselves, are accorded the pivotal status through and in their philosophical reconstruction. In Hegel, this pattern is exposed in that he locates Christianity's uniqueness in Christ's dialectical nature,<sup>97</sup> which is, of

---

95 See *Ibid.*, p. 364.

96 In his "Base Materialism and Gnosticism," Bataille argues that the Gnostics developed an understanding of the matter that approximates present-day dialectical materialism. In this way he presents his own version of the "Hellenistic error" whose dominion over Western philosophy seems to subside. See Georges Bataille, "Base Materialism and Gnosticism," trans. Allan Stoekl, with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr., in Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (eds.), *The Bataille Reader* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 160–4. I owe this insight to Professor Rodolphe Gasché.

97 See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: Volume III. Consummate Religion*, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson and J. M. Stewart, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 314–6.

course, hardly the religion's fundamental idea but dovetails conveniently with Hegel's own philosophy.

We could say that the forms of modern philosophy referred to above "descrie" in past traditions the very structures they want to describe and prove. By the same token, they disguise the fact that these structures are intrinsically modern because, framed in such ways, the structures come across as ahistorical since existing already in the doctrines of old. It could thus be posited that *modern philosophy has a distinct tendency to transform its own structures into oppositions that are supposed to govern the entire history of thought.*

This suggests an answer to the question posed at the beginning of this subchapter. Namely, the position of Judaism in 20th-century thought may result from the structural patterning of modern philosophy. The Athens-vs.-Jerusalem opposition seems a veritably paradigmatic outcome of the projection of this philosophy's inner movement onto the whole of history. Judaism is consigned to the position of an external "nonphilosophy," accessible *only now*. The line between philosophy as known so far and the searched-for "nonphilosophy" is extrapolated as the Athens-vs.-Jerusalem opposition and, in this shape, seems to hold sway over the historical vistas of Western thinking. As can easily be noticed, this opposition structurally mirrors similar pairings produced by modern philosophy also much earlier. "Jerusalem" mimics the function attributed to "Christianity" in Kant, Hegel, Lacan and Žižek, to "Greeks" in Nietzsche, and to "pre-Socratics" in Heidegger.<sup>98</sup>

Concluding, for modern philosophy, Judaism is one of the many external discourses that it institutes in the position of its own remnant and deploys in its own movement. This is evinced in a characteristic selectiveness with which it sifts Judaism's vast legacy for aspects of which to avail itself. As I will show in this book (resorting chiefly to the example of Jabès), in making a recourse to Jewish tradition 20th-century thought is happy to reduce it to a few properties (e.g. anti-mythical inclinations, radical monotheism and Messianism) that are akin to its own premises. In this way, a modern construct is generated and transposed onto

---

98 The paradox inherent in the use philosophy makes of these external discourses is exposed in that the mythical construct of the "Greeks" can function both as a "nonphilosophy" sought by philosophy (e.g. in Nietzsche and Heidegger) and as the philosophical error to be repudiated (as is the case in the Athens-vs.-Jerusalem opposition). Of course, "Athens" is concocted in different ways each time. What is more, in Nietzsche and Heidegger, the very construct of Greek philosophy is split into two parts: the "error" (e.g. post-Socratic philosophy) and the looked-for nonphilosophy (e.g. pre-Socratics).

the expanses of history, with its modern origins carefully erased. This, however, does not change the simple fact that it is in discovering its “nonphilosophies” that modern philosophy feels most at home.

## The Concept of Jewish Philosophy of Modernity

With these insights, we can formulate the concept of Jewish philosophy of modernity. As the reasoning above implies, modernity is more than just another historical period. Rather, it is a new site where historicity is produced and perceived. It is an epoch which itself crafts the frameworks that make it into an epoch. A considerable portion of concepts it contrives are overdetermined as they rely at the same time on many various points of reference which, in fact, were formed in advanced by the modern structure. Also Judaism finds itself drawn amidst a grid of interconnections configured in this way and devoid of an Archimedean point. Side by side with religious Jewish studies (spared the strong impact of the modern shift), a broad and varied tendency developed, particularly in the 20th century, to employ Jewish elements in philosophy and literature. As the argument above shows, this tendency is laden with patterns of modern thinking. Therefore, I propose, at least within this book, to abandon the simple idea of Judaism’s “influence” on philosophy and, instead, adopt a construct which intrinsically reflects the complexity of relationships among philosophy, modernity and Judaism.

This is the theoretical nucleus of “Jewish philosophy of modernity.” Now its model must be fleshed out to compound its typologically distinct patterns discussed in the foregoing. Bringing them together does not mean, of course, that they must all be stamped on the thought of every author that drew on Judaism in the 20th century. Rather, amassed, they add up to a certain ideal type on which to base any more detailed analysis. On this model, Jewish philosophy of modernity would have the following attributes:

- (1) an identifiable trace of the modern hiatus manifest in
  - (a) recognition of a crisis in contemporary thinking;
  - (b) dissociation from the tradition of Judaic thought, perceived as more or less lost in its earlier shape;<sup>99</sup>

---

99 This, admittedly, requires a clarification. Many thinkers whom I associate with Jewish philosophy of modernity did profess Judaism (e.g. Rosenzweig, Taubes and Lévinas) but believed that some of its tenets needed a contemporary re-interpretation. Others, such as Kafka, Scholem, Celan and Jabès himself, were exposed to more or less rudimentary Jewish religious education as children, but were isolated from the continuity

- (c) reference to a singular, originary event of loss, formative of the current age – hence popularity of the Lurianic *tzimtzum*;
  - (d) a chasm between the (apparently lost or “dead”) content of thinking and its structure;
  - (e) conspicuous historicity, i.e. attempts to inscribe the contemporary era within a broader historical narrative;
- (2) a more or less pronounced presence of characteristically modern premises outlined already in the Kantian critique, such as:
    - (a) the division of reality into two realms: one knowable, continuous and dependent on an a priori structure and the other unknowable, radically singular, external and, at the same time, forming a possibility condition of the former;
    - (b) a tension between the continuity of the series and its ungraspable limit;
    - (c) primal limitation of knowledge, including also perspectivism;
    - (d) marking of the finite world by the infinite outside;
    - (e) dismissal of the notion of transcendent God;
    - (f) a new concept of Divinity as connoting a remnant, a central lack, a pure negativity;
  - (3) positing the residual structure not only as philosophy’s object but also as its construction principle. As a result, philosophy is perceived as dependent on an ensemble of nonphilosophical conditions that determine the *movement* of thinking rather than its *content*. This dependence causes a crisis of philosophy that can be overcome only if philosophy self-transcends towards the as-yet unknown outside;
  - (4) framing Judaism as a particular “nonphilosophy,” that is, “knowledge” whose structure conditions philosophy. Hence, elements of Jewish thinking are supposed to foster a new, post-crisis form of philosophy (if it is to go by this name in the first place);
  - (5) linking the “discovery” of Judaism for Western thought to fundamental transformations the latter underwent at the onset of modernity. In this perspective, Judaism seems to have known the “truth” *for long* while philosophy arrives at it only now;

---

of Judaism and did not practise it (at least not in an orthodox form). Their visions of Judaism are thus reconstructions of the lost tradition. Still others (e.g. Blanchot) were never involved in Judaic worship and did not attempt conversion, with Jewish religion being just their philosophical inspiration. The differences between these three groups of thinkers notwithstanding, the continuity of Judaic tradition was rather problematic to all of them both philosophically and personally.

- (6) pairing the movement towards Judaism not only with cognition but also with a practical act (e.g. affirmation of life or superiority of ethical action to ontology). The coupling of the two components, i.e.
  - (a) philosophy's attempt at self-transcendence through Judaism and
  - (b) a practical act, breeds Messianic tendencies within philosophy;
- (7) inscription of the tension between philosophy-in-crisis and the "nonphilosophy" sought by it within cross-historical binaries, in particular within the Athens-vs.-Jerusalem opposition, but also within the "paganism"-vs.-"monotheism" dichotomy.
- (8) crafting a selective vision of Judaism in which its alleged fundamental premises are those that align with modern philosophy, i.e. radical monotheism,<sup>100</sup> anti-idolatry, primacy of the word over the image, intertextuality, dismissal of one dogmatic truth for the sake of interpretive multiplicity, desacralisation of the world, positive appraisal of "life as such," Messianism, prioritisation of a practical act (ethics) over ontology, embracement of insecurity brought by the happening of things and the nomadic condition;
- (9) deployment of this construct of Judaism as a basis for re-interpreting the *content* of philosophy and re-appraising it.

Thus, the tradition of Judaism would stand for something more than just a source of inspiration for Jewish philosophy of modernity. Judaism embodies the goal of its own movement. It seems to harbour the "nonphilosophical" truth about philosophy and, as such, to explain also its structural crisis. *These conclusions imply that the relationship of philosophy and Judaism is thoroughly organised by modern structures.* In other words, that philosophy seeks to absorb elements of Jewish thinking and how it chooses and constructs them reveals more about modern philosophy than about Judaism.

With this theoretical footing, we can now produce an account of Edmond Jabès' philosophy. I shall attempt to show how his work can be interpreted in terms of Jewish philosophy of modernity and, subsequently, formulate further conclusions that will augment the concept outlined above.

To conclude, Jabès as a "Jewish philosopher of modernity" is a rather specific author. Like Celan, he does not set out from philosophy, but from literature.

---

100 Why should radical monotheism be so convergent with modern philosophy if I have stated that modern philosophy perceives reality as one, continuous atheistic space without transcendence? The answer is that radical monotheism, unlike the "Greek" idolatrous one, offers a structure that describes an uncrossable and ubiquitous transcendental line between reality and its "thing in itself."

*Nevertheless, his movement towards Judaism produces the same outcomes as in thinkers of a strictly philosophical mindset.* This is certainly thought-provoking. For it may as well be that the phenomenon which I labelled “Jewish philosophy of modernity” is, in fact, broader and extends over all modern thinking as such, not only philosophy. Perhaps, the movement of simplifying and processing the external content into a redeeming remnant has a far wider compass than philosophy. If it is indeed the case, Jabès’ thought, albeit essentially devoid of any direct philosophical references and focused on the very structure of movement that motivates it, could tell us more about Jewish philosophy of modernity than concepts entangled in internal philosophical disputes are possibly capable of doing.

