

Nihilism Through the Looking Glass: Nietzsche, Rosenzweig, and Scholem on the Condition of Modern Disenchantment

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*I am sought of them that asked not for me; I am found of them that sought me
not.
(Isaiah 65, 1)*

*Nichts an theologischem Gehalt wird unverwandelt fortbestehen; ein jeglicher
wird der Probe sich stellen müssen, ins Säkulare, Profane einzuwandern.
(Adorno, "Vernunft und Offenbarung", *Stichworte*, p. 608)*

Resumo

O presente artigo aborda a questão do niilismo sob a ótica de Nietzsche, Rosenzweig e Scholem, procurando estabelecer a maneira como cada um se posiciona frente à condição do desencantamento moderno. A análise parte de uma comparação entre o diagnóstico nietzscheano de um mundo sem Deus, e sua posterior apreensão por Rosenzweig, que dará novo encaminhamento à questão. O tema do niilismo é examinado em suas diversas facetas e inter-relações e, culmina, com a análise feita por Gershom Scholem, acerca da conexão entre niilismo e messianismo.

Palavras-chave: Nietzsche, Rosenzweig, Scholem, niilismo, desencantamento.

Abstract

The following article analyses Nietzsche, Rosenzweig and Scholem's view of the nihilism by attempting to establish each one's opinion on the modern disenchantment condition. The analysis begins on the comparison between Nietzsche's "Godless World" and its new approach done by Rosenzweig. The nihilism is examined based on its plural aspects and inter-relations and on the analysis made by Gershom Scholem concerning the connection between nihilism and messianism.

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Introduction

The aim of this essay is to compare two strategies of coping with the phenomenon of modern disenchantment: Nietzsche's and Rosenzweig's. Although they are both in some most general understanding of the word *religious*, I wish to endorse by contrast with Nietzsche the Rosenzweigian solution and show how his *leap* within nihilism reveals a new theological perspective which may seem especially vital for us, modern people. Gershom Scholem will appear as an insightful critic of both, Nietzsche and Rosenzweig, as, accordingly, a neopagan and a modern Jewish sensibility. It is via his writings, which show internal connection between nihilism and messianism, that we will be able to strengthen the Rosenzweigian conclusion. The key to this difficult antinomian stance is the principle: Where the fall is the deepest, there grows a chance of salvation too.

I define the concept of disenchantment after Friedrich Schiller, who used it for the first time as a notion describing the state of the world after the decline of myth and metaphysics, caused by the triumph of modern science (SCHILLER, 1788). *Die Entzauberung*, which the German romantics diagnosed as a serious malaise of the world under the reductive spell of Enlightenment, refers to reality after *die Götterdämmerung* (*the twilight of the idols*), which leaves the world deprived of its justification: it is now but a naked being which cannot answer for its origin and purpose, a being, metaphysically speaking, very close to nothing. The British early romantic equivalent of Schiller, William Blake, coined an analogous term, referring to the world of purely rational mechanism and its ever-grinding *Satanic Mills: the universe of death*.²

² Friedrich Schiller famously described the disenchanted world in his poem from 1788 "Die Götter Griechenlandes", where he already accused Christianity of depriving reality of its natural charm that was still so resplendent in the ancient times. This originally Schillerian idea, making a connection between Christian disinterestment for sensual life and modern technocratic abuse of the world, was later on undertaken by Max Weber who popularised it in his *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, as well as in *Altentümlicher Judentum*, where he extended Schillerian diagnosis towards the Hebrew prophets. Disenchantment, therefore, from the very beginning emerges as a phenomenon closely related to the development of monotheistic religions, where Enlightenment is but a phase in their evolution. For a more detailed story of the career of *Entzauberung* see the article of H. C. Greisman: "Disenchantment of the World: Romanticism, Aesthetics and Sociological Theory", *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Dec., 1976), pp. 495-507.

It is precisely in this post-romantic context that Nietzsche forges the concept of an *accomplished nihilism*.³ The only goal of the accomplished nihilist is to affirm the nakedness of the disenchanted reality as, precisely, the sign of its immanent sacredness. The very fact that it does not have any metaphysical justification should not be deplored; quite to the contrary, it should be viewed positively as an indication of being's immanent plenitude and autonomy which needs no transcendent legitimacy. The Nietzschean perfect nihilist comes thus *to the other shore of nihilism*, or - to use our guiding metaphor - finds a different facet of nihilism *through the looking glass*. Instead of lamenting the disappearance of *metaphysical background* of being, he makes a *leap*, thanks to which he can see the disenchanted reality as self-enclosed, integral, not lacking anything, and as such ultimately full. In this manner, the accomplished nihilist discovers a new cult: freed not only from God, but also from any nostalgia after the divine, he can see the world as pleromatically sacred and sovereign.

Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* is deeply influenced by Nietzsche's treatment of modern nihilism but tries to develop his argument in an altogether different direction. Just like Nietzsche, he also affirms the condition of disenchantment, yet for a purpose which is very adversary to his precursor-antagonist. He is convinced that modern *Entzauberung* can prove to be a useful, even necessary, stage in the process of the proper maturation of our religious intuitions. It is only in the face of God's total disappearance, says Rosenzweig, that we can start to understand the very possibility of God's presence. What we then experience is not so much a *nostalgia* after the God, who had vanished from the magical reality, as a *desire* for God who has not yet manifested himself properly as God: a desire for the encounter with the divine which is possible only *after* we had experienced nihilism, i.e. a state of ultimate mistrust in God's direct presence in the world. For Rosenzweig, therefore, the stage of nihilism is a necessary condition of discovering God as truly transcendent and separate from his creation; it is an essential experience of purification of the name divine, an indispensable *via purgativa*. Similarly to Nietzsche, he wants us to plunge without protest into the nihilistic condition, yet unlike him he does not want us to stay within it and thus become *accomplished*

3 On the meaning of "accomplished nihilism", which is a frequent phrase in Nietzsche's writings, see especially Gianni Vattimo's "An Apology for Nihilism" in his book *The End of Modernity. Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, trans. Jon R. Snyder, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1988, pp. 19-21.

nihilists. He wishes to pass beyond it, as if through the looking glass, into the sphere of a purified, proper, ultimately mature encounter with God (ROSENZWEIG, 1985).

Hebrews and Nietzscheans

Both thinkers, therefore, see a possible use of disenchantment for maturing of our intuition of the sacred, but they do it for a radically different purpose. Nietzsche's vision is a synthesis of an archaic, mythic sensibility with a modern, nihilistic attitude, while Rosenzweig wishes to renew religion by turning it from myth-oriented, i.e. nostalgic and restorative, to hopeful, modern and, in its own peculiar way, progressive. For Nietzsche, religion is bound to be nostalgic and escapist: dismissed by him as merely a sign of cowardice, religion always looks for ways of evacuation from the unbearable, inhuman world marked by natural cruelty of becoming and disappearing. For Rosenzweig (and for the whole Judaic tradition, for which Rosenzweig serves here as a spokesman and *pars pro toto*), religion, quite to the contrary, is a mature and courageous stance towards reality, actively forcing its demythologization and disenchantment.

On the surface, it would seem that Nietzsche, the late heir of German romantics and the pupil of Schopenhauer, deplores modern process of *Entzauberung*, and speaks in favour of mythological richness of being. Yet, in fact, Nietzsche wears, as Stanley Rosen convincingly shows in his latest book, *the mask of enlightenment* that fully endorses the disenchanted reality and only then, seemingly paradoxically, seeks to re-mythicize it precisely in its naked, cruel, mechanically repetitive state (ROSEN, 1995). What Nietzsche is looking for in old myths is, in reality, nothing else but an intensified characteristic of the modern *universe of death*: hopeless return of the same, absolute, stone-cold indifference to suffering, the great wheel of life-and-death *shut up in finite revolutions*.⁴ This is a religion of the disenchanted world whose intuition of the sacred rests on the ascetic sacrifice of everything *human, all too human*, that is, all impulse of negativity that would raise a voice of protest against the inhuman general machinery of being in the name of particular suffering. This ascetic Nietzschean gesture, executed in the hour of the shortest shadow⁵, purging itself of all

4 See William Blake's *Europe*, which contains a terrifying image of the universe as The Great Wheel from where there is no escape.

5 Once again reminded in the context of ascetic ethics by Alenka Zupancic in her latest book *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two*, MIT, Cambridge Massachusetts 2004, where she tries to affirm

negativity of claims, protests and nostalgias to become light enough to fit the easy coming, easy going, fleeting moments of naked reality, constitutes a founding act of the peculiar quasi-religious strain that starts with Nietzsche, continues with Bataille, and culminates in Deleuze. This kind of religiosity is not so much a return to archaic myth but a disenchantment troped on the canvas of mythological rhetoric into holiness itself: an intuition of the sacred based on what Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* called the negative, purely numerical, sublime of the massive, indifferent, deathly power of natural mechanism (KANT, 1790).

And if Judaic sensibility always protested against any form of a mythic conciliation with the world, this form of remythicisation must anger it even more so. I cannot see nowadays any greater tension, philosophically speaking, than the one between the Nietzscheans and the Hebrews – to paraphrase Matthew Arnold's famous antithesis, where the original Hellenes are now represented by the imitators of Zarathustra. If we understand modern disenchantment as, in Gershom Scholem's formulation, a process leading towards *meaninglessness of the world*⁶, or in Harold Bloom's words, *the ultimate dearth of meaning*⁷, then we can also see the neo-Nietzschean, Deleuzian turn towards pure functionalism, where no question of sense is ever asked, as a gesture of passive adaptation to the Urizenic *universe of death*, charged quasi-religiously with the pathos of Nietzsche's exstatic *Ja-Sagen*. From the perspective of Judaic sensibility, such quasi-religious pathos must be seriously and dangerously misplaced.

Any living Judaism – writes Gershom Scholem in “Reflections on Jewish Theology” – no matter what its concept of God, will have to oppose pure naturalism with a definite no. It will have to insist that the currently so widespread notion of a world that develops out of itself and even is capable of independently producing the phenomenon of meaning – altogether the least comprehensible of all phenomena – can, to be sure, be maintained but not seriously held. The alternative of the meaninglessness of the world is unquestionably possible if only one also is prepared to accept its consequences... One has to study one of these works

and defend the Nietzschean version of the ascetic ideal against the “all too human” hedonism of our times.

6 Gershom Scholem, “Reflections on Jewish Theology”, in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis. Selected Essays*, Schocken Books, New York 1976, p. 278.

7 Harold Bloom, “Breaking of the Form”, in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom, Continuum, New York 1979, p. 12.

carefully in order to perceive the equivocations, the *petitiones principii*, the latent theologies, and the cracks and fissures in such intellectual edifices (SCHOLEM, 1976).

Karl Löwith (1956) was certainly one of those interpreters who, having carefully studied Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal return, came to the conclusion that it is totally incongruent for it contains a contradiction between "*the expression of completeness and the invocation to decision*" (LÖWITH, 1956: 13f). The universe as a self-enclosed totality is complete and full, which simply makes no room for a phenomenon of will, based, by necessity, on *wanting* – in both senses of this word, i.e. also on *lack*. Nietzsche attempted to overcome this contradiction by identifying his own will of affirmation (an already oxymoronic notion), with the self-willing of the natural world in an ecstatic *Einklang*.⁸ But this circular self-willing of the natural universe is nothing but a salutary pseudonym for its absolutely self-enclosed indifference whose sheer play of forces can generate no meaning whatsoever. The truly disenchanted nature neither wills itself nor wills human affirmation; all this volitional addition is completely spurious to its apathetic and unresponsive functionality.

The same intuition as to futility of Nietzsche's effort to adapt oneself to the world of senseless becoming appears in Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* which portrays the author of "*Zarathustra*" as a contemporary incarnation of the tragic hero. It is not what Nietzsche said that is of any significance, but what he did *not* say; what he had to leave unsaid in his typically tragical muteness, i.e. the repressed, and because of it misplaced, religious longing after a communion with the vital sources of meaning. "*What he philosophized*" – writes Rosenzweig – "*has by now become almost a matter of indifference. Dionisiac and Superman, Blond Beast and Eternal Return – where are they now?*" (ROSENZWEIG, 1985). At the same time, however, it is precisely thanks to Nietzsche that the whole abstract edifice of idealism came down and revealed the ruins of once integral world-view: the disenchanted reality, bearing no sign of Spirit on the one hand – and the disoriented, alienated reality of human soul, desperately seeking ways back to this strange new world, on the other. "*Man in the utter*

8 This incongruence is also fully endorsed by Stanley Rosen who in his *The Mask of Enlightenment* writes: "Expressed in metaphysical or philosophical terms – he says of the eternal return – there are a finite number of human types and associated stages of historico-political existence. Strictly speaking, there is not only no unending creativity or radical uniqueness, there is no creation at all. Creation is the illusory or phenomenal manifestation of the actual or noumenal fluctuations of chaos (i.e. intrinsically random motions of points of force, or of what are today called energy distributions)": Stanley Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment. Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, p. 13.

singularity of his individuality... stepped out of the world, out of the All of philosophy”, and, willy nilly, exposed himself in his naked negativity, set “against all being” (idem: 9-10).

On the Uses and Misuses of Nihilism for Religion

Naturalism in all its forms – either scientifically cold or quasi-religiously glorified – is, as we have already stated, a prime enemy of Judaic sensibility. At the same time, however, Scholem insists on a possibility of “a fruitful meeting between religion, whose message begins and ends with the meaningfulness of the world, and secularism” (SCHOLEM, 1976: 293). But how can we conceive it? The juxtaposition of Nietzsche and Rosenzweig drives us towards three possible different uses (or misuses) of secularizing disenchantment which denudes world of its immanent *sacrum*: trivial, heroic, and dialectical.

The trivial use is, philosophically speaking, least interesting, although it may be the most popular: it consists in an escapist rejection of the disenchanted world as a spiritual desert into the consoling arms of religion. For Nietzsche, this easy way out for cowards who cannot stand the horrors of life, constitutes the “gregarious truth” of all religious formations. For Rosenzweig, who is equally critical of such move, the simple negation of the world results only in a false asceticism which remains immanentist and innerworldly: it cannot lead towards the proper turn, that is, the revelatory *Umkehr* towards transcendence. This banal use of disenchantment was perhaps best spotted by Adorno, who wrote in “*Vernunft und Offenbarung*”:

Such orientation towards transcendence works here as a cover of the immanent feeling of hopelessness... A purely immanent, innerworldly anxiety becomes hypostatized as a fake transcendent. The triumphs sustained by religion in the name of this anxiety are clearly only Pyrrhus victories (ADORNO, 1969:612-13).⁹

On the other hand, the heroic use of disenchantment is, in a way, equally straightforward. It consists in blocking the flight of cowardly imagination and forcing it to stay and say *Yeah* to

9 “Die Wendung zur Transzendenz fungiert als Deckbild immanenter, gesellschaftlicher Hoffnungslosigkeit... Die höchst innerweltliche Angst davor wird, weil nichts sichtbar ist, was darüber hinausführte, als existentielle oder womöglich transzendente hypostasiert. Die Siege, welche die Offenbarungsreligion im Namen solcher Angst erficht, sind Pyrrhussiege”: Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, *Stichworte. Kritische Modelle 2*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1969, pp. 612-13.

difficult reality; this is the neoarchaic model of a somber, inhuman, renaturalised *sacrum*, advocated by Nietzsche himself, forging a typically modern synthesis of myth and nihilism. Finally; the third, dialectical use of disenchantment is characteristic of those Jewish thinkers who attempted to translate the traditional Judaic critique of myth and magic into modern conditions of secularising *Entzauberung*, where the latter would be conceived not as an enemy but as an ambiguous ally of religion. These two last options are philosophically and theologically most ambitious – and this is precisely why nowadays they constitute two vital poles of a spectrum that determines the shape of modern belief.

The Nothing of Meaninglessness

Scholem touches a very sensitive point of wisdom when he says that meaning is “*the least comprehensible of all phenomena*”, and that we can approach it only negatively, i.e. through *the deep* experience of meaninglessness” (SCHOLEM, 1976). Even Nietzsche, as it seems, could not fully accept the thoroughly disenchanted and nihilised world without meaning – for the very gesture of acceptance, of *amor fati*, already constitutes a tension, a certain surplus decision of affirmation, which can originate only from the difference within the indifferent world. Even Nietzsche, therefore, produced an unwanted *minimum of meaning*, by not being able to sink completely into the matrix of indifference, or what he used to call “the innocence of Becoming”.

Meaning can thus be approached best as a *difference*: an attempt to constitute a tension within being that cannot be generated by being itself. Meaning is not a spontaneous artefact or epiphenomenon of the wordly play of forces. The more the world disenchant itself; the more it reveals itself as a purely functional mechanism, i.e. the grinding wheel of beings, marked by metaphysical *indifferentia* - the more distinctly comes into relief the origin of difference and meaning as strictly transcendent and *not from this world*. As long as the world remains under the mythic spell of immanent gods – as is the fable-like, pagan *Vorwelt* in Rosenzweig’s system – the transcendent source of meaning as non-indifference remains invisible, hidden behind alluring mythological images. But when the pagan *logos* evaporates from reality due to the process of rationalizing *Entzauberung*, its immanent inability to produce meaning becomes shockingly evident; the creaturely life, left to its own devices, discovers its natural poverty and turns towards God as the other-wordly origin of all sense.

The Rosenzweigan turn, therefore, goes in the direction strictly opposite to the one advocated by Nietzsche (or Feuerbach before him). For Rosenzweig, the immanence is not an original pleroma of meaning which only then becomes impoverished by the Platonic evacuation of sense into a “metaphysical backstage” (ROSENZWEIG, 1985). Quite to the contrary, the immanence of the archaic mythic world appears merely as a *fake plenitude*, whose fakeness becomes manifest thanks to the process of rational disenchantment that gradually reveals its sense-giving poverty. In consequence, the disenchanted world discloses itself as *ontologically* separate and autonomous, i.e. a well-oiled Great Wheel of Beings – and at the same time, *semantically* speaking, as insufficient and lacking.

Death, the Divine Signature

This is precisely what Rosenzweig calls the dual status of the creaturely world: sovereign as a beautiful mechanism, ready to enchant every beholder with its spectacle of imaginary richness – and simultaneously deprived of meaning that can never come with impassive contemplation but only with speech, addressed towards the otherworldly God. This is

a world inwardly infinitely wealthy, a colorfully irradiated, overwhelming cascade which, ever renewed, ever renews its clarity and placidity in the still depths which gather it in, but a world outwardly weak and impoverished. Is there an Outward for it? Well, it must answer affirmatively. But it has to add that it knows nothing of this outside and, worse yet, wants no part of it. It cannot deny the outside, but it has no need of it (ROSENZWEIG, 1985:61).

It just lies there, “inspired with its own spirit, resplendent with its own splendor” (ibidem) – and as such *tautological*, i.e., as all tautologies, meaningless. Being just is, or as Heidegger could have put it, *die Welt weltet*: tautological self-repetition, self-perpetuation and self-enclosure is the main and, in fact, *only* essential feature of the world.

As one can easily see from this passage, for Rosenzweig, the pagan enchantment of the world - unlike for most of the religious thinkers of his time, both Jewish and Christian, deeply influenced by the romantic elevation of myth – does *not* constitute a paradigmatic experience (*Erlebnis*) of the sacred. Rosenzweig is much more antithetical to myth than, for instance, Martin Buber, who can be blamed for remythicising Judaism by dissolving it in the post-

romantic *Lebensphilosophie*, but also, to a certain extent, than Walter Benjamin, for whom myth with its “beautiful appearance” acts as a false cover, or rather a tainted mirror of redemption, and as such has to be used by theology, if only for the purpose of “saving destruction” (*die rettende Zerstörung*). Rosenzweig saw in the mythic world of the ancients nothing but an ahistorical version of the world after the demise of idealism, that is, a world that has lost its organizing principle of unity and now lives in a state of a dispersed *logos*. In Rosenzweig’s account the pagan reality is divided into three separate elements that are the remnants of the fragmented Whole: a living God of myth, who cares only for his immortal life, *Lebendigkeit*; a plastic world of nature, which produces only beautiful images and (as Blake would say) not a single seed of meaning; and a man, personified in a defiant tragic hero who throws his mute and hopeless No to the powers of fate. This is the world of the speechless, mythic charm, i.e., of purely *schöner Schein*, in which human being, teeming with helpless negativity, has only right to remain silent – until the final verdict of death under the crushing hand of *Ananke*. For Rosenzweig, therefore, the chanted world of the pagans is nothing but the world of sheer force, only thinly masked by fleeting beautiful images.¹⁰ Hence disenchantment is not oriented towards the destruction of the *sacrum*, for it was never truly there, in the dispersed *logos* of the pagan world – but, quite to the contrary, from the very beginning serves as an ally of religion, driving away from fake mythic lures towards the true unity of everything in God, where reality as a whole can find its proper justification. It recognizes the world of the broken *Allheit*,¹¹ and as such opens a gate for the religious perspective of redemption.

Conceived in this manner, i.e. against all post romantic prejudices, the disenchantment finally drives towards the ultimate recognition of the truth of creaturely world. This truth lies not in images of enchanting beauty, with their vague and ever-pending promises of, in Kant’s words, “teleology without purpose” - but in the final disclosure of mortality. The disenchanted world is, indeed, a “universe of death”, but unlike in early romantic Blake or late romantic

10 We will find a similar, i.e. deeply deidealized and anti-Schillerian vision of Greek reality in Simone Weil in her “L’Iliade ou le poème de la force” (*Oeuvres*, vol.3, Gallimard, Paris 1999), as well in Benjamin’s famous critical essay “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” (*Selected Writings*. Vol. 1, 1913-1926, Harvard UP, Cambridge, Mass. 1996). On the consequences of especially Weil’s reading of *The Iliad*, see my “Bad Timing: The Subject as a Work of Time,” *Angelaki. Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, no. 6. (3/ 2000).

11 In Hebrew: *olam ha shevirath ha-kolim*, where *kolim*, meaning totality in plural, is Rosenzweig’s pun on the kabbalistic *kelim*, “vessels”, and the original Lurianic phrase *shevirath ha-kelim*, “breaking of the vessels”.

Schopenhauerian Nietzsche, this deathly truth does not spell a final verdict we either strive against or adapt to. In Rosenzweig – and generally, in modern Judaism – death is a dialectical point of departure, beyond the world of creation, which creates the semantic vector driving from absolute “meaninglessness” to equally absolute “meaningfulness”. It is a point of recognition and clarity which, once all the beautiful and deceptive appearances are gone, lends a rock-bottom of semantic orientation.

It is a rock-bottom, that is, a point which is both lowest and most solid. The awakening of knowledge, therefore, can happen only at the most thoroughly disenchanting end of the Fall. After Talmud, by punning on the Hebrew consonance between two words – *meot* and *mavot* – meaning accordingly *death* and *very*, Rosenzweig says:

Within the general Yea of creation, bearing everything individual on its broad back, an area is set apart which is affirmed differently, which is *very* affirmed. Unlike anything else in creation, it thus points beyond creation. This *very* heralds a supercreation (*Überschöpfung*) within creation itself, something more than worldly within the worldly, something other than life which yet belongs to life and only to life, which was created with life as its ultimate, and which yet first lets life surmise a fulfillment beyond life: this *very* is death. The created death of the creature portends the revelation of a life which is above the creaturely level... That is why, on the sixth day, it was not said that it was “good”, but rather “behold, very good!” *Very*, so our sages teach, *very* – that is death (ROSENZWEIG, 1985:155).

Note that Rosenzweig does not offer here any theodicy of death that would place mortality within a providential, well-functioning plan of creation. Quite to the contrary, death is not simply good, i.e. well-designed in a Leibnizian kind of way. It is *very* good, which means that its emergence cancels the simple, straightforward “goodness” of creation and lets it awaken to its true status as “weak and impoverished”, endangered by meaninglessness. Death is thus *very* good for it tears out creation from “the slumber of the world” and, within its well-ordered mechanism, suddenly opens a gap – a lack, dysfunction, interruption.¹² Before, the beautiful, dreamily enchanted world “denied the outside, for it had no need of it”; now,

12 In the Lacanian language, which is, in fact, a theology in disguise, this dysfunction would be called *béance*: a gap that signals intrusion of “the contingent” (*tuche*) into the well-oiled mechanism of speech (*automaton*). See his *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, Jacques-Alain Miller, ed., trans. Alan Sheridan, Penguin Books, London 1979, especially the chapter “*Tuche* and *Automaton*”.

however, after the recognition of death, such need appears. Death is thus God's signature left in the work of creation. Who discovers this signature, discovers also that the world is not enough and that it has only a non-sovereign, creaturely status. This is the moment where the true turn – *Umkehr*, *teshuva* – can begin, that is, when seduction by images ends and the proper speech, taking its roots in prayer, commences.¹³

We find an analogy of this maneuver – i.e. the dialectical use of disenchantment for clarifying mature religious intuition – in Walter Benjamin whose openly Gnostic idiom covers this issue even better than Rosenzweig, too much, and sometimes against himself, bound by pious orthodoxy. In *“The Origin of German Tragic Drama”*, Benjamin, whose main concern is also language, and more specifically: the state of language in the condition of creaturely Fall, elaborates his famous conception of allegory as *ein verschminkter Tod*, *a beautified death*. In the conclusion of his work, when dealing with baroque images of Golgota, he writes:

For it is to misunderstand the allegorical entirely if we make a distinction between the store of images, in which this about-turn into salvation and redemption takes place, and the grim store which signifies death and damnation. For it is precisely visions of the frenzy of destruction, in which all earthly things collapse into a heap of ruins, which reveal the limit set upon

¹³ This motif of the divine signature, or “the seal of God”, can probably be best approached via the story of Golem, which is one of the symbolically richest legends in the whole Jewish tradition. The word *golem*, before it begins to signify a magical creature, fashioned by a man out of dust or clay, is a Hebrew equivalent of *hyle* or *materia prima*, the very stuff of creatureliness. As early as in *Genesis Rabbah*, there appears a description of the creation of Adam as first a mute, speechless *golem*, who only later became vivified by God's breath. When Adam lies there in this inanimate state, God shows him in form of images, a kind of a silent movie, the whole future history of creation. Thus, comments Scholem, “even before Adam has speech and reason, he beholds a vision of the history of Creation, which passed before him in images” (“The Idea of the Golem”, in *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Schocken Books, New York 1965, p. 162). The very status of creatureliness is thus firmly associated by the tradition with speechless imagery that shows the “whatness” of creation but does not reveal its hidden meaning. In its initial golem-like state, Adam, although privileged – for he is shown everything that is to happen – also shares the silent fate of all created things, i.e. participates in their *Kreatürlichkeit*. Then, God leaves on Adam's forehead his proud signature, the word *emeth*, meaning “truth”: “the name which He had uttered – so goes the Pseudo-Saadya commentary on *Sepher Yetsirah* – concerning the creature as the culmination of His work” (ibidem, p.179). This “seal”, however – precisely, as a *seal* – encloses the world of creation within itself. It can open itself to God only when it is shattered, i.e. when the word *emeth* breaks in two separate terms: the initial *aleph*, signifying the divine life-giving breath – and *meth* which means “death”. “It is said in the Midrash – continues Pseudo-Saadya – that Jeremiah and Ben Sira created a man by means of the *Book Yetsirah*, and on his forehead stood *emeth*, truth... But this man erased the *aleph*, by which he meant to say that God alone is truth, and he had to die” (ibidem). The turn to “God alone”, therefore, which constitutes the essence of Rosenzweig's *teshuva*, is possible only when creature breaks the seal of separation, and by consenting to die, begins to praise its creator. No longer imprisoned within mere images, it uses for the first time a speech proper, i.e. speaks to someone who cannot take form of any image. I am very grateful to Adam Lipszyc for pointing to me the links existing between Golem motif and the conception of nihilism in Scholem's works.

allegorical contemplation... Ultimately in the death-signs of the baroque the direction of allegorical reflection is reversed; on the second part of its wide arc it returns, to redeem... And this is the essence of melancholy immersion: that its ultimate objects... turn into allegories, and that these allegories fill out and deny the void in which they are represented, just as, ultimately, the intention does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones, but faithlessly leaps forward to the idea of resurrection (BENJAMIN, 1998:232-233).

Abstraction, which for Benjamin is an indication of the fallen, deathly condition of our speech, recognizes its fallenness by turning into a conscious allegory – the fully realized sign of an absent meaning – and in this purely negative manner “denies the void” from which it originates: it does not recreate any fullness, but it faithlessly refers to its painful “living” absence and in this lame way it “leaps forward to the idea of resurrection”. “Spirit is a bone”, as Hegel says in *“The Phenomenology of Spirit”*, for this nihilism of bones, depicted by the skeletal dance of Benjaminian allegories, is, again, a rock-bottom, pushing from which the spiritual trajectory can begin to reverse the movement of the Fall.

The Horrific Vision: Apocalypse Now

It is a peculiar experience to read Benjamin deciphering the images of Christ’s Passion bequeathed by German Baroque; peculiar, because Benjamin seems deliberately blind to their stark dualism of death and resurrection, which for him, deeply influenced by Jewish tradition, forms one dialectical whole. Following the pattern of this stark dualism, deliberately underplayed by Benjamin, we could probably add a third, typically Christian reaction to disenchantment, which - after Saint Paul - might be called a *strategy of invalidation*. According to the Paulian interpretation (very directly endorsed by such modern readers of his as, for instance, Alain Badiou) *death is everything but God’s signature*. Mortality is just a phase that becomes unambiguously and non-dialectically overcome in the process which leads to the one and only message of Christianity that spells the glory of infinite life: “Christ has resurrected”. Seen from this perspective, disenchantment of the world and the bony nihilism of the flesh neither pose a threat nor can be true objects of interest for the Paulian

Christianity for it has already leapt, and not at all lamely, rather with a triumphant anticipation, “forward to the idea of resurrection” (BADIOU, 2003).¹⁴

And just like the main difference between the Hebrews and the Nietzscheans consists in their various reactions to the process of disenchantment – dialectical endorsement versus ecstatic affirmation – the same can be said about the difference between the Hebrews and the Christians, where the latter simply seem to ignore it. It is obvious why: with the fully realized paradigm of the resurrected Christ, there is no longer a need to read signs of divine presence and absence in the creaturely life; with the knowledge as clear as that, there is no need for meticulous hermeneutics of prophecies, signatures and miracles. Whereas – and this is the strongest point made by Rosenzweig – the Jews *cannot* understand revelation unless they constantly read from the book of creation, i.e. unless they destroy all superficial meanings it misleadingly suggests and dig deeper to reach God’s own-handed chiffres and signatures. Torah makes no sense as such *without* the *teshuva*, the turn to God prepared by the thorough knowledge of what Rosenzweig calls the condition of creatureliness (*Kreatürlichkeit*). The disenchantment, leading to nihilisation of being, is, in fact, such a violent hermeneutic procedure we may fully legitimately call a *deconstruction of the creaturely world*: an interpretive strategy which demystifies suspiciously all myths of the surface in order to reach the truth and understand the ultimate meaning of the created reality.¹⁵

14 This extremely anti-dialectical version of Christianity which, proceeding from the Event of resurrection, can leave all “the discourses of the world” - be it a Greek “discourse of cosmic totality”, or a Jewish “discourse of exception”, based on the idea of prophecy, sign and miracle – is presented by Alain Badiou in his *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism*, and forms doubtlessly the strongest philosophical reading of the Christian message today. “Christ is a coming – says Badiou - he is what *interrupts the previous regime of discourses*. Christ is, in himself and for himself, what happened to us. And what is it that happens to us thus? We are relieved of the law”: Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2003, p. 48, my emphasis. According to this interpretation, the dialectical knot, where nihilism serves as a negative sign of God’s living absence, makes sense only on the grounds of prophecies and miracles that form Judaic “discourse of exception”. Nihilism – like creatureliness in Rosenzweig – is, in fact, nothing but a *negative miracle*: a sublime horror of being left to its own devices that cannot produce “a single grain of meaning” (Blake). All this becomes invalidated in Badiou’s anti-dialectics which reads Christian message as a pure declaration of resurrection; the death is vanquished, and the new life has already forgotten that it ever had to tarry with death. There is a visible Marcionite influence here: for if death is the signature of the Jewish God, His Son comes to erase it. The *stilus* of God is no longer there; the death has lost its “edge”. The miracle of death no longer evokes “the beyond” of creaturely world. There is simply no need for it - for Christ has resurrected. “Christian discourse – concludes Badiou - must, unwaveringly, refuse to be the discourse of miracle...” (ibidem, p. 51).

15 Derrida with the quasi-mystical experience of the “radical atheism in the desert” and with the Babel-God who spreads confusion and gives death – is seemingly very similar to this solution, but only seemingly so. In fact,

In the end, this meaning seems to reduce itself to a vibrant sort of nothingness, fervently pointing to the painfully absent God, who is the pleromatic source of meaningfulness. And all this message seems condensed in the figure of aleph, the most mysterious letter of the Hebrew alphabet: the breath-word from which creation sprang – and, at the same time, an allegorical scheme of a creaturely form, reduced down to a bone-like structure, aiming in a gesture of desperate prayer to its creator. God, whose name resides in aleph, *gives-life-and-gives-death* - so we can understand the meaning of *life eternal*.

The *horrorific vision*, therefore, which penetrates to the bony core of creation, is not just an arbitrary product of a tortured, masochistic mind – as it is often suggested by more affirmative Christian (or, like Badiou, post-Christian) thinkers, who, having left the depressive domain of the Law, find themselves wholly on the side of joyful Grace.¹⁶ The horrorific vision is not a Gnostic whimsy, or – as Nietzsche would have it – a sign of a spiritual weakness of those who cannot endure the exigencies of life; it is not even an accusation directed against the Creator – but a necessary vehicle of semantic orientation. It allows us not to drown in the contemplation of the riches of created reality, not to be weighed down too excessively by the heavy “seal of God” written on our foreheads - and thus to keep a balance between immanence and transcendence.¹⁷

Whereas the so called Christian *beatific vision* can have the opposite effect, when it obliterates the meaning of transcendence for the sake of direct, immanentist participation. “*In being the Bride of Christ – says Conor Cunningham, a fierce exponent of the divine methexis – we are to find form in the formless, love in hate, blood in wine, life in death*” (CUNNINGHAM, 2002: 274). Which indicates that, by believing in the goodness of creation,

his conception of God as death-giving appears equally non-dialectical as in Badiou’s version of Christian God as the pure giver of life, i.e. it does not open the complex play of life, death, trauma, and life again that is so characteristic of those Jewish thinkers I discuss here. Here compare especially: Jacques Derrida, “Comment ne pas parler: dénégations”, in *Psyché: Invention de l’autre*, Galilée, Paris, 1987 and *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1996.

16 I beg the reader a pardon for this neologism but I wished to find the most radical antonym for the cheerful mystical *beatific vision*.

17 The undisputed master of horrorific vision within Jewish tradition is, obviously, Emmanuel Levinas, who in his portrait of *il y a* gave the best philosophical description of the dreadfulness of pure being. See especially his early works: *On Escape (De l’évasion)*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2003, and *Existence and Existents*, trans. Robert Bernasconi and Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press 2001.

we are asked to beatify it with our vision, which fulfils the function of a renewing *creatio continua*, i.e. makes it as fresh and lovely as “the Bride” of the Creator in the very first moment of creation. We are bound to *find meaning* directly within creation, and at the same time asked to ignore what *is* actually there and what constitutes the very fact of “there is” – formlessness, hate, and most of all death – and see the created reality only as “the gift of love”, which, for this very reason, has to be excused for any deficiencies. The language of the gift blocks all the further, suspicious inquiry into the nature of creatureliness because of the most elementary etiquette: you don’t inspect a present that’s been given to you. The solemnity of the occasion must blind your perception. You are asked and obliged *not to see*.¹⁸

The rhetoric of gift, therefore, represses any suspicious or deconstructive attitude towards being: the gift must remain “enchanted”. In consequence, if the nihilistic, horrific vision of the world appears within the Christian discourse, it always has a destructive power of the return of the repressed. It comes from the excluded outside to defeat religion, as in case of Nietzsche, in whom there culminates the militant, irreligious tendency of the modern, cynical disenchantment. When religion makes no room for the horrific vision, it becomes immediately vulnerable to *the expelled Real of nihilism*: formlessness, hate, death, dearth of meaning. When religion cannot account for the nihilistic perception of the world, it falls a victim of recurrent waves of suspicion.

It is precisely because of its anti-dialectical nature that Christian discourse has to disintegrate in two clashing parties – the praisers of the gift of being on the one hand, and their Nietzschean demystifiers on the other – where the latter assume a militantly atheistic position than can enter in no dialogue with the believers. Whereas the dialectical solution, proposed by Judaism (or, at least, one of its philosophically most prominent branches), defends faith against the onslaughts of suspicion by welcoming both disenchantment and nihilism into the very center of its religious sensibility. For Judaism, disenchantment – as we have already proved – is not an enemy but an ally of religion, and nihilism is not a violent anti-religious reaction but an internal phenomenon of faith. The horrific vision, which strips creation to the

¹⁸ Here, the only exception is Derrida whose reflections on the nature of the gift bear an aura of curious ambivalence: the gift erases the giver in an act of generosity, but it also means “abandonement”, a situation in which the recipients of the gift are left with it alone, whether they want it or not. But he also tacitly assumes the prohibition of inspection that is inscribed in the notion of *le don*. See most of all his *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994.

bone, delivers a necessary insight into the naked facticity of “there is”, non-veiled by the “beatific” rhetoric of the gift. It is an insight into the apocalyptic nature of creation – its ongoing, fundamental “apocalypse now” – where all the world appears in its golem-like *Nichtigkeit*, i.e. dissolving into dust. It shows the region of death, which is at the same time the region of the erasure of God. And since we cannot know God directly, we can at least begin to know Him through His absence, the erased aleph. Standing on the rock bottom of “there is”, we begin to understand what is *truly lacking*.

There is No *One* Nihilism

Unlike this fiercely nihilistic vision, all the conceptions of divine presence in the world, based on the Neoplatonic notion of *methexis*, cannot by the very lack of contrast even intimate a “clear” vision of God; they only deliver a contaminated version. The horrific vision, which we ascribed here to Judaism, may come in different forms with various degrees of intensity – from the Levinasian “silent worry” through sobering suspicion to apocalyptic fright – but it always looks at the created world from the mistrustful perspective: it sees most of all that creation is *not* God. And the golem-like amorphous, disintegrating repulsion, and death, which returns everything to anonymous dust, is precisely what is *not* God in creation. This un-Godness, the Jewish *materia prima*, relegated to the fact of being itself, constitutes the very stuff of separation. This is where the world parts with its creator, as in the already quoted medieval versions of the Golem motif, where the creature “erased the *aleph*, by which he meant to say that God alone is truth, and he had to die”.¹⁹ The dramatic sundering within the word *emeth*, written on Golem’s forehead, into *aleph*, containing the name of the living God, and *meth*, meaning *death*, perfectly expresses the principle of non-contamination, according to which no participatory image of the divine within creation can substitute for the truth of “God alone”. Being, however resplendent, can never overshadow the glory of its creator.

But, isn’t it precisely what happens in the discourse, which privileges the rhetoric of the being as gift, and thus precludes any “suspicious” attitude towards created reality? While reading the thinkers, who nowadays under the heading of “radical orthodoxy” try to advocate the idea of divine *methexis*, I cannot but fall under the impression that their prerogative is not so much

¹⁹ The anonymous commentary on the *Book Yetsirah*, known as Pseudo-Saadya, in Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, op. cit., p. 179.

a theology, i.e. “the truth of God alone”, but the *defense of being*, conducted *nolens volens* at the expense of theological interest. Conor Cunningham’s *Genealogy of Nihilism*, one of the most impressive achievements of this school, ends with a surprising conclusion, strangely close to Nietzschean immanentism, which also accused Western philosophy of depriving being of its internal value and sacredness (CUNNINGHAM, 2002: 274). Nihilism is defined here in the Nietzschean manner as an evacuation of immanent *sacrum* of being into a false region of transcendence – while the overcoming of nihilism means bringing it back to the world which can be seen again, thanks to “the beautiful vision”, in its full, undamaged glory.

The fault of this otherwise very imposing book is that, in the Nietzschean fashion, it reduces all forms of nihilisms to one pattern of the Neoplatonic origin. The logic of nihilism, according to Cunningham, is as follows: “sundering of something, rendering it nothing, and then the production of nothing as something” (idem: 275) This is, generally speaking, a pattern of collapsing dualism, not very far indeed from the one described by Nietzsche in “*The Twilight of the Idols*”: being is first set asunder; all its meaning and plenitude is projected towards unknown Beyond; this Beyond cannot be portrayed within ontic categories, so it is rendered as Nothing; this Nothing is subsequently granted a creative power; and since beings cannot emancipate themselves fully from their generative principle, they all remain pervaded by the original nothingness. “Nihilistic philosophy – Cunningham calls it “meontotheology” – has at its centre a *reditus* which precedes every *exitus*” (ibid.), which means that whatever proceeds from Nothing is predestined to return to it, so it can never gain a separate status. Yet, Cunningham soon discovers that this post-neoplatonic meontotheology has quite a lot in common with theology, position he himself fiercely defends: they both are dissatisfied with “ontic immanentism” and both emphasize the ultimate dependence of created beings on their creator. The real difference consists in the different nature of the highest principle: the ultimate One-Void-Nothingness, which generates being through an impassioned mechanism of emanation, on the one hand – and the Christian God of Love, who creates difference without creating dualism.

Creation-difference – says Cunningham – is a result of love which, precisely, does not divide... To this degree, then, creature cannot be simply set over and against God the

Creator: Nicholas of Cusa referred to God as *non aliud* (not other)... Consequently, there is no simple dualism between creator and creature (CUNNINGHAM, 2002: 264).

Love is thus a vehicle that takes us beyond philosophical dualisms: it allows to evade the Scilla of full participation, where beings cannot leave the womb of the One, and the Charibda of total separation, where there is no place for divine presence in the world. Love works, in a Winnicottian fashion, as a “maternal holding”: a space of a gentle difference that knows no frustration, no falling out, no trauma of sudden separation.²⁰ And from the perspective of the Creator, love works as a principle of a ever self-renewing plenitude that precludes any change, any contraction or emptying of God: “*Creation arises because love can allow for difference; love gives in such a way, and so utterly, that what is given is not a change, and therefore divine simplicity is not offended... Love is the invention of difference...*” (idem: 264-265). Love, therefore, also builds a great chain of beings where everything is interconnected – but these chains are different, for they are the Hölderlinian “bonds of love”: “*...being is after all nothing as something although in a manner beyond nihilism’s imaginings*” (ibid.: 265). Why? Because this kind of *reditus* is joyous and hopeful, oriented towards future as grateful return, i.e. the return of the gift of being to the loving God – whereas the meontotheological one sounds like a verdict, i.e. an order of obedience that pulls beings back into their abyssmal matrix. Yet, despite all the differences, there is a deep structural analogy between theology and meontotheology. They are, in fact, two versions of one Neoplatonic scheme, where mechanical emanation becomes replaced by intentional love.

The Neoplatonic scheme always works according to the principle *nothing as something*. While the Judaic scheme of separation works according to the precisely opposite principle: *something as nothing*. Judaism creates its own version of nihilism that Cunningham’s book fails to cover.²¹ For this is a nihilism that issues from dualism which can never collapse into any form of monism. Creation is separated from the start, and it *is* definitely *something*. It may mean *nothing*, but it is *something*. In fact, the more it *is*, the more it reveals its autonomous, self-sustaining *somethingness* (not in term of *quidditas* but *quodditas*); the more

²⁰ See Donald Woods Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, Routledge, London 1971.

²¹ The best instance of which is a forced proximity between Levinas and Heidegger that continues through all the book, where the former’s “otherwise-than-being” Cunningham stubbornly interprets along the Neoplatonic-Heideggerian lines of “Being-as-Nothingness”.

it appears as *nothing of meaning*, or, in Scholem's phrase, as "nothingness of revelation". In this highly dialectical vision of creation, revelation – so to say – does not travel. Just like in Hegel, of whom might be said that he codified philosophically this Gnostic model, absolute meaning turns into its absolute *Anderssein*, i.e. pure being which, precisely because of its purity, cannot be distinguished from nothing. The first moment of creation is simultaneously the moment of the greatest thinkable difference: between absolute meaning of the Divine Name in its unity, the absolute revelation – and the separated reality of which one can only say in a manner of empty tautology that it *is*, and is just *something*. Between fullness of revelation, where there is no world (or more specifically, where there is *no more* world, for this fullness is always projected into redemptive future) – and nothingness of revelation, where there is world only.

This is a logic of nihilism that goes beyond Cunningham's analysis for it attaches itself to a special form of metaphysical dualism which we may define as *antagonistic*. Creation, unlike in the love-model sported by Cunningham, brings a change in the Creator – more than that, a *catastrophic* change. And it creates an absolute difference by bringing forth a world, closed in the immanentist structure of being as a mechanism of existence that constantly produces *something* within nothingness of meaning. According to this logic, God in the unity of His Name and Fallen World in the dispersion of anonymous, nameless "there is" form two opposite poles of the antagonism. The rule of God alone spells the messianic time of what Lurianic kabbalah used to call *tikkun*: a return of everything to divinity, yet a return – and this is a decisive difference between both neoplatonic and Christian *reditus*, and messianic prophecy – that is not at all certain or predestined. While the rule of "there is", the ultimately nihilistic, Levinasian *il y a*, indicates claustrophobic condition within the belly of Leviathan, i.e. as far as possible *away from God*. In consequence, the reality, in which we actually live, is a compromise formation between these two clashing orders: slightly above the level of pure "there is", but still not much closer to the hidden God.²²

22 A very interesting account of falling down to the rock-bottom of creaturely misery, which nonetheless must be the first step in recognizing the transcendence of "God alone", is given by Eric Santner in his book *On Creaturely Life. Rile, Benjamin, Sebald* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2006), which is a meditation on some Rosenzweigian motives. By using the metaphor of animal form, taken especially from Kafka and Sebald, Santner gives us an image of a golem-like creature, living under the heavy "seal of God" which it is unable to break, and as such, i.e. unable to die, it is doomed to continue living. It is therefore "undead", hanging between life and death, in the horror-zone of self-perpetuating being. When finally this creaturely form is brought to the ultimate point of despair, it "snaps from within", and, by shaking off the

Thus, from the perspective of such antagonistic dualism, which produces its own version of nihilism, the two “enemies” of Cunningham’s conception – meontotheology and theology – collapse into one quasi-neoplatonic, ultimately monistic party. Judaic thinking, by insisting on radical separation, cannot but perceive “the gentle difference” of the Christian love-model as yet another immanentism in disguise which in the end abolishes all difference. Using the psychoanalytic metaphor once again, we could build a gradation of the states of freedom, which starts with meontotheological absolute, prenatal dependence of beings never allowed to leave the “womb – thomb” of the One; passes through the “holding stage” of the maternal “bonds of love”; and finally arrives at maturity, i.e. a state of separation where all ties of participation and mediation had been broken. It is therefore by no accident that Emmanuel Levinas called Judaism “a religion of adult people” for, indeed, Jewish religious imagery (perhaps only with some exceptions in Kabbalah) never really exploits motifs that come from the sphere of infinatile “primary narcissism”.²³

Messianic Nihilism

The deconstruction of the creaturely world in the horrific vision is not just a hermeneutic strategy; it is also messianic. The best way to approach messianism is via a contrast with mysticism. All these Jewish writers I have mentioned here (as well as almost all philosophically minded Judaic thinkers from Maimonides to Levinas) build a stark opposition between a mystic attitude, driving towards communion with ultimate divine reality, and a messianic stance, which can never free itself of the wordly influence. A mystic, in Benjamin’s words, “leaps forward to the idea of resurrection”, where, following the way of Christ, he can leave all the deathly realm behind – whereas a Jew, who merely anticipates the messianic solution, can never be so “light-footed”: as long as he lives, he is encumbered by his creaturely status, immersed in the sphere of creation, unable to escape. Creatureliness is a heavy burden (a heavy “seal”) which slows down the “light joyous steps” (St. John) of a potential mystic and does not allow the final leap into the pleromatic experience of the sacred.

burden of pure existing, opens itself to otherwordly source of meaning.

23 See Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile liberté. Essais sur le judaïsme*, Éditions Albin Michel, Paris 1963; such is the title of the second essay in the volume.

The relation between mysticism and messianism is thus a little more complex than just a simple opposition. Before they become theological enemies, they seem to derive from the same impulse: *to get closer to God*. And not necessarily in terms of knowledge: “closeness” – the Derridean use of *korban* – is in fact the best metaphor to describe this impulse without presuming its epistemological characteristics.²⁴ *Korban*, however, meaning also *sacrifice*, has an ambivalent connotation which surrounds this “closeness” with a halo of danger and death; it also spells, almost immediately, necessity of withdrawal. It is a highly ambivalent knot of attraction and repulsion which together make of this “closeness” an unsteady, unbalanced and indefinite realm, hovering between communion and distance. “Getting closer” can be resolved in two ways: either by leaping forward into a full identity, or by retreat into the state of separation. Christian God-seekers (if one is allowed such a generalisation) usually choose the first solution, thus becoming full-fledged mystics of the “beatific” vision – while Jews usually recoil, falling from closeness back to remoteness, all the more aware of the fallen, “horrorific” status of the creaturely world. It is precisely this unrealized, hindered mysticism, which can never make a final “leap forward”, that gives rise to messianism.

The hint that messianism derives from unrealized mysticism, *ein verhinderter Mystizismus*, appears most explicitly in Rosenzweig and Scholem. Messianism is a Hebrew version of the Platonic Myth of the Cave, in which the “wise men” return into the darkness of the world; blinded by the Sun they could not bear to look at.²⁵ Messianism is thus an inverted mysticism, even more so: a mysticism which sustained a failure. The messianic impulse expires once it becomes a fully blown mystical encounter with ultimate reality: this is the case of Martin Buber. The moment he achieves the desired intensity of the “I and Thou” relation with the world, time resolves into eternal *nunc stans* and the creaturely reality appears as redeemed, here and now. Redemption loses its temporal aspect, as well as practical. It is no longer a matter of *action* that works towards reparation of the fallen world – it is now a matter of *vision* that manages to see the world differently, as sacred, intact, and in no need of redeeming practice. The rule of the mystic is “If we could only see better...” – whereas the rule of the messianic is always “If we could only *do* better...”

24 See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, op.cit., p. 58.

25 Of course, only if we follow Leo Strauss and his very Jewish indeed rendering of this Platonic motif. See most of all his *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1985.

It is precisely against the *mystical vision* that *messianic action* begins to stand out in its full specificity. For while mystical vision demystifies the nihilistic perception as merely an appearance, covering the real plethora of the created world in its full glory, messianic action departs from the nihilistic perception as a solid rock-bottom of the creaturely knowledge. Once again, the mystic leaps forward to a resurrected, pleromatic life behind the death of “slumbered senses” – while his messianic opponent remains within “the universe of death”, only reconfirmed in this recognition. The mystic seeks passive and private reconciliation with the created world and the God, its creator, taking place within the inwardness of a Vision²⁶ – whereas the messianic “doer” thrives on the moment of insurpassable negativity which does not allow him to tie a thruce with the fallen world.

“*Judaism*” – says Scholem in his “*Messianic Idea in Judaism*” – “*thought nothing of such a chemically pure inwardness of redemption... The establishment of all things in their proper place, which constitutes the redemption, produces a totality that knows nothing of such a division between inwardness and outwardness.*” (SCHOLEM, 1995: 17)

Messianism, therefore, can never become indifferent to “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”, quite to the contrary – the more scandalously disenchanting the world appears, the more intense becomes the messianic response. This specific *Jewish negativity* never annuls the scandal in which it arises. It rather exacerbates this scandal to the critical point in which it “snaps”, thus bringing on itself a saving catastrophe.

“*Jewish Messianism*” – continues Scholem – “*is in its origins and by its nature – this cannot be sufficiently emphasized – a theory of catastrophe. This theory stresses the revolutionary, cataclysmic element in the transition from every historical present to the Messianic future*” (SCHOLEM, 1995: 7).

The nihilistic perception, therefore, which we have already established as a rock-bottom of the theological knowledge of creatureliness, does not limit itself to recognition only: it also becomes a ground of an action, which we may call an *active nihilisation of being*. The more

26 See, for example, one of the innumerable fragments in Buber, emphasizing the fully accomplished character of the visionary moment: “What exists *is*, and nothing more. The eternal source of power is flowing, the eternal contact is waiting, the eternal voice is resounding, and nothing more”: Martin Buber, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I, Kosel-Verlag, Munich 1962, p. 154.

nichtig the world becomes, the greater the chance for redemption. As in “*Midrash Tehilim*”: “*Israel speaks to God: When will You redeem us? He answers: When you have sunk to the lowest level, at that time I will redeem you*” (*Ibid.*: 11-12), or in “*Sanhedrin 98a*”: “*May he come, but I do not want to see him*” (*Ibid.*: 13). On which Scholem succinctly comments: “... *the redemption, then, cannot be realized without dread and ruin*” (*Ibid.*: 13).²⁷

The messianic, actively nihilising impulse is thus absolutely contrary to any theodicy. The desire “to justify the ways of God to men” clashes with the will to watch the smooth, functional mechanism of being fall down. Not only a mystic, who annuls the nothingness of the world in his Vision, but also an anxious practitioner of theodicy, who glorifies the very idea of mechanical order and harmony, are enemies of the messianic “doer”. The latter has an inborn mistrust towards any kind of well-ordered, well-oiled, well-functioning mechanisms that turn within the Satanic Mills of creation; towards all sorts of Great Wheels that support the chariot of divinity, conceived heartlessly as an Urizenic Supreme Architect of Being (vide Kant!). Scholem says:

From the point of view of the Halakhah, to be sure, Judaism appears as a well-ordered house, and it is a profound truth that a well-ordered house is a dangerous thing. Something of Messianic apocalypticism penetrates into this house; perhaps I can best describe it as a kind of anarchic breeze (SCHOLEM, 1995: 21).

This “anarchic breeze” is a necessary correction for any theodicy, which in the Leibnizian-Kantian way praises and glorifies the architectonic order of creation, comes dangerously close to naturalism: by inscribing a meaning into the preestablished harmony of things, even more so; by *equating meaning with order*, it risks losing meaning altogether. “What exists *is*,

²⁷ Or yet in other words: “There can be no preparation for the Messiah. He comes suddenly, unannounced, and precisely when he is least expected or when hope has long been abandoned” (*ibidem*, p. 11). The motif of the “active nihilism”, whose function is to hasten the coming of the Messiah, is very well explained in Scholem’s essay “The Nihilism as a Religious Phenomenon” where he enumerates all sacral uses of nihilistic technics (subversion of the earthly law as the “law of death”, antinomian fall into the “abyss of sin”, promise of anarchic “infinite life”, not limited by any rule) from early Gnostics, through the medieval Chiliastic movements, up to the sectarian Jewish revolts of Sabbatai Zvi and Jacob Frank. In contrast to the Nietzschean version of nihilism, where “nihilism means rejection of values and meaning because man understands himself as a purely naturalistic being”, Scholem proposes an alternative definition of nihilism as a form of religious expression, where “nihilism arises from the rejection of reality because this reality... is only worth of being destroyed”: “Der Nihilismus als religiöses Phänomen”, in *Judaica*, vol. 4, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1995, p. 131 (in my translation).

and nothing more” – this sentence, uttered by Buber in a good faith, in fact constitutes a warning against all those who would like to reduce meaning to a passive contemplation of the well-ordered state of nature. There is no more desperately nihilistic spectacle, implies Scholem, than watching the mechanism of the world sustaining and reproducing itself in an eternal, tautological *perpetuum mobile*. The natural beauty, glorified by the exponents of theodicy, appears as a sheer horror to the messianic perception. “Well-ordered house is a dangerous thing” – for it preserves creatureliness in its provisional status and infinitely postpones the cataclysm of redemption.

For Scholem, therefore, “living Judaism” would be better represented by those “non-normative” Judaic thinkers who struggle with the idea of order, than by the Halachic orthodoxy, which seems to have forgotten that too much order is simply “a dangerous thing”. From Scholem’s diagnosis there follows that a Jew can fall headlong into secular modernity and become almost thoroughly disenchanting, but as long as he or she preserves “the anti-naturalist spark”, he or she still remains a Jew. The most interesting case in this context is Franz Kafka of whom Scholem, in his theses on Kabbalah, said that “he gave the best expression of the borderline between religion and nihilism”.²⁸ In another essay Scholem called this stance, oscillating between nihilistic diagnosis of the world and its religious significance, a position of a *pious atheist*.

The emptying of the world to a meaningless void not illuminated by any ray of meaning or direction – writes Scholem in “Reflections...” - is the experience of him whom I would call *the pious atheist*. The void is the abyss, the chasm or the crack which 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. [My emphasis]. (SCHOLEM, 1976: 283)

This remark contains a self-evident polemic with the Nietzschean motif of the *death of God*. Against Nietzsche, who proposed to get out of the condition of modern nihilism by the way of *aktive Vergessenheit*, an active oblivion of God that would abolish not only any future desire of God but also any past-oriented nostalgia after His presence, Kafka appears to be a

²⁸ Gershom Scholem, “Zehn unhistorische Sätze über Kabbala”, *Judaica* 3, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1973, p. 271.

stubborn mourner. Even if God had withdrawn from the world, which subsequently underwent a process of nihilistic disenchantment, He is – paradoxically – still present via His painful absence. This painful absence has nothing to do with the dead absence of a God killed, as in Nietzsche’s famous anecdote, by modern disbelievers who simply no longer needed a divine hypothesis. It is a *living absence* of the only One, who could give a meaning to the world and whose lack merely exacerbates the depth of the semantic need, experienced by the *pious atheist*.

Such reading of Kafka, revealing the ambivalent, shifting grey sphere between nihilism and religiosity, is crucial for Scholem, because it simultaneously reveals a deeper, unexpected dimension of the modern, seemingly secularized reality. Once again, it is a *Gestaltswitch* which allows to see the same reality in two completely different ways: the more this world suffuses itself with mechanical self-sufficiency, the more it appears unjustified. The *lack of the lack* in such fullness blocks all the ways of possible evacuation; the more stifling this feeling of *nauseating* immanence, the stronger grows the need of radical transcendence (as in Levinas). The more the world turns into, in Adorno’s formulation, *perfect myth* of a positivistic self-sustaining mechanism, the more urgent becomes the question of its meaning.²⁹ It is precisely this pure functionality, thoroughly disenchanting, i.e. deprived of the traditional charm of theodicy – as represented by the Kafkan institution of the court – that is most demonical, for it immediately pushes us towards voicing a vehement metaphysical protest: *what is it for?*

Seen in this way the modern, naturalised and nihilised world presents itself as an arena of a potential powerful revival of a proper religious intuition. “

There is no doubt” – Scholem writes in “Franz Rosenzweig and his *Star of Redemption*”,

that we had lost sight of the traditional objects of theology, yet they still remain as hidden lights, which radiate from the inside, invisible from the outside. God, expelled from the human sphere by psychology, and from the social world by sociology, gave up his reign in Heaven. He passed the throne of judgment to historical materialism, and the throne of mercy to

²⁹ On the relationship between modern nihilism, disenchantment and remythification of the world see most of all Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, G. Schmid Noerr, ed.; trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2002.

psychoanalysis; he withdrew and hid himself in order not to return any more. But is that true that He does not reveal himself at all? Perhaps, this last contraction of His is simultaneously His last manifestation? Perhaps, His regression to the point bordering on nothingness was a matter of the highest urgency, according to the wisdom that His Kingdom may be revealed only to such radically voided world? For “I am sought of them that asked not for me; I am found of them that sought me not” (Isaiah 65, 1 apud SCHOLEM, 2006: 182).³⁰

Conclusion

Where the fall is the deepest, there grows also the greatest chance of salvation. This antinomical intuition, guarded by Scholem as the most precious treasure of Jewish Messianism, shines as an eternal beacon for the disoriented religious mind of all epochs. Its flickering weak radiance may be easily ignored in the periods of great light, but it begins to shine forth visibly during the Hölderlinian *Nacht der Erde* where glory of revelation is lacking. Rosenzweig, who pushes into this night the whole of creation, finds his way out thanks to the guiding star that took a shape of the six-sided *Magen David*. Benjamin, also a thinker of the nightly condition, discovers his constellations of ideas that appear to him like the famous rainbow of Caspar David Friedrich, visible only on the night sky. Kafka, operating in the deepest dark, *has no inkling of even the weakest light that would betray presence of the Castle*, surrounded by an impenetrable cloud.

All of them are the masters of the dispersed, shadowy revelation that can be found only there where it is least sought, i.e. in the deep of the nihilistic fall of the world where its light raises unexpectedly as, in the beautiful formulation from *Zohar*, *a dark flame and a whirlwind coming out from an amorphic mist*.

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³⁰ I quote this fragment after the Polish translation of the text which appeared originally in *Dvarim bego*, Am Oved, Tel-Aviv 1975.

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