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Mysteries of The Promise. Negative Theology in Benjamin and Scholem

Schier vollendet bis zum Dache
Ist der grosse Weltbetrug.
Gib denn, Gott, dass der erwache,
Den dein Nichts durchschlug.
So allein strahlt Offenbarung
In die Zeit, die dich verwarf.
Nur den Nichts is die Erfahrung,
Die sie von dir haben darf.

Gershom Scholem, a poem on Kafka's *Trial*¹

The difference between 'not,' 'nothingness,' and 'none' is of great importance for philosophy. The Kabbalah contains the fundamental notion (which reappears in Hermann Cohen) that God is nothingness... Idols are called 'nothing,' while God is called 'nothingness' (which is entirely un-Christian).

Gershom Scholem, Diary entry from the 22nd of February, 1918.²

In my essay I will approach critically the idea of the 'hidden God' which figures very strongly in the writings of Scholem and Benjamin and comes to the fore most intensely in their famous correspondence on Franz Kafka.

In *Old Mirrors, New Worlds*, Moshe Idel claims that this emphasis on negativity, so fashionable in the intellectual milieu of the German philosophical Jewry (not just Scholem and Benjamin, but also early Lukàcs, Ernst Bloch and Jacob Taubes) is, in fact, not very Jewish at all, rather strongly influenced by the German-Protestant notion of *deus absconditus*, deeply entrenched in reformed Christianity, from Luther via Kierkegaard to Barth.³ There is more than a grain of truth in this accusation. Indeed, while reading Scholem and Benjamin correspondence, particularly their reflections on Kafka (where the celebrated phrase of *Nichts der Offenbarung* appears), one may have an impression that their divine negativity is of

¹ The great deceit of the world/ Is not consummated./ Give then, Lord, that he may wake/ Who was struck through by your nothingness./ Only so does revelation/ Shine in the time that rejected you./ Only your nothingness is the experience/ It is entitled to have of you. In *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem. 1932-1940*, trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevre, New York: Schocken Books 1989, p. 125.

² Gershom Scholem, *Lamentations of Youth. The Diaries of Gershom Scholem, 1913-1919*, ed. and trans. Anthony David Skinner, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 208.

³ See Moshe Idel, *Old Worlds, New Mirrors. On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, p. 111. Another critic of the 'hidden God' motif in the context of Jewish thought is Hans Jonas who comes from a completely different background than Idel. In his famous essay, "The Concept of God after Auschwitz," Jonas says: "The *deus absconditus*, the hidden God (not to speak of an absurd God) is a profoundly un-Jewish conception. Our teaching, the Torah, rests on the premise and insists that we can understand God, not completely, to be sure, but something of him – of his will, intentions, and even nature – because he has told us. There has been revelation, we have his commandments and his law, and he has directly communicated with some – his prophets – as his mouth for all men in the language of men and their times: refracted thus in this limiting medium but not veiled in dark mystery. A completely hidden God is not an acceptable concept by Jewish norms": Hans Jonas, *Mortality and Morality. A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, trans. Lawrence Vogel, Chicago, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1996, p. 140. On the issue of the influence of Karl Barth on his Jewish readers, see most of all Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination between the World Wars*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012, especially the chapter "Romans in Weimar."

an uneasy, mixed origin, and that Idel is right when he criticises the German Jews for falling too much into a Protestant set-up of negative theology, deriving from Kierkegaard, Schelling, and Barth. Yet, I would not go as far as to adopt Idel's unambiguously *kataphatic* and positive image of the Jewish God as 'fully revealed in the Torah,' which supposedly has nothing in common with any negative theology, this lofty science of God of Philosophers, usually Christian and Muslim, but rarely Judaic. Idel may be right in pointing to the Kierkegaardian-Barthian influence, but in case of Scholem and Benjamin this influence, though palpable, is nonetheless not *all-consuming*. The language in which they talk about God's hiddenness may indeed be to some extent foreign, but the theological meanings which they try to create in this partly alien medium do not belong to it originally; they suggest a different notion of divine negativity which Harold Bloom calls simply 'the Jewish negative.'⁴ The aim of this essay will be to distill from their writings *the clinamen on the divine negativity* which, once disentangled from the conflation with the Christian notion of God's concealedness, should reveal aspects more specific *only* to the Jewish tradition.

Idel's critique is, in fact, an ironic reversal of Scholem's own frequent objections against those representatives of modern German Jewry who, in their eagerness to "sound modern," would draw heavily on the Protestant theological idiom-of-the-day, thus throwing away all the achievements of Judaic tradition, resistant to such attempts of quick modernisation. Idel's irony – operating under the principle of "first heal yourself, doctor!" – accuses Scholem of falling exactly in the same trap which he saw as crippling the thought of Hans-Joachim Schoeps, Ernst Bloch or young Jacob Taubes. In the open letter to Schoeps, the author of *Jüdischer Glaube in dieser Zeit* (from the 15th of August, 1932) Scholem protests against his approach to Judaism as too strongly tinged with Protestant categories, deriving directly from Kierkegaard and Barth. And while he sides with Schoeps in his effort to ignore the apologetic element in Jewish thought, which he also sees as dated and *unecht* [inauthentic], he nonetheless does not want to allow for the concept of modern 'authenticity' that would indicate a possibility of facing the word of revelation itself in its *absolute Konkretheit* (absolute concreteness) without any mediation of the tradition. Scholem thus rejects Schoeps conviction that "with the process of emancipation, Halachah has lost its theological meaning for us and that we must now return to the biblical revelation itself."⁵ Scholem perceives such suspiciously 'modernizing' maneuver as nothing more than an unconscious recurrence of a very old Jewish heresy, the Karaitism, which "is always the most modern, whether in the 10th century as Mutasilite, or in the 20th century as Kierkegaardian," yet, precisely because of that, "does not give the Jewish existence a long lasting breath" (*ibid.*, 470). The Neo-Karaite move, not only does not renew and authenticate the Jewish belief,

⁴ See Harold Bloom, "Freud," in *The Strong Light of the Canonical. Kafka, Freud and Scholem as Revisionists of Jewish Culture and Thought*, New York: The City College Papers, no 20, 1987, p. 32. Bloom talks about the specificity of the Jewish Negation which issues from the iconoclasm of the Second Commandment and creates 'a certain curious sense of interiority,' characteristic only of a Jewish psyche which "represses all images." This negativity has nothing to do with the 'Hegelian mode of negative thinking' (following the Protestant dialectical logic of *kathargein*) but "always reenacts the ambiguities of the Second Commandment": the prohibition of figuration which only intensifies *the desire to see*, to confront God one day 'face to face' (*ibid.*, 34). On the ambiguities of this 'desire to see,' compare also the magisterial study of Elliott Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

⁵ "Offener Brief an den Verfasser der Schrift *Jüdischer Glaube in dieser Zeit*, von Dr. Gerhard Scholem, Universität Jerusalem," in Gershom Scholem, *Briefe I, 1914-1947*, ed. Itta Shedletzky, München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1994, p. 469.

but destroys the most characteristic Jewish difference which lies precisely in the dialectical mediation of the absolute concreteness of the given, i.e. the word of revelation itself: “[The revelation] is the absolute that gives meanings but itself remains meaningless as the interpretable (*das Deutbare*) which shows itself only in time thanks to the mediation of the tradition” (ibid., 469).

But that is not all. Apart from accusing Schoeps for falling into the oldest ‘modernizing’ blunder of Judaic heterodoxy, he also reproaches him for not understanding properly the Jewish concept of *Nichts Gottes*, ‘the nothingness of God,’ which, according to Scholem, has nothing to do with the holy terrors of the Kierkegaardian-Barthian abyss of transcendence (*der Sprung in Nirgendwo*, ‘the leap into nowhere,’ ibid., p. 467-468). Scholem’s conviction that the Jewish concept of negative theology, which identifies the most secret name of God with *ayin*, is absolutely unique, appears at the very early stage of his intellectual biography and remains intact till the end. “Idols are called ‘nothing,’ while God is called ‘nothingness’ (which is entirely un-Christian),” notes Scholem in his diary in 1918, and this belief – in the radical difference between Jewish and Christian ways of approaching the divine concealedness – can indeed be said to have fuelled his life-long theological pursuits. And these, as Idel rightly observes (though with a critical intention in mind) should not be simply reduced to the work of a disinterested historian. They have its agenda – and it is precisely the exposition of the unique Jewish *clinamen* within negative theology.

The Deactivated God

But before we get to the Jewish *clinamen* of the divine hiddenness, we must first understand the dominant idiom from which it consciously deviates: the Protestant discourse of *deus absconditus*.

Deus absconditus, the hidden and distant God of Calvin and Luther, is so far removed from the world because of the contrast with the God of incarnation, the close and palpable Jesus Christ. Unlike the latter, the truly revealed God – where revelation, *die Offenbarung*, means, as in Hegel’s idea of Christianity, *die offenbarte Religion*, ‘laying out all clear’ – the former, God the Father hides in the mist of unapproachability as an uneasy remnant of the Old Testament which needs to be acknowledged but also superseded by the New Covenant. From the beginning, therefore, the Jewish God becomes a part of the dialectical dynamics, already implied by Paul’s notion of *kathargein*, which Luther translates as *Aufhebung* and Hegel later elevates to the heights of his philosophical dialectics. He is made remote and concealed due to the maneuver of deactivation, just like his Law becomes deactivated for the sake of Love and Grace. He is made inoperative, leaving all revelatory activity to His Son, now understood as God the Redeemer: the one who comes to elect, exonerate and save. His, therefore, is the hiddenness of a shadowy remnant which stays behind the only *truly active* God, the Second Person of the Trinity.

As all shadowy remnants, the Jewish God is ambivalently poised between good and evil; later on, in Schelling, even *beyond good and evil*, imagined as a ‘dark ground of existence’ (*der dunkle Grund der Existenz*). His concealedness tends to be understood as an impenetrable withdrawal, violent self-contraction which stands in stark contrast to the revealedness of incarnation. Hence, it becomes susceptible to all those elements of Marcionite Gnostic dualism, which *nolens volens* pervade all Protestant thought only to find its culmination in the openly Marcionite climate of the

Weimar times and the theologies of Adolf von Harnack and Karl Barth⁶. Take, for instance, this quote from Feuerbach's highly illuminating essay, "The Essence of Faith According to Luther":

'The God in Himself, God beyond Christ' – Luther says – is a terrible and terrifying God.' And what inspires terror and fright, is an evil entity. God in Himself, the divine 'majesty,' differs only in name and in our imagination from the essence of the devil [...] The only real God, the only object of Lutheran and Christian faith is Christ.⁷

And indeed, in Kierkegaard and Barth, God the Sovereign, Lord of Creation, the hidden God of the created cosmos, is the one who inspires 'holy terror' and – as Ernst Bloch put it *a propos* Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* – makes one wonder whether the divine is not confused here simply with the demonic.⁸ Bloch is absolutely right. The Marcionite mistrust towards the God of Creation, so palpable in all Lutheran and post-Lutheran writings, lends itself immediately to even more archaic overtones, associating the hiddenness of God the Father with the pagan dark mysteries of nature itself, which, as in the famous saying of Heraclitus, "likes to hide" (*physis kryptestai philei*).

In *The Veil of Isis*, Pierre Hadot sketches a two millennia long history of this pagan motif of hiding nature, *Isis abscondita*, which according to him culminates in the theosophy of Schelling.⁹ In Schelling, we find a truly modern syncretic combination of the pagan-masonic image of the veiled Isis-Jehovah, the pietist vision of Angry God, deriving mostly from Jakob Boehme, as well as a peculiar echo of the kabbalistic motif of *tsimsum*, which Schelling interprets in his own way, very far indeed from the manner of Isaac Luria himself and his XXth century German-Jewish followers: Scholem, Benjamin, and Kafka.

The theosophy of Schelling, especially when interpreted by Hadot, constitutes a *symmetrical case of influence* where the Lurianic concept of divine contraction becomes accommodated into the Protestant vision of *deus absconditus*. Here, *tsimsum* is imagined not as a gentle self-withdrawal, a loving act of giving space for creation, but as a 'angry' (*zornig*) self-condensation which gives hidden God his solid dark ground of existence and constitutes the sombre origin of his inscrutability. In Schelling's vision "development presupposes envelopment" (*ibid.*, 301), which means that being, when regarded in itself, is originally in the state of contraction, producing dense and opaque 'dark ground' that "loves to hide" and resists any attempt of penetration. By conflating the God of Moses, who says of Himself "I am that I am," with the principle of self-contracting being, Schelling perceives the divine reduction as an act of what Lévinas later could have called 'the ontological egoism': *tsimsum* here is an indirect manifestation of "the blind, obscure, and inexpressible side of God" (*ibid.*, 301). God as the principle of being, delivering the dark ground of "the hidden

⁶ In Barth's own words: "I was puzzled, on reading the earlier reviews of Harnack's book, by the remarkable parallels between what Marcion had said and what I was actually writing": "Preface to the Second Edition": Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, Oxford University Press: Oxford 1968, p. 13.

⁷ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Glaubens im Sinne Luthers. Ein Beitrag zum 'Wesen des Christentums,'* in *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 9, ed. Werner Schuffenhauer, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1967–2007, p. 392. In my translation.

⁸ See Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, trans. Peter Thompson, London: Verso, 2009, p. 37.

⁹ Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis. An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, trans. Michael Chase, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006.

mystery of existence” (ibid., 302), is thus also an object of a sacred terror and anguish, which befalls every living thing. Hadot quotes Schelling saying: “Anguish is the fundamental feeling of every living creature, and all that lives is born and greeted only in the midst of a violent struggle” (ibid., 302). Delivering the dark canvas for everything that exists, contracted in wrath and inner struggle, the Schellingian *deus absconditus* is on the antipodes of love which can come only with his second manifestation, the God of revelation and redemption, ‘the pure essence’ of Christ. The hidden God, therefore, stands here for “that which terrifies: *a power and a blind force*, a barbaric principle that may be transcended but never canceled, and which is the basis of all that is great and beautiful” (ibid., 303); all majestic, unapproachable, sublime, ultimately mysterious, unfathomably sovereign. As Hadot rightly observes, the Schellingian vision of God is deeply *tragic* (ibid., 302): the darkness, which surrounds God’s foundational act of being, can never be dispelled. While angry God remains an impenetrable mystery to Himself, this blindness must impart itself to all being as such; it is precisely in this violent blindness that revelation must meet its tragic limits.

This hidden God, identified as the principle of being in itself, is a very far cry indeed from the Lurianic God of *tsimtsum* which our XXth century ‘kabbalists’ will interpret in the opposite to tragic, i.e. *messianico-antinomian* terms – as a gesture of withdrawing *from* being, contrary to the gesture of establishing ontological foundations *for* the created world. It will be one of the tasks of this essay to expose the main difference between Christian (especially Protestant) and Jewish mode of perceiving the divine concealedness as organized around this conceptual axis: *the tragic* versus *the messianico-antinomian*. While the tragic mode of hiddenness, quite aptly associated by Benjamin with Christianity,¹⁰ addresses God as the eternally dark principle of created being – the antinomian mode of hiddenness, sported by the ‘kabbalists,’ addresses God as a *Gegenprinzip*, a counter-principle to being, which can manifest itself in the creaturely realm only in an indirect, partial, and subversive manner.¹¹ While the tragic mode of hiddenness smuggles into its *deus absconditus* a pagan notion of inscrutable and essentially unchangeable Fate – the antinomian mode of hiddenness locates itself on the antipodes to any fatalism, by remaining faithful to the messianic reversal that leads to a future *apocalypsis*, i.e. a possibility to see God without veils and secrets: not *hester panim*, but finally ‘face to face.’

Perhaps, the best way to illustrate this difference is to remind a XIIIth century student of Abulafia, himself a representative of the ecstatic kabbalah, Rabbi Nathan ben Sa’adyah Harar, who taught on the mysteries of the *messianic reversal*:

During the time of the Exile the activity of the names has been obliterated, and prophecy has been cancelled from Israel, because of hindrance of the attribute of judgment. The state will go on until the coming of him whom God has chosen, and his power will be great because of what has been transmitted to his and transmit to him the supernal keys. Then he will stand against the attribute of judgment [...] and the attribute of mercy will guide him. *The supernal entity will become lower, and the lower will become supernal, and the Tetragrammaton, which has been concealed, will be revealed, and Adonay, which was revealed today, will be concealed.* Then it will happen to us what was written: ‘For they shall all know me from the least of them to the

¹⁰ See Walter Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion,” in SW1.

¹¹ This term is used by Jacob Taubes in his *Abendländische Eschatologie*; Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 15.

greatest of them.’ Then the natural, philosophical sciences will be cancelled and concealed, because their supernal power was cancelled, but the science of names and letters, which are by now unknown to us, will be revealed, because their supernal power is gradually enhancing.¹²

This is not a static image of the Divine Sovereignty, as in Karl Barth’s diathesis. The Tetragrammaton, the hidden God behind the revealed Adonai, is not the God of mastery and judgment, but the God of eternal life and mercy – precisely the other way round than in the Christian vision of the concealed Sovereign and the revealed Christ. Since the messianic reversal, which already had happened in Christianity, has not yet happened here, the game of good and evil, love and justice, law and mercy, hope and obedience, is still in the play, still not fully ‘laid out.’ But one thing is sure. The messianic reversal will one day result in the divine exchange of places: the Lord, Adonai, will become concealed, while the Tetragrammaton, the Living God, will finally come to the fore.

It is, therefore, not the God the Sovereign who “likes to hide” his somber face, but a God of Life, the merciful lord of the world to come, which will know only the concrete ‘science of names and letters,’ doing away with the abstractions of the Law. It is not the terrifying Master of Creation, which constitutes the dark abyss of ‘nothingness’ behind the revelation of Christ the Redeemer – but a God of Sabbath, a still hidden and unrealized possibility of the divine itself: the *not-yet* of God, his own pregnant *nothingness* shining through his so far manifest revelation. Not the deactivated God of the Old Testament, but a not-yet-activated God of *olam ha ba*.

The Nothingness of Revelation: Procuring the Messianic Reversal

It is only in this context that we should approach the famous phrase uttered by Gershom Scholem in his correspondence with Walter Benjamin over the works of Franz Kafka: *der Nichts der Offenbarung*, ‘Nothingness of revelation’:

You ask what I understand by the ‘nothingness of revelation’? I understand by it a state in which revelation appears to be without meaning, in which it still asserts itself, in which it has validity but no significance. A state in which the wealth of meaning is lost and *what is in the process of appearing (for revelation is such a process) still does not disappear* [das Erscheinende, wie auf einen Nullpunkt des eigenen Gehalts reduziert, dennoch nicht verschwindet (und die Offenbarung ist etwas Erscheinendes)], even though it is reduced to the zero point of its own content, so to speak. This is obviously a borderline case in the religious sense, and whether it can really come to pass is a very dubious point. I certainly cannot share your opinion that it doesn’t matter whether the disciples have lost the ‘Scripture’ or whether they cannot decipher them, and I view this as one of the greatest mistakes you could have made. When I speak of the nothingness of revelation, I do so precisely to characterize the difference between these two positions.¹³

¹² in Moshe Idel, *Old Worlds, New Mirrors*, p. 129

¹³ Gershom Scholem to Walter Benjamin, Letter nr 66, September 20th 1934; in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem. 1932-1940*, trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevre, New York: Schocken Books 1989, p. 142; my emphasis. In original this fragment runs: “Ich verstehe darunter einen Stand, in dem [die Offenbarung] bedeutungsleer erscheint, in dem sie zwar noch sich behauptet, in dem sie *gilt*, aber nicht *bedeutet*. Wo der Reichtum der Bedeutung wegfällt und das Erscheinende,

We shall yet go back to this formulation: *what is in the process of appearing (for revelation is such a process) still does not disappear*, which, I think, constitutes the gist of Scholem's argument. The choice of the word here, *das Erscheinende*, is highly significant: as a *gerundivum*, an active verbal adjective which condenses in itself – as indeed in the Lurianic image of *tsimtsum* – the activity of revelation, it presents this activity as congealed in the participial form and thus held in a suspense. Before we lay out Scholem's message, suffice it to say that it is not purely negative. 'Nothingness of revelation,' far from suggesting some dead remainder of a once alive religion, contains a component of a future-oriented promise: of something truly living, expectant, still in the process of revealing itself, slowly (though not at all surely) coming to the fore.

First, however, we must turn towards Benjamin's interpretation of Kafka, the crux of which is the position of the Law, so fiercely criticized by Scholem. For Benjamin, the Kafkan universe is perfectly lawless: *nothing* separates law from life, which means that Scripture has simply become life. Law, therefore, is no longer a structure giving meaning to life, but life itself, the meaningless force of *flux*: entropy and dispersion. For Scholem, on the other hand, law is still separated from life, though as if by the intangible film of *nothing*: the fact that *nothing* separates them is experienced precisely as a cause of a sacred alarm, a sign of the deepest and most sinister distortion, which, felt as such, still maintains its validity, though without suggesting any directive. For Benjamin, God the Legislator withdraws, leaving a complete vacuum of 'mere life' (*blosses Leben*) with its senseless flow-and-fall, unable to produce 'one grain of meaning.' For Scholem, however, this withdrawal is dialectical: the more God disappears from the world, the more world is in the need of revelation, which, in the end, becomes a *new* form of revelation characteristic of a 'religious nihilist' or a 'pious atheist': *Nur den Nichts is die Erfahrung, / Die sie von dir haben darf* (Only nothingness is the experience we are allowed to have of you).¹⁴ Thus, while Scholem concentrates on the *Nothing* itself, expecting from it a renewal of revelation, or a messianic reversal occurring withing the Godhead itself, preparing to leap into a new manifestation (thus, we can say, *reculer pour le mieux sauter*¹⁵) –

wie auf einen Nullpunkt des eigenen Gehalts reduziert, dennoch nicht verschwindet (und die Offenbarung ist etwas Erscheinendes), da tritt sein Nichts hervor. Es versteht sich, dass im Sinn der Religion dies ein Grenzfall ist, von dem sehr fraglich bleibt, ob er realiter vollziehbar ist": *Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem. Briefwechsel 1933-40*, ed. Gershom Scholem, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980, p. 157.

¹⁴ The idea of a religious nihilist as someone capable of 'walking a thin line between nihilism and religion' appears first in Scholem's letter to Salman Schocken from 1937 and then becomes repeated in his *Ten Unhistorical Theses on Kabbalah*, characteristically - *a propos* Franz Kafka: Gershom Scholem, "Zehn unhistorische Sätze über Kabbala," *Judaica* 3, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1973, p. 271. The name of a 'pious atheist' also refers originally to Kafka: "The emptying of the world to a meaningless void not illuminated by any ray of meaning or direction 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": Gershom Scholem, "Reflections on Jewish Theology," in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, op. cit., p. 283

¹⁵ Irving Wohlfarth, combining Scholemian-Lurianic metaphysics with Benjamin's later metaphor of the chess-playing, cunningly hidden theology, will call it a *theologischer Schachzug*, a theological chess-gambit in which God retreats into a new *tsimtsum* in order to spring anew from his nothingness: Irving Wohlfarth, "*Haarscharf auf der Grenze zwischen Religion und Nihilismus. Zum Motiv des Zimzum bez Gershom Scholem*," in Peter Schäfer und Gary Smith, eds., *Gershom Scholem. Zwischen den Disziplinen*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995, p. 236 (f).

Benjamin is ready only to rely on the ‘weak messianic force’¹⁶ of the abandoned creatures who must procure the messianic reversal themselves:

You take – he replies to Scholem - the ‘nothingness of revelation’ as your point of departure, the salvific-historical perspective of the established proceedings of the trial. I take as my starting point the small, nonsensical hope, as well as the creatures for whom this hope is intended and yet who on the other hand are also the creatures in which this absurdity is mirrored [...] Whether the pupils have lost it [the Scripture] or whether they are unable to decipher it comes down to the same thing, because, without the key that belongs to it, *the Scripture is not Scripture, but life*. Life as it is lived in the village at the foot of the hill in which the castle is built. It is in the attempt to metaphorize life into Scripture that I perceive the meaning of ‘reversal’ [*Umkehr*], which so many of Kafka’s parables endeavour to bring about [...] Kafka’s messianic category is ‘the reversal’ or the ‘studying’ (Letter nr 63, p. 135).

For Scholem, the formula *Nichts der Offenbarung* is reversible: it is just as well ‘the revelation of Nothingness,’ which maintains its validity – the power of hope and expectation – despite the zero point of its content (despite, or precisely *because* of that). But not so for Benjamin and Benjamin’s Kafka, where nothingness, not to be capitalised, appears only from the ‘nether side,’ as a simple, non-dialectical nullification of the transcendence:

I endeavored to show how Kafka sought – on the nether side of that ‘nothingness,’ in its inside lining, so to speak – to feel his way toward redemption. This implies that any kind of victory over that nothingness, as understood by the theological exgetes around Brod, would have been an abomination for him (Letter nr 59, *ibid.*, 129).

Of course, this is not what Scholem expects - not the victory over nothingness that would lead to a positive restoration of the Law – so it is a bit unfair by Benjamin to use this argument against his friend, which would put him in the naively pious company of Max Brod. What they truly quarrel about is the *dialectics of nothingness*, not its positive overcoming: whether it is necessary to stay on the ‘nether side’ of nothing, or whether it is possible to wrench from it a new form of revelation.¹⁷ Or, yet

¹⁶ This term will appear just few years later in Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy and History*, clearly anticipated in Benjamin’s reflections on Kafka.

¹⁷ We could thus say that in this debate Scholem occupies a position with which Benjamin toyed in his *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, but abandoned, precisely of its non-dialectical impasse in which he could not secure the ‘transcendent leap’ on the grounds of the isolated immanence. The argument was to work along the now-Scholemian lines of ‘the more isolated, the more open to transcendence,’ but Benjamin must have found it ultimately unconvincing. Stéphane Mosès summarizes this strategy very aptly: “Gershom Scholem had a lifelong fascination with Franz Kafka’s *oeuvre*, in which he saw a paradigmatic image of the spirit of our age: the meticulous presentation of a world void of the idea of the divine, yet one in which immanence itself must be read as the inverse of a lost transcendence [...] The deterioration beyond repair Scholem detected in that world, recalling Benjamin’s description of the world of Baroque, is that of a corrupt universe beyond the salvation”: Stéphane Mosès, “Gershom Scholem’s Reading of Kafka: Literary Criticism and Kabbalah,” in *New German Critique*, No. 77, Special Issue on German-Jewish Thought (Spring-Summer, 1999), p. 149; 162. A similar interpretation of Scholem as oscillating between nihilism pure and simple, self-contained and self-enclosed and in the disenchanting modern reality, and a ‘religious nihilism’ which turns the experience of *Nichts Gottes* into

in other words: whether the fading of the Law, its receding into nothing, ends the story of revelation (so Benjamin) – or whether it merely marks a point of erasure, a yet another *tsimtsum* of God, which also bears a hope of the revelatory renewal (so Scholem). Filled with a definite ‘sense of an ending,’ Benjamin says:

For the work of the Torah – if we abide by Kafka’s account – has been thwarted. And everything that Moses accomplished long ago would have to be reaccomplished in our world’s age (Letter nr 63, p. 135; second sentence added by Benjamin in his notes).

To which Scholem obstinately replies:

I am still firmly convinced that a theological aspect of this world, in which God does not appear, is the most legitimate of such interpretations [of Kafka]... *The existence of secret law foils your interpretation*: it should not exist in a premythical world of chimeric confusion, to say nothing of the very special way in which it even announces its existence. *There* you went much too far with your elimination of theology, throwing the baby out with the bathwater (Letter nr 57, p. 122-23; my emphasis).

In a moment we will return to the ‘chimeric confusion’ Scholem attributes to Benjamin on the basis of his ‘dangerous’ fascination with Bachofen. Even if Scholem agrees to a point with Benjamin that “the work of the Torah [...] has been thwarted,” he nonetheless would not go as far as to assume a complete disappearance of the *shadow* of the Law and thus a full regression to the ‘premythical world’ which had not yet known the light of revelation. He thus constantly admonishes his friend for neglecting the ‘numinous shadow’ that is still present in the fading of the Torah: “You stubbornly persist in viewing [the Law] only from its most *profane* side... and one finds your silence about it quite puzzling” (Letter nr 58, p. 127). God may be dead, Law may be finished – but we still haven’t cast away their shadows, their persistent *reshimu* [remnants] still floating about in the voided world. Thus, when Nietzsche complains in *The Gay Science* about the still hovering presence of the dead God over us,¹⁸ for Scholem this haunting remnant serves as a positive point departure.

The discussion, therefore, oscillates between the *dysfunctionality* of the Law which nonetheless still remains the Law – and the *dissolution* of the Law into the hetaeric universe of bare life, the Bachofenian plasticity of *blosses Leben*: just being there, profligating and growing, incapable to stop in its senseless *flux* and produce one stable meaning, structure or form. For Scholem, the alarmingly naked ‘nothing of revelation’ calls for the absent meaning – while for Benjamin, the very issue of meaning may no longer emerge; it may not even be ‘askable’ in the strange twilight of the life in the village at the foot of the hill. *Nothing remains of revelation*: yet, either it is a *mesmerizing* nothing, nothing itself as a remnant, poisoning in front of us one big distressing question mark and putting all being into doubt without delivering any

a springboard of a potential revelation appears also in the already quotes Irving Wohlfarth’s essay, “*Haarscharf auf der Grenze zwischen Religion und Nihilismus*. Zum Motiv des Zimzum bez Gershom Scholem”: “Where Benjamin expects a profane-messianic salvation from the mterialistic transformation of theology, Scholem insists on the potentiality to wrench the messianic directly from the process of secularization, the numinal from the loss of aura, and God from his self-withdrawal,” p. 182.

¹⁸ See the aphorism nr 108 called “New Struggles.”

counter-answer – or indeed, nothing as a simple nullity, no remnants at all, where the whole job of Moses would have to be done again completely from the premythic scratch.¹⁹ It is, after all, a question of viewing the history: in Scholem, firmly linear, under “the salvific-historical perspective of the established proceedings of the trial” (as Benjamin sarcastically reproaches his friend for sticking unreflectively to the Schillerian *dictum*, according to which *Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*²⁰) – while in Benjamin, fragmented and prone to temporal disturbances, where the revelation can indeed be lost without a trace.

At this point we should resist the temptation to follow Giorgio Agamben who, siding with Benjamin, claims that Scholem’s defense of the *shadow* of the Law boils down to the preservation of *the naked structure of sovereignty*.²¹ It is, in fact, just the opposite: Scholem rather wishes to maintain *the antinomian lesson of the Jewish Law* (precisely for this reason not to be conflated with any ‘profane’ law), now reduced only to the mystifying ‘nothing’ that cannot mean anything in the world dominated by mere life, fully consummated by its ‘deceit,’ but still can retain its resistant and vestigial validity. In Kafka, he maintains, there still remains the vestige of the Law, already dysfunctional and emptied, which nonetheless constitutes the *trace* of the antinomian message that had failed to reach us and transform world-being into redemptive history. Just like the Kafkan message from the Emperor, lost in the infinite chain of Chinese whispers which twist and distort its original meaning, this antinomian lesson came to earth disfigured beyond recognition. It may now masquerade as a hollow shell of pure sovereignty, which gives no account of its claim to power, but it is not how it keeps its significance; the question of meaning, of what it was *meant for* in the first place, has not departed from it completely. It still hovers there in a spectral manner, like the ghost of Hamlet in Derrida’s interpretation of the revolutionary teaching of Marx, which also underwent a historical distortion.²²

This is precisely why Scholem protests so strongly against leveling the Kafkan world back to the Bachofenian hetaeric universe of absolute beginnings (or the Goethean *Urmütter*) where no issue of Law can even be raised:

You don’t manage – he scolds Benjamin – without doing flagrant violence to the text; you are constantly obliged to interpret in defiance of Kafka’s own testimony, not only in the matter of the Law [...], but also in that of women, whose function you construe so masterfully, but from a totally one-sided Bachofean perspective, which runs counter to the most obvious evidence [...] If it were a primal world, then what need would there have been to make the women’s relationship to it into a riddle? (Letter nr 66, p. 141).

¹⁹ As Robert Alter put it in his commentary on the ‘Kafka debate’: “At first blush, the difference between the two positions may seem hairsplitting, but it will be worth pondering what might be at stake in the opposition between an absent and an unintelligible revelation”: Robert Alter, *Necessary Angels. Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 103.

²⁰ “The history of the world is the trial of the world”: this phrase, later borrowed by Hegel, appears originally in Friedrich Schiller’s poem, *Resignation*.

²¹ See Giorgio Agamben, “The Messiah and the Sovereign: The Problem of Law in Walter Benjamin,” in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 162. In the later essay from *Profanations*, Agamben will even strengthen his critique of Scholem and, once again leaning towards Benjamin, he will reproach Scholem for maintaining the rhetoric of secularization which blocks the modern idiom of profanation, the only one capable of truly casting off the transcendent ‘shadow.’

²² See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York & London: Routledge, 1994.

To which Benjamin retorts that in this true and absolute nothingness of revelation, to which the Kafkan world regresses, there is only bare life – flowing, self-proliferating, ‘sinking back into itself’ (precisely as in Scholem’s poem: “no life can unfold/ that doesn’t sink into itself”: *Preisgegeben an Gewalten,/ die Berschwörung nicht mehr zwingt,/ kann kein Leben sich entfalten,/ das nich in sich selbst sinkt*). In this world of the deepest oblivion, the only messianic hope lies in the fully immanentist maneuver, i.e. the reversal of studying: *stopping the flow*, which for Benjamin is always paramount to *stopping the fall*. For it is only studying, taking life for its object, that can create meaning without the props of tradition which can no longer teach how to get out from the snares of being. Torah has been thwarted (in its antononian attempt to revolutionise being), the Tradition ‘sickened,’ the Law completely forgotten – so the only way to procur the messianic reversal is to ‘metaphorize life into Scripture’ by studying. To which Scholem says, again: fine, let’s grant that this reversal will be fully immanent this time, but why doing it at all? If this truly were the primal world of the Bachofean *Mutterrecht* without the trace of the vanished revelation, why would we bother at all instead of just-living on the lap of our *Urmütter*? Why would anything pose itself as a ‘riddle’: a question mark, a pressing problem?

This, indeed, is a valid point. But Benjamin has an answer for that objection too. For in his interpretation of Kafka, it is only a revelation in form of the Law-the Torah, which has been ‘sickened’ and nullified beyond any redemption; despite the regression to the hetaeric universe, there still hovers a memory of this regression, preserved in the only *form* that is truly opposite to life’s chaotic flow: the narrative, the story, *that-which-progresses* by its very nature. In the later letter to Scholem from June 1938, Benjamin explains:

Kafka’s work represents a sickening of tradition. Wisdom has sometimes been defined as the epic side of truth. Wisdom is thus characterized as an attribute of tradition; it is truth in haggadic consistency. This consistency of truth has been lost [...] Kafka’s genius lay in the fact that he tried something altogether new: *he gave up truth so that he could hold to its transmissibility, the haggadic element*. His works are by nature parables. But their poverty and their beauty consist in their need to be *more* than parables. They don’t simply lie down at the feet of doctrine, the way Haggadah lies down at the feet of Halakhah. Having crouched down, they unexpectedly cuff doctrine with a weighty paw.²³

Already in his early talk on Kafka in German radio, from July 1931, Benjamin sees the antagonistic use of the haggadic element against the halachic order as the most distinctive feature of Kafkan parables:

Like the haggadic parts of the Talmud, these books, too, are stories ; they are a Haggadah that constantly pauses, luxuriating in the most detailed descriptions, in the simultaneous hope and fear that it might encounter the halachic order, the doctrine itself, on route [...] The fact that the Law never finds expression as such – this and nothing else is the gracious dispensation of the fragment (SW 2, 496; 497).

²³ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 326; my emphasis. Later on in the text as SW (and the number of the volume).

The kinetic character of this imagery is very telling. Benjamin pictures the Law as a ‘burden’ which weighs upon life and stops its flow by freezing life’s chaotic movement; it gives life an order, but it doesn’t give it a meaning. The meaning is promised by the haggadic story-telling which aims at easing and dissolving the heavy load of the Law by the narrating ‘procrastination’ (ibid., 496). By studying attentively all the details and pausing at seemingly irrelevant *peripeteia*, the haggadic parable chooses the longest, most winding route possible in order to avoid the encounter with the order: the totalistic sovereign authority of Halachah. We have thus three elements here, bestowed with three kinds of motions: bare life which flows; the Law which stops; and the story which both progresses and procrastinates. The latter two oppose the messy *flux* of life, but in a very different way; while the Law orders life, it also kills it – whereas the Story, less interested in ordering, aims at wrenching from life a meaning, a *sense*, i.e. ‘orientation’ and ‘direction,’ and at the same time delays the moment of the ossifying ordering. The Tradition is thus seen here as divided between the ‘Letter that kills’ (Benjamin would not have minded this Paulian association) and the spirit of a pure *transmissibility* whose only purpose is a sense-giving and formatting of the movement of life or reversing its inertial tendency towards dispersion.

The Law, therefore, is nothing but the hunch of the hunchback, which can only be lightened by the movement of storytelling whose vector is not exactly opposite, but tangential to the weighing down force of law (*force de loi*)²⁴; this means that when you move with a great speed forward, you feel less the burden pressing down on you (it is not just Kafka’s physics!). Narration plays then the role of Sheherezade who delays the verdict of death: the encounter with the lethal-legal doctrine.²⁵ But there is also another movement of narration: the studying, which implies the reversal of the flow of unreflected life. These two movements of storytelling may seem at first glance contradictory – running forward faster than life and stopping the flow of life by a hindsight – but, in fact, they share the same vector of antinomianism, pressing against the inertial flux of the hetaeric *Vorwelt*. For Kafka, as for Benjamin, the Law is like the Sinai mountain which Yahweh threatens to throw at Israel, unless it accepts His teaching: it is indeed a hill, a burden, a hunch, which weighs down on the believers, paradoxically thwarting their attempt at Exodus.²⁶ For,

²⁴ On the heavily material aspect of the force of law and the mystical foundation of authority see Jacques Derrida, “The Force of Law,” in *Acts of Religion*. Derrida may be also said to speak in favour of aggadah as the narrative alternative form of revelation in the conclusion to his *Mal d’archive*, where secret, nothing, and literature belong together; see Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996 .

²⁵ As presented by Benjamin in his essay, “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” SW 3, p. 154. In his interpretation of Leskov, Benjamin depicts the art of storytelling as offering the ‘epic side of truth’ which he calls ‘wisdom,’ – and this balance between truth and wisdom is precisely what has been lost in a now deeply disturbed relationship between Halachah and Aggadah. Here Benjamin clearly follows Bialik’s essay, “Halachah and Aggadah” (1916), which he read at the time of writing his text on Kafka, and in which Bialik states sarcastically that “now we are privileged to live in an age of pure Aggadah, both in literature and actual life. The whole world is but Aggadah within Aggadah; of Halachah, in whatever sense, there is no trace and no mention”: Haim Nahman Bialik, “Halachah and Aggadah,” in *Revelment and Concealment. Five Essays*, Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, p. 83. Yet, as Stephane Mosès rightly observes, even in the midst of this gravely ‘sickened tradition,’ “Kafka’s *oeuvre* is a testimony to the survival of a certain manner of ‘telling the tale’”: Moses, “Gershom Scholem’s Reading of Kafka,” p. 165.

²⁶ This is how the talmudic tractate *Shabbath* (88a and 88b) interprets the moment in the exodic story of Israel when “they stopped at the foot of the mountain...” (Exodus 19:17): “Rav Abdimi bar Hama

although God presents his Law as the help and guidance in the process of Exodus, without which it would not be possible to leave Egypt and begin a new life in the desert, it is, in fact, a ruse which aims at aborting the exodic movement and reestablishment of the Egypt-like legalistic arrangement of life.

For Benjamin, therefore, Kafka's works reflect the pure structure of Haggadah whose paradigmatic instance is precisely the story of Exodus from Egypt. There lies for him the only hope for the exit from bare life: not in the traditional *content* of the exodic story, but in the *form* itself, which now is supposed to fare better than the message it had so far conveyed. The weighty paw of Haggadah, which focuses on the motif of Exodus, raises against Halachah because of the latter's betrayal of *yetziat* in the rigid and mortifying doctrine of the Law. The feud between Haggadah and Halachah, which Benjamin found in Kafka's parables, may thus be understood as the opposition of the still valid project of Exodus (though preserved only in a vestigial form of a pure narrative) and the compromised legalistic doctrine which lost its antinomian touch and fell back into the realm of being.²⁷

The Exodic Story-Telling

The difference between Scholem and Benjamin would thus appear to be even more subtle, now circling around the issue of the *antinomian trace*. While for Scholem, it would still be the shadow of the Jewish Law, waging war against the laws of nature - for Benjamin it would only be the liberated form of the exodic narrative: the very movement of story-telling. For Scholem, the antinomian trace would still hide in the retreating *nothing* of revelation; for Benjamin, it would merely stay in the pure form of the exodic story which, relieved from the traditional content, now also tells *nothing*. Their debate is not about the Messiah versus the Sovereign (so Agamben in *Potentialities*), nor about the profanation versus the secularisation (so Agamben in *Profanations*), but about two *nothings*, two 'zero point contents,' which preserve the antinomian intuition of the radical 'otherwise than being': the nothing of the nullified, no longer significant Law - and the nothing of the liberated exodic narrative. These two 'nothings' are also the respective *loci* where Scholem's and Benjamin's *dei absconditi* reside.

Yet, the common point of the discussion is the motif of distortion, which Benjamin developed in his essay on Kafka. While Scholem believes that it is possible to revert the distortion of the teaching of the Law and go back to its antinomian-messianic origins, Benjamin believes in the powers of the narrative, capable of disentangling the distorted fragments of life and reverting them, via *en geringes*

bar Hasa has said: This teaches us that the Holy One, Blessed be He, inclined the mountain over them like a tilted tub and that He said: If you accept the Torah, all is well, if not here will be your grave." The 'mountain threat' is also the topic of Emmanuel Levinas's second talmudic reading, "The Temptation of Temptations," whose conclusions are - needless to say - very opposite to Benjamin's perception of the Law as a useless burden. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, pp. 30-50.

²⁷ On the salvific powers of the narrative in Judaic tradition, one can also refer to Wohlfarth who, following Yoseph Hayim Yerushalmi's *Zakhor*, stresses the role of memory playing itself out in story-telling. Convinced that Scholem finally took to heart his friend's "mystique of story-telling," Wohlfarth analyzes the conclusion of Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, which reminds the Hasidic story according to which "we can no longer make the fire, we can no longer pray, we no longer recognize the place, but we can still tell the story about it" - and says: "This would also be the moral of the whole story: that telling of the story itself is a religious act. Scholem accepted this moral in turning it into his own art of a critical retelling of the Jewish history": *Haarscharf...*, p. 180.

Zurechtstellen, ‘ a small adjustment,’ to the right form of the living. Life “assumes [the distorted form] in oblivion,”²⁸ and it is only a story which can retrieve it from the abyss of forgetfulness. In another essay on Kafka, “Franz Kafka: *Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer*,” Benjamin signals the enormous difficulties that lay in front of every attempt at such reversal, where any ‘description’ can work as a double-agent, only deepening the distortion:

Kafka’s work is prophetic. The precisely registered oddities that abound in the life it deals with must be regarded by the reader as not more than the little signs, portents, and symptoms of the displacements that the writer feels approaching in every aspect of life without being able to adjust to the new situation. His only reaction to the almost incomprehensible distortions of existence that betray the emergence of these new laws is a sense of astonishment, mixed with elements of panic-stricken horror. *Kafka is so possessed by this that he is incapable of imagining any single event that would not be distorted by the mere act of describing it [...]* Kafka’s fixation on the sole topic of his work – namely the distortion of existence – may appear to the reader as obsessiveness (SW II, 497; my emphasis).

As we have already said, the proper story of exodus-reversal cannot move in accordance with the ‘normal’ flow of life. In his theory of the messianic narrative, Benjamin would come up with many versions of counter-rhythmic rhetorical devices or ‘conversation stoppers.’ Thought-image, dialectical image, gesture, isolated quotation – all function here as figures of a counter-articulation, or *die gegenfügige Strebung* in the field of articulating practice, which, as Sigrid Weigel observes, avails itself of *die entstellte Ähnlichkeit*: “distorted imitation of particular figures of thought, often in completely changed thematic contexts.”²⁹ It is, therefore, the distortion, *Entstellung*, this essentially Freudian category, which governs the dialectics of the Benjaminian tropes of counter-articulation. For ‘distortion’ itself is a hyper-dialectical notion: it is a double-edged sword which points to the ‘right’ hidden origin of all these distortive *clinamena*, but also simultaneously shows how far it is and difficult to reach. Distortion, therefore, is at the same time a form of oblivion and a form of memory: “the forgotten [i.e. distorted] always touches on the best, for it touches on the possibility of redemption” (*Illuminations*, 136).³⁰

Not only does it remember; distortion also protects, for it hides the Messianic Idea from the onslaughts of the mythic forces of ‘what is.’ Kabbalistically speaking, it gives a masking cloak to the Angels of the realm of Yetzirah, so they can go

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books 1968, p. 133. Benjamin says on the hunchback, the emblem of the distorted life: “This little man is at home in *distorted life*; he will disappear with the coming of the Messiah, of whom a great rabbi once said that he did not wish to change the world by force, but would only make a slight adjustment in it” (ibid., 134).

²⁹ Sigrid Weigel, *Body and Image-Space. Re-Reading Walter Benjamin*, trans. Georgina Paul, London & New York: Routledge 1996, p. xi. Benjamin in *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. Howard Eiland, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 59: “Ich war entstellt von Ähnlichkeit”, I was distorted by resemblance.

³⁰ Distortion in this sense is thus akin to repression in Bloom’s interpretation of the essentially Freudian ‘Jewish Negative,’ for it touches on the specificity of ‘Jewish memory.’ Bloom says: “Freudian memory is Jewish memory, and Freudian forgetting is yet more Jewish” (Bloom, *The Strong Light*, p. 36) which suggests that both remembering and forgetting are dialectically intertwined in one operation of repression-distortion, *Vergrängung-Entstellung*.

unnoticed in the hostile world of Assiyah, and appear as the parodistic opposite of their fiery power, for instance, as a grotesque Odradek or a helpless *Gehilfe* (or, going straight into Frankism, a scandalous Messiah incarnated into a son of a prostitute). *To hide means also to protect*. One can do it as Rosenzweig did in *The Star of Redemption*, when he wished to hide the messianic prophecy in the storage of the religious unconscious, as a safely deposited *Niederschrift*, with which no one will tinker and expose it to the dangers of repaganization. Or one can do it in the Benjaminian way, i.e. by allowing for symptomatic, necessarily distorted, expressions of the messianic *Niederschrift*, always trying to deceive the surface consciousness and assuming the manner of the Freudian symptomatic speech. But such protecting through hiding remains a risky method for it may lead to a quite straightforward *oblivion*: a complete irrelevance of a God who is now so well hidden that no longer bears on our lives. Thus *to hide means also to risk losing by forgetting*; to bury things too deeply in the oblivion, beyond the reach of any mnemotechnics. Hence, one should rather tell stories by knowing that every word is but a symptom or a knot on a handkerchief, only pointing towards something we forgot, but were not supposed to have forgotten.

Weigel sums up this dialectics nicely by saying: “Distortion is *the* form in which lost similitude is both concealed and yet at one and the same time becomes perceivable” (ibid., 136). But this dialectic develops even further in what she rightly calls ‘the reversal of revelation into the messianic’ (ibid., 139), which constitutes yet another dimension of this massively overdetermined word, *Umkehr*: “the remotness from revelation reverses into a Messianic figure: into redemption” (ibid., 140). When revelation becomes completely nullified, the only messianic force can be found in the redemptive form of a narrative which will look for immanentist distortions and their ‘lost similitudes.’ For Benjamin, therefore, ‘nothingness of revelation’ means that there is no longer hope (at least, not for us) of the revival of revelation, or looking for *the signs of transcendence*; once the attempt to rekindle the transcendent perspective, undertaken by Benjamin in his work on *Trauerspiel*, failed, all that remains is to watch for *the redemptive indexes* within the realm of abandoned immanence, pointing obliquely where to go to realise the messianic ideal of a happy, undistorted life.

It is only in the context of the interplay between oblivion and distortion as the disfigured form of memory that we should look at Benjamin’s use of Bachofen’s concept of the ‘hetaeric world,’ which so much irritated Scholem. In fact, they – again - are not so far from one another, also on this point. Just like in his essay on the Kafkan story on the Chinese Wall, Benjamin praised its author for prophetic powers, also in his piece from 1935 called “Johann Jakob Bachofen,” he begins by extolling ‘prophetic side of Bachofen’ (SW3, 12) He is fascinated with the Bachofenian primal world of hetaeric fluidity where life and death do not yet form an opposition, which he also associates with the matriarchal form of early communism. The Kafkan women, promiscuous and seductive, rolling in the deep night of creation, are the true rulers of this anarchic world without rulers, where all the *Behörde* had been put into a sleep of oblivion. Yet, what clearly attracts Benjamin in the vision of the premythic stage of mankind is not the narcotic universe of *Mutterrecht* itself but only its *distorted similarity* with the messianic age; the disfigured image of a ‘happy, lawless life’ that cannot be saved *as such*, but can nonetheless be saved dialectically as the bearer of the distorted redemptive spark which it contains.

But this is also where Benjamin’s and Scholem’s ways truly part. While for Benjamin, more radical in this respect, ‘nothingness of revelation’ means that it can no longer be renewed or retrieved, and all that is left is a search for the indexes of

redemption, contracted in the immanent distortion – for Scholem, ‘nothingness of revelation’ means that revelation itself goes into hiding and retreats into original ‘meaninglessness’ from which it can spring again reinvigorated. While Benjamin’s way is strictly ‘horizontal,’ investing in a complex kinetics of the messianic narrative – Scholem’s expectation remains ‘vertical,’ firmly convinced that “what is in the process of appearing (for revelation is such a process) still does not disappear.”³¹

Power versus Promise

The excursion into Agamben’s reading of Scholem-Benjamin correspondence on Kafka was meant to raise once again the issue of the Jewish *clinamen* on the Protestant theme of *deus absconditus*, with which I began this essay. Pace Idel (though also partly in agreement with him), I wanted to demonstrate that there is more to the debate on the *Nichts der Offenbarung* than just a repetition of the well-known German-Protestant motives coming from Kierkegaard, Schmitt, and Barth. In the concluding section, I would like to sum up these differences and put them in an even stronger relief: as a salient distinction between *the negative theology of power* and *the negative theology of promise*.

The Protestant hidden God of the unreachable beyond is always the God of the sovereign power. But not so the Lurianic God who figures so strongly in the Scholem-Benjamin exchange in which both friends develop two complementary aspects of Luria’s metaphysics: while Scholem elaborates on God’s ‘second *tsimsum*’ or his withdrawal into the transcendent ‘nothingness of revelation,’ Benjamin focuses on his vestigial presence as hidden-in-the-world, immanently distorted and weakened, and thus even more radically breaking with the mythic image of lordship. Both Scholem and Benjamin would agree that there is, in fact, nothing inconceivable or deeply mysterious about divine sovereignty – as long as it is, simply, sovereignty. *Power holds no mysteries*; quite to the contrary, it is the most self-evident of all earthly things, the very essence of the most manifest mythic immanence. In their polemic against the dubious *mysteries of sovereignty*, which so strongly dominated Protestant negative theology, Benjamin and Scholem firmly unite: Benjamin in his deconstruction of the holiness of power in the *Trauerspiel* book, and Scholem in his alternative interpretations of the divine ‘meaninglessness.’ As Scholem says, *Es gibt Geheimnis in der Welt*, but this mystery is *not* the mystery of a hidden might; it is always and only the mystery of the unknown God who *promises* the ultimate messianic transformation of the power-dominated life into life liberated, happy, and blessed, beyond any dominion of sovereignty. It is not power which is concealed and radically transcendent – but only life, the ‘mysterious hidden life of God.’ God, therefore, reveals himself as indeed meaningless – but not as a Nothing-of-Meaning or the capriciously inexplicable power issuing ‘commands that command nothing,’³²

³¹ For Scholem, therefore, the modern world, although naturalized and nihilized, still presents itself as an arena of a potential powerful revival of religious intuition. In his eulogy of Franz Rosenzweig from 1930 he thus says: “There is no doubt 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 [...] 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)”: Gershom Scholem, “Gedenkrede auf Franz Rosenzweig,” in Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988, p. 533.

³² See Agamben, *Potentialities*, p. 163.

but as an autotelic Pleroma of eternal Sabbath, delighting in its own absolute uniqueness.³³

But this *reversal of divine concealedness* is not Benjamin's or Scholem's own invention; it derives from the kabbalistic teachings much earlier than those of Isaac Luria. Already in *Zohar*, which was Scholem's first kabbalistic love, we find a dismissive treatment of the Divine Sovereignty (as merely human projection) in favour of the absolute mystery of the All-Hidden One who, not incidentally at all, appears also to be the joyful God of Sabbath: the other, non-sovereign and non-judgmental God of the 'bundle of life.' Thus even YHVH, who makes Himself manifest as the active principle of creation, is called 'Small Countenance,' and only "in the last [order of manifestation], in Sovereignty, he calls himself King"³⁴:

Man dares project one sole conception of the Holy One, be blessed, that of his sovereignty over some one attribute or over the creation in entirety. But if he be not seen under these manifestations, then there is neither attribute, nor likeness, nor form in him [...] Neither shape nor form has he, and no vessel exists to contain him, nor any means to apprehend him (ibid., 52-3).

But there is just one hint with which human mind can begin to approach the All-Hidden Ancient One: it is not, as in the ascetic practices of Christian negative theology, a rigorous *via negativa*, but the joys of the Sabbath -

On each of the six days of the week, at the hour of the afternoon prayer, the force prevails of the unmitigated judgment, and retribution stands by. Not so on the Sabbath. When the hour of the Sabbath afternoon prayer has come, regnant are the benign influences, the lovingkindness of the Holy Ancient One is made manifest, all punishments are restrained, and joy and satisfaction are everywhere. In this hour of satisfaction and grace, the holy, faithful prophet Moses departed from this world, so that it might be known that he was not taken away through judgment, but that his soul ascended in the hour of grace of the Holy Ancient One, to be hidden in him. Hence, 'No man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day' (Deut. 34:6). Thus, as the Holy Ancient One is the All-hidden, unknowable to those above and those below, so also was the soul of Moses hidden, in the revelation, as the Sabbath afternoon prayer, of God's grace. *Of all hidden things in the world, this soul of Moses is the most hidden, and cannot come under judgment* (ibid., 59; my emphasis).

There are no mysteries of power, for power lies always on the surface: it is the most crudely visible and open feature of the immanent life. There is also nothing enigmatic about guilt and judgment, despite the Christian emphasis on the unphatomable depths of *hamartia*, the tragic guilt, then only slightly modified by Augustine and turned into the concept of 'original sin.' What is truly cryptic, always in-the-hiding, is only the

³³ Scholem writes about this delight and joy a propos one of his favourite kabbalists, Israel Saruk from the Lurianic School about 1600: "He explains the beginning of the speech movement, originating in the infinite essence of the Godhead, by pointing to the joy, delight and pleasure – in Hebrew *shi'aschu'a* – which creates the first stirring within the *Ein-Sof*": Gershom Scholem, "Die Sprachtheorie Isaak des Blinden," in *Judaica* 3, p. 53. This beautiful image very aptly sums up Scholem's positive and affirmative understanding of God's nothingness and meaninglessness as a spontaneous self-expression of the original pleromatic joy.

³⁴ *Zohar. The Book of Splendour*, trans. and ed. by Gershom Scholem, New York: Schocken Books, 1995, p. 54.

promise: the nothingness of *not-yet*, releasing from all guilt and judgments, all covenants and oaths, pointing out of its virtual non-existence towards a ‘sabbath-like’ possibility of life.³⁵ And just like, according to *Pesach Haggadah*, the whole world is Moses’ grave, the whole world is also filled with his ‘hidden soul’: the scattered spark of grace which can nonetheless be found amidst the distortion.³⁶

The Scholemian formula of *Nichts der Offenbarung* shimmers with all these alternative meanings that have nothing to do with the traditional negative theology, especially in its Nominalist-Protestant variant, enquiring into inscrutability of God’s transcendent power. While it releases from the grips of the Law, as the only Jewish manifestation of the divine sovereignty, it does not show a mysterious *nothing* behind it, from which there spring God’s capricious decisions and verdicts. It rather shows an originating matrix of an ever-renewable promise of which we cannot talk openly and have to remain prudently silent.³⁷ Or, just hint at it, pause at it, and luxuriate at its possibility, as according to Benjamin all haggadic narratives do by cherishing their own version of the hidden God.

Nothing perhaps sums this discussion better than the remark made by Paul Celan in *The Meridian*. Celan, who read Scholem and Benjamin carefully, saw himself as a poet continuing the haggadic story-telling, trying to find ways out from the Egypt of the post-Holocaust world. Equally committed to seek the possibility of the ‘messianic reversal’ in the midst of the Egyptian *Verengung*³⁸, Celan never abandoned hope into what he called the hidden God of the poem and his still concealed poetic powers of future expression:

... one makes something understandable through non-saying; the poem knows *argumentum ex silentio*. There is an eclipse which one should not confuse with a trope or a simple stylistic sophistication. *The God of the poem is undoubtedly a deus absconditus*.³⁹

³⁵ This Scholemian-Benjaminian motif of getting beyond the mysteries of power will then continue in Jacques Derrida’s reflections on the death/withdrawal of God who dies/withdraws in order to release us from all forms of validity and guilt, *Geltung-Gültigkeit*. In the exchange with Yvonne Sherwood, Kevin Hart and John D. Caputo, called “Epoche and Faith,” Derrida says: “One has to dissociate God’s sovereignty from God, from the very idea of God. We would have God without sovereignty, without omnipotence”: in *Derrida and Religion. Other Testaments*, eds. Yvonne Sherwood & Kevin Hart, Routledge: New York & London 2005, p. 42.

³⁶ For Ernst Bloch (whose *Spirit of Utopia* was highly appreciated by Benjamin, though less so by Scholem) this is yet another instance of the theological superiority of Haggadah over Halachah and its “redacted Scripture,” for it pardons and exonerates Moses instead of supporting the image of YHWH as an angry, all-powerful and punishing God; see Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, p. 75. Bloch follows Bialik’s famous opening of his essay: “Halachah wears a frown, Aggadah a smile. The one is pedantic, severe, unbending – all justice; the other is accommodating, lenient, pliable – all mercy... On one side there is petrified observance, duty, subjection; on the other perpetual rejuvenation, liberty, free volition”: Bialik, *Revelment and Concealment*, p. 45. But unlike Bialik, who believes that there is a constant communication between the two and “a living and healthy halachah is an aggadah that has been or that will be – and the reverse is true also” (ibid., 47), Bloch, similarly to Benjamin, emphasizes the antagonism between them and opts for an alternative theology issuing from the haggadic narrative.

³⁷ Already in his short essay on “Lamentation and Dirge” from 1918, Scholem talks about the ‘unfallen silence’ which retained its purity despite the fall of all languages. Scholem never abandoned his belief in silence and its unfallen quality, still containing the promise hidden in *Nichts der Offenbarung*. See Gershom Scholem, “Über Klage und Klagelied,” *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, 2 Halbband 1917-1923, Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 2000, p. 133.

³⁸ One of the most famous Celan’s poems, *Die Verengung*, takes its title from the Hebrew meaning of Egypt as *mitsraim*, ‘the narrow place’: the place of suffocation and death.

³⁹ Es gibt [...] ein dem Gedicht und nur ihm eigenes Sprach-Tabu, das nicht allein für seinen Wortschatz gilt, sondern auch für Kategorien wie Syntax, Rhythmus oder Lautung; vom Nichtgesagten

her wird einiges verständlich; das Gedicht kennt das *argumentum ex silentio*. Es gibt also eine Ellipse, die man nicht als Tropus oder gar stillistisches Raffinement missverstanden darf. *Der Gott des Gedichts ist unstreitig ein deus absconditus*: Paul Celan, *Der Meridian. Endfassung – Entwürfe – Materialien*, eds. Heino Schmuhl, Bernhard Böschenschein, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999, pp. 86-7.