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CHAPTER 2

After Germany

An American Jewish Philosophical Manifesto

Zachary J. Braiterman

Modern and contemporary Jewish philosophy should have to re-create itself in every generation, to unpack and reorganize itself. Yet Jewish philosophy today tends to come late to the task of turning the wheel of its own conceptual universe in sync with new times, places, and concepts. To count as scholars, those of us who commit to Jewish philosophy speak our own thoughts historically through the sieve of the great thinkers. We do not project in a transparent way a critical voice. Instead, we channel the voice of Martin Buber or Franz Rosenzweig, Emmanuel Levinas or Leo Strauss, and use them to mask our own thoughts. Caught in the past, Jewish philosophy will have lost the feel for time’s acceleration, as if unaware that the ninety to one hundred years already separating us today from Buber and Rosenzweig represent the same historical span that separated them from the early German romantics whose influence on them they sought hard to shake. My colleagues and friends hardly seem to notice that “modern” German Jewish philosophy is no longer “contemporary,” which it was in the 1920s or in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s when the origin and the first impact of its concepts were young. In the blink of an eye, one hundred years go by. Everything changes, except Jewish philosophy, which has yet to shift its attention from Germany to America, from modernism to postmodernism and to theoretical frames that come after postmodernism.

I begin these reflections under the assumption that “America” would constitute a primary locus of an American Jewish philosophy insofar as historical time and geographic space represent the aesthetic forms that condition possible philosophical inquiry. Accepting the offer extended by the editors of this volume to speak in an autobiographical voice, I am going to do so in relation to my own small place in the world, growing up in Baltimore in the late 1970s and early 1980s just prior to the popular advent of postmodernism. The ones who eventually brought me to the study of religion and Jewish philosophy belonged to a weird cabal of literature and philosophy, including Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Friedrich Nietzsche, Baruch Spinoza, Hermann Hesse, A. D. Gordon, I. B. Singer, and Y. L. Peretz. My corner of the world was an adolescent American Jewish microcosm defined by the old Modern Library
edition of the modern classics, emerging out from the shadows of Auschwitz, late 1960s youth culture, Labor Zionism, and the kibbutz socialist idea.

Apart from an adolescent attraction to pantheism, none of this intellectual autobiography had much to do with religion, not with the sources of Judaism like the Bible, Talmud, or Zohar, and not with synagogue and the Siddur, which I neither understood nor liked. I came to those things later in college, to Martin Buber and Richard Rubenstein, and then in graduate school, plowing through Jewish and German philosophy, as well as rabbinic midrash and aggadah, vaguely under the rubric of “postmodernism” but without much theoretical direction imposed on me by my advisors. In my first book, *(God) After Auschwitz* (1998), I sought to explore the theological and textual revision shaping and reshaping the canon of Jewish theological ideas and traditional texts in post-Holocaust thought. And then I came to art and to aesthetics, moving on to stake my own independent intellectual identity as a thinker and scholar. My second book reflects more clearly new angles into religion and Judaism. *The Shape of Revelation* (2007) is a philosophical, aesthetic-theoretical excursus placing the German Jewish thought of Buber and Rosenzweig into conversation with German expressionism and “the spiritual in art.”

America was nowhere in sight. My thoughts were elsewhere, driven first by the idea and image of catastrophe and the memory of the European Holocaust and then by the art of German modernism and the aesthetics of German Jewish philosophy. But instead of making my home there, I want to try to set aside, to place and replace modern German Jewish thought, and try to do something new. As will become clear, the only way to do this is polemically. Politics after 9/11 has something to do with my growing sense that, after Buber and Rosenzweig, there is not a lot of open space in modern German philosophy for contemporary forms of Jewish thought and philosophy. Following the art world from Europe to New York in the 1940s and 1950s, my pivot away from Germany has as much to do with aesthetics as it does with politics. To set aside the German-Jewish modernism in whose aesthetic and conceptual space I have worked so many years can only be a prologemena to the reterritorialization of an American Jewish philosophical place, to a preliminary scoping out of new things and new places, a new kind of contemporary style that might owe more to Andy Warhol than to Marc Chagall or German expressionist woodcuts.

I have no doubt that Jewish philosophy will remain forever enmeshed in the history of modern German philosophy and modern German Jewish thought. If philosophy can be understood as nestled deep in the imagination, then the way one ultimately moves about in the world comes down to style, that is, the
modality under which the design of subjects, objects, and concepts are shaped as systematic articulations of sense impression. As I read them, German and German-Jewish philosophy and thought recommend themselves for the aesthetic energy of their conceptual thinking. About art and aesthetics in relation to thought and to the construction of concepts, everything was said with brio in works by G. W. Leibniz, Moses Mendelssohn, E. G. Lessing, Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, Nietzsche, Hermann Cohen, Buber and Rosenzweig, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, Theodor Adorno, and Hannah Arendt. As important as the theories actually theorized is the grand and musical way in which these theorists theorized, the way philosophical contents formed out of dramatic gestures and assumed a visual stamp.

High style and strong spirit characterized Jewish thought and culture as conceived in Germany by thinkers as varied as Mendelssohn, nineteenth-century historians such as Abraham Geiger and Heinrich Graetz, and Buber and Rosenzweig. In their own time in the history of art and design, they drew, respectively, on rococo charm and the cool marble-like surfaces of eighteenth-century neoclassicism, the warm domestic and bourgeois material comforts of Biedermeier design-aesthetics, and the hot, sharp-edged lines and roiled coloring of German expressionism in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In contrast, American Jewish philosophy has remained artless and unschooled in its own contemporary aesthetic cultures. One will not find there anything like the form creation, sheer presence, lyric pathos, rhythmic repetition, open spatial arrangements, and erotic pulse that moved German-Jewish thought in the first quarter of the last century. Framing this polemically, I would say that those of us at work today in Jewish philosophy do not genuinely understand the art or the craft of thought, the relationship between content and form, and we have yet to figure out how to place our own more contemporary form of Jewish philosophy in new aesthetic and conceptual environments. The problem is that, in Jewish philosophy, nothing and no one came after Buber and Rosenzweig, while to stay in Germany after them is to flail into the historical and philosophical abyss of “1933.”

1 Germany

About twenty years ago, Emmanuel Levinas stood to succeed Buber and Rosenzweig in the philosophical affections of contemporary Jewish thought. The fit was only natural. Heir to and critic of the phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, the philosophical world shaped by Levinas was steeped in the Bible and Talmud, whose sober philosophical stance
was so dominated by ethics as to exhaust it. Whether or not they wanted to recognize Levinas as Jewish thinker, continental philosophers at least recognized him as one of their own, and this assured Jewish things a place at the table. Things change. In the years since 9/11, ethics has been eclipsed by “the political” in works by Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri, and Slavoj Žižek, leading continental philosophy and critical theory into conceptual territory from which Jewish philosophy tends to shy. What now stands out as the soft humanism of Jacques Derrida, Levinas, and Jean-François Lyotard and the 1970s French postmodernism of midrash, literature, ethics, and “the Jews” have been superseded by the figure of St. Paul and by the ultraconservative German political theorist Carl Schmitt. Paul was sought for concepts meant to forge a new universalism that is neither Greek nor Jewish, whereas Schmitt has been used by Left-leaning thinkers to gin up political theory against liberalism on the basis of “militant gestures,” power politics, “theo-politics,” and deciding “the friend/enemy distinction.” To borrow Buber’s sketch from the 1929 essay “Dialogue,” critical theory has been dominated by “men of the ‘collective’ who look down superciliously on the ‘sentimentality’ of the generation before them” (Buber 1965, 32).

Taking further advantage of the license extended by the editors of this volume to speak both autobiographically and also polemically, I will admit that I do not know what to do with many of the sources that inspire contemporary critical thought, that is, the importance of Lenin for Žižek, the fidelity of Badiou to Mao, or the recourse made by Agamben to Schmitt. In the space of a polemic, I can only skim the surface of their work, but I do not believe that anything theoretically or practically sound comes from any of these sources. My own inclination is instead to see the compromised and compromising form of liberalism as a more corrigible, self-correcting historical, political, and theoretical platform upon which to reconstruct Jewish thought and political culture, and that contemporary critical theory and the discourse of political theology have offered no help out of our current theoretical and political jitters after 9/11.

Aware of the historical contexts coming out of Germany right before and after the war, my own philosophical thinking remains distant from the antitechnological, antimodern, antiliberal, and antidemocratic frames of reference, the “jargon of authenticity,” the harsh decisionism, the utter contempt for common sense and instrumental reason, or the violent political-cum-apocalyptic gesturing in the works of some. I am working here with a broad brush, trying to register a subjective impression that is not so much professional as it is polemical. Viewed as a whole under a blanket judgment, what strikes me about the discourse is how its authors seem consistently to combine a philosophy of crisis, contradiction, and predicament expressed in a cold, airless register, in the acid
either/or polarizing between one thing and another: Being/beings, Athens/ Jerusalem, secular/sacred, freedom/obedience, philosophy/law, poeisis/ratio, agora/oikos). On these hardened fields, there seems to be no middle ground given for the negotiated place for hybrid things, creatures, concepts, or systems between either point of dead-end oppositions. Without human warmth, the conceptual terrain precludes positions that are more irenic, felicitous, and open to the possibility that conflicts are fungible, if not entirely resolvable.

In a nutshell, the Weimar and post-Weimar conceptual topoi that continue to orient my own work have mostly to do with the imagination and with spatial constructs, and less with politics per se. Arendt plumbed the space of appearance, a conception of the public sphere built on political action, political risk, natality, and the new. Benjamin remains unequalled in his mastery of the thought-image, philosophical surrealism, and profane illuminations. Heidegger, as well as his critic Hans Jonas, reorients Continental philosophy away from metaphysics back toward the natural attention to worldly things. Leo Strauss understood better than most how politics is based on images, against his own will, pointing his readers back into the Platonic cave. Strauss’s polemics with Jacob Taubes, a fringe figure in the field of modern Jewish philosophy, tells me that maybe there is something to be said for aggressive counterhistories, heretical imperatives, antinomian world denial, and an apocalyptic excess of thought as intellectual performance.

It is just not clear what one is supposed to do with the source material except to study it in terms of intellectual history. Immersed in its own world and time, it provides an uncertain basis on which to consider very well philosophical things that come after German modernism. For instance, take Bonnie Honig’s edited volume Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt (1995). One notes the mighty labor to “rescue” Arendt for feminism, even as the most charitable contributors will have noted Arendt’s hostility toward gender and sex and her aversion to “the politics of the personal” (see chap. 1, 127–28, 135–36). In the end, one can appreciate the work, the theoretical tools, and the hermeneutical ingenuity brought to bear in these kinds of philosophical rescue attempts, without being sure that they are worth the effort. Another option would be more simply to identify and to take what one can from Arendt, to use this concept or that concept in relative isolation, while leaving the author and the larger scheme of the project behind without attempting this resurrection of the dead for a political purpose alien to the thinker’s work, historically considered.

Consider another example closer to the Jewish conceptual canon, namely, messianism. It is a relic still bandied about in critical theory, as well as in contemporary Jewish thought, as if the idea were still fresh. An ancient idea with modern roots in the bourgeois culture of nineteenth-century liberal
German-Jewish thought and the hot pathos of German expressionism, its dominant position in contemporary Jewish thought speaks to the synthesis of Cohen, Rosenzweig, and Levinas in Jewish philosophy, with disaster aesthetics gleaned from Benjamin, Schmitt, and Agamben in critical theory. My own view is that messianism has been forced to carry too much weight as a philosophical figure. In *I and Thou* (1970 [1922]), redemption plays for Buber a limited role in comparison to revelation, whereas, in Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption* (1971 [1930]), the place of messianism is only penultimate to ungentle apocalyptic vision. As for Cohen, I can only suspect that, if he had had time to finish the *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* (1995 [1972]), the messianic ethos of the social prophets, along with the “holy” God of morality and pity, would have given way to atonement and to the peaceful death instanced in the last chapter of the book, assured to a stabilized human subject by the “good God” revealed by the prophet Ezekiel.

As the messianic assumes all the rage in the discourse of political theology since 9/11, I have come to the opposite judgment that it was and remains the wrong answer to the problems of time and totalitarianism. For Schmitt, it was the state, whereas, for Benjamin, it was revolution or some other figure of divine violence that can force decision or break-shock the *rigor mortis* or indecision of liberal politics and bourgeois culture. Only one or the other can enjoy the status of absolute power. With Agamben, an inoperative divine law is an index to an inoperative state. I find myself wanting more critical distance on this bizarre philosophical figure. My own souring reflex is to wonder if the messianic was overacted and just too cute. Viewed critically, I suspect that, for Benjamin, messianism bridged his flirtation with Judaism and totalitarianism, with Scholem and Bertolt Brecht, and with Schmitt, as is now realized. Almost, but not nearly as bad are Buber’s reflections on the messianic in *Kingship of God* (1967 [1932]) and *Prophetic Faith* (1949). Buckling under pressure from Nazism, the idea that the sovereignty of God might staunch human kingship by occupying all areas of life sounds like a desperate flip side of the totalitarianism that the idea was meant to oppose.

Placing these kinds of philosophical “things” in context, I increasingly suspect that, with the passage of so much history, philosophical concepts like the messianic and messianic now-times, “divine violence,” Dada and surrealist montage and shock aesthetics, or even clarion calls to “neighbor love” begin to run down and wear out. About messianism, the Babylonian rabbis seem to have been quite cold. At least the late redactors of the Babylonian Talmud seemed to have thought that, for the messiah to come, the whole world, their world, would be turned upside down. With “the face of a dog” and without the Torah, those who suffer the generation preceding the coming of the messiah live in a world
the rabbis do not want, one in which scholars are held in contempt, no longer holding the status that they themselves have always believed they should enjoy. The messianic signifies the end of the world loved by them because the world they loved was dominated not by God and not by the messiah but by the Torah and by their own hermeneutical acumen. The messiah turns into a fantasy figure. He occupies pride of place in the siddur, the Havdalah ceremony closing off the end of Shabbat, and the Passover Haggadah. But it has always been the mistake of hard and soft messianic thinking to confuse liturgical poetics with anything practical. The coming of the messiah is apolitical or antipolitical. That is at least how I read the main thrust of this material in BT Sanhedrin (97a ff.), the *locus classicus* for this kind of speculation in the Babylonian Talmud. Anti-catastrophists as they were, the Babylonian rabbis placed the messiah in a liturgical box, as a theoretical-conceptual limit point or poetic utterance, not as the object of a political desire or a program. The rabbis’s own sense of political place seems to have been more accommodating and pragmatic, which, in the context of twentieth-century Europe, might not have been so wise, as Richard Rubenstein reminded us.

After Buber and Rosenzweig, the unhappy, unpragmatic place of Weimar and post-Weimar German philosophy leaves Jewish philosophy in the kind of place thought marked out by Franz Kafka in the very short “A Little Fable.” Its trapped protagonist is a sad little mouse caught up in a hostile world. From beginning to end, here is the tale. So brief it ends almost before it even begins:

“Alas,” said the mouse, “the world is growing smaller and every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when at last I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly, that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into.” “You only need to change your direction,” said the cat, and ate it up. (Kafka 1946, 445)

In this tiny little thing, in this quick little fable, Kafka underscored the tightening tempo of time and space, in which an animal protagonist finds itself caught stuck in narrowed corners from which there is no exit.

My interest here in Kafka has to do less with modern literature or even the history of German philosophy and more to do with contemporary Jewish philosophy. The polemical question I want to pose is whether Jewish philosophy should continue to commit itself conceptually to intellectual history, to the constricting space here in “A Little Fable,” to the ones suffered by the men, women, mice, dogs, vermin, jackals, and apes in so many of Kafka’s collected
stories. Or might it be the case that these figures inhabit precisely the very kind of tight, immobilizing places and placing out of which an American Jewish philosophy might seek to move? Kafka's were the narrowing corners that historically shaped the modern German Jewish philosophical tradition at its terminus. We visit these corners, even if they are no longer ours. They belong to a different time and place, and I do not see how one could, in anything other than bad faith, pose conceptually or dramatically the particularism of this place as a human universal, as our universal space.

2 America

“America” would represent a new horizon, an antipode to “German” philosophical seriousness. It is a Jewish America one can discover in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, with its queer historical arc grandly combining metaphysics and secularism, politics and sentiment, the comic and the serious sitting side by side; in bizarre hybrids like the feminist Talmud in Rachel Adler's *Engendering Judaism* (1998), entering into a zone of conflict territorialized by misogynistic texts from which a feminist should otherwise flee, but sensing instead a kind of closeness to these psychologically damaged and damaging yet somehow endearing rabbis; in the mix of high-mindedness and low burlesque marked out in Daniel Boyarin's study of the Babylonian rabbis, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (2009), which one can read as cultural performance just as much as for its scholarship.

These are distinctly American contributions that encourage one to think about religion and Judaism in a secular key. To take, philosophically, the claims of Judaism or religion seriously but not too seriously requires the constant back-and-forth shift between credulity and incredulity maintained by all three authors, Kushner, Adler, and Boyarin. Without having to decide absolutely one way or the other, “America,” like the Talmud, offers new space for the possibility of Jewish philosophy in the form of credulous and incredulous wide-open spaces and rangy ruminations synchronized to a cultural environment marked by the reality of vulgarity, commercialism, and crass cheapness. Generous and self-centered, America and its liberal promise for Jewish philosophy, the promise of its ideal, has always been what Ralph Waldo Emerson in “On Art,” called the “production of a new and fairer whole” (cited by Kushner, epigraph).

But why should it be the case that postwar and contemporary American Jewish philosophy seems always to fall short of German-Jewish philosophical modernism? I am contending here that the answer to this question has everything to do with art and aesthetics and with the fact that American Jewish
philosophy has never been “postmodern,” not in a genuine way. Aesthetics gave German-Jewish philosophical modernism its conceptual edge. In contrast, postwar and contemporary Jewish philosophy in the United States has been unable to steep its thinking in new conceptual vocabularies made possible by contemporaneous aesthetic cultures of architecture, art, cinema, digital media, drama, installation, music, novels, poetry, and video. Perhaps neither aesthetics nor American Judaism has yet to be considered sufficiently serious. Perhaps, too, American Jewish philosophy continues to rely overmuch on Germany and German Jews for its materials, and this has made it more difficult for Jewish philosophers to integrate Judaism into America, spiritually intellectually. Like the fourth child in the Passover Haggadah, we do not even know where to look or what to ask. Immersed too deeply in German intellectual history, the academically specialized discourse of Jewish philosophy remains out of touch with environments and object-worlds closer to home, while at the same time suffering under the impression that the thought-world of German Jewish modernism would continue to hold the key to our own contemporary predicaments.

In this attempt to stake out new topoi for an American Jewish philosophy, I will start with house and home. Again taking advantage of the license given us to speak in a personal vein, this means with my parents and with adolescence, not only for obvious sentimental reasons but also for reasons that have as much to do with the self-constituting of my own work in Jewish philosophy. I will begin with my father, Sheldon (z’l).

A quintessential second-generation American Jew, my father’s attachment to family, Jewish people, the Jewish people, and Israel was as emotional and nonreflexive as it was historically and culturally thick. In his experience of the world, these Jewish things were simple and bound up together. He ran an independent law firm because it was possible to do this in the 1970s and 1980s and still earn a decent living and because he did not work well with others. Devoted and domineering, aggressive and overbearing, he was brilliant, funny, charming, and irritating. I had figured out already in high school to avoid him at his most difficult, while accepting that his was the mode with which I came, unthinkingly, to my own ideological and intellectual commitments to Jewish “things” and Jewish “places.” From him, I learned crude arts of rebellion, non-assimilation, and rejection of bourgeois propriety and polite manners.

As an adolescent and into my early twenties, I was in every sense devoted to Habonim-Dror, a Labor Zionist youth movement. It was for me an autonomous space, a second space, outside the constraints of the primary parental home. In the 1970s, the American Labor Zionism at Habonim-Dror was defined by a rump-end form of radical drug culture. Woodie Guthrie, American folk
repertoire, the Grateful Dead, and Crosby, Stills, and Nash meshed with the socialism of Ber Borochov and A. D. Gordon, with classical Israeli folksongs and folkdance. It is where I first heard Bernard Malamud’s “The Jewbird” read out loud or saw the Holocaust documentary Night and Fog. It seemed that we must have been shown The Producers, On the Waterfront, and Cool Hand Luke every summer. It is where I would have also read Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery” and would have seen the movie adaptations of To Kill a Mockingbird and The Fixer and The Pawnbroker. The best movies were in black and white. There was no contradiction, no theological-political predicament. The combinations felt organic, not forced. They held together for as long as they did.

My parents had grown up in America during the 1930s and 1940s, watching from this side of the Atlantic the destruction of European Jewry, the establishment of the State of Israel, and then the 1967 Six-Day War. They lived very much on the outside of mainstream society dominated by WASP culture, and a rebellious outsider sense still stamped my friends in the mid-to-late 1970s. We despised bourgeois American Judaism, which we thought was physically dull and politically compromised. This was our negation of the Diaspora. Ideologically self-righteous and self-important, what mattered most of all was the intense social interaction between us, an intensity that I now believe is very “Jewish,” an old reflex, this shtetl-solidarity and bonding that my parents would have learned from their immigrant grandparents and that my friends and I would have learned from our grandparents. Looking back at old pictures from the 1970s, what strikes me is the almost naïve and open self-giving of ourselves to a camera. I am probably imagining it, but the faces seem more relaxed, less anxious, and happier than the way people appear in pictures today, when the relationship to cameras and other types of imaging technologies is more knowing and critical. We were closer in 1975 to 1945 (to the end of World War II and to the Holocaust) than we are today in 2013 to 1975—and closer still to the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the Six-Day War. Things looked different back then. Israel looked different; America looked different; we looked different. I will not say “better.” Worlds were smaller back then, perhaps less self-critical and self-aware than today, less cynical, and also less wise. I think we were better bonded back then, to each other, to history, and to political ideas. There is the notion now that none of this was “genuine,” that it was, indeed, all posed. This critical insight represents a little bit of postmodern wisdom, which may be true, if not in an absolute sense, then at least more or less, but in a way that is probably beside the point.

This group consciousness was something that my father understood, my mother much less so. To her, this Jewish thing was limited and limiting, which, of course, it was. From my mother, Marilyn, I learned over time how to place
and to connect Jewish commitments out into a more cosmopolitan place. It is not as if she was ever interested in either German Jewish philosophy or Judaism. She was not and is not. But in her professional life, she remains very interested in the fin de siècle, the aesthetic milieu out of which, coincidentally, modern Jewish philosophy emerged. For years, she volunteered at the Smith College Used Book Sale, sponsored by the school’s Baltimore alumna. Helping set up the tables, I got first dibs on books and built my first philosophy library there on the cheap as a teenager. Later, my mother started Marilyn Braiterman Rare Books, selling books out of the house when my younger brother and I were in high school in the late 1970s. I remember one summer driving with her in a van full of books, with the windows open, back home to Baltimore from a show in Philadelphia. Although she claims to be sick of the business, Marilyn continues to find, buy, trade, show, and sell first-edition illuminated books related to art, architecture, travel, design, and photography, mostly from late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany, France, England, and America. When there was a market for it in the 1980s and early 1990s, there was always a lot of modern Judaica and some anti-Semitica around. I have been going to the annual book fairs of the Association of Antiquarian Booksellers of America for years now. I have always liked the culture of the fairs, the dealers from California, New York, New England, and from the European stores, the gossip and the back and forth. As often as not, antiquarian book dealers tend to be incredibly smart. Combining erudition and business, they know a lot and in a more worldly way than is common among most academics such as myself.

The antiquarian book trade constituted my first practical introduction to the aesthetics of Jewish modernism, about which I might have otherwise not known a thing. Marilyn Braiterman Books modeled a small and rarified corner of the world where modern Jewish aesthetica cohabits with larger blocs of very old printed books, modern first editions, autographs, maps, anatomical and zoographical and ethnographic picture-books from the eighteenth century, and art books from the early and mid-twentieth century. Before my eyes, in three dimensional display, I first saw in her shop how one might put two and two together with three, four, and five: neoclassical architecture; art nouveau, Jugendstil, and Bezalel design; German expressionism; neuesachlichkeit; Ballet Russe; English gardens; landscapes and landscape design; Japanese erotica; German and French anti-Semitica; the Song of Songs; and other modern rare-edition illuminated Hebrew books.\(^1\) These were among the first nontextual, visual cues with which I began to make sense of modern Judaism and modern Jewish thought and culture. Rare-book culture may have nothing to do

with ethics and social justice, with “the messianic” or “the call of the other.” But rare books remain deeply “moral” in the technical sense meant by anthropologists. Relating to coded conduct and value, nothing matters more than style, including moral substance, which itself has always already been stylized.

As for a practical payout to this aesthetic education, I am learning from my mother how to draw sharp, business-like conclusions. I do not believe that contemporary Jewish philosophy will ever be done with German Jewish philosophy, at least not for another hundred years. But German Jewish philosophy has already entered into an historical archive. There are wonderful things to look at. This is both a descriptive and a normative claim, reflecting my own attempt to arrange them vis-à-vis a different place and time. I have come to understand that the fancy that the dead continue to speak to us is an antihistoricist, philosophical conceit used to justify our own hermeneutical work. “Adorno,” “Benjamin,” “Buber,” “Cohen,” “Kafka,” “Rosenzweig,” “Scholem,” “Strauss” all belong now together as objects in a museum of philosophical ideas or at an antiquarian philosophy fair. Go to them like to any other period genre; handle them like any antiquarian object; pick them up mentally; look at them this way and then that way; turn them about. They continue to enjoy conceptual exhibition value. And then go home, leaving them there up on the wall or under a glass.

Academic antiquarianism nests Jewish philosophy deeply, safely, and professionally inside a tight cocoon, But it does not encourage one to open up new ground, to allow Jewish philosophy to move around outside in search of new things, new mental leads and landscapes. A case in point is the aversion of Jewish philosophy to French theory and to American intellectual culture. Apart from Levinas and a little bit of Derrida, the vast majority of contemporary Jewish philosophers would seem to have never taken a look at thinkers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gaston Bachelard, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, or Gilles Deleuze. As for American thought, with perhaps the exception of Charles Saunders Peirce, American thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, William James, John Dewey, Richard Rorty, and Stanley Cavell figure only dimly on the philosophical radar. What these thinkers could offer contemporary Jewish philosophy are more nuanced understandings of the relation between philosophy and nonphilosophy, the places between immanence and transcendence, the real and virtual lives of the body and bodies, their sex and affective dispositions, art and the visual imagination, the science and the technologies that underpin contemporary thought and culture, including religious life and thought. Ultimately, these varied things do not simply “deconstruct” as much as they hold together in time and in place.
It is hard to say how, where, and with whom to begin. Any such decision would have to relate practically to any given project and, less practically, to accidents and sheer serendipity. Again, about this I can only speak personally. Back when I was still more deeply immersed in German Jewish philosophy, I am sure, for instance, that I would not have bothered to notice a review in the *New York Times* of Alfred Kazin’s recently published diaries (Cook 2011). A godsend to me now, Kazin could only have been, at the time, a complete stranger. One of the great New York Jewish intellectuals, here was a leading light of American letters at midcentury ensconced for years at the *New Republic*, a randy man about town, the kind of unreligious Jewish Jew whom my father and mother would have instantly recognized. If I were to try to reset Jewish thought and philosophy and to provide it new conceptual and historical legs, and a visual sense in mid-twentieth-century America, it would be with him.

I do not know exactly why I immediately ordered *Alfred Kazin’s Journals* as well as *A Walker in the City* (1948), Kazin’s stream-of-consciousness memoir of growing in the 1920s in the wilds of Brownsville on the outer edge of Brooklyn. I was looking for something new, for an American form of Jewish theoretical discourse, some still-uncharted expression of an American Jewish philosophy, built on American aesthetic and philosophical sources. But why Kazin in particular? That I still do not understand, apart from dumb luck. What I did not expect to find in him and what my parents, in their atheism, would not have seen themselves or even recognized is the strong metaphysical and pungent spiritual impulse pervading this secular American Jewish worldview at midcentury. In *Walker in the City*, Kazin lets us feel this impulse standing in a state of pronounced tension with the light and smells of intense summer heat, the moldering form of traditional Judaism, the stifling Judaism of his grandparents’ generation, which was the only Judaism it seems he encountered growing up in faraway Brownsville. Jewishness is defined in this text not by religion but rather by second-generation American Jewish culture. For Kazin, however, the memory of Shabbat at home, with his working-class parents and with his cousin and her friends who would drop in, Shabbat with its whiff of socialism and sex, never integrates into a spiritual landscape defined by the author’s own adolescent yearnings and his passionate love for “the old America” of the 1890s. Reflecting on his pilgrimage walks to the public library in a “better” part of Brooklyn, Kazin remembers having no one in Brownsville to talk to about these things. There would have been no one with whom to pose better questions about religion and Judaism and to generate new forms of response, to find better concepts with which to frame them and with which to put together diverse things, secular and religious. So, Kazin picked up a free copy of the New Testament on the street, flirting with the Christ idea in order to make new
and broader connections, to fan his mind out into more capacious directions; and then, in the story that is these memoirs, he gave it all up for a girl and sexual awakenings in Highland Park.

If the memoir betrays an unsatisfied and inchoate spiritual impulse, the journals are just as “religious, or as Kazin said of Kafka, “plus religieux que les religieux” (Cook 2011, 111). But what is this spiritual impulse, and where is one to see it? Again, there is this particular thread in Kazin’s writings between second-generation ethnic Jewishness, the socialism indigenous to that generation of Jewish immigrants and their children, and American transcendentalism. It all comes together as some new form of what Harold Bloom calls “the American Religion,” which he describes as self-centered, “gnostic,” and energetic (Bloom 1992). The American religion comes from Blake, Whitman, Melville, and Emerson, not from biblical sources per se and certainly not from rabbinic texts. But the conversation with these old Americans, the geographic sense of place and the social affiliations in Kazin’s writings are profoundly Jewish, even when the author in the earlier entries claims to preserve the best of Judaism in passing beyond it (Cook 2011, 189). For Kazin, this meant the overriding sense of oneness and the transcending of all the kinds of difference that separate people from each other and from spontaneous living in the world. What Kazin even early on says he appreciated in Judaism is the intense overinvolvement in “the smallest details of living,” the notion that Judaism represents a humanization of the world that allows human beings to live in it (ibid., 560; 322).

If there is any single entry in Kazin’s diaries that gets to the nub of “the American religion,” in sync with Whitman, with “the song of myself” that “I utter En-Masse,” it would be this one from Kazin’s journal. In the spirit of Spinoza’s famous motto “God or nature,” Kazin might have offered “God siva Brooklyn.” It is from May 8, 1949, its subject the Brooklyn Bridge:

Along the River Road. Picking up the old life as I go, walking parallel to the river, I feel that I march alongside my hidden genius, who sleeps in the river at my side. How slowly and gently he paces me, leading me on. . . . As soon as I look up to the coil and swing of the cable, I am threaded through, caught up and threaded through, by millions of lines. Going through the arches of the towers I slowly and unbelievingly make my way through the eye of a needle; then with the lines streaming back and forth, and up and down on every side of me, I am threaded through, I am led on. Into the thousand thicknesses and coiled strength of the lines, I am led on. This is my only understanding of the divine . . . in the continuing, in the apprehension of an interminating [sic] energy, and infinity of suggestiveness.
How the lines course back again on every side of me! *Plenitude over the river*, in the full light of day. I open my arm to the plenitude. In the day it is the threads that I see, for it is in me that they do their work. At night, in the rain and the mist, it is the towers—the implacable surface of the divine. . . . But especially I think of the Bridge as I have walked across it on a hot day . . . a day when the metal plates that reinforce the worn, wooden floor are glowing in the heat, when the boards of the promenade seem to come up to meet you, and *melting*, expanding, warm, the worn gray and sooty, sooted blocks of the promenade clamped back by your feet. You feel that the whole bridge is fluid, *familiar to every sense*, its lines, its odors, its deeply engrained familiarity swimming in your blood. (Cook 2011, 129)

I love this passage, to read it aloud to my students, overdramatically and with special emphasis on the words I have italicized here. I love the threading of lines, colors, smells, and the moving, melting undulations that shape this secular theology, and I also love the Brooklyn Bridge. The Germans called this *Schwärmerei*. I don't care. Lord Shaftesbury called it “enthusiasm.” Despite important differences between religion and art, these analytic differences are not absolute or categorical. I am more inclined to see art and religion, like religion and politics, as synthetic “things,” overlapping into and staining each other. If the rabbis and kabbalists entertained the notion of God as place (*makom*), Kazin’s modernist dithyramb spools spiritual filament into the representation of space, coiling it through the time of rhythmic expression and style. The immanent streak reads like Deleuze and reminds me of Kaplan; the self-reliance is Emerson. Should Kazin be the new face of American Judaism, American Jewish philosophy, and religious thought? This is a pragmatic question, and a personal one, but I can think of no American Jewish thought that to date has pulled together or modeled all these spiritual strands with such care for indigenous place and literary texture.

No doubt, my own thoughts here reflect the kind of rank romanticism reflected in this little bit of Kafka, “The Wish to Be a Red Indian.” It is another short piece by him, which I quote here also in its entirety:

> If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, kept on quivering jerkily over the quivering ground, until one shed one’s spurs, for there needed no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins, and harshly saw that the land before one was smoothly shorn heath when horse’s neck and head would be already gone. (Kafka 1946, 390)
For Kafka, of course, the wish to be “a Red Indian” was an impossible one. It strikes a chord with his famous quip to Max Brod: “Oh yes! There is, an infinite amount of hope, just not for us.”

Maybe not in Prague at the start of the last century, but maybe in America, there might be a small hope for us that Jewish thought and culture might make for itself a little more room and a lot more space in which to move around, affectively and conceptually. To be “a Red Indian” is to go outside, out into the city, driving fast at 79 mph, back to the suburbs, or into the countryside; to take with us the impressions that they have made on us and that we hope to share with others; to try something new, inside and outside the synagogue and seminar room and on the blogosphere with the Bible, Talmud, and Zohar and a new group of concepts, and new modalities with which to connect them. I see this clearly at the antiquarian book fairs; in my walks in New York through Riverside Park and Central Park, places designed by Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux at the turn of the last century; or in galleries and museums, at synagogue on Shabbat and holidays, on the subways, the tunnels and bridges that stitch points in the city together and along the highways that connect cities and suburbs together, the seasonal landscapes and nightscapes where sense impressions, the work of imagination, and concepts can gel into a poiesis proper to the articulation of an American Jewish philosophy.

Sensibility and concepts determine each other, capacious and dynamic space sensations yielding concepts that are more flexible and free than would be the case under more confined spatial models, in which thought tends to get trapped and congealed. Careful attention is demanded at the intersections between open space and closed circuits in contemporary culture, between pure and flow, on the one hand, and fractured aesthetic and conceptual environments. Looking past a more pure form of classical poststructuralism, America, as a place and concept, as network culture, allows one to locate and to structure small nodal units within a large mass and information flows (Teranova 2004). Or what Deleuze throughout the entirety of his oeuvre called a “line of flight,” something that creates for an American Jewish philosophy a connection between points of difference, allowing one to look past more narrow and parochial confines, yet always with the realization that these open-closed networks are assembled and reassembled in some particular place and time.

Out to where and into what kind of metaphysical space do these constructs eventually open? In his crypto-mystical book on Henri Bergson, Deleuze came to see how what we call “actuality” is always constituted as a force of division, whereas “virtuality” stands for radical surplus and excess. The virtual posits pure creative potential, like naturing nature (natura naturans) in Spinoza. “Actual” differences in their division are combined with their “virtual” coexistence in
“a single time” or duration, or what Deleuze would soon call “a plane of imma-
nence” (Deleuze 1988, 93–94). As modeled here, “thought” divides and differ-
entiates in a single impetus along two paths, matter and “spirit.” By “spirit,”
Deleuze means a thought’s “qualities and changes” (ibid., 116). The single-
differentiating impulse that constitutes duration as its condition propels
thought beyond the human field into a more cosmic-mystical vision defined as
superabundant activity, action, and creation. The visible world has been trans-
formed into “something” invisible. Turning to art and mysticism at the end of
the Bergson book, Deleuze writes how with the “[s]ervant of an open and finite
God (such are the characteristics of the élan vital), the mystical soul actively
plays the whole of the universe, and reproduces the opening of a [virtual?] Whole in which there is nothing to see or to contemplate” (ibid., 112).

It is at this mystical juncture that I give up on Deleuze. At the end of the
day, I would like there to be some “thing” to look at, some “thing” to consider.
It might be a picture of my father, or an antiquarian book, or a stretch of the
New Jersey Turnpike, or a cat or a door in a stitch of Talmud, things that relate
to some particular place and time, be it the time and place of their first for-
motion, as well as and no less than the time and place of our encounter with
them. The interdependence between aesthetic form and philosophical possi-
bility was the one flagged by Kant’s basic insight in the Critique of Pure Reason:
“Without sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding
no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions
without concepts are blind” (Kant 1965, 95). Local forms of sensibility and
local concepts are always already going to have determined each other as the
“actuality” of philosophical inquiry. As I mis-read him, Kant allows that neither
sensibility nor intelligibility is prior to the other. Not one before the other, they
are copresent simultaneously.

The posture posed in this little polemical reflection is both aesthetic and
metapolitical. Abstract aesthetic form is inseparable from some local mani-
festation as contingent time and physical place. One such time and place is
now in America, whose reality can be as cold, calculating, irascible, and cruel
as it can be gracious, inviting, and naïve. As an idealized construct, America
presents itself as creation itself, the world we come to as our own, the world
we share with other people, a capacious whole under and over the Brooklyn
Bridge or vis-à-vis other local landmarks or indexical image points. For an
American Jewish philosophy, it forms the space around which to get a bead on
our own temporal life today, our own being in the world in the overlap between
times and places that is basic to the structure of memory and to other forms
of externalized human consciousness as they work themselves out in the open
space of an appearance.
My own philosophical belief is a skeptical one, namely, that the concepts, impressions, and animating sentiments that mark the walls of Jewish philosophy can only be presented: they cannot be verified by or to an outside observer as obligating or binding in any direct or self-evident way. What that leaves are constellations of concepts caught up with images, whose rhetorical force is caught up in the quality of the image itself as an open or closed possibility. Necessity seems to be the wrong modal form for an American Jewish philosophy. For his part, Leo Strauss very much opposed the imagistic character that he identified in the work of Cohen, Buber, and Rosenzweig. The problem, however, is and was an image of the modern world that Strauss could reject out of hand only on the basis of another set of images, including among them an image of religion based on an image of the Bible or on an image of an ancient or a medieval past, in which revealed visions of truth and obedience to them were established on putatively absolute, normative foundations (cf. Braiterman 2007, 253–56).

While it might be impossible to “verify” an image, it is also true that images are not utterly unfalsifiable, which means that they are not completely unreasoning. About an image there are, indeed, grounds to dispute. Images are not, however, falsified by concepts, ideas, and the truths they represent, whether inadequately or adequately. As Spinoza understood, “imagination is an idea, which indicates rather the present disposition of the human body than the nature of the external body; not indeed distinctly, but confusedly.” Just as emotions can only be controlled by other emotions, so too “imaginations do not vanish at the present of the truth, in virtue of its being true, but because other imaginations, stronger than the first, supervene and exclude the present existence of that we have imagined” (Spinoza 1955, 192; 194). The truth of an image, the abiding power of an image, rests internal to the world of images, to an image world. Like at the movies, the critical condition of an American Jewish philosophy is that an image always in time will give way to another image inside the mental cave of a place.

References


