

The Sacred and the Unfamiliar: Gershom Scholem and the Anxieties of the New Hebrew

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ABSTRACT: The question of Hebrew, the conditions and possibilities of its “renaissance” and its rebirth as a secular language and a source of modern national discourse, was one of the central concerns of the Zionist enterprise around 1900. In his famous letter of December 1926 dedicated to Franz Rosenzweig and titled “Bekenntnis über unsere Sprache,” Gershom Scholem expressed his anxiety with the Zionist project and reveals his apocalyptic view of the future of the New Hebrew. The author of this essay attempts to reconstruct the historical, metaphysical, and philological context of Scholem’s letter. The author discusses the letter’s theological background (the Kabbalistic theory of God’s names, the figure of the “demon”) and its political implications and considers Scholem’s dialogue with Rosenzweig and Bialik as an additional context for the understanding of its complexities. The author also provides a model of cultural criticism that explores the dialectic of Jewish secularization and exposes the paradoxes of theopolitics and modernism in Zionist thinking.

Keywords: *Chaim Nachman Bialik, epistolary, Kabbalah, Gershom Scholem, theopolitics*

THE WORDS AND THE SACRED

In the beginning were the words. These were the words Gershom Scholem wrote in December 1926, in Jerusalem, in “Bekenntnis über unsere Sprache,” which was dedicated to Franz Rosenzweig:

This country is a volcano. It houses language. One speaks here of many things that could make us fail. One speaks more than ever today about

the Arabs. But more uncanny than the Arab people [*unheimlicher als das arabische Volk*] another threat confronts us that is a necessary consequence of the Zionist undertaking: What about the “actualization [*Aktualisierung*]” of Hebrew? (“Confession” 226)¹

With these words on the *Unheimlichkeit*, “the uncanniness” of language, Scholem opens his document, “a letter” that was included in an anthology of short texts sent to Rosenzweig on his fortieth birthday.² Scholem’s text, which was rediscovered after his death, can be viewed as a document of esoteric writing on the New Hebrew and the future of the Zionist enterprise in Palestine. Scholem wrote this letter three years after his arrival in Palestine, during a period of discontent in which he felt alienated from the cultural and political agenda of Zionism. He regretted in those years the “fall” of a vision, the collapse of the Zionist “dream that becomes violence.”³ Scholem, who from 1925 was a lecturer at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and a member of *Brit Shalom*, a group of Jewish intellectuals who supported the idea of a bi-national, Arab-Jewish solution in Palestine, did not give up his involvement in the Hebrew *Öffentlichkeit*. His study in these years, however, was dedicated to discourses of marginal, heretical writings of Jewish mysticism. Scholem’s interest in esoteric philology and forgotten scripts served perhaps as a “path of escape” from the political question in Palestine. It also shaped, however, his “path of return”—his critical and original understanding of language and being. For the fate of language, particularly the future of Hebrew, was of crucial significance for Scholem. From his perspective, Hebrew embodies the theological condition of Judaism and thus provides the path for modern Jewish renewal. “Hebräisch,” he wrote in his 1918 “Thesen über Judentum und Zionismus,” “ist nicht nur der erste, sondern auch der letzte Schritt im Judentum” (“95 Thesen über Judentum und Zionismus” 292): Hebrew is not only the first, but also the final step in Judaism. A few years later, this “final step” of Hebrew became, in his own view, apocalyptic.

Scholem’s 1926 letter reads as text of tensions. It is permeated by dialectics between the sacred and the secular, the hidden and the unconcealed, the esoteric and the public, the mystical and the political. Scholem’s manuscript speaks about the hidden, forgotten elements of Hebrew that are neglected in the Zionist enterprise. It speaks about the “names,” the holy entities of language, and warns of their apocalyptic potential. As he writes, “Sprache ist Namen,” the names are the essence of language; they embody the depth of tradition and they seal the *Abgrund*,

the abyss of language. The names are holy words that lie hidden and silent in Hebrew, the ancient language of creation and revelation. Now, with the “renaissance of Hebrew,” the holy names are transformed and “actualized” in a new, profane, territorial frame—the Jewish settlement in Palestine. Scholem writes, however, “Die Verweltlichung der Sprache,” the secularization of the language, implies its emptying:

One believes that language has been secularized, that its apocalyptic thorn has been pulled out. But this is surely not true. The secularization of language is only a *façon de parler*, a ready-made phrase. It is absolutely impossible to empty out words filled to bursting, unless one does so at the expense of language itself.⁴ (“Confession” 226)

Secularization seems to Scholem to be an impossibility, and thus “a phrase.” For how can one empty the names, the holy words that are so loaded, if not at the expense of language itself? The secularization of Hebrew challenges the sacred layers, its theological depth. The “old names” that are now awakened by our call, he writes, will reappear. Their reappearance, the return of the divine and the revolt of the sacred against its challengers, is of an apocalyptic nature:

In a language where he is invoked back a thousandfold into our life, God will not stay silent. But this inescapable revolution of the language, in which the voice will be heard again, is the sole object of which nothing is said in this country. Those who called the Hebrew language back to life did not believe in the judgment [*das Gericht*] that was thus conjured upon us. May the carelessness, which has led us to this apocalyptic path, not bring about our ruin. (“Confession” 227)⁵

The Zionist attempt to transform Hebrew, the language that carries God’s words, into a spoken and useful language, is an enterprise with horrific implications. The “blind belief” of the Zionist movement in the success of secularization and the devotion of its believers to the creation of a secular Hebrew as a medium of national communication and representation, is bound up, Scholem argues, with the forgetfulness of the abyss, the deep, hidden, unrepresentable element of language. The secular amnesia that he attributes to Zionism is “a terrible threat,” a metaphysical danger. This threat is “*unheimlicher als das arabische Volk*,” more uncanny than the Arab people (226). Here, in the process of secularization, in a false, profane articulation of holy names and in the danger of their return from the silent, forgotten layers of the language, lies the *Unheimlichkeit* of the New Hebrew, its unfamiliarity, its homelessness, its terrible faith.

How should we understand Scholem's "Bekenntnis"? In what context should we discuss the *unheimliche* remark on the New Hebrew? How can we associate the Gnostic theory of holy names with a thesis about the importance of this letter as a critical document of Zionist discourse? How should we bridge (if there is a bridge) Scholem's esoteric philological study and his contribution to the Hebrew *Öffentlichkeit* in Palestine?

By posing these questions this article follows the readings of Stéphane Mosès and Jacques Derrida, both of whom stress Scholem's Gnostic sources, discuss Walter Benjamin's influence, and hint at the deconstructive implications of this letter in the history of philosophy (Derrida 191–226; Mosès 217–34). My reading, however, includes additional assumptions on the horizons of Scholem's text and its theoretical and philological paradoxes. In my reading, Scholem's essay should not be separated from his critical dialogue with Rosenzweig and with Chaim Nachman Bialik, the Hebrew poet. The contemporary discourse on the secularization of Hebrew is the context through which Scholem's theological thesis should be introduced. In his "Bekenntnis," Scholem writes as a self-critical Zionist and as a Kabbalist, and this unsolved tension and double position between history and Gnosticism, territorial Judaism and consciousness of exile, modernism and hidden tradition, Hebrew poetry and Bible translation, is the source of the conflicts, the paradoxes, and the achievements of his text.

LANGUAGE, TERRITORY, AND ANXIETY (SCHOLEM AND ROSENZWEIG)

Scholem's text had an addressee: it was written, dedicated, and sent to Franz Rosenzweig. The dedication "An Franz Rosenzweig" is one of the horizons of his letter. The reading of this letter thus requires the recognition of the similarities, the differences, and the double signature of *Denkfreundschaft*, the friendship (and rivalry) of thought (Brocke 127–48). Scholem respected Rosenzweig's work and prized his book *Der Stern der Erlösung* as a major achievement of modern Jewish thought. Both shared a similar interest in the theological renewal of Judaism and rejected the culture of Jewish assimilation; both were dedicated to the learning of Hebrew and were involved in translation projects into German. However, despite these areas of common interest, Scholem and Rosenzweig were also deeply divided. Scholem rejected Rosenzweig's theological commitment to the idea of Jewish

Diaspora and criticized his views on the German Jewish future. In *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*, Scholem repeated his accusation against Rosenzweig for being trapped in a false vision of “German Jewish harmony” (177–79). Rosenzweig’s views on the possibilities of Jewish German dialogue seem to Scholem to be illusions of cultural symbiosis.⁶ A similar tension defined their attitudes toward the question of translation. Both were interested in the theological depth of Hebrew and were conscious of the difficulties of its transformation into German. They even once compared and discussed their versions of the translation of a religious poem, *Havdala*. Scholem, however, criticized Rosenzweig’s translation as “christlich,” Christian (Rosenzweig, *Briefe und Tagebücher* 699), and later judged his translation of Yehuda Halevi’s poetry as “sehr schlecht,” very bad. In a letter to Ernst Simon he argued that Rosenzweig’s translation lacked “טעם” (“reason”; Scholem, *Briefe* 230). In another letter from January 1926, he criticized Buber and Rosenzweig’s new translation of the Hebrew Bible as suffering from “falsches Pathos,” false pathos, which he attributed primarily to Rosenzweig’s destructive influence (232).

And indeed, Scholem’s encounter with Rosenzweig, from their first meeting in 1921, was “traumatic.” Rosenzweig viewed his encounter with Scholem as a hidden struggle,⁷—a struggle with a “nihilistic” and “evil” spirit (“der böse Scholem”; *Briefe und Tagebücher* 768). In Rosenzweig’s view, Scholem embodies the paradox of “Heimkehr,” homecoming: “Scholem is perhaps the only one who truly returned home, however, he returned home alone” (704). Scholem’s way of return to Judaism, his Zionist path, was understood by Rosenzweig as a form of solitude, as if Scholem was enmeshed in an esoteric “silence,” an unspoken gesture of nihilistic thought (Guerra 46–53).

One can perhaps discuss Scholem and Rosenzweig’s relationship in terms of a deep and fundamental misunderstanding (*Mosès* 220), or as evidence of the narcissism of minor differences. However, the biographical differences and the oppositions also reflected metaphysical conflicts in the world of modernist Judaism. In December 1926, Scholem, who knew about Rosenzweig’s illness, his paralysis, and his inability to talk,⁸ sent him this letter of *Bekennnis*, a gesture of confession that displays the signature of friendship and rivalry.

The affinities between Scholem’s and Rosenzweig’s views and their anxieties about the New Hebrew are revealed in Rosenzweig’s 1926 essay *Neuhebräisch?* which was written as a review of the new translation of Baruch Spinoza’s *Ethics* into Hebrew by Jakob Klatzkin

(*Zweistromland* 723–29). Rosenzweig’s essay title addressed the New Hebrew with a question mark—a sign of doubt and concern about its future. The review deals with some of Klatzkin’s translation decisions, which, in Rosenzweig’s view, are symptoms of a radical Zionist theory, “der formale Nationalismus,” the formal nationalism that embodies the denial of Jewish tradition and the wish for “nationale Wiedergeburt von der Zukunft,” national rebirth from the future (724).

Klatzkin’s “denial” of Jewish tradition, his “fanatical,” futuristic view of secular Judaism, leads him, Rosenzweig argues, to reject the real theological depth of Spinoza’s philosophical discourse and its Hebrew sources. However, “das Heilige,” the sacred, cannot be removed from Hebrew. The denial of its theological layers would ultimately return it to its sources. For Rosenzweig, as for Scholem, the essence of Hebrew lies in its holiness. Hebrew thus cannot be secularized without becoming distorted or destroyed. Even the profane language, Rosenzweig argues, keeps the theological desire, the depth of the sacred and the wish to return to the “seventh day” (725), the Shabbat, the day of holiness. The sacred is bound up in this context with the openness of Hebrew, its ability to receive and to gather words, motifs, and names from the spoken languages of the nations. The sacred means “Werden,” becoming. Hebrew is thus always in a process of renewal. The theological “Lebendigkeit” of Hebrew does not, however, demand forgetfulness or the denial of its past. Hebrew is not governed by the formalist visions of progress, but rather is characterized by its traditional structures and forms of dialogue.

Rosenzweig argues against the (radical) Zionist wish for a new, spoken Hebrew that is released from its old, theological origins and that is based on its territorial experience in Palestine. Zionism, he writes, wishes to create a “bodenwüchsige” Hebrew—a territorial language, language of “Boden und Blut,” blood and soil (727). Palestine is already governed, however, by the spoken Arabic (a language, Rosenzweig writes, that has philological proximities with Hebrew). In this land the New Hebrew, which gives up its original sources and depth, he argues, will lack defense against the challenge of the Arabic language. Under the influence of Arabic, the New Hebrew might lose its historical coherence and be condemned to self-alienation (727). The secularization of Hebrew in Palestine thus endangers the condition of an open tradition that is based on ancient sources and productive dialogues with the languages and cultures of its host nations. It is the open tradition that German Judaism, Rosenzweig argues, still embodies. For German

Jews still keep the treasures of Hebrew in their language and thought. “Unsere Anklänge ans Hebräische sind unser gutes Recht,” the echo of Hebrew in our language is our right, Rosenzweig writes in his 1921 lecture *Vom Geist der Hebräischen Sprache* (720). German Jews indeed speak German; their German, however, is still linked with Hebrew sources that endow German with theological horizons.

The secularization of Hebrew and its territorial adventures endanger the coherence of tradition and its openness. However, Rosenzweig adds, the Zionist theory and even its criticism are shorthanded. “One cannot speak Hebrew as one wishes, he should rather speak it as it once was” (*Zweistromland* 727). The nature of Hebrew lies beyond its national or individual implications in the present. Hebrew is rather bound up with the past and committed to the universe (728). Its past orientation and universal tasks, its “peripheral” or Diasporic experience and its traditional horizons are inevitable. The Zionist project of the New Hebrew should thus go back and listen to the theological depth, to the Talmudic layers and Biblical sources of Hebrew.

Rosenzweig’s review of the Hebrew translation of Spinoza—in which more should have been said about the idea of translating Spinoza as a primal scene of secular Judaism—led him to reveal an essential view on the *Unheimlichkeit* of Hebrew. Rosenzweig argues that the theological essence of Hebrew implies the notion of an open tradition that cannot be secularized or reduced to social functions nor bound exclusively to territorial frames (*Mendes-Flohr*). Hebrew lacks *Boden* or *Heimat* in its modern national and political context. The essence of Hebrew lies rather in the experience of Diaspora, in the long tradition of exile that was enfolded in an ambivalent dialogue with the cultures of foreign nations. In his *Der Stern der Erlösung*, Rosenzweig writes about this experience of Hebrew: after the destruction of the temple, Hebrew lives “zu Gast,” as a foreigner in the lands of the peoples. The sacred language lives “schweigsam,” silent and hidden in the profane languages of the nations (*Stern* 334–36). The theological silence of Hebrew embodies a refusal to serve discourses of political violence and interests of everyday life. Hebrew is rather dedicated to prayer. This legacy, the inheritance of prayer, becomes the treasure of a hidden tradition that is inscribed in all languages. Hebrew, the language of prayer, is like a foreign tongue that now lives in silence, hidden in all languages and carrying the utopian horizon for repairing the world. It is the discourse of “noch im Werden,” the idea of becoming, Rosenzweig argues in his lecture *Vom Geist der Hebräischen Sprache*,

that embodies the condition or principle of hope (721). Hebrew, in Rosenzweig's view, contains an element of hope (תקוה) for repairing the world. It carries the prayer for "צדקה" that "means more than justice." Hebrew enhances all languages with an ethical horizon that is based on its time structure, its "Noch nicht," the not yet. The "not yet" is a structure of the past in Hebrew that is open endlessly towards the future. In Hebrew, the past is never passé; rather, it is an expectation. Hebrew, Rosenzweig writes, thus stands as a hidden source for "all modern revolutions" (720). Contemporary revolutionary thought has inherited the time horizon of Hebrew and its utopian implications. The major path along which Hebrew flows into all languages, endowing them with its ethical principle, its time structure of hope, and its endless expectation, is, of course, the translation of the Bible.

Rosenzweig's argument on the *Unheimlichkeit* of Hebrew, its "homelessness," its "uncanniness," is bound up with the view that its theological depth and its fullness cannot be reduced to a particular historical or territorial experience, but rather should be attributed to its transcendence, its foreignness, its being like a "guest." Hebrew is like an eternal wanderer who lives *un-heimlich* in the world. This is how Hebrew reveals itself as an abyss—the gap, the absence, the wound of *Heimat*. Rosenzweig's thesis on Hebrew can be read in this context as an (ironical) answer to Richard Wagner's famous essay *Das Judentum in der Musik* and his view of the Jews as "bodenloser Volksstamm," homeless people, who ostensibly speak as an "Ausländer" in all languages (Wagner 149–50). Rosenzweig's remarks on Wagner may hint at the historical urgency of his theo-philological thesis, namely his anxieties about German nationalism and its Jewish mimicry.⁹

The discussion on the *Unheimlichkeit* of Hebrew reveals the correspondences and the contradictions between Scholem's and Rosenzweig's views on the nature and the future of the language. Both authors agreed that the essence of Hebrew, its sacredness, cannot be secularized or reduced to profane functions of representation. Both recognized the danger of Hebrew becoming a source for a discourse of violence and territorial desires, and voiced their concern about the repression of tradition in the Zionist enterprise. These affinities, however, concealed a difference. For Rosenzweig, "das wir," the "we" that carries the treasures of Hebrew, the theological call of Judaism, and that embodies its *Unheimlichkeit*, was of a Diasporic nature. The young Scholem rejected this view and argues that the path of return to Judaism had to be bound up with *Eretz Israel* (*Od Davar* 53).

Scholem's "we" thus refers to the first generation of Hebrew speakers in Palestine. And yet, the voice of "we" in his letter is more than a historical signifier; it is also the signature of a theological body, the corpus of a prayer that embodies God's secret names.

It is indeed ironic that Scholem's letter on the essence of *Hebrew* was written in *German*—a signature of his own Diasporic experience as a German Jew who kept his ties to his mother tongue (Biale 205–09). And is this irony of German and Hebrew, the interplay between mother tongue and foreign language not the irony of *Unheimlichkeit*? In a lecture given in 1974 in Germany, Scholem again reflected on the tension between German and Hebrew. He spoke about his 1911 decision to learn Hebrew, a decision that embodied also a biographical gesture of resistance, a revolt against his parents and the assimilated German-Jewish milieu. When he emigrated to Palestine, Scholem said, he entered the world of New Hebrew, the world of an "extremely vital language, characterized by an anarchistic lack of rules" (*On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism* 22). The creation of the New Hebrew and its relation to the ancient language, he said, remains "fertile but dangerous" (22). In this late lecture, Scholem thus remained faithful to his insight on the necessary but dangerous path of the New Hebrew. In his speech, he also recalled his 1946 visit to Germany and "the shock that I experienced in my encounter with the German language." "There was in it something Medusa-like, something paralyzing, something that has absorbed the events of those years" (24). The encounter with German after World War II, the confrontation with his mother tongue that was now charged with the terrible impressions of destruction, is again described as an experience of *Unheimlichkeit*—the German language returns as a Medusa face, as a frightening, unfamiliar body. Scholem's lecture, although written from an apologetic perspective and bound up with the experience of the postwar era, re-performs the dialectic of Hebrew and German with all its implications of uncanniness. He hints at the depth of the theo-philological argument that language is always unfamiliar: even a mother tongue is a "foreign word" that carries forgotten meanings and odd voices. Scholem's "real language," one can argue, lies in the gap between the languages; the source of his speech is the difference, the tension, the unfamiliarity of German and Hebrew.

As Derrida suggested, Scholem's letter to Rosenzweig reads as a monologue in a German Jewish drama of guilt (Derrida 194). In his "Bekenntnis" Scholem admits the ambitions and the failures of the

historical project in which he himself was involved and recognizes its metaphysical blindness—the “Zionist crimes” against the sacred. However, his rejection of the hegemonial Zionist discourse did not lead him to forgo the notion of Hebrew as a condition for the return of the sacred. His letter maintains the collective form, the voice of “we.” The “actualization” of Hebrew in Palestine, the historical ambition of Zionism and its apocalyptic implications seemed to him as an inevitable drama: the danger and the catastrophe bear a form of revelation—*apocálipis*, the opening of God’s name.

GOD’S NAME, DEMON AND APOCALYPSE IN PALESTINE

Scholem’s letter has a biblical voice. His text internalizes the discourse of revelation, and its allegories are apocalyptic. He speaks about the “ghosts” of Hebrew, the holy names that are challenged by the profane actualization of the language and wander as empty entities in the streets of Palestine. The letter warns against the “demonic courage” of these blind creators of the New Hebrew who ignore “das Gericht,” the Day of Judgment, and “guide us on this apocalyptic path” (227). Scholem’s rhetoric, which possibly hints at traces of “romanticism” (Löwy), should not, however, be merely reduced to Expressionism or to a neoromantic turn. Scholem speaks as a scholar of Jewish mysticism who now suspends the scientific distance, the “objectivity” of his historiographical enterprise, and dedicates his speech to an apocalyptic discourse (Mosès 217). His speech can be read as another counter-historical thesis on the essence of language.¹⁰ In other words, Scholem speaks here as a *mekubal*, a Kabbalist, a title which he himself used ironically in some of his essays and letters. This ambivalence and similarity of historiography and mysticism, science and tradition (Biale 189–205), the double irony of Scholem’s identity embodies the theological exceptions of his academic studies: by studying the forgotten texts of Jewish Gnosticism, Scholem sought to mark a path of a Jewish renaissance. One should recall in this context Scholem’s 1937 letter to Salman Schocken, in which he reveals his “true intentions” in studying Kabbalah: It was, he writes, the search for the “lost key” to the hidden kingdom of symbols, which had been neglected in the history of Jewish philosophy. And even more than this “missing key,” Kabbalah research still lacked in his times the courage to “descend into the abyss,” the forgotten layers of Judaism (*On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism* 4). This is how Scholem understood

his position as a “Kabbalist,” as if his own research of Gnostic texts was a challenge that has theological implications and embodies an apocalyptic horizon—the abyss.

One of Scholem’s earliest explorations in the field of Kabbalah was the study of language theory in Jewish mysticism and the implication of the “name of God” as a theo-philological figure, a forgotten theme that he already declared in 1917 to be his real challenge (*Briefe und Tagebücher* 472). Scholem wanted this topic for his dissertation project, but this had to be postponed as he recognized his lack of appropriate skills (*On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism* 21). It took Scholem another fifty years to accomplish this study of Kabbalistic language theory. His 1970 essay “Der Name Gottes und die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala” summarizes his research and reveals some of the Kabbalistic figures that were already contained in his 1926 letter on the New Hebrew (*Mosès* 219). One of these figures is the “name.”

Language is name [*Sprache ist Namen*). In the names, the power of language is enclosed; in them, its abyss is sealed. After invoking the ancient names daily, we can no longer hold off their power. Called awake, they will appear since we have invoked them with great violence. (“Confession” 226)¹¹

The name, Scholem writes, is the essence of language. The name embodies the abyss of language, its potential. The New Hebrew, however, abuses the old names; it uses them in profane contexts, in everyday life. The names will thus return and reappear in a gesture of revenge. This day of return will be “ein Gericht,” a Day of Judgment.

What are these “old names” that Scholem refers to in his letter? What are their power and their potential? What is the depth that they seal and why is their reappearance apocalyptic? Scholem’s essay *Der Name Gottes* may reveal the mystical context and the Kabbalistic origins of Scholem’s view on the names that are hidden in Hebrew. Among his arguments, the essay includes the following central points:

1. According to mystical theory, God reveals himself in the language. His essence is condensed in names or symbols that are hidden in the “inner side” of language (*Judaica* 3, 8–9).
2. The names have no semantic meaning and they should not be considered as representations or references.
3. God’s names are philological structures, semiotic schemas based on combinations of the Hebrew letters *yud*, *heh*, *vav*, and *alef*. The names are “unausprechbar”—they are not allowed to be mentioned or enunciated. God’s names are hidden and silent (11–17).

4. The names of God hold the potential of the cosmic creation. The names are the seals of the “abyss of creation”—the depth of the beginning (20–21).

5. The Torah, the Hebrew Bible, and Jewish prayer contain hidden textures of holy names that are combinations and derivations of God’s name. These “subtexts” are secret and are known to very few. This implies that behind the revealed, readable, preannounced Torah, between its lines, a hidden Torah is written, the texture of God’s names (28–29).

6. God’s name carries magic power, the “spiritual aspect” of which is the discourse of prophecy. Its vulgar aspect is the “practical magic” that is dedicated to the materialist aspects of being. The implications of the practical magic are “demonic”—they bring out the demon instead of the Holy Spirit (66–68).

7. God’s name is, indeed, empty. It has no concrete meaning, no clear or defined message. However, the emptiness or “openness” of the name, its endlessness, is the condition for the possibility to represent, to signify, and to create meanings in the language (50–52).

8. All profane languages are corrupted forms of the holy language that still, however, inherit and bear God’s names (55).

9. The tradition that carries the knowledge of God’s names became itself silent and foreign. We are living in an age of crisis in which the secrets of the holy language are lost (69).

10. The lost tradition of mysticism, the belief in the holy potential of words, has become the heritage of poetry (70).

The “names” are holy since they carry and seal the secrets of divine creation. The names carry the plan and the codes of creation. They embody the essence of God. Here perhaps lies the meaning of the “abyss of language” that is mentioned in Scholem’s 1926 letter—it is the essence of God as a creator and the plan of creation itself that is written secretly in the language. The names, however, the seals of creation, are “empty.” This is the depth of the abyss—the groundless, transcendental dimension of the language. The “old names” are empty of any concrete meaning and yet they embody the possibility of all meaning. This, Scholem writes, is the “paradox of the name”—its emptiness is the transcendental condition in the process of signification (Dan 31–58). The name is undefined, unknown and thus empty, and yet is ready to be filled endlessly. However, as Scholem writes in his “Bekenntnis,” the attempt to call the holy names, to pronounce them, and to charge them with profane meanings, is to abuse

the names in contexts of everyday life, which is “demonic.” Secular language can be understood as equivalent to the “practical magic,” a vulgar misuse and a “demonic” praxis of the sacred. This is how the “demonic” character of the New Hebrew reveals itself: its enunciation of the holy names is to march on the path of apocalypse—a violent revelation of God’s words.

Indeed, all forms of revelation, in Scholem’s view, are apocalyptic. *Apocálipis* is the essence of the divine revelation. Furthermore, according to Scholem, the nature of the messianic idea itself, the theological horizon of redemption, is essentially apocalyptic. The return of the divine is always a form of catastrophe, a radical break in history, a split in the realm of time (*The Messianic Idea in Judaism* 7; Löwy). The apocalyptic potential of the divine revelation is imprinted in names. Names are the secrets that bear the traumatic potential of revelation—the dreadful openness of the divine. However, if this is the case, and all forms of divine revelation are apocalyptic and contain the void, the emptying of God, the contraction—*tzimtzum*—of his being (Wohlfarth 197–98), then what would be the “sin” of the New Hebrew and its creators? The crime of the New Hebrew is the forgetfulness of tradition, a form of denial and indifference that brings it to invoke God’s names in a foreign, inappropriate context. The apocalypse of the New Hebrew thus lacks the horizon of redemption. Its “catastrophes” contain no messianic hope; its “emptiness” is that of bare violence. According to this reading, the false interpretations of the holy names and the profane abuses of the Hebrew originate in metaphysical distortions that are reflected in forms of political violence. Political violence is the historical reflection of the distorted language. It is “die Verweltlichung,” the secularization, of the Hebrew that creates a new myth, a new plan of violence. This is the Zionist myth of Jewish militarism and national heroism against which Scholem warns in his public writing (*Od Davar* 61–62) that can be seen as an example of the false plan of the New Hebrew. The profane discourse that neglects the tradition and denies its ethical implications and dedicates itself to military and territorial tasks becomes a pretext for oppression and thus a source for distortions and political radicalization of the repressed (*Mosès* 230). The emptiness, the abyss, the “void of revelation,” re-turns in this context into a naked form of “göttliche Gewalt,” divine violence.¹²

Scholem’s writing on the old names, the abyss of language, and the apocalyptic implications carries a double meaning. His letter

challenges the discourse of secularization and hints at its dialectics. Scholem rejects the simple distinction between the secular and the sacred and suggests a different “dialectical” model of language and being. In his view, the profane has no life of its own and thus cannot be separated from the sacred; all corrupted, profane languages still contain the holy names and refer to the sacred that lives silent in their hidden layers. Language is thus never fully secular. However, it is argued that since the “babylonische Sprachverwirrung,” the Babel of languages, the sacred has lost its purity and is now interwoven in the profane languages (*Judaica* 3, 55). The secular and the sacred cannot be discussed merely as oppositions or replacements, but rather they belong together. This is the paradox of secularization, namely the fact that the secular becomes a host, the medium in which the sacred is hidden. The forgetfulness of this treasure, the amnesia of spoken Hebrew, is a source for distortions that carry violent implications. Scholem thus calls the New Hebrew to recognize its own depth. He calls it to listen to its abyss, the void of language, and to hear the voice of its forgotten, lost traditions. His letter calls the New Hebrew to recognize its own demonic power, its creation and dangers, its apocalyptic path.

THE SACRED AND HEBREW POETRY (SCHOLEM AND BIALIK)

The treasure of mysticism, the belief in the fortune of the hidden, secret potential of the language and its absolute horizon, the “abyss” of language, become, Scholem writes in his essay on the language theory of Kabbalah, the issue of poetry. It is poetry, he writes, that listens to the divine and its silent secrets (*Judaica* 3, 70). Poetry is the tradition that retains belief in the possibilities of a language that are not exhausted in the profane discourses of meaning and representation. To follow this argument means to understand poetry as a call from the abyss of language. The poet, like the Kabbalist, stands on the threshold of the void, in a place of danger. His work is a new “esoteric philology” (is there any other way of understanding poetry?) that inherits the hopes and the despairs of revelation.

Scholem’s belated comment on poetry leads us to recall the other, “hidden” addressee of his 1926 letter on the New Hebrew—the Hebrew poet Chaim Nachman Bialik. Scholem’s relations with Bialik were imprinted with a similar tension of *Denkfreundschaft* that governed his affinity with Rosenzweig—the friendship and the rivalry of thought

on the question of Hebrew, Zionism, and tradition. Scholem was very familiar with Bialik's poetry as well as his essays on language, literature, and Jewish tradition. In 1919, he translated Bialik's essay *Halacha and Agada* into German and recommended it to his friends Werner Kraft and Walter Benjamin. His view of Bialik's poetry was, however, different. His 1925–26 correspondence with Ernst Simon, in which he responded to Simon's essay on Bialik, reveals his discontent with Bialik's poetical work and describes him as "völlig zerstört," completely destroyed through the double meaning of his poetry (*Briefe* 233). The lyrical aspect in Bialik's poetry, Scholem argues, is being destroyed by the "the constant fall of the I," the individual, into semi-allegorical symbols of the national collective. This failure, the destruction of Bialik's "pretended" lyrics, is bound up, in Scholem's view, with the fate of the New Hebrew: "Bialik ist das Opfer, das der Erneuerung der Sprache gebracht werden mußte," the victim that the renewal of our language demanded (233). Bialik's poetical disaster is thus the victim of the New Hebrew. Bialik is the poet whose lyrics are being sacrificed for the creation of the new language. And indeed, thanks to this sacrifice, the destruction of the poetical, the New Hebrew gains its "demonic" power. For the "Nichtigkeit des Dichterschen," the poetical emptiness, is the source for the "Dämonisierung der Sprache," the demonization of language (233). In Bialik's work, Scholem argues, Jewish tradition suffers from emptying: the medieval depth of his poetry is not of his time. His poetry is thus anachronistic and manifests the distortions of tradition. These distortions and impurities of Hebrew, its empty pathos, the fusion of lyrics and national allegories, the self and the collective, are the discourse of the "demon."

Bialik comes to symbolize for Scholem the paradoxes of the New Hebrew. The work of the Hebrew poet, which is considered a national achievement, a model of poetical creation, is essentially evidence of the contradictions, the failures, and the distortions of the New Hebrew. This is how Bialik appears in Scholem's letters as a representation of the "demonic courage" of the New Hebrew and its creators.

Scholem's remarks on Bialik are also deeply ironical. His use of the concepts of "Opfer," victim, and "dämonisch," demonic, in his letter has a double meaning and creates an effect of estrangement. The transformation of theological references loaded with mystical implications into the context of literary criticism seems almost parodic. However, Scholem's rhetorical decision, his "demonic" pathos, should again be considered as a derivation of his esoteric thought, as evidence of a Kabbalistic mind that also imprints his other 1926

critical letter on the New Hebrew. In both cases, Scholem's writings were signed with the irony of the "demon" and the "divine" that dwell together as double figures in his work.

It should be mentioned that one of Scholem's early scholarly publications in Hebrew was indeed dedicated to the figure of the demon, its genealogy and metamorphosis in the writings of Jewish mysticism. Scholem's 1925 article on "Bealar the Demons' King" deals with the origin of demonological traditions and their implications in the early Kabbalah. The demon, the element of evil, Scholem explains later in his book *Elements of Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, is perceived in Jewish mysticism as an ontological element, a derivation of God's existence (*Elements of Kabbalah* 187–99). Evil is a divine element that was torn from its original location and lost its initial affinity with the other attributes or *Sephirot*, the "enumerations" of God. The split in the realm of the divine, the emergence of contradictions and exaggerations in the process of creation, are the sources for the emergence of evil. However, according to certain interpretations, this element of evil is internalized in the plan of creation. The demonic element embodies the power of negation that becomes a necessary part of being. Evil is identified here with the *sitra ahra*, the other, dark side of being (199–204; Tishby 285–80). In one of the Kabbalah's heretic versions, the theory of Nathan of Gaza, a teacher of Sabbatai Zvi, this element is recognized as the "depth of the abyss," the void, the emptiness, in which, however, the source, a spark for a (false) messianic power is hidden (209–12).

Should we assume that Scholem's references and allusions to the demon in his discussions on the New Hebrew include these metaphysical implications? This would be to argue that Scholem identifies the "demonic" nature of Bialik's Hebrew poetry with the process of a new creation that is necessarily based on displacements, exaggerations, and distortions of traditional elements. Scholem's "demonic" interpretation of the New Hebrew thus had, next to its criticism of the profane and the rejection of its violent symptoms, to recognize the Zionist power of creation and its dangers. However, was not Kabbalah research itself bound up with a similar "demonic" instinct? Was not the "demonic enthusiasm" which Scholem attributes already to pre-Zionist Jewish history and its writers something that was also imprinted in his own project?¹³ Was not the desire to enter the abyss, the realm of unfamiliar symbols, a deed that embodies a "demonic courage," the impulse that he refers to the creation of the New Hebrew?

The affinity between Scholem and Bialik, the similarities and the differences in their views on the New Hebrew, reveal themselves in Bialik's 1927 programmatic lecture "The Sacred and the Secular in Language" (*Revelment and Concealment* 89–96). Bialik delivered the lecture in Tel Aviv to the convention of the "Legion for the Protection of the Language." He begins his lecture with a gesture of prayer, a reference to "Havdalah," the concept that marks the end of the Sabbath, the Holy Day, and the beginning of a new week. The lecture refers in this context to the distinction and difference between "Israel and the nations" and "the sacred and the secular" (89). The transformation of the sacred language into a profane language, the creation of "Hebrew speech," Bialik says, is the main "issue of secularization." For Bialik, the meaning of Jewish secularization, its essence, is, again, the creation of the New Hebrew. Bialik, however, calls for a reconsideration of this process of secularizing, which is now seen as a "great advantage" and naively perceived as an admirable achievement of the nations (89). "The ideal of Hebrew speech" should, in his view, be the sacred, for the essence of the language lies forever in its theological depth, its "primary sources" and "ancient forms" (91–92). Bialik ends his lecture with a Kabbalistic remark, a biographic note and a word of warning. "Heaven and earth," he reminds his audience, were created by the Hebrew letters and their combinations (94). The New Hebrew should preserve these letters, the words and the books of creation: "Symbols should not be taken lightly, for we are soon faced with their outgrowth" (94).

Bialik's 1927 lecture, like Scholem's 1926 letter, is a document of self-critical Zionist thought. His speech on the New Hebrew embodies also a critical theory of secularization, the view that the sacred cannot be fully secularized, except at the expense of language itself. Like Scholem, Bialik also hints at the mystical depth of the Hebrew words, the power of Hebrew letters that contain the plan of cosmic creation. This view of the depth of language was already evident in Bialik's 1915 Hebrew essay *Revelment and Concealment in Language*, in which he discovers the abyss, the depth of language, its void:

"There are yet to the Lord" languages without words: songs, tears, and laughter. And the speaking creature has been found worthy of them all. These languages begin where words leave off, and their purpose is not to close but to open. They rise from the void. They are the rising up of the void. Therefore, at times they overflow and sweep us off in the irresistible multitude of their waves; therefore, at times they cost a man his wits, or even his life. (26)

The void is the essence of being that is open and covered by words. This hidden, empty, dangerous depth of being is sealed in the sacred language that becomes, Bialik writes, the heritage of the poets:

The profane turns sacred, the sacred profane. Long-established words are constantly being pulled out of their setting, as it were, and exchanging places with one another. Meanwhile, between concealments the void looms. And that is the secret of the great influence of the language of poetry. And to what may those writers be compared? To one who crosses a river when it is breaking up, by stepping across floating, moving blocks of ice. He dare not set his foot on any one block for longer than a moment, longer than it takes him to leap from one block to the next, and so on. Between the breaches the void looms, the foot slips, danger is close. [. . .] (25–26)

The poet stands at the abyss of language, on its threshold, where the void appears. His work reveals the essence of being that has no bottom, no ground, and no end.

These words on the *Unheimlichkeit* of language, on the groundless, hidden depth of the speech; these words on the unfamiliarity, the tension between the old and the new, the sacred and the profane; these words of Bialik on void and danger—are they not to be, ten years later, Scholem’s own words? His own “modernist poetry”? (Alter 162–64; Weidner 128–30).¹⁴

Bialik’s 1915 essay and his 1927 lecture on the New Hebrew carry the gesture of a prayer and are signed with words of warning (free, however, from Scholem’s apocalyptic pathos). Both Bialik and Scholem were committed to the horizon of sacredness in language and introduced a theo-philological model of Judaism, a model of a religious and a national being that was based on the Kabbalistic theory of God’s name.

Scholem’s “demonic” jargon and his attacks on Bialik can be read, in this context, as a radical version of self-critical thought that recognizes the threat of the holy and its split—the divine that becomes unfamiliar, the spirit that appears as a ghost, a friend who emerges as a double-figure, a demon, the uncanny. This “ghost” returns in 1934, in a letter Scholem sent to Walter Benjamin in which he discusses the theological depth of Franz Kafka’s literature. Scholem opens his letter with a remark on Bialik’s death and its “terrible impressions.” For Bialik, Scholem writes, “was a friend and a source of light for our land” (Scholem and Benjamin, *Briefwechsel* 157). Bialik, the “demon” of the New Hebrew, reappears in Scholem’s letter as the “moral figure” of the Zionist enterprise, as a teacher, a friend, and a source of light.¹⁵ The irony of this metamorphosis is accomplished in the second part of Scholem’s letter, in which he

turns from “New Hebrew” back to “German” and criticizes Benjamin for his “misunderstanding” of Franz Kafka’s paradoxical theology. It is, he writes, the “Unvollziehbarkeit des Geoffenbarten,” the unrealizability of the revealed, that characterized Kafka’s world—a notion that Benjamin failed to recognize. Kafka’s work, in Scholem’s view, embodies the secular perspective of the “Nichts der Offenbarung,” the void of revelation (*Briefwechsel* 175). It is the emptiness of the sacred, its unfamiliarity and horror, that is imprinted in Kafka’s writings and carries “etwas von dem strengen Glanze des Kanonischen—des Vollkommenen, das zerbricht,” something of the rigorous splendor of the canonical—a hint of the Absolute that breaks into pieces (*Judaica* 3, 271). This remark, however, belongs to another drama, another “story of friendship.”

Scholem’s 1926 letter on the New Hebrew was introduced here as a “demonic drama,” a dialogue of hidden thoughts. The major protagonists of this play are Scholem, Rosenzweig, and Bialik. The role of the fourth protagonist, Walter Benjamin, had, however, to be suspended. These dialogues on the New Hebrew reveal the complexity of the discourse on the Zionist enterprise and its theological implications. In a few cases, the writing on the New Hebrew created critical models of secularization and elaborated the paradoxes of the sacred. In Scholem’s case, the writing on Hebrew was a product of “esoteric thought,” a radical version of a Kabbalistic study that turned into a mode of apocalyptic thinking. His interpretation of the New Hebrew was charged with the pathos of Gnostic discourse, a “demonic” view of language and being. The “demon” is the figure that embodies Scholem’s ambivalent concept of the sacred and carries its terrible, unfamiliar implications in an era of crisis. It thus comes to perform the anxieties and the ironies of Scholem’s own project and to provide evidence for the ambivalence of his Zionist experience. The “demon,” in other words, is the self-portrait of a divided consciousness, a reflection of metaphysical distortions that carry historical, political, and biographical implications—a portrayal of modernist Judaism.

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NOTES

1. “Dies Land ist ein Vulkan. Es beherbergt die Sprache. Man spricht hier von vielen Dingen, an denen wir scheitern können, man spricht heute mehr als je von den Arabern. Aber unheimlicher als das arabische Volk steht eine

andere Drohung vor uns, die das zionistische Unterfangen mit Notwendigkeit heraufbeschworen hat: Was ist es mit der "Aktualisierung" des Hebräischen?" ("Bekenntnis" 148).

2. Scholem's letter was included in an anthology of short manuscripts dedicated to Rosenzweig on the occasion of his fortieth birthday. The initiators of this enterprise were Martin Buber and Ernst Simon.

3. Compare with Scholem's 1930 poem titled "Der Untergang":

Was innen war, ist nach außen
Verwandelt, der Traum in Gewalt
Und wieder sind wir draußen
Und Zion hat keine Gestalt

The poem was originally published in the Hebrew journal *Hadarim*, quoted in Wohlfarth 199.

4. "Man glaubt, die Sprache verweltlicht zu haben. Aber das ist ja nicht wahr, die Verweltlichung der Sprache ist ja nur eine façon de parler, eine Phrase. Es ist schlechthin unmöglich, die zum Bersten erfüllen Worte zu entleeren, es sein denn um den Preis der Sprache selbst" ("Bekenntnis" 148).

5. "Gott wird in einer Sprache, in der er tausendfach in unser Leben zurückbeschworen wird, nicht stumm bleiben. Diese unausbleibliche Revolution der Sprache aber, in der die Stimme vernommen wird, ist der einzige Gegenstand, von dem in diesem Lande nicht gesprochen wird, denn die, die die hebräische Sprache zum Leben wieder aufriefen, glaubten nicht an das Gericht, das sie damit über uns beschworen. Möge uns dann nicht der Leichtsinne, der uns auf diesem apokalyptischen Weg geleitet, zum Verderb werden" ("Bekenntnis" 150).

6. Scholem returned to articulate his resistance to the "myth" of the dialogue between Germans and Jews in his 1962 open letter to Manfred Schölsser, "Wider den Mythos vom deutsch-jüdischen Gespräch" (*Judaica* 2, 7–11).

7. Rosenzweig tells about his meeting with Scholem: "Scholem—es waren anderthalb tolle Tage, aber gar nicht wie du denkst. Du kämpfst mit ihm, ich habe die Waffen gestreckt und habe von und bei ihm gelernt" (*Briefe und Tagebücher* 704).

8. Rosenzweig suffered from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. In his last years, he was confined to his bed and lost his speech and handwriting ability.

9. Rosenzweig's critical views on Wagner's musical drama and its theological implications deserve a wider discussion than the framework allows. Rosenzweig already wrote in 1906 on Wagner's "imperialistic visions" (*Briefe und Tagebücher* 92). In his *Stern der Erlösung* he criticizes Wagner's empty, erotic category of redemption (*Stern* 272) and rejects Wagner's territorial concept of art that is incompatible with his understanding of a work of art as the unfamiliar and the homeless. For further reading see Batnitzky.

10. On Scholem's theory of language, its theological sources and (counter-) historical implications see Biale 79–113, 201–05.

11. "Sprache ist Namen. Im Namen ist die Macht der Sprache beschlossen, ist ihr Abgrund versigelt [sic]. Es steht nicht mehr in unserer Hand, die alten Namen tagtäglich zu beschwören, ohne ihre Potenzen wachzurufen. Sie

werden erscheinen, denn wir haben sie ja freilich mit großer Gewalt beschworen" ("Bekenntnis" 149).

12. This is how the "Traum," the dream of Zionism turns into "Gewalt," violence (Wohlfarth 199). The concept "Göttliche Gewalt" refers to Walter Benjamin's critical theory of political violence (Benjamin 59–64). On the link between secularization, the emptying of tradition, and the naked form of political violence see Agamben 74–78.

13. Scholem argues against the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* for "the removal of the pointedly irrational and demonic enthusiasms from Jewish history, through an exaggerated emphasis on the theological and the spiritual" (*On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism* 63). On Scholem's "demonic" interpretations of Jewish history and its ambivalent implications see Idel 83–88.

14. My essay does not deal with Scholem's "real" poetry—his poems that may hint at further complications in his theory of language and poetics.

15. In his 1977 lecture "Understanding the Internal Processes," delivered upon receiving the "Bialik Prize," Scholem returns to praise Bialik, his friendship and collegiality, and tells an anecdote about a false usage of Hebrew in one of his early articles on Kabbalah (1926). In this article Scholem writes about the "peger, the corpus, of Simeon bar Yohai." His false, "demonic" use of the word *peger*, which has a negative implication in Hebrew, invoked the anger of Bialik, who mocked Scholem as a *Yekke*, a German Jew, an immigrant who ostensibly cannot understand the minor differences and nuances in Hebrew (*On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism* 46).

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