

# Scholar and Kabbalist: The Life and Work of Gershom Scholem

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## “Our Sabbatian Future”

*Kitty Millet*

### Abstract

In “Redemption through Sin,” Gershom Scholem posits that, “drawing closer to the spirit of the Haskalah all along,” Sabbatians experience a radical transformation “so that when the flame of their faith finally flickered out, they soon reappeared as leaders of Reform Judaism, secular intellectuals, or simply ... indifferent skeptics.” The transformation from heretic to intellectual suggested to Scholem that Sabbatianism had migrated into secular culture, specifically literature, which is a thesis that he and Walter Benjamin shared in their discussions of Franz Kafka. Tracing Sabbatianism’s genealogy, and its migration into literature, I speculate on what Scholem believed to be “our Sabbatian future.”

### Keywords

cosmopolitanism – Erich Auerbach – Frankism – Franz Rosenzweig – *galut* – Haskalah – Jonas Wehle – Kafka – Kant – messianism – nihilism – Sabbatai Zevi – Sabbatianism – sublimity

My curiosity about a “Sabbatian future” derives from Scholem’s reference to the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz<sup>1</sup> in which he asserts that “Mickiewicz, the greatest Polish poet,” had a “Frankist affiliation” through his mother, who was reportedly a Sabbatian.<sup>2</sup> Scholem adds that Mickiewicz’s wife “also came from Frankist families”<sup>3</sup> and then depicts Mickiewicz as a familiar Frankist figure to Warsaw’s Jews. Ostensibly, Scholem identifies Mickiewicz as a Frankist to prove the pervasiveness of Frankist and Sabbatian cells operating throughout Central and Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 308. The book reprints Scholem’s entry, “Frank, Jacob, and the Frankists,” 191.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Scholem, “Redemption through Sin.” Scholem uses the tactic to counter rabbinical sources’ claim that Sabbatianism was a marginal movement.

However, a secondary effect of Scholem’s thinking is the unarticulated premise that Mickiewicz’s Frankist tendencies might have informed his poetics. Having analyzed Mickiewicz’s concept of *Urwald*<sup>5</sup> in “Pan Tadeusz” and its relationship to Nazi ideology,<sup>6</sup> I wondered whether Mickiewicz saw his poetry as a Sabbatian aesthetic. I started mentally rescanning the lines of “Pan Tadeusz” to see, for example, whether anything emerged in Mickiewicz’s work that implied a Sabbatian cosmology behind what I had assumed previously was a literary mysticism built on Slavic and Christian folklore, myth, and legend. In other words, Mickiewicz’s poetry is usually understood as a repository of signs associated with mystical, mythical, and even nationalist speculations. Simon Schama believes that it is a linchpin to Slavic, German, and Russian nationalist projects, in which ethnic groups fantasize about their destinies’ intimate link to the mythical power of the *Urwald*.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the notion of the *Urwald* has fostered historically messianic and redemptive myths throughout Central and Eastern Europe, but these are believed to be Christological rather than Sabbatian.

Thus, Scholem’s comments on Mickiewicz indicate that the Polish poet’s work could be a repository not only for nationalist, redemptive signs, but also for Sabbatian messianic speculation. I questioned whether there were other post-Haskalah Jewish literary interventions that construe the aesthetic as a redemptive space and whether these might be related to late Sabbatianism. I wondered, furthermore, what underpins such notions of literature. Most scholarship on the “redemptive” aspect of literature takes these leanings to be Christological and Romantic, but as I pondered Scholem’s persistent suggestion that Sabbatian families remained active throughout the nineteenth century, I wondered whether Sabbatianism had found another space more amenable to the expression of its “radical nihilism.”<sup>8</sup> And if so, could the principles themselves be detached from an active Sabbatian subject, promote

5 See Schama, *Landscape and Memory*. A literary and mythological concept, the *Urwald* refers to the primordial forest, present in several central and eastern European literatures; it depicts a mythical forest where Nature is unsullied by a narrative of sin, emitting a dynamic creative power at its core. For many Christian writers, the *Urwald* was the site of the missing Ark, where Creation continued. It was the real Garden of Eden.

6 Millet, “Caesura, Continuity, and Myth.” The *Urwald* captivated Joseph Goebbels and the Heck brothers (Ludwig and Heinz). They believed Poland’s Białowieża Forest to be a repository of mythical power, taking Mickiewicz’s “primitive paradise” quite literally. To that end, Goebbels prevented Nazi soldiers from razing the forest in order to preserve what he imagined was an “Aryan paradise.”

7 Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 48. My analysis follows from Schama’s discussion of *Urwald*’s historical uses in relation to the Polish nobility’s desire to identify themselves with a “sylvan” aristocracy.

8 Scholem, “The Crypto-Jewish Sect,” 163.

a messianic project and be grafted on to another kind of messianic sign? Could some element of Sabbatianism be retained and repurposed in post-Haskalah Jewish literature? Although Scholem stops tracking the more visible families either by demonstrating their complete assimilation into the Reform movement or by suggesting that they just “die out,”<sup>9</sup> I asked whether Sabbatianism really did just dissipate, whether its “sparks” died out or whether they remain embedded in some other form. Were active Sabbatians really necessary for Sabbatianism to continue?

Essentially, I am speculating about what a “Sabbatian future” might look like in the work of three different scholars—Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin, and Erich Auerbach—even though none of these writers considered themselves Sabbatians. It is a sign of hubris perhaps to include Auerbach with Scholem and Benjamin,<sup>10</sup> but I believe that Auerbach represents a key mediation of a German-Jewish perspective<sup>11</sup> that may no longer exist, but that is very much related to Scholem’s perspective—not only about the prospect of a “Sabbatian future,” but also about the implication of “an inner nihilism” punctuating Judaism at its core.<sup>12</sup> Thus, I am looking at resonances primarily between Scholem’s perspective and two of his contemporaries, whose personal trajectories of exile remain very different from his own.

This essay maps signifiers, words, and concepts shared between these scholars in order to show a connection through aesthetic elements, which I argue are derived from an initial displacement of Sabbatianism on to German philosophy and then on to literature. In fact, I argue here that a Sabbatian future is grafted on to literature—text—rather than on to an individual subject or messiah so that it is part of the larger constellation that we understand as a secular Jewish literary tradition engaged with a secular non-Jewish partner. It is “our Sabbatian future” in the sense that these, our texts—the texts of a secular

9 See his discussion of Gottlieb Wehle’s will in Scholem, “A Sabbatian Will from New York.” In 1849, Gottlieb Wehle immigrates to New York and was related to Jonas Wehle (1752) as well as Justice Louis Brandeis.

10 Lindenberger, “On the Reception of Mimesis.” Lindenberger’s survey of the reception of Auerbach’s text reiterates the claim that critics had never analyzed Auerbach in relation to Jewish themes, although they routinely mention his flight from the Nazis.

11 Mosse, *German Jews beyond Judaism*, 12–15.

12 Scholem, *Major Trends*, 299; Rabinbach, “Introduction,” xiii. Rabinbach coins the term “inner nihilism” to describe “Scholem’s research into Kabbalah” as the kabbalist realizes that “God is alienated from the world, from Creation itself, and in which exile or *galut* is the most fundamental condition of existence.” The tradition itself “had to come to terms with the inner nihilism of Judaism itself: ‘All that befalls the world is only an expression of this primal and fundamental *galut*. All existence, including God, subsists in *galut*.’”

tradition—retain this messianic and necessarily transgressive impulse. To illustrate how we have come to this “future,” I want to retrace Scholem’s steps as he thinks about Sabbatianism’s basic tenets and their historical development.

At the end of “Redemption through Sin,”<sup>13</sup> Scholem argues that Sabbatianism’s influence on secular German Jewry occurs because Sabbatians “had been drawing closer to the spirit of the Haskalah all along, so that when the flame of their faith finally flickered out, they soon reappeared as leaders of Reform Judaism, secular intellectuals, or simply ... indifferent skeptics.”<sup>14</sup> After the Haskalah, they emerge reinvented as religious reformers and cultural critics, or “indifferent skeptics,” ambivalent about any project of reform and redemption. He links their transformations, furthermore, to Sabbatian nihilism. “Once its original religious impulse had been exhausted,”<sup>15</sup> Sabbatian nihilism moved into a new sphere or space for its expression, Haskalah culture. In other words, Haskalah culture appears in Sabbatian thinking as a place where Sabbatians’ “nihilist ... faith” could “transition to a new world beyond the ghetto.”<sup>16</sup> They would express, literally “press out” (*sich darzustellen*)<sup>17</sup> “a new emotion”<sup>18</sup> from “the hidden recesses of the Jewish psyche.”<sup>19</sup>

Scholem makes this the basis for a “liberal–bourgeois idealism,” with its “unique fusion of Judaism and Christianity”;<sup>20</sup> he shows it to intersect with the kabbalist’s dialectical struggle between a “novel, living,” intuitive, subjective experience of renewal and a reified, lifeless, “dogmatic,” static tradition.<sup>21</sup> Scholem marks, then, two boundaries: one in which kabbalists seek to displace Jewish tradition fundamentally, by promoting a new language for expressing a new attitude, and another in which language points necessarily to its own failure to sustain a living, vital, intuitive experience of the Divine.<sup>22</sup> Scholem

13 Scholem, “Redemption through Sin.”

14 Ibid., 140.

15 Ibid., 84.

16 Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 308.

17 In her “Stepping Out,” Liliane Weissberg identifies the related concept *sich darzustellen* that Hannah Arendt uses to describe Varnhagen’s sense of being in the non-Jewish world. Arendt argues that Varnhagen purposely uses a Kantian register to denote that a space does not exist in which she can be produced.

18 Scholem, “Redemption Through Sin,” 86.

19 Ibid., 84.

20 Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 308.

21 Scholem, *Major Trends*, 10.

22 The problem is the synthesis: how the third term resolves the tension. False messianic movements tend to resolve the tension by proposing the messianic age’s appearance and by imposing a messiah as the fulfillment of that age. In contrast, the kabbalists withhold that fulfillment.

formulates this tension quite self-consciously as the dialectic of Jewish history, in which Jews confront repeatedly Judaism's "dogmatic object of knowledge"<sup>23</sup> as they move to intuit or renew a "novel, living" sense of being Jewish.

From these coordinates and due to the Sabbatian intervention, Scholem implies that the Haskalah produces within its vectors of art, literature, and culture an ambivalent German-Jewish identity characterized by its subjective nihilism and only partially intuitable through cryptic signifiers. This last element is actually quite important for Scholem, since it broaches the notion that the synthesis of the aforementioned dialectic is the production of an ambivalent sign of German-Jewish identity, which is always in negotiation with the poles of Judaic and Sabbatian nihilisms. Scholem frames the ambivalent sign, furthermore, as an effect of exile.

Anson Rabinbach explains that Scholem believes that exile creates the context for this ambivalent Jewish identity, an identity alienated from its tradition. As a result, the tradition itself has to be extended beyond the boundaries of rabbinic authority:

For Scholem the problem was to redefine that tradition to include far more than rabbinical orthodoxy could ever admit. It had to come to terms with the inner nihilism of Judaism itself: "All that befalls the world is only an expression of this primal and fundamental *galut*. All existence, including God, subsists in *galut*. Such is the state of Creation after the breaking of vessels."<sup>24</sup>

The "inner exile" requires Scholem not only to go beyond the boundaries of rabbinical Judaism, but also to accommodate the ambivalent alienation of modern Jewish identity in contexts completely denuded of any religious significance. These new contexts indicate the terrain through which the "inner nihilism" of Judaism now travels. Since "all existence, including God himself, subsists in *galut*," existence registers a profound ontological loss. Scholem adds that this result is ultimately caused by the "primal," pre-human, "breaking of vessels" with the consequence that creation internalizes exile because of the loss of its paradisiacal being.

Within the outlines of the phenomenal world, ontology becomes the signifier of this lost being; it signals a loss that is only partially intuited after it becomes unavailable: only its trace remains. Scholem understands this

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<sup>23</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Rabinbach, "Introduction," xiii; Scholem, "The Star of David," 45f.

realization as the existential crisis of Judaism itself in modernity, arising during the Haskalah and continuing post-Haskalah.

Sabbatianism intervenes at this moment in modernity and reclaims Judaism’s “inner nihilism” by revalencing its signs; in this way, Judaism’s signifiers of loss become Sabbatianism’s signifiers of liberation. The Sabbatians have not “lost the law,” but they are no longer bound by it. It has been set aside because of their existence; furthermore, their existence proves that the *halakhah*’s abrogation is necessary for the messianic age. Consequently, by identifying the signs and signifiers of Sabbatian nihilism in the master narratives emerging from the Haskalah, Scholem makes visible the outline of this modern identity. He glimpses it as “it falls” away from the tradition.

Thus, Scholem posits several conceptual transformations to have taken place in German Jewry during and after the Jewish Enlightenment. Going into the Haskalah, we have Sabbatians choosing to live “as Marranos”—whether among the Orthodox or non-Jews—but imagining themselves, nevertheless, liberated from the law because they intuit the beginning of the messianic age. Regardless of their outward appearances, they imagine that they articulate a true Judaism. Coming out of the Haskalah, we have a new construction of German-Jewish identity whose Sabbatian tendencies have been displaced onto culture as a field constitutively conducive to the production of new modes of “being-in-the-world,” one of which is literature.

We have the stirrings of a cosmopolitanism associated with Heinrich Heine, Rahel Varnhagen, Salomon Maimon, and even Eduard Gans, in which the subject feels compelled to reject national boundaries and limits; and we have an intuited belief in music, art, and literature as redemptive, messianic spaces through which subjects discover their own imagined liberations against a backdrop of ambivalence and alienation.<sup>25</sup> They discover their own redemption in the secular literary text, finding their sparks among the aesthetic principles of modernity. Moreover, the new identity appears detached from Judaism. It adheres to a philosophical construction.<sup>26</sup> Within these new coordinates, the

25 Lazarus, “Venus of the Louvre,” 184f. Lazarus poses Heine before the Venus statue, weeping, at her beauty, so that the line, “and Heine wept,” suggests the profound liberation the poet intuits through art.

26 Scholem, *Major Trends*, 123. I am intentionally thinking of the concept of *devekut* from kabbalism. The term refers to the adhesion of the kabbalist to “being joined” to the Divine. In his discussion of Abraham Abulafia, the thirteenth century kabbalist, Scholem notes that the Hebrew term encompasses both “a perpetual being-with-God” and the realization that “even in this ecstatic frame of mind, the Jewish mystic almost invariably retains a sense of the distance between the Creator and His creature.” Wehle performs a revalencing of *devekut* by joining the Sabbatian orientation to a philosophical construction.

modern Sabbatian becomes visible, and Jonas Wehle (1752–1823), the leader of the Prague Frankist community, is Scholem's emblematic example. With a family genealogy reaching back into "several generations" of Sabbatianism, and having already "strong connections" with Frankist communities throughout Bohemia and Moravia, Wehle was poised to reconfigure the Sabbatians' relationship to the Enlightenment.<sup>27</sup>

Initially, Scholem suggests that the Sabbatians' adoption of Enlightenment concepts was a move similar to Sabbatai Zevi's adoption of Islam, Jacob Frank's adoption of Catholicism, and the moderate Sabbatians' continued public practice of Orthodox Judaism. They "practiced" another religion as a matter of convenience and expediency; the new religion cloaked their Sabbatian activities. However, Wehle's application of Kantian principles to Sabbatian interiority indicates an intellectual investment unlike previous Sabbatian "conversions." Scholem implies, then, that Wehle's connection of Enlightenment thinking to Sabbatianism is a result of late kabbalah's transformation of redemption:

Redemption is no longer primarily a liberation from the yoke of servitude in exile, but a transformation of the essence of Creation ... a process which runs through all the visible and hidden worlds ... it is ... *Tikkun*, the restoration of that great harmony ... a radical change in the structure of the universe. Its significance is ... the end of that inner exile.<sup>28</sup>

Scholem tracks the transformation of redemption as it shifts from the physical redemption of bodies in "servitude" to the imagined experience of a restored ontology. While the kabbalists imagine "the end of that inner exile," the Sabbatians' revalencing goes even further, for they imagine a "*Tikkun*" of subjective unity—the "unified subject." This sets up the Sabbatian identity to be the signifier of ontological transformation.

Through a careful working out of the Sabbatians' conceptual and cultural development, Scholem sketches the trajectories of this transformation. With its emphasis on emancipation, a world ungoverned by *halakhah*, the Jewish Enlightenment signifies ultimately an interior liberation "from the ghetto." It emphasizes a subjective experience deepened by "a turn inward and not outward" in tracing the "crisis of faith which overtook the Jewish people as a whole" in which "groups of Jews within the walls of the ghetto, while still outwardly adhering<sup>29</sup> to the practices of their forefathers, had begun to embark

<sup>27</sup> Scholem, "Frank, Jacob, and the Frankists," 190.

<sup>28</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 305.

<sup>29</sup> Scholem applies the term "Devekut" purposely to illustrate the shift's trajectory.

on a radically new inner life of their own.”<sup>30</sup> Scholem recognizes that the Sabbatian turn “inward upon itself” acting “upon the hidden recesses of the Jewish psyche” represents the key moment when Judaism’s nihilism forces the Sabbatian subject to plumb the depths of the abyss in search of a missing spark to produce a new subject position.

These “hidden recesses” have no substance, creating a “world” or “space” of action that has no physical reality; in other words, it is represented in cultural and aesthetic terms. Whereas for Sabbatianism the components of subjectivity are signifiers of authentic spiritual experience, in art, they become traces of the transcendent, a philosophical end to the experience of the sublime.<sup>31</sup> A philosophical sublimity begins to resonate with Sabbatian imagined experiences. The question is whether or not the Sabbatians follow these traces into art or whether they still attempt to constitute a physical messianic age.

In other words, what could be imagined indicates intuitively for the Sabbatian the true revelation. For Scholem, this realization signifies that Jewish messianism has been displaced in late Sabbatianism onto the aesthetic through the development of secular culture. Furthermore, it appears to him to be an inevitable consequence of nihilism, which is unarticulated in Judaism but present at its core, always attempting to “break through the lifeless surface,” to break its “shell” so to speak, except now, “exhausting its religious aim,” it moves quite “naturally” into aesthetic space.

This identity proposes though a new relationship to secular culture. Michael Brenner has remarked that it creates interest in Judaism as an object of knowledge so that, in subsequent generations, Jewish scholars examine the religion and history of the Jews in terms of principles associated with *Wissenschaft*.<sup>32</sup> As Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi notes, “history becomes ... the faith of ‘fallen Jews,’”<sup>33</sup> and it leaves literature free to absorb the role of “messianic space.” However, instead of signifying a specific Sabbatian world, literature evokes in readers the necessity of “unpacking,” “unearthing” hidden traces of the Divine

30 Scholem, “Redemption through Sin,” 84.

31 The play between Scholem’s native language and his adopted one is important for understanding how Scholem begins to rethink the German registers of Haskalah concepts through the religious language of Hebrew. He most likely translates the German *Das Erhabene* for the Hebrew term for transcendence: *Hanisgav*.

32 Brenner, *The Renaissance*, 201. While Brenner is preoccupied with the particular historical development of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, I am more interested in the concepts borrowed from the general project of German *Wissenschaft*.

33 Brenner, *Renaissance*, 29. Brenner quotes Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 86. Yerushalmi implies how a Sabbatian cultural intervention could eventually produce an intellectual project for “fallen Jews.”

from within its residue or form. This modern transformation is apparently coded to the rise of *Wissenschaft* culture, in which Sabbatianism's association of Enlightenment concepts and principles with redemption becomes reconfigured by the ambivalent, post-Haskalah German-Jewish identity as the sign of a lost experience, an intuitive spark awaiting discovery.

Scholem hints at this resonance between the language of *Wissenschaft*<sup>34</sup> culture and its sudden applicability not only for Sabbatian purposes, but also for the purposes of these ambivalent new German-Jewish identities. It is in the reference to Jonas Wehle's adoption of Kantianism to depict Sabbatian interiority;<sup>35</sup> he also describes it in his early discussions with Walter Benjamin on Kafka's texts and their expression of a failed messianism.<sup>36</sup> The Sabbatians appear to have to travel through Kantianism in order to reach literature as the province of their redemption. For Scholem, literature is freighted with the Divine; it confirms for him that "*commentary*" remains the critical path "through which truth is approached."<sup>37</sup> However, it also points toward culture as a space for the articulation of a modern Jewish sensibility that is tinged with messianism, signified in and through texts, and yet ambivalent about redemption.<sup>38</sup>

This realization also construes that a move from dogmatic and ideological object to living, non-reproducible, non-static intuition can only be an aesthetic act.<sup>39</sup> It requires the imagination to be liberated from its tether to the understanding, the governing faculty of objects and implicitly of law. Thus, it calls into being the need for an unresolvable dialectic.

The problem for Scholem is keeping this tension unresolved; the philosopher, notably Kantian, wants to resolve the tension in aesthetic judgment and thereby constitute the subject; the Sabbatian wants to synthesize the two positions so that the dialectic closes or ends because of the revelation of a

34 Not to be confused with the formal *Wissenschaft des Judentums* project, this is a reference to the *geistige* or intellectual aspects of *Wissenschaft*.

35 Scholem, "Redemption through Sin," 140–146. Scholem indicates that Wehle shifted Sabbatianism's intellectual foundations from Judaism to Enlightenment thought, much as his predecessor Sabbatai Zevi shifted to Islam.

36 Rabinbach, "Introduction," xxxviii.

37 Rabinbach, "Introduction," xiii. Rabinbach quotes Biale, *Gershom Scholem*.

38 Scholem, *Major Trends*, 10. For example, Scholem explains that "mystical religion seeks to transform the God whom it encounters ... from an object of dogmatic knowledge into a novel and living experience and intuition." Scholem's tension between object and intuition resonates with Kant's description of how the Understanding might act illegitimately to "rule" the faculties, by asserting its object of knowledge as an idea. Kant declares it then a dogmatic object.

39 Scholem appears to peg the German principle of an unbounded, dynamic intuition to a Hebrew equivalent, the flow, or Shef'a (שפּא).

messianic age.<sup>40</sup> However, while identifying that the tension between object and intuition continually reproduces the dialectic historically, Scholem also observes that the synthesis does not take place in authentic kabbalah. The gap or abyss is never closed.<sup>41</sup> They only draw close. As a result, Scholem sees in philosophy an artificial move to synthesize or close the gap, and this artifice—“magic”—makes it particularly interesting to Sabbatian aesthetics. Scholem hints, then, at the reasons behind Wehle’s application of Kant to Sabbatian interiority.

In two early essays, “On Kant” and “Against the Metaphysical Exposition of Space,”<sup>42</sup> written in 1918 as a part of his joint study with Walter Benjamin on Herman Cohen’s *Kant’s Theorie der Erfahrung* (*Kant’s Theory of Experience*), Scholem, a young college student, declares Kantianism flawed because it proposes “the pure cult of a mysticism without an object.... The neo-Kantians practice magic.”<sup>43</sup> For Scholem, mysticism could not emerge without being dialectically partnered to an object.<sup>44</sup> In fact, in an exegesis of the zoharic *Elohim*, Scholem shows the stakes behind Kantianism’s postulate of a transcendental entity without relationship to creation:

The domain of *Mi*, of the great Who, in which God appears as the subject of the mundane practice ... can at least be questioned. The higher sphere of divine wisdom represents something ... beyond the reach of questioning, which cannot even be visualized in abstract thought.... Elohim is the name given to God after the disjunction of subject and object ... The mystical Nothing which lies before the division of the primary idea into Knower and the Known, is not regarded by the kabbalist as a true subject. The lower ranges of God’s manifestation form the object of steady human contemplation, but the highest plane which meditation can reach at all ... can be no more than an occasional and intuitive flash which illuminates the human heart.<sup>45</sup>

In Scholem’s exegesis, the subject–object split has such a profound effect on the human that in “mundane practice,” or “steady human contemplation,” the kabbalist still can only hope for the “lower ranges of God’s manifestation.”

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40 For Scholem, both of these are false resolutions—“dead-ends” induced by the dialectic itself.

41 Scholem, *Major Trends*, 5.

42 Scholem, “Against the Metaphysical Exposition of Space”; Scholem, “On Kant.”

43 Scholem, “On Kant,” 443.

44 Scholem, *Major Trends*, 10.

45 Scholem, *Major Trends*, 221.

Consequently, the kabbalist does not regard “the mystical Nothing” as “the true subject”; likewise, the transcendental is “not the true subject.” According to Scholem’s thinking, Kantianism proposes a unification of the subject in which the transcendental can be the property of human intellect. The “highest plane” that “steady human contemplation” can attain is the “occasional and intuitive flash.” Thus, Kantianism can have “a spark of genuine mysticism in it.”<sup>46</sup>

However, it is “an abusive one because it is external” and “does not correspond positively to *anything* here.”<sup>47</sup> In another discussion of Cohen, Scholem declares that “the Transcendental appears in Kant and Cohen as a magical concept” because objects are constituted through “analytical judgments”;<sup>48</sup> they cannot correspond to “*anything*” in human experience. The Kantian project isolates the object in its objective world. While Scholem notes the seductive appeal of the Kantian project, he recognizes simultaneously that such reasoning about the transcendental fails to see a fundamental connection between subjects and objects.

In contrast to the flawed Kantian project, Scholem begins to think about Benjamin’s sense of the “new and higher type of experience that is still to come.”<sup>49</sup> Benjamin believes that Kant’s project could be redeemed if it “were overhauled with a theory of language conceived ... not as a matter of arbitrarily assigning signs to things, but as uniquely and ineluctably bound up in cognition’s linguistic expression.”<sup>50</sup> Language itself is dynamic, but it has been hampered by an imposed instrumentality.

In his “On Language as Such and the Language of Man,”<sup>51</sup> written in 1916, Benjamin advances a linguistic messianism through which “language is privileged as a model of experience ... because it undermines and transgresses the neat divisions and limitations operating in the Kantian system.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, Benjamin’s thesis on language offers the possibility of correcting “Kantian errors” (or the Kantian Error) by shifting focus away from the “neat divisions” of

46 Scholem, “On Kant,” 443.

47 Ibid.

48 Scholem, “Against the Metaphysical Exposition of Space,” 457.

49 Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy.” It cannot be accidental that the German “the philosophy to come” echoes the Hebrew, “the world to come”—that is, Scholem and Benjamin appear to be translating or converting German and Hebrew concepts in relation to each other (ha-’olam ha-ba, the world to come, resonates with *Philosophie zu kommen*, the philosophy to come).

50 Benjamin, “On the Program,” 102; Ng, “Walter Benjamin’s and Gershom Scholem’s Reading Group,” 436.

51 Benjamin, “On Language as Such and the Language of Man.” Written in 1916, the essay is among Benjamin’s earliest works.

52 Osborne and Charles, “Walter Benjamin.”

subjects and objects, so that “if both [subject and object] are constitutively linguistic, language serves as a medium of experience that binds the ostensible ‘subject’ and ‘object’ in a more profound, perhaps mystical, relationship of underlying kinship.”<sup>53</sup> Subject and object are not distinct from each other, but proceed from a shared linguistic root. For Benjamin, the underlying “mystical kinship” between subject and object is the intimate paradox of language, since “mental being is not identical with linguistic being.”<sup>54</sup> Subject and object can share this mystical linguistic root in a way that cannot be thought. The lack of identity between linguistic and mental being imposes the idea of an inaccessible depth, or abyss, that requires the mind to ponder, to hover over, contemplating the paradox of its own ontology. The mind focused on this linguistic element becomes aware of its own alienation.

As Benjamin progresses in the essay, he tracks the implications of his thesis in relation to *Genesis* and the creation of man:

In the threefold “He created” of 1:27, God did not create man from the word, and he did not name him. He did not wish to subject him to language, but in man God set language, which had served *Him* as medium of creation, free.<sup>55</sup>

“God set language ... free” in man.<sup>56</sup> Benjamin marks Eden intrinsically as the place where language is set free in the human being. Language serves “*Him* as medium of creation,” but in the human mind language is free from instrumentality. Thus, exile from Eden suggests that even language is in exile, an effect of which is its diminished state as instrumental and determinate.

Perhaps one of the most controversial aspects of Benjamin’s reading of the text sets up for him the link between his idea of linguistic messianism and Kant’s liberation of the imagination. Language in its liberation from instrumentality is released to delve ever deeper into the depths of the abyss so that the imagination is likewise free to create, produce its own being and so that it can glimpse a freedom from its own alienation. For Benjamin, Kant came close and then fell into the error of his own deduction. For Scholem, Benjamin’s posited liberation of language resonates not only with language’s divine source in kabbalah, but also with the Sabbatians’ reading of Zohar.

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53 Ibid.

54 Benjamin, “On Language,” 316.

55 Ibid., 323.

56 Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, 106f. Biale discusses this aspect in relation to “naming,” in which “man concretizes divine language and makes it human.”

David Biale observes that Scholem reads Benjamin, “as he might [read] ... a kabbalistic writer and subjects him to the same kind of ‘decoding.’”<sup>57</sup> In fact, Scholem sees in Benjamin a convergence of competing tensions, the ambivalent post-Haskalah, German-Jewish identity that refuses to stake a claim in Judaism, the kabbalist whose revelation makes him aware of language’s divine source so that text regains its redemptive dimension, and the potential Sabbatian, falling away from the tradition to follow a false messiah.

To make the stakes clearer about the multiple ways that Scholem “reads” Benjamin, Scholem interposes Kafka’s work as a way of mediating the relationship between himself and Benjamin. “The world of Kafka” represents the “fine line between religion and nihilism, an expression, which, as a secular statement of the Kabbalistic world-feeling in a modern spirit, seemed to me to wrap Kafka’s writings in the halo of the canonical.”<sup>58</sup> Kafka’s texts produce the coordinates for “Kabbalistic world-feeling in a modern spirit,” that is, his stories enable the secular German Jew to re-establish a connection with an inaccessible past, “the halo of the canonical.” Consequently, the writer’s world becomes a place where “God appears as an agent of nihilism ... that does not preclude the possibility of redemption, only of human intercession on its behalf.”<sup>59</sup>

Excluded from “human intercession,” redemption becomes an effect of language’s freedom in the text so that readers intuit a dual liberation, the liberation of language and a subjective freedom from “inner exile.” Biale frames the dual liberation as a consequence of Scholem’s needing to think about the “finite world of human beings” in relation to the “infinite revelation,” that is,

how to realize and comprehend in the finite world of human beings the infinite revelation of God.... This was the problem for the Kabbalists and it was also the problem, in its most acute form, for Kafka.... Benjamin came to this conclusion himself several years later in a formulation which seemingly anticipates Aphorism 1: “Kafka’s real genius was that ... he sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to its transmissibility, its haggadic element. Kafka’s writings ... do not modestly lie at the feet of the doctrine, as the Haggadah lies at the feet of the Halakhah.”<sup>60</sup>

Two concerns emerge in Scholem’s thinking about Kafka. First, as Biale notes, Scholem questions how to make “the infinite revelation of God” intuitable.

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57 Ibid., 252, n. 94.

58 Ibid., 75.

59 Rabinbach, “Introduction,” xxx.

60 Biale, “Gershom Scholem’s Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms,” 90.

Second, Kafka “sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to its transmissibility, its Haggadic element.” “Transmissibility” and “Haggadic element” are synonymous with narrative. They guarantee that certainty is established through the possibility of retelling the story. It is the eidetic element missing in Kant<sup>61</sup> and reinforces the notion that “if God is meaningless, but meaning-bestowing, then ‘not system but *commentary* is the legitimate form through which truth is approached.”<sup>62</sup> The multiplicity of meaning is sacred, divine, and it supercedes a rigid, dogmatic “system” of knowledge that would impose the regulation of meaning as its ultimate goal.<sup>63</sup>

Surprisingly, Scholem finds Kafka also to be illustrative of Jonas Wehle’s thinking. The Prague Frankist who combines Kantianism with Sabbatianism is “the first one to ask (and to affirm) whether paradise had not experienced a greater loss than mankind had in the latter’s expulsion from the former.... Was it sympathy of souls that led Kafka to ideas bearing a strong resemblance to Jonas Wehle’s?”<sup>64</sup> In fact, Scholem even attributes to Kafka, Wehle’s “heretical kabbalah.” By placing Wehle within Kafka’s world, Scholem indicates that Kafka’s work brings Wehle back within the tradition; it redeems him. Consequently, Scholem “revises tradition” to include literature. He implies that Kafka’s world is a necessary mediation, moreover, for bringing Benjamin back to the tradition too.

What we have then in Benjamin’s and Scholem’s essays are hints, glimpses, of two German-Jewish scholars trained in *Wissenschaft* and living post-Haskalah who plot their subjective experience in relation to aesthetic and Sabbatian registers. In this way, the Scholem–Benjamin exchange illustrates how the Sabbatian intervention could be displaced onto literature, both intentionally and unintentionally, through the mediation of *Wissenschaft* aesthetics after the Haskalah.

In a text never associated with a discussion of Sabbatianism, his foundational “Odysseus’ Scar,”<sup>65</sup> Erich Auerbach offers another example, I believe, of a textual messianic project combining both Sabbatian and *Wissenschaft* registers. In other words, it shows that *Wissenschaft* is a necessary mediation for Sabbatianism’s move into literature. In the essay, Auerbach maps the principle of *mimesis* in relation to his theory of how literature in European culture has

61 Scholem, “On Kant,” 443. Scholem critiques Kant as presenting a system “eidetically” impossible.

62 Rabinbach, “Introduction,” xiii.

63 In a radically revalenced midrash, Scholem suggests that, every time we interpret, we plunge into the Sabbatian world of possibilities.

64 Biale, “Gershom Scholem’s Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms,” 90.

65 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 3–23.

been produced historically. Its development occurs because of a tension between Greek and Jewish modes of representation, a tension exhibited in Homer's *Odyssey*, with one specific example being Eurykleia's foot-washing scene,<sup>66</sup> and the "Akedah" or the "Binding of Isaac" narrative in *Genesis*.<sup>67</sup> Like Scholem and Benjamin, Auerbach initially places the tension in relation to how a Jewish mode of interpretation becomes intuitable in a non-Jewish world.

In "Odysseus' Scar," Auerbach notes that Homer's text offers an unmediated, "fully externalized description" because it signifies an "uninterrupted connection." In contrast, the biblical "Akedah" presents the God who is "not comprehensible in his presence, as is Zeus; it is always only 'something' of him that appears, he always extends into depths."<sup>68</sup> The biblical text relies on the "suggestive influence of the unexpressed, 'background' quality, multiplicity of meanings and the need for interpretation" so that the biblical narrative of Abraham's commanded sacrifice of Isaac reveals a "development of ... historical becoming, and preoccupation with the problematic."<sup>69</sup> Through its discrete signifiers—an altar, an angel's voice, Abraham's answer, and a ram stuck in a bush—the "Akedah" proposes a code in need of decoding, or "unpacking." The scene itself emphasizes human incapacity, since God remains hidden in shadow, "alone" and inaccessible.

By testifying to Abraham's incapacity to comprehend the Divine, Auerbach infers the "hidden God" to be one whose thought is not "externalized," who remains in obscurity, and who creates the necessary conditions for interpretation, echoing Scholem's use of "commentary." Furthermore, Auerbach sketches an experience that resembles the kabbalist's encounter with "the mystical Nothing."<sup>70</sup> It bears such a resemblance because the "hidden God" is intuited as incomprehensible. The human mind can only contemplate an aspect of *Elohim*, a fragment that is "visible."

The story of the patriarch Abraham and his son Isaac furnishes Auerbach with a link between language's refusal to divulge all of its contents to the faculties and a Hebrew *mimesis* that neither "externalizes" divine wisdom, nor reduces itself to a communicative concept.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, Auerbach indicates that

66 Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 19, lines 445–539.

67 Genesis 22:1–9. Lindenberger, "On the Reception of *Mimesis*," 196–201. Auerbach's philosophical model resonates with themes implicitly connected to Scholem's kabbalistic interpretations.

68 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 12.

69 *Ibid.*, 23.

70 Scholem, *Major Trends*, 221.

71 Implicitly, Auerbach works from the kabbalist's distrust of language, a theme perhaps residually present in post-Haskalah culture.

the interiority of the patriarch, who exists before the Law, is the emblematic Jewish experience. An interiority unfettered by *halakhah* becomes the true expression of Jewish identity.

In the patriarch’s uncircumscribed interiority, the God who “is not comprehensible in his presence,” who “extends into depths,” expresses his “lack of local habitation” as a form of exile:

The concept of God held by Jews is less a cause than a symptom of their manner of comprehending and representing things.... Even their earlier God of the desert was not fixed in form and content, and was alone; his lack of form, his lack of local habitation, his singleness, was in the end not only maintained but developed even further in competition with the comparatively far more manifest gods of the surrounding Near Eastern world.<sup>72</sup>

Auerbach notes that the Jews’ “God of the desert” lacks “form”; in his “singleness,” he remains “alone” so that the Jews’ “concept of God” is bound up with a specific cultural and religious form of representation. In a cryptic reference, Auerbach implies that God’s singularity and isolation is “developed even further” by the Jews historically. Auerbach suggests an implicit connection between the emblematic Jewish experience, freed from the Law, and the “God of the desert,” “alone,” unfixed in “form and content.”

Auerbach then contrasts how Abraham’s faith legitimates interpretation, a “multiplicity of meaning,” framed against an unknowable “background” with an analytical method whose emblem is the revelatory wound. The wound elicits Euryklea’s reverie through exhibition; it is “uniformly” illuminated while Abraham’s God remains inaccessible in his “depths.” His truth cannot be exhibited. Auerbach implies the necessity of an “inward turn away” from a visible God to focus on the “hidden recesses of the Jewish psyche.”<sup>73</sup> Even in this action of turning away, though, the Divine remains beyond the ken of the human faculties.

The Hebrew God becomes accessible only in discrete signifiers and signs, even to his prophets, patriarchs, and priests. Abraham assumes that his God does not offer a complete transcendence or *pleroma* as either affect or effect of the human imagination. God’s glory, *kavod* (כְּבוֹד), is not the human mind’s possession. Without a capacity for full transcendence, Abraham finds his God

<sup>72</sup> Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 8.

<sup>73</sup> Scholem, “Redemption through Sin,” 84.

to be in the shadows, “hidden” from the human, something Benjamin explains in “On Language” and something Scholem derives as a given from kabbalah.

Consequently, this sets up the tension between Abraham’s memory of what he is obligated to do and the “Akedah’s” redemption: the voice and the sparing of Isaac. Although memory and precept establish the boundaries of Judaism’s experience of revelation, Auerbach’s Abraham struggles with the tension between a static obligation and a subjective need for an experience of redemption. In other words, we have the outline of a dialectic present in the text similar to the dialectic that Scholem posits as the historical expression of Judaism’s nihilism.<sup>74</sup>

Resonating with Scholem’s dialectic, this struggle imposes a very modern crisis on the patriarchal story because its only resolution is the positing of a subjective experience, or subject position, capable of holding together the competing and unresolved tensions of a static Judaism challenged by a living, renewed faith that something else is possible, something new is on the horizon, a ram is caught in a bush. God will redeem the Jews, and this belief leads Auerbach to a final conclusion.

The biblical story is more than a history. It retains the trace of a Jewish interiority that can be called an experience of “the sublime” (הַנְּשִׁיב). However, “a different conception of ... the sublime is to be found here.”<sup>75</sup> With its emphasis on the “problematic” and its “being permeated with ... conflict,” the Hebrew sublime demands the presence of these competing tensions as an aspect of being “chosen.” Auerbach thinks about sublimity on a Jewish scale in contrast to an unarticulated Kantian other, so that he is left with a narrative and never without its memory of “conflict,” loss, alienation. In this way, Auerbach uses a Jewish sublimity to pose an alternative future, a speculation on what “being-in-the-world” could be, “the created through text,”<sup>76</sup> in order to suggest a literary ontology of the text that redeems even as he wonders whether his “study will reach its readers ... for whom it was intended.”<sup>77</sup> Auerbach writes with the awareness that the world where his readers should be may no longer exist.

In moves akin to Auerbach’s, Benjamin ponders and Scholem glimpses this linguistic world of the text. Filled with the sparks of the Divine, literature retains traces of a post-Haskalah sensibility that recuperates Sabbatian signifiers and signs as formal components. As American novelist Chaim Potok notes: “Once you open up ... the imagination, you can ... handle good and evil, the

74 Scholem, *Major Trends*, 10.

75 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 22. Auerbach refers to biblical stories in general.

76 Benjamin, “On Language,” 323.

77 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 557.

demonic.... What it offers you is a realm of metaphors that the Halakhah simply doesn't contain.”<sup>78</sup> In literature, “our Sabbatian future” reflects the tension of a modern sensibility always negotiating the sacred and the profane. To some degree, these texts of Auerbach, Benjamin, and Scholem have found readers waiting for them. As a result, Sabbatianism in literature becomes an imaginable, necessary lever for repositioning not only the Jewish subject, but also the Jewish subject in dialogue with a world of non-Jews.

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78 Potok, “Interview with Elaine M. Kauvar,” 63–87.

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